Arts education on the “endangered” list in Australia

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As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, most planned arts activities in Australia were cancelled or severely modified to the point of being unrecognisable in 2020. This was across the board, affecting all modes of artistic expression. By the end of April, more than $340 million in lost work had been reported to the ilostmygig website.

As many in the arts sector are painfully aware, the federal, state and territory governments offered little or no assistance, leaving many thousands of arts and entertainment workers on sub-poverty dole payments. This has been an extraordinarily long and difficult time for artistic communities to survive.

A dire situation has also developed in Arts education, seen in closures of arts-related degrees across educational institutions. The official response to the pandemic has accelerated and deepened a protracted attack on the arts and humanities.

From this year, arts and the humanities degrees will become almost as expensive as law degrees, and the following cuts and mergers are scheduled:

• Monash University in Melbourne will cut its theatre studies and musicology programs.

• Newcastle and La Trobe Universities will abolish their drama departments.

• Griffith University’s Queensland College of the Arts will cut courses in fine arts, photography and design.

• Flinders University in South Australia will have a “temporary pause” in enrolling students in its acting degree.

• The Australian National University in Canberra proposes to downgrade its arts schools with the possible cancellation of Furniture, Jewellery and Object workshops and a restructuring of Glass and Ceramics Workshops.

• The University of NSW’s Faculty of Art & Design in Sydney will become part of a school within a larger faculty that will see the merging of Arts & Social Sciences with Art & Design and Built Environment.

• The University of Tasmania is cutting courses, including arts and humanities, from 514 to about 120.

Writing in the *Conversation*, Jo Caust, an associate professor in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, commented: “Being ignored was one thing, but the federal government decided it should ensure there was no future in the arts by decreeing an education in the arts and the humanities to be effectively an indulgence.

“There is a dreadful feeling this is just the beginning, and there will be many more to follow across the country,” Caust noted. “When universities focus on being businesses first and educational institutions second, they are willing collaborators in the degradation of Australian’s arts and culture… The capacity for the country to continue to train a range of future performers, directors, musicians, artists, writers and curators will be dramatically affected.” This was “creating a bleak and uninspiring future for our young people.”

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Many educators are concerned that the loss of teaching capacity and specialisation in the arts will cause irreparable damage. A current exhibition, entitled Space YZ, displays work by alumni from the Western Sydney University art school before its closure 12 years ago.

Presented by Campbelltown Arts Centre for the Sydney Festival 2021 (7 January–14 March), the exhibition raises the question of the impact of the closure of an art school. Curator Daniel Mudie Cunningham wrote in *Arts Hub*: "We don't often define art history based on art schools, with some iconic exceptions, like the Bauhaus. I started thinking about what happens to that art history when an art school disappears?"

Cunningham said people often remembered the Western Sydney University art school "with a lot of affection… They remember it being quite different; people use adjectives like 'radical' and 'experimental,' things like that. And it was very different. What set it apart was the pedagogy and the commitment from artist lecturers who made it very much their mission to teach differently and make students think differently.

"Over the past two decades, I have seen art schools shrink and close as they don't neatly fit within the university framework. As a result, younger people in the area have experienced a deficit in art education."

Dr Nigel Helyer, former Head of the Sculpture, Performance and Installation Studio at Sydney College of the Arts, commented: "In Sydney, there is only one dedicated art school left, which is the fee paying National Art School. UNSW is basically a design school, Sydney College of the Arts is being absorbed into the fabric of Sydney Uni with a reduced range of studio practice."

Dr Cecelia Cmielewski, research officer at Western Sydney University's Institute for Culture and Society, said: "COVID has, in a way, given many universities an excuse to downsize dramatically, as has the federal government's recent fee increases for the humanities… they're just looking at their bottom line." This was compounded, "because there is no arts policy in Australia—which sends the message that the arts aren't valued."

Clearly, in 2021 arts education is on the brink of a collapse. There must be a struggle against the business models that are wreaking havoc on arts courses, specialisations and modes of fostering young artists.

Waves of job cuts and course closures are hitting university workers and students around Australia. Despite widespread outrage, these cuts are being imposed with the assistance of the National Tertiary Education Union, which has isolated each struggle.

As the WSWS has warned: "Humanities, arts and language courses are among the worst-affected, adding to the intellectual and cultural impact of the offensive being conducted by the federal government and university managements. This restructuring is further transforming the 39 public universities into corporatised facilities for churning out 'job ready' graduates to serve the needs of the corporate elite."

The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education are urging arts educators, 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 trade unions.

These committees would seek to organise a nationwide, unified struggle to defend educational programs for the arts and humanities, to 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 challenging the dictates of the capitalist profit system and turning to a revolutionary socialist perspective based on the working class taking power in order to totally reorganise society in the interests of all, instead of the financial elite.

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