

# Rank-and-file forum to discuss Australian Labor government's pro-business and war restructuring of universities

Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee  
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The Rank-and-File Committee at Sydney's Macquarie University is hosting an online forum on April 10 to discuss the serious implications of the Labor government's Universities Accord final report, released last month. The forum is open to all educators and working people, because the Accord will have repercussions for every level of education.

The Accord report insisted on a further corporate restructuring of tertiary education, including funding, teaching and research, to satisfy the employment and research demands of big business and the plans for war.

The government's review panel, which featured Australia's highest-paid CEO, Macquarie banking group's Shemara Wikramanayake (\$32.82 million in 2022–23), declared that the education system, including universities, had to focus on "areas of national priority like clean energy, critical technology, minerals and defence." These "will need more skilled professionals."

All these fields are directly related to the geo-strategic interests of Australian imperialism and its commitment to US war plans, especially the AUKUS military pact between Australia, the UK and US against China. Increasingly, university academics, professional workers and students will be pressured into joining these efforts.

The barbaric nature of this agenda is underscored by the Albanese government's active support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, as well as for the disastrous US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which is threatening to trigger a nuclear conflict.

In line with its agreement with the program of the Albanese government, the primary campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), welcomed the report, describing it as "an ambitious

reform blueprint." The other main union covering university workers, the Labor Party-affiliated Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), has also promoted illusions that the Accord review would lead to better conditions for staff.

Education Minister Jason Clare and the corporate media presented the Accord review as an effort to boost participation by students from low socio-economic, outer suburban and regional areas, as well as indigenous students.

That really means funnelling more students, including from working-class suburbs, into courses to meet the "skill shortages" designated in the employer-government "national priorities," not least the preparations to join a potentially catastrophic US-led war against China.

The report insisted on a shift to "micro-credential" courses tailored to meet the needs of employers and "work integrated learning" (WIL) programs. These will embed students in industry throughout their courses, featuring tied "degree apprenticeships." A Research Investor Forum of big business peak bodies would direct university research and funding into corporate partnerships.

The report demanded "skills coalitions" of tertiary education providers, industry and trade union "partners" to "create a basis for scaling skills delivery on a sector basis."

One of the examples the review panel provided is that the University of South Australia is partnering with the South Australian Labor state government, the Australian Industry Group—a peak employers' body—and "the defence industry" to develop university degree apprenticeships to support the construction of

AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines.

The AUKUS military pact involves spending hundreds of billions of dollars to build or acquire US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range hypersonic missiles and other hi-tech weaponry designed for use against China. This is a spearhead of the Labor government's calls for a "all of nation" war economy, with universities on the front line of research and teaching.

In a media statement posted on the union's website, NTEU national president Alison Barnes said: "This ambitious reform blueprint has the potential to create better universities but only if it is implemented correctly and funded properly."

Barnes added: "The proposed changes to research funding have the potential to inject more fairness and certainty after years of neglect to one of Australia's most precious resources."

What the Accord report actually proposed is tying funding to universities negotiating "mission-based compacts" with a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission. These compacts would, first and foremost, require universities to "deliver Australia's future skills needs."

Business groups hailed the report. The Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest companies in the country, said the document "offers a unique opportunity to reshape the higher education sector into one that is agile and responsive to industry." It said the BCA had "long called for job-ready graduates who have the targeted and practical skillsets businesses need when they leave the tertiary sector."

For years, the NTEU and CPSU leaders have suppressed educators' hostility to the creeping transformation of universities into corporate entities. While feigning concerns about aspects of this trajectory, such as the payment of million-dollar salaries to vice chancellors, the unions have opposed any unified mobilisation against it. In fact, they have pushed through enterprise agreements that facilitate such pro-business restructuring.

Universities have already become increasingly enmeshed in serving the research needs of the Australian and US militaries. In recent years, some universities have signed multi-million-dollar research and development deals with the world's largest arms manufacturers, including Lockheed Martin (US) and

BAE Systems (UK). University-linked research institutions are performing military research in fields such as quantum technologies, hypersonics, autonomous vehicles, cyber warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence and space warfare.

Last year, Universities Australia (UA) chief executive Catriona Jackson conducted a week-long visit to Washington to further integrate Australian universities into the AUKUS operations. UA, a management body covering Australia's 39 public universities, said Jackson's trip had "cemented the role Australia's universities will play in delivering AUKUS, and responding to challenges and opportunities alongside global peers."

To fight this union-backed agenda, university workers and students need to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. These can link up with workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This needs to be part of a broader struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and plunge into war.

This perspective will be discussed at the April 10 forum convened by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee. Please use this zoom link to join the online forum at 7 p.m. on Wednesday April 10.

For further discussion, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) the rank-and-file educators' network:

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