Archaeology as a discipline has a uniquely bad publication record, and the last 20 years in Britain have witnessed the growth of a large backlog of unpublished rescue excavations. A number of organisations have addressed this problem by setting up separate fieldwork and post-excavation departments. Unfortunately, this division has tended to exacerbate some of the problems which contributed to the creation of the backlog in the first place, creating an artificial distinction between excavation and post-excavation and interrupting what should as far as possible be a seamless process. It is true that fieldwork and post-excavation call upon different sets of skills, and that employees will have individual strengths and weaknesses, but it is important for the profession as a whole that all its practitioners should have as full as possible an understanding and knowledge of all the processes involved so that overall aims and standards are not warped by narrow specialisation. It was in the hope of soliciting solutions to these problems that the subject of feedback mechanisms was raised for discussion.

As a number of contributors to the discussion agreed, the essential problem is that site records do not always answer the questions which will be asked during post-excavation analysis. A number of units have addressed this by appointing a Records Officer with extensive experience of both fieldwork and post-excavation projects. It is the Records Officer’s job to visit sites in progress and check records in the field, not only for completeness and consistency but also with the requirements of post-excavation in mind. The Records Officer may also be responsible for ordering and curating the record at all stages. One delegate made a connection between the checking of records during the progress of excavation and the concept of units of interpretation, a tier of recording above units of record (ie context records) which encouraged the excavator to make explicit his running interpretation of the site.

A number of speakers emphasised the need for structured training programmes which would provide practical experience of all aspects of archaeology. This need was felt to be particularly acute among more junior site staff, who may be responsible for on-site recording but are rarely involved to any significant extent in the interpretation of the records they have created. The problem is, of course, not confined to junior staff. It is clear to anyone who has worked on backlog sites that in the past it has been possible for archaeologists to accumulate extensive field experience and reach the stage of excavating major sites without having had any substantial exposure to the processes involved in post-excavation.

In his notes on this session, Martin Foreman of Humberside has outlined the benefits to be obtained from the transfer of staff from excavation to post-excavation duties, following a project through from the field to the final report; he also makes the point that arranging this sort of transfer calls for advanced administrative and financial skills and a high priority for staff development, including junior employees. For many organisations the present structure of archaeological funding in Britain, which entails both delays between project phases and the necessity of finding continuous funded work for every employee, makes programming the movement even of senior staff from excavation to post-excavation a complex task; the potential for the creation of individual backlogs is almost built into the system.

It is clear from this discussion session that there is widespread acknowledgement of the need for better communications between those involved in the fieldwork and post-excavation phases of archaeological projects. Practical vocational training in archaeology is also recognised as a priority, but many units would face difficulty in designing, implementing and funding such programmes. This is an area in which the units, the Universities, the IFA and the national bodies could and should co-operate.