

Australian universities further integrated into war drive

Eric Ludlow
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South Australia is rapidly emerging as a focal point for the militarisation of the country's universities. Several research and development (R&D) partnerships between military contractors and universities in the state have been announced in recent weeks.

This is part of the deepening integration of universities across Australia into a military build-up, all behind the backs of students and the broader public. Successive Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments have placed Australia on the front lines of the escalating danger of war as US administrations step up the confrontation with China and Russia.

Three South Australian institutions—all situated in the state capital, Adelaide—have joined the French Australian Laboratory for Humans-Autonomous Agents Teaming, also called CROSSING. The University of Adelaide, Flinders University, and University of South Australia will enter CROSSING in collaboration with the French National Centre for Scientific Research, French technological university IMT Atlantique and French maritime military contractor Naval Group.

The Naval Group was listed in the online magazine *Defense News* as the world's 30th largest defence contractor in 2020.

Announced in February, the new lab will focus on human interaction with autonomous systems. The lab's director, Professor Jean-Philippe Diguët, said: "The CROSSING lab will bring together leading French and Australian scientists from artificial intelligence, machine learning, computer science, engineering, psychology and human factors." Such research, he said, would be used to advance the way operators control systems on ships, and improve human performance.

CROSSING codirector, University of Adelaide's Anna Ma-Wyatt, said the lab will "develop new ways for humans to work with robots and autonomous systems." Anne Beauval, IMT Atlantique vice-president, says CROSSING will look at human interaction with autonomous machines in "submarine communication and detection, ocean monitoring

as well as digital transformation at different levels of practice (industrial management, command & control)."

While few concrete details are available, such research could potentially be used, among other applications, in developing smaller, cheaper and faster autonomous submarines that can be engaged in underwater military surveillance, border patrol, mine countermeasures and anti-submarine warfare.

University managements lauded the announcement as a boon for business, including their own.

Flinders University vice-chancellor Colin Stirling, said the new lab "lifts South Australia's internationally regarded defence research capacity." In 2019, when the lab was first proposed, Stirling said it was "yet more evidence of South Australia being an unbeatable place to do business."

University of Adelaide vice-chancellor Peter Høj boasted: "The CROSSING lab is another dimension in which IMT Atlantique is joining forces with academic and industrial partners to strengthen our positioning in Australia."

Having established the University of Adelaide's Australian Institute of Machine Learning in 2018, the university will oversee artificial intelligence and machine learning research at the CROSSING lab.

Last month, Australian defence contractor Safran Electronics & Defense Australasia (SEDA) announced its largest investment in related research. Subsidised by an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant, \$1.8 million will be pumped into a multi-year collaboration between SEDA and the University of Adelaide, with \$643,565 of the funding coming directly from the government-funded ARC.

SEDA's project at the University of Adelaide will focus on coordinated autonomous sensing of naval objects in dynamic maritime environments based on artificial intelligence technologies.

Also in late March, Defence Industry Minister Melissa Price announced a partnership between Flinders University and South Australia-based defence contractor DEWC T&E to establish a Centre of Expertise for Electronic Warfare.

DEWC specialises in electronic warfare—the use of

electromagnetic radiation to attack or impede enemies—and is owned by former Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel.

“Having a skilled Electronic Warfare workforce comprising both practitioners and researchers across Defence, academia and industry is key to ensuring future defence capabilities are fit-for-purpose and future proofed,” Price said.

She added: “The *2020 Defence Strategic Update* outlines increased investment in Electronic Warfare capabilities across all domains. These advanced capabilities will provide the ADF with a strategic and tactical advantage to keep pace with the evolving operating environment.”

The electronic warfare centre is part of the government’s Defence Science Partnership (DSP). The DSP was developed in 2014 by the Defence Department’s Defence Science and Technology Group (DST Group). DST Group’s then chief defence scientist declared that it would “provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects.”

When the WSWS reported on the DSP in 2018, 32 of Australia’s public universities had signed on to the agreement. Last year, new DST chief defence scientist Professor Tanya Monro ratified a new agreement called DSP 2.0, which has been signed by all 37 public universities.

Monro said last July: “This new arrangement provides a robust framework for Defence to partner with universities and removes the need to negotiate individual contracts for every collaborative project... It’s critical that we harness the skills, talents and expertise of the entire innovation network to deliver the best possible outcomes for Defence and Australia more broadly.”

Universities across the country are being further incorporated into the military build-up. Among them is the University of Queensland.

In the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, \$9.3 billion was pledged to the development of hypersonic weapons—missiles that travel faster than the speed of sound, allowing them to bypass existing missile defence systems—and the further development of capabilities such as directed-energy systems.

Research on hypersonic flight has been conducted for over a decade, most notably through the Hypersonic International Flight Research Experimentation program (HIFiRE), which began in 2007. HIFiRE was a collaboration between the DST Group, the University of Queensland, the US Air Force Research Laboratory and defence contractors BAE Systems and Boeing.

UK-based BAE Systems is the world’s seventh largest defence contractor, while US arms maker Boeing is second.

HIFiRE was succeeded by the Australia-US Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment program

(SCIFiRE), announced last December. SCIFiRE aims to develop and test prototype hypersonic cruise missiles, able to reach Mach 5 (five times the speed of sound), with the project expected to be completed by the early 2030s.

Royal Australian Air Force chief Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld said in December that SCIFiRE “is another opportunity to advance the capabilities in our Air Combat Capability program to support joint force effects to advance Australia’s security and prosperity.”

The announcements are just the latest agreements between universities and weapons makers. In 2017, the world’s leading arms dealer Lockheed Martin opened the \$13-million Science, Technology, Engineering Leadership and Research Laboratory (STELaR Lab) at the University of Melbourne under the Victorian state Labor government of Daniel Andrews.

Universities are being increasingly integrated into Australia’s alignment with US imperialism’s war drive against China. Such a war would lead to a catastrophic nuclear third world war.

Deep opposition exists to militarism and the drive to war, but to succeed it requires a socialist perspective, directed against the entire capitalist nation-state system that produces war. Students and youth who want to help build an international anti-war and socialist movement are encouraged to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and participate in the IYSSE

The Australian IYSSE is holding a major meeting in opposition to the drive to war against China at 4 p.m. on Saturday, April 24.



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