Time to be professional?

Guest editorial by Paul Sillitoe

Is anthropology in trouble? Perhaps it is time to take professional stock.

Occasionally there are comments in ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY about the overly academic status of the discipline. The impression given is that to be a practising anthropologist one has to hold an academic post. Anthropology is seen as similar to subjects like classics, history, geography etc. that do not train people to enter specific professions beyond teaching except that for anthropology teaching posts exist almost exclusively in higher education. For this reason, the current omens are disturbing: the number of academic anthropology posts shows signs of declining after a period of steady increase. Why? Academic posts are dependent on there being students to teach, and the numbers applying to study anthropology are on the wane.

At a time when UK universities are experiencing an unprecedented increase in student numbers as the government presses for a 50% participation rate in higher education, anthropology is not only failing to share in the expansion, it is experiencing a contraction. According to the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) statistics, between 1996 and 2001 the number of undergraduate applicants to read anthropology fell nationally by 8.5%. The drop is actually worse than this statistic suggests: anthropology’s decline is a disconcerting 25% relative to the increasing numbers of people applying to university in the UK. The recently released 2002 figures show a further 2.7% decline in anthropology entrants this year, which almost inversely matches a 2.8% increase in university entrance overall. The recruitment of postgraduates is likewise difficult.

There is a danger that university authorities, increasingly squeezed for resources and seeking growth opportunities, may not see anthropology as a worthwhile investment. The fall in student numbers raises a most unwelcome spectre. While not wishing to

Conference: Anthropology in trouble? The anthopologist one has to hold an academic post.
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Anthropology students at a practical class in museum ethnography.