

Australia: Students and staff oppose pro-corporate restructure at University of Newcastle

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The University of Newcastle (UoN), the largest tertiary institution in the regional city north of Sydney, is attempting to shorten semesters beginning in 2026. The move is part of a pro-corporate restructuring of universities across the country which is degrading learning quality for students and working conditions for staff.

In December, management announced its plan which includes an optional, intensive eight-week term in between the current semesters. 13-week semesters will be shortened to 12 weeks. There will only be two weeks between semester one and the new mid-year term, followed by a one-week break before semester two. There is currently a four-week gap between semesters.

There will only be a limited set of courses in the mid-year term, and staff will be forced to complete marking and preparations for the next semester's courses in the single week after it ends.

Course fees will not be affected by the change, despite the decrease in content.

The intention is to condense existing courses into the shorter terms, or to cut content from the courses entirely to facilitate the speedier pumping out of "job-ready" graduates to enter the workforce to be exploited for the profits of corporations.

Management claims they have consulted student and staff, including focus groups, two student surveys and two forums.

Yet staff and students have taken to social media and conducted their own polls which reveals broad opposition to the proposed changes.

Law, education and engineering student societies organised the polls.

According to the UoN Law Students' Association's joint statement with six other discipline clubs, poll results show 90 percent were against the changes. The Engineering Society found that 77 percent of students surveyed were concerned about the quality of student learning.

One UoN worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I will likely lose 8–12 weeks of research out of my year."

Another raised that it would "complicate conference attendance, essential for disseminating research findings."

When asked about the mid-year term, the staff member said it will intensify workloads and that "it solves nothing and creates a lot of problems."

Asked if staff would be paid more for the greater load, the worker said: "No, and UoN will claim it won't be more work."

Meanwhile, shorter semesters and intensive mid-year courses will exacerbate the stresses on students who are increasingly having to work.

A UoN survey of 6,500 students released in August last year found that more than 80 percent are engaged in paid work alongside study. Over 41 percent are already finding their workload difficult to balance with other commitments. Among postgraduate students, 41 percent work more than 30 hours per week in addition to their studies.

The portion of those who are struggling to balance work and study rises to more than 50 percent among "equity cohorts" such as indigenous students, immigrants, those who live with physical disabilities or learning difficulties and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The sentiment among students is not represented by the University of Newcastle Students Association (UNSA), who have said nothing opposing the change. Instead UNSW hosted the two "forums." It claimed they were "to provide students with the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback," however the events were carefully stage-managed attempts to provide management with a democratic façade.

At the Callaghan Campus forum on 30 October 2024, two security guards were posted outside the door. Discussion, in person and online, was suppressed by UNSA through the use of software to vet questions.

In 2021, UNSA employed the same strategy of giving management a platform, only allowing questions and shutting down criticism, that time around massive course cuts.

UNSA is an arm of the university management, formed in an anti-democratic merger of the three existing student unions in 2019. UNSA's function is to suppress opposition among students and provide a cover for management's pro-corporate restructuring of the university.

The proposed change to the UoN academic calendar

restructuring is the latest in a series of attacks by management.

During 2020, management merged the five faculties into three, slashing a quarter of the university's courses and cutting jobs. The following year saw two massive restructures that eliminated nearly 200 full-time equivalent positions. Then, in 2022, management brought in a sub-inflationary pay "rise," paired with longer hours and reduced leave. The response of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers academics, was limited to a 24-hour strike, with hardly any disruption of classes.

These changes were part of a wholesale assault on higher education across Australia, using the COVID-19 pandemic to deepen attacks on university workers and students.

Universities around the country have brought in course cuts and shortened terms along the lines of the changes proposed at UoN.

In 2017, the Australian National University reduced semesters to 12 weeks for more "intensive learning." Sydney's University of New South Wales (UNSW) moved from semesters to trimesters in 2019. Nearly 1,000 UNSW students and staff protested the change less than six months after it was implemented.

The disastrous effects of the UNSW change have frequently been raised by opponents of the proposal at UoN.

An October 2023 report on UNSW showed that 46 percent of students found it harder to manage the workload in the trimester model. About 40 percent of students said they have less time for paid work, while 41 percent said they have less time to participate in non-academic activities.

At Melbourne's Victoria University, a block model was implemented in 2018, wherein formerly 12–13-week courses are completed in just four weeks, one at a time. Research by the university and student accounts have shown that it "places high demands on staff workloads," especially in marking which they have just days to complete. Teaching experts have also raised concern about how students' long-term information retention is affected by the shorter terms.

These attacks on universities have been overseen by successive Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments and have been facilitated by the pro-corporate NTEU which has suppressed opposition from staff. The NTEU at UoN has not made an official statement on the latest change and has not made any call for staff to mobilise to oppose it.

The Universities Accord of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government demands that universities tailor their courses to the needs of employers, with more "work integrated learning" (unpaid internship), for more "career ready graduates."

Since the abolition of free university education by the Hawke Labor government in 1989, costs have been shifted to students. This particularly affects international students, who are charged exorbitant fees to offset the huge funding cuts, to the point where higher education constitutes the "fourth largest export"

earner of Australia.

The pro-corporate restructuring of universities in Australia and internationally also includes the institutions' further integration into the military-intelligence complex amid a global eruption of imperialist violence.

A March 2024 statement of Universities Australia—a grouping of all of Australia's 39 public universities including UoN—declared that "universities will play a major part in skilling the workforce needed to deliver the nation's nuclear submarine plan," the anti-China AUKUS military pact with the US and UK.

Meanwhile, the Albanese government is spearheading the suppression of anti-war opposition at universities, highlighted by the ongoing witch hunt of Macquarie University academic Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah for her opposition to Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people.

For students and staff to chart a path forward against pro-corporate and militarist restructuring of universities, they must unite in a struggle against all of the parties and organisations which defend the profit system. This includes Labor, the NTEU and the so-called "student associations."

University workers and students should form rank-and-file committees, independent of these pro-capitalist organisations, to hold discussions and organise the struggles in their interests.

For more information about how to build such committees, please contact the Committee For Public Education (CFPE) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

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