

Australian Senate universities report covers up Labor's onslaught on tertiary education

Mike Head

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When an Australian Senate committee released its final report of a year-long inquiry into university governance this month, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) hailed it as marking “a new dawn for higher education.” Yet the report features two noticeable silences.

First, no mention is made of the ongoing destruction of nearly 4,000 jobs throughout the country's 39 public universities over the past year, nor of the underlying pro-corporate and war-related restructuring agenda of the Albanese Labor government.

Second, while the report documents some of the deterioration of conditions in the universities over the past four decades—such as huge class sizes, the casualisation of the workforce and the ever-greater reliance on private funding—there is no explanation as to why and how this has occurred.

In particular, the report covers up the role of the Labor governments responsible: the Hawke-Keating governments of the 1980s and 1990s and their “Dawkins reforms” of the universities, the Rudd-Gillard governments of 2007–2013 and their “education revolution,” and the current Albanese government and its 2024 “Universities Accord” report.

Likewise, not a word is said about the part played by the trade unions, notably the two main campus unions, the NTEU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). For years they have suppressed educators' opposition to the corporate transformation of the universities and facilitated this process via enterprise bargaining agreements with individual university managements.

The Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee report describes aspects of the devastation of university conditions since the 1980s. For example:

- Federal funding for higher education has been declining since the 1970s, with inflation-adjusted spending per student in 2022 at “the lowest since records started in 1964.” Funding per student has been slashed from around \$32,000 in 1974 to some \$12,000—a cut of about two-thirds.
- Between 1995 and 2019, non-government funding sources, including corporate money and student fees, doubled as a share of university revenue—rising from 21.7 percent to 43 percent.
- Cost-cutting has led to vast casualisation and tenuous employment, with many universities guilty of “wage theft,” that is, systemic under-payment for teaching roles. Today, an

estimated 49 percent of staff are employed on an insecure casual basis, with 19 percent on limited term contracts, and only 32 percent on a permanent or tenurial basis.

- Estimates of the proportion of teaching delivered by casual and/or sessional staff range from over 50 percent to up to 70 percent, impacting on the quality of students' courses, and their ability to obtain consultation and assistance.

- Class sizes have mushroomed, with “tutorials” often having up to 70 students. Since 1980, the teacher-student ratio has soared from about 1:12 to as high as 1:70 (depending on calculation method).

The report's eight recommendations, however, are either so vague as to be meaningless or specifically designed to cover up and assist Labor's agenda, which is worsening these conditions.

The recommendations speak in broad terms about asking the governments responsible for the universities to “ensure the primacy of public research” or to require the universities to serve “the public good.” That leaves the interpretation of these amorphous phrases in the grip of the same political establishment, Labor, Liberal-National and Greens, that has presided over the process for decades.

Other recommendations propose strengthening the powers of existing government-appointed regulatory agencies, alongside Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to monitor and enforce compliance with amended standards that are designed to serve Labor's agenda. The new standards include the quality of “work-integrated” courses and workplace placements that are intended to integrate students into employers' operations.

In a media release, NTEU national president Alison Barnes claimed the release of the report was a “watershed moment.” She stated: “We now have a clear blueprint to fix burning crises like corporatisation, casualisation and wage theft.”

But these conditions flow from the underlying decades-long transformation of the universities into corporate-dominated institutions, which is intensifying under the Albanese government.

Barnes added: “We need reform so courses are not at the mercy of vice chancellors with warped priorities pursuing reckless cuts.” This is continuation of the argument pushed by

the NTEU leaders to blame individual vice chancellors for the job destruction in the universities over the past year, rather than the Labor government's agenda.

The agenda of the Albanese government is set out in its Universities Accord which is a political blueprint to subordinate higher education to the imperatives of corporate profit, militarisation and the state.

It proposes "mission-based compacts" for university funding, requiring universities to serve "national priorities," including AUKUS-related war preparations, while financially pressuring universities into line, including through cuts to international student enrolments.

Universities are being reorganised to produce technicians, managers and researchers for corporate and military projects, not to foster broad, critical and democratic learning. The Universities Accord's "national priorities" specifically name "green" energy, critical minerals and technologies and defence. That means that decisions about courses, staffing and research are being driven by state and corporate strategic aims, not social need.

For both academic and professional staff, the Accord has produced mass redundancies, forced "spill-and-fill" competitions and soaring workloads. For students, there is a narrowing of curricula, erosion of humanities and critical disciplines, and increased surveillance and censorship in the name of "national security" or by falsely equating opposition to the Gaza genocide with antisemitism.

Labor's assault on the universities is taking to a new level what began, as the Senate report briefly mentions, with the Hawke-Keating government's Dawkins review of the higher education system in the late 1980s.

That restructuring featured the reintroduction of student fees—which had been abolished in 1974—via the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), and an increased emphasis on national competitive grants for research. It required universities to earn income from other sources, including commercialising research results and charging fees for international students, and also reduced the number of elected staff and student members on university governing bodies.

The Rudd-Gillard government's "education revolution" went further. Universities were forced to compete against each other for enrolments, primarily in business-related courses, as the basis for funding. By 2023, universities spent an estimated \$363 million a year on "advertising, marketing and promotional expenses."

For decades, union apparatuses such as the NTEU and CPSU have acted as enforcers for management. Across campuses this year, the unions have struck sellout deals that facilitate restructures, promote "voluntary redundancies," and channel grievances into "consultation" processes designed to suffocate resistance.

Over the past year, the NTEU has opposed every call by the

Western Sydney University and Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committees (RFCs) for a unified struggle against the job destruction and restructuring.

This is not an aberration. It is part of a wider integration of all union leaderships into management and government mechanisms, particularly since the Prices and Incomes Accords that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) imposed on workers under the Hawke-Keating governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

The NTEU's enthusiasm for the Senate report reflects its efforts to channel staff unrest back into the arms of the parliamentary establishment. The union apparatus is trying to perpetrate the illusion that governments, which function as political servants for the corporate elite, can be pressured to make concessions.

Lessons must be drawn from the bitter experiences of the past four decades. Democratic, high-quality, publicly funded education can be achieved only through a political struggle that breaks with Labor and the unions and challenges the subordination of learning to corporate profit and war. That means:

- Build independent, democratically elected rank-and-file committees (RFCs) of staff and students at every campus to coordinate resistance beyond union control and to develop concrete demands—halt and reverse job cuts; end casualisation; protect academic freedom; no requisitioning of research to war projects.

- Link struggles internationally via the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to confront multinational corporate and state interests. This international perspective is vital because the restructuring is part of a global capitalist and militarist realignment, spearheaded by the fascistic Trump administration.

- Advance a socialist program that defends free, first-class public education as a social right.

To discuss how to develop this counter-offensive, 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

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