

University of Sheffield plans to close world-leading Archaeology Department

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The University Executive Board (UEB) of the University of Sheffield plans to close its world-renowned Department of Archaeology. This act of wanton cultural vandalism could be greenlighted in a matter of weeks—as early as September—with the loss of the remaining 11 jobs.

The University of Sheffield is one of only seven of the 24 Russell Group universities (the UK's highest-ranking) with a dedicated archaeology department. Established in 1976, Sheffield archaeology is currently ranked 5th in the UK, and 12th worldwide. It is conducting groundbreaking and crucial research and teaching, including valuable work at Stonehenge.

Upon hearing of their planned dissolution, the archaeology department tweeted, “As a department we unanimously reject this decision, and the grounds upon which it was made. It will mean the end of Archaeology at Sheffield.”

Archaeology staff, students and supporters have instigated a campaign against the closure and have held several protests. Third-year Sheffield archaeology student Liam Hand set up an online petition to oppose the closure that has garnered over 45,000 signatures so far. The campaign has won significant support from around the world, including from other various world-standard archaeology departments.

Maria, a former student at the Archaeology Department who is now finishing a PhD at the University of Oxford told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I was deeply shocked and saddened when I heard the news that the Archaeology Department is under institutional review which could lead to its dissolution and closure... At Sheffield's Archaeology department I found a true sense of community and an interdisciplinary environment in which we could develop ideas and learn from each-other across a range of subfields. I have yet to find another institution that has reached the same standard.”

Archaeologists from the Sheffield department are working on animal teeth and bones located close to Stonehenge which suggest prehistoric peoples travelled from as far away as northeast Scotland to bring animals to cater to those constructing it. Mike Parker-Pearson, a leading Stonehenge

expert and a former member of the Sheffield department, directs the Stonehenge Riverside Project, which has made a series of major discoveries including evidence of a second Stonehenge two kilometres away. He told the *Guardian*, “Colleagues at Sheffield are working right now on material for my project at Stonehenge, and if they lose their jobs it jeopardises completion of this project which has grabbed the world's media attention over the last 15 years.”

Recently, the Archaeology department has worked on excavations at Sheffield Manor Lodge, where Mary, Queen of Scots was imprisoned, and at the UK's biggest prisoner of war camp in suburban Lodge Moor in southwest Sheffield.

Colleagues at the University of Sheffield's history department affirmed their support for their colleagues declaring, “Archaeologists recover the past in places where our own methodological tools fall short. Such knowledge is vital to research that takes place in our own department.”

The University of Sheffield have attempted to run archaeology into the ground over recent years. Asked during an interview with the WSWS if the department has been subjected to “managed decline”, Professor Umberto Albarella of the archaeology department and a leading figure within world zooarchaeology replied, “Totally, totally, I mean there is no question about the fact that it has been deliberate”. The professor noted, “When I came to Sheffield in 2004 there were 29 permanent staff. Now I think we've got 10 or 11. That gives you a sense of what has been happening.”

Like all higher education institutions, the University of Sheffield is under heavy pressure from the Treasury to reduce costs, student numbers and the Conservative government's exposure to unpaid and underpaid student loans. The protracted and severe job cuts to archaeology have been made simultaneously and in conjunction with the accelerating marketisation and privatisation of higher education that has proceeded under the framework of the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act.

Sheffield's archaeology department was recently placed

under institutional review by the UEB and was found wanting by the marketised “value for money” criteria for higher education. The department is supposedly unable to attract enough undergraduate students and failing to generate sufficient research income.

The UEB plans to close the archaeology department and discontinue archaeology as a coherent academic discipline at Sheffield. They aim to retain only potentially money-making aspects of archaeological research and education. Human osteology and cultural heritage are to go to the departments of medicine and landscape respectively.

Professor Albarella described the arguments about the department not being financially viable as a “red herring” and believes the decision to close the department is driven by ideological calculations by management.

A-levels results for school-leavers wanting to study archaeology at Sheffield were raised from an already relatively high bar, limiting undergraduate numbers, and obstacles were placed in the way of prospective mature students intending to study archaeology at Sheffield. The Pipeline, an investigative digital news magazine, notes in a piece on the planned Sheffield closure, “The upshot of this is that the Archaeology Department was required to make it harder for students to join the department”.

The Pipeline reported that it had seen several emails detailing how university management conveniently disposed of the records of crucial meetings from the review procedure. Pipeline asserts that the university made a calculated attempt to withhold access to crucial documents which contributed towards the fate of the department. Notes and transcripts have been destroyed, denying staff and supporters the opportunity to scrutinise the decision made to close the department. Contrary to university policy, the university claimed the notes and transcripts had to be destroyed because they contained “sensitive information”. Anti-closure campaigners point out that the university maintains sensitive information, like staff evaluations and disciplinary records, for years.

At a meeting held on May 18, students, councilors and academic reps were not made aware they were participants in a departmental review nor that the review could lead to the closure of the department. They were told by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Gill Valentine that the aim of the meeting was to “support the development of the department”.

Students were told they would be consulted and their views considered in a timely and reasonable manner regarding any changes. Instead, say campaigners, last-minute changes and a lack of transparency meant academic reps did not have time to collect students’ opinions, which should have informed the review. A commitment to students to take “reasonable steps to protect your studies” has been

proven a lie. Campaigners say no timeline, preparation, or plans are evident for the closure, leaving students feeling like “an afterthought”, one person told *The Tab*.

The university is also refusing to publish the report upon which the decision to close the department was made. Just a one-hour PowerPoint presentation was shown to academics, which a lecturer in the department, Hugh Willmott, described on Twitter as “pathetically inaccurate”. Professor Albarella described to the WSWS how archaeology staff were not even allowed to speak to the two external assessors employed by the university for the purpose of the review.

Social science, arts and languages departments across the country will soon face the noose if the University of Sheffield succeed in closing archaeology. The university’s history department noted, “As members of the faculty of Arts and Humanities, we are mindful of the wider context of these proposed cuts: the devaluation of the Humanities in our society based on the narrow and misguided criteria of ‘value for money’ recently condemned by the Royal History Society”.

Despite this grave threat, the Sheffield branch of the University and College Union (UCU) has only stated that it is “deeply concerned by the decision... to recommend the closure of the archaeology department”, and warning, “We will be taking the necessary next steps to consult our members on escalating a dispute as soon as we can.”

The UCU’s ritual registering of concern and vague promising of an escalation is a death sentence on any serious struggle. Thousands of jobs have been lost at colleges and universities over the last decade, with the union not lifting a finger, except to insist that they be lost “voluntarily” instead of being imposed. All the UCU has actually done at Sheffield is urge the university to reverse their decision and call on the public to sign the petition and to send messages of support.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on staff and students at the archaeology department to take forward their struggle by establishing a fighting rank-and-file committee, independent of the UCU, which can immediately reach out to university and other workers across the country and internationally. The fight to save the Sheffield archaeology department requires a determined struggle against the whole marketisation of higher education.



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