

Rank-and-file forum discusses Australian Labor government's pro-business and war restructuring of education

Our correspondent
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The Rank-and-File Committee at Sydney's Macquarie University hosted an online forum last week to discuss the far-reaching implications for all levels of education of the Australian Labor government's Universities Accord final report.

The committee, established last year by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, is alerting educators and students to the true content of the report, which is being covered up by the corporate media and the education trade union leaders.

In the name of "reform," the Accord document insists on an accelerated corporate restructuring of tertiary education to satisfy the employment and research demands of big business and the Albanese Labor government's escalating commitment to US militarism.

The forum was attended by school teachers as well as university educators. In the discussion, it became clear, including from questions and comments by teachers, that the war-related thrust of the Accord report is also being imposed in schools, where related "outreach" courses and competitions are being rolled out.

In her opening report to the forum, Carolyn Kennett, a leading member of the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee, warned that university educators and students were already being pressured into joining these profit- and war-driven programs, including by changes to courses, workloads, performance indicators and career prospects.

Kennett said the thrust of the Accord could not be separated from the whole pro-business agenda of the Albanese government, its commitment to US war plans and its complicity in the US-backed genocide in Gaza, in which the enclave's universities had been destroyed, as well as 90 percent of the school buildings.

"This is the same government that defends Israel's genocide in Gaza, sends arms to the Ukraine to be used against Russia, and has allocated billions of dollars to preparations for war against China through the AUKUS military pact," she said.

Kennett cited the Accord panel's first discussion paper, which declared: "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," she explained, the panel meant 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 meant 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.

While the report suggested some changes to the HELP student fee system, whose aim was to draw students into industry-tied courses, including higher degree research placements through industry.

The Accord final report proposed a further shift to "microcredentials"—courses tailored to meet the needs of employers—and "work-integrated learning" to embed students in industry throughout their courses, featuring tied "degree apprenticeships."

One of the examples cited by the report was the University of South Australia partnering with the South Australian Labor state government, the Australian Industry Group and the defence industry to develop university degree apprenticeships to support the construction of AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines.

Kennett pointed out that the AUKUS alliance was part of a vast military build-up directed against China, which the strategists of American imperialism openly proclaimed as the chief threat to US global dominance.

To drive its agenda, the report called for a revamped funding scheme that would tie universities to negotiated "mission compacts" overseen by a new body called the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, with key stakeholders from business and government.

"At Macquarie University there are already courses where content is essentially dictated by business," Kennett continued. "We have seen a huge emphasis on 'work-integrated learning.'

So much so, that the amount of content in a degree program on key topics has been reduced significantly. This will only be further entrenched under the mission-based compacts.

“Workloads and research will be further tied to this agenda, as will career progression. We already have measures in promotions that require ‘application.’ Examples on the university’s promotions website of ‘application’ when seeking promotion include ‘Leadership in sustained and durable industry, government or community engagement’ and ‘Leadership or coordination of student placements within industry or community and/or engagement.’”

Kennett said universities had become increasingly enmeshed into serving the research needs of the Australian and US militaries, including via multi-million-dollar research and development deals with the world’s largest arms manufacturers, such as Lockheed Martin and BAE systems.

Another example was the \$370 million “Trailblazer” project, initiated in 2022. The federal government website for this program stated:

Trailblazer is a new research funding driving commercialisation outcomes and new industry engagement opportunities with universities in problems that matter. It provides opportunities and pathways that promote strong industry engagement and job ready skills, including developing educational pathways with VET [Vocational Education and Training]. The trailblazer priorities include projects in resources and critical minerals, defence, the space market, production of rockets and launchers, satellite spy systems and renewable energy.

The Trailblazer programs featured outreach into schools, including primary schools, ensuring a pipeline of students ready and willing to contribute to the war efforts of the Albanese government. For example, the space project website stated:

By facilitating career pathways into Space Engineering, we will draw upon the educational expertise from each university partner, and key industry partners. This will support outreach and enable activities from STEM in schools (Year 3-12), through to micro-credentialling, and tertiary studies in the form of a Space Engineering Degree to industry PhD pathways.

Kennett said this war-related drive was not just an Australian phenomenon. Universities were being militarised internationally: “One report recently released details of the military and arms industry ties that exist at various universities

in the UK, in what is referred to as the Military Industrial Academic Complex.”

This process was rife in the United States as well, and the German Social Democrat government was even demanding the teaching of war requirements in schools.

Kennett condemned the role of the leaders of the two main campus unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). “They have repeatedly urged workers and students to support Labor’s review, promoting illusions that it would improve university conditions,” she said. “The truth is that the unions share Labor’s pro-business and militarist agenda.”

For years, the union bureaucrats had suppressed educators’ hostility to the corporate transformation of universities, blocking any unified mobilisation against it while pushing through enterprise agreements that enabled such restructuring.

In the discussion that followed, school teachers said Kennett’s report had shed a revealing light on what was happening in schools, with curriculum changes and other programs being implemented along the same lines.

In order to fight this destructive agenda, educators 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.

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

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