

Australian universities rush to enroll students and disregard COVID dangers

Jack Turner**25 February 2021**

As the teaching year begins, Australian university administrations are competing to secure the largest share of enrolments, while returning to face-to-face teaching and expanding class sizes with little to no regard for the health risks to staff or students posed by the continuing global COVID-19 pandemic.

At present, the coronavirus, if it is currently present in the community, is circulating at extremely low levels. However recent outbreaks, including of highly-contagious overseas variants of the virus that have spread from hotel quarantines, have demonstrated that the situation can change very rapidly.

The return to physical classrooms is part of the rising “economic reopening” and anti-lockdown push of governments and the corporate media.

Universities are also desperately seeking to boost their revenues after decades of government funding cuts and pro-market restructuring of tertiary education, intensified by the loss of international student fees due to the pandemic.

University of New South Wales deputy vice chancellor (academic), Merlin Crossly, told the *Guardian* last month that “2021 will be a bit of a celebration” because of the roll out of vaccines. In Australia, vaccines only began to be administered to front-line health workers this week. Most university students fall under the fourth category of the government’s five-part rollout plan, so they will receive the vaccine in the second half of the year at the earliest.

Moreover, the vast majority of the country’s population will receive the AstraZeneca vaccine, which may not adequately protect against the more virulent strains, such as that detected in South Africa.

Even if all goes to plan, this still leaves plenty of time and possibility for outbreaks to start on campuses, endangering the lives of students and staff alike. Judging by media reports, university managements plan to have

tens of thousands of students back inside classrooms this semester.

According to the *Guardian*, “more than two-thirds” of classes will be face-to-face at the University of Canberra. All tutorials and laboratories at Murdoch University will be in person. The Australian National University “expects” all students who can study on campus to do so this year. The University of Sydney reported that half its students attended in-person classes in the second half of 2020 and it expects the number to rise this year.

Universities are not required to enforce the official 1.5-metre social distancing rules. University managers are being allowed to work out arrangements with staff. To the extent that social distancing is practiced, and/or mask wearing and hand sanitization required, it is being left up to individual staff and students, sometimes at their own expense.

At Western Sydney University, students and staff have been issued with COVID-19 Protocols that include the following:

- Where 1.5 metres cannot be maintained, all impacted students **MUST** wear a mask.
- Students and Staff must bring their own masks.
- Hand sanitising and wipe dispensers are provided in the corridors... The academic must wipe the lectern or teaching space. The students must wipe the desk space where they are sitting. This cleaning must take place at the START and FINISH of every class. If the hallway supply of wipes and sanitiser run [sic] out, call x5800 for the PPE to be replenished.
- The in-class teacher is responsible for the monitoring and assurance of these Covid-19 protocols.
- A **LIMITED** supply of hand sanitiser, wipes and masks are [sic] available to support Face to Face teaching... These limited resources can be used **ONLY** where the central supplies are exhausted or where the academic or student forgets to supply their own. Remember,

academics and students are REQUIRED to supply their own masks. These resources are emergency ONLY [emphasis in the original].

Many academics are being instructed to teach in a new “hyflex” model, which means presenting lectures and tutorials to students in classrooms while simultaneously having students participate online. Often this is being presented as a temporary measure, yet it accelerates moves by universities to maximise class sizes.

The “hyflex” model creates the possibility of almost limitless student numbers per class, thus further driving up staff workloads and diminishing the quality of university courses.

In an email to department heads this month, the Faculty of Arts general manager at the University of Sydney called for an increase to class limits as “a matter of urgency” to relieve pressure on over-enrolled classes.

This agenda has received no opposition from the trade unions, which have remained silent on the COVID-19 dangers. Instead, they have advised their members that they cannot refuse to work in unsafe conditions unless there is an “aggravating factor,” such as a recent infection case.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) website states: “As long as the public health advice allows it and your workplace is practising physical social distancing and hygiene measures, being at work does not itself constitute an immediate or imminent hazard that would allow you to cease work without penalty.

“For example, if students or colleagues are not adhering to the social distancing guidelines or your area has run out of hand sanitiser, it is unlikely to meet the threshold for stopping work unless there is some sort of aggravating factor, such as a confirmed case of COVID-19 recently being in the area.”

The unions are continuing their decades-long collaboration with the managements, which has facilitated the pro-business transformation of universities. At the start of the pandemic, the NTEU offered employers wage cuts of up to 15 percent, supposedly as a “job protection” scheme, but nevertheless said it would accept thousands of redundancies.

This cleared the way for the elimination of what the NTEU itself estimated to be up to 90,000 jobs in the university sector last year, despite widespread opposition among staff members. This offensive is now being accelerated. Macquarie University management, for example, told its staff last week that \$50 million had to be saved across the university through a series of “change

proposals.” That equates to another 400 to 500 job losses.

With the help of the unions, Liberal-National and Labor governments have implemented decades of market-driven education “reforms.” The last Greens-backed Labor government lifted caps on student enrolments and cut tertiary funding by \$2.7 billion in 2013. As a result, universities are constantly fighting each other for enrolments, particularly from full-fee paying international students.

According to *news.com.au*, the Australian Border Force Commissioner has granted travel ban exemptions to permit 1,050 international students to enter Australia in recent months as part of the scramble to secure a section of the lucrative international student market.

International students pay three to five times the fees of local students. A three-year Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Sydney would cost an international student over \$121,500; a health science degree would cost at least \$165,000. Education is counted as one of Australian capitalism’s biggest exports, worth \$37.6 billion in 2018–19.

Just as the unions have policed management’s demands to eliminate jobs, they are doing nothing to ensure the safety of staff and students, because this would cut across university revenues.

To ensure the necessary precautions are taken to defend their health, university staff, academics and students need to establish rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions. These committees would ensure that class sizes are strictly limited and only proceed under conditions in which all participants are safe.

Such measures, while basic, mean rejecting the financial and political dictates of the managements, the governments and the corporate elite. To stop the destruction of jobs and conditions, there must be a vast redistribution of resources away from the banks, big business and the military, and into education, and that is possible only as part of a socialist program organised by the working class.



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