

Buildings occupied as student unrest grows

ANGRY STUDENTS have occupied buildings at Lancaster University and Middlesex Polytechnic in protest against recent fee and staff standards of teaching.

The Lancaster students are angry that room rents on the campus have increased by 13 per cent in a year, and by 50 per cent over three years. Grants have been frozen for 12 months and students had difficulty earning money in the summer holidays because of a shortage of jobs. Those over 25,

who may have dependents, are no longer entitled to housing benefit or income supplement and the holiday hardship allowance has been abolished.

Eric Britten, a spokesman for the university, said that it would curtail funds to the student union if the protest continued.

The dispute at Lancaster University began six weeks ago when 140 students went on a rent strike. It escalated a week ago when several hundred students occupied the senate room in the administration building and slept there overnight. On Tuesday, the university obtained a court order for repossession of the building. But the students, who insist they are occupying only the senate room, continued their occupation. Yesterday, they defied a request from Andrew Wilson, the Under-Sheriff of Lancashire, to leave voluntarily.

Report by Oliver Gillie

At Middlesex Polytechnic in Barnet, north London, art students began their occupation of a building at the Cat Hill site on Tuesday. Since then, staff have been locked out and several hundred students have slept there to protest at an 8 per cent cut in staff this year, at the same time as a 25 per cent increase in students. Tutors now supervise some full-time students for only three days a week from 9.30am to 5.30pm, instead of four-and-a-half days a week until 4pm. In addition, the studios are overcrowded - sometimes two students have to share the same workbench.

Sharon Walsh, 21, a third-year student at the polytechnic, a leading art school, said: "We came back after the summer holiday to find massive cuts - 91 members of staff had been persuaded to take redundancy.

Carin Jones, a third-year law student and their spokesman, said: "A union meeting on Tuesday was attended by more than 200 students, who voted by an overwhelming majority to continue the occupation in the face of court action. We are not looking for a protest in our party

Students from the Conservative and Liberal clubs are taking part."

Student numbers have shot up but there has been no extra funding for materials and equipment. Students are having to pay an increased levy for the cost of materials.

Jewellery students have been unable to work because a compressor which supplies air for their blowtorches is malfunctioning, and foundation course students have been unable to use the photographic laboratories because there has been no technician to help them. Expensive equipment for screen printing, etching and animation courses is not being fully used because of a

An artistic protest by one jewellery design student at the polytechnic

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STUDENTS SAY THE FUTURE NO STUDENTS NO FUTURE



Middlesex Polytechnic jewellery design students continuing their work during the sit-in at Cat Hill, north London. Photograph: Craig Easton

lack of servicing and a shortage of supervisors. Yesterday, the occupation spread to sites at Trent Park, Enfield, Ivy House and Quicksilver Place, as students voted to support their Cat Hill colleagues. The protest now involves humanities, languages and drama students. Engineering students at Bounds

Green are to vote on the issue today, which brings the threat that all the polytechnic's 12,000 students will take action.

David Mehüle, the polytechnic's director, held urgent discussions with students and course heads yesterday. He said: "The polytechnic has a deficit of £2.6m and so we had to make cuts to live

within our budget. But I have set up committees in which course heads can work with students to discuss the allocations and resolve problems where that is possible.

"The underlying problem is student powers. We have noticed a threefold increase in applications for the hardship fund. Students have been unable to get work over the summer and are coming back with overdrafts of £2,000 or more. When you can't afford to eat you become dissatisfied with everything. The prices in our canteens are very reasonable - we had meals for £1.20, but students complained. So we have now introduced a meal of the day for less than £1."

Crisis meeting fails to win assurances over complaints Frustrated students take over Poly site

By Paul Francis

SEVERAL hundred frustrated students began what they claimed would be an "indefinite" sit-in at Middlesex Polytechnic's Cat Hill site in East Barnet this week.

The students took over all departments on Tuesday in protest at what they claim is appalling overcrowding, drastic cuts in crucial teaching staff and lack of facilities and equipment.

The occupation of the art design facility followed a meeting between students and polytechnic director Professor David Melville on Tuesday morning.

Angry students acted after failing to win any assurances from Professor Melville, that he would investigate their complaints.

All departments at the facility were taken over, staff locked out and lectures abandoned.

Many of the 1,200 students on courses at Cat Hill are furious at what they say is the polytechnic's failure to respond to serious complaints about staff cuts and overcrowding.

"Most students applied to college because of its reputation and because of the promise of facilities which are no longer here. We feel let down," said one, who added not to be named.

A third-year graphic student told the Press: "I now have one and a half days a week with a tutor... I should have five. We have reached a limit and won't take any more."

Middlesex Polytechnic is struggling to overcome a £2.9 million deficit but has taken on up to 30 per cent more students this year, in response to government pressure to increase accessibility to higher education.

Since October, about 100 part-time courses at Cat Hill have been axed and the teaching hours of those who survived slashed. Paper lecturers who have left since October are not being replaced.

Professor Melville told students he could offer no prospect of the situation improving.

Acting Dean at Cat Hill, John Lansdowne, accused students of exaggerating their problems but said he sympathised with some of their worries.

"We don't believe the situation is as bad they say it is," Martin Power, NATFHE secretary, said.

He said that the quality of education had been necessary to meet the needs of the industry.

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THE BARNET & FINCHLEY Press Poly uproar



The massed ranks in a hall at the Cat Hill site

Sit-in students make a job of it

By Nigel Prosser

Students at the sit-in protest are making a job of it, according to a report by a student journalist.

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Campus sit-in in protest over cash cutbacks

By Mark Cottle

THREE hundred students protesting against cutbacks at Middlesex Polytechnic this week staged a sit-in at the Cat Hill campus and threatened to extend their action to the Trent Park and Enfield sites.

Students at Trent Park and the Enfield site, in Queensway, Ponders End, were due to meet today, Thursday, to vote on protest action.

But in the wake of the Cat Hill takeover on Tuesday, the more attempts to move the meetings forward.

A protest leader, who asked not to be named, said the students were angry about overcrowding because of the increasing number of students and the financial cutbacks.

"They say they've got to run this place as a business, but in that case we feel that as clients we're not getting the service we're paying for," he said.

Richard Hamilton: the visual arts under attack

PATRICK Heron's outcry over the plight of British art schools (Review Guardian, November 7) is both understandable and necessary. It is entirely altruistic. Profits have been made over many years, often by those best able to see the money created by the conservative government - the arts teaching in the schools. That appears as slow progress (despite the fact that the most important view looks like a case of enthusiasm to an infrequent artist).

Among the best examples of minimal input surgery is one which the knave can be easily found in Teacher's hand. The changes at the Elms and Albert Museum printing with equipment of the same government of a

new Director, ousting of distinguished departmental heads and the transformation of a noble museum into a shop with a "great cat" in the window. The transformation in the historic Royal College of Art studios, originally attached to the rear of the V&A and now annexed by the museum, is less publicised. The Painting school has been moved into inadequate new premises and it is hard to see how study of the art of painting can survive in the context of the Royal College of Commercial Art.

Richard Hamilton, Northend, Henley-on-Thames. THE UNDERLYING reason for the gathering crisis in the art schools over the past decade has been government education policy. The central tenet of that policy has been the requirement to increase student numbers while simultaneously cutting costs and maintaining academic standards. The impossibility of attaining this (important and cynical demand) has meant that the quality, in fact the very character, of art education has been, and continues to be severely damaged. The consequences for the cultural life of the country will become apparent over the coming years. The appalling situation faced by the art schools can no longer be seen in isolation. What is now needed urgently is an independent inquiry such as a Royal

Commission to look at and make recommendations concerning the whole field of higher education. Michael Craig-Martin, Kenilworth, Warwickshire. PATRICK Heron's article perpetuates two misunderstandings about Brighton Polytechnic's plans and current work. The NATFHE conference at Easter 1991 did discuss one of a range of financial forecasts we had produced for internal discussion, in which we demonstrated the hypothetical effects of the continuation of current resourcing formulae. The purpose of the exercise though, was to ensure that we avoided the £17 million deficit, rather than achieved it. We remain in a strong financial position.

No course or option in our Faculty of Art, Design and Humanities has been discontinued for financial reasons. David Watson, Director, Brighton Polytechnic. IT IS obvious that art schools and departments of art and design are not immune from the shake-out taking place in the economy as a whole. We are living in a dog eat dog world. A debate, "Is Art and Design Education Dying?", will take place at the Royal College of Art next April organised by the alumni association. Patrick Heron will be invited to speak. Anyone who would like to attend should contact me Sheridan Taandy, Royal College of Art, London SW7 2EU.

But unlike their counterparts in other disciplines, art schools have not been able to raise their own money. The situation is therefore more precarious. The Royal College of Art is in a similar position. It has a £17 million deficit. The situation is therefore more precarious.

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