

Staff and students face unbearable conditions at Western Sydney University College

Our correspondent
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Over the past year, the pro-business restructure at the Western Sydney University (WSU) preparatory college has resulted in intolerable conditions for staff and students.

The loss of more than 10 percent of jobs, mostly academic teachers, a purging of experienced staff and a gutting of the Arts has set an alarming precedent for the university as a whole and for the entire tertiary education sector.

Colleagues are referring to “fast-food education” and “sausage factory learning.”

Some of the main issues are to do with workloads and unclarity about roles and responsibilities. For example, program coordinators, subject coordinators and teaching staff, especially casual and part-time, are being asked to perform more and more duties. It remains unclear whether these are their responsibilities, or whether they are even possible given the scheduled hours.

For a start, subject coordinators are required to teach nine hours of face-to-face classes per week and mark assessments continuously. The four-week block mode means that students have an assessment every week.

Assessments due on Friday of week 1 by 11.59 p.m., for instance, have to be marked by the next Wednesday evening. For full-time teachers who have more than 60 or 70 students, this is an impossible task.

The feedback is a proforma template with an online rubric grade, but teachers are expected to provide personalised feedback in class. However, there is little to no time for this because there is so much to cover in the three hours of class. That includes reviewing content, ensuring some of the lesson plan is adhered to, going through weekly assessments and providing feedback on drafts.

Alongside the face-to-face classes, students have one parallel online course that is mandatory and while not graded by teachers, it requires a satisfactory grade.

Teachers and subject coordinators are required to assist students with completing this online course in class if the data shows low completion rates. The same is required for the face-to-face classes. Teachers and coordinators (who email teachers instructing them to email students) are

required to email students and remind them in class to complete the three online learning modules before attending the face-to-face classes. Each module takes about two to three hours to complete. This is a “flipped learning model.”

If prior learning module completion rates are low, coordinators have to mine data to discover why, because the leadership ties academic outcomes to the online module completion rates. Pressure is placed on coordinators, who are provided data comparing the completion rates and grades for each discipline. This causes much stress to coordinators and teachers, who are made to feel as if they are underperforming.

Then there is the “moderation,” which takes place twice in each four-week block. Subject coordinators send every teacher in their subject three assessments to review or “moderate.” If students submit assessments at the last minute, staff are required to improvise.

Coordinators must ensure that teachers meet marking deadlines or make alternative arrangements if not possible. They also have to insist that they and teachers email students who don’t attend classes and who don’t complete assessments. This is the case for every single week and every single assessment. The volume of emails that coordinators and teachers write to students and to each other is overwhelming.

Coordinators are also responsible for sending assessment reminder announcements. The college leadership regularly checks to ensure that teachers are reaching out to students about missed assessments and attendance. The leadership then requests that program coordinators speak to those identified as not meeting these requirements or deadlines. It is just like a factory, with micromanagers overseeing every step.

That is not including the correspondence between colleagues about subject specific issues or problems. The correspondence can be bewildering and time-consuming.

For teachers and coordinators to be on top of what they teach, they must also complete the student modules and do extra scholarly research and reading to be able to teach

effectively and with integrity, and answer questions.

This is particularly the case if a teacher/coordinator is teaching outside their area of expertise, such as teaching sociology when they are a literature or history expert. Therefore, preparing to teach requires around three hours of reading and completing the student modules before class.

Subject coordinators are also responsible for finding teachers to cover classes, and if none can be found, they have to instruct teachers to merge classes. This is usually at short notice and requires much correspondence and efforts to find a room that can accommodate more than 40 students, notifying students via email and ensuring signs are posted on doors redirecting students.

Some program coordinators are responsible for coordinating many subjects, with more than 300 students and many teachers. Subject coordinators are expected to process grades in one week before the start of the next block. This could involve processing 100-300 students' grades. They are also required to approve student extensions that come through academic support and relay these to their teachers.

Subject and program coordinators are also expected to attend several meetings a week, make themselves available to students, remind students and teachers of the workshops run by academic learning advisors and refer them to student success coaches.

There are not enough student success coaches. They assist students with anything to do with allocation of classes, withdrawing or deferring from study, enrolment issues, attendance, special consideration, etc. Since the restructure began, there have been many resignations, including of leading personnel, with some roles not being filled.

Staff are all expected to teach at various campuses across Sydney, which impacts part-time and casual teachers most. New timetables have been introduced to meet higher than anticipated enrolments. Staff were advised at the beginning of the year that classes would start at 10 a.m., as the research-based evidence indicated low attendance when classes started before this. However, there will soon be classes starting from 8 a.m. and finishing as late as 9 p.m.

Teachers with young children who objected to working from 6 to 9 p.m. were advised that it was the condition of employment and were threatened having their offers of permanent work withdrawn.

There are always issues to contend with including the misallocation of students, and casual teachers not having contracts finalised and approved before they begin teaching.

Everything described above takes place almost daily and at breakneck speed.

Many teachers and coordinators have taken sick leave and stress leave. Part-time and casual teachers cannot possibly

meet the demands in the hours for which they are paid. Coordinators and full-time teachers are being overworked to the point of exhaustion.

New directives are issued almost daily, with very short deadlines and almost no discussion, combined with endless meetings. It is an absolute roller-coaster. Everyone is easily doing the work of two or more people.

There is a mood of anger, resentment and exhaustion and a desire to push back against the incessant demands and the micromanagement. Teachers feel undervalued and overworked, and that their expertise is undermined. They hate a business model of education that is antithetical to the needs of student and staff.

What is happening at The College seems about to be replicated throughout WSU, given last week's vice-chancellor's webinar. Up to 400 jobs are likely to be cut. There will be university-wide redundancies, "voluntary" and non-voluntary.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has been invisible at The College except for an occasional email and meeting, mostly about negotiating a new NTEU-management enterprise agreement (EA). In the last EA, which the union rammed through in 2022, the NTEU promised to help implement any changes allegedly needed to make the WSU College "competitive in the market."

As a result, the NTEU has tried to block any organised struggle against the restructure, even removing members of the WSU Rank-and-File Committee from its union branch meetings.

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