

University of Sheffield forces through closure of world-renowned archaeology department

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The University of Sheffield has confirmed it will close its renowned archaeology department. Despite widespread local and international revulsion at this act of cultural vandalism, an online petition opposing the closure attracting 45,000 signatures and a campaign by the department's staff, students, and supporters to keep the department open, management decided to close the department.

On July 13, the University Executive Board (UEB) officially ratified recommendations made by the University's Senate in the spring that the department cease to exist. Staff numbers have been reduced in the department for years, with only 11 remaining. An unspecified number of staff will be retained, with management proposing they are attached to other university departments to focus on specialist areas of postgraduate study. Undergraduate study will cease.

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. Staff are conducting groundbreaking and crucial research and teaching, including valuable work at Stonehenge.

Sheffield's Vice-Chancellor Professor Koen Lamberts said the decision to close the department had been made "in the face of challenging external pressures, not least a declining interest in studying archaeology by undergraduates." No mention was made of how management have deliberately run down the department over a protracted period.

Professor Umberto Albarella, a zooarchaeologist who has been with the department since 2004, asked rhetorically in the local press, "Who is going to go to a department that is going to close?"

Undergraduate courses will be rapidly phased out by university management that is responsible for declining

applications, halving the number of staff, raising the entry level qualifications for school leavers and created obstacles to mature students' access.

Lamberts asserted that archaeology would still be taught at the university "through focusing on postgraduate studies." He added, "This decision will ensure that many fantastic projects and the outstanding work our staff and students undertake with partners and communities within the city and far beyond it will continue to enrich our cultural heritage, knowledge of the past and people's lives."

Listening only to the vice-chancellor, one would imagine the department was expanding operations, not closing down.

Archaeology department members told the media that they received the news in a meeting chaired by the vice-chancellor that lasted just 13 minutes. Staff were not even given the opportunity to interject or speak. They were kept on mute for the duration of the brief online meeting.

A departmental statement on the confirmation of closure read, "We received this information in a presentation which lasted 13 minutes. There was no ability to engage or respond as our microphones and cameras were kept off the entire time. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the decision taken by the university as well as the rudeness and lack of professionalism of the form of communication chosen. This is a decision that harms both the university and the city of Sheffield, within which our department is strongly embedded. Our campaign to oppose this calamitous decision will continue."

Professor Albarella told the *Sheffield Star*, "The whole process has been incompetent, unimpressive and rude." Regarding the university's claim that a drop in numbers wanting to study archaeology was a major factor in the decision, he continued, "To say they have only 10 students in the cohort is manipulation of the worst kind. They spent the last few years discouraging students to

come to Sheffield. If I was an archaeology student the last place I would go is Sheffield.”

Professor Albarella played a major role in helping establish the department as one renowned globally. He said, “I feel ignored, trampled on, we have worked our socks off for years doing the job of two people. They have not invested in us.”

Regarding his future employment prospects, he said, “I will have to evaluate things very carefully, I have a family to feed. I believed in the Sheffield project. I believe that this university was supposed to serve its city and the working class. If I had been asked to work at Cambridge I would have said no. But it will be difficult to work with this administration. This decision will leave the university in ridicule.”

PhD archaeology student at the university Bronwen Stone told the *Sheffield Star*, “It’s not good news. They seem to think that by making a couple of modules in other faculties they will be able to maintain archaeology. It’s the end for archaeology in terms of the university... Students and teachers are upset that their voices have not been heard. We’re going to keep fighting, we’re not giving up.”

The department faces the catastrophe of closure, despite the willingness of staff and students to fight, due to the refusal of the University and College Union (UCU) to lift a finger in opposition.

On July 15, two days after the decision to close the department was taken, the UCU web site reported, “In a meeting of over 200 members, University of Sheffield UCU voted to ballot for sustained industrial action during the autumn semester if the university does not reverse its decision to close the archaeology department.” University of Sheffield UCU branch officer Robyn Orfitelli told the *Sheffield Star*, “We will escalate our fight until management is willing to listen.”

No confidence can be placed in the UCU to act on its last-minute threat to organise industrial action in the autumn. It has delayed any action until now so that closure can proceed as planned, not to fight it. The UCU has collaborated with universities to cut jobs in their thousands and close departments over the last decade, as the ruling elite’s offensive against the right to higher education has intensified. At most the UCU demands that jobs be lost “voluntarily” instead of being imposed.

Just in the first months of the pandemic—between March 1 and September 20—UK universities carried through over 3,000 redundancies according to Freedom of Information requests by educational platform, Edvoy. The education

unions, primarily the UCU, did nothing to prevent any of these. The University of Sheffield recorded 424 redundancies, the majority of whom were staff on fixed-term contracts that were not renewed. The University of Manchester carried out 528 redundancies.

Prior to the final announcement to close one of its major humanities department, all the UCU did at Sheffield was appeal to the university to reverse their decision, call on the public to sign the petition and to send messages of support. The University Executive Board treated the petition and messages of support as waste paper to be binned.

In its annual report, covering the period to August 31, 2020, the UCU lists 536 ballots for industrial action, testifying to members desire to fight attacks by management and oppose the marketisation of higher education. Of these ballots, just 12 resulted in the UCU sanctioning an actual strike. Five other disputes were restricted to action short of a strike.

The decision to shut archeology in Sheffield is part of a wave of course closures in the arts, languages, humanities and social sciences, derided by the Tory government as “dead-end courses” which are “uneconomic” to run and do not serve the interests of business.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on archaeology department staff and students take forward their struggle by establishing a fighting rank-and-file committee, independent of the UCU, which can reach out to university and other workers across Britain and internationally. To discuss the way forward in establishing a rank-and-file committee contact the SEP here.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
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