

Australian university students occupy campus over substandard conditions

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Students at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Macarthur-Bankstown campus have occupied the Student Centre building since October 27 and intend to remain until the administration meets a list of 26 demands. The action is the product of pent-up frustration at the substandard conditions throughout the university and the increasing cost of tertiary education.

With three campuses and six main sites in Sydney's working class outer suburbs, UWS is one of Australia's newest tertiary institutions. It was established in 1989 by merging various scattered teacher training and other tertiary colleges into a university to help cope with the rising demand for higher education by youth from middle and lower income families.

The Bankstown campus itself is situated within an industrial estate that is home to large factories such as Hawker de Havilland, the Kirby's engineering plant and a BHP Steel facility. UWS enrolments have risen rapidly, from 11,500 in 1989 to 25,000 last year. Nearly 70 percent of the students live in western Sydney and 60 percent of UWS graduates are the first in their families to achieve a degree.

The entire Australian university system has been embroiled in cost-cutting since 1996, when the federal government slashed the tertiary education budget by 11 percent, or some \$600 million. Denied adequate state funding, universities have sought to pass on the impact by restricting staffing levels, abolishing courses and eliminating or charging for student services. Instructed to generate their own revenue, universities like UWS and those in regional areas have been plunged into an unequal competition with the older and more prestigious colleges for private sponsorship and direct fee-paying students.

The situation at UWS Bankstown has reached crisis point. Understaffing saw most classes throughout the

year contain 30-35 students. With the academic year drawing to a close, rumours were circulating that up to 40 more staff would be cut over the summer break and several more courses abolished. Fears were also mounting that students would face a range of new fees and charges when they returned next year. The occupation began after administrators refused to address a student rally and deny the rumours.

The students are demanding that current staffing levels be maintained and that the administration commit to reducing class sizes to a maximum of 15 students by mid-next year and guarantee no face-to-face learning is replaced via the Internet. Students described "Internet tutorials" and "Internet lectures," which consist of little more than students logging on to the web pages of their subject and printing out the text.

Students are also calling for a guarantee that no charges will be introduced for car parking, late library borrowing and the printing of various timetables and course outlines. They want increased consultation with the student body; improved campus security; and 24-hour access to computer labs.

One of the most significant aspects of the UWS student action is its concern with the lack of support, counseling and crisis assistance for international students, most of whom are paying direct fees in excess of \$1,200 per subject per semester, or close to \$10,000 per year. On top of this, they face living and study expenses.

Contrary to myth, the majority of overseas students are not from the wealthy elite of their home countries, but from professional and middle class families. Many face extreme personal hardships while studying in Australia. While university education has become one of Australia's largest "exports", overseas students are denied any student concessions and face tight

restrictions on their ability to work.

The occupation has won support both from the student body at the campus and from the surrounding area. A delegation of metal workers from the neighbouring Kirby's factory attended a student rally on November 4. A further rally will be held tomorrow. To this point the action has not spread to the other UWS campuses and staff have taken no supporting industrial action.

In a reply to the students issued on November 3, the university acceded to student demands on new charges, but stated it would give no guarantees past December next year, due to ongoing restructuring and an expectation of further government budget cuts. In relation to staffing issues and class sizes it did little more than express "sympathy". It has not responded on the demand relating to international students.

The student occupation reveals the growing social tension over government education policy. Not only are budget cuts lowering education quality, but the eligibility criteria for the government student income allowance, Austudy, has left the majority of students unable to receive assistance. Even when students are eligible, the amount paid is often as low as \$230 per fortnight.

The general decline in living standards over the past 15 years has left many families unable to support their children while they study. Thousands of full-time university students are forced to work over 30 hours per week. The immediate difficulty of supporting themselves is only part of the economic burden they face. As they study, they are accumulating a HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) debt—the system of deferred university fees introduced by the Labor party government in the 1980s, which students must pay after they have entered the workforce. A student graduating from a three-year degree course can now be liable for a debt of over \$15,000.

The point is being approached where youth from working class backgrounds will be effectively excluded from higher education altogether. Already, only 9 percent of students are from the lowest 25 percent income bracket. This situation can only be addressed by the restoration of free tuition, the provision of universal student allowances and a massive injection of government funding into tertiary education.



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