

Mounting calls for Australian universities to slash enrolments

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Over the past weeks, there have been repeated calls, including from the Liberal-National government, for a new overhaul of tertiary education in Australia, including a dramatic reduction in the number of university enrolments. The campaign is a continuation of the bipartisan assault on higher education carried out by successive governments, Coalition and Labor, and is aimed at entrenching universities as elite institutions responsive to the needs of the market and accessible to only a wealthy few.

Earlier this month, Education Minister Simon Birmingham spelt out the federal government's agenda at the "Australian Davos Connection Education Summit." The forum, "brings together leaders from business [and] government" to discuss public policy.

In his speech, Birmingham flagged financial measures to cut student numbers. He said the government would, "look at how the financial incentives the government has in place actually drive behaviour by the universities in their decision in how many people to enrol in different disciplines."

Birmingham also indicated steps to direct resources to areas that would have a direct benefit to business. "We need to find a method that drives an outcome which is frankly more attuned with what the employment market demands," he declared. The minister contemptuously told students to consider the prospects of finding work in a particular field before beginning their studies.

The speech followed a string of commentaries in the financial press complaining about the high numbers of students enrolled in courses such as law and teaching, compared to fields such as IT, which are central to the "innovation economy" being touted by the government.

An *Australian* editorial last week, for instance, declared that the government "would do students,

universities and the national interest a major service by reforming a system in which too many students with low tertiary entrance scores, who may not finish their degrees, are being drawn to courses with poor job prospects." The newspaper repeated its call for the government to "direct resources to increasing places in fields with the most pressing skills shortages."

The editorial made clear that any conception of education as a social right aimed at the all-rounded cultural and intellectual development of individuals is a thing of the past as far as the corporate elite is concerned.

The heads of various university institutions have voiced similar conclusions. On August 17, Vicki Thomson, head of the Group of Eight wealthiest "sandstone universities," called for an end to uncapped student enrolments. She called for a "new model," to ensure "access and equity for all who are eligible to the program most suited for them but not at the expense of quality."

In an earlier speech, Thomson said: "Why are we all so reticent about stating the obvious—that university isn't for everyone. It was never intended for everyone."

In 2012, the previous Labor government uncapped the number of places universities could offer to students, while making their funding dependent on how many they enrolled. The move was aimed at opening higher education up to the demands of the market and driving ever-greater competition between universities for enrolments, particularly in the most lucrative business-related degrees.

At the same time, the Labor government, under both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, slashed a total of \$6.6 billion from higher education and research between 2011 and 2013. This only intensified the fight between universities to attract both domestic students and full

fee-paying international students, while cutting costs, thus driving up class sizes and reliance on lower-wage casual staff.

Both the Coalition and Labor opposition are committed to further cuts. The government is seeking to slash \$3.2 billion from the sector. Birmingham earlier this month likened universities to “five-year-olds pleading for more chocolate who don’t appear to realise that budgets may have reached their limits already.”

The government has also advanced plans for higher student fees for “flagship courses.” In 2014, the government sought to deregulate all fees, which could have seen the average three-year bachelor’s degree priced at \$100,000. That plan stalled in the Senate. The latest proposal to partially deregulate fees is aimed at developing a two-tier system, with the most sought-after degrees accessible only to the wealthiest students.

For its part, during the campaign for the July 2 federal election, Labor announced at least \$320 million in university funding cuts. Labor’s measures included lowering the repayment threshold for student fees and loans, so that students would be forced to pay back their debts when they begin earning \$50,000, rather than the current \$54,000. Labor also called for the abolition of concessional fees for students in numbers of fields, including early childhood education.

Already, there is a stepped-up assault on the jobs and conditions of staff and academics at universities. Last December, the University of Sydney (USYD) adopted plans to slash undergraduate degrees from 122 to just 20, and to amalgamate 16 faculties and schools into six faculties and three schools. The restructure is based on a model previously implemented at the University of Melbourne, including the destruction of hundreds of jobs. USYD’s move includes the relocation of its visual design school, the Sydney College of the Arts, and the axing of 50 of its staff, or some 60 percent of the workforce.

Flinders University in Adelaide is similarly planning to merge its 14 schools and four faculties into six colleges, sparking fears of jobs cuts. Adelaide University is planning a restructure, while the University of Western Australia began the destruction of 300 jobs in June.

In addition, as a result of Labor’s restructuring of university funding, rates of casualisation across the

sector have soared. Casual and sessional academics, most of whom earn less than \$500 per week while teaching, now do half the teaching and research in Australian universities.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers most academics and university staff, has played the central role in enforcing the ongoing restructure of universities. The union has done everything it can to politically subordinate the widespread hostility among staff and students to the process to its chief architect, the Labor Party, as well as the Greens, who kept the last minority Labor government in office. At the same time, the NTEU has worked hand-in-hand with university authorities to force through redundancies, faculty mergers and other pro-business moves.



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