

# Australian Labor Party proposes pro-business restructuring of universities

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Shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek addressed an elite business gathering last month, presenting a future Labor government as the best means of escalating the corporate restructuring of tertiary education.

In her August 16 speech to the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Conference, Plibersek said nothing about the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs throughout the country's public universities, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, let alone commit a Labor government to reversing the cuts.

Instead, she echoed the demands of the corporate elite, highlighted by a recent blueprint issued by the EY global consulting giant, for the pandemic disaster to be exploited, in order to radically reshape higher education and to satisfy the vocational training and research requirements of big business.

Plibersek proposed “an Australian universities accord.” It would be a “partnership between universities and staff, unions and business, students and parents, and, ideally, Labor and Liberal—that lays out what we expect from our universities.”

This would be a corporatist regime. It would tie university staff and students, via the trade unions, to a bipartisan Labor front, with the Liberal-National Coalition and university managements to deliver the profit-generating demands of the capitalist class.

The aim of the accord, according to Plibersek, would be “to build consensus on key policy questions and national priorities,” in order to “help university reform stick.”

A chief “principle” of that “reform” would be “prosperity.” “A university system designed to underpin job creation, productivity and our national prosperity. And where the benefits of university research are used to create Australian jobs and

economic growth.”

That means subordinating universities, even more, to the dictates of employers and the corporate elite as a whole. “No aspect of the higher education system will be out of bounds,” Plibersek assured the audience. There would no “tinkering around the edges.”

Another “principle” would be “sustainability.” Plibersek spoke of boosting “national export income” from the “tens of billions of dollars” that universities generate each year. In other words, universities must intensify their exploitation of high fee-paying international students as cash cows, to offset chronic government underfunding.

Plibersek boasted that previous Labor governments had led the way in transforming tertiary education from a basic social right, free to all, into a money-making enterprise, featuring ever-higher student fees.

Labor, she said, “deserves credit for introducing the HECS system,” through which the Hawke Labor government reimposed fees in 1987. At the same time, the Coalition deserved credit for “supporting the introduction of the demand-driven system by the previous Labor government.”

The Rudd-Gillard Labor government, in which Plibersek was a cabinet minister, imposed an “education revolution,” featuring a “demand-driven” system. It slashed university funding, by several billion dollars, in 2012-13, and compelled universities to compete with each other for enrolments, particularly in business-oriented courses, in order to survive financially.

The system has been retained by the Coalition government since 2013, as the bedrock of the deepening cuts and pro-business transformation of tertiary education.

Plibersek's proposal dovetails with the EY report,

released in the same week, that proclaimed the “death” of “higher education” and demanded an end to universities as they currently exist, to be replaced by corporate vocational and research services.

For Labor’s vision of universities, Plibersek invoked “a successful history of bipartisanship when it comes to national security and defence policy.” This also indicates a closer integration of universities into the military and intelligence apparatus, and preparations for war.

Speaking at the same *Australian Financial Review* event, Education Minister Alan Tudge advanced a similar vision. He declared that once international students returned to Australia after the pandemic, “we need to do it differently.”

There had to be a “better alignment with skills shortages,” and a drive to “reach new markets with different models of offerings at different price points—from pure online, to on-campus learning offshore, to shorter stints in Australia, to microcredentials etc.”

Tudge vowed to continue the “Research Commercialisation agenda,” to tie university research funding to corporate demands and partnerships. He said the government wanted to “see Australia to be more like the United States or Israel, where our universities produce not only great pure research, but then translate this into real-world benefits for Australia.”

Such is the bipartisan “consensus” advanced by Plibersek. It is also one shared by the university trade unions, such as the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). Having backed and enforced the previous Labor governments’ offensives against tertiary education, including the pro-business “education revolution,” the unions are again supporting the return of a Greens-backed Labor government.

This is because they share the underlying outlook that universities must serve the interests of the ruling class, including by raising billions of dollars in revenue for Australian capitalism every year.

To fight this destructive agenda, a socialist perspective is needed: one that fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires. That would provide the billions of dollars needed to establish free, high-quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the basic right of all

education workers to full-time employment, with decent pay and conditions.



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