Australian universities integrated into military build-up

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An article published by the *Conversation* last month has underscored the extent to which Australian universities are integrated into a vast military build-up through a string of defence research initiatives and expanding ties with private military contractors.

The report, by University of Melbourne academics Tilman Ruff and Alex Edney-Browne, begins by noting that the federal Liberal-National government's 2016 Defence White Paper outlined an 81 percent increase in military spending over a decade, or around $495 billion.

Ruff and Edney-Browne also draw attention to a $3.8 billion allocation to the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation, a little-known government body, announced by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last February. The money is aimed at expanding arms exports with the stated goal of Australia becoming one of the world's top 10 weapons dealers.

The unprecedented allocation of resources to the military follows substantial increases to the defence budget by the previous federal Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. It is aimed at placing the country on a war footing, in line with Australia's backing for Washington's "pivot to Asia," a major US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific in preparation for conflict with China.

In 2011, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government, as part of its support for the US pivot, signed secret agreements that expanded basing arrangements and integrated the Australian military into the US war machine. The report in the *Conversation* makes clear that universities are a key component of this project, which has been deepened by successive governments.

In 2014, the Defence Science and Technology Group (DST Group), a wing of the Department of Defence, which researches and develops new military, surveillance and intelligence technologies, announced the formation of the Defence Science Partnerships (DSP) program.

Dr Alex Zelinsky, DST Group's chief defence scientist, declared that it would "provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects and ensure a consistent approach to intellectual property and cost sharing."

Zelinsky made clear that the program was aimed at subordinating universities and academic research skills to the needs of the military. "The program's strength lies in its potential to harness Australia's world-class research and better align it to Defence priorities through increased collaboration and a greater sharing of resources and infrastructure," Zelinsky declared.

In 2015, Zelinsky forecast that DSP would "grow into a $40m to $50m" program per year, up from that year's figure of $16 million. Currently, 32 universities are partners in the program. They range from the country's prestigious "sandstone" universities, such as the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney, to institutions with a large working-class student cohort, including the University of Newcastle and Western Sydney University, in New South Wales.

The activities of the DSP are opaque. In an article in the *Australian* in 2015, Zelinsky wrote that the "next stage" was "to begin knitting together universities to work on specific challenges associated with the national science and research priorities." Zelinsky indicated that of "particular interest to Defence is the cybersecurity priority."

The year after Zelinsky's article appeared, the Department of Defence announced a $12 million outlay of funds to establish a "purpose built" cyber-security facility at the Australian National University in Canberra. The centre brings together students, academics and intelligence agents from the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), in a collaboration focused on "data analytics, performance computing and cyber security."

The ASD is Australia's primary electronic eavesdropping agency. It works closely with the US National Security Agency, as part of the intelligence sharing "Five Eyes" network, which has been involved in spying on the private communications of hundreds of millions of people, illegally tapping foreign heads of state and conducting offensive cyber-warfare operations.

As part of the DSP, a number of universities, including ANU, offer scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate students to participate in defence research. The centre at the Australian National University makes clear that the aim is to harness their skills for the military and integrate them into the murky world of professional spies, military contractors and academics who collaborate with the military.

Ruff and Edney-Browne also point to direct ties between Australian universities and the US military. Last year, the Department of Defence joined with the US Department of Defence in establishing a Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative.

The program, funded to the tune of $27 million, provides grants to universities for specific research projects, and facilitates collaboration in military research between US and Australian institutes. Ruff and Edney-Browne note that the grants are provided to universities for research on "designated topics" with

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"potential for significant future defence capability." Like the DSP, the programs are shrouded in secrecy.

A key aspect of the militarisation of universities, outlined in the *Conversation* report, is their rapidly expanding ties to private military contractors.

Ruff and Edney-Browne point to the establishment last year of a new Lockheed Martin research centre at the University of Melbourne. Lockheed Martin, the largest military contractor in the world, has the closest ties to the Pentagon, and has developed some of the most highly-coveted American war technology, including next generation fighter jets and drones that have been used to bomb Yemen, Iraq, Syria and other targets of US aggression.

According to a 2016 article in the *Age*, the centre, known as STELaR Lab, will focus on "developing sophisticated computer software to help direct attacks" on targets. LM Australia and New Zealand chief executive Raydon Gates said it would develop "the ability in a conflict situation to analyse that data and then make the correct decision." Lockheed Martin stated that the lab will also focus on "autonomous systems, robotics, command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance." All of these technologies are critical to the preparation and waging of wars against militarily advanced adversaries.

In an indication of the bipartisan backing for the military build-up, STELaR Lab's launch in August 2016 was attended by then Liberal-National Coalition Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne, as well as Stephen Conroy, then Labor's shadow minister for defence and Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews. The centre has received funding from the DST Group.

DST Group previously funded the establishment of the Defence Science Institute (DSI) at the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus. Opened in 2010 with the backing of the federal Labor government of Kevin Rudd, the DSI's stated aim is to "build defence science research networks."

The DSI also funds programs at other universities, including one at RMIT University in Melbourne examining "unmanned aircraft systems" that can fly and harvest their own energy in "urban environments." Another, in partnership with the US Army, is aimed at developing artificial enzymes, which may "decontaminate nerve agents … offering protection to war fighters and civilians in a range of chemical and biological threats." In other words, preparations for urban and chemical warfare.

The *Conversation* article notes that ties between the universities and military contractors are continuing to expand. In February, the University of Melbourne signed a "memorandum of understanding" with BAE Systems, a major British arms manufacturer, for the establishment of a manufacturing and innovation centre at Fishermans Bend. The centre is slated to supply the army with new AMV35 Combat Reconnaissance Vehicles.

In its announcement, BAE Systems made clear that it is seeking to integrate the university into its activities as closely as possible. It stated that "the two organisations have agreed to consider opportunities to collaborate in relations to graduate placement, internships, research and development activities and sharing of facilities (real estate and tools and equipment)."

The University of South Australia, Adelaide University and Flinders University are also part of a research network established by BAE Systems.

Significantly, last month, the company won a $1 billion federal government contract to "upgrade" the "Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN)." The systems operations are shrouded in secrecy, but it is known that it is used to surveil much of the Asia-Pacific region. BAE Systems stated that JORN, "plays a vital role in supporting the Australian Defence Force's air and maritime operations, border surveillance, disaster relief and search and rescue operations."

An article in the *Age* in 2006 noted that JORN was "a key link" in "a new anti-ballistic missile shield" being developed by the United States. While such "shields" are invariably presented in defensive terms, they will undoubtedly play a central role in offensive military operations, including any US strike against North Korea or China.

The academics who authored the *Conversation* report note that the expanding ties between universities and military contractors potentially implicate the former in major crimes. BAE Systems third-largest customer is the despotic Saudi Arabian regime, to which it supplies aircraft used in the genocidal bombing campaign against Yemen.

Significantly, the report in the *Conversation* concludes by warning that the militarisation of the universities could pose a risk to academic freedom. It stated: "As Australian research councils struggle and universities face a funding freeze, academics with limited funding options may be driven to seek military funding. This could undermine their control over the direction and use of their research. Academics may be less inclined to speak out against military funding if their department, colleagues, or PhD students rely on it."

University administrations have already cracked down on anti-war activities at campuses across the country.

In 2015, the University of Sydney banned a Socialist Equality Party meeting opposing the drive to war and the glorification of militarism on Anzac Day, the nationalist public holiday which celebrates the unsuccessful Australian, British and New Zealand invasion of Turkey in World War I. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth wing of the SEP, has faced repeated attempts to prevent it from forming affiliated student clubs by student union and university administrations at a number of campuses, including at the University of Melbourne.

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