Australian universities further integrated into military build-up

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There is an accelerating drive to incorporate Australian universities into the military apparatus.

The push for institutions to sign lucrative deals with defence contractors is part of the Australian ruling elite's role in the US-led confrontation with China, which Washington is rapidly intensifying, even as it wages a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

This drive is being deepened under Australia's Labor government. During its first five weeks in office, Labor has already threatened Pacific Islands nations against turning to China and sought to line up countries throughout the region behind the US war preparations.

A central component is AUKUS, a military pact with the US and Britain unveiled with bipartisan support last September. It involves a substantial expansion of offensive military capabilities, including Australia's acquisition of nuclear-armed submarines and hypersonic missiles.

The universities are playing a key role in developing these weapons of war.

Founded in 2014 by the Australian Defence Department's Defence Science and Technology Group (DST Group), the Defence Science Partnership (DSP) has now been signed by all 37 public universities. The DSP was set up to "provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects."

Universities are signing agreements with the world's largest arms manufacturers at a rapid rate.

In January, the Australian government announced a Defence Trailblazer Concept to Sovereign Capability program—a $242 million package aimed at the "commercialisation" of universities through their partnership with military companies.

The program's focus is researching quantum technologies, hypersonics, cyber warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence and space warfare.

Among the first two universities to join the program in April was the University of Adelaide (UoA). Solidifying South Australia as a hub for Australian military research, the UoA in conjunction with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) will match the government's $50 million contribution for its military research and development alliance with companies.

The program is chaired by the US-based Northrop Grumman, the world's fourth largest military weapon company. Northrop Grumman Asia Pacific manager Christine Zeitz said: "The Defence Trailblazer will transform the nature of the relationship between the academic sector, defence industry and the Department of Defence, compelling universities to pivot outwards towards entrepreneurial and commercial outcomes-driven collaboration."

UNSW Vice Chancellor Attila Brungs boasted: "We have a proud track record at UNSW of quantum, cyber, hypersonics, robotics and space technology research which are supporting Australia's national capability."

The UK's BAE Systems, the seventh largest global arms manufacturer, joined the "trailblazer" in April, pledging its Red Ochre Labs R&D centre, which employs 500 people across Australia, to develop air, land, sea, space and cyber technologies.

The Defence Innovation Partnership—a collaboration between the DST Group and South Australia's three public universities—granted $150,000 funding each for five research projects linked to military contractors. Among the projects is a one led by Flinders University and electronic warfare company DEWC Systems to address design challenges in war games.

On January 25, the then Defence Minister Peter Dutton opened a new $14 million purpose-built

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hypersonic research facility in Brisbane, Queensland. With 60 staff, the centre is yet another joint venture between government, universities and defence companies.

Hypersonic weapons travel up to five times faster than the speed of sound, allowing them to bypass existing missile defence systems, as well as hunt down long-range missiles.

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

Following from HIFiRE, in 2020 Australia and the US began to test hypersonic cruise missile prototypes under the Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFiRE).

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) was in March granted membership to the federal government's Defence Industry Security Program (DISP). The university has already been involved in defence research into hypersonic propulsion systems, rocket fuel development, machine vision and advanced materials.

USQ works with DST Group as well as the US Airforce and Navy, Boeing and BAE Systems. In an *Australian* article, USQ Deputy Vice-Chancellor John Bell wrote that all three of the university's campuses "are in close proximity to South East Queensland's strong defence presence … enabling USQ to work directly with defence end-users and boost Australia's sovereign space and defence capability."

German defence company Rheinmetall announced late last year that, in partnership with Queensland University of Technology and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, it had developed a new Autonomous Combat Warrior "Wiesel" craft.

According to the German magazine *Europäische Sicherheit & Technik*, the vehicle is designed to understand soldier behaviour, recognise terrain and make tactical decisions in combat situations.

At the beginning of 2022, Victoria's Deakin University signed a $5.13 million contract with the federal government to provide naval firefighting training. "Deakin University has executed more than 165 contracts with the Australian Defence Department, highlighting the important role our region's institutions can play in driving innovation and generating cutting-edge capability in support of the ADF," Victorian Liberal senator Sarah Henderson said.

In mid-2021, Deakin University was awarded the Australian War College contract, taking over in January 2023 from the Australian National University (ANU) as the provider of the Australian Command and Staff Course and Defence Strategic Studies Course.

Led by the University of Sydney, nine Sydney universities were last year awarded $2 million to work as part of the Australian-United States Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative (AUSMURI).

University of Sydney Deputy Vice-Chancellor Duncan Ivison said the program was one which "the US and the Australian defence departments support and monitor at the highest levels because they are so targeted to our defence priorities."

AUSMURI has already held talks with defence companies GE, AmericaMakes and world number one arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin, as well as the DST Group and the US Department of Defense.

Students and young people have to oppose the transformation of the universities into hubs of war preparation, which goes hand in hand with their commercialisation and an assault on learning,

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, is the only political tendency on campuses fighting to transform the widespread hostility to militarism into a conscious anti-war movement.

Such a movement needs to be based in the working class, which is entering into struggle against the soaring cost of living, austerity and war. It must be directed against the source of conflict, the capitalist profit system itself, and based upon an alternative socialist and internationalist perspective. Contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.

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