

Australia: Hundreds of students and staff protest against trimesters at UNSW

Our reporters
3 July 2019

Nearly 1,000 students and staff rallied at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) last Wednesday to protest the replacement of the previous semester schedule with a new system of trimesters. Students from other Sydney universities also took part.

In one of the largest demonstrations at UNSW in the past decade, students and staff marched from the main library to the chancellery to demand a return to the semester calendar.

As part of its “2025 Strategy,” the university changed to a trimester system at the beginning of the year, with three teaching sessions per year instead of two. As a result, course content previously taught in 13 weeks has been crammed into 10, breaks between teaching periods have been shortened, and mid-term breaks eliminated.

Speakers raised the concerns of staff and students over the increased workload and reduced quality of education resulting from the introduction of trimesters.

Tutor Jason Heffernan told the protesters that the move to a trimester system was part of management’s push to make students “pay more and more for less education,” so as to increase the university’s profits.

The pseudo-left group Socialist Alternative and student union officials sought to prevent any discussion of the decades-long assault on education, spearheaded by successive Labor governments. Nor did they place the introduction of the trimester system in the context of an onslaught on the social rights of the entire working class, presided over by the entire political establishment and the unions.

UNSW Student Representative Council education officer Caitlin Keogh summed up the official line of the rally by calling on staff and students to “turn up the heat on UNSW management and get rid of trimesters.” This was aimed at framing the issue as one confined to UNSW, which can be resolved merely by pressuring university management.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, warned that this approach was aimed at politically neutering the emerging movement of students and blocking a broader struggle against the attacks on education.

For years, the student unions and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which claims to represent academics, have limited opposition to the gutting of tertiary education to sporadic campus-based protests. This has been aimed at preventing students and staff from uniting in a movement to defend education.

At the same time, the NTEU and the student unions have enforced continuous cuts by governments and university managements, resulting in unprecedented rates of casualisation among university staff, ongoing job cuts and an ever-poorer quality of education for students.

IYSSE campaigners called for students to reject the bankrupt protest politics of Socialist Alternative and stressed the need for students to turn to the working class. They explained that a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social needs, not private profit, is required to secure high-quality, free public education for all.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to students and staff at the protest rally.

Zac, a first-year arts student, said that the introduction of trimesters was “placing a lot of stress on many students including myself.

“The trimester system just rushes through the course so there is no deep understanding of the course content for any of the students. Ninety percent of people disagree with the change, including generally the academics.”

Zac recognised that attacks on public education are not confined to UNSW, or to Australia. “There should be an international movement against it. This is more of a global thing than a local thing. More and more

universities are planning to do this,” he said.

Echoing the sentiment of many at the protest, Zac said: “I believe academics should have given some speeches in the protest. It would have shared more perspectives.”

Zac also raised concerns that the change to trimesters, as part of the broader commercialisation of education, would reduce the value of a university degree.

“A degree won’t mean as much and there will be less jobs. As more people are rushed through there will be less jobs. Even if students do manage to find a good job, they will still be stuck paying huge amounts of university debts,” he commented.

Lewis, a second-year software engineering student, said: “I think that there should be more interest in education than profits. Orientating the uni towards profit rather than education is not a good thing overall for education. I’m definitely for the universities being more publicly funded.”

Kenny, who is studying architecture at UNSW said that shortened assessment deadlines and the lack of a mid-semester break were having a negative effect on his studies. “Under the semester system we would get five weeks to work on a project, now we get one to two weeks,” he said.

“If you are behind on work because, maybe you were sick, there is no leeway to catch up on the work. In our course there are a bunch of steps that you have to go through, planning and all that, to make a building design. But they have given us no time and we have to just make do and we end up with bad marks because we don’t have time to expand on our ideas.”

Kenny disputed UNSW’s claim that the calendar change brought the university into line with other institutions, making it easier for students to participate in foreign exchange programs, stating: “The university says it is changing to trimesters to fit in with the timeframes of other unis. But there are only two other unis that we are partnered with that have trimesters so it doesn’t make sense to us.”

Neil, a protester from the physics department, stated: “For subjects that are high in content such as maths and physics and most of the other sciences it means that they have four lectures a week rather than three. So you have to learn all this stuff so much quicker than you would have done. It goes against research that people have done that says that you need a longer time scale to cement this in your head.”

According to Neil, the two-week break between trimesters did not give staff enough time to complete their

marking and give feedback to students: “People were working on the long weekend and some people are still working on the first trimester when the second is running. The turn-around is ridiculous. You just can’t do it.”

The university’s “2025 Strategy,” under which trimesters have been introduced, aims to make UNSW “Australia’s global university.”

This is part of a push to increase the number of international students, who are a major source of funding for universities amid ongoing government budget cuts.

International students at UNSW pay around five times as much for an undergraduate degree as domestic students in commonwealth supported places (CSPs). Even when government funding for CSPs is taken into account, each international student contributes roughly twice the revenue of a domestic student to the university.

International students, however, have also voiced opposition to the trimester system.

Weiyinta, a second-year economics and commerce student from China, said that the introduction of trimesters had put particular pressure on students whose first language is not English. She said that many international students may consider leaving the university as a result.

Weiyinta explained that, “Because the terms are shorter, they have increased the assessments. We need more time than English speakers. They can read academic articles in two hours, when it would take us two days.

“There’s not much time to participate in some extracurricular activities because we need to focus on study. We don’t want to fail because for international students it’s really expensive.

“My friend has taken a gap year and maybe she will come back or maybe she will change university. I think I will not be in UNSW next year.”



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