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2023



# STUDENT ACTIVISM AGAINST STAFF CUTS

A Short Positional Paper from the  
Student Movement of Aotearoa  
New Zealand



NEW ZEALAND UNION OF STUDENTS' ASSOCIATIONS



The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) wants to take this opportunity to highlight our concern at the nation-wide staff layoffs, and the current responses to student activism across the motu. This paper covers these two areas of concern on the behalf of NZUSA.

Currently, the intersection of the cost-of-living crisis and post-pandemic, post-Cyclone education environment, is pressurised. With the reports of mass layoffs of tertiary staff since the end of 2022 due to millions of dollars in institutional deficits, there has been significant concern, stress, and pressure upon educators, and also, importantly, students.

Student activism has been on the increase on campuses across the country, in response to the cuts. Multiple forms of protests have been held including marches to parliament such as a “funeral” march, demonstrations, concerts, zine-writing, and the fine arts, to name a few. Two main self-forming groups have emerged - Protect Otago Action Group (POAG) and Students Against Cuts (SAC) - who have been involved in organising these initiatives. Yet in some cases, student activism has seen a less welcoming response from security and police forces. An increasing trend is seen in verbal or actual “trespassing” student activists from campuses, as occurred at the University of Otago Business School to one student, and two students for chalking at Massey University Turitea campus. (1)

While we do not condone any misuse of university property, we wish to bring to attention that student activism can and does continue to play a role in the life of the tertiary institution, especially at a time when staff cuts are occurring. Given this complex time, it is essential that tertiary institutions, civil society and Governments work together to uphold education for all. It is also essential that students and staff are able to uphold and exercise - within respect and reason - their autonomy, academic freedom, and the right to free expression on campuses.



## Mass staff layoffs have been occurring across the country for the last few years.

This was exacerbated in 2023. In March, Te Pūkenga announced that they were letting go of more than 200 but less than 10,000 jobs due to a \$63m deficit, only partially contributed to by a 10% drop in enrolments. (2) The following month, the University of Otago proposed to cut several hundred jobs with a \$60m deficit credited to a decrease in domestic enrolments by 670 students. (3) Victoria University of Wellington was quick to follow, proposing up to 260 job cuts due to falling enrolments and a financial deficit of \$33m, following a \$25m deficit in 2022. (4) Massey University proposed some cuts in April, with the proposal to cut 178 jobs, with the reinstating of 144. Cuts were then furthered in July, estimated to be 125 redundancies. (5) The University of Waikato also proposed minor cuts to the IT and Mathematics departments despite strong student enrollments, for service operations and digital technology. (6) Te Pūkenga returned for another round of layoffs reporting 960 potential redundancies, while AUT has also signaled the potential for staff layoffs. (7)

Over 7,000 staff members from the tertiary sector went on a collective strike in 2022 - the first time in two decades - with the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) stating that staff were “underpaid and overworked”. (8)

With the increase of 5% Student Achievement Component funding to universities in Budget 2023 by the Government, the TEU stated that the increase in funding was a direct response to the strike action, but with large-scale staff cuts already underway at Otago, Te Pūkenga and Victoria University, and expected elsewhere, now and expected elsewhere, now is the time for institutions to re-think plans to cut jobs. (9)

Following the reports of layoffs from Otago and Victoria, self-forming groups emerged including the POAG and SAC, resulting in a series of student-and-staff protests in the presence of various political figures. (10) Respected figures such as the Rt Hon Helen Clark and Mayor Tory Whanau, signed an open letter to Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education, the Hon Jan Tinetti, Minister for Finance, the Hon Grant Robertson, and CEO of the Tertiary Education Commission, Tim Fowler, to provide sustainable funding to tertiary institutions and **#savetertiaryeducation**. (11)

A provision of \$128m for tertiary institutions was announced in June to “increase tuition subsidies at degree-level and above by a further 4% in 2024 and 2025”. (12) Jan Tinetti, stated:

*When we began our Budget process universities and other degree providers were forecasting enrolment increases. The opposite has occurred, and it is clear that there is need for additional support.* (13)

For the last few months, students have been contacting us in distress at changes in courses and assessments, loss of their lecturers and tutors part-way through their studies, uncertainty at their course continuation, and inability to access student services at some campuses. This is occurring in the context of a welfare crisis for students, with the Greens' *People's Inquiry Into Student Wellbeing*, reporting 2/3rds of these students are living in impoverished conditions - unable to pay for food, clothing or heating - while student employment is trending at 20-40 hours per week to survive. (14)

**Students are not protesting for no reason.** They are protesting from frustration that current staff layoffs make them feel that they have no control over their education and their future. **We also reiterate that very few tertiary institutions - due to their own internal pressures - have adequately attempted to support democratic communication with students and staff, to reassure them in transitional periods.**



# IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT RIGHTS AND STUDENT ACTIVISM

This is only one of many incidents that acknowledge that a democratic backsliding is occurring in many nations, including in New Zealand. Globally, attacks on student activism are getting worse, with increased campaigns to silence student voices and push further market-values upon tertiary education.

While we acknowledge that not actions by student activists may be welcome by tertiary institutions - and do not by any means condone violent or aggressive behaviour - student activism across the world demonstrates:

*Questions raised within the classroom often transcend the university campus and shape societies at large. However [...] the repression of student activism has become more frequent, more coercive, and intense. Unions have been banned, student activists and leaders are continuously persecuted and ultimately become targets due to their tireless activism. (15)*

Students are an essential part of civil society, contributing to dialogue and action in a shrinking civic space. It is important that this civic space for students is understood and acknowledged as important.

In the context of the incidents of the student arrest at the University of Otago and chalking at Massey University, both situations remind us of the importance of how we function with student activism during complex periods such as staff cuts. Two of the areas that need to be considered to uphold student activism in these incidents during the staff cuts, are highlighted by the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) as being:

**Lawfare - the use of law prohibiting public disturbance or terrorism to constrain student organizing (16)**

**Delegitimisation - the use of rhetoric that labels student activists [i.e.] as "terrorists," "hooligans," "criminals," "idiots," or "perverts" (17)**

Lawfare applies in the context where either legislation is set up to directly oppose student activism as witnessed in Voluntary Student Membership passed in 2011, or through prioritising one form of legislation over another.

For example, the Massey incident favoured Part 11A of the *Summary Offences Act* when dealing with the chalkers and made no reference to part 267 4(a) of the *Education and Training Act*, which gives students the ability under Academic Freedom

*to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas, and to state controversial or unpopular opinions (18)*

Such only erodes democratic law when self-regarding interpretations prioritise certain legislation over others.

The other form is delegitimisation. This can be in small ways which appear non-harmful, such as the refusal to allow the use of certain words such as “student”, “activist”, “advocacy” or “union”. In a more aggressive form it can be the labeling of student protestors or their actions in criminal terms, such as the security guard calling the act “vandalism” without attaching it to legal process, or media exaggerations of damage to buildings.

**These titles are argued by SAIH to minimise the legitimate political complaints of students, and not acknowledge the role that they play in contributing to societal conversations, such as those on the staff cuts.**



**READ  
SAIH'S  
REPORT  
HERE**

This paper acts as a reminder that in this post-pandemic, post-Cyclone, cost-of-living crisis, still feeling the repercussions of global financial instability and the global education crisis, we need to first prioritise treating each other with respect.

The decades of neoliberal reforms to the tertiary sector are now publicly known to have furthered colonial racism, class wealth divides, intergenerational indebtedness, and challenge inclusivity in education. The politics of curriculum reform, bloated managerial systems, and the marketised rhetoric around pedagogy and practice has exhausted students and staff. For students, it has burdened them with debt and often a lessened adult autonomy in the lecture hall. For staff, it has burdened them with perpetual performativity.

## **01** Action or Commitment

*We call upon tertiary institutions across the country to become champions of upholding fair, transparency and authentic communication with staff and students through open forums and dialogues - to share their own internal difficulties - in favour of supporting democracy in civil society, and not squashing or hindering it!*

## **02** Action or Commitment

*We call upon tertiary institutions to not endorse violations towards student rights by directly opposing movements, rather instead finding ways to dialogue and see common ground solutions!*

## **03** Action or Commitment

*We call upon the Government to include a fair and transparent review of financing in the upcoming Higher Education Funding Review - in light of decades of stringent reforms - with the aim of making a sustainable tertiary sector!*

## **04** Action or Commitment

*And above all, we call upon tertiary institutions and the Government to not endorse the use of force that can potentially violate student rights, human rights, or the exercise of active democracy through student activism! While we do not support any form of violence or aggression, it is important that activists are given space to freely and safely express themselves!*

One thing we can all agree on, is that education makes us a whānau. **Our whānau is messy.** It has a history of structural concerns, damage and violence, but also many celebrated triumphs and innovations.

**But it is first and foremost, our whānau.**

**If we lose that, we don't need education.  
We have already lost ourselves.**

EHARA TAKU  
TOA I TE TOA  
TAKITAHU,  
ENGARI HE TOA  
TAKITINI



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