

Australian government's universities report demands restructuring for big business and war

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Last week's interim report by the Labor government's Universities Accord review was politically packaged, and presented by the media, as a call for greater student participation and equity. But its central thrust is a fundamental restructuring of universities to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite and preparations for war.

"Courses must be designed with the skills needs of industry in mind," the report insists. This would include employers being involved in setting curricula and making university degrees almost obsolete, to be replaced by "microcredentials" courses tailored exclusively for businesses.

Launching the report at the National Press Club, Education Minister Jason Clare underlined this shift. He said the review panel, which features Australia's highest-paid CEO, Macquarie banking group's Shemara Wikramanayake, was considering ways to "knit" university education with vocational training.

The report specifically nominates the "AUKUS nuclear submarine program" as a field with an "urgent need to train enough highly-skilled researchers" and for an expansion of specialist programs and qualifications.

The AUKUS military pact, which entails spending up to \$368 billion to acquire US and UK attack submarines designed for use against China, is a spearhead of the Albanese government's plans for a war economy, and this includes the universities.

In fact, the reports tells universities that they must serve the geo-strategic interests of Australian capitalism, which are concentrated on supporting US preparations for war against China, which Washington has identified as the main danger to US global hegemony.

That includes a closer alignment with India and greater efforts to reinforce Australian domination over Pacific island states to block Chinese influence. The report states that universities must ensure that "international education supports broader Australian foreign policy objectives, for example, strengthening relationships with India and the Pacific."

If one were to judge by the media coverage, however, the report's principal focus was five "priority" recommendations, each accepted by the government. They included a guarantee of a government-funded place at university for all indigenous

students—provided they qualify for a course.

The other recommendations were online "study hubs" in outer suburbs and regions; scrapping the rule that stripped government funding from students if they failed half their subjects; making universities "good employers"; and an extension of the current inadequate funding arrangements into 2024 and 2025.

These proposals camouflage the core of the report, which is to demand that both teaching and research be reshaped to meet the needs of employers and the military and foreign policy push of Australian capitalism. These plans are to be fleshed out in a final report, due in December.

Anticipating opposition from staff and students, the report's language is uncompromising and threatening: "The Review believes that bold, long-term change is required to fulfil the mission of higher education in Australia. Change in the sector must be significant. Complacency cannot be tolerated."

Among the changes proposed are:

- cadetships, internships and short microcredential courses to be "stacked" on top of bachelor qualifications to meet constantly shifting industry skill demands

- higher education and VET [vocational education and training] to be integrated, starting in "areas of national priority like clean energy, the care economy, and defence"

- students to undertake "work integrated learning" (WIL), that is, work placements

- "a greater number of academic staff should be chartered and/or active in the profession they are teaching."

This last proposal means replacing academics, especially those involved in broader and critical education in disciplines such as history, arts and humanities, with vocational teachers embedded in industry.

According to the report, there is no choice about this shift. It is a "must." In breakout quotes, the report cites the submissions made by business organisations, including the Australian Industry Group (AIG), which states: "Industry and universities must be intertwined to ensure graduates exit with the technical knowledge and generic skills needed."

Under AIG's concept of "degree apprenticeships,"

universities would work with business owners to design and deliver teaching content, jointly assess students and award credentials.

These corporate-driven processes are underway globally. “Nationally and internationally recognised microcredentials are already being developed for this purpose,” the report states. As examples, it says New Zealand and the UK are moving down this path.

In research too, the report says far closer ties to business are required. It accuses Australian universities of lagging behind their global competitors in commercialising their activities, failing to translate research into “new processes, products and services.”

The report proposes tying PhD research students directly to the needs of companies. It hails the development of a formal “industry PhD” scheme in Australia in which PhD students “work on problems nominated by industry.” But this is not enough.

“Other countries have taken this further and have firms assign employees to PhD programs where the PhD candidate typically works under joint university/industry supervision on problems nominated by the firm.”

The report canvasses redefining universities so that institutions that provide only vocational teaching would be accredited and funded. It proposes exploring ways to “remove the requirement that all universities will carry out research.”

Even the report’s calls for greater access to universities for students from poorer backgrounds are motivated by seeking to provide the capitalist class with bigger supplies of suitably skilled labour. The report notes a glaring disparity. While 32 percent of the country’s population aged over 15 have a bachelor degree, that figure is only 17.3 percent in low socioeconomic areas, 15.2 percent in regional and remote areas and 7.4 percent among indigenous people.

Far from concern for social equality, however, or for young people to have the basic social right to education at all levels, including higher education, and exposure to critical ideas, the report’s intent is to slot youth into jobs if and when required. It states: “These additional potential enrolments would make a significant difference to meeting Australia’s skills needs.”

The report makes a passing reference to the cost-of-living crisis confronting students from working-class backgrounds. “Most students work to support themselves while they study, with around four in five domestic students now in paid employment,” it states. “The Review has heard many students struggle to balance their paid work and study commitments, as cost of living pressures, including rising rents, require them to take up additional hours.”

There is no suggestion of abolishing student fees, let alone wiping the billions of dollars in student fee debt. Instead, the report says employers could consider paying the fees of students they seek to recruit. That would be a way of bonding graduates to companies.

To impose this program—as the Rudd-Gillard Labor government did with its market-driven “education revolution” a decade ago—the Albanese government is working hand-in-glove with the trade union bureaucrats and other “stakeholders,” such as big business and the already highly-corporatised university managements.

The leaders of the two main campus unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are urging university workers and students to support Labor’s review. That is because they entirely share Labor’s pro-business agenda.

The NTEU’s submission to the Accord panel dovetailed with the interim report. It called for a higher education sector that “provides the graduates with the necessary skill sets for future productivity.”

The union bureaucrats have long suppressed educators’ hostility to the increasing corporatisation of universities, blocking any unified mobilisation against it while pushing through enterprise agreements that facilitate restructuring.

In order to fight this destructive agenda, university workers and students need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to link up with workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and turn to war.

To discuss how to form rank-and-file committees, and obtain help to do so, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact