

Australian university workers and students face new wave of job cuts and “commercialisation”

Mike Head
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Australian university managements have announced hundreds more job losses over the past fortnight, adding to the 90,000 jobs that the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) estimated they destroyed in 2020. Increasingly, academics and professional workers are being forced to compete with each other in “spill and fill” contests for the remaining positions.

In a related move, the federal government has launched a new drive to tie university funding to “research commercialisation,” with Education Minister Alan Tudge declaring the need for academics to become “entrepreneurs.”

These developments further demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic is being exploited to accelerate a decades-long offensive against university workers and students. Far beyond the impact of the pandemic itself, government funding cuts and corporate restructuring are being intensified.

Not only are the livelihoods and basic conditions of thousands of university employees being destroyed. Students confront larger class sizes and lower quality courses, and universities are being transformed even more into business entities serving the commercial and strategic demands of the financial elite.

Last week, Sydney’s Macquarie University took to a new level a *Hunger Games*-style “spill and fill” process, already seen at Sydney University and the University of Queensland late last year. The Macquarie management released “change proposals” that aim to eliminate about 90 full-time positions and require academics to fight each other for survival, on top of 109 “voluntary” redundancies already inflicted in 2020.

The business school is targeting the equivalent of 17 to 27 full-time positions, the science faculty “approximately 31–38 FTE (full-time equivalents)” and medicine

“between 18 and 25 FTE.” The change papers identify academic roles that will be “in scope” or targeted for retrenchment. Those staff will have to submit application documents making a case for their retention, competing against their colleagues as judged by the university’s promotion criteria.

In the Faculty of Science and Engineering, for instance, 103 academics (or FTE) will compete for 65 positions. In the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences, 100 academics will compete for 75 posts.

As the management stated, these plans are in accordance with the process set out in its 2018 enterprise agreement with the NTEU, which merely requires “consultation” with the union and staff members before being implemented.

The essential purpose of such “consultation” was revealed last month at Western Sydney University. Despite that university reporting a surplus for 2020, the NTEU admitted at a staff meeting that more than 200 jobs would be scrapped, not counting casuals and fixed-term workers, as the management’s 35 or so “change proposals” were finalised.

The union claimed that the “consultation” process instigated late last year had been successful because most of the jobs would be eliminated via “voluntary redundancies.”

As this response typifies, the trade unions work with employers to facilitate job cuts, and stifle workers’ opposition, by helping to pressure enough workers into taking retrenchment packages, supposedly as a matter of “choice,” to satisfy management’s requirements.

At the University of Melbourne, vice-chancellor Duncan Maskell sent a letter to staff last week declaring that savings of \$252 million must be achieved in 2021, on top of \$360 million in 2020, regardless of an operating

surplus of \$8 million in 2020. He said the pandemic had created a “pipeline problem” that would affect the university for multiple years, requiring up to 450 job losses. Revenue had dropped \$275 million in 2020, and another fall of \$200 million was projected for 2021, as international students remained shut out of the country.

As at all the country’s 39 public universities, these official job loss figures do not count the far greater number of casual and fixed-term workers who have been laid-off. Universities Australia, the employers’ organisation, last month said 17,300 full-time equivalent jobs had been abolished in 2020, but the real figure is close to the NTEU’s previous estimate of up to 90,000.

This is part of an international assault on the jobs and conditions of university workers and students. The United States Department of Labor published a report last month that said US colleges and universities had cut a total of 650,000 jobs since February 2020—13 percent of all US higher education workers—ranging from professors to food service employees.

The NTEU, like the education trade unions in the US and elsewhere, has systematically suppressed resistance to this escalating offensive. 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.

When outraged university workers objected, rejecting the union’s betrayal, some university employers pulled out of that national deal, concerned that the NTEU could not enforce it against its members. But the NTEU then proceeded to strike similar agreements with individual universities, bulldozing them through despite members’ discontent.

The NTEU’s response to last week’s Macquarie announcement was typical. Michael Thomson, the union’s New South Wales state secretary said: “We call on the university management to sit down and negotiate with the union over alternative measures. If the management doesn’t have the decency to negotiate, then we will fight these callous job cuts.”

That is, the NTEU’s only concern is to retain its position at the bargaining table. Talk of “fighting” the cuts is for PR purposes only, both to placate members’ anger and convince management to keep engaging the union’s services as the police force best equipped to impose the cuts.

Likewise, the Liberal-National Coalition government’s latest edict on tying research funding to “commercialisation” and the “national interest” is only

possible because of the NTEU’s long record of collaboration with the employers and governments.

Having deliberately starved the universities of funding throughout the pandemic, the government is now seizing on the crisis to intensify its corporate strategy. In a speech at the University of Melbourne last Friday, Education Minister Alan Tudge declared: “We want academics to become entrepreneurs, taking their ideas from the lab to the market.”

Tudge said the current funding model, where an average 25 percent of universities’ revenue relied on international students, had not only been disrupted by COVID-19 but was not sustainable beyond the pandemic. Instead, universities would be funded to “help us build our sovereign capabilities.” Tudge said this “great national project” included developing medical capacities, such as vaccine production, but extended to “security, manufacturing and energy.”

These remarks, coming on top of the government’s recent overturning of research grants that would allegedly benefit China, point to the growing integration of the universities into preparations for a US war against China to maintain Washington’s post-World War II hegemony.

Opposition Labor Party education spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek made it clear that her party agrees with this agenda. Her only criticism was that the government’s “research support” had come too late for thousands of university staff who lost their jobs in 2020.

With the help of the NTEU and other education trade unions, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike 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, forcing universities to constantly fight each other for enrolments, particularly from full-fee paying international students.

Labor’s market-style “education revolution” was endorsed and policed by the NTEU, underlining its own commitment to meeting the strategic, vocational and profit-making demands of the Australian capitalist class.



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