

Labor's cuts threaten thousands of jobs in Australian universities

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A meeting of Western Sydney University (WSU) staff and students last month voted to form 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

The Australian Labor government's deep cuts to international student enrolments, on top of Labor's continuation of years of chronic underfunding of universities, threaten to destroy thousands of educators' jobs.

Economic modelling commissioned by the University of Sydney estimates that the expected cut to international student numbers by 63,500 next year will create a \$1.1 billion revenue black hole and cause 21,922 direct and indirect job losses in 2025.

The government not only plans to impose punitive university-by-university caps on international student numbers from next year, it has cut student visa approvals by a third over the past year, and last week more than doubled international student visa fees from \$710 to \$1,600.

In the year to April 30, the number of visas approved fell to 306,000, from the 465,500 approved up to April 2023. Universities Australia, the managements' umbrella body, said its members are already facing a \$500 million shortfall in funding this year due to the visa crackdown.

Acting in bipartisan unison with the Liberal-National Coalition, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government is making overseas students and immigrants scapegoats for the intensifying cost-of-living, housing and social crisis that is causing immense financial stress throughout the working class. It has vowed to halve immigration, including student arrivals, to 260,000 in 2024-25.

University managements are wasting no time in moving to slash jobs. So far, Federation University, a regional institution in Victoria, has said it will axe 200 staff on the way to shedding 20 percent of its employees. The University of Tasmania has instituted a jobs freeze, and both 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). A rank-and-file campaign is being developed there to fight the management's plan to restructure WSU College, the university's wholly-owned feeder college, at the overall cost of nearly 19 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.

Despite objections by university managements, Labor is pushing ahead with its Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024, which would give the education minister unprecedented political powers to cap international student enrolments and scrap courses.

According to the bill, the minister could cancel international enrolments and/or courses on the basis of "systemic quality issues," or providing "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."

Such vague and arbitrary language essentially means tying enrolments and funding to the narrow vocational demands of employers and the corporate elite as a whole, as well as other government "priorities." These include military preparations, such as the AUKUS nuclear submarines and weapons program, for a US-led war against China.

In its submission on the bill, the University of Sydney said any cuts to foreign enrolments would have "very damaging flow-on consequences," pointing out that it and the other "Group of Eight" elite universities take more than 30 percent of their total revenue from international student fees.

Likewise, the University of Melbourne said enrolment caps would lead to "disruptive job losses and course cancellations as early as next year." The Regional Universities Network warned any reduction in its international enrolments would result in the "loss of regional university jobs [and] the closure of regional campuses."

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers most university educators, is seeking to divert the blame for the job destruction solely onto the university managements and away from the Labor government.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes told the media she was “deeply concerned” that the managements might be weaponising the federal migration policy as an “excuse to threaten staff and students with decisions that damage universities.” She claimed it was “premature” and “cruel” to warn of job losses because the government’s policy details were not finalised.

In reality, the cuts to student visas are already biting, and the reactionary thrust of Labor’s measures is clear.

Labor’s attacks on international students are so financially damaging because successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have slashed funding and pushed universities into relying on international students as cash cows, charging them exorbitant fees, in order to operate.

A [report](#) last July calculated that federal government funding for universities, excluding the fees loan system that students must repay after graduation, fell from 0.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1995 to 0.6 percent in 2021. That amounted to a \$6.5 billion funding reduction in 2021, equal to almost half (46.5 percent) of current higher education funding.

This decline began in 2011?12, during the “education revolution” instigated by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments. Moreover, since 1995, private sources had doubled as a share of university revenue—increasing to 43 percent by 2019. Thus, the nominally “public” universities have become substantially privatised, while casualising their workforces and ramping up class sizes.

Despite the NTEU and other trade union apparatuses promoting illusions that a Labor government would reverse this historic assault, the opposite is occurring. In a media release, Barnes hailed the government’s May budget this year as “a first step on the road to major reform universities desperately need.”

Barnes highlighted the government’s headline claim that the budget earmarked \$1.1 billion in funding over the next five years to implement recommendations from the Universities Accord. First of all, however, this figure camouflages the ongoing cut to funding, which Labor’s first budget, in October 2022, would decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25.

At the same time, the [Universities Accord](#) proposes to tie funding, via individual university “mission statements” to the reshaping of tertiary education to satisfy the employment and research needs of big business and the preparations for war, such as the AUKUS military pact against China.

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.

The NTEU bureaucrats have a long record of suppressing educators’ hostility to the increasing corporatisation of universities, even when they claim to oppose it. While striking regressive enterprise bargaining deals with university managements, all designed to assist restructuring, the NTEU machine has repeatedly blocked any unified mobilisation against it.

At WSU, the NTEU has struck a [deal](#) with the management to facilitate the WSU College restructuring by encouraging 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 as a result of its previous betrayals.

The NTEU is seeking to prevent a rank-and-file campaign across WSU as a whole and throughout other universities for a university-wide and broader fight to defeat the restructuring and job cuts.

Taking a stand for quality education and the defence of jobs and conditions means rejecting the dictates of management, governments and the corporate elite, as well as the union bureaucrats who enforce their demands.

That is why staff and students at WSU are establishing a rank-and-file committee to fight this offensive. We call on WSU staff and students who agree with this stand—whether union members or not—to join our next meeting and help build the committee. To do so, or to form rank-and-file committees at other universities, 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](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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