

Australia: Student association promotes management cuts at Newcastle University

University of Newcastle IYSSE

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The University of Newcastle Students Association (UNSA) is currently holding a series of campus meetings, at which top university executives are being provided with a platform to justify sweeping cuts to staff jobs and courses.

The UNSA campaign is one of the most graphic expressions of the role played by student unions across the country over the past year. They have worked closely with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers academics and university staff, to stifle widespread opposition to a sweeping pro-business restructuring of the tertiary sector, accelerated by the pandemic.

The NTEU has struck regressive enterprise agreements at a host of universities, providing for the destruction of jobs and major cuts to conditions. By its own estimate, some 90,000 university positions were eliminated in 2020. The student unions, primarily led by representatives of the Labor Party, have echoed the management-union justifications for these attacks, while doing everything they can to prevent the emergence of a movement of students in defence of education.

The situation is particularly stark at the University of Newcastle, where UNSA has volunteered to play the role of a management public relations agency.

Leading representatives of the student association have made only a handful of mealy-mouthed statements since management announced a major restructure last August. They have bemoaned its impact on students and the broader Newcastle area in regional New South Wales (NSW). But UNSA has not organised a single action against the overhaul, or even pretended to be waging a campaign against it.

Instead, it has allowed management to press ahead. UNSA, together with the NTEU, did nothing but call for greater "consultation" as the university began implementing a "course optimisation" program at the end of last year. It is eliminating some 530 of 2,200 subjects, eight undergraduate degrees and 14 postgraduate degree programs, suspending four postgraduate degree programs in creative industries and consolidating five faculties into three. Management is also

proceeding with plans to destroy at least 120 jobs, while threatening 400 more, as part of a bid to "save" some \$35 million per year.

Now, with the impact of the regressive changes already being felt, UNSA has stepped in, calling five management "consultation" sessions and promoting them among students.

A UNSA email, announcing the first of the sessions on May 12, was indistinguishable from a management press release. It noted that the "current change process that the University is undertaking," i.e., the decimation of entire departments and mass sackings, has "been the cause of some concern and anxiety for our members." The meetings would be "a fantastic opportunity to ask questions and respectfully voice any concerns you have."

UNSA is collaborating with the highest levels of university management. The forums have been addressed by Vice-Chancellor Professor Alex Zelinsky and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) Professor Mark Hoffman, along with senior leaders from the Colleges.

The promotion of Zelinsky is particularly notable. He was installed as vice-chancellor in November 2018 to oversee continuous restructuring, of which the current cuts are only the latest expression.

Zelinsky is a prominent political figure. He was Australia's Chief Defence Scientist from 2012 to 2018, when he collaborated closely with Labor and Liberal-National governments in a military build-up, including a major expansion of defence research on university campuses.

Zelinsky has been a leading figurehead of the nationwide assault on higher education. Last month, he was featured in the *Australian Financial Review*, where he called for an acceleration of the corporatisation of universities, including through greater "research commercialisation," which would compel academics to develop "marketable products and services."

At the May 12 meeting, UNSA representatives did not differentiate in the slightest from this representative of big

business, or from management as a whole. Luka Harrison, UNSA's president, along with Jessica Philbrook, the union's "vice-president of welfare and wellbeing" presided.

Harrison introduced the speakers, before instructing students that they would have to adhere to the university's code of conduct. He expressed his hope that students would "find the answers they are looking for," which would address their "anxiety, stress and concerns."

Zelinsky praised the UNSA executives for "taking the leadership and organising this discussion today." The forum, he said, meant that students were "involved in the decision making." Zelinsky proceeded to insist that the university had no alternative but to implement sweeping cuts, partly as a result of the substantial drop-off in international student numbers during the pandemic.

During a question and answer period, students voiced their hostility to the restructure, and asked for further information about its impact on different areas of the university. Philbrook stepped in to block any concrete discussion of the slated job cuts, insisting that it was necessary to "respect" the "confidentiality" of the backroom discussions between management and the NTEU for a new enterprise agreement.

In other words, students learnt nothing new from the briefing. Its sole purpose was to give Zelinsky an opportunity to justify the cuts, provide a fig leaf of "consultation" as the restructure proceeds, and promote the fraud that management will listen to student "concerns."

Throughout the overhaul, the UNSA and NTEU have made limited criticisms of aspects of the restructure. But the NTEU has repeatedly declared its willingness to countenance "measures that are proportionate to the university's broader financial issues." The forums are themselves the outcome of appeals from the NTEU and UNSA for greater "consultation" over the cuts, by which they mean collaboration between management and the unions.

The UNSA has already made clear the content of such consultation. Last August, Harrison told the *Newcastle Herald* that the UNSA "sympathise[d] with the university," i.e., management. Repeating almost verbatim Zelinsky's line, he complained that the tertiary sector had been "more or less abandoned by the federal government" during the pandemic. "If the federal government provided adequate support for universities, the University of Newcastle would not be in this situation."

It is undoubtedly true that the federal government is overseeing the onslaught on higher education. But the university managements are hardly idle bystanders in this process, as Zelinsky's record makes clear. Harrison's comments, moreover, accepted entirely the framework of management. There was no suggestion of a struggle by

students for free, high-quality university education, only of greater subsidies to the university management, which Zelinsky has said should be directed toward "research commercialisation."

Harrison's reference to the current Liberal-National government alone was aimed at covering up the protracted and bipartisan onslaught on education. The UNSA president is an NSW Young Labor executive. He would thus prefer not to discuss Labor's record. This included the abolition of free university education in the 1980s, a major deepening of the corporatisation of the sector under the Rudd-Gillard governments, and the introduction of the largest ever cut to university funding, when \$2.3 billion was slashed in 2013.

The UNSA forums are a united front of management, the NTEU, the student unions, Labor, and the Greens, directed against students and staff.

The University of Newcastle International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club is the only political organisation on campus opposing the restructure and fighting to mobilise students against it.

The IYSSE, the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, fights for the unity of students and staff across Australia and internationally, in opposition to the corporatised unions, which everywhere have become an arm of management. It defends the social right of all young people to high-quality, free public education, including at the tertiary level.

The IYSSE advances a socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of the universities to the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. Billions of dollars must be allocated to education, as well as health, instead of the endless subsidies to big business and the massive sums being provided to the military. This requires the fight for a workers' government and socialism, the reorganisation of society to meet social need, not the profits of the corporate oligarchy.



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