

# Australian students use Internet to defend threatened media course

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Students at the Charles Sturt University in the regional Australian city of Bathurst occupied the campus Media Centre on Friday, and boycotted classes yesterday, in opposition to plans to terminate the Media Production course next year.

In what is a first for university student protests, the focus of the occupation has been maintaining a campaign website, the 'Multimedia Press Centre', featuring appeals for support, press releases, a message board and real-time video broadcasts of the student actions.

The website has enabled the students to quickly assemble support from high-profile past students of the university currently working in the Australian media, and broadly disseminate information both within Australia and internationally.

The site is located at:  
<http://pages.hotbot.com/edu/protest/index.html>

Over 400 students are studying six media-related fields in Charles Sturt's Communication school, which was established over two decades ago. Graduates from the university are highly regarded, with 86 percent finding employment in the media industry.

The Media Production course employs one lecturer and is structured to train specialists in digital media, radio and video technologies.

Its primary facility is the university's Media Centre—the site of the student occupation—which is equipped with computers, cameras, recording tools and editing and design software. The Centre and its equipment are used by all strands of the Communication school to familiarise students with the technologies they would work with in journalism, the theatre, advertising or public relations.

Despite the centrality of the course facilities to the quality and prestige of the Communications degree, the

university administration announced that Media Production would not be offered to first year students in 2000 and a restructured course called Online Media Production would begin in 2001.

Student and staff opposition has focussed on the lack of detail as to nature of the new course, the delay in its initiation and the impact on the Communication degree as a whole. The new course name suggests it would not cover television or radio production. Questions have been raised about a possible transfer of resources out of the Media Centre not directly related to online publishing, such as radio equipment.

Fears were heightened by statements issued by the Faculty of Arts, of which Communications is a part, that 'online media' had more in common with graphic design than with media production and would be taught within a Graphic Arts course next year.

Yesterday, following discussions between student representatives and the administration, a statement was made that the new Online Media Production course will now be offered in 2000, subject to approval by the Faculty of Arts of a course outline on Wednesday. No details have yet been released however, as to the implications on curriculum offered, staffing levels, student intake numbers or the type of equipment that will be maintained in the Media Centre.

The course restructuring underway at Charles Sturt is taking place within a definite climate. The restructuring or termination of courses, and even entire faculties, is sweeping through the Australian higher education system as universities pass on the impact of \$500 million in budget cuts imposed by the federal government since 1996.

Increasingly orientated to filling a permitted quota of full-fee paying students and attracting corporate sponsorship, the once fully publicly funded universities

are tailoring course curriculums to meet stated industry requirements or perceived market opportunities, and at the same time cut staff and equipment costs.



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