

Australian government prepares pro-business university “Accord”

Mike Head
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Speaking at the “Universities Australia 2022 Gala Dinner,” on July 6, Education Minister Jason Clare underscored the Labor government’s intent to further transform universities to service the needs of big business and “national security.”

Clare confirmed Labor’s commitment to setting up an “Australian Universities Accord,” to be drafted by “a small group of eminent Australians.” Its purpose is to bring the education trade unions into a closer partnership with corporate chiefs, university managements and government representatives to “build a long-term plan for our universities.”

Significantly, addressing a gathering organised by the university employers’ peak body, Clare said not a word of criticism of their record. He said nothing about the way the managements have already exploited the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years to destroy tens of thousands of jobs, further casualise the workforce and ramp up class sizes and workloads, at the expense of staff and students.

On the contrary, he lauded University of Sydney Vice Chancellor Mark Scott, a highly-paid and leading proponent of pro-business restructuring, for talking about universities being “in the solutions business for government.” Clare declared: “I think Mark is bang on. There is so much good we can do, working together.”

Clare offered no suggestion of reversing the devastating cuts of 2020 and 2021, implemented under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government.

Instead, his entire thrust was on “working together” to integrate universities more closely, both in teaching and research, with business. “We want you to work with industry,” Clare emphasised.

Throughout his remarks, Clare spoke of universities in purely profit-generating, job training and nationalist terms. They were “an incredible national asset” that had to do more “to turn Australian ideas and discoveries into Australian jobs.”

Clare also stressed the need to restore the \$40 billion in

revenues that universities generated for Australian capitalism before the pandemic by charging exorbitant fees for international students.

Ever since the Hawke Labor government imposed fees on international students in 1986, successive governments, both Labor and Coalition, have increasingly starved universities of funding, forcing them to become heavily reliant on milking these students as cash cows.

Clare went further. He said universities could do more to train international students to satisfy employers’ needs too. They should get the students “we teach and train to stay after their studies end and help us fill some of the chronic skills gaps in our economy.”

Under conditions where Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government has aligned itself totally behind Washington’s war agenda against China, Clare called for the universities to play a greater role on that front as well. He highlighted “our shared interest in strengthening our nation’s security and resilience.”

As an example of the fields in which university “skills and talents” could be harnessed, Clare nominated “nuclear subs.” That was a clear reference to the AUKUS pact signed with the US and UK last year to provide Australia with access to nuclear-powered submarines and other hi-tech weaponry for use against China.

Far from criticising the previous Liberal-National government, which brutally cut and redirected funding to tie it to churning out “job ready” graduates and meeting the research requirements of the corporate elite, Clare praised the Coalition for doing “some good things to encourage translation [of research] and boost commercialisation.”

In fact, Clare signalled closer collaboration with the Coalition. He insisted that the Accord had to be a “bipartisan effort” in order to “come up with reforms that last longer than the inevitable political cycle.”

Clare’s mission statement confirms the analysis made by the WSWS last August, when Labor’s Accord was first outlined by Tanya Plibersek, his predecessor as Labor’s education spokesperson. As we warned, “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.”

In the *Conversation* “Politics with Michelle Grattan” podcast on July 6, Clare reiterated that the government wants universities and researchers to “collaborate with business, with industry.” He proposed the Bradley report on tertiary education commissioned in 2008 by the last Labor government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard as a “template” and “blueprint” to be updated.

That report laid down the framework of Labor’s “education revolution,” which accelerated the corporatisation of the nominally public universities by stripping away their previous block funding and compelling them to compete with each other for enrolments, both domestic and international.

The main trade union covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has rushed to embrace Labor’s agenda. On July 12, NTEU national president Alison Barnes welcomed the government’s proposed September 1–2 “jobs and skills summit,” which is, like the “Accord,” a corporatist venture to cement ties between the unions and business.

Barnes committed the NTEU to partnering with the university managements to implement Labor’s plans. “As Universities Australia has noted, universities have a fundamental role in solving labour shortages and building the workforce of tomorrow,” she stated.

Barnes said: “That can only happen if we invest in universities’ workforces now and repair the damage caused by a decade of corrosive Coalition policy and chronic underfunding of public higher education.”

This is a sham. It was Labor’s “education revolution”—continued by the Coalition—that ramped-up the destructive profit-driven assault on university staff and students.

Moreover, Labor voted for this year’s federal budget, handed down by the Coalition government in April, which cut government funding, per university student, by 5.4 percent in real terms for 2022–23 and 3.6 percent for the following two years. According to the NTEU itself, that means \$3 billion sliced off universities from 2017–18 to 2025–26.

This ongoing offensive has been facilitated by the NTEU, which has opposed any unified mobilisation against it. When the pandemic first hit in 2020, the NTEU volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent and up to 18,000 job cuts, including by forced redundancies. That triggered widespread disgust and opposition among university workers, and a precipitous

loss of its membership.

Now, in an attempt to stifle and divert opposition to the Labor government’s plans, the NTEU has appealed to its members to join a delegation to Canberra for the government’s first parliamentary sitting next week.

The NTEU’s June 24 email to members even offered to provide “travel to and from Canberra as well as meals and accommodation” to selected representatives for the two-day visit.

The supposed purpose is to place university workers’ demands for “secure jobs,” the email said, “firmly on the new government’s agenda from the get go.” It implored: “[W]e are committed to sharing your important stories with Education Minister Jason Clare and will be presenting these statements to the Minister and other politicians.”

This highly stage-managed and orchestrated mission has nothing to do with fighting for the interests of staff and students. It is part and parcel of the NTEU’s bid for a central place in the Labor government’s university “reform.”

Year after year, the NTEU has organised similar lobbies of governments and the parliamentary establishment—none of which succeed in gaining workers’ real demands—as a means of channeling the mounting discontent back into the corridors of power.

These developments underline the reality. The NTEU and other unions function as pro-Labor and pro-employer industrial police forces.

To fight back against the onslaught on higher education, staff and students need to form independent rank-and-file committees and link up with the struggles of educators and students internationally against the corporate offensive on jobs and conditions. For discussion contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE).

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