

Australian universities increase fees despite student protests

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Nationwide protests against fee increases saw students occupy university premises in both Sydney and Melbourne on March 31, followed by further blockades and protests this week. Thousands of students joined last week's demonstrations, including rallies in Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart, Canberra and regional centres.

Despite the protests, 12 universities have already announced fee hikes that will become effective in 2005. All but three have imposed the maximum 25 percent rise in Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments permitted by the Howard government's Higher Education Reform Act, passed last December. Another 20 universities are yet to declare their position, but many are expected to opt for the maximum rise in order to offset crippling cuts in government funding.

In Sydney last week, state police used capsicum spray against 500 students who attempted to occupy the vice chancellor's office at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Two students were arrested. Later 80 students occupied the Great Hall at UTS for several hours. After a state MP protested at the use of capsicum spray without warning, police spokesman Steve Thompson told the media it was appropriate to "give [protesters] a spray".

In Melbourne, following a rally attended by around 1,000 students, a section of the crowd broke away and entered nearby RMIT university, where a decision is pending on fee increases. About 200 students entered the administration block, and some 100 students reached the seventh-floor vice chancellor's office. Meanwhile, police and security staff violently cleared students from the ground floor foyer.

Upstairs, the occupying students barricaded themselves in with filing cabinets and bookshelves and formulated a series of demands for RMIT vice

chancellor Ruth Dunkin, including that the university council decide not to increase fees and conduct a referendum of staff and students on the issue. Dunkin was contacted by phone, but insisted students had already been consulted and refused to negotiate.

The occupation continued for about seven hours until police surged into the chancellery. The remaining 70 students formed a line chanting, "No fees for degrees" while baton-wielding police dragged individual students away. Police elbowed and kicked Radio 3AW journalist Ahron Young, angry that a media representative was recording their actions. "They definitely used unnecessary force, and had removed their name badges," he said.

The students were eventually herded down the stairwells, as they linked arms and kept chanting. At the bottom of the stairs, police demanded their names and addresses, but the students refused and were allowed to leave the building without arrests. Police evicted another group of 25 students who had occupied the RMIT library.

While police media spokesman Kevin Loomes denied there was "unnecessary" force, Yorrn Pelekanakis, a first year student at Melbourne University, described the police actions to WSWs.

"The police dragged me out of the lift and assaulted me. They pushed me against the wall and then pushed me to the ground. I was bleeding from an injury to the head. I wanted to get down the stairs, but I wasn't going fast enough, so they pushed me. There was a policeman on a horse outside. I tried to get away, but he smashed my head against the wall. The police refused to call an ambulance. When an ambulance did come down, I was able to get inside, and was told I could need stitches."

Hundreds of students demonstrated on April 5 to

block university meetings in Sydney and Melbourne. A meeting of the Sydney University Senate was cancelled after students blockaded gates of the building where it was to be held. Students threw themselves in front of Senators' cars, in protest at the Senate's "in principle" support for 25 percent fee hikes.

At Melbourne University, the university council moved to a secret location in order to approve 25 percent fee rises for most courses, a decision expected to net the university \$5.4 million in 2005. Student protesters broke police lines and blockaded the Old Arts building where the meeting was to take place.

Jackie, a graduate music student at Melbourne University, told WSWs: "The actual cuts won't affect me, as I'm on a scholarship. But I'm opposed to a situation where only those with money can afford an education, in other words where education is privatised. What should happen is that education should be funded properly at the secondary level so that everyone has a fair opportunity to go to university. A lot of Australians don't agree that people by virtue of their bank balance should be advantaged or disadvantaged in their education. I know my parents share that view."

Steven Giblett, another Melbourne graduate student, told WSWs that although the fee rises would not affect him personally, "I promote free education... There are going to be costs for a whole generation with what is happening." Giblett said funding cuts had produced deteriorating conditions in universities. "Even when I was at Monash [University] for two years we had a lot of problems—facilities were run down and decrepit and our studios were in poor condition. At the same time the government is closing down facilities in amalgamations.

The rush by cash-starved universities to raise fees confirms that last December's legislation represents a qualitative turning point in the "user pays" agenda that was initially introduced by the Hawke Labor government in the 1980s. Labor abolished free tertiary education and introduced HECS, forcing students to repay a substantial portion of the cost of their degrees after they graduated.

Now, with increases of 25 percent, typical HECS payments will be \$15,000 for an arts degree, \$20,000 for a science degree and \$40,000 for a law degree. These levels will drive students deeper into poverty and life-long debt—the national total of HECS debts is

already reported to be nearly \$9 billion. Poorer students will be forced to abandon their hopes of tertiary education, while the remaining students will come under greater pressure to join a new government loan scheme in order to pay full up-front fees.

The legislation also allows universities to increase their full fee-paying places to 35 percent of enrolments, requiring students to pay up to \$150,000 for an undergraduate degree. Full fee places will inevitably expand at the expense of HECS places, lengthening the list—already at about 30,000—of qualified students denied university places each year. Increasingly, the norm will be that students will have to pay full fees to get into the course of their choice, or even to simply go to university.



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