

Western Sydney University advertising covers up job cuts at “pathway” College

A WSU Rank-and-File Committee member
23 July 2024

The newly-founded Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee (WSU-RFC) has called an online public meeting at 7pm on Wednesday July 31 as part of its campaign to stop the destruction of jobs and the pro-business restructuring at WSU's The College, the university's wholly-owned feeder college. Register at: <https://tinyurl.com/ydrd3eu4>

The Western Sydney University (WSU) Rank-and-File Committee, whose members include staff and students, is calling on staff, students and the wider community to join its campaign to defeat the restructuring and job cuts at WSU's College.

The WSU management is marketing its planned pro-business and cost-cutting restructuring of The College, the university's wholly-owned feeder institution, to students and their families as an educational advance.

WSU's online advertising states: “Launching in 2025: Modular Learning. We've re-imagined the way our courses are delivered, using research on the best ways for students to learn.” It adds: “Learn by immersing yourself in small interactive workshop-style classes. Our modular learning model will help you reach your potential, no matter your starting point or ATAR [high school assessment score].

“Study one course-specific subject at a time, delivered in 4-week modules—giving you more time to focus without slowing down... **Life-friendly timetable:** The average timetable includes three hours of classes, three times a week, meaning you can fit study around your other commitments.”

This marketing covers up the job and course cuts at The College, which management has blamed on falling enrolments.

The reality is that WSU management is demanding the elimination of the equivalent of 17 full-time learning and teaching positions at The College—or more than 10 percent—and a divisive “spill and fill” regime to force staff members to compete against each other for the remaining posts.

The heaviest course cuts are planned for English, arts, literature and humanities, thus depriving more students of

access to critical, broad-based courses, rather than just the narrow vocational ones demanded by employers.

As of 1 January 2025, all subjects would be taught as four-week intensive blocks, rather than as semester-length courses. This “modular learning” regime means extremely onerous workloads for teachers and coordinators, with all assessment and marking to be completed in just one month.

This is not just an attack on educators' jobs and conditions.

It would also further erode the quality of the courses for students, making effective feedback almost impossible. Each marked assessment during the four-week block is supposed to be returned to students, and their marks recorded, within two days of the submission date.

So compressed is the proposed schedule that in the final fourth week of each block, no classes are scheduled on the third day. Instead, teachers would have to finalise marking and ensure that all results are recorded, ready to be approved and released to students later the same week.

Moreover, in block mode there is no leeway to deviate from the schedule if students miss a class or are slower than expected in completing the work or grasping a concept.

Yet, as college and WSU educators know—and many former students can attest—The College has played a vital part in helping to prepare students, often from disadvantaged working-class and immigrant backgrounds, for university study.

Research has shown that block mode teaching, first introduced in some US universities in the 1970s, intensifies educators' workloads and creates student concerns about the workload and difficulty in covering 12- or 13-weeks' worth of content in 4 weeks.

According to one recently published peer-reviewed study, “identified challenges of the Block Model included decrease in time students spent studying outside of class time, students needing to juggle caring responsibilities struggling to complete the tight assessment requirements and inadequate time for students to revise papers or for instructors to provide feedback on assessments.

“Additional challenges included reduction in marked assessments and inadequate time for instructors to prepare new materials and adapt to the new teaching and learning environments.”

Other studies have raised concerns about educators’ fatigue—impacting preparation and delivery—and superficial learning at the expense of deep learning.

This is a broader danger, not confined to “pathway” colleges like WSU’s. In recent years several Australian universities have joined others in the UK and elsewhere in imposing the block mode throughout their courses, likewise marketing it as particularly suitable for working-class students. This includes Victoria University, Southern Cross University and Murdoch University.

Unless the carve-up of WSU College is defeated it will set a precedent throughout the tertiary education sector. Up to 22,000 jobs are threatened by next year as a result of the Labor government’s moves to slash international student enrolments, making these students scapegoats for the worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis.

These pressures are mounting because the federal Labor government is continuing to starve the public universities of adequate funding. This is forcing them all to scramble against each other for enrolments, including by offering students vocational “micro” courses and alternative pathways into degree programs.

At the same time, the government is proposing to tie future funding to increased enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, essentially for the purpose of churning out “job ready” graduates to meet the needs of the corporate elite.

This is part of Labor’s pro-business Universities Accord. It demands the systemic restructuring of universities to satisfy the vocational and research requirements of big business, as well as military preparations, such as the AUKUS pact, for a US-led war against China.

Members of the WSU Rank-and-File Committee have faced repeated moves by representatives of the main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), to block a unified campaign across WSU and more broadly against management’s job cuts and restructuring at The College.

As a result, virtually no staff members or students at WSU even know about the pro-business restructuring of the college, except for the campaigns conducted at various WSU campuses by the rank-and-file committee over recent weeks.

The NTEU is actively trying to help impose the job losses and stifle resistance by encouraging staff members to apply for redundancy packages. It is also pitting people against one another by urging its members to lodge “individual cases” with the NTEU and by refusing to defend the jobs and

conditions of non-union members.

The majority of educators at The College are not NTEU members because they have no confidence in the union apparatus as a result of its previous betrayals, including at The College, WSU as a whole and throughout the tertiary education sector.

In fact, the NTEU is partnering in The College restructuring as per its current enterprise agreement (EA) with WSU management, which was pushed through a poorly-attended meeting in 2022. In that EA, the NTEU pledged to assist The College “to remain competitive in the market,” which meant The College “may need to change its structure, operations, and priorities to meet business requirements.”

At the July 31 online public meeting, the WSU-Rank-and-File Committee will outline its initial demands and propose a campaign of action. These demands include:

- the scrapping of WSU’s restructuring
- the retention of all jobs, with no loss of pay or conditions
- no imposition of “block teaching”
- secure employment for all casualised and contract staff who want it
- free first-class education for all students instead of channelling billions of dollars into AUKUS and other preparations for US-led wars.

We appeal to all WSU students and staff, whether union members or not, who agree with us to attend the July 31 meeting, join our campaign and participate in the work of the committee. To do so, register at the link below or contact the rank-and-file committee at: rfc.wsu@gmail.com

Online public meeting

WSU Rank-and-File Committee

STOP THE WSU COLLEGE CUTS!

Wednesday July 31, 7pm

Register at: <https://tinyurl.com/ydrd3eu4>



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact