

Australian government demands return to face-to-face university classes

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Despite the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian government has called on the country's public universities to bring all their students back onto campus.

This demand, issued by federal Education Minister Alan Tudge last week, is part of the government's drive to fully reopen the economy to satisfy the profit requirements of big business, regardless of recurring infection outbreaks across the continent.

"Universities should absolutely have students back on campus, within the COVID-safe rules of their relevant state or territory," Tudge declared. "If we can have 50,000 people at a football match, surely we can have COVID-safe face-to-face learning on campus. Our universities have to focus more on giving Australian students the best possible learning experience."

Tudge's comparison to a football match was revealing. It underscored the push by the financial elite for the full resumption of lucrative operations, including air travel and tourism, in order to boost corporate revenues, whatever the risk to public health and lives.

Just days after Tudge's statement, the latest infection outbreak in Perth forced the Western Australian state Labor government to ban crowds at football and other high-profile sporting events over the weekend as part of a three-day lockdown.

Even that limited shutdown incurred the wrath of the corporate media. Without waiting to see how many people became infected, the Murdoch media flagship the *Australian* denounced it as a "crazy COVID panic."

At present, the coronavirus is at low levels in Australia. However outbreaks in recent months in each mainland state capital, including of highly-contagious variants that spread from hotel quarantines, show that the situation can change rapidly.

Tudge's claim to be seeking a better "learning experience" for students is totally fraudulent. The Liberal-National Coalition has deliberately starved the universities of funds throughout the pandemic, exploiting their losses of international student revenues to ratchet up the pro-business restructuring of tertiary education.

This has triggered the slashing of tens of thousands of jobs by university managements, which have increased workloads and class sizes, further cutting the quality of courses.

That is on top of years of government under-funding of universities, which was intensified when the previous Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard cut \$2.7 billion from their budgets in 2013.

From reports by staff members at various universities, many students are choosing not to return to campus, opting for online options instead, because of legitimate concerns about the pandemic.

Tudge is seeking to push them back into classrooms when the country's vaccine plan has been reduced to a shambles. The government has abandoned any deadline for the inoculation of the population. Most university students fall under the lowest priority category, so they are unlikely to receive a vaccine before the end of the year, at least.

In the meantime, outbreaks could spread to campuses, endangering the health and lives of students and staff alike. Universities are not required to enforce 1.5-metre social distancing rules. To the extent that social distancing is practiced, or mask wearing and hand sanitation required, it is being left up to individual staff and students, sometimes at their own expense.

Cleaning after classes is being made the responsibility of staff and students as well. This is not only burdensome, but also unenforceable. At Western

Sydney University, for example, the COVID-19 protocols include: “The academic must wipe the lectern or teaching space. The students must wipe the desk space where they are sitting.”

According to media reports, university managements plan to have tens of thousands more students back inside classrooms and other facilities next semester.

A University of Melbourne spokesman told Nine Media that 25,000 students—nearly half the total cohort—were already attending classes on campus. “The university is optimistic all onshore students can return to campus for the start of winter term and second semester,” he said. Activities such as libraries, gyms and clubs were operating.

A University of New South Wales spokesperson said it was conducting tutorials and practicals face-to-face “where possible” and those who could attend in-person should do so. “Out of caution, some classes remained online in Term 1, but we expect more face-to-face in Term 2 and beyond.”

Given the risks, staff and students must have the right to work and study off-campus if they choose, without any penalty or disadvantage, and the highest-quality education must be provided.

The staff and student unions have lined up behind the premature return-to-campus agenda. After remaining virtually silent for the past year as jobs and conditions have been decimated, the Labor Party-aligned National Union of Students (NUS) backed Tudge’s demand.

NUS president Zoe Ranganathan told Nine Media: “If Minister Tudge comes out and says something as basically a directive to the sector, I’m very sure there are not many vice-chancellors that wouldn’t want to follow what he’s saying.”

Ranganathan said “a lot of course cuts and staff cuts and cost-cutting measures [were] happening under the guise of COVID-safety measures.” But the NUS has opposed any unified national mobilisation of students and staff to fight the cuts.

Instead, the NUS has collaborated with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which has worked with managements to enforce cuts to wages and leave entitlements, as well as thousands of redundancies.

For its part, the NTEU instructs its members that they cannot walk off the job unless there is an “aggravating factor, such as a confirmed case of COVID-19 recently being in the area.” The online advice 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.”

With the help of the unions, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike have implemented market-driven education “reforms” that are being accelerated in the pandemic. Last year, the NTEU offered employers wage cuts of up to 15 percent, supposedly as a “Job Protection Framework,” but nevertheless said it would accept about 18,000 redundancies.

This actually cleared the way for the destruction of up to 90,000 jobs in the university sector during 2020, despite widespread opposition among staff members. These cuts are continuing. Last week, it was reported that 1,500 jobs had been eliminated at the Queensland University of Technology after the NTEU negotiated a local version of its “job protection” scheme.

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

Such measures mean rejecting the financial and political dictates of managements, governments and the corporate elite. A recent joint meeting of the Committee for Public Education and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality proposed an alternative socialist perspective.

Its resolution demanded that “instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed into the military, resources be poured into healthcare and education funding, to protect the population from COVID-19 and guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students, including international students, and full-time jobs for all university workers.”



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