

Ex-Australian Labor leader calls for corporate and militarist “re-imagining” of universities

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Bill Shorten, a former longtime trade union bureaucrat and Australian Labor Party leader, last week laid out a totally pro-business and militarist blueprint for universities.

His speech made more explicit and blunt the content of the Albanese Labor government’s assault on tertiary education, which is currently driving the destruction of nearly 4,000 jobs throughout the country’s 39 public universities.

In an address to the Australian Institute of International Affairs last Thursday, Shorten declared that universities had to help build a “pillar of national security” by serving the needs of industry and the military, particularly through the AUKUS pact, which is a preparation for war against China.

Shorten, who quit parliament to be installed as vice-chancellor of the University of Canberra earlier this year, and to continue cutting jobs there, called for a “fundamental re-imagining” of Australia’s universities as a “core instrument of our national power” under conditions of global instability and war.

This was not just an educational reform but “a national security and foreign policy imperative” for “national survival.”

In effect, Shorten spelt out the essential content of the Labor government’s Universities Accord, which demands the wholesale restructuring of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the corporate elite and preparations for war.

He hailed the government’s decision, as outlined in the Accord, to tie university funding to “mission compacts” to deliver on government-designated “national priorities.” This was being “ably led by Education Minister Jason Clare.”

Shorten placed Labor’s transformation of universities squarely in the context of war. “For the better part of three decades, Australia has enjoyed a holiday from history,” he said, but “that holiday is now over. We find ourselves in a world of escalating strategic competition.”

At the centre of this restructuring, Shorten said, was a turn to short vocational courses and away from three-year degrees. He proposed dismantling the current “analogue structure” of university degrees. “We must break the monopoly of the three-year degree as the primary unit of educational currency,” he said.

Shorten outlined a “modular system” of mini qualifications “to produce the thousands of nuclear engineers, cyber specialists, and AI technicians that the AUKUS enterprise demands, at a pace that matches the urgency of our strategic environment.”

The primary example he offered was directly tied to the development of war industries, under the AUKUS Pillar II program, which goes far beyond the \$368 billion acquisition of nuclear-powered long-range attack submarines for use against China.

“Imagine a Defence industry worker in Adelaide,” Shorten said. “They don’t have three years to learn about quantum mechanics but they have a wealth of skills and experience and 4-6 weeks to complete a micro-credential co-designed with industry and Defence to fill identified gaps... This is a system that builds skills at the speed of relevance, providing the workforce for AUKUS Pillar II not in a decade, but now.”

This was part of a wider vision of a war economy. “The ramping up of defence manufacturing will call for skilled workers in professions including scientists,

engineers, project managers, technicians, welders, construction workers, electricians and metal fitters,” he declared.

Shorten said the “harmonisation” of universities with the technical and further education (TAFE) system of vocational training was “even more of an imperative against the backdrop of national security needs.” That was because “national security doesn’t ask if you went to uni or TAFE or how long you studied. It just needs the right skills to uphold it.”

Chillingly, Shorten called for greater intervention by the government and its new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), to enforce the restructuring. He said previous attempts at imposing funding compacts on universities had failed “due to complacency, myopia, competition or because selfishness took over and it was easier to retreat to the comfort zone.”

Further, Shorten called for the creation of specialist universities, such as “a national University of Advanced Technologies focused, laser-like, on the engineering, computing, and physics skills required for our sovereign defence industry.”

He also insisted that universities had to “overcome the gaping chasm” between their research and “our ability to apply and commercialise it.” In other words, research, as well as teaching, had to be subordinated to the profit and strategic requirements of Australian capitalism.

Shorten proposed a funding model by which companies would directly finance courses to deliver the credentials they need. This is already happening in various universities under the Labor government’s “microcredentials” scheme, which is being exploited by McDonalds and other corporate employers.

As part of this vision, “An AI-driven diagnostic tool, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), could assess a person’s existing competencies and build a bespoke degree focusing on their knowledge gaps.”

This “re-imagining” is already at the heart of the avalanche of job cuts and restructuring being inflicted on staff and students throughout the universities, with managements implementing pro-corporate “reset” plans, such as the “Western Sydney Reset” blueprint at Western Sydney University.

At the University of Canberra, Shorten is leading such an offensive, presiding over the axing of 120

professional roles and 71 academic positions that commenced just before he took over as vice-chancellor, supposedly in order to “make the university sustainable.”

The two main unions covering university workers, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), support Labor’s restructuring. The union officials are covering up Labor’s underlying agenda, and their complicity in it, by blaming “mismanagement” by individual vice-chancellors for the job cuts ravaging the entire sector.

Above all, the union apparatuses are trying to stifle the outrage of staff and students, opposing calls by the WSU and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees for a unified fight across the sector.

At the same time, the unions are assisting the very same university managements to implement the restructuring. They are helping push people out the door, either via so-called voluntary redundancies or the sham “consultation” processes in union enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) with managements, which offer little or no protection against retrenchments.

University staff, along with students, must break out of this straitjacket. That means forming rank-and-file committees (RFCs), independent of the unions, at every university. RFCs can link up with workers everywhere, including in the US, where the Trump administration is demolishing public education, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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

Contact the CFPE:

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