

‘I am not a piece of value added
human capital’: student activism after
the Higher Education Contribution
Scheme, 1989-96

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Image: Demonstration against changes to Austudy, Melbourne March 25 1992.
Above are the Austudy 5 arrestees.

'Give space a chance' – RMIT protest slogan, 1991

'It was the most phenomenal few hours... when you show that people power is more powerful than the Victoria Police, that's a pretty exhilarating thing' – Jerome Small

On March 25, 1992 3500 students assembled on the lawns outside Melbourne's State Library for a protest against the proposed transformation of the youth allowance AUSTUDY into a compulsory loans scheme. The students marched down Swanston Street towards state parliament. Socialist activist Jonathan Sherlock recalled that, once the students reached the building they charged forwards:

you look at this line, this thin line of police standing in front of parliament and when you've got the determination, you know you've got people standing behind you, you're brave right. And so ... maybe 50 of us led the initial ... we pushed past police, got to the top of the stairs of parliament house... You see this packed crowd down below you ... they're wedged up against this line of police that are 5 paces or so apart and you can see the power you have, so we're waving at them, come up come up come up and then the crowd broke ... it was like a dam bursting, just amazing.

The crowd occupied the Parliament House steps and some burst inside, trashing a National MP's office. In the process of claiming the steps, four people were arrested by police and bundled into a divvy van. Yet the van only made it 200 metres down the street before it was surrounded by 1000 students. After a standoff for an hour, including a failed attempt to use police horses to clear the street, the four in the van were released.

The Austudy loans campaign exemplified the key issues facing student activists in the era following the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution

Scheme (HECS) in 1989. While HECS marked a major reorganization of the education system and its relationship to government, the period from 1989-1996 saw a gradual exacerbation of what has been dubbed by some scholars as 'academic capitalism'. Education was less a state-supported social good, and more a personal investment in one's future by a 'self-interested individual.' While the establishment of HECS under Dawkins simultaneously expanded access, the Austudy plan – like other ALP proposals for postgraduate and undergraduate upfront fees - was a more explicit attempt at commodifying and marketising student experiences. More broadly, at the upper echelons of universities an increasingly corporate governance structure, with administrators remunerated like company executives, and the development of 'technology parks' in partnership with business and industry saw forms of academic capitalism seep into the internal structures of institutions.

On the other hand, the impressive student campaign around Austudy was largely successful. For the historian of student protest Graham Hastings it showed that activists were 'caught up in a new mood to resist on campuses' and were 'prepared to take things further than the free education activists of the 1986-89 campaigns'. While a version of the loans scheme was introduced for students it was optional, only taken up by a small number, and was eventually scrapped by the Howard government. My article argues that this mix of more explicitly neoliberal, 'academic capitalist' plans for tertiary education, combined with relatively successful responses by student radicals was the key dynamic at play in the post-HECS era from 1989-1996. Activists now struggled *within* a commodified university providing mass education, with its own set of problems

and issues. As the student socialist group Left Alliance eloquently put it, activists claimed that they 'were not a piece of value added human capital', resisting attempts at marketizing their experiences.

'Daddy Dawkins wants me to get amarrinated': amalgamations and student activism

The first issue to confront student activists immediately after HECS was the vexing and politically disorientating one of amalgamation. Under Dawkins' Unified National System institutions needed the equivalent of 5000 enrolled full-time student units to conduct 'limited research' and receive funding, while 8000 were required for comprehensive research. As Macintyre, Brett and Croucher point out, organisations with between 2000-5000 units were consequently expected 'to give serious consideration to their future as independent institutions'. As a result a series of amalgamations began to take place, typically through larger universities merging with geographically close Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology. Amalgamations would be supported by special payments, subsidies and capital grants, leading to what Marginson and Considine vividly described as an 'orgy of courtships and marriages among suitor institutions'. The student response to the amalgamations was dependent on the exact nature of the plans in particular areas. Although restructuring of institutions could facilitate cost-cutting and the development of new, more business friendly and anti-democratic governance structures, amalgamation did offer the potential for progressive change in some ways — breaking down the two-tier division between universities and colleges,

known as the 'binary system', with the colleges seen as inferior.

With this mix of issues in play, student opposition to amalgamation came from conflicting left and right standpoints. This tension was perhaps most vividly seen in Perth, where a proposal to merge the traditionally elite University of Western Australia (UWA) with the more 'alternative' Murdoch was on the cards from 1988 onwards. Despite historically being a bastion of student Labor politics, UWA had a strong Liberal club presence at the time. *Pelican* (the UWA student newspaper) published an editorial that put the conservative critique fairly unsubtly:

the academic quality of students accepted into undergraduate degrees at Murdoch is strikingly lower than at U.W.A... In a number of common areas the Murdoch University department can contribute little or nothing that is unique and actively sought after by the corresponding U.W.A department. The two universities are based upon entirely different philosophies... Perhaps this is an elitist attitude but it is also realistic.

In contrast, Murdoch leftists saw the merger as closer to a corporate takeover, with UWA 'eyeing Murdoch's assets lustfully'. But in terms of campaigning, the Liberal/conservative students were more effective, organising a petition with 7500 signatures and engaging in a flurry of lobbying. This eventually bore fruit: Liberals MPs opposed the merger, and when the Nationals came out against it as well the proposal failed to pass state parliament in 1990.

In a similar vein — although controlled much more by left-wing students — was the anti-amalgamation campaign at Flinders University in 1989, against a proposal for Flinders to merge with the South Australia Institute of Technology. Tom Flanagan, the socialist General Secretary of the Students Association at the

time, recalled how student activists organised a referendum and several forums critical of the merger, criticising the plan for serving the interests of 'business and industry' and devaluing the humanities. Key to the activists' strategy was winning staff support, and Flanagan described how at one of the forums:

We tried to get the staff to come along... the Vice Chancellor made the very big mistake of speaking at a forum and after he spoke we asked how many people supported the merger. And four people out of 200 put up their hands! And after that a wave went across the crowd and we knew then that he wasn't going to win it.... Within a month of that meeting it was over, the staff on campus found their voice.

Flinders revealed the contradictory nature of anti-amalgamation campaigning too. Flinders activist Rob Houghton reflected that it:

tapped into academic's staff conservative perceptions, which was about opposing change...

Eventually in 1991 Flinders would go through an amalgamation with the much geographically closer Sturt College of Advanced Education. Unlike the 1989 proposal, this was supported by the student union — after lobbying for including provisions around protecting student rights — and the merger went through with minimal opposition.

A more consistently left critique was seen in the campaign against a 1989 plan for Melbourne's Footscray Institute of Technology and the Western Institute to merge with the much larger Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Both Footscray and the Western Institute were based in Melbourne's traditionally working class Western Suburbs, and the plan was read by student associations' as a 'hostile takeover' by RMIT, that would fail to serve the interests of the

western suburbs community. The Footscray student newspaper *Seed* ruminated on the amalgamation proposal in a whimsical attempt at poetry:

Daddy Dawkins wants me to get amarrinated
But I aint got no ring yet
P'raps being single ain't so bad...
I kinda like running my show.

For the Footscray students, amalgamation seemed like another example of Labor's bureaucratic and managerialist behaviour, articulated in a language increasingly close to corporate jargon. Amidst organisational chaos, the plan collapsed.

Despite this success, overall the amalgamation campaigning didn't play into the strengths of left student activists, with the mix of progressive and conservative elements and the lack of a clear, direct threat to spark anger tending to draw activism into forums and lobbying rather than rallies. In this environment conservative students and staff, with stronger links to existing power structures, tended to have more success in pushing their agenda.

Moreover, in their analysis of the new model of governance flowing from Dawkins, Marginson and Considine note evocatively that:

What the senior management of the universities could not avoid they plainly chose to imitate. Stronger executive pressures from Canberra begat enhanced executive control at home. University leaders used the Dawkins reforms as legitimisation for an internal revolution which often copied Canberra's much reviled instruments of government: the efficiency saving, the strategic fund, the relative funding model and the central performance formula.

While amalgamation ended the binary system this phase of remaking

governance structures provided opportunities to organise universities in more corporatized ways, with competition between institutions and academics for limited state resources. This 'internal revolution' in turn would lead to activism in opposition to executive figures on campus.

Overcrowding, Technology Parks and Hotel Nikko

As the 1990s began, education activism started to fall back into more traditional left and right divisions. With increasing enrolments in the wake of HECS, overcrowding became a key concern. This was particularly pronounced at RMIT in Melbourne, and was further exacerbated by the context of economic recession.

From the perspective of TAFE RMIT activist Jerome Small:

91 obviously was the onset of the recession that we had to have. And apparently it's quite common practice for universities to over enrol, because you know in the first couple of months about a third of students will work out 'oh this isn't for me' or 'look I've got a job offer' or 'I'll come back in another year' whatever whatever. But because in 91 because there were no jobs on offer it turned out that people who were at uni actually wanted to stay at uni. And when it dragged out for months and months, literally people could not fit in the tute room, not just not have a seat in the tute room, but hanging out in the door or the corridor that sort of thing.

Outraged by these conditions, the RMIT student union decided to organise a protest. The rally — billed as 'Give Space a Chance' — was promoted brilliantly with rock-band style posters that proclaimed 'We're overcrowded, pissed off and spilling into the streets!' The issue struck a chord and the turnout was massive, with around 5000 attending. Chants reportedly included 'there's more space in the back of a divvy van'. The politics of the rally fused RMIT parochialism with

hostility to the government and when Geoff Boucher, a prominent Melbourne University activist at the time got up to speak:

his first words were 'Hi, I'm Geoff Boucher from Melbourne University!'. And the reaction of every single person in the crowd was 'boooooo, get off'. But to his credit he stuck to it and went 'I'm from Melbourne Uni but I'm here to support you!'. And the reaction of everyone in the crowd was 'yayyyyyy'.

In response the state government organised a committee on overcrowding which bumped up RMIT several places in terms of resource allocation, which helped ameliorate the issue in future years. While organising petered out after this, Marc Morel recalled that the sheer size of the rally and the networks that came out of it helped build and sustain a left at RMIT for years afterwards.

The early 1990s also saw proposals for corporate backed 'technology parks' at La Trobe and Sydney University spark protests. For Slaughter and Rhoades this corporate-university co-operation is a key feature of academic capitalism, where 'new circuits of knowledge' link universities to various facets of the new economy. Activist Heidi Norman recalled that while today this sort of arrangement would be commonplace, at the time they were a significant break from the norm. At La Trobe the proposal was particularly dubious, with mining giant Rio Tinto (then CRA), notorious for its Bougainville copper mine that sparked a social and environmental crisis, establishing an Advanced Technological Division on campus. At around the same time, new courses in petroleum geology and geophysics at Monash, Melbourne University and La Trobe, funded by BHP and Shell, were implemented. In response La Trobe's progressive Left Out newsletter noted sarcastically:

Good to see that academics don't let education get in the way of industry training- the triumph of human capital theory. Nothing like a vigorous interface with a few mining giants...Education as extraction, open-cut schooling, mining education.

A further proposal for military research at La Trobe was also made, involving the federal government, AWA Limited and BHP. Despite numerous articles, protests and public meetings at both institutions, the plans eventually went ahead. For Sydney University, by the time of its 1997 submission to the West Review, the technology park was an example of 'high-level expert collaboration with industry', that would help Australia remain 'a key player in the global marketplace'.

Besides RMIT, the other major 1991 rally was at Hotel Nikko in Sydney. From August 22-23, the first Higher Education Summit was to be held there. A \$995 per head affair, guests included Peter Baldwin (by this time Minister for Education) and Don McNicol – the Sydney University Vice Chancellor notorious to activists for his \$ 3 million house, paid for by the university. 'Let's crash the party!' enthused the activist propaganda. Buses were organised on campuses to take protestors to Kings Cross, and on the day a crowd of 'well over a thousand' arrived. As the rally marched down to the hotel, only a dozen or so police were positioned outside the closed front entrance. The protestors moved close and the glass doors began to shudder with the press of the crowd, and the staff inside unlocked and opened the doors before they broke. Around five hundred – six hundred students poured in and occupied the foyer.

After chanting and listening to speeches for several hours, the activists

attempted to move upstairs, where the conference was actually being held. However, police had positioned themselves in the stairwell. The students were unable to break through, and several arrests were made with some force. Yet perhaps the militancy helped set a tone. Soon after a further occupation followed at UTS — successfully leading to the university reneging on a plan to allocate \$2 million for a home for the Vice Chancellor, Gus Guthrie. Further direct action took place in Canberra: at the end of 1991, a blockade of the AIDEX (Australian International Defence Equipment Exhibition) arms fair was held from November 26 – 28. As author Iain McIntyre described, around 2000 activists converged on the capital. This included many students, with even caucusing for NUS happening on the picket lines. Despite hundreds of arrests and widespread reports of police violence, the protests were highly effective in delegitimising and disrupting the event — with nearly 100 less companies present than in AIDEX 89 and the Minister of Defence forced to cancel his speech. In the aftermath, the ACT government voted not to hold another AIDEX within its borders, and the organisers were unable to relocate it elsewhere in Australia.

The Austudy 5 and the Austudy Campaign

As the recession continued into 1992, student protest was ready to ignite. While Labor had managed a relatively stable economy throughout the 1980s, by 1992 unemployment reached over 11%, the highest figures since the Great Depression. Conditions were ripe for a renewed wave of discontent and activism.

In the student realm, concern around paltry Austudy payments had been

simmering for at least a year. Throughout 1991, a number of relatively small cross campus days of action were organised around it, under the theme 'You can't feed a dog on Austudy'. But it was with the 1992 Chapman Review that the issue became a priority. Chapman argued that as participation in education was increasing, the need for state-supported payments would decline. With a fixed assumption of tertiary education rates correlating to an increase in wealth, Chapman neglected the multiple other reasons that could cause enrolment numbers to increase. Austudy payments, in his view, could therefore be turned into 'income-contingent loans' on top of HECS, with tax debts of up to \$20000 possible. Jonathan Sherlock, a Melbourne University student socialist recalled how activists saw this as especially egregious:

And here's the really bad part of the proposal, you could get the loan at the rate of 2 dollars for every 1 dollar of your Austudy that you sacrificed...Every student financial advisor who came to speak at meetings said it's rubbish. You'd be better going off and borrowing your money off your credit card and getting your Austudy.

Rob Houghton, the Left Alliance NUS Education Officer for the year, reflected further that tying welfare payments to a loan system was a shift in the broader model of welfare, that could set a precedent for other forms of payments.

Victoria soon became the hub of the Austudy campaign. A statewide Cross Campus Education Network was formed in January 1992, resourced by NUS but largely organised by activists on the ground. The network soon went to work in organising protests. When Chapman spoke at the Austudy office in the city on February 27th, a rally was organised to disrupt the speech, while a tent city was organised at La Trobe from March 24-25, to promote the Austudy national day of

action on the 26th. Even a Terminator themed leaflet was produced to drum up the rally – with a picture of a T-1000 and the question ‘Is this how the Chapman loans will be collected in 2020 AD?’ ‘Don’t Let the Loans Scheme terminate your future’, it concluded.

Actions for March 26 were organised across the other states as well. Sydney organised a ‘Tent Offensive’ during the week of the National Day of Action, with tent cities sprouting up at Sydney University, Macquarie and UTS to help publicise the Austudy issue. This culminated in a 500-strong rally on the 26th.

The Melbourne turnout for March 26th was huge. A contingent of around eight hundred - a thousand assembled at Melbourne University, and marched down to the State Library, joining a crowd of another 2000 students from other campuses. The plan from there was to march to the state Parliament. When they arrived, the mood in the rally was buoyant and only a thin line of police separated the protestors from Parliament itself. The students simply ran through and past the police line and swarmed onto the steps. In the fracas, an office window was broken and as the students rushed passed the cops, four protestors were picked off and bundled into a police van. Instead of letting the police have their victory, students began to rush over and surround the van, preventing it from moving. Small recalled how:

I’m thinking that’s it we’ve had our fun but no there’s this developing crowd around this police van... it was quite a thing. You had surfer looking guys getting their mates to hoist themselves up on top of the van...Crusty looking dudes storming around on the top and trying to whip up the crowd. Police trying to clear the crowd.. kneeing people, punching people, sending the horses in. One of the police was unhorsed, and the horse bolted down, it must have been Lonsdale Street into peak hour traffic, that made them withdraw

the horses! They were still trying to drive the van... The story I heard was that... some of the kids from Huntingdale Tech, who were a lot more handy when it came to disabling cars than... arts students, disappeared under the truck, took a look at some of its components and removed them. Everyone was finding different ways to disable the thing.

After an hour of stalemate, the local police commander made the decision to release the four and they came out to cheers and jubilation. It was:

The most phenomenal few hours... when you show that people power is more powerful than the Victoria Police, that's a pretty exhilarating thing.

The media backlash was swift. The following day, *The Age* ran with the headline 'Students' city brawl', while the *Herald Sun* described the protest as 'riot'. The NOLS NUS President Tony White condemned the action, and police were quick to blame the International Socialist Organisation, and an investigation squad was set up. Soon *The Age* was running sensationalist stories on the ISO, describing them vividly as a:

shadowy group accused by police and student representatives of hijacking Thursday's student protest on the steps of Parliament House.

The student press was naturally much more sympathetic. Yet even here conservative letter writers got a word in — after Small wrote a piece in *Catalyst* emphatically defending the action, one wit replied that he was undoubtedly 'small not just in name, but in brain size'.

On April 14th — the day before another student action against Austudy — dawn raids were carried out by police throughout Melbourne. Jonathon Sherlock, who was living with his parents (who were both members of the clergy) at the time, recalled in a darkly humorous vein how:

I used to go running with a friend... And when the first bashes came, it was 5.20 something and I'm thinking 'oh Theo (his friend), you're early, what are you doing!'. And then it was 'open up police'. And I almost fell out of bed...

Then when they went and interviewed Mum and Dad, the sergeant asked Dad 'What's your occupation' 'Minister of Religion. And then Mum 'Minister of Religion'. The sergeant actually went and looked down at his clipboard and went 'oh shit'.

Other houses were raided too. At one, women were reportedly abused by the police as 'sluts'. In total, 7 people were arrested, including 5 members of the ISO. When the police discovered that 2 of the arrestees weren't ISO members, they were released without charges. The 5 ISO activists (Marcus Banks, Jill Sparrow, Jeff Sparrow, Mick Armstrong and Sherlock) were collectively charged with unlawful assembly, obstructing police and rescue. 'Rescue' in particular was an archaic charge designed for prison breakouts, which hadn't been used for several decades and carried a penalty of around 10 years in prison.

The arrests gained added civil liberties significance as the five were not especially close to the brawler van itself, and were well dispersed throughout the rally. Convictions could set a precedent for police to target anyone who happened to be in a crowd during a fracas.

The case dragged out for over two years and a substantial solidarity campaign soon began. An array of fundraiser goods were produced including a 'Defend the Austudy 5!' calendar, wine emblazoned with pro Austudy 5 propaganda and even a series of witty postcards – one of which featured two bumbling cops searching a student's room and getting bogged down amidst reading about Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. More politically, activists held solidarity rallies

outside court and tried to gain support for the five from as wide a range of other organisations as possible. Finally in 1994, the five were found not guilty on all charges except one count of assault police.

In 1992, meanwhile, campaigning against AUSTUDY and the broader restructuring of the university had continued unabated. On April 15 — the day after the arrests — 1500 turned out in Melbourne for an anti-AUSTUDY rally, despite ‘rain and police intimidation’. In the other states centralized rallies were not as strong. Brisbane saw a turnout of 250 while Sydney decided to delay its next day of action to a series of decentralized actions on local campuses on May 27. But after the April rallies the proposed legislation was substantially revised. The loans scheme was now optional, rather than compulsory. In the light of this the Sydney May 27 rallies focused as much on campus specific issues as broader government policy. 300 protested at UNSW, 100 at Sydney University and 200 at UWS. Most impressively, a 250 strong general meeting at Macquarie turned into an occupation of Vice Chancellor (VC) Di Yerbury’s office.

The Macquarie protest reflected a concern with increasingly corporate forms of governance. The spark for the action was executive pay. Yerbury’s pay had been raised by 56% to \$165000/year, while the Deputy VC’s and Registrar’s salary had also increased. The Students Council Education Collective summed up the issue:

What does this cost you?
2350 books in the library
OR
40 students on AUSTUDY

OR
9 tutors
OR
3000 parking stickers
OR
165 personal computers for students

Yerbury's office was adorned with stickers that declared 'Tax the Wealthy not the Students' and the activists prepared to stay for the long haul. Support poured in from across the student left. While Yerbury and the Macquarie University administration tried to argue that the action was essentially sexist, targeting one of the two female VC's in the country, several Sydney University feminists wrote a letter of solidarity to the occupiers, enthusing that:

Di Yerbury can go suck on her archaic warped feminist ideals – liberation for women can start with equal access to tertiary education! Behind you all, love Sydney

UTS students meanwhile, did up a comic strip declaring 'Go for it Macquarie', with various prominent Macquarie student activists in superhero guise — Chairperson Lucy Blamey was 'the cheetah', while Education Officer Simon Kent was dressed up as 'Dr Poison'. At La Trobe, a solidarity occupation by 15 activists of their own VC's office began, although this was quickly ended by police.

The occupation lasted for 2 and a half days, till late on Friday night. It was then evicted by Macquarie private security, accompanied by undercover and uniformed police. Undeterred, on Monday a second occupation started. Galvanized by the Friday eviction — evocatively described by the Student Council as a 'midnight military style tactic that proves that democracy at this uni

is a farce' — 700 rallied, with 500 invading the VC's office, smashing through the doors to get in. After 8 hours, police mobilized in force to kick them out and the occupation was over.

In the aftermath, Macquarie tried to discipline some of the activists involved. Marcus Strong, a tutor who participated in the occupation, was forced to resign. Kent, Blamey and student activist Jamie Parker were taken to court by the university administration and banned from re-entering the office. Parker was also suspended from the university for allegedly smashing a window in the course of the occupation.

While not immediately successful in terms of its demands, the Macquarie occupation helped galvanise the previously quiescent Sydney student left and amp up the pressure on the user-pays vision of education. Following on from Hotel Nikko the previous year, a 2nd Higher Education Summit was to be held in Sydney on June 29 and 30 1992. Blockades and protests were soon organized, and the summit would feature (as one leaflet put it):

Bruce Chapman as the loans schemer, David Kemp as the Full Fees Vampire, a cast of thousands of Angry Students demanding free, accessible education... Showing at the Gazebo... Adults \$1095. No student concession. Added bonus: picket of the Defence Department Privatisation Conference.

In the wake of the Macquarie occupation, Yerbury cancelled her attendance, claiming that her presence would prompt student 'riots'. A sense of threat to the conference was palpable. The organisers changed the venue from the Gazebo in Kings Cross to the Sydney Cricket Ground – thought to be a much more secure

location.

Far from being deterred, plans for student protest were only expanded. A 5 day 'Rage against the Right' was organized, targeting 3 conferences: the Liberal GST Launch, the Commercialisation of Defence conference and the Higher Education summit. Before they even arrived, the summit was cancelled.

'Fightback and NUS electoralism': 1993

It was hard to sustain this sort of energy into 1993. After the upheavals of 1992, 1993 would be a quieter year. Labor was tipped to lose the federal election to John Hewson's Liberal Party, whose 'Fightback' program constituted a significant attack on the student movement: openly arguing for less AUSTUDY, VSU and full fees. Campaigning was focused front-and-centre on the election, with information broadsheets produced and election forums held. Much of NUS and the student left's propaganda for the year was in this vein. One NUS electoral quiz was typical, excoriating potential student Liberal voters as:

Your parents voted for Malcolm Fraser. Their parents voted for Robert Menzies. Their parents voted for Attila the Hun. You are not about to break the family tradition.

While an anti-Liberal focus – whilst neglecting Labor's flaws – predictably attracted ire from the left, this critique tended to be subsumed within the anti-Hewson campaign.

‘No Fees for Degrees’: 1994-1995

Surprisingly Labor won the 1993 election. Without the galvanising presence of a conservative federal government - combined with the electoral focus and generally lower rally turn outs of 1993 -1994 was expected to be a down year. With desultory turnouts at the first semester student rallies in the major cities, signs weren't promising for activists. But in the middle of the year, a major campaign at ANU in Canberra began, against the introduction of an effectively compulsory fee for law students and a fee for postgraduate students across the board. This helped shift the political terrain considerably. Featuring several student strikes and an eight day occupation of the main administration building, as well as a less successful follow up occupation, ANU galvanised a wave of activism throughout the country.

In the aftermath, sizeable demonstrations were held around fees at Sydney and Macquarie, and students at Flinders launched an anti- fees campaign of their own. The Flinders activists — facing the introduction of upfront fees for nearly all subjects involving postgraduate course work — held a successful strike of over 900 on October 27 that shut down most of the campus, directly imitating the tactic that sparked the campaign at ANU. They even produced two issues of a strike newspaper dubbed *The Persistent Goose*, in mocking reference to a recent incident in which the university groundskeeper had shot the geese that populated the ponds on campus. Yet when it came time to occupy, there was a failure of nerve. Some key members of the Students Association argued against militancy, because it was too close to exams, and it was agreed to attempt an

occupation in the first week of the new semester in 1995. However with the momentum from the strike lost, an occupation never eventuated.

On a national scale, ANU activists initiated a No Fees Conference held in Melbourne on December 4-5, attended by between 200-300 people, prior to the annual National Union of Students conference in Ballarat. This was an opportunity to organise a coherent plan for anti-fees campaign in 1995, and to encourage NUS to take stronger action. A plan for several national days of actions was agreed at the conference, and with activist enthusiasm pushing them to the left, NUS ratified the decisions. With the government considering the introduction of upfront fees and increases to HECS, it seemed a key moment.

The first national day of action was set for March 23rd and activists began the work of publicising for it. One poster from La Trobe, titled Pup Fiction and decorated with a picture of a particularly adorable dog, proclaimed 'It's a dog-eat-dog world. We're angry students, we hunt in packs'. On the day of the rally, classes were cancelled by lecturers in solidarity with the students, bolstering the turnout considerably. Melbourne saw an impressive attendance of 5000 (with 1500 from Melbourne University alone), while in NSW 2000 students descended upon Wollongong University – embroiled in its own anti fees campaign – by far the largest rally in the history of the campus. Described glowingly in the *Tertangala* as 'the day the campus came to life' it was estimated that a thousand students bussed in from Sydney, in addition to a thousand Wollongong students. But similarly to Flinders, after a tense debate, a decision was made not to occupy. Although the fee was eventually passed – though at a considerably reduced

amount - and the campaign subsequently dwindled, its legacy can be seen in the existence of a considerable Wollongong University activist scene throughout the rest of the 1990s. In Adelaide a 4000 strong rally culminated in an occupation of the University of South Australia – targeted because of a proposal to introduce a legal training fee, which was then placed under a two year moratorium. Overall, 15000 students demonstrated across the country on March 23: the largest day of rallies of the decade so far.

A follow-up action was set for May 8. Perth's rally — organised by the Education Action Network, largely separate from NUS — was a particular success by the city's standards, with around 1500 in attendance: the largest demonstration since the 1980s anti-fees campaigns. After the rally was seemingly winding up, students decided to occupy the DEET (Department of Education Employment and Training) building, running 'hell for leather' down the main city street, St George's Terrace, to get in. Undeterred by security guards, the activists broke down the glass door and several hundred stormed in, holding a forum inside to discuss the state of the contemporary university. After an hour they departed without arrests. Sydney saw a 700 strong rally occupy the DEET office as well, before ending at the foyer of the stock exchange where students burnt their HECS forms. Melbourne, Hobart and Adelaide saw thousand strong actions too, while in Brisbane and Canberra there were smaller affairs. Amidst the pressure, the proposal for domestic undergraduate upfront fees was jettisoned. The collective activity of students had helped derail the advance of user-pays for the moment.

Despite this a plan to bring in upfront fees for overseas students was quietly introduced in the May budget. While sizeable demos against it of several hundred were held in the major cities on August 24 — featuring burning of the Australian flag and citizenship papers — resistance was much more limited. Although the scale of the earlier 1995 demonstrations had helped illustrate that students still had the capacity to mobilise in force, as one of the last acts of the Keating Labor government around education, the non-citizen fee helped naturalise the idea of one more generally and set the tone for the years of Howard Liberal government to follow.

Conclusion

At its best in this period activism could capture the imagination and organise successful campaigns. After the March 1992 Melbourne Austudy rally stormed onto the steps of Parliament, Andrew Fernandez recalled that ‘I was hooked’, catalysing a half decade of student activist endeavours. Rob Houghton recalled that important to their success was the layer of activists radicalised by the late 1980s campaigns. This meant that there was an experienced core of activists around. Activists were able to leverage a favourable political context effectively, delaying some of the implementation of educational neoliberalism for a time.

At times students could organise spontaneously too. In a rally in Perth against fees in 1995, Elena Jeffreys recalled how, without planning, students burst into the Department of Education, Employment and Training office:

I was stuck at the foreshore where we had the speakers, winding up, saying goodbye to the speakers, dealing with the equipment, by the time I got up to where the rally had marched... the front doors were smashed due to the pressure being put on the door... BROKEN GLASS EVERYWHERE, what was meaningful about it for me was that it didn't take lefties to smash up the glass, students were ANGRY, it was all very spontaneous.

Other factors created by the very establishment of user-pays mass education limited protest. In an intriguing paper, then Left Alliance activist Adam Bandt argued that as user-pays was rolled out, an ideology of 'students as consumers' had gradually become hegemonic and naturalised, making it harder to mobilise students. For Bandt:

In the minds of otherwise sympathetic students, this ideological hegemony twists the left's standard cries for 'free education' into a statement that we don't deserve to pay even a small amount for any personal benefits of education. A commodity for nothing. The polite students respond to such catchcries with a stunned, blank look. This will continue to be the response for so long as the student-university relationship is modelled on the commodity form.

Commodification, perhaps, enclosed the imagination as well as the material aspects of the university. Free education had shifted from a concept that needed to be ideologically argued against, to something that ran against the grain of common sense. As Jeffrey Williams has argued, moreover, a 'pedagogy of debt' produced in the context of the contemporary university helps shape one's view of the world too: if debt needs to be repaid it makes more sense to conceptualise your time in tertiary education financially, rather than as a moment for political expression and activity.

Despite this, 1990s student activist culture could still have power and vibrancy. 1990s La Trobe activist Ben Rosenzweig recalled how the level of organisation

was such that solidarity trips by student delegates to the Philippines were organised annually, through the La Trobe, Macquarie and Flinders student unions. Rosenzweig recalled how the tours could even entail visiting the armed guerrillas of the New People's Army (the guerrilla force linked to the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines) in the jungles:

They were official programs in all three universities (LaTrobe, Macquarie and Flinders). Now you couldn't do that anymore, because the New People's Army is an armed guerrilla organisation and post 9/11 there's no way we could send people to be with an armed anti US group in a decades long insurgency, regularly involved in firefights that caused death! I don't think you could do that. But we didn't give it a second thought! It didn't occur to us for a second that that would be a problem, sending students to armed guerrillas where they would have their photos taken with machine guns, smiling with them all.

More generally, Sydney University activist Heidi Norman reflected how:

It was quite an amazing time, it was quite fun, it was incredible...People were so smart you know... You all lived together, you all talked politics together, you were writing together. It was this very intense exchange of ideas that was going on. We had a house on Wilson Street, we were convinced that there was bugging of our place, we had people turn up at the weirdest times! We would have meetings there, maybe fifty people in the lounge room.

Some activists would carry this 'intense exchange of ideas' into their futures — with current Greens parliamentarians Adam Bandt and Jamie Parker, and academics like Norman all heavily involved in progressive politics and writing. By 1995 demonstrations were at their largest scale since the height of the 1980s. Recalling the ANU occupation of 1994, activist Hamish McPherson reflected that there was:

a discourse around students being apathetic, you know not like it was back in the sixties or seventies. So we kind of felt that we were, we felt like we were a new generation I guess. We were all pretty young, I was 20. There were postgraduates there, they were an important element in providing some cooler and wiser heads to the thing, but there were also a lot of really young people doing stuff which was exciting.

As the period of Labor hegemony ended and the Howard government came into power in 1996, this new generation 'of really young people doing stuff' would prove important in co-ordinating further activism and resistance. As I have written about elsewhere, 1996 and 1997 would see an array of occupations and a series of large rallies: this was galvanized in part by a generation who came of age under the last years of the Labor government. The early-mid 1990s had seen an important series of protest and activism.