

Cost-cutting taking place across Australian universities

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Less than two weeks after the Gillard Labor government declared that higher education had been “spared” from cutbacks in its 2012 budget, a new round of job losses has been revealed at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney. The sackings at UNSW are the latest in a series of cuts taking place to departments and jobs at universities across Australia, with the complicity of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

At least 10 positions have been eliminated in UNSW’s Computer, Science and Engineering (CSE) school, according to the NTEU. The Student Representative Council at UNSW told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the real number of jobs shed is 30, including voluntary redundancies that were agreed to one week prior to the announcement.

The university administration told UNSW staff that the reason for the job cuts was a loss of revenue. Funding for universities is not determined by what is necessary to provide high quality education, but is instead directly linked to variable student enrolments. Student numbers in the CSE school have reportedly declined by a third over the past decade, triggering the cuts and layoffs of highly trained educators, despite the prospect that enrolments could increase again next year.

The destruction of jobs in the CSE school comes on top of a cost-cutting freeze on the hiring of casual staff in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Working conditions at universities have been eroded to the point that close to 50 percent of academics and lecturers who teach undergraduate courses have only insecure casual positions, often on six-month contracts.

Another 32 staff at UNSW are likely to lose their jobs due to the outsourcing of the university’s gym. Other cuts include the demolition of a dance studio and

funding reductions to the College of Fine Arts. The Student Representative Council believes that further job losses are being planned in the History and Philosophy departments and the university technical support unit.

The cutbacks at UNSW follow attacks on jobs at other universities. At the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, all 32 staff in the music department will be sacked at the end of the year and their positions eliminated. They will then have the option of applying for 20 new jobs in a restructured and substantially down-sized department. ANU is in consultation with the ACT Chamber of Commerce and Industry to establish a business “consortium” to manage its finances.

At the University of Sydney, 23 academics were made redundant on May 7, on top of 32 jobs eliminated by voluntary redundancies in previous weeks. The NTEU claimed at a meeting on May 9 that the job losses were a “big win”, as the administration had initially announced that as many as 140 academic positions would be eliminated, as well as 190 general staff jobs. The union cancelled a protest rally that had been planned for later this month, because of this “win.”

University management is in fact proceeding with its budget cutting agenda. A lecturer attending the May 9 meeting told the WSWs that 110 academics have already been forced into teaching-only roles, which strips them of conditions associated with a tenured post.

Over the past year, jobs have also been destroyed at Macquarie University in Sydney and the University of Queensland. The *Australian Financial Review* reported this month that cuts are planned at the campuses of Victoria University due to budget shortfalls caused by a drop in student enrolments.

The cost-cutting flows directly from the fact that universities have been transformed over several decades from institutions of learning into corporate entities that compete with one another for sources of revenue—of which students are the largest.

The amount of funding per student provided by the government is grossly insufficient. A major study into university funding last year recommended an urgent 10 percent increase in base annual grants, due to the overall increase in the number of young people enrolling into university. The recent Labor government's budget provided only 3.8 percent.

At the beginning of this year, the government lifted the limits on how many students universities could enrol, setting in motion an even more ferocious struggle for numbers. Some universities, such as Victoria University, suffered declines in enrolments, while others have over-enrolled, leading to overcrowding.

Lack of funds has driven university administrations to slash any area that is deemed unprofitable—regardless of its educational and societal value—and to seek out alternative resources. There is now intense competition between universities for corporate sponsorship and also government research grants that currently make up 8 percent of total university sector revenue. At the same time, administrators have a direct incentive to casualise their academic and general workforce, so to more easily eliminate staff if student numbers drop over the course of the year. A spokeswoman for UNSW bluntly told Australian Associated Press that the “the demand-driven system increases pressure to respond in a short time frame.”

The pressures on universities will only increase as the Labor government seeks to achieve the budget surplus it has promised the financial markets. As in the US, Canada and Europe, the austerity agenda now being imposed in Australia will inevitably see further cuts to education funding and higher student fees. Universities have already increased the fees they charge international students to compensate for a fall in enrolments.

At each university where jobs and conditions are being destroyed, the NTEU has covered up the role of the Labor government by claiming that cost-cutting is simply the result of the incompetence or vindictiveness of particular vice-chancellors. In every case, it has channeled opposition into futile denunciations of the

administrators while negotiating with them behind the scenes to allow the cutbacks to proceed. The pseudo-left organisations active on the campuses, such as the Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, have in turn covered up for the NTEU. Like the union, they claim that the cuts are the product of mismanagement—not the outcome of the Labor government's university funding mechanisms and the subordination of education to the dictates of the capitalist market.

A genuine campaign against the budget cutting and deteriorating state of university education can only be developed as a political struggle against the Labor government, the unions and their pseudo-left apologists. It must be directly linked up with a broader struggle by the entire working class for the socialist perspective of establishing a workers' government and placing the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic control. The defence and expansion of the fundamental social right to free and high quality higher education, for everyone who wants it, requires nothing less than the socialist reorganisation of economic life on a world scale, to meet social need, not private profit.



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