

Students and staff to protest imposition of trimesters at Australian university

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Students and staff at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney are planning a protest on June 26 to demand a return to a semester-based teaching calendar. More than 5,000 people have expressed interest in the rally, called by a student group named Cancel Trimesters.

The university moved to a trimester system—three teaching sessions per year—at the beginning of 2019, despite vocal opposition and multiple protests since the change was first flagged in 2015. Instead of two semesters per year, with summer and winter breaks, this system means that students and staff alike are under pressure to study or work year-round.

UNSW's compressed teaching periods cram course content previously taught in 13-week semesters into 10-week trimesters. This means a more intense workload and truncated learning, while the university can enrol more students and push them through their courses faster.

The trimester system also sharply affects poorer students who must work long hours to support themselves while studying, and often use the long summer break to obtain employment.

The new calendar is part of the university's "2025 Strategy," which aims to make UNSW "Australia's global university." Documents leaked in late 2016 revealed that the restructure would cut annual spending by \$47.3 million. At the same time the university was slashing more than 400 jobs and earmarking \$30 million for severance pay.

Most staff at UNSW are represented by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which has had nothing to say about the introduction of trimesters since February 2017.

At that time, the union raised concerns, based on the experiences of staff at other Australian universities, that

the change would negatively impact work-life balance, and lead to increased stress and mental health issues for staff.

The NTEU called off a proposed strike at UNSW last July on the basis that the union had "achieved" an 8 percent pay rise over five years—less than the rate of inflation—and a marginal improvement in redeployment offerings for professional staff facing job cuts. But there was no mention of the impending calendar change then, or at an earlier strike in May.

The staff support for the Cancel Trimesters group shows clearly that the trimester shift is an important issue for academics and other education workers, and that the NTEU's silence is a betrayal of its membership.

A UNSW casual staff member, Jason, told a meeting of staff and students that he had been given just three days to mark 102 papers. If he failed to complete the marking on time, he would be penalised half his pay for the week. Jason reported that many students had not received feedback on assignments in time to prepare for their final exams because teachers were too overworked. As soon as Jason raised the massive profits the university expected from the move to trimesters, a high-ranking UNSW official, who was on the meeting's platform, silenced him.

This was not the first attempt by UNSW management to shut down criticism of trimesters.

Earlier this month, students handing out flyers to promote the Cancel Trimesters rally were accosted by UNSW security personnel, who falsely claimed that "permission from management" was required to distribute the material.

In early 2016, the university surveyed students, and claimed broad support for the introduction of trimesters, but did not release the survey results.

Management rejected a freedom of information request by the student newspaper *Tharunka*, claiming that releasing the data would “provide competitors with information they could use to attract staff and students away from [UNSW].”

This refusal not only points to the reality of widespread opposition. It underscores the management’s commercial orientation. It views students as customers, lecturers as resources, and other universities as competitors.

Decades of funding cuts from both Labor and Liberal-National governments have forced Australia’s public universities to shift to an increasingly corporate model.

Since fees for students were re-introduced in 1986 under the Hawke Labor government, universities have been forced to extract a growing proportion of their funding directly from students. First, international students were forced to pay, providing a huge financial incentive for universities to focus on courses such as management, which promise a good return on investment for students paying exorbitant fees.

Labor re-imposed fees for all students in 1989, and the Howard Liberal-National government increased the fees between 1996 and 2007.

The “education revolution” introduced from 2008 by the Rudd Labor government removed enrolment caps, and linked funding directly to student enrolment, leading universities to over-enrol students in the most profitable courses.

Rather than fostering critical thinking, Australian universities have become degree mills, churning out graduates as quickly as possible to fulfil the needs of big business and the military.

A 2017 survey found that almost one third of domestic students worked more than 20 hours a week while studying. A quarter of undergraduates had been forced to reduce their course load or defer their studies because they could not afford to continue.

To maintain eligibility for small government allowances, students must take at least one course each trimester, so the promised “flexibility” of taking a trimester off to complete an internship is not an option for students who depend on these means-tested payments.

Poorer students can apply for “start-up loans” to help with the high cost of textbooks and other study supplies, but these are based on a semester calendar, so

students starting in the second trimester cannot obtain the loans until midway through the term.

Student visas allow international students to work full-time only during non-teaching periods. Many depend on the income they can earn over the summer break to finance the high cost of their education. Since international students must remain enrolled in a full-time course, they cannot take a trimester off to work.

UNSW management has suggested that students struggling to balance work and study could take fewer concurrent courses and still graduate on time. But students have found that to be impractical as many courses are offered only in one term or another, and cannot be taken out of order.

This further contradicts UNSW’s claim that the new timetable offers “flexibility” for both staff and students. Offering courses in all three trimesters would require staff to teach year-round, negating the promise that lecturers could take the third trimester off to do research or recover from the increased workload of the previous two terms.

While wide layers of staff and students oppose the new calendar, a pseudo-left group, Socialist Alternative, is depicting the problem as “neoliberalism,” not the commercialisation of all public education under the capitalist profit system. It is also promoting the illusion that “UNSW will be forced to listen to us only if we make our voices loud enough.”

In reality, the fight for free, high-quality education as a basic social right is bound up with the struggle for the socialist transformation of society in the interests of all, not the wealthy corporate elite. Students who are serious about defeating the assault on public education should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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