

Students protest lack of funding at University of Western Sydney

By Tom MacDonald
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A student meeting at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Campbelltown campus voted last week to organise a UWS-wide protest rally on April 5 against over-crowded classes and inadequate facilities. The rally will consider calling a student strike and will march to a nearby university oval with shovels to dig up some of the 10,000 books that UWS authorities buried five years ago in order to save money.

More than 60 students, academics and staff joined the open-air meeting. Students were incensed that they face sub-standard conditions, both as a result of funding cuts by the federal government and a cost-cutting restructuring imposed by the UWS administration.

Many who spoke at the meeting expressed anger at the fact that the wealthier and more established universities in Sydney's eastern suburbs receive up to 50 percent more funding per student. UWS, with more than 30,000 students on seven campuses spread across Sydney's working class western suburbs, is one of Australia's largest multi-campus universities. Yet its total revenue per student is only \$10,500 a year, compared to \$15,000 to \$17,500 at Sydney University and University of New South Wales.

Students at all universities are being affected by overcrowding and deep cuts in courses and staffing levels, but the impact is particularly acute at UWS.

During the meeting, students complained of:

- * tutorial or seminar classes of up to 60, making genuine discussion impossible.
- * cuts to administrative staff, with drastic effects on student services.
- * the shortening of semesters to 12 weeks to make way for summer and winter fee-paying courses.
- * shortages of library staff and services, including photocopying machines, combined with the introduction of late loan fees.

* the scarcity and breakdown of computer facilities, which are essential for study and research.

* queues of an hour or more at the student administration centre and bookshop.

* overuse of casual tutors and lecturers.

* the introduction of privileged car parking for those with the money to pay parking fees.

The meeting formulated a series of demands, including class sizes of no more than 25; more staff, not less; abolition of fee-paying courses; a return to full semesters; and increased funding for library and other basic services.

Called on only a day's notice, the meeting followed a *Daily Telegraph* report on the burial of books and the under-funding of UWS. The books, believed to include first editions and rare 100-year-old volumes, had been donated to UWS after being discarded by the University of Sydney. Lacking the funds to properly catalogue and store the books, UWS officials simply used them as landfill. Such an act is antithetical to the role of a university as a centre of learning and culture. No consideration was given to donating the books to charity.

Since the books were buried, the funding shortfalls have worsened, both at UWS and at other universities, as the federal Coalition government has deepened spending cuts begun under previous Labor governments.

Since 1996, basic grants to universities have been reduced by 6 percent—almost \$600 million per year—despite rising enrolments. Universities have been forced to make up the gap by introducing fee-paying courses, obtaining research funding from corporate and government sources, and launching other commercial activities, including business consultancies and overseas campuses.

Responding to the *Telegraph* article, federal Education Minister David Kemp baldly denied any responsibility for UWS's lack of resources. His spokesperson declared that total university revenues had never been higher. But 10 years ago, the federal government used to provide 95 percent of university budgets; now, the figure is about 37 percent, with 23 percent coming from Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees paid by students and 40 percent coming from full-fee paying students and research funds. In addition, government research grants are tied to establishing partnerships with companies, so that research projects must be tailored to commercial interests.

This funding system forces universities to fight against each other for research grants and to attract fee-paying students. The more elite universities, which have built up facilities and reputations over decades, are aggressively pursuing potential markets, pushing aside the less endowed universities that are generally attended by a higher proportion of working class students.

In a letter to the *Telegraph*, Kemp claimed that UWS was over-funded. He alleged that the wealthier universities taught more expensive disciplines, such as medicine, engineering and science, and that therefore UWS was receiving 7.3 percent more than it should. In fact, UWS teaches science and engineering and a full range of university courses, apart from medicine and a handful of highly-specialised disciplines. Kemp also argued that universities such as Sydney and the University of NSW had higher proportions of students at post-graduate levels. If true, this only indicates that students from Sydney's west are being denied equal opportunities to undertake post-graduate study.

Like other university administrations, the UWS management has not opposed federal government policies. Instead, it has curtailed spending on basic services and student needs in an effort to compete with rival universities. UWS academics have been pressured to forge links with business and obtain research grants in order to “bring in the money” to fund basic teaching.

UWS vice-chancellor Janice Reid last year pushed through a restructuring plan, which she claims has cut administrative overheads by 8 percent and will increase expenditure on courses by 14 percent. As students have experienced, however, the first areas targetted for

cost-cutting have been library services and lower-level administrative staff—those upon whom students and academics depend for assistance.

In 1999, students at the UWS Bankstown campus occupied the administration building for nearly two weeks, forcing the management to agree to class sizes of no more than 25 and a list of other demands. In the subsequent merger of UWS into a single institution, the UWS authorities have flouted this agreement.

See Also:

UWS students condemn lack of resources "I don't agree with universities being funded commercially"
[27 March 2001]

10,000 books buried at Australian university
[7 September 2000]

Australian university students occupy campus over substandard conditions
[8 November 1999]

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>