

Students launch petition at University of Western Australia against cuts to courses

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14 July 2021

Students at the University of Western Australia's (UWA) School of Social Sciences have launched a petition titled "Save Social Sciences at UWA," seeking to halt a new round of job cuts and restructuring at the university. In just four days, there has been an outpouring of support. There are nearly 5,000 signatures and hundreds of comments expressing disgust at the escalating pro-corporate restructuring of universities at the expense of scholarship and genuine education.

According to *WA Today*, the UWA's School of Social Sciences is just the first to suffer in a \$40 million cost-cutting program, "with almost all staff in sociology and anthropology axed and their disciplines to disappear." Eight of nine positions are being eliminated in anthropology and sociology. Three jobs are going from political sciences and international relations, three from geography and planning, and one each from Asian studies and archaeology.

According to the *Campus Morning Mail*, the student-to-staff ratio is to be increased from 18:1 to 35:1 across the school. Overall, 16 academic positions are set to be axed, with 12 jobs being reassigned from teaching and research to teaching-focused. There will be seven new jobs.

In Brand, Marketing and Recruitment, some 34 positions are set to go, with a proposal to create 13 new posts. At the UWA's library, eight jobs are to be destroyed, and four new ones created. In all the new positions, staff will be forced to compete for lower-level, worse-paying jobs.

The student petition states that the plan "directly targets for redundancy a significant proportion of the school's highest performing, world-renowned researchers, including a professor who played a critical leadership role on the United Nations

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change." The cuts "will decimate postgraduate education in the School, in both quality and scope... Through the proposed redundancies and reallocation of staff roles, we are losing 28 of our supervisors and mentors, and estimate at least 43 percent and up to 65 percent of the PhDs currently enrolled in the school will be severely impacted."

This campaign reflects a broader striving by students and young people to find ways to fight the historic offensive underway against university jobs, conditions and courses, and the wider wholesale attack on working class conditions under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic. For years, the resistance of students, like university workers, has been stifled or derailed by the staff and student unions.

A similar struggle has been taken up by students at Sydney's Macquarie University, where the Mathematical Society has launched a petition demanding the reinstatement of a much-appreciated lecturer, Dr. Frank Valckenborgh. A petition has been initiated also at Melbourne's Monash University against the effective retrenchment of Dr. Jan Bryant, a highly-regarded art history and theory academic and educator.

Like the Macquarie and Monash petitions, the comments posted on the one at UWA, mostly by students, demonstrate passionate opposition to the ongoing business-driven attacks on public education, carried out for decades by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments.

The top-voted comment on the petition states: "Universities should not be so concerned with what is popular or profitable or politically expedient. Instead, the university's purpose is the advancement of human knowledge for the betterment of humanity. To open

young people's minds and help them learn how to think, how to collaborate, how to find their place in the world. They should not just be glorified technical colleges. I am genuinely sad about what's happening to our universities and I have grave concerns for our children. At such a crucial point in world history, we need all our great minds in full bloom. Instead we're cutting them off at the knees."

Another states: "Universities should represent the greatest depth of curiosity & desire to understand the nature of human existence—these cuts highlight a focus on supporting disciplines which make money at the expense of those that ask questions."

Another comment points to the assault on education internationally: "This phenomenon is not unique to UWA and Australia. It is a crisis in the social sciences that is now developing all over the world."

Such student-led actions need the broadest support from students, youth and workers. This means a fight in opposition to the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and student unions, which have assisted university managements to impose the corporate elite's demands, resulting in the destruction of an estimated 90,000 jobs in the past 18 months.

The cuts are hitting all Western Australia's universities. Murdoch University retrenched 100 staff last year. At Curtin University, 140 "voluntary" redundancies supposedly saved the institution \$21 million. In Fremantle, Notre Dame pushed for an 18 percent reduction in staff to save \$15 million.

Sacrifices of pay and conditions extracted from university workers by the NTEU last year have emboldened university managements to go further, commencing a new wave of cuts across the country.

In a staff forum last week, Adelaide University vice-chancellor Peter Høj unveiled forced redundancies of upwards of 130 full-time equivalent (FTE) professional staff. That comes on top of 157 "voluntary" redundancies in 2020.

Last year, the NTEU dragooned staff at Adelaide University into accepting a 3.5 percent pay cut, loss of annual leave loading, postponement of a pay increase of 1.5 percent and a "purchased leave" scheme. The NTEU falsely claimed this would save 200 FTE jobs.

At Melbourne's La Trobe University, another 300 jobs are on the chopping block under a change plan to be released this month. Over 300 "voluntary"

redundancies have already been instituted there since the beginning of 2020, assisted by a similarly destructive NTEU deal. If the latest cuts proceed, La Trobe will have lost 15 percent of its permanent workforce, on top of a significant reduction of its casual staff.

Years of funding cuts, particularly since the last federal Labor government's "education revolution," made universities dependent on exploiting full-fee paying international students, but that market has been shattered by the still-worsening global pandemic.

The current Liberal-National government has utilised the crisis to impose its "Job-Ready Graduates" legislation, which slashed funding for social science students, while hiking their fees. This is taking the pro-business restructuring of universities to a new level, more directly servicing the vocational and research requirements of the wealthy elite.

The struggle taken up by students against the demolition of higher education at Macquarie University and nationally will be the subject of a joint online public meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) on this Saturday, July 17, at 4 p.m. (AEST).

The meeting will discuss the necessity for a socialist perspective to fight the capitalist offensive and for the formation of a network of student-staff rank-and-file committees to mount a unified counter-offensive, completely independent of the thoroughly complicit staff and student unions. To register to attend click here .



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