

Both major parties in Australia plan accelerated pro-business university restructuring

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The Liberal-National government and the opposition Labor Party have each unveiled plans in recent weeks to further exploit the COVID-19 disaster to continue transforming Australia's public universities into business units servicing the narrow training and research demands of the corporate ruling class.

Regardless of whether the Coalition or Labor form the next government after the imminent federal election, due in March or May, the devastating attacks over the past two years on jobs, conditions and the quality of education will accelerate.

In the government's scheme, announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison during a speech to business leaders last month, four "trailblazer" universities would receive small funding boosts, totalling some \$200 million, for research hubs tied to "advancing Australian manufacturing."

The government has starved universities of funds throughout the pandemic, on top of the swingeing cuts imposed over the past decade and a half by previous governments, Coalition and Labor alike. Now it is using this financial pressure to step up its demand that universities satisfy the needs of employers, investors and the military.

This policy, set out in Morrison's address to the Business Council of Australia, which represents big business, will give each university \$50 million to help "commercialise" research in the government's "priority areas" of defence, space, resources technology, food and beverage, clean energy and medical products.

The four universities will be selected by a "competitive" process that will consider their "commercialisation readiness," as demonstrated through industry partnerships; co-funding; intellectual property arrangements; promotion for academics who focus on

commercialization, not just pure research; and appointment of an industry leader to oversee the hub.

On behalf of the university managements, Universities Australia chief executive Catriona Jackson, welcomed the announcement as "clear recognition from government of the central role universities play in productivity, prosperity and boosting sovereign capability."

The "priority area" of defence and Jackson's reference to "sovereign capability" point to the increasing integration of universities into preparations for involvement in US-led wars, particularly against China. Already numbers of universities host military industry-related research facilities and university research on designated strategic technologies is subject to controls and restrictions.

The "commercialisation" push comes on top of the government's switch to funding tied to the production of "job-ready graduates" and "micro-credentialling" short courses to fill employers' training holes.

These are all steps toward implementing the agenda outlined in August in an EY consultancy report that proclaimed the "death" of higher education.

The EY report, based on interviews with 32 vice chancellors and other senior figures in Australian and New Zealand universities, demanded the end of universities as they currently exist, to be replaced by corporate vocational and research services. It declared in capital letters: "HIGHER EDUCATION IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KNOWLEDGE SERVICES SECTOR!"

The government is planning to go further down this path. This month it released a "Review of university-industry collaboration in teaching and learning" final report that recommends "actions that government, higher education providers and industry can take to promote

greater collaboration across the sector.” These include increased “industry engagement in teaching and learning through improved course curricula.”

In response to Morrison’s speech, the main trade union covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), rushed to assure him and his government that it had no difference with the focus on business requirements.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes issued a media release in which she pleaded: “There is nothing in existing industrial relations agreements which hinders the commercialisation of research and the NTEU would be happy to explain this to the Prime Minister and his Education Minister.”

Barnes said the NTEU always welcomed an “injection of funding,” but Morrison could not pretend to care about the university sector when “he let 35,000 workers at public universities lose their jobs over the past 12 months.”

This is a sham. The still-deepening destruction of university jobs—which the NTEU previously estimated at up to 90,000 job losses in 2020 alone—has been possible only because the NTEU has opposed any unified national struggle by staff and students against the onslaught.

After the pandemic hit in March 2020, the NTEU proposed a national deal with the university employers to cut wages by up to 15 percent, while still cutting “at least 12,000 jobs.” Despite outraged opposition by NTEU members, which effectively scuttled the agreement, the union proceeded to impose similar sacrifices, university-by-university.

The bipartisan nature of the drive against university workers and students was underscored when Labor leader Anthony Albanese held a campaign launch-style rally last week. He said a Labor government, if elected, would fund “up to” 20,000 extra university places in 2022 and 2023, while providing access to 465,000 free places at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in subjects on a National Skills Commission priority list.

Education should be free at all levels, as a basic social right, not just for some “priority” TAFE courses. There was, of course, no suggestion by Albanese of abolishing university fees, which the Hawke Labor government reimposed in 1987.

Labelled a “Future Made in Australia Skills Plan,” Labor’s blueprint is no less employer-driven than the Coalition’s. Albanese said: “This will help fix areas of skills shortages and fill future skills needs by training Australians in jobs including engineering, nursing, tech,

and teaching.”

The new university places would focus on areas such as digital and cyber security, and advanced manufacturing. Albanese also mentioned early childhood educators, and aged care and disability professionals. These are “priorities” for the ruling class as it plans for military conflict and seeks to maximise the available workforce to exploit.

An article in the *Australian*, a Murdoch media flagship, welcomed Albanese’s abandonment of Labor’s 2019 election promises to boost university funding. It noted: “Labor’s higher education policy for the 2022 election has nothing like the largesse of 2019, when it promised to step up university funding by \$10 billion over 10 years.

The newspaper said the extra university places would cost less than \$500 million, representing just a 3 percent increase in funding. It estimated that fewer than 20,000 places actually would be created with that amount of money.

In August, Labor’s shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek addressed an elite business gathering, presenting a Labor government as the best means of escalating the corporate restructuring of tertiary education, roughly in line with the EY report’s agenda.

Plibersek proposed a bipartisan “accord” between the two ruling parties, the unions, business, university managements, students and parents to “make university reform stick” in the interests of “national prosperity.”

These developments underline the warnings issued since the start of the pandemic by the Socialist Equality Party and the Committee for Public Education. The unprecedented destruction of jobs, conditions and courses can be fought only on the basis of a totally opposed political perspective that rejects the dictates of the financial markets and employers. That is, a socialist program in which free, first-class education is a right for all.



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