

Australia: Murdoch newspaper denounces universities for “over-educating” students

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An editorial published in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper on January 20, titled “Higher education reform still a compelling cause,” provides an insight into the deeply reactionary ideological agenda that underlies the bipartisan political assault on university education.

The editorial is written in support of the attempt by the conservative Liberal government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott to deregulate tertiary education funding by uncapping the amount that universities can charge students for their courses. The measure would mean student fees could rapidly rise in 2016 to up to \$30,000, or \$40,000 at elite universities, placing tertiary education even farther out of reach for large sections of the population.

The Abbott government’s measures follow directly from the deregulation of the number of places that universities can offer by the former Greens-backed minority Labor government in 2012. This directly resulted in universities slashing or altogether ending unprofitable courses, while boosting enrolments in more profitable degrees. Both measures are aimed at creating a market-driven education system, in which only the wealthiest students can afford to enrol in the most expensive degrees at prestigious universities, while the overall quality of tertiary education is slashed.

In favour of the Abbott government’s measure, the *Australian* editorial denounces figures released this week showing that university enrolment figures have increased for students whose high school Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) placed them in the bottom 60 percent of their year.

“The need for bold reform is shown by our report yesterday that universities continue to offer places to large numbers of young people whose performance at school is, at best, underwhelming,” it declares. “More than 80 percent of would-be students with university entrance

scores between 50 and 60—these are very modest results indeed—were offered a place in 2014; five years ago the counterpart figure for offers such as these was just under 60 percent. This is a recipe for high dropout rates, personal misfortune and policy failure.”

The problem, in other words, is that too many people are going to university. The editorial does not directly state what portion of youth should gain access to university campuses, but clearly, it is well below 40 percent. As far as the corporate and financial elite—for which the *Australian* speaks—is concerned, education is not a social right, but a privilege, to be enjoyed only by the wealthiest and best-performing students. This layer considers public education to be an intolerable burden on its own accumulation of wealth.

Substantial empirical research, conducted by sociologists in Australia and internationally, has demonstrated that working-class youth from poorer backgrounds are far less likely to perform well in school. Hundreds of thousands of youth, attending under-resourced and over-stretched high schools, which have been decimated by decades of funding cuts by successive Liberal and Labor governments at the state and federal level, face no hope of gaining a high-quality education. Now, this is to become the justification for the further erosion of access to universities.

The editorial reveals the deep hostility within the Australian ruling class to the Enlightenment principle of an educated population. In a previous historical period, the most enlightened and democratic representatives of the rising capitalist class viewed the extension of public education as a key weapon in the destruction of feudal absolutism and backwardness. Leaders of the American Revolution such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin campaigned for the expansion of public education as the very basis of democratic principles.

The modern-day financial aristocracy, awash in obscene

levels of wealth and sensitive to its own social isolation from the mass of the people, views an enlightened working class, and particularly the youth, with fear and hostility. Instead, the youth must be suspended in a state of ignorance and drudgery, their critical faculties blunted, reduced to raw material for capitalist exploitation and cannon fodder for imperialist war.

The editorial continues: “As well, there is fresh evidence of a worryingly high degree of mismatch between the qualifications of graduates and the jobs they end up securing; this suggests ‘over-education’ and wasted public funds.”

Here the *Australian* editorialists turn reality on its head. The jobs crisis facing young people is not a result of “over-qualification,” it is a consequence of the failure of the capitalist profit system to provide the youth with decent, fulfilling, and well-paid work in the areas for which they have completed their studies.

According to a July 2014 report by Graduate Careers Australia, graduate employment is now at its lowest level since the all-time historic low of 1993. The proportion unable to find work more than four months after graduating is 28.7 percent, up by 5 percent in just two years. The figure is expected to reach 30 percent by 2016–2017, or 65,000 young people.

Starting salaries for higher education graduates, as a fraction of average male weekly earnings, are predicted to fall from 78 percent to 74 percent over the same time. So-called unpaid internships are becoming a mass phenomenon. A survey of 160 students by Interns Australia completed in April 2014 revealed that 87.5 percent had completed some form of unpaid internships, of which more than half had lasted more than three months.

In an attempt to justify its reactionary agenda, the *Australian* decries “a university system that expands by sacrificing standards.” Indeed, the past three decades have witnessed a steady decline in the quality of university education. This, however, is a result of definite policies, carried out by both big business parties in line with their counterparts internationally, to tear up all the social gains won through struggle by the working class in the post-war period.

The Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983–1996 initiated the offensive against tertiary education in 1989 with the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) loan scheme, ending the policy of free education established by the Whitlam Labor government in 1974.

The introduction of HECS set the stage for the massive increases to student fees by every subsequent government. Immediately upon taking office in 1996, the Howard government carried out a \$600 million cut to university funding and over the following 11 years, fees increased by up to 300 percent. The Rudd-Gillard Labor governments of 2007–2013 maintained and deepened Howard’s measures and, in 2012, Gillard implemented the largest-ever cuts to university funding of \$2.3 billion, at the same time deregulating course places.

Since the introduction of HECS, student fees have risen from \$1,800 to up to \$10,085 per year. While in 1995, federal government grants provided 57.2 percent of university revenue by 2013 this had dropped to 43.6 percent. In the same period, fees and charges doubled from 11 to 22.2 percent of university revenue.

Now, the systematic starvation of funds is being used to proclaim the need to allow universities to massively boost their fees, paving the way for an entirely user-pays tertiary education system.

It is a contemptible lie that there is “no money” for a free, high-quality tertiary education system. The resources exist, but they are monopolised in the hands of a modern-day plutocracy, whose interests are prosecuted by media such as the *Australian* and the entire political establishment.

The latest report on global wealth inequality by Oxfam revealed that 80 individuals control the same amount of wealth as 3.5 billion people—or half the world’s population. According to a 2014 Oxfam report, within Australia, the top 1 percent of society owns the same wealth as the bottom 60 percent. Nine Australians have a combined net worth of \$58.6 billion, more than four times the annual federal expenditure on university education.

The fight for free, high-quality education today requires the ending of the financial aristocracy’s monopoly over every aspect of social life. This can only be achieved through an independent, international political movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist perspective, involving the reorganisation of economic life on the basis of social need, rather than private profit.



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