

Australia: Students and staff protest University of Western Sydney cuts

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Students and academics at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) yesterday protested against sweeping cuts to courses and jobs by the university. The measures were unveiled on the eve of the final exam period when both staff and students were pre-occupied with studies.

The cutbacks follow similar downsizing at other Australian universities, flowing from the Gillard government's "education revolution" blueprint, which forces tertiary education institutions to compete for inadequate federal funding. In the guise of opening up greater opportunities for university study, the government has tied funding to actual student enrolments, leading to fierce battles between universities to attract large student numbers, at the expense of their rivals.

Chronic, and worsening, under-funding has also compelled universities to become heavily reliant on attracting full-fee paying international students, turning tertiary education into a \$16 billion-a-year business, and Australia's third-largest source of overseas revenue, after coal and iron exports.

At UWS, the entire Bachelor of Economics degree is being scrapped, together with Arabic, Italian and Spanish language majors and sub-majors of writing, performance and animation. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers university staff, estimates that this will result in the loss of 29 academics from the School of Business and 25 from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts.

These figures mask the full extent of the cuts. In particular, they do not include the academic job cuts

taking place by stealth via retirements, resignations and unfilled vacancies—there will be 10 positions axed out of about 35 in law, for example. Nor do they include the many casual lecturers who will have their jobs eliminated or their hours severely reduced. Moreover, teaching workloads for the remaining academics will be increased substantially, both in terms of hours and class sizes. Students will face much larger classes, less face-to-face learning and seriously reduced course options.

In an email to staff, UWS Vice-Chancellor Janice Reid blamed "the intense competition from other universities in the Sydney basin" and "flat international student numbers." She warned that 2013 could be even worse, as "there are indications that the federal government could cut projected allocations for higher education."

About 100 students and staff rallied yesterday outside a meeting of the UWS Board of Trustees, the university's formal governing body. The relatively small attendance reflected the university's timing in revealing the cuts, and the role being played by the NTEU and the university's recently-formed official Student Representative Council (SRC).

Both organisations have sought to divert the opposition of students and staff into calls for "consultation" with SRC and NTEU representatives. SRC member Christopher Wilson told reporters that students were aiming to convince the management to extend a consultation period. He agreed that units with "low" enrolments were "not going to last," but "we're hoping they'll put a delay on it, seek some consultation and take feedback."

The NTEU and SRC have attributed the cuts to alleged poor UWS management, helping to cover up the impact of the Labor government's funding regime, which the NTEU has long supported and helped to

implement. UWS NTEU branch president Jan Falloon said the cuts “appear to be a panicked reaction by UWS to a drop in enrolments this year, even though the university still has a large budgetary surplus.”

Similar claims have been put forward at other universities, with the NTEU claiming that their budget cuts were also the result of university mismanagement. A year ago, Sydney University’s decision to cut 340 jobs was blamed by the NTEU on “budgeting errors” and misallocation of resources. The union then worked to dissipate the anger among academics over the cuts, eventually striking a deal with the management that resulted in the loss of at least 55 jobs, with more than 100 other academics forced into teaching-only roles.

Other recent cuts have included the University of NSW axing 30 jobs from its Computer, Science and Engineering School in May, and the Australian National University eliminating 150 jobs. Macquarie University imposed 70 redundancies last year. Similar cuts have taken place at the University of Queensland and Victorian universities such as La Trobe.

At the start of 2012, the Labor government launched a new stage in its restructuring, by removing limits on student enrolments. This resulted in some universities, such as Sydney, suddenly increasing their enrolments, undercutting the enrolments at UWS and other competitors. Universities have also moved to increasingly casualise their workforces, so that they can quickly eliminate jobs in targeted areas.

Inside the UWS Board of Trustees meeting yesterday, in line with the NTEU’s orientation, the union-backed staff representative moved a resolution calling on the management to revise its financial allocations in order to increase funding to individual schools for teaching purposes. Despite the protest outside, the motion was defeated, underscoring the management’s insistence on enforcing the austerity measures.

During the 2007 and 2010 federal elections, the NTEU backed the return of Labor governments, promoting the notion that Labor would reverse the deteriorating conditions, rising student-staff ratios and increasing commercialisation of universities. Instead, the opposite has happened. Now, the NTEU is working

to obscure the source of the cuts and prevent any serious resistance by students and staff.

WSWS correspondents discussed these issues with students yesterday’s UWS protest.

Jess, a first-year secondary education student, attended the rally despite hearing rumours that students would be de-enrolled if they opposed the cuts. She complained that students had not even been told about the establishment of the SRC, let alone the scale of the UWS cuts. “We don’t get told we have a student union,” she said. “I didn’t find out until yesterday, when I was told to find them. How am I meant to find something I didn’t know exists?”

Jess opposed the cuts because “we get affected, and we can’t get the help we need or deserve, with the amount we pay for our fees.”

Marco Fante, a mature-age economics student, was alarmed by the scrapping of the economics degree and concerned that UWS would be turned into “a giant vocational college for western Sydney.” Asked about the impact of the Labor government’s “education revolution,” he noted that the University of Sydney had experienced similar cuts over the past year, “so everyone is losing out.” Fante said the cuts were the product of “two dynamics”: the Gillard government’s underfunding of tertiary education and university “mismanagement.”



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