

Thousands of university jobs being axed in Australia as Labor scapegoats international students

Mike Head
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A meeting of Western Sydney University (WSU) staff and students last month established a rank-and-file committee to oppose the job destruction and restructuring at WSU College and across the university sector. To join the committee or form one at other universities contact: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

As many as 14,000 jobs are being cut already throughout Australia's public universities, and thousands more are threatened, as a direct result of the Australian Labor government's deep cuts to international student enrolments.

The Albanese government is more than halving the number of international student and other migrant arrivals. It is trying to make them scapegoats for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis affecting working-class households.

This is eliminating university jobs and conditions, as well as cutting the quality of courses and research, coming on top of Labor's deepening of years of systemic underfunding of the universities by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

Luke Sheehy, head of peak group Universities Australia, told a Senate committee inquiry last week that 60,000 fewer student visas had been issued this year compared to the same time last year, costing over 14,000 university jobs so far.

The Albanese government has not waited for the passage of its draconian Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill, which would give it unprecedented powers to cap the number of international students. It has already slashed the intake by:

- more than doubling student visa application fees from \$710 to \$1,600, adding to the financial burden of students having to take out private health insurance and prove they have sufficient funds to cover the exorbitant tuition fees (at least twice as high as for domestic students), accommodation and other living expenses.
- slowing visa processing so much that an estimated half the international students enrolled to commence this semester, which began last month, still have not been approved.
- imposing harsher English language requirements and "genuine student" tests, as well as measures to stop students living in the country after completing their courses.

This crackdown will intensify if the bill passes. According to

media reports, the government is likely to decree that international students can make up no more than 40 percent of enrolments. Currently, 10 of the 39 public universities reportedly exceed that limit, and others are close to it.

The caps would also be linked to 2019 numbers, when overall student numbers were about 16 percent, or 109,000, less than the 780,100 overseas students in Australia in 2024.

The government's efforts to blame overseas students for soaring rents and housing prices are entirely fraudulent. The intensifying housing crisis is the result of 13 government-backed mortgage interest rate hikes, the decimation of public housing over the past four decades and the underlying domination of the housing industry by billionaire property developers and profiteering building companies.

In any case, one report concluded that international students made up only 4 percent of the rental market.

Nevertheless, Education Minister Jason Clare has doubled down, even in the face of vocal opposition from university chiefs and business groups. "Once the legislation passes, the intention is to set limits for every university, higher education and vocational provider that educates an international student," Clare reiterated last week.

The university and other employers oppose the bill from the standpoint of its impact on corporate profits. Universities Australia told the Senate inquiry that international students were worth almost \$50 billion in annual revenues across the economy last year.

This is the result of the higher education "market" introduced by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, which forced universities to fight each other for enrolments, and exploit overseas students as cash cows. That led to the sector being rated as the country's fourth largest export earner, behind iron ore, gas and coal.

Regardless of these concerns, the Albanese government remains set on its course, for two inter-related reasons.

First, Labor's measures are part of a wider attempt to divert intensifying discontent with rising working-class financial stress and deteriorating living conditions in a filthy nationalist direction by blaming immigrants for the social crisis. Labor

plans to more than halve net overseas migration, cutting it to 235,000 annually for the next three years. That would require student arrivals to fall drastically, to about 95,000, compared to about 300,000 in the year to March.

The Liberal-National Coalition has gone further, in what amounts to a bipartisan front. In interviews following May's federal budget, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton said he would cut net migration to 160,000, which would reduce student inflows to a trickle.

These moves are in line with those by capitalist governments internationally—from the Biden-Harris administration in the US to the Starmer Labour government in the UK and those across Europe—to shut their borders to refugees and other immigrants. They are effectively matching the anti-foreigner demagoguery of far-right and fascist parties, such as those of Trump in the US, Le Pen in France and the AfD in Germany.

Second, the enrolment cuts are intensifying the pressure on the chronically-underfunded universities to transform themselves to meet the requirements of the Albanese government's pro-corporate and pro-military Universities Accord blueprint.

The government's bill would allow it to cancel international enrolments and/or courses on the basis of "limited value to Australia's current, emerging, and future skills and training needs and priorities" or because it is in the "public interest to do so."

That essentially means tying enrolments, as well as research funding, to the vocational demands of employers and other government "priorities." These include military preparations, such as the AUKUS nuclear submarines and weapons program, for a US-led war against China.

Labor's Universities Accord makes funding depend on individual university "mission statements" to satisfy this agenda, while cutting spending overall. Labor's first budget, in October 2022, set university funding to decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

While starving the universities of funds, the Labor government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending and backing the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

University managements, as well as private colleges, are slashing jobs. Federation University, a regional institution in Victoria, is axing 200 staff on the way to shedding 20 percent of its employees. The University of Tasmania has instituted a jobs freeze, and La Trobe and Wollongong universities have warned staff of looming cuts to courses, subjects and jobs.

These moves highlight how much is at stake at Western Sydney University (WSU), where the recently-formed WSU Rank-and-File Committee is fighting the management's plan to restructure WSU College, the university's wholly-owned feeder college, at the overall cost of nearly 18 educators' and learning coordinators' jobs, or about 10 percent of the total.

If not defeated, the pro-business restructuring of WSU

College will set a precedent across the tertiary education sector. The main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), is seeking to block the rank-and-file campaign throughout WSU and other universities for a university-wide and broader fight to defeat the restructuring and job cuts.

In fact, the NTEU is facilitating the WSU College restructuring by striking a deal with management to encourage educators to apply for redundancy packages and by refusing to defend non-NTEU members. The majority of educators at the College are not NTEU members because they have no confidence in the union bureaucracy.

That distrust is well placed. The NTEU bureaucrats nationally have a long record of suppressing educators' hostility to the increasing corporatisation of universities, even when they claim to oppose it. While signing regressive enterprise bargaining agreements with university managements, all designed to assist restructuring, the NTEU machine has repeatedly blocked any unified mobilisation against it.

Likewise, the NTEU is today effectively enforcing the Labor government's anti-immigrant and militarist agenda. It is backing the Universities Accord, and blaming "opportunistic" university vice-chancellors, not the government for the job cuts. It is urging its members to sign a petition appealing to the government to ensure "phase-in periods for any caps" on international student enrolments, supposedly to guarantee "no job losses."

This underscores the necessity for the formation of rank-and-file committees throughout the education system, totally independent of the union apparatuses, to defend jobs and conditions and oppose Labor's deeply reactionary agenda. To form such committees, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) the rank-and-file educators' network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact