

“Archaeology provides us with a better understanding of humanity and the complex environmental and socio-political contexts that have led us to where we are today”

## University of Sheffield Archaeology student denounces planned closure

**Our reporter**  
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Maria, a former student at the Archaeology Department at the University of Sheffield spoke to the WSWS about its planned closure.

She said, “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.

“I studied for a BSc in Archaeological Sciences at Sheffield and am now finishing a PhD at the University of Oxford. I grew up in Portugal and came to Sheffield because I was seeking a holistic multi-disciplinary degree with strong foundations in science and heritage as well as theoretical, analytical, and practical training. The universities in my home country did not, and still do not, offer a comparable course. I know many other European, international, and even British colleagues, who chose Sheffield for similar reasons.

“The department ranks one of the highest in the UK and the world. There are very few institutions that match its excellence and the breadth of training in a range of specialised sub-disciplines, such as archaeomaterials, landscape archaeology, zooarchaeology, human osteology.

“But I think another aspect that has made it so successful was the incredible level of support and collegiality across academic generations. 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.

“As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to contribute to and participate in public outreach events, develop and conduct scientific research independently and as a team, learn statistical analyses and coding in a statistical programming language, as well as receive training in cutting-edge techniques such as 3D-scanning and modelling. Many of these competencies are highly valued and sought after in the current skilled job market, in addition to the fact that ‘archaeologist’ is listed as a shortage occupation under the UK government guidance for Skilled Worker Visas.

“But regardless of the careers paths graduates take, archaeology is a degree that provides us with a better understanding of humanity and the complex environmental and socio-political contexts that have led us to where we are today. This knowledge is critical to help shape a better future.”

Speaking about the university’s determination to close the department, Maria said, “The university has refused to listen to the voices of staff and students, and the thousands of supporters around the world who sent letters or signed the petition. I was furious when I received a very impersonal reply stating that the University Executive Board [of the University of Sheffield] had decided to retain two courses and dissolve the rest of the department, like this was a great outcome in the circumstances. It shows that the university has totally missed the point—that any option other than supporting the Archaeology Department in its entirety will completely diminish the reputation of archaeology at Sheffield and will result in a major loss

to prospective students, local and national heritage, and the international research community.”

Addressing the marketisation of higher education, which determines the closure of the Archaeology Department and many humanities courses nationwide, Maria said, “I was even more furious when I read that to the suggestion to lower entry grades the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Gill Valentine purportedly said that the university needed to maintain its brand, and that students with lower level grades, referred to as Aldi-products, would damage the reputation of the ‘Marks and Spencer’ university. If this is not a blatant demonstration of how much higher education has become a business, then I don’t know what is. Higher education should be more than just a machine to fill the skilled job market. It’s also about learning about the world around us and gaining transferrable skills that will help us develop as individuals and a community. In this sense arts and humanities are equally important as science, and archaeology is one of the few subjects at the interface of these sectors, which are often pitted against each other.

“More importantly, setting the entry threshold [for archeology] at an impossibly high grade standard is a complete disregard of the diverse learning and social backgrounds of prospective students. Despite being in a fairly good state school in Portugal, I had average grades. I had some brilliant teachers, but also not so good ones, and sometimes I was more interested in hanging out with friends than studying for exams. This is not to say that I didn’t enjoy school, but there were many subjects for one reason or another that I was not passionate about.

“I was passionate about archaeology, so it was not until I started my undergraduate at Sheffield that I was able to reach my academic potential. Many other UK universities asked for grades that I could not achieve, but after Sheffield I went on to do an MSc at UCL and am now doing a PhD at Oxford. While my subsequent academic training has also been important, it was my time as an archaeology student at Sheffield that formed the critical starting point to where I am today.”



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