

Australian high school students speak out against dangerous reopenings, lack of assistance prior to exams

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
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There is widespread concern and anger among Australian high school students, over a full resumption of in-person teaching in the most-populous states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, where the virus is circulating widely. This term alone, the Delta variant has been detected in at least 469 Victorian schools, where education accounts for the highest number of active cases by sector, and 229 in NSW.

A key driver in the spread has been the return of year 12 students, the first cohort to have gone back in both states. The respective Labor and Liberal-National state governments of Victoria and NSW rejected calls from students for the final exams to be postponed or cancelled, due to the dangers and the immense disruption to their learning caused by the pandemic.

In Victoria, final exams began last month, with even students identified as primary contacts of COVID-positive cases, forced to sit the tests. In NSW, the Higher School Certificate examinations begin tomorrow, a postponement of only several weeks compared with the initial schedule.

The insistence that the exams must proceed has been used as a battering ram, to force hundreds of thousands of other students and teachers into the classrooms. The policy is central to the broader pro-business “reopening” of the economy and lifting of lockdown measures, and is aimed at forcing parents into the factories and workplaces en masse.

Last week, an anonymous high school student in NSW issued a powerful open letter to the state government and education authorities, condemning the lack of support for year 12 pupils and the rush to proceed with the exams, whatever the impact on students. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has publicised the important statement, and discussed the issues that it raises, with numbers of students (see: “Open letter exposes difficult conditions imposed on final year Australian high school students amid pandemic”).

Layla, a year 12 student in Sydney, said she did not agree with the exams proceeding. “They have tried to minimise the risk by enforcing that we wear a face mask. But I think it’s unnecessary and putting 100 students or more in a hall sitting an exam for 3 hours is definitely dangerous in this case,” she stated.

Asked about the impact of the pandemic and the exams on students, Layla said that she had a “terrible experience this year” in terms of mental health. She “agreed with every word” of the open letter published by the anonymous student.

The education authorities, including the Board of Education, the

New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA), which oversees exams and marking, and the state government had “definitely not done enough to support the Year 12 cohort this year. What we faced was tough and the lack of support definitely demotivated a lot of students. I think that the HSC being cancelled should have been taken under consideration,” she said.

“The unpredictable experiences that occurred, especially in the three months of online learning right before trial exams, mean it is ridiculous. I wouldn’t be surprised if this year’s ATAR [university entry] scores are relatively low. I found it hard to get myself back up as the board of education did not give enough reason to want to succeed in the HSC. Pushing the exams back and changing the date of the ATAR release also played a role in demotivating students as most early offers [for university admission] had already come out,” Layla added.

Layla agreed with the anonymous letter’s emphasis on social inequality. “I think the point about the inequities faced by students without access to technology, whether they have a low socioeconomic status or live in rural areas, was excellent as it was not addressed by the people who make final decisions regarding our education,” she said.

Another student told the IYSSE that while she was pleased to be going back to school, because of the difficulties of online learning, she was concerned about the safety implications.

“Being fully vaxxed doesn’t prevent COVID from hitting you, but I think it can help you not die,” the student noted, and added, “COVID is able to spread faster because of the schools reopening, as well as recreational centres like swimming pools and libraries, places where different children and young people interact.”

The student, who lives in one of the working-class local government areas (LGAs) of Sydney that was an epicentre of the outbreak explained some of the difficulties young people faced during the limited lockdown:

“I have a casual job and my shifts were from 6–8 hours a week, but during the outbreak they went down to three hours. The whole business was impacted, even though it is nationwide, because it is in hospitality. It was scary to go to work as I had to catch public transport sometimes.

“For school, we’ve been doing online learning over Zoom but it is difficult to learn as the teacher is not physically in front of you to assist and answer questions. Those who don’t have access to technology and Wi-Fi will struggle during online learning which significantly affects their grades and mental well-being. I haven’t

been able to see my extended family much either,” she said.

Giorgia, another year 12 student in a Sydney LGA that was placed under harsher restrictions due to high cases, said she “really agreed” with the anonymous letter-writer and “the point he made about lack of support from NESA, as well as individual schools during this pandemic. It’s been very challenging, especially when the HSC has been pushed back, to keep staying motivated and studying with no support. It just feels like people in power ‘acknowledge’ how tough this has been for year 12 but don’t actually do anything about it to help.”

Giorgia continued: “The mixed messages were very stressful and confusing. We didn’t know when the HSC was going to be held or if it was going to be cancelled, averaged, or even having modified exams. On top of this the same thing occurred for trials and every school did a different thing which was very unfair.

“For example, some schools got averages, some schools had open-book modified exams, etc. And also because of trials being held differently at all schools, we have never actually had the chance to have a real practice for how HSC will be. It was also very demotivating because many people had made study plans for the original date, and all of that had to be changed as it was pushed back.”

Asked about the dangers of the virus to young people, Giorgia replied: “I do think that is a risk. In the context of school, two of my friends, who are both at different schools, have already had COVID outbreaks at their schools just from being back for two weeks. The thing is that people might say that we have better immunity against COVID, but if we catch COVID it is not just us who suffers, but our whole family. Many people live with their grandparents, or have family members who have weak or compromised immune systems.”

Giorgia said she “very much agreed” that the school reopening was motivated by a push to end lockdowns and force parents back to workplaces.

“Sending kids back to school wasn’t for ‘the kids’ benefit’ and to help them get back to ‘normal learning,’ but rather for the economy. I feel like the government has rushed getting everyone back just so that they can say that learning wasn’t interrupted too severely. I feel there’s unnecessary competition between states for who can open up the quickest. I feel that’s why they’ve done it in NSW,” she said.

In an extended written response to questions from the IYSSE, another student explained: “I have mixed feelings about the HSC being cancelled. On the one hand, it is something seniors build themselves up to for so long... looking forward to placing their pen down and leaving the exam room for the final time. A point in life where they can say they’ve completed something big and feel a sense of achievement, regardless of how they may have gone under the exam conditions. Without being given the ability to experience that, disappointment may rise within students as some may be looking at the final exams as a chance to redeem themselves.

“I know for a period of time, I was one of those students. Now, I couldn’t care less about doing the HSC. When things got really rough with COVID and external circumstances, I lost all motivation for the HSC. I can strongly say that I was once a high achiever, a pure academic! I skipped parties, dances, movies, sleepovers. You name it, I skipped it, TO STUDY. I look back now and I’m like wow, how stupid of me? All that time I WASTED, stressing, crying, being disappointed in myself time and time again. ONLY for my senior years to finish like this anyway.

“From the very beginning I have hated the way school is operated. It’s not even about LEARNING anymore. It’s about who can

competitively handle the most under pressure, who can REMEMBER the most when put under stressed conditions.

“All marks should be based on the individual, not the rest of the class nor the year/cohort. Students should be excited to go to school, not slug themselves around to get through the door. School should be ENERGISING, and mentally stimulating- NOT draining. They throw hoops at us and expect us to just keep jumping through them- and inflict disappointment on ourselves when we can’t jump as high as they want us to.

“School is hard enough without the bushfires, COVID and personal problems each student faces here in Australia. The lack of support from those in power is preposterous. So many students have been killing themselves for a decade over the HSC exams. We’re molded to believe that high school is the be-all-end-all.

“It’s not until we start mentally, AND physically deteriorating that students are told ‘it’s okay, as long as you do your BEST. There are other pathways.’ The system has to CHANGE. Do they want us to learn? Or do they want us to be ‘mindless robots’ as it was described in the anonymous letter?

“It’s all so ridiculous. We can learn to be formal, committed, resilient, engaged, driven—without all these pressures over our heads. It’s alright for them to dish out all the work and standards—but we’re the ones who have to meet them without wanting to dig a hole and bury ourselves in it.

“I’ve thought about asking the HSC cohort of Australia to take a stand, or the opposite, join together in unity to present a sit in. The students could sit at their exam tables and not write anything. When time is up, we could all walk out. They have nothing to assess us on then and can no longer compare us. If everyone did so at the first English exam, it would surely shake the country. Perhaps we need to sit in silence for our voices to be finally heard?” the student concluded.

The Committee for Public Education, a group of rank-and-file teachers and school staff, is holding an online meeting for educators, parents, students and workers on Saturday, November 13 at 4pm (AEDT). The IYSSE encourages students and young people to participate in the event, entitled “Oppose the dangerous opening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!” Register here.



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