

Universities Australia chief visits Washington to “cement” campuses into AUKUS military pact

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Universities Australia (UA) chief executive Catriona Jackson has just completed a week-long visit to Washington to further integrate Australian universities into US-led war preparations against China.

Central to her talks with US national security officials were plans for universities to play a critical role in Australia’s acquisition and development of nuclear-powered attack submarines, hypersonic missiles, cyber warfare and other weaponry for use in a war with China. All of this is proceeding under AUKUS, the militarist pact between Australia, Britain and the US.

According to UA, a management body representing Australia’s 39 main universities, Jackson’s trip has “cemented the role Australia’s universities will play in delivering AUKUS, and responding to challenges and opportunities alongside global peers.”

Jackson met with national security officials from the US Department of State as well as National Science Foundation—a US think tank that has as one of its main aims to “secure the national defense.” She also held discussions with the Business Roundtable, which represents chief executives from major global corporations.

Jackson’s meetings covered not only how Australian universities can deepen their role as hubs of militarism. They were also an opportunity to guarantee that the universities will ensure the “security” of military research through anti-democratic measures such as spying on and censoring academics involved in collaborations with researchers internationally, above all in China.

The context of Jackson’s tour was the announcement, on March 14, that Australia, under the Labor government of Anthony Albanese, will seek to acquire

nuclear-powered submarines at a cost of \$368 billion. This comes on top of over half a trillion dollars already set aside to be spent on Australia’s military over the coming decade.

AUKUS is central to US war aims against China, which the ruling elite in Washington views as the main threat to American global dominance. While already at war against Russia in Ukraine, the US is bolstering its military capacity and alliances in the Indo-Pacific in preparation for open conflict with China.

Indicating the intimate consultations between UA and US, UK and Australian governments that have led to Jackson’s visit to Washington, she said in a UA press release: “We’ve already had close discussions with our government and AUKUS partner governments about how universities can help. We’re in Washington this week to turn those ideas into reality.”

The statement noted that Jackson would hold meetings with higher education bureaucratic bodies from the US, UK, Canada, Germany and New Zealand—all imperialist centres that play a key role in US-led war aims around the world.

Late last year, UA presented a submission to the Labor government’s “Defence Strategic Review,” calling for a vast expansion of government programs to funnel students, including international students from allied countries, into the military.

Jackson said this proposal would be discussed in Washington. “Universities have previously called for defence internships to boost the flow of skilled workers needed for projects like AUKUS and we’re looking forward to exploring this option further,” she stated.

Australian universities have been integrated into the war drive in recent years. Their role as centres for the

ideological promotion of pro-war propaganda through various think tanks, and as centres for research and development partnerships with the world's biggest arms manufacturers has deepened.

A Defence Science Partnership founded in 2014 by the Australian Defence Department's Defence Science and Technology Group has since been signed by all Australia's public universities. The program aims to "provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects."

In recent years, universities have signed multi-million-dollar research and development deals with the world's largest arms manufacturers at a rapid rate. These include Lockheed Martin (US) and BAE Systems (UK). Australian research institutions are being used to provide military research in quantum technologies, hypersonics, autonomous vehicles, cyber warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence and space warfare.

The universities are also hubs for pro-US and anti-China war propaganda. Many now host pro-imperialist think tanks, such as the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre, formed in 2006 to counteract anti-war sentiment in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq, and formulate the strategic conceptions underlying Australian involvement in US-led military interventions.

Jackson's visit to Washington aimed to further develop ties with US and UK agencies and institutions, in particular, to overcome a recruitment crisis and "skills shortage" in the Australian military.

In an interview on Sky News, Jackson said that the 20,000-strong workforce, including skilled workers, required for the AUKUS pact will necessitate the bolstering of Australia's pool of university graduates trained in defence technologies. This will place universities at the centre of the war economy proposed by Albanese upon signing the \$368 billion AUKUS submarine deal.

Under Albanese's chilling vision, all aspects of society, including a wide array of workplaces, are to be tied to the needs of the military. In the case of the universities, this means an ever-greater focus of research and academic activity to meet the requirements of the defence force and the military contractors with which they collaborate.

Jackson referred to the University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT) which was set up in

2019 to "identify and analyse emerging threats" in Australia's universities and ensure "research integrity" and "cyber security."

This anti-democratic measure was installed with bipartisan support as part of sweeping wartime-like measures to combat supposed "foreign interference." In the name of "national security," universities and researchers are under constant surveillance by the state to determine whether their international collaborations are a "threat." The main target of the UFIT is any research with Chinese academics and research institutions.

As the war fever against China reaches new levels under the US administration of President Joseph Biden, Australia's UFIT is being presented by Jackson and UA as a model to develop similar anti-Chinese programs in the US, UK, Germany and elsewhere.

Collaborations with defence contractors, think tanks and military-intelligence agencies aligned with Washington's war aims are not only accepted—they are positively promoted and nurtured. This exposes the utter fraud of the "foreign interference" campaign of which universities, and UA in particular, have been at the forefront.

The real target of the anti-democratic measures are workers and young people, who are hostile to militarism and war. There is widespread anti-war sentiment, but to go forward, it requires a socialist perspective based on the fight for the unity of workers internationally in a struggle against the source of war, the capitalist system.

Such a perspective will be elaborated at the *World Socialist Web Site* global online rally to celebrate May Day 2023. It will be livestreamed at 5 a.m. (AEST) Monday, 1 May. Register here.



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