

# Jobs “catastrophe” worsens in Australian universities

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Nearly one in five tertiary education workers in Australia lost their jobs in the 12 months to May this year, according to a recent analysis by the Centre for Future Work, and the toll is still growing.

The report, entitled “An Avoidable Catastrophe: Pandemic Job Losses in Higher Education and their Consequences,” sheds light on how governments and employers have been able to exploit the COVID-19 disaster to devastate higher education, at the expense of staff and students alike.

The report estimates that more than 40,000 jobs were eliminated in just one year, from May 2020 to May 2021. This was the highest number in any non-agricultural industry so far, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, university job losses have been much worse this year than in the first year of the pandemic. Now, according to the report, they mostly affect permanent and full-time positions, unlike last year, when casual workers suffered the initial brunt of the government-employer attack.

In 2021, “university administrations began to attack permanent positions with a vengeance. Year-over-year permanent employment (defined as positions with normal paid leave entitlements) in public tertiary education declined by over 34,000 jobs in the first half of 2021.”

By the May quarter of 2021, as universities increased hiring casuals, as cheap and expandable labour, permanent jobs represented all the net job loss compared to year-earlier levels.

Altogether, an estimated 35,000 jobs had been lost at public universities by May. More than 5,000 jobs disappeared at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and other public vocational education institutions. But no overall job losses occurred at

private colleges, many of which received federal government bailouts via last year’s JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) national president Alison Barnes issued a media release on the report saying: “It is now incumbent on vice chancellors to step up and secure jobs and careers. The pandemic must not be an excuse for further casualisation and wage theft.”

But that is exactly what is happening. Appeals to the very managements that are executing these cuts will do nothing to halt this offensive.

Last year, the NTEU itself calculated that up to 90,000 jobs could have been eliminated. The latest estimate appears to show that some of the losses may have been reduced, but only because casuals are being hired to replace permanent staff.

The truth is that the “catastrophe” documented in the report, commissioned by the NTEU, is an indictment of the sector’s trade unions, which have opposed any unified national struggle by staff and students against this onslaught.

A supposed national “week of action,” by the NTEU from September 13 to 17—timed to coincide with the report’s release—consisted primarily of impotent appeals to vice chancellors and the Liberal-National Coalition government for increased funding to restore job losses. That was combined with pleas to university workers to support the NTEU’s current enterprise bargaining negotiations with individual employers.

This enterprise bargaining regime, concocted by the Keating Labor Party government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions three decades ago, serves only to atomise workers. It ties them to the revenue and cost-cutting demands of “their” employer and straitjackets them into the anti-strike laws that were reinforced by

the last union-backed Labor government of 2007 to 2013.

The NTEU and other unions are promoting the prospect of another Labor government, even though Labor's shadow education minister, Tanya Plibersek, told an elite business gathering last month that a Labor government would escalate the corporate restructuring of tertiary education.

In her August 16 speech to the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Conference, Plibersek said nothing about the destruction of jobs, let alone commit a Labor government to reversing the cuts. Instead, she echoed the demands of the financial elite, highlighted by a recent blueprint issued by the EY global consulting giant, for the pandemic to be utilised to radically reshape higher education to satisfy the vocational training and research requirements of big business.

It was the Rudd-Gillard Labor government of 2007 to 2013, in which Plibersek served as a cabinet minister, that imposed the "education revolution," featuring a "demand-driven" system. Labor compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, particularly in business-oriented courses, in order to survive financially, and then slashed university funding by several billion dollars in 2012–13.

This system, which the Coalition government has retained ever since, drove the universities to turn to full-fee paying international students, treating them as cash cows. By 2019–2020, international student fees accounted for over \$12 billion in revenue for Australian universities—almost quadrupling over the previous decade. Vocational education providers received another \$2 billion per year, in international student fees.

When the pandemic hit, these revenues began to dry up, and this became the pretext for the government-employer drive to slash costs.

The NTEU has actively facilitated this assault, despite the anger and resistance of staff and students, who have initiated petitions against the demolition of jobs and courses at numbers of universities, including La Trobe, Monash, Adelaide, the University of Western Australia and Sydney's Macquarie University.

The NTEU's role was typified at Macquarie University, where, on top of more than 300 job losses in 2020, management has used a "Hunger

Games"-style operation to cut several dozen more positions this year, forcing educators to compete against each other for survival.

A letter from the NTEU's Macquarie branch to Bruce Dowton, the university's vice chancellor, made no demand that the redundancies be reversed. Instead, it "requested" that redundant staff have access to the information that led to the decision to cut their positions, so that the "process" could be "transparent."

Moreover, the entire "spill and fill" operation was conducted within the framework of the "change process" set out in the NTEU's enterprise agreement with management.

Such bitter experiences demonstrate that in order to fight the assault on public education, new organisations are needed—in the form of a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions.

Such committees would reject the entire framework of enterprise agreements, and establish common cause among university workers, students and all those in schools and childcare. They would link up with all workers internationally, who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis, and discuss the necessity for an opposed socialist perspective: one that fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires.

Such an orientation would provide the billions of dollars needed to establish free, high-quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the basic right of all education workers to full-time employment, with decent pay and conditions.



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