

# University of Western Sydney victimises Professor Steve Keen

By Mark Church  
29 January 2013

The University of Western Sydney has laid “serious misconduct” charges against economics professor Steve Keen, a well-known academic, who is regularly interviewed on radio and television, as a means of intimidating staff and student opponents of its sweeping course closures and retrenchments.

Late last year, after classes had ended for the term, and just as students were preparing for exams, UWS management began to reveal, in piecemeal fashion, closures of courses, as well as more than 50 academic redundancies. The economics degree is being scrapped, together with courses in Arabic, Italian and Spanish languages, writing, performance and animation.

Through cuts to departmental budgets, UWS is also eliminating academic jobs via retirements, resignations and unfilled vacancies. In law, for example, 12 positions will be empty, out of about 40. Many casual lecturers will lose their jobs or have their hours slashed, and the teaching workloads of those who remain are being increased substantially.

This year, students will face larger classes, less face-to-face learning and seriously reduced course options. The cuts come on top of a decision to close the Student Learning Unit, which assists the university’s many students from working class, low-income and non-English speaking backgrounds.

Professor Keen, in an attempt to alert his students to the cuts, posted a notice on the Behavioural Finance web site, informing them that he would give them extra time to submit assignments, and would not fail any of them in their exams, since UWS would not be offering the subject again.

University management immediately instituted disciplinary action against the high profile professor, and cut off his capacity to communicate with his students. Soon after, its response escalated to laying

“serious misconduct” charges, which are usually reserved for offences such as sexual assault or corruption, and can lead to dismissal. In addition, he was ordered to keep the matter confidential and to refrain from contacting students.

UWS has pursued the case, despite the fact that Keen last month applied for a voluntary redundancy. It has now instituted proceedings in the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), accusing him of “corrupting” academic standards. These are unmistakable signals that UWS management has decided to use Keen’s case to send a threatening message to all staff and students regarding any opposition to course closures and job cuts.

By choosing to move against an internationally-known academic, the university is seeking to establish a precedent that can be used against others. Moreover, other universities will be watching closely, with a view to carrying out similar measures to silence opposition to the wave of closures and redundancies sweeping tertiary education. In the past 18 months alone, cuts have been implemented at Sydney, Macquarie, NSW, Bond, Victoria and La Trobe universities, as well as the Australian National University.

Under Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s “education revolution”, total tertiary enrolments have been increased, particularly in business-related courses, but real funding per student has dropped, placing intense pressure on already chronically-underfunded public universities. Institutions have been compelled to undercut each other to secure enrolments, especially in courses that attract the highest commercial demand, because their funding now depends on the number of students they enrol. Any fall-off in enrolments in less lucrative areas, such as humanities and languages, is

being met by the shut down of entire departments.

At UWS, management has even resorted to trying to boost enrolments by providing all new students with an Apple iPad, supposedly to encourage on-line learning, and offering existing students \$50 to re-enrol, ostensibly to help defray the cost of books.

While it trumpets the fact that overall tertiary enrolments are increasing, the government's underlying agenda is the restructuring of education to satisfy the demands of the corporate elite for specific business-oriented courses, lower levels of public financing and more compliant graduates.

The trade unions covering Australian universities, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), have enforced the Labor government's pro-business assault since it took office in 2007. Having backed Labor's election, claiming it would inaugurate a new era for higher education, the unions have suppressed the resistance of university employees to the resulting casualisation, cost-cutting and undermining of conditions. Union-sponsored enterprise agreements have given universities greater "flexibility" to erode full-time employment. Today, by the NTEU's own estimate, of the 200,000 employees of public universities, only 68,000 have continuing employment, while 45,000 are on fixed-term contracts, and 86,000 are "regular casuals".

While the NTEU claims to oppose the UWS cuts, and Keen's victimisation, it has tried to keep staff and students in the dark and isolate departments from each other. At the same time it is appealing to management to negotiate, and to utilise the union's services to achieve its required savings.

The union's slogan has become: "Let us be part of the solution." Union members in individual schools have been urged to become involved in "working groups" to propose ways to minimise the damage caused by the cuts. In a November 28 branch newsletter, the NTEU listed 11 departments and schools where cuts had been announced, and bragged that its "working groups" were working to reduce the impact, including by suggesting alternative cost-cutting measures.

The newsletter declared: "We all want to be part of a productive, open dialogue that genuinely explores how we can achieve change that meets the shared objectives

of staff, students and the community." In other words, the union has become the open instrument of both the Labor government and UWS management for imposing the cuts.

At the same time, the NTEU has sought to divert attention from the Gillard government's role by blaming the cuts on the university's "mismanagement". The NTEU's efforts have been aided and abetted by the Greens, who have propped up the minority Gillard government since 2010. Senator Lee Rhiannon last year moved a Senate motion criticising UWS management, while presenting the cuts as a supposedly unintended consequence of Labor's demand-driven funding regime.

The pseudo "left" groups have lined up behind this diversion. In an article on the UWS cuts, the Socialist Alliance's *Green Left Weekly* failed to even mention the Labor government. Instead, it promoted the NTEU's response and claimed that the cuts resulted from a misallocation of resources by UWS, not a "funding problem".

Defeating the cuts at UWS, and other universities, will require the development of an independent and unified movement, in direct opposition to the CPSU and NTEU, of staff and students. Such a movement must launch a political struggle, across all tertiary institutions, and fight for support among all those teachers, parents, students and workers who oppose the Labor government's offensive against public education. This requires a socialist perspective, aimed at the complete reorganisation of economic and social life for the benefit of all, not just the wealthy elite, including the provision of free, high-quality education, at every level, as a basic social right for young people.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>