

# Australian Labor government's international student cuts hit thousands of university jobs

Mike Head  
9 September 2024

*The rank-and-file committees at Western Sydney University and Macquarie University, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are jointly hosting an online forum this Wednesday, September 11 at 7 p.m. AEST to discuss how to fight the Australian Labor government's international student enrolment caps and the thousands of resulting job cuts across the tertiary education sector. To register click the link:*

*[https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_3-2u5sbnQ1-1FmQwiYP8rg](https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3-2u5sbnQ1-1FmQwiYP8rg)*

Details were finally released late last week pointing to how far Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government has lined up with the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition to slash the number of international student enrolments, triggering the loss of thousands of jobs throughout the higher education sector.

As warned by the Western Sydney University (WSU) Rank-and-File Committee in announcing tomorrow evening's online forum: "Both Labor and the Coalition are engaged in reactionary nationalism. They are trying to blame international students, like refugees and immigrants more broadly, for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis, and deteriorating living conditions affecting millions of working-class households."

Federal Department of Education figures, only made public on Friday evening, show that 15 universities have had their numbers slashed for 2025, particularly targeting those with the highest numbers of Chinese students. Across the country, enrolments will be cut overall by more than 50,000, to 145,000, for publicly-funded universities, with severely damaging consequences.

Among the hardest hit are the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne, both composed of more than 40 percent international students—many of them from China. They received 7 percent decreases on their 2023 intakes, making their 2025 caps 11,900 and 9,300 respectively.

The Australian National University had its international student allocation reduced by more than 14 percent. Murdoch University in Perth had its cohort cut by 34 percent to 3,500, down from 5,272 in 2023.

This will have a punitive financial impact, forcing

universities to axe jobs, programs and courses, and conform strictly with the corporate- and military-related agenda of the Labor government's Universities Accord, which ties reduced funding to government "mission statements."

In fact, the department's figures understate the true dimension of the cuts. For example, in an email to staff on Monday, University of Melbourne acting vice chancellor Nicola Phillips said the government's cap represented an 18 percent reduction of new international student enrolments in 2025, compared to the management's projection of 11,000 for 2025.

Phillips' email also confirmed the WSU Rank-and-File Committee's warnings that job cuts are already underway. She declared that while "a great deal of uncertainty" remained about the impact, "belt-tightening" had commenced, including a freeze on filling job vacancies and renewing employment contracts.

Similar job axes are being wielded at the University of Sydney, and throughout the tertiary education sector. Among the other universities already announcing such measures are Federation, Tasmania, La Trobe and Wollongong. Many more casual jobs are being eliminated.

The government's caps are not "random" or "arbitrary" as some university vice chancellors have complained. There is a definite agenda. Under the flimsy disguise of trying to shift students to regional universities, the so-called Go8 elite universities, which predominantly attract Chinese students, have had their enrolments slashed from this year by 22,000 or 27 percent.

This targeting has been spelt out by the government through the corporate media. The *Australian* reported on August 20: "Wealthy universities that profit from enrolling too many Chinese students will be penalised... The government intends to reward universities that diversify their student base away from Chinese students, who dominate enrolments."

While 23 universities will be permitted to enroll more international students than they had in 2023, these numbers are small, just a few hundred additional students. Some institutions are unlikely to fill their allocation, because their locations and course offerings are less attractive to overseas students.

Moreover, these universities have been hurt already by the

government more than doubling student visa application fees from \$710 to \$1,600, slowing visa processing and imposing harsher English language requirements and “genuine student” tests.

Universities with more working-class enrolments have been affected as well. Despite being composed of less than 35 percent international students, Melbourne’s Victoria University and the University of Wollongong have had harsher caps imposed of -11 percent and -8 percent, bringing them down to 3,600 and 3,700 respectively.

Federation University, regional Victoria’s largest educational institution, will be permitted to take just 1,100 overseas students from 2025, compared with 2023’s intake of 2,306. Another regional institution, Charles Sturt University, received an increase to 1,000 students, up from less than 200 in 2023, but that is a 66 percent decrease on its 2019 intake, before the impact of visa rejections and delays.

Hundreds of educators and other staff are also being laid off or faced with closure in private colleges.

The attack on international students forms part of Labor’s plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. This is a bipartisan offensive. The Coalition has vowed to cut annual net migration further, to 160,000, which could reduce student inflows to less than 15,000.

University staff and students must oppose this poisonous xenophobia, which also feeds anti-China war-mongering, and defend the basic rights of workers and young people to live, work and study wherever they choose. This is essential to forge an international movement against war and austerity and the underlying capitalist profit system itself.

The Albanese government’s Universities Accord blueprint ties enrolments, as well as research funding, to the vocational demands of employers and the building of a war economy. This includes military preparations such as the AUKUS nuclear submarines and weapons program, for a US-led war against China.

While starving the universities of funds, the 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.

International students have been treated as cash cows, paying exorbitant fees. That is the direct result of the higher education “revolution” imposed by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, on top of chronic under-funding.

This “revolution” created a corporate-style market, which forced universities to fight each other for international enrolments. That led to the sector becoming Australian capitalism’s fourth largest export earner behind iron ore, gas and coal, generating revenues of some \$50 billion a year.

The main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), is desperately trying to cover up the job cuts and the Labor government’s destructive role. It is falsely claiming that university vice-chancellors are “scare-

mongering” about the enrolment cuts, just as an excuse to slash jobs.

Far from opposing the student cuts, the NTEU has effectively lined up behind them. It is urging its members to sign a petition, to be submitted this week, asking the government to introduce “phase-in periods for any caps,” supposedly to avoid retrenchments.

Likewise, the NTEU is trying to block the WSU Rank-and-File Committee’s campaign throughout WSU and other universities for a broader fight to defeat the pro-business restructuring and job cuts at WSU College, the university’s preparatory college. In fact, the union struck a deal with management to suppress resistance by encouraging WSU College educators to apply for redundancy packages.

What is happening at the WSU College is a test case for the entire sector. Staff are being forced to compete against each other in a “spill and fill” process, with absolutely no guarantee that any of them will have a job in the new structure.

Students will also suffer from the elimination of courses and the introduction of “block mode” teaching, cramming subjects into four-week periods. Courses such as English, arts, history and philosophy are being decimated. The corporate elite does not want informed and articulate working-class students who can think critically. It only wants them for industry exploitation.

Tomorrow night’s online forum will discuss the need to form rank-and-file committees throughout the education system, totally independent of the NTEU and other union apparatuses, to defend jobs and conditions and oppose the reactionary bipartisan Labor-Coalition agenda.

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

To register for the forum, “Oppose Labor’s cuts to international students and tertiary education jobs,” click this link.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**