

New Zealand universities shed “non-core” courses

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The University of Canterbury (UC) and Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) will announce decisions on course-cutting during the coming mid-term break.

The College of Arts governance group at UC has issued a proposal to eliminate the departments of Theatre and Film Studies and American Studies, as well as to make cuts in the School of Fine Arts, with a loss of twenty-one jobs. Staff were granted six weeks to submit counter-proposals, though this was during the busy beginning of the academic year. The cuts have been justified on the basis that the courses are not “core” and can be removed in order to redress the College’s NZ\$1.8 million (\$US1.4 million, €908,000) shortfall. This is despite the fact that UC has been recording consistent surpluses in excess of NZ\$6 million.

VUW, currently running an NZ\$11.3 million surplus, aims at more modest cuts. The university intends to transform its department of Film Studies into the department of Cinema Studies, shedding two academic staff on the way. VUW staff were given only three weeks to prepare submissions, and the local Student Association (VUWSA) only received second-hand notification a week later. In response to a student outcry, the university later relaxed its deadline.

Deeply unpopular is the likely consequence that VUW courses teaching the practical skills of film production and scriptwriting will be unavailable to undergraduates. For film students interested in practical instruction, the change amounts to a *de facto* fee increase of thousands of dollars. Based on this year’s fees, a domestic Film major at VUW would expect to pay around NZ\$11,000 over three years, with the option of deferring costs through the government student loan scheme. Adding just one year of graduate study pushes the total up to almost NZ\$16,000. For film students from overseas, who must pay their tuition costs up-front each term and already face fees of over NZ\$30,000, the prospective increase in tuition costs comes to nearly NZ\$17,500.

A further plan to cut staff and courses was announced at VUW’s College of Education on the March 31. The justification was a “budget blowout” in the faculty of NZ\$1.7 million, and will lead to the loss of up to 24 jobs.

Such proposals are no aberration. On the contrary, they are typical of the trajectory throughout the public sector since the “reforms” of the 1984-1990 Labour government. In 1989, tertiary education was shifted onto a market footing, with the imposition of flat-rate fees under the associate minister of education, Phil Goff.

Voting out the Labour government in 1990 did nothing to halt this trend. In 1991, the new National government allowed tertiary educators to set their own fees and brought in a new public funding scheme based on the Equivalent Full Time Student (EFTS)

model—known more colloquially as “bums on seats” funding. The combination of these factors saw fees rise by an average 13 percent through the 1990s, while EFTS funding fell from nearly three-quarters of universities’ total operating revenue to less than half.

Aside from a fee freeze in 2001-2003, the Labour-led government of Prime Minister Helen Clark has presided over continued rises in university fees toward an ever-increasing Fee and Course Costs Maxima. While the rate of increase has declined since the 1990s, universities routinely raise fees by the 5 percent annual maximum that Labour’s policies allow, and some apply for and receive exemptions to allow for increases of as much as 10 percent.

At the same time, the Clark government has shifted tertiary education policy with the introduction of new funding schemes, oriented towards lifting the number of post-graduate students and the quantity of research. Reports on these reforms have been surprisingly frank in identifying, among their aims, “[fostering] a skilled and knowledgeable population” and increasing the contribution of research to “national economic development”.

The tattered banner of “high quality learning” flies over this careful tailoring of the education system to the needs of “stakeholders”—a euphemism for employers and the business elite. Universities have been increasingly forced, over the past twenty years, to turn towards sponsorship and the provision of courses that will fill lecture theatres to the brim in order to generate funding.

The end result is a system geared entirely towards the immediate needs of the “market”—at the direct expense of the educational, social and intellectual needs of students.

Currently developments at the University of Auckland, the country’s biggest, provide a stark example. The university’s council voted in December to limit the number of students able to access “open entry” courses in arts, sciences, education, theology and first year law—i.e., courses that allow access to anyone who meets the general criteria for university entrance. The university argued that rapid growth and changes to the government’s funding regime meant it had to slow the rising numbers of undergraduates and boost the proportion of postgraduate students.

Those who will suffer most are students seeking to enter the university from working class areas. This is of no concern to the ruling elite. The *Dominion Post* applauded the measure on the basis that it represented a move away from “pervading egalitarianism”. In a sneering reference to working class students, the paper proclaimed that universities should not be “a repository for kids who believe attendance is their birthright but need remedial English lessons before they begin.... A varsity education should be reserved for the very brightest and the best.”

What this means in terms of University of Auckland's priorities was indicated by the opening in February of a new \$220 million business school. The custom-designed facility is named the Owen G Glenn Building after its chief benefactor, a multi-millionaire businessman and Labour Party funder, who donated \$7.5 million towards the project. It will bring together 480 staff and 7867 students in order to develop, according to the school's head, a first-class business school, featuring partnerships with the business community to "prepare middle and senior level managers to compete in global markets".

While posturing as "opponents" of the recent cuts, the student associations have restricted themselves to criticising inadequate "consultation" with university administrations. At a 300-strong meeting of the Auckland University Students' Association late last month, students voted overwhelmingly to oppose the elimination of open entry. Yet the students association's response was to put forward resolutions condemning the university's "complete failure" to consult students, and then to threaten legal action.

Liz Hawes, co-president of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA), similarly criticised the "lack of process and transparency" in the course cuts at Canterbury and VUW. She has, apparently, just discovered that there is an "absolute inappropriateness" for universities to compete against one another, and that "education ... is no longer the priority for many public tertiary institutions". She has called on the Clark government to solve these problems.

Hawes is no babe in the woods. She is one of the longest-serving student politicians in New Zealand, having spent thirteen years in Massey University's Extra-Mural Students Association (EXMSS). She spent nine of those years as the organisation's president, where she presided over the professionalisation of EXMSS and developed its role as a lobby group. Her new role as co-president of NZUSA is not the result of any direct election by the 180,000 students its component organisations claim as members. Rather, Hawes was elected by representatives of the university student associations in order to fulfil a "vision" of making New Zealand's parliamentary parties "aware of the tertiary issues as they affect students" and lobbying those parties to adopt "student-friendly" policies as part of their manifestos for the 2008 national elections.

To the universities, Hawes offers kindly advice that the courses under threat are in fact relevant, well-attended and will produce more post-graduate students given time. To the parties of big business, she politely suggests the tactic of courting the student vote. In her role as consultant to big business and its political representatives, Hawes asks only that NZUSA not be called in at the last minute.

For students themselves, Hawes has nothing but political deceit. She claims that the universities are engaged in "misuse of the tertiary reforms", when the precise purpose of Labour's reforms has been to subject the universities to the discipline of the market. Hawes seeks to promote illusions in the possibility of pressuring Labour to change tack—under conditions where Clark has simply taken further what Labour started in the 1980s. Today, Phil Goff holds a cabinet post and has even been floated as a possible successor to Prime Minister Helen Clark.

As for the student associations—the traditional home of "radical" activists and budding Labour bureaucrats—they have become increasingly moribund, particularly as years of failed protest politics and "consultations" over rising fees have resulted in the alienation of the majority of students.

University of Canterbury Student Association (UCSA) president

Michael Goldstein owes his position to the support of just over a thousand students out of a total roll of nearly eighteen thousand. In response to the threat to Film Studies and American Studies, UCSA has advised students to write submissions in reply to the proposed changes. For interested parties struggling to frame their thoughts, UCSA offers a model on their web site. This friendly letter of advice to the College of Arts explains that the forthcoming action "could potentially conflict with the imperatives and goals explicitly set forth in the [University of Canterbury] Charter". In essence, UCSA suggests that students think long and hard about how they can help the university to increase profits, in line with its business plan.

Close at hand to NZUSA's offices in Wellington, VUWSA deputy president Paul Brown faithfully parroted the official line and claimed that, "An open and transparent process which states the impacts on students and staff is ultimately what we want." Perhaps this is what the student associations want—but for students and staff, the demand is for a high quality, free, tertiary education and well-paid jobs.

VUWSA president Joel Cosgrove, a self-styled "Revolutionary on Campus" and member of the so-called Worker's Party, has taken a more left-sounding stance. But this is simply to disorient students and provide yet another political cover for the Clark government. Cosgrove's latest explanation of the current state of affairs is the suggestion that "someone in Senior Management Team failed FILM 101". Before calling for a protest march, aimed at making "the University aware of what they're facing" he declared that "ultimately it does not matter if students and staff overwhelmingly oppose this proposal and voice their concerns."

The vast majority of students at VUW are aware of the uselessness of "their" association. Over twenty thousand students are enrolled at the university, but less than a hundred have turned out to VUWSA protests against the cuts to the film programme. Even if they were in any doubt that trudging behind the student associations offers no solution to the global attack on public education, Cosgrove has made the matter perfectly clear. The main purpose for students to attend one of VUWSA's protests is to partake of the accompanying free sausage sizzle.

New Zealand students cannot defend their right to education simply by abstaining from such stunts. There is a real alternative to watching rising fees with a shaking fist or a shaking head, and a real alternative to the multi-hued parties of big business, including Clark Labour. That alternative is to join the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), to take part in the building of an independent political movement of the working class, in New Zealand and around the world, and the struggle for a genuinely democratic and egalitarian society, based on social need, not private profit.



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