

Australia: Students occupy Sydney College of the Arts

Our reporters
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Around a dozen students from the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), which is connected to the University of Sydney (USYD), are occupying the top floor of the college's administration building at Callan Park in Rozelle.

The occupation, which began on August 22, is part of a series of protests by staff and students against last month's announcement by Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence that USYD would combine the SCA with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the university's overcrowded Camperdown/Darlington campus.

The SCA's extensive work spaces and studio facilities are located in Callan Park, which was originally constructed in 1878 as a mental health hospital. SCA moved to the heritage-listed area in 1996. Successive state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have sought to sell-off Callan Park, which consists of 60 hectares of prime property in Sydney's inner west.

The new USYD "merger" plan will be disastrous for the college's staff and 700 students. If implemented, an estimated 60 percent—or about 50 fulltime and part-time jobs—will be axed. The ceramics, jewellery and glass-making studios shut down and Bachelor of Visual Arts (BVA) courses not offered next year.

The protesting students have called for the immediate dismissal of SCA Dean Colin Rhodes; demanded that the SCA remains at Callan Park; there be no further job, studio or course cuts; that BVA courses be retained; and there be an independent review of the SCA's "financial and constitutional status."

University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor Dr Michael Spence and the university's financial administrators have declared that the SCA is running a \$5.1 million annual deficit, including \$2 million in maintenance

costs, the highest of any USYD faculty. The merger, administration insists, would reduce the college's debt to between \$500,000 and \$1 million a year.

The so-called deficit, however, is a direct result of the university's corporate University Economic Model program which was imposed on all faculties in 2012 and includes a per metre "space tax." This heavily impacts on the SCA, which prior to 2012 had no such debt.

Vice-Chancellor Spence has responded to the ongoing student occupation by declaring that the university administration would not negotiate or withdraw its merger plans. Closed-door discussions about how to merge the SCA have been underway for years, despite denials by university officials.

Emails between the SCA dean and University of Sydney's deputy vice-chancellor published in the *Inner West Courier* this week revealed that discussions about "staffing changes" and the establishment of "strategy, timeline and plans" for the merger have been underway since 2014.

The SCA occupation coincided with a protest march to the NSW state parliament last week by 500 people opposing separate plans to merge the National Art School (NAS) with the Art and Design faculty at UNSW.

The NAS is located on the other side of Sydney and like the SCA is a heritage-listed property on prime real estate. It is the only art school in the city not attached to a university. Students, staff and their supporters presented a petition of 14,000 signatures to the state government opposing the imposition of a merger on the National Art School.

NAS director Michael Lynch has publicly denounced attempts to merge the NAS with the UNSW Arts and Design faculty and has spoken out against USYD's

plans for the SCA. Lynch said he supported student and staff protests against the attacks on the fine arts education facilities. He told the media that the colleges required “extra injections of money, rather than reductions.”

Well-known artists and former art school graduates including Mike Parr, Ben Quilty, photographer Rex Dupain, Fiona Hall and others, along with gallery owners have all spoken out against the merger plans.

Veteran gallery owner Damien Minton explained that the majority of teachers at the colleges were working artists. “Shut the schools and you also shut down the primary source of income for artists,” he said.

The attempts to merge and restructure the three tertiary art schools in Sydney is part of a broader process of cost-cutting, downsizing and corporatisation of the entire tertiary sector in line with government and big business demands.

USYD plans to reduce 122 undergraduate degrees to just 20 and to reduce the current 16 faculties and school down to just 9. Similar restructuring has taken place at the University of Melbourne, resulting in hundreds of job losses as well as Flinders University and Adelaide University in South Australia. The University of Western Australia began the destruction of 300 jobs in June.

In early August, the Turnbull government’s federal education minister Simon Birmingham declared that tertiary student enrolments and courses should be more closely geared to the demands of business. “We need to find a method that drives an outcome more attuned with what the employment market demands,” he said (see: “Mounting calls for Australian universities to slash enrolments”).

The Turnbull government, with bi-partisan support from Labor, intends to cut \$3.2 billion from university funding and deregulate “flagship courses,” creating the conditions for a two-tier degree system in which certain course will only be available to the wealthiest layers of society.

The last federal Labor government cut \$6.6 billion from total university and research funding between 2011 and 2013. It also removed the cap on student enrolments so that universities could ramp up enrolments while cutting costs. The result has been a restructuring of university degrees on the basis of their profitability.

While art students and academic staff in Sydney have come forward to fight the escalating attacks on their right to education, this can only be taken forward in a political struggle against Labor, the Greens and union bureaucrats who are working to isolate the protests.

A rally last Sunday at Callan Park was dominated by speakers from Labor, the Greens and the unions, including from Unions NSW and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).

While all proclaimed their solidarity with students, hailed the occupation and led chants of “SCA, here to stay,” no mention was made of Labor’s assault on tertiary education and arts funding, or the active involvement of the education unions with successive Labor and Liberal-National governments in imposing these cost-cutting measures.

Setting the tone, Labor MP Anthony Albanese praised the student protests and hypocritically declared, “Education is not just about business, it is not just a commodity. It is about society.” None of the other speakers pointed out that it was the Hawke and Keating Labor governments that transformed it into a business—abolishing free tertiary education in 1987, imposing fees for domestic and international students and introducing the HECS student loan scheme.

University of Sydney NTEU president Michael Thompson demagogically declared that the SCA debt could be resolved by cutting the salaries of the deputy vice-chancellor and vice-chancellor. The NTEU has been instrumental in blocking any opposition to the restructuring of university campuses across Australia that has resulted in over half of all teaching work being carried out by casuals.



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