

Penalising the workers

BATTLE lines have been drawn at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) over management plans to retrench more than 620 support service workers and give their jobs to casuals working for outsourcing companies at the end of this month.

The retrenchments of support services workers will have their echo at the academic level later in the year as management's "Wits 2001" restructuring plan goes ahead. A process of academic retrenchments, potentially affecting 52 people in arts, social sciences and education, is scheduled for October.

The decision to retrench workers in the building care, catering, cleaning, grounds and maintenance departments has drawn fire from unions, student organisations and academics.

The National Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) has walked out of mediation over a "social plan" to mitigate the effects of retrenchment. Student organisations have threatened protests. And a Concerned Academics Group has released a detailed study arguing that the review process leading up to the retrenchments was biased against labour and misleading in its findings.

At the heart of the dispute is a fundamental conflict over the nature and social responsibility of universities in the post-apartheid era.

Over the last five years, more and more universities have been restructuring in the face of a long term decline in the Government subsidies and student numbers.

This restructuring has largely taken a neo-liberal form that centres on the privatisation of the university – downsizing workers, outsourcing departments, undermining union rights and having teaching and research priorities set by the capitalist marketplace.

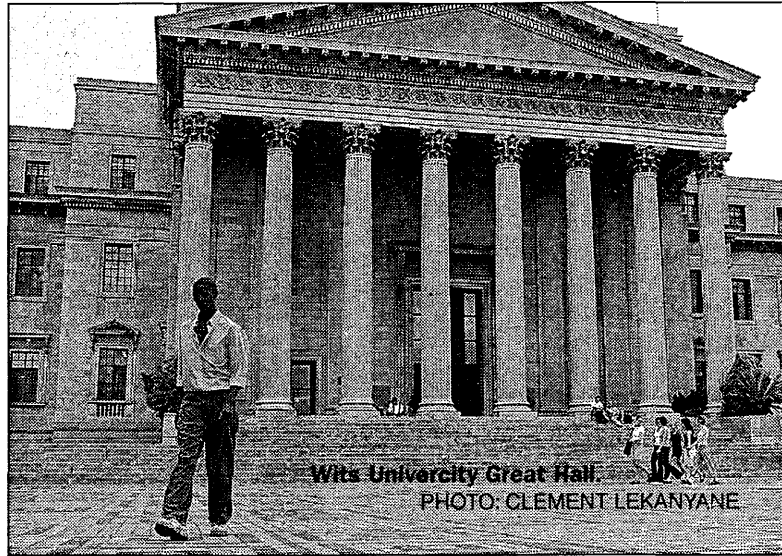
Typically, restructuring has involved shifting service functions like cleaning to outsourcing companies, closing academic departments that lack "adequate" student numbers and adopting a hard line on students' non-payment of fees.

The better-resourced universities – typically historically white universities such as Wits – have also sought to reposition themselves in an increasingly competitive environment by prioritising disciplines that attract the most funding and fees, by developing partnerships with business and the Government and by raising student fees.

Competing with overseas universities, and competing with each other, these universities have sought to reinvent themselves as profit-making capitalist companies, "market universities" providing "intellectual capital" and "Mode 2" (applied) research to the highest bidder.

The overall effect of the neo-liberal restructuring of universities, opponents charge, is the privatisation of higher education. As such it is no different in essence from the national drive to

Growing conflict over 620 retrenchments at Wits University is the latest salvo in a battle for the soul of higher education, writes **Lucien van der Walt**



career dashed as they prove unable to pay ever-increasing study and residence fees.

At Wits, neo-liberalism takes the form of the Wits 2001 plan. Subsidies to the arts and education faculties, in which poor students are concentrated, have been slashed as money is reallocated to profitable faculties such as com-

merce and law. Faculties and departments are being merged, laying the basis for academic retrenchments. Power has shifted upwards towards the management as corporate styles of operation become the norm.

Evictions of working class students from residences proceed on a weekly basis. And 620 workers face a bleak future in three weeks time. Despite the "social plan", despite vague promises of re-employment in the outsourcing companies, these workers are losing their jobs and, in all likelihood, union representation when Nehawu's recognition agreement – based on its representation of Wits employees – comes up for review.

Like other forms of privatisation – whether Johannesburg's controversial iGoli 2002 plan or the planned sell-off of Telkom – Wits 2001 penalises working class people.

The university, which should provide a space for research unfettered by crass commercial considerations, education that empowers, and a decent working environment becomes just another business that sacrifices its staff to money.

And the model of transformation championed by workers and students over the last 15 years – recreating the university as a liberated zone able to help eradicate the gross injustices of the apartheid past – is supplanted by neo-liberalism.

(The writer is a lecturer in sociology at Wits, as well as a member of Nehawu and the Concerned Academics Group.)