

Prospective students hit by cuts to Australian university courses

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A far-reaching, pro-business restructuring of universities across the country is having a severe impact on the future of prospective students, with growing numbers of school leavers reporting that the courses they had intended to study are not available.

Over the past 11 months, some 3,500 jobs have been destroyed at universities across the country, with more sackings slated at many institutions. The offensive, being spearheaded by the federal Labor government through cuts to international student enrolments and the suppression of government funding, is resulting in the elimination of courses and in some instances entire departments.

A recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) reported high schoolers' university applications being suspended, as the courses they had enrolled in no longer exist.

Interviewee Natasha Lim was hoping to study international relations, earth and environmental science, but said "literally all of my courses got suspended.

"I was pretty annoyed. These are really important courses I believe people should be allowed to partake in. UTS [University of Technology Sydney] is an affordable university, and now people who want to do international relations have to go to a more expensive university like UNSW [University of New South Wales] or USyd [University of Sydney]."

Another high schooler, 17-year-old Neel Erande told the SMH he had applied for a communications and international studies degree at UTS, only to be told by email both his selections were to be suspended.

The cuts are also hitting existing students. In response to a social media post, one commented: "I complete my post grad marketing cert this week and was looking to go into my masters of marketing—with the new cuts I lose 2 of 4 courses worth of credit towards my

masters—that's another 6 months and many thousands of dollars I lose."

In September, UTS announced that it was cutting some 1,100 subjects, or about a fifth of the total, and was suspending enrolments into them. It is also seeking to eliminate hundreds of jobs, as part of a multi-year restructuring aimed at saving \$100 million.

While the course cuts at UTS are particularly sharp, they are part of a broader onslaught.

Eighteen-year-old high schooler Fabian Closuit told the SMH he deferred his offer to study music at Macquarie to take a gap year, only to be told that the course he was set to start in February was being removed. The university recommended he enrol in "criminology," "arts," "security studies" or "social services" instead.

Closuit said "I thought it was a joke. I get they are trying to keep students to make money out of me, but I think they are losing all credibility as a learning institution."

After Macquarie University offered Erande a bachelor of arts/commerce, he said he "was informed that the politics major had been cut and was forced to switch to a bachelor of commerce single degree."

Erande observed, "It has really made me think of uni as something that is profit-led. There is not as much care for students. The priority isn't education. They are businesses; they are trying to make money." Erande said he "fears more cuts are on the horizon."

At Macquarie University, a restructuring will eliminate bachelor's degrees in archaeology, music, education, and ancient languages, while cutting back sociology, ancient history, politics, gender studies, criminology and psychological studies.

The course cuts are bound up with the wave of sackings of academics and administrative staff at

universities across the country, hitting virtually every university.

The overhaul is being pushed by the Labor government. It has imposed draconian caps on international student enrolments, upon whose fees the universities are heavily dependent as a result of decades of cuts to public funding.

At the same time, the Albanese government's continuation of the "Job-ready graduates" program initiated by the previous Liberal-National government sets fees for three-year humanities degrees at up to \$50,000, while cutting the funding to universities for delivering them.

Those who do attend university, despite the cuts, face leaving with a mountain of debt.

As of 2025, the federal government HELP-HECS scheme lends most students up to \$126,839 to pay for tuition fees, \$13,811 or 12.2 percent more than last year. Graduates repay the debt gradually through the taxation system once they earn \$48,361 per year—just above the minimum wage—taking a decade, on average, to repay the full amount.

While student loans do not technically accrue interest, the outstanding debt is indexed to keep up with inflation.

According to Finder, latest figures show total outstanding student debt hit \$81.05 billion for 2023–24, a \$2.85 billion increase from the year before. Average individual student debt continues to climb, increasing from \$26,494 to \$27,640 at the end of 2023 and 2024. Some 63 percent of those with student debt were concerned about repayment and 12 percent thought they would never be able to pay their debt.

That has flow-on implications, under conditions of a social crisis and where the housing market is more inflated than ever before. Graduates seeking to purchase a home, for instance, will have to service their student debt, while trying to save the hundreds of thousands of dollars required for a deposit, under conditions where the median house price across Australian cities is now over \$1 million.

The consequence is that higher education will increasingly be confined to wealthier layers of the population.

While the assault on courses is broad, there is a definite targeting. Arts and humanities courses are disproportionately affected, as part of an assault on the

conception of a well-rounded education, aimed at producing critically-thinking individuals.

Instead, Labor's "national priorities" for universities are aimed at subordinating them to the immediate employment demands of big business, and to the requirements of the military, amid the development of a war-related economy.

Labor has particularly emphasised the need for university courses geared towards training those who will work in AUKUS-linked projects. AUKUS is the militarist pact with the US and the UK, including Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, aimed at preparing for war against China.

There is growing opposition to the wave of university restructurings, among university staff as well as students.

The campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union and the Community and Public Sector Union are suppressing any fightback, however. At one university after another, the union officials have presented the cuts as the product of poor decisions by individual managements, covering for Labor's role in spearheading the nationally coordinated offensive against jobs and courses.

The unions have subordinated staff to their negotiations with the managements, and have forced through a series of deals, facilitating the elimination of jobs. In this, the thoroughly corporatised unions, which are aligned with the Labor government itself, effectively function as adjuncts of management.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the Committee for Public Education are putting forward an alternative. That is based on the fight to link-up university academics, students and staff across the country, in a unified industrial and political struggle to defend all jobs and courses.

Such a fight means establishing rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucrats, and directly opposing the Labor government, the political establishment and their subordination of education to profit and war.



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