

# La Trobe University in Australia announces hundreds more job cuts

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On July 14, La Trobe University in Melbourne announced the slashing of 230 jobs as part of a “Change Proposal.” This is part of a destructive new wave of job losses throughout Australia’s public universities, on top of up to 90,000, including casuals, during 2020.

In addition to the slashing of casual staff, La Trobe’s management will have cut 15 percent of the university’s permanent workforce since the beginning of the pandemic. That is among the highest rate of job losses of any university in Australia.

As well as the academics and all staff members, this has serious consequences for the students, both undergraduate and post-graduate. They face course cuts, larger class sizes and the loss of experienced educators and thesis supervisors.

The management said the proposal would be subject to a three-week “consultation” period before being finalised. This is a bid to dampen, divert and dissipate the outrage and opposition of staff and students.

As at a number of other universities, the management declared that new roles would be offered in a brutal “Hunger Games”-style spill and fill operation, with staff forced to vie for remaining positions. Altogether, the change proposal would result “in the order of a loss of 200 FTE [full-time equivalent] positions.”

The proposal features major restructuring, including the “centralisation” of student services, and “[c]onsolidation of some disciplines and departments within Schools” to align with “strategic objectives.” The School of Molecular Sciences is to be liquidated into other schools, with the management dishonestly claiming this would “have no impact on teaching and learning.”

In the past year, La Trobe has already scrapped its drama department and either demolished or reduced

around a dozen “financially unviable” disciplines in the arts and education.

Universities across the country have utilised the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate years of pro-business restructuring at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions. A decade of chronic underfunding under the pro-market framework imposed by the last federal Labor government’s “education revolution” made the universities dependent on international student fee revenue, which has dropped sharply.

This offensive has been possible because of the full cooperation of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers academic staff, and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which covers professional and administrative staff.

La Trobe University’s NTEU branch last year adopted a version of the NTEU’s fraudulently named “Jobs Protection Framework ” (JPF). The JPF was proposed in May 2020 to allow university managements nationally to cut wages by up to 15 percent while still eliminating “at least 12,000 jobs.”

After an upsurge of rank-and-file opposition to the JPF, most universities abandoned the deal to pursue similar pacts with individual NTEU branches. At La Trobe, the NTEU proceeded with a version of the JPF, claiming it would “protect jobs.” Yet the university still announced around 400 redundancies under the framework last July and August.

Taking advantage of the NTEU’s complicity, the management claimed in its July 14 announcement that the JPF “saved 225 jobs and reduced the magnitude of changes we need to make in 2021 ... but didn’t provide permanent savings.”

In response, NTEU appealed for another such deal. La Trobe NTEU branch president Alysia Rex said in a

media release she was “disappointed” that Vice Chancellor John Dewar had “made this announcement without exhausting all other options.” She urged Dewar to “work with the union to find alternatives to involuntary redundancies.”

This appeal is along the same lines as NTEU operations elsewhere to help universities achieve their cuts by pressuring staff into “voluntary” redundancies. The union recently boasted of a “resounding success” at the University of Queensland, where it helped the management to axe five jobs by that means—more than the two posts originally targeted for elimination.

The union’s La Trobe statement outlines supposed “alternatives,” including “job shares” and a “pathway to retirement contracts.” These proposals are echoed in an online petition initiated by the NTEU. While the petition has received well over 1,000 signatures, indicating widespread anger among staff and students, it is another bid to funnel opposition into such outcomes.

One comment on the petition by a former student said: “Since I graduated, I have seen LTU [La Trobe University] decimated. Neither of the depts where I did majors exist anymore. They are not the only depts now gone. LTU used to be ‘cutting edge.’ Nowadays, it’s just ‘cutting.’”

Taylor, a first-year agriculture student at La Trobe, told the WSWs the change proposal was an “attack on the right of youth and students to quality education.”

“There have been cuts across the country,” Taylor said. “This, of course, began before COVID-19 broke out, but the crisis caused by the virus was an excuse to further escalate cuts.”

“Typically, those teachers and lecturers who care the most for their students, putting the most effort into getting the most out of them, are the ones that are lost... There’s already been numerous job cuts at La Trobe. I think it’s clear that the quality of our learning is dropping.”

Taylor commented on the role of the unions, which “pose as defenders of university workers, yet they outright oppose any broader mobilisation against the cuts. I think it’s a reflection of the unions themselves who have tried to keep the university executives happy.”

A student-led campaign in defence of much-respected Mathematics lecturer Dr Frank Valckenborgh

at Macquarie University in Sydney has won broad support, but the cuts at that university are continuing, as they are around the country. Similar petitions and campaigns have started at Melbourne’s Monash University and the University of Western Australia.

Student unions and associations, however, are also seeking to disorient these campaigns. At La Trobe University, the management-backed La Trobe University Student Association (LTSA) released a statement supporting the change proposal. It claimed the job cuts showed a focus “on LTU strengths and distinctiveness in teaching and research” and were “designed to simplify business processes and operations while making a positive difference to students, communities and partners.”

Claiming to represent the real voice of students is the La Trobe University Student Union (LTSU), which had much of its university funding diverted to the LTSA at the end of 2020. However, the LTSU has close ties to the Labor Party, which laid the foundation for the assault on tertiary education and defends the corporate profit system that is driving the restructuring.

If jobs, wages, conditions and public education are to be defended, students and staff need to join in a common struggle, independent of the thoroughly corporatised trade unions. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees to take the fight forward.



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