

Retrenchments hit Australian universities

Carolyn Robinson
23 December 2011

A wave of retrenchments and budget cuts has hit academics and professional staff at Australian universities in recent weeks, providing an early warning of the sharp cuts and other shocks to come in 2012, the first year of the Gillard Labor government's market-driven funding system.

The University of Sydney last month announced plans to cut 340 positions—150 academics and 190 professional staff—representing about 7.5 percent of its workforce. Victoria University in Melbourne later said it was seeking up to 80 voluntary redundancies.

Macquarie University is carrying out forced redundancies in several departments after cutting almost 70 staff earlier in the year and there are job cuts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales. La Trobe, Monash and Melbourne University plan to cut costs through forced redundancies, reduced hours or non-replacement of departing staff.

The cuts will also cull academics who are deemed to be insufficiently productive or attuned to the new funding requirements, which will make universities increasingly dependent on meeting the vocational training and commercial demands of major employers. In a video to staff, Sydney University's vice chancellor, Michael Spence, said the university "can no longer carry members of staff who are not pulling their weight."

Universities are slashing their budgets and restructuring their workforces in preparation for Prime Minister Julia Gillard's new funding scheme, under which they will be financed according to the number of students enrolled. Divisive competition is already underway, as universities poach students from each other. Sharp and unpredictable fluctuations in enrolments and hence funding are certain to mean more job cuts, combined with closures or mergers of entire departments and universities.

Enterprise agreements struck at individual universities over the past two years by the National Tertiary Education

Union (NTEU) have ensured that the managements have full "workplace flexibility" to replace permanent staff with casual, part-time or temporary employees, in keeping with the Gillard government's "education revolution."

The number of job losses is greater than officially reported because many faculties are cutting back on casual teaching staff. One recent report estimated that 60 percent of the academic workforce at Australian universities were casuals. The University of Queensland has slashed \$600,000 from the casual teaching budget in its Faculty of Arts. Similar cuts have surfaced at Macquarie University and Adelaide University.

Decades of underfunding by successive federal governments have left universities in serious financial straits, increasingly reliant on commercial sources of funding, in particular international student fees. In 2007, the NTEU backed the election of a Labor government that would supposedly reverse the situation, but the opposite has taken place.

La Trobe University Vice Chancellor Paul Johnson told the *Australian* in October: "The likelihood is that some universities will fail in the demand driven system." The government clearly anticipates this possibility. In September, it announced an insurance scheme to protect international students' fees in the event of a university going under.

With the global financial crisis also cutting international student numbers, university managements are reshaping the academic workforce. Teaching-only positions increased by 105 percent between 2000 and 2010, and by a further 52 percent in the past year. This is creating a new underclass of academics who are denied permanent job security and promotion possibilities, which invariably hinge on research grants and publications.

Student-staff ratios have continued to soar under Labor. Already high in 2000 at 24.8 students for every teaching

staff member, the official average in 2010 was 34.1. The real situation is worse because these statistics include part-time staff. A recalculation showed there were 40.2 students for every full-time equivalent staff member in 2010. During the past decade, coursework student numbers rose by 71.5 percent, but teaching and administrative staff numbers increased by only 38 percent.

This month's release of a government funding review confirmed there would be no increase in funding per student. Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said the government's response would necessarily take account of the current fiscal environment and budget constraints. "As I have previously made clear, expectations of new funding must be tempered," he said.

In a November mini-budget Treasurer Wayne Swan announced another \$640 million cut to funding, on top of those made in January in a supposed response to the floods crisis in Queensland.

Entire departments and disciplines are under threat, as universities seek to cut areas that have relatively small enrolments and drive up the number of students in popular courses that are cheap to teach. La Trobe University has announced a levy on faculties that have units with less than 20 students.

Students face larger and fewer classes. Macquarie University arts and science departments are abolishing tutorials for some units and creating groups of 50 or more students for other units. As a result of the government's reintroduction of compulsory services and amenities fees, students will also have to pay nearly \$300 per year up-front, on top of their tuition (HECS) fees, which range up to \$9,425 per year. In addition, fees for science, statistics and mathematics students will nearly double to \$8,353 per year.

Five hundred staff attended a union meeting at Sydney University last month to oppose the cuts, but the NTEU is diverting staff anger behind a dead end plan to lobby university management. The union is distracting attention from the Labor government, and the need for a struggle against its pro-business agenda.

NTEU Sydney University branch president Michael Thomson, an ex-radical from the International Socialist Organisation, said "staff were paying the price of the university's budgeting error." In other words, the cuts resulted from bad management, not Labor's "education revolution." Thomson told the *Australian* that the NTEU

would "abide by the Enterprise Agreement," which allows the university to impose restructuring, so long as it follows a process of consultation with the union.

At other universities too, the union has blamed poor management or "rogue" vice chancellors. NTEU New South Wales state secretary Genevieve Kelly said "the job cuts at the current time were nonsensical and unfair" and "managements ... have taken the irresponsible step of cutting jobs."

At La Trobe University, the NTEU branch president openly sided with the management, saying the university had no choice but to take action given the seriousness of its budget problems. The NTEU, whose executive includes members of Labor, the Greens and pseudo left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, welcomed Labor's "student demand-driven" model two years ago. NTEU officials continue to insist, despite Labor's record, that Gillard's Labor-Green minority government is a "lesser evil" than the Liberals.

Only by organising independently can university staff begin to wage any struggle to defend their jobs and conditions against the Labor government and its corporate agenda. A first step is the establishment of rank-and-file committees and a turn to students and other sections of workers who are also confronting an assault on their living standards.

Such a fight requires a socialist perspective. Universities must be fully funded public institutions, freely available to all, run in the interests of the intellectual and cultural development of students and staff. That is only possible under socialism, whose guiding principle is the satisfaction of human need rather than private profit.

The author recommends:

Union seeks to ram through pro-market deal at Australia's Macquarie University
[27 July 2011]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact