

# Student opposition continues as cuts deepen at Australian universities

A correspondent  
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A new wave of cuts to jobs and courses throughout the public universities in Australia is fuelling student opposition, including among post-graduate students. Through petitions and protests, students are seeking ways to fight the sacking of much-appreciated educators and the shutting down of critical courses, and to break through the stifling of opposition by the student and staff unions.

At the University of Western Australia (UWA) in Perth, a petition against the retrenchment of academics in the School of Social Sciences and the virtual scrapping of anthropology and sociology now has over 8,500 signatures as well as hundreds of comments denouncing the pro-corporate shift taking place.

One student wrote: “University education is not meant to be a degree factory which supports capitalist industry.” Another stated: “The proposed cuts to important areas of teaching at UWA are undemocratic, unjustified and outrageous.” One comment called for nationwide opposition to the profit-driven schemes of the university managements: “I strongly support UWA student and staff action, and encourage similar action against greedy corporate universities across the country.”

Other comments reflected serious concern about the educational and intellectual damage being done. “Social Sciences, including Anthropology, are essential to our understanding of society and to the breadth of our education system,” one said. “Without them we would be poorer for it as a society and limit the educational opportunities of the next generation. Such disciplines have intrinsic value that is vital to our ability to engage with complex social and global problems now and in the future.”

UWA management has moved to abolish 16 academic positions in the School of Social Sciences

and remove research rights from another seven posts. Many more cuts are planned across the university, as part of the pro-business “Structural Reform Program.” An estimated 300 to 400 jobs are being targeted to reach Vice-Chancellor Amrit Chakma’s goal of cutting \$40 million from the university’s operational spending.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government and the university employers are continuing to use the financial crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic to accelerate the transformation of universities into largely vocational institutions servicing the narrow profit requirements of big business, both in teaching and research. This is provoking student anger and concern.

At the University of Adelaide, where up to 130 full-time equivalent staff face retrenchment, the Labor Party-led National Union of Students (NUS), which has been virtually silent throughout the pandemic, felt compelled to organise a protest outside the vice-chancellor’s office on July 16, under the banner, “No mergers, no staff cuts at Adelaide Uni! Don’t trash our education!”

The refusal of the student unions and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers staff members, to mount any struggle whatsoever against the government-management offensive across the country has encouraged the employers to go further. More job cuts have been unveiled, some involving brutal “spill-and-fill” operations that force staff members to compete against each for smaller numbers of positions.

Despite the student-led petition at Macquarie University, which forced the reinstatement of maths lecturer Frank Valckenborgh, the management is still proceeding with the “Hunger Games”-style process to terminate the jobs of 34 other academics. The University of Tasmania has proposed to shed five senior academics from its Australian Maritime College.

Last year, the NTEU dragooned staff at the

University of Adelaide 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 jobs.

Likewise, La Trobe University in Melbourne is conducting a restructure that would reduce overall staffing levels by the equivalent of 200 full-time positions, after exploiting the NTEU’s bogus “Job Protection Framework” (JPF) to announce around 400 redundancies under the framework last July and August.

The NTEU proposed the JPF 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 eruption of rank-and-file opposition to the JPF, most universities abandoned the deal to pursue similar pacts with individual NTEU branches. Since then, up to 90,000 jobs—permanent, contract and casual—have been eliminated.

The NTEU is continuing to block any unified struggle by staff and students, and is instead trying to tie educators into another round of enterprise bargaining. This regime splits workers into individual workplaces and subjects them to the associated Fair Work Act anti-strike laws imposed by the last federal Labor government.

At the UWA, NTEU branch president Sanna Peden responded to the cuts by appealing for an extension of the management’s consultation period with staff and the union, and urging the vice-chancellor to “look for savings elsewhere.” Peden said: “We are extremely disappointed in the proposal to cut staff at a point when the University is explicitly seeking to increase student numbers.”

In effect, the NTEU is pleading with management for the union to assist it to meet the cost-cutting and corporate-driven agenda of the government, as it did recently at the University of Queensland. There the NTEU claimed a “resounding success” was achieved by convincing five academics to take “voluntary redundancies” to avoid the elimination of two positions in the architecture school.

Similarly, at the University of Adelaide, NTEU branch president Nick Warner said: “We believe that listening to the views and ideas of staff is the only way for a path forward that minimises the pain that job

losses will bring.”

In other words, the NTEU is volunteering once more to help divert and defuse the outrage of staff and students, and deliver the government-management agenda.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are fighting to mobilise students and staff against this offensive. They are calling for full support to the campaigns taken up by students at UWA, Adelaide, Macquarie and other universities.

They are urging the rejection of the entire enterprise bargaining straitjacket and union-led “consultations” that serve only to block any actual fight against the jobs onslaught and pro-business restructuring.

They are demanding that, instead of big business being bailed out with billions of dollars, and billions more being handed to the military to prepare for war, 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 secure jobs for all university workers.

The IYSSE and CFPE are calling for a unified struggle by staff and students against the government-management assault, and for the formation of a network of joint student-staff rank-and-file committees to take forward this counter-offensive.

These committees are also essential to protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions and link up with workers internationally who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global capitalist crisis.



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