

Australian government steps up attack on university students and workers

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University students, as well as staff, are under mounting assault by the Australian government. It is attempting to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to impose a major pro-business slashing and restructuring of higher education.

Last Friday, the government unveiled plans to more than double the fees for humanities and communications students, alongside 28 percent higher fees for law, economics and commerce, putting them all in the highest price band of \$14,500 a year.

Students could pay as much as \$43,500 for a three-year undergraduate humanities degree, up from \$20,400. This would financially punish young people, and mature-aged workers seeking further education, who wish to study potentially intellectually stimulating courses as history, geography, politics, sociology, film studies, behavioural sciences and journalism. Creative arts fees would rise by 13 percent to \$7,700 a year.

By this move, the government is seeking to further transform universities into vocational businesses, churning out “job-ready graduates” to meet the immediate profit-making requirements of employers. Addressing the National Press Club, Education Minister Dan Tehan said the plan would “incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices.”

This is antithetical to genuine education, which requires critical thinking and the exposure to new ideas. Young people, now facing an unemployment and under-employment level of 48 percent, are being denied the basic right to decent education.

Fees for courses that big business regards as vital, such as science, maths, agriculture, IT, engineering, teaching, nursing, clinical psychology, English and languages, would be reduced. But the government funds for most of these degrees would be lowered too, leaving the universities with less money overall and

therefore forced to cut costs, including by increasing class sizes. There is no guarantee against students in those courses paying higher fees in the future.

Despite the corporate media fully backing this offensive, there is clearly outraged opposition among young people, including this year’s school leavers, and university educators, reflected in social media posts and comments published by some media outlets.

One student told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “I am a business/politics (humanities) student. I am the first in my family to attend university, and all this does is make university (for the most part) unattainable. My degree is now going to be on par with the cost of a medical degree ... Poorer kids are going to move away from economics, humanities and law.”

Another message stated: “Truly devastating news. What the world needs now more than ever is for young people to learn to think deeply, critically, and creatively about the complex issues we face as a global community, to challenge the status quo, learn from the past and understand other cultures and points of view.”

Tehan denied that students would be priced out of degrees, saying “no student pays a single dollar upfront” due to the HECS-HELP fees loan scheme. Because of lower income thresholds introduced in 2018, however, graduates must start repaying their fee debts when they earn more than \$46,000 annually—only about \$730 a week after tax.

Many students will be saddled with a life of debt. By January 2019, about 3.2 million graduates had outstanding student loan debts, totalling over \$66 billion.

After a three-year funding freeze, Tehan said an extra 39,000 university places for domestic students would be funded by 2023 to cope with the extra demand caused by the collapse of job prospects, but without any

overall increase in government funding for universities. The plan would lift student contributions to the overall cost of degrees from 42 percent to 48 percent.

The latest measures will need to be legislated and pass the Senate, where the Liberal-National Coalition government holds only a minority of seats. But no reliance can be placed on the other Senate parties, including Labor and the Greens, which have helped decimate university funding over the past decade.

The government has been emboldened by the role of the university staff and student unions. They have assisted the government and the university managements to inflict the burden of the financial crisis triggered by the pandemic on staff and students.

Because of the loss of international student fees, the 39 public universities expect to lose revenues of \$16 billion between June this year and 2023, with up to 30,000 jobs to be eliminated as a result. This is on top of years of multi-billion dollar funding cuts by the current Liberal-National Coalition government and the previous Greens-backed Labor government.

The government has refused to rescue the public universities, while handing JobKeeper wage subsidies to private universities. It has been aided by the fact that as soon as the pandemic began to hit, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) rushed into backroom national talks with the managements, offering wage cuts of up to 15 percent while still agreeing to the destruction of at least 18,000 jobs.

The NTEU thus made clear its commitment to help the managements impose cuts and restructuring on university workers and students. For two months, while the closed-door negotiations continued, the union stifled any struggle against the offensive, permitting hundreds of job cuts, particularly of casual workers.

Since the NTEU-management “Job Protection Framework” was finally revealed to university workers last month and collapsed in the face of intense opposition, the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) have intensified their efforts to inflict similar job- and pay-cutting agreements on university workers at individual universities.

Likewise, the National Union of Students has opposed any mobilisation of students against the attack on jobs and conditions, which also means lower quality education, larger classes and worse services and facilities for students.

This escalating offensive underscores the need by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for a unified struggle by university workers and students for the defence of jobs and conditions and for the right to decent, free and first-class education for all, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.

This will require the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students. These must be completely independent of the unions, which have shown they are nothing but political and industrial police forces.

Instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military, resources must be poured into healthcare and education funding. That means challenging the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective, based on the total reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy.



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