

Australian artists and students speak out against closure of fine arts college

Our reporters
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As second semester of the university year begins, opposition has grown among academics, students and artists to the University of Sydney's plans to close its specialist fine arts campus, the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA).

SCA is set to be merged with the University of New South Wales School of Art and Design (UNSW A&D) at the beginning of next year. The move is part of a broader campaign to restrict access to the arts, bound up with the corporatisation of universities and the gutting of arts funding.

Discussions are also underway about the possible closure of the National Art School (NAS) located in inner-city Sydney. The New South Wales government has moved the property on which the school is located into the hands of its department responsible for selling off state lands. There are calls from within corporate circles for NAS and SCA to be rolled into one "super-arts" campus at UNSW.

Prominent individuals within the arts community have spoken out against the plans. Tamara Winikoff, executive director of the National Association for the Visual Arts, told the *Saturday Paper* last weekend that "The idea of trying to push together three such disparate approaches to art education will be a serious disadvantage to potential students."

Michael Snelling, the former director of NAS recently resigned and pointed to the opening up of universities to the market. He noted: "The only way they can get money is by packing in more students... So you want to put 500 students into a lecture theatre, you don't want to teach a violin player how to play one-to-one—and similarly with art."

Well-known artists, including film director Jane Campion, actor Hugo Weaving, Archibald-portrait prize winner Ben Quilty and Reg Mombassa, have also

denounced the proposed mergers. Quilty, who studied at SCA, said: "There's no money left to fund those courses that speak to our souls and not to financial markets."

He pointed to the culpability of successive governments, noting: "It's a pattern; it's the slow closure of humanities subjects ... It is actually not the universities' fault. They are being put under further pressure to survive with less and less government funding. Therefore the courses cut are the ones that don't reap the financial benefits to the university."

Students and staff have held a number of protests opposing the attack on the SCA. However, the official leadership of the movement, Let SCA Stay, along with the National Tertiary Education Union, has promoted the illusion that the assault on the arts can be halted through futile appeals to university management and for support from the Labor Party.

A protest on July 15, outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales, featured senior Labor leader Anthony Albanese as its most prominent speaker. Albanese was given the platform to posture as a defender of the arts and an opponent of the federal Liberal-National government's attacks on higher education.

The organisers did not mention that it was the last Labor governments of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd that opened the way for the deregulation of university fees, and in 2013, introduced a \$2.3 billion cut to university funding. Moreover it was the Hawke Labor government that introduced efficiency dividends for the public sector, used by successive governments to slash social spending, including for the arts.

Reporters from the WSWs spoke to a number of students who attended the rally.

Anne, an ex-SCA student who is an honorary associate professor at the college said, "There's no

guarantee of employment for anybody in teaching or any other staff capacity. I'm most in contact with the teaching staff and the support staff. Who knows what will happen to their jobs?"

"You can see there's a tremendous groundswell of support for the SCA. People feel very strongly about it," she said. "It's impossible not to see this as part of a broader attack on the arts and disregard of the arts and undermining of the arts in NSW and Australia."

Ben, a recent graduate of the college, stated: "I was going to do my masters this year but it doesn't look like that's possible, since they are getting rid of the whole course. There's three art schools in Sydney. There's the NAS, which is about the technical skills of being an artist, and the UNSW A&D which is a hands on, industry based school. Then there's the SCA, which is more conceptual, which I think is the way of the future in art.

"They're talking about creating a centre of excellence, but it's just a spin. They're basically getting rid of art education in Sydney," Rush said.

Four current students, Jessica, Christina, Christopher and Steph, spoke to the WSWs about how the amalgamation would affect their studies.

Steph said, "It would be like a university saying 'we're shutting physics down, but we'll stick you with biology. It's science, so you'll be fine.'" Christopher added, "The difference between SCA and UNSW A&D is that we have practising artists as teachers, lecturers and mentors."

Steph continued, "There's a total disregard for the students. No one was consulted, and they really think that it's as easy as picking up our faculty and putting it in another school. SCA has facilities for disadvantaged and disabled people that other colleges don't. They have studios built specifically for them and funding to help."

She spoke out against the corporatisation of the University of Sydney, commenting that university management "doesn't deem an art school profitable, so they're cutting us off. We don't fit into the new path that they're taking. They want to foster law students, business students and doctors, and they don't think that the arts is of value."

Daniel, an honours student specialising in photography and installation, spoke critically of the Liberal and Labor parties, stating, "I haven't seen any

defence of the arts from either of the major parties.

"I worked in the library at SCA up until the beginning of last year, and then all the casuals got kicked out, which was the start of moving towards this," he said. "They shut down two or three libraries on the main campus at Sydney Uni, got rid of a ton of books, got rid of tons of staff, and that's going to happen to the SCA library. All those books, that they've only got one of in that collection, are just going to go to storage. It's a really important research facility."



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