

Australian universities exploit COVID-19 crisis to cut jobs and courses

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Australian university managements, like other major employers, are seizing on the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate plans to eliminate jobs and courses, slash costs and further cut workers' conditions.

The University of Tasmania (UTAS) last week gave a signal of the intensity of the management assault. It announced the elimination of about three-quarters of its courses by next year. It brought forward a five-year restructuring program, citing an "over-reliance" on students from China.

With courses being cut or placed online throughout the country's 39 public universities, staff members and students alike are paying the price. The worst affected financially are the approximately 90,000 casual staff who do much of the teaching, research and administrative support work on the campuses.

At the same time, despite belated federal and state government calls to halt large gatherings, universities remain open, exposing thousands of staff and students to the growing danger posed by the coronavirus.

The corporate executives who run the universities are being assisted by the trade unions covering tertiary education workers. Far from proposing any industrial action, even on health and safety grounds, the unions have issued pleas to the federal government and individual vice chancellors for financial relief for laid-off casual teachers.

The unions are trying to stifle rank-and-file resistance by staff and students, under conditions in which factory workers in Italy and elsewhere are walking off the job in so-called wildcat strikes, defying governments, employers and unions, because of the obvious risk of mass infection.

University workers internationally have also held stoppages against wage cuts and attacks on conditions, especially low-paid and insecure sessional lecturers and graduate student teachers in the UK and US.

UTAS vice chancellor Rufus Black, a former consultant for the global management giant McKinsey & Company,

told staff the university was "facing sustained headwinds" and would cut the number of courses on offer from 514 to fewer than 120 by next year.

Black refused to say how many full-time jobs would be eliminated, let alone how many casual staff would be axed. He said there was no need for redundancies to be "decided quickly." In the meantime, staff members would be placed under intense pressure to quit. "We will lean hard on natural turnover to achieve as much of that as possible," he said.

Black admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic was not the underlying cause. In fact, he said the majority of the university's students who had been subjected to the Australian government's travel ban on Chinese students had resumed study with the university.

Instead, Black described the combination of "over-reliance" on Chinese students for income and the coronavirus as a "known strategic risk."

This is a thinly-veiled reference to the anti-China propaganda by the intelligence agencies and the corporate media, accusing Australian universities of becoming too dependent on Chinese students as successive governments cut university funding.

Every Australian university is slashing costs at the expense of workers' livelihoods and workloads, as well as the quality of the education offered to students.

At the University of Sydney, where the management has announced budget cuts of \$200 million, casual teachers have lost shifts and academics have been given onerous deadlines to transform their courses to be taught online.

Likewise, casual teachers at the University of Queensland, including about 40 at its Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education (ICTE), have had their shifts cut without warning. The ICTE supplies English language training, including pre-university programs for international students.

At Western Sydney University, the management is

imposing a “refresh” program on targeted academics, issuing them with arbitrary ultimatums to lift their performance or face dismissal procedures.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) called for consultation with the UTAS management. As in every past university “restructuring,” the purpose of such talks is to assist the management to find ways to inflict its cuts without an eruption of opposition.

NTEU Tasmanian state secretary Kelvin Michael told the media he hoped the cuts could be achieved without forced redundancies, but job losses were likely and “some areas of teaching may not survive the cull.”

National NTEU president Alison Barnes said that if consultation failed to produce a solution, “we will be addressing this if necessary through the appropriate industrial forums.”

This means diverting UTAS workers into the Fair Work Commission, which enforces the no-strike laws that were reinforced by the last federal Labor government of 2007-13. More broadly, it means keeping staff straitjacketed by union-negotiated enterprise agreements at each university, which have prevented a unified fight back by university workers.

These agreements have helped managements casualise their workforce over the past three decades. They also have allowed federal governments to cut at least \$7 billion from university budgets since the global financial breakdown of 2008-09.

The Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard cut \$2.7 billion from tertiary funding in 2013, initiating a cost-cutting drive that the Liberal-National Coalition government has intensified ever since.

The NTEU’s own 2019 State of the Uni Survey, released last week, points to worsening workloads and unpaid work. The estimated median hours for full-time academic staff was around 50 per week, with many thousands working more than 55 hours per week.

As a result of Gillard’s supposed “education revolution,” international students have become one of Australian capitalism’s biggest foreign exchange earners, valued at some \$32 billion annually. Universities have been transformed into money-making corporations, run by highly paid executives.

In early February, the NTEU wrote to federal Education Minister Dan Tehan and each vice chancellor, pleading for a government support package or efforts by individual universities to compensate casual staff members for incomes losses. Contemptuously, Tehan has not bothered to reply.

Consistent with the NTEU’s record of collaboration with managements, Barnes’s February 10 letter to vice chancellors offered to cooperate with them. “[W]e are committed to working with universities in managing the current situation and ensuring that the health and wellbeing of all students and staff is given priority,” she wrote.

The NTEU leader urged the vice chancellors to “consider any relevant workload requirements of the enterprise agreement when making changes to university operations and workloads.” Yet these agreements permit universities to impose restructuring and provide no guarantees against job losses and cuts to casuals’ hours.

For the health and survival of themselves and the population, university workers and students need to take action, completely independent of the unions. They should decide, not the financial elite and its parliamentary and trade union servants, whether to close campuses and when to re-open them once the pandemic is over.

To defend the incomes and jobs of all, including casual staff, they should link up with the strikes by 50,000 university staff in the UK in defence of pension rights and for better pay, terms and conditions, and the graduate students at the University of California in their “wildcat” teaching strike against sackings and job cuts and for substantial cost-of-living adjustments.

This requires the building of committees of action to coordinate the response of the working class, ensure that workers who are laid-off or self-isolating keep receiving full pay, and ultimately oversee the safe operation of campuses. To maintain this response, workers need a revolutionary socialist perspective: the fight for a workers’ government, aimed at the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the profits of the wealthy few.



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