

An interview with Professor Umberto Albarella on the closure of the University of Sheffield's Archaeology department

Our reporter
1 July 2021

The WSWs interviewed Umberto Albarella, a Professor of Zooarchaeology from the University of Sheffield's Archaeology department, which is threatened with closure.

Describing his role, Professor Albarella said, "I am a zoo archaeologist, a person that studies the past relationship between animals and humans and of course, being an archaeologist, I study the material remains of the past which is what all archaeologists do."

Albarella has been with the University of Sheffield for 17 years, staying because "the university is supposed to serve its community and also it is very much embedded in the city, and it is supposed to open its doors to people coming from all sorts of backgrounds and I liked that approach."

He told our reporter that the Archaeology department is "very much international with lots of contacts all over the world" but added that "it is just as important for us to work locally... I thought it was important for us not to work as a unit separated from the community surrounding this." The department leads archaeological projects based in Sheffield and the Peak District National Park, "in which quite often we also operate together with various community groups." Its staff give "presentations in schools" and participate in "various festivals and initiatives around the city".

Albarella and his colleagues also launched a series of short courses, "important in terms of community engagement", which "open the doors to the extended world, so people come to us and we show them what we do... We keep the costs as little as possible so that they are very inclusive and then you get people from all walks of life coming to us, which means we have

hundreds and hundreds of people coming to us many from local, some others coming from other parts of the country, or even from outside the country."

Asked if there had been a managed decline of the Archaeology department, Albarella replied, "There is no question that there has been a deliberate and managed decline of our department. When I came to Sheffield in 2004 there were 29 permanent team staff members, now we've got 10 or 11. That gives you a sense of what has been happening. The attitude of the university, and it has been for many years, is how can they suck more and more blood from us—just keeping the same activities more or less going on, but with a skeleton staff."

In the last 3-4 years, the attacks on the department have escalated and moved to "deliberate obstruction," Albarella said, including "centralising the decision-making process so that we as a department can make fewer decisions, threatening us constantly, insulting us in all kinds of ways, to the point where many of the staff were getting very depressed by this situation."

Speaking on the planned closure of the department, Albarella said, "I don't know why they want to close us... I don't know what is in the mind of the university management. But I wasn't born yesterday and I have a certain perception as to what they want to do. My speculation is that it is for a combination of factors. Some are perhaps purely coincidental, some are related to some local reality, and some are associated with the broader political context."

Explaining that the claimed financial argument for closing the department "doesn't add up", Albarella pointed to the harm already caused by "the reputational damage the university is having because of this",

“alumni withdrawing funding to the university because of the outrage” and the prospect of students deciding “to boycott the University of Sheffield.” He continued, “My department doesn’t even have a deficit! The University itself has a deficit and it has accrued it over the past few years, but it is only there because of the way that the finances are taken. The University takes 60-70 percent of our earnings from the department, so the financial argument is a red herring.”

Instead, said Albarella, “Let’s look around us and at the political context in which we are operating in. Well, we have an almost far-right government which obviously doesn’t value culture and doesn’t value education but especially believes in a society which has two tiers with the ruling class and the class of people who are supposed to work for them... The message from the government is: one, culture and education are not priorities for us, but also, crucially, they are the privilege of just a few... They don’t want to destroy these fields all together, but they want them to be the privilege for their children. This is the political situation as it is, and of course no one says this explicitly but anybody who has a little bit of knowledge of history and politics can see what is going on.”

Referring to spiralling university tuition fees, Albarella said, “The whole fees issue, regardless of the financial burden that is placed onto people, is a way to preserve the ruling class. There are Masters courses that cost more than £20,000. Who is going to pay for those Masters? Only those that can afford it and then you can attend here and of course there is a job here, and it is just a way to replicate your position of power.”

Albarella described the process of closing the department as one of “manipulation”. He and his colleagues sent a letter to the university Vice-Chancellor several months ago but received no response to their questions. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor also refused to answer questions, telling the department in a meeting that it would be placed under review.

“I have been through reviews before but never this kind. This was a review without a proper conversation. What we had were very formal meetings where basically we were put on trial.

“Incredibly, two external reviewers were appointed, and you would expect that we would have the opportunity to have a frank conversation with this

external reviewer. But nothing. The whole process clearly indicated that they had absolutely zero interest in understanding or listening to us or to our students, and they had an agenda that they were pursuing.”

An eventual meeting with the pro-Vice Chancellor featured “a PowerPoint presentation about the results of the review, which was full of misinformation, wrong information. The work we had to do constantly trying to correct all of this was exhausting. We had to do this as well as our everyday work and to try and correct it was tiring. And then she says, we are considering either investing in or closing your department and in five days the university executive board will decide. Five days which included the weekend.”

In that time Albarella and his colleagues won widespread popular support: “we had a massively successful petition, the students were up in arms, the whole academic community all over the world was up in arms because everybody knows us, we are world known and renowned.”

The university nonetheless decided to close the department. “Throughout the whole process,” Albarella said, “there has never been any transparency, no openness.”

A final decision is due in less than two weeks’ time. Albarella told our reporter: “The staff and students in the department are working cohesively together to stop this. There are no separations between the staff and the students...”

“The final decision will be made by the university council and this will probably be the final death sentence for us, on July 12. Normally, the council have the reputation of just rubber stamping the decisions of the executive board. Having said that, I don’t think the council has ever experienced anything like this.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact