

Australian Labor's universities Accord seeks to tie universities to big business and war preparations

**Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
9 March 2023**

The Albanese Labor government is drafting a blueprint to tie Australia's universities ever-more closely to the demands of the corporate elite, and the military and intelligence apparatus.

That is clear from the very first words of a discussion paper published last month by a government-appointed advisory panel: "The Australian Government is working to establish an Australian Universities Accord to drive lasting alignment between Australia's high quality higher education system and national needs."

By "national needs," the panel means the private profit, geo-strategic and war requirements of the capitalist class, particularly for vocational training to meet the narrow needs of employers, and for the dedication of research to commercial and military purposes.

This necessarily means denying students the essential social right to a decent, all-round critical education and depriving educators and researchers of the capacity to conduct genuinely socially-useful and scientifically-important teaching and research.

In our intervention into the New South Wales (NSW) state election on March 25, the Socialist Equality Party alone is opposing this drive. We demand the spending of tens of billions on education, healthcare and other essential social programs, instead of handouts to big business, tax cuts for the wealthy and massive military spending.

The Accord document repeatedly spells out the demand to dovetail courses for the benefit of business. "Preparing the workforce to meet the changing needs of industry and contribute to a more innovative, productive economy is a major challenge for higher education," it declares. "A key question for Australian higher education providers is how to respond to the various employer and entrepreneurial needs across the labour force."

The paper claims: "By international standards, the current links in Australia between higher education and industry in learning and teaching are under-developed." It calls for

increased work placements and "work-integrated learning (WIL)" to get students "to apply knowledge they gain in the classroom to practical settings," thus "giving employers access to highly skilled, career-ready graduates."

Likewise, the document complains that university research is not sufficiently tailored to profit-making outcomes. "Australia has for many years scored poorly compared to OECD peers, with Australia ranking 37th in knowledge and technology outputs," as measured by the Global Innovation Index. Universities are failing to translate research into "high impact innovation outputs (new processes, products and services)."

This is posed as a requirement that can no longer be put off. "Why the links and collaboration between industry and universities are not stronger and more productive" is "an ongoing, multi-decadal question in Australia."

The increasing integration of universities into military and other war-related research is not specifically mentioned in the document. But it does so implicitly. It speaks of higher education contributing to "sovereign capability" amid "the growth of geopolitical tension," "the risks of cyberattack and unauthorised surveillance" and "concern about foreign interference and sovereign risk."

All the public universities have already signed up to the Defence Science Partnership to "provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects." Universities Australia, the body representing the country's university managements, has also urged the Albanese government to establish "internships" to funnel students—including international students—into the Australian military.

When Education Minister Jason Clare confirmed plans for the Accord last July, he bluntly nominated "nuclear subs" as an example of the fields in which university "skills and talents" could be harnessed. That was an obvious reference to the AUKUS pact signed with the US and UK to provide Australia with access to nuclear-powered submarines and

other hi-tech weaponry for use against China.

In our election statement, we warn that the US and its allies, including Australia, are pouring billions of dollars into weaponry to escalate the Ukraine war in order to dismember Russia and prepare for a similar catastrophic war against China to assert the global domination of American imperialism.

Another “national need” emphasised in the discussion paper is to exceed pre-pandemic levels of exploiting full fee-paying international students, both to finance the universities and provide broader revenue and profits to Australian capitalism. The document refers to the international students as “the fourth largest export industry in Australia” and declares that “rebuilding and strengthening” this industry is “a key focus for the sector.”

Ever since the “education revolution” of the last Labor government of 2007 to 2013, international students have been milked as cash cows to offset chronic under-funding.

The paper is silent on the fact that higher education expenditure is expected to decrease by more than 9 percent in real terms from 2021–22 to 2024–25, according to the Albanese government’s budget papers last October.

The Accord blueprint will intensify Labor’s pro-business “revolution.” Its “demand-driven” funding system forced universities to compete for enrolments, primarily by offering vocational courses, while cutting funding by \$3 billion in 2012–13.

This drove institutions to rely on insecure casual staff. The paper estimates that “sessionals” now deliver 50-80 percent of undergraduate teaching in universities. It admits that this reliance on under-paid educators mirrors the growth of international student numbers.

The handpicked Accord panel personifies Labor’s corporate agenda. It is led by Mary O’Kane, an ex-university vice-chancellor, company director, and executive chairman of O’Kane Associates, a consulting practice. The panel features Shemara Wikramanayake, managing director and CEO of the Macquarie banking group, a global financial conglomerate.

The main trade union covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), has welcomed the Accord process and is participating in its “roundtable discussions.” The NTEU submission to the panel advocates for a higher education sector that “provides the graduates with the necessary skill sets for future productivity” and is “positioned to support innovation and creativity in teaching and research.”

This is in line with the NTEU’s own record of suppressing educators’ opposition to the increasing corporatisation of universities under successive governments. The NTEU has

facilitated the ongoing offensive on university conditions and jobs, opposing any unified mobilisation against it.

When the pandemic first hit in 2020, the NTEU officials volunteered wage cuts of up to 15 percent and up to 18,000 job cuts. That triggered widespread disgust and opposition among university workers, and a precipitous loss of its membership, but the union proceeded to push through cuts at individual universities.

As part of our election campaign, the SEP demands free, high-quality education, from kindergarten to university, and the right of all education workers to secure employment with decent pay and conditions, instead of governments pouring billions of dollars into corporate pockets and preparations for more US-led wars.

Such demands inevitably mean taking a stand against the Labor government, the pro-business union bureaucrats and the ruling class as a whole. This is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism aimed at reorganising society along genuinely democratic and egalitarian, that is socialist lines, in the interests of humanity, not the soaring profits and wealth accumulation of billionaires.

We appeal to all educators and students to support our election campaign.

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