

Australian university cuts to jobs and courses to intensify in 2021

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As campuses start to reopen for 2021, it is clear that historic cuts to jobs, courses and conditions for university staff and students will deepen this year, on top of the destruction of close to 90,000 jobs last year.

Multi-billion dollar revenue losses from the collapse in international student enrolments will worsen in 2021, compounding the impact of decades of funding cuts by Liberal-National and Labor Party governments alike.

Australia's public university managements, like other employers, are also exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic to bring forward restructuring plans. Many humanities, arts, languages, science and maths courses, in particular, are being decimated.

This will further transform their institutions into highly-casualised and corporatised enterprises servicing the vocational requirements of big business. Australian National University (ANU) Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt recently told staff members and students: "We don't expect to ever return to business-as-usual pre-COVID."

For the universities, as for the capitalist economy as whole, the pandemic has proven to be a trigger event. It has intensified and accelerated the destructive processes dictated by the financial elite for decades, particularly since the "education revolution" unleashed by the last Greens-backed Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard from 2007 to 2013.

That market-style "revolution," which was endorsed and policed by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), stripped universities of \$2.7 billion in 2012–13 and scrapped the previous system of block funding, forcing them to compete with each other for student enrolments to finance their operations.

As a result, the universities became heavily dependent on charging international students exorbitant fees, treating them as cash cows. By 2019, more than 40 percent of the sector's annual student revenue came from these students,

mostly from China, India and other Asian countries.

In October 2019, almost 51,000 new and returning international students arrived in Australia. By October 2020, as a result of the pandemic, this figure had fallen by 99.7 percent, to just 130.

By last October, the actual number of fee-paying foreign students enrolled in Australian courses had dropped by 13 percent, from 580,202 to 502,206, and that total will drop more quickly from 2021 to 2023 as students complete their courses and few new ones arrive.

According to Australian government data, about 120,000 international students, or 24 percent of the enrolled cohort, were due to finish their courses between last October and this month alone.

In 2019, universities reported \$9.8 billion in revenue from foreign students. Modelling by Universities Australia, the employers' body, shows by 2023, its members stand to lose \$16 billion due to the loss of international students.

As it further slashed funding last year, the current Liberal-National Coalition government falsely held out hopes that a rollout of COVID-19 vaccines could allow universities to resume large enrolments of international students in 2021, easing their financial blow.

This was part of the government, corporate and media drive to reopen the economy and get all workers back into workplaces, for the sake of corporate profit, regardless of the resurging global COVID-19 catastrophe and the ongoing danger of outbreaks in Australia.

This week, however, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told reporters that talk of instituting "vaccination passports" to permit the return of international students was "somewhat premature." He added: "It is not a silver bullet because there are still limitations to what these vaccines can do."

This followed warnings by epidemiologists that it was not yet known whether any of the vaccines would reduce

transmission, how long immunity would last, and whether the vaccines would be fully effective against the mutant coronavirus strains emerging around the world.

Various universities and state and territory governments had pushed plans to trial the return of some students. These included flying in 300 students to South Australia, 350 to the Australian Capital Territory, 63 to the Northern Territory and setting aside up to 1,000 quarantine places per week in New South Wales for international students and temporary migrants. But these efforts stalled in the face of public concern after the more infectious UK variant arrived in Australia.

At the end of 2020, university managements unveiled a “second wave” of job destruction and course closures, which included hundreds of retrenchments, both “voluntary” and forced, at ANU, La Trobe, Swinburne, University Technology Sydney and the Australian Catholic University.

The opening weeks of 2021 will see further cuts implemented. At both Western Sydney University (WSU) and Macquarie University, for example, the managements have said they will announce the final results of scores of “change proposals” that were issued just before the New Year break.

Staff at WSU were bluntly informed by email this week: “Implementation of approved changes will commence from the date the Vice-Chancellor approves the change plan.”

At ANU, the management “disestablished” 75 positions in the College of Science just before Christmas, and demanded that “surplus to requirement” staff immediately apply for redeployment, a first step toward retrenchment. The “ANU Recovery Plan” proposes that 130 positions in total will go from the College, so more job losses will be unveiled soon.

None of this would be possible without the role of the NTEU, the main campus union, which has systematically suppressed resistance by university workers, opposed calls for industrial action and struck regressive deals with individual universities to impose job and wage cuts.

As soon as the pandemic erupted, the NTEU requested closed-door talks with the employers and in May volunteered a “Job Protection Framework” by which universities would cut wages by up to 15 percent and still inflict unprecedented job losses, totalling at least 18,000 to 20,000. That proposal was eventually abandoned by the employers in the face of rank-and-file hostility, which cast doubt on the union’s ability to enforce the agreement.

Nevertheless, the union proceeded to push through

similar deals at one university after another. In the union’s annual report for 2019-20, published near the end of 2020, national president Alison Barnes declared it had been a successful year for the NTEU. “Indeed, the Union has grown even stronger,” she insisted.

Since mid-December, nothing has appeared on the NTEU’s website and social media platforms about the intensifying job losses, thus keeping its members in the dark and indicating its continued complicity in the onslaught.

The NTEU is being assisted by pseudo-left groups that falsely claim to be socialist, such as Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance and Solidarity. Echoing Barnes, one of their numerous former members now entrenched in union bureaucracies, called on university workers to “build the union.” That means to shore up the union apparatus that is blocking any unified fight by the working class.

The only alternative to this disaster is being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education. We are urging university workers and students to draw the essential conclusion—the need to form genuine new working class organisations, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the NTEU and other trade unions.

These committees would seek to organise a nationwide, unified struggle for secure well-paid jobs and basic rights, protect staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with educators nationally and internationally who are facing similar critical struggles.

That requires opposing the dictates of the capitalist profit system, which is enriching the world’s billionaires at a staggering pace at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of working people. It means turning to a revolutionary socialist perspective based on the working class taking power in order to completely reorganise society in the interests of all, instead of the wealthy elites.



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