

# Australia: Dean of arts college quits amid student protests

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Colin Rhodes, dean of the Sydney College of Arts (SCA), resigned last month amid opposition from students and staff to plans to relocate the facility to the University of Sydney's main campus and merge it with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the beginning of 2017.

University of Sydney (USYD) Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence claimed that Rhodes' resignation was unrelated to ongoing protests. However the dean was intimately involved in preparations for the closure of the SCA facility for at least two years, and was a target of widespread student anger.

Students and staff first learnt in June of the administration's plans, which will lead to significant job cuts, a reduction of courses and facilities, and the axing of the Bachelor of Visual Arts degree. A group of students has been occupying the administration building since August 22 and had called for the removal of Rhodes.

The planned merger of the SCA is part of a broader assault on students and staff across the university. In March, USYD management released a 63-page document titled *2016–2020 Strategic Plan*, which contains proposals aimed at more directly subordinating the university to the immediate needs of the corporate and financial elite.

The total number of faculties is to be slashed from 16 to six. Only four of the new faculties have been confirmed so far: Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Engineering and Information Technologies and Science. SCA does not appear in the list of faculties and schools.

The document also introduces a new four-year bachelor's degree in Advanced Studies, which will include courses focused on skills directly applicable to the corporate world, such as leadership and project

management. The degree includes projects in research, industry and "entrepreneurship."

While posturing as an opponent of the SCA merger, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers staff and academics, was privy to the management's Strategic Planning Discussion Papers before the release of the final document in March this year.

Last October, the NTEU offered advice to the university on how to proceed with its restructure. It stated: "The NTEU recommends that strategic planning for 2016–2020 aspire to achievable goals that build on existing excellence and do not disrupt productivity, morale and staff well-being by premature implementation of major change plans."

In other words, the union had no opposition to the restructure itself, but warned the university that "premature implementation" of "major change plans" could provoke widespread hostility among the staff and academics.

The NTEU, its document continued, "sees itself as a constructive player in the industrial and political landscape." That is, the union's real concern is its own position at the bargaining table and its ability to negotiate away the jobs, wages and conditions of its members.

In 2013, for instance, USYD management announced a plan to slash 340 jobs. The NTEU struck a deal which destroyed 55 jobs and forced 100 academics into teaching-only positions. Along with pseudo-left groups such as Solidarity and Socialist Alternative, the union declared this betrayal to be a "victory."

At the same time, the NTEU and student groups have promoted legal action as a means of halting the merger. Over 130 students are involved in a case against the closure of the SCA college, which, if successful, could

claim up to \$19.5 million in damages from the university.

Contrary to the claims of the leadership of the Let SCA Stay campaign, the college cannot be defended through legal action or protests appealing to the university administration.

In a bid to isolate the SCA students and staff, the NTEU and the student groups that support it have obscured the fact that the restructure at USYD is part of a broader attack on tertiary education. Over the past weeks, there have been mounting calls from the corporate elite and the political establishment for the deregulation of student fees, which would result in course costs soaring by tens of thousands of dollars.

The NTEU and Let SCA Stay have repeatedly provided representatives of Labor and the Greens a platform to posture as defenders of education and the arts. They have covered-up the fact that the current measures are a continuation of cuts implemented by previous Labor governments.

In 2013, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government introduced a \$2.3 billion cut to university funding. The move was part of a broader restructuring, aimed at opening universities up to “market forces.” And it was the Hawke Labor government that abolished free university education in the late 1980s, paving the way for the ensuing corporatisation of the entire sector. During its federal election campaign in June, Labor outlined another \$3.7 billion in cuts to university funding over the next decade.

At the same time, the unions and Let SCA have presented the resignation of Rhodes as a victory. They have also promoted dangerous illusions in vague statements from USYD management that a consultation period will be extended and the merger may not take place at the beginning of next year.

In reality, the attacks on the arts, as well as education, are a product of the crisis of the capitalist system, and one aspect of a wholesale offensive against the social rights of the working class. Access to culture, like all the social rights, can be defended only by an independent political movement of the working class aimed at reorganising society on socialist lines in the interests of ordinary people, and ending the subordination of every aspect of social life to the profit interests of the corporate elite.



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