

Australian university releases plans on arts college closure

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University of Sydney management has intensified its cost-cutting attacks on the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) following the collapse, on July 28, of a proposed merger between the fine arts college and the University of New South Wales Art & Design centre.

Early last week, Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence released a Draft Change Plan (DCP) which made clear that the arts college will be forced into the university's overcrowded Camperdown campus where it will be merged into the Arts and Social Sciences faculty.

Under the new plan, academic and professional staff positions will be slashed by 60 percent, or about 50 full and part-time jobs, and specialised courses in glassmaking, ceramics, jewellery and other "more resource intensive mediums" eliminated. The Bachelor of Visual Arts (BVA) will also be suspended and no applications accepted for Master of Contemporary Arts and Master of Fine Arts.

Vice-Chancellor Spence declared that the Rozelle campus, which has 700 students, was "costly to run" and cynically asserted that the current location of the arts college was "constraining choice and options" for students.

The DCP claims that enrolments for the SCA had fallen by 20 percent since 2011 and that the college was running a \$5.1 million annual deficit, including \$2 million in maintenance costs, the highest of any Sydney university faculty. The shift, it insists, would reduce the SCA debt to between \$500,000 and \$1 million a year.

The shutdown of BVA, higher graduate programs and specialised courses will lead to further falls in enrolments and be used, in turn, to justify more cuts. The so-called deficit, moreover, is a product of the university's corporate University Economic Model (UEM) program.

The UEM was imposed on all faculties in 2012 and

includes a per metre "space tax." This heavily impacts on the SCA, which occupies a large area of heritage-listed, state-owned buildings in Rozelle's Callan Park. Prior to imposition of the UEM, the SCA had no such debt. Successive state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have sought to sell-off Callan Park, which consists of 60 hectares of prime foreshore parkland in Sydney's inner west.

Senior lecturer in jewellery Dr Karin Findeis, whose job is on the line, told the media that the proposed merger would destroy the college, which would be "fragmented and dispersed across parts of the university."

SCA staff, she told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, are concerned that students would "no longer have a defined and cohesive contemporary art education."

"This level of education," she continued, "will no longer be on offer to people wanting to work in that field and that will have an ongoing detrimental effect on the whole field of contemporary art. Galleries will disappear, the inclusiveness and the breadth of contemporary art will be challenged."

Sydney College of the Arts students and staff have held a series of protests at the University of Sydney and outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales opposing the closure since university management first announced it was planning a merger on June 21.

More than 130 students are currently suing the University of Sydney over proposed changes to the Bachelor of Visual Arts degree. Their legal case alleges that the university actions were "deceptive conduct" under consumer law by misleading already enrolled students who were unaware that access to the Rozelle campus and its various courses were not guaranteed beyond 2020.

The SCA student and staff protests, however, have

been dominated by the Student Representatives Council and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) who have promoted the illusion that University of Sydney management can be pressured to withdraw its SCA closure plans.

These claims are false and are aimed at preventing SCA students and staff from understanding that the moves to close the college are part of an escalating assault on the basic social right to decent high quality education and access to arts and culture for all by Liberal-National and Labor governments alike.

SRC Education Officer Dylan Griffiths, an organiser of the “Let SCA Stay” campaign, was quick to claim the cancelled merger with the University of New South Wales late last month was “an initial victory.” He insisted that the protests had “put pressure on the university to recognise the faults in the closure.” The claim had no credibility. The campaign did nothing to halt the attacks on the arts college. In fact, just over a week later the assault was stepped up.

On the NTEU’s “Let SCA Stay” Facebook page the union appeals to university management to engage in “a genuine, good faith collaborative process to secure its future” and “honour its stated commitment to excellence in visual arts education.”

This is empty posturing. The fact is that the NTEU, at the University of Sydney and other tertiary institutions across Australia, have worked hand in glove with management to impose cost-cutting and pro-business measures. At the University of Sydney in 2013, for example, it assisted management to destroy over 60 jobs and force 100 academics into teaching-only positions.

With the assistance of the NTEU, Sydney University has become one of the most corporatised tertiary institutions in Australia. In December last year the university’s senate adopted plans to slash the number of undergraduate degrees from 122 to just 20 and restructure the university’s current 16 faculties and schools into six faculties and three schools. The union is now calling for enterprise agreement talks with university management, which will include negotiations on jobs redundancies, not just for SCA employees but academics and other professionals.

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Several arts students spoke with the WSWS last week about the attack on the Sydney College of the Arts:

Philia, a mature age TAFE student who attended the SCA in the 1990s, was critical of claims by SRC education officer Dylan Griffiths that the previous cancellation of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) merger was an initial victory. “How can it be a victory when [the students] are being forced to go on campus? This is all about money. Education has now become a business. USYD is now the biggest business,” she said.

Philia is currently attempting to find somewhere to study jewellery and object design. She says that the course was axed from TAFE last year, and all that remains is an apprenticeship version. She has tried to contact the SCA about the course, which she said is the last place in Sydney she can study jewellery and object design.

Lisa, a mature age student at UNSW Art & Design, said: “They seem to be merging arts at other universities as well. My sister studies Natural History Illustration at Newcastle Uni. They’re talking about offering a degree called creative disciplines [instead] ...”

“If the SCA is closed,” she continued, “there will be no alternatives. I don’t understand the rationale. I think they’re trying to make us more employable but I’m not quite sure how. We’re supposed to be more ‘industry ready’ ... I’ve done life drawing classes. My life drawing class had 24 people in it. Trying to jam enough people around one life drawing model ... you’ve got to question whether it’s turning into a money-making thing.

“I can understand [SCA students] not wanting to be forced into a merger. There’s not enough space. People are fighting over studio spaces as is. People studying masters came in this semester and found their names had been taken down, and others put up, because there’s no space. I’ve no idea how they would fit any other people in.”



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