

Face-to-face teaching resumed at Australian universities, despite continuing COVID-19 cases

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Several public universities in Sydney have returned to on-campus classes, requiring staff to physically deliver teaching and other student services. Although confirmed COVID-19 cases are currently low in the city, there are ongoing community outbreaks and a new wave of infections is possible.

Evidence from the US, Europe and around the world shows that a small rise in case numbers, accompanied by the lifting of restrictions, can have devastating consequences while the virus is still circulating in the community.

In both the United States and Britain, campuses have become centres for outbreaks of the virus among students and surrounding communities. In the UK, the University and Colleges Union has reported almost 40,000 infections among students and staff in higher education since the start of the academic term.

Despite the clear dangers, the trade unions covering Australian university workers—such as the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU)—have mounted no opposition to the return to campuses.

This is part of the broader “return to work” campaign by the corporate media, big business and the federal Liberal-National government. It is also bound up with the drive to recruit a new cohort of international students. In June, the federal government approved a pilot program to bring international students to Australia, despite the border restrictions for general travellers, but only on pre-approved plans for particular institutions.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham defended the program on explicitly pro-business grounds, saying that international education was a key part of the economy. A report by the Mitchell Institute said that: “for every

\$1 lost in university tuition fees, there is another \$1.15 lost in the broader economy due to international student spending.”

The collapse in the number of international students, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has exposed the deep funding crisis in the tertiary sector, which has driven universities to treat full fee-paying international students as cash cows. Following decades of cuts by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, the sector is forecasting billions of dollars of losses. If universities were to remain fully online, there would be little incentive for international students to continue or commence their studies.

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and Macquarie University recommenced face-to-face teaching for a large percentage of students at the beginning of their Spring semesters. While both universities are continuing to deliver lectures online, small group teaching, including practicals, labs and tutorials have resumed for the majority of courses.

Sydney University delayed the commencement of its Spring session until late August for most courses and is also teaching face-to-face small group activities. The University of New South Wales began onsite teaching in September, accompanied by the full return of all staff to the campus. Of the major campuses in Sydney, only Western Sydney University has remained largely online.

Macquarie University staff members were informed that the management was exercising its exemption, under COVID-19 health directives, to bring students back onto the campus. Under the state government’s Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order (No 4) 2020, the four-square-

metre rule does not apply to a university when a gathering is necessary for its normal business. The UTS website notes that university learning activities are considered exempt “essential gatherings.”

Many Macquarie University workers were required to return to work on campus on July 20, while face-to-face teaching recommenced on July 27. Since then, there has been a further drive to get staff back onto campus. Many departments and offices are insisting that staff return to working from their offices full-time, with management insisting that even those in high-risk categories will not be in danger.

In its official communications, Macquarie University management promised additional cleaning regimes and the maintenance of social distancing—where possible. In reality, the additional cleaning is limited to a small number of staff members wiping down door handles and lift buttons. Students and staff are expected to wipe down surfaces in teaching and communal rooms, before and after their use. Cleaning wipes are provided for this task.

The situation at the other universities is similar. Students and staff are being asked to wipe down teaching and learning spaces when they enter and leave, and there is minimal cleaning of high-contact areas, such as door handles and lift buttons.

In learning and teaching spaces where, due to the nature of the space or the learning activity, it is impossible to physically distance at all times, Macquarie University staff and students were promised that additional risk control measures would be in place. This is limited to the availability of masks and disinfectant wipes. However, staff and students are not required to wear masks. In fact, the university web site notes that face masks are not recommended for the general population.

UNSW points out on its website that in teaching, learning, research or operational situations there will be situations where physical distancing cannot be maintained. It requires that face masks be used in those situations. But while staff were to be provided with face masks, students are expected to provide their own. Similarly, UTS students are required to wear masks where the 1.5 metre rule cannot be adhered to.

All the universities in the Sydney region draw students from across the city, as well as from satellite urban centres in the north, south and west of the city.

Since the return to face-to-face teaching, several universities have reported active cases on campus. An outbreak at any one of these universities could have disastrous consequences for the greater Sydney metropolitan area, which has a population of five million.

The return-to-work campaign, amid the global pandemic, demonstrates the willingness of the financial elites to sacrifice the lives of workers and students in the interests of private profit. The refusal of the NTEU and other unions to oppose this drive underscores the necessity for the formation of genuine rank-and-file committees of educators and students, completely independent of the union apparatuses.

These committees are essential to organise a unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions, and link up with workers and students internationally who are facing similar critical struggles.

This means challenging the capitalist profit system and turning to a socialist perspective, based on the reorganisation of society in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy. We urge all university workers and students who want to take forward this fight to contact the Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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