

Students speak out about impact of Australian university job cuts

Our correspondents
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The Western Sydney University and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees have called an online public meeting this Saturday August 2 to fight for a unified campaign by educators, students and working people against the Albanese Labor government's intensifying cuts to international student enrolments and jobs, and the underlying pro-corporate, pro-military reshaping of tertiary education. Register here.

Students, as well as staff members, continue to be hit with job cuts at Australia's 39 public universities.

This week, Newcastle University announced, via an all-staff email, cost-cutting of at least \$20.6 million this year. Previous modelling indicates that could mean up to 400 job losses. That would bring the total job destruction nationally over the past 10 months to more than 3,500.

As well as Newcastle, the known job cuts list now includes Western Sydney University, Sydney's Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University, the Australian National University, University of Canberra, University Technology Sydney (UTS), and the universities of Wollongong, Tasmania, Charles Darwin, Federation, James Cook, Southern Queensland, Griffith, La Trobe and Swinburne.

This assault is primarily being driven by the Albanese Labor government's reactionary cuts to international student enrolments, with a definite agenda: to transform tertiary education to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and the development of a war economy.

It parallels similar measures by the Starmer Labour government in the UK, where 10,000 university jobs are now being cut, and the Trump administration in the US, which is slashing funding for universities unless they comply with its fascist, repressive and militarist policies.

The main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are desperately covering up the Labor government's role. They are trying to blame individual vice-chancellors for the assault, despite its sweeping character across the country.

At the same time, they are seeking to help the managements find ways to implement Labor's agenda, including via supposed "voluntary redundancies," as the NTEU proposed last week at Western Sydney University.

These cuts, on top of years of under-funding and corporate-style restructuring, are having a serious impact on students, who also face Labor government-backed attacks on anti-genocide protests and free speech, including arrests and suspensions of students.

Both the NTEU and CPSU have refused to oppose the cuts to international students. They are silent too on the fact that, while starving the universities of funds, the Albanese government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending, and backing the Gaza genocide, the criminal attacks on Iran and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Labor government, like the Trump and Starmer administrations, is also seeking to suppress opposition to the ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Education Minister Jason Clare instigated moves to freeze the research grant of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent critic of the Israeli war machine, at Macquarie University.

Jack, a chemistry student at Newcastle University, said the job cuts and course restructuring in recent years had already led to less access to lecturers and fewer subject choices.

"My parents were surprised by how little face-to-face class time there was, compared to 30 years ago. I had 13 hours in one week and they were doing like 30 hours a week of class time.

"If you really want to get an idea of how to do a broad range of questions and get a good understanding of all the concepts, then that's just not enough. Lecturers themselves don't have a lot of time to actually do the classes, because of their workloads.

"Work integrated learning (WIL) is now mandatory in the Bachelor of Science degree. It's basically free labour. I did a group project on water treatment for a business in the area. It was a helpful experience, but people should get paid for this!

"There is an attack on broad education, which is the ideal of universities, and free discussion. It's a lot about getting the paper that says I can have a job now. It's not about getting a broader understanding of ideas and concepts, which is really what universities should be about."

Jack said universities were becoming part of the development of a war economy.

"Humanities courses are literally twice the cost of science and engineering courses. That was a result of the Morrison

Liberal-National government's "job ready graduates" scheme, which has been continued by Labor.

"The attack on the ideal of university is clearly connected with militarisation. The Labor government's Universities Accord stated openly that the push for more STEM graduates is bound up with the AUKUS submarine deal, or in its words 'national priorities.'

"Under Labor, the universities have really doubled down on militarisation, as well as all the attacks on students opposing the genocide in Gaza.

"We see this even at a basic level, at the careers expos we have fairly regularly. The military businesses are always there. Boeing, Lockheed Martin and even the Australian Defence Force, have stalls... Grants from defence are advertised to academics as well.

"When it comes to militarisation, the money doesn't stop flowing, it's like the German rearmament at the moment. With the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal, that's \$368 billion over 30 years. It's coming out of essential services, such as universities.

"The connection between the 'job ready graduates' issue and the lack of knowing deeper concepts is a real race for militarisation... You don't need to know deeper concepts if you're going to help manufacture a nuclear-powered submarine. You need to know how to solve the engineering questions relating to that kind of thing."

Jack also pointed to the deterioration in young people's living conditions over the past five decades.

"Students and teachers don't have the time they used to have to dedicate to study. Students used to actually be able to live on student allowances back in the 1970s when there was free uni. Now almost everyone works alongside study. It's a symptom of a whole societal crisis."

Daniel, a fine arts student at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, first spoke about the deterioration in health, disability, counselling, equity and other support services for students.

"Over the seven years that I've been studying these services have become increasingly difficult to access. There are longer waiting times and difficulty in getting responses from certain services.

"This is a political question because the money is available. It's just being prioritised in other ways, not education, or if it is education, it is for particular industries, particularly in STEM subjects and engineering.

"And it's become more and more clear that weapons manufacture and these sorts of associated businesses are closely tied with the universities."

Daniel said arts students faced deepening problems.

"We're seeing a narrowing of options across the board. In my course, in particular, effectively all the elective classes have been removed. We don't really get any choice in that regard.

"We have classes in visual arts and in the arts school that are

basically focused on telling us that there's no future in the arts. It's a whole class dedicated to saying there's very limited funding in the industry. You're going to be constantly asking for grants and you won't get them. The cost for exhibiting in gallery spaces is just astronomical. So you're likely not going to be able to afford it.

"Another challenge, as an art student, is that you have to self-fund all your materials. So depending if you're a sculpture student or a photography student or a painting student, you have to source all your canvases or your paints or your brushes. So that limits students as to freedom of what they can explore."

To fight this agenda of job cuts, pro-big business restructuring and war preparations, there must be a unified struggle by staff and students across the country. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees of staff and students at all universities, completely independent of the trade union apparatuses.

We urge students to join this struggle. It cannot be won on the campuses alone. Rank-and-file committees will fight for support among all educators, including in the schools, and all workers, because what happens in the universities is an issue for society as a whole. They will also link up with educators' struggles globally, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

To discuss and develop this fight, the Western Sydney University and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees will host an online public meeting this Saturday August 2 at 3pm, titled "What is driving the university job cuts across Australia? Labor's pro-corporate and war agenda."

To join the meeting, please register here.

To support this campaign, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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