

McDonald's to offer employees “microcredentials” for university degrees

Jack Turner
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The rank-and-file committees at Macquarie and Western Sydney universities are holding an online forum Thursday April 10 from 1–2 p.m. AEST, entitled, “Oppose Trump’s global research cuts and demands.” We urge educators to register now and attend.

Under a framework provided by the Albanese Labor government, fast-food giant McDonald's is planning to award employees with “microcredentials” based on skills supposedly learnt on the job.

These certificates can be potentially used to count to a degree at the public University of South Australia or the private Torrens University.

McDonald's Australia director of learning and development Mandy Sharp boasted about the scheme to the Murdoch media's *Australian* newspaper.

The corporation, she said, was providing “the possibility for our employees to gain certified recognition of the skills they learn while working at Macca's, and being able to use these to save time and money when it comes to study.”

McDonald's also boasts of being one of Australia's largest employers of young people, with 115,000 staff working across more than 1,030 restaurants. Many of these workers are super-exploited teenagers, some still at school, working for sub-poverty junior wages.

To be run by Capability Co., a private education company, the trial program, called “Archways of Opportunity,” is another step in Labor's drive for the integration of universities with big business.

It also illustrates the narrow vocational focus of the Albanese government-endorsed microcredential program, which is designed to meet the profit requirements of employers like McDonald's, not the needs and future prospects of young workers.

Very little is known about the scheme. According to the *Australian* article, the company claims that each microcredential certificate will reduce the cost of a university degree by \$3,500. These credits can be used in business, management, accounting and data, cybersecurity and information technology degrees.

Capability Co. chief executive Kate Britt said: “By recognising the capabilities developed through real work and experience, we are creating new pathways for lifelong learning and career progression.”

In reality, by recruiting employees on the basis of such promises, the scheme will help maintain poor wages and conditions for McDonald's and other retail workers, while also undermining

genuine tertiary education.

In 2015, McDonald's set up the “Archways to Opportunity” program in the US, whose name differs only slightly from the Australian program. According to its website, “Archways to Opportunity” mainly offers employees scholarships.

The University of South Australia, which is currently merging with the University of Adelaide to create one of the country's largest universities, already allows students to use microcredentials from Capability Co. to count toward their degrees.

The McDonald's trial program takes this process one step further. Staff will be awarded microcredentials, and therefore university credits for performing duties for the company.

This is part of a wider agenda. Torrens University, a private hospitality training house, has three “pillars” in which it integrates its courses with big business.

One is that companies can “co-design” education programs with the university that will have their branding on them, such as the Flight Centre Travel Academy's Diploma of Travel and Tourism, developed in 2017.

Another is that employers can enlist Torrens University students to solve their “business challenges” and in the process earn university qualifications.

Thirdly, companies can use their internal education programs to provide employees with alternative pathways into Torrens University bachelor's and master's degrees.

Like the Liberal-National government before it, the Labor government is pushing microcredentials as part of an escalating drive to restructure universities to more directly meet the demands of big business and the military.

Labor is spending \$18.6 million on a “Microcredentials Pilot” to assist the development of microcredentials “in fields of national priority, to meet industry skills needs,” according to a government website.

These courses are available for students to browse on the MicroCred Seeker website, run by the University Admissions Centre. The site currently lists 600 courses from over 60 organisations, including 34 private and public universities, 16 private colleges, 12 government and private institutions and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) providers in South Australia and Queensland.

The website encourages students to enroll in microcredential courses, stating: “Microcredentials are one of the fastest-growing post-secondary course types in the market,” and are “driven by

industry needs.”

This includes five microcredentials from the University of South Australia “specifically designed for Defence and related industries” costing over \$3,000 each, and a four-week “Introduction to Naval Shipbuilding” course by TAFE SA (South Australia) that has been “licenced from the Department of Defence.”

This is directly in line with Labor’s Universities Accord, which has been falsely promoted by the campus trade unions as a basis to improve education funding.

Labor is tying funding to universities signing “mission-based compacts” with a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission, above all to “deliver Australia’s future skills needs.” This includes through “microcredentials,” “work integrated learning” and “degree apprenticeships,” including apprenticeships in projects linked to the AUKUS military pact directed against China.

As the WSWS warned last year when the Universities Accord’s final report was released:

In reality, the report’s core axis is a further restructuring of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the corporate elite and preparations for war. In part, that means funnelling more students, including from working-class suburbs, into courses to meet the “skill shortages” designated in employer-government “national priorities,” not least the preparations to join a US-led war against China.

In February this year, Job Skills Australia (JSA) released a report calling for a “tertiary harmonisation roadmap” to create “a more ‘joined-up’ tertiary system... enabling them [Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training providers] to work together more effectively for the benefit of students and industry.” The report identified “defence” as one of the “national priorities.”

In announcing the publication of the JSA report, federal Education Minister Jason Clare said: “We are not going to fix the skills shortages we have, and will have, unless we better integrate higher education and vocational education and training.”

Speaking on behalf of big business, Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox, welcomed the Accord report, saying his employers’ organisation had “long advocated for the need for a coherent, connected and industry-relevant tertiary education system.”

Likewise, Business Council chief executive Bran Black said: “Short, stackable courses will be increasingly essential in a rapidly changing economy, particularly with the opportunities afforded by AI [artificial intelligence].”

Labor is deliberately squeezing funding to universities to force them to restructure along such pro-market and militarist lines. As a result of Labor’s reactionary cuts to Chinese and other international student enrolments by up to 50,000 a year, on top of decades of under-funding, university managements are already eliminating more than 2,000 jobs.

Now at least seven universities have had American funding for

research projects paused or cancelled as part of US President Donald Trump’s fascistic and militarist “Make America Great Again” agenda, and the Labor government is advising university researchers to comply with the Trump administration’s demands.

The campus trade union officials have opposed any industrial action against this assault because they support the Labor government and agree with its pro-business and militarist program.

As the Committee for Public Education, the educators’ rank-and-file network, said in its 2025 opening statement:

Opposition exists throughout the universities to the job destruction, course closures, pro-corporate restructuring and suppression of dissent. But the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) leaders have for years opposed any unified fight by university staff and students...

Just quitting the unions in disgust, as many have done, is not an answer. Staff and students must take matters into their own hands. For that, new democratic forms of organisation, independent rank-and-file committees (RFCs), must be built.

To discuss these issues and how to form RFCs, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/poseaeusellout

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