Militarisation of Australian universities intensifies: More than $200 million in defence contracts since 2024

Eric Ludlow
24 February 2026

Multimillion-dollar military contracts have been awarded to Australian universities in 2025 and early 2026, taking the total to more than $200 million since late 2024. This underscores the further integration of higher education into the military-intelligence apparatus, above all US led preparations for war against China.

These announcements include an Australian Defence Department's Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator (ASCA) $70 million Emerging and Disruptive Technologies tranche in November 2024, a $135 million Defence Trailblazer R&D round in April 2025, and ASCA's $40 million Decision Advantage contracts in January 2026, totalling $245 million.

In the most recent contract round, ASCA last month unveiled $40 million for 14 "decision advantage" artificial intelligence and data projects, geared to providing the Australian Defence Force with an "asymmetric advantage" on the battlefield.

Recipients include the Australian National University, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Curtin, Macquarie and Western Sydney universities, the University of Queensland and the University of Technology Sydney. Each received grants in the order of $1 million to $3 million.?

In April 2025, the Albanese Labor government's Defence Trailblazer program announced 35 projects with 26 military contractors totalling $135 million to "fast track" research into deployable technologies across quantum, hypersonics, cyber, autonomous systems and space. The contractors included Lockheed Martin (US), Praetorian Aeronautics (Australia), Northrop Grumman (US), QuantX Labs (Australia) and CAE (Canada).

These contracts feed directly into the next phase of the AUKUS military pact between the US, UK and Australia, targeting China.

AUKUS's first phase—Pillar I—was initiated in 2022 by the Albanese government. It committed Australia to acquiring nuclear powered attack submarines—US Virginia-class boats in the 2030s followed by British designed SSN AUKUS vessels—at an estimated cost of up to $368 billion over three decades. That was tied to a permanent rotation of US and UK nuclear submarines on Australia's west coast and full integration of the Australian navy into US war fighting plans.

Pillar II of AUKUS is a high technology spearhead: eight areas covering advanced cyber, AI and autonomy, quantum, undersea systems, hypersonics, electronic warfare, "innovation ecosystems" and information sharing. This is designed to weld together allied military research and development (R&D) systems, including universities.

The *Australian Defence Magazine* (ADM) hosted a one-day AUKUS Pillar II Summit on February 18 in the national capital Canberra. The event underlined how the ruling class intends to use the universities to deliver this agenda. Co-located with the 23rd ADM Congress, a defence financing forum, it brought together senior military officers, ministers, weapons executives and university managers to map a "nationwide approach" to AUKUS R&D.

A dedicated panel—featuring UNSW Defence Research Institute director Chris Mills and the Australian Capital Territory government's Defence and Advance Technology Industry Advocate Karen Schilling—called for intensified coordination between universities, defence and industry through regional innovation hubs aligned with Pillar II.?

The Labor government's Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy used the ADM Congress to launch a new Advanced Capabilities Investment Fund (ACIF). The government is seeking private capital partners to manage a pool potentially worth $1 billion, seeded by up to $500 million in public funds, to back firms developing "the advanced capabilities and exports of tomorrow such as cyber, artificial intelligence and autonomy, electronic warfare, quantum technologies, and undersea warfare."

Conroy boasted: "This fund demonstrates that the Albanese government is prepared to think outside the square." The aim is to hardwire finance, industry and university laboratories into the development of a war economy.

Government funded think tanks such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) welcomed the proposal. ASPI insisted it be tightly "anchored" to Pillar II priorities to bridge "venture capital and mission demand."

Conroy trumpeted autonomous weapons systems now entering production—the Ghost Shark underwater drone and Ghost Bat collaborative combat aircraft. These are precisely the categories of systems being fed by ASCA, Trailblazer and AUKUS Pillar II university research contracts.??

The same week, on February 15, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese travelled to Adelaide to unveil a $30 billion Nuclear

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Powered Submarine Construction Yard at Osborne, beginning with a $3.9 billion “down payment” by the federal government. Spread over 75 hectares, the facility will include vast fabrication and assembly halls and a $500 million Skills and Training Academy.

South Australia—already home to the Adelaide-UNSW Defence Trailblazer, a planned $60 million Defence Technologies Academy, and dedicated AUKUS linked degree programs—has become a central focus of the drive to militarise universities and vocational training.?

South Australian Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas hailed AUKUS as a “watershed moment” for the state’s economy. The new academy will funnel students from schools and universities into nuclear submarine production, locking educators and young people into AUKUS workforce needs for decades.

To head off concerns over this militarisation, Albanese claimed that at least 4,000 workers would be employed in building the yard and around 5,500 employed on submarine production at its peak. This is essentially tying employment to preparations for war.

On February 22, the British Astute-class nuclear powered attack submarine HMS Anson arrived at HMAS Stirling near Perth, Western Australia, for the first-ever maintenance period on a UK nuclear submarine in Australia.

Around 100 personnel from the Royal Navy, UK Submarine Delivery Agency, Royal Australian Navy, ASC and the US Navy’s Pearl Harbor shipyard are involved, building the “skills, systems and supply chains required for routine maintenance of nuclear powered submarines” ahead of a permanent “Submarine Rotational Force–West” from 2027.

During the visit, the three AUKUS partners are conducting a combined Pillar I/Pillar II activity, testing the interoperability of the Australian developed Speartooth Large Uncrewed Underwater Vehicle with HMS Anson and trialling Pillar II anti-submarine-warfare AI algorithms on RAAF P 8A Poseidon aircraft. This means that university-linked AI research is being drawn directly into live war-fighting experiments in the Indian Ocean.

Think tanks are pressing for far greater university involvement.

On February 2, the United States Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney released a briefing paper complaining that the sector’s contribution has so far been “exceptionally modest.” The paper calls for the revival of the AUSMURI (Australian Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative) scheme, channelling Pentagon funds into Australian labs and for an expanded Australian Defence Science and Universities Network, alongside streamlined security clearances for academics and “systemic engagement” by Defence to ready universities for AUKUS work.

Co-author of the USSC paper and senior defence strategist Professor Peter Dean declared: “There is no way Australia can realise the AUKUS Pillar II advanced capabilities without significant uplift in R&D and a coordinated and concerted effort by government to make universities essential partners.”

In 2023, the Albanese government allocated $128 million for 4,001 additional STEM places explicitly earmarked for AUKUS submarine construction and sustainment, while leaving in place the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s “Job-ready Graduates” program that sought to herd students into such programs by imposing far higher fees for humanities and social science courses.

University managements are fully on board with this push to transform campuses into war laboratories. The Group of Eight coalition of Australia’s elite research-intensive universities, for example, has pledged to “turbocharge” Pillar II through redesigned curricula and defence institutes.

This is line with the Labor government’s Universities Accord, which demands the restructuring of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the corporate elite and preparations for war. It ties funding to universities signing “mission-based compacts” with Labor’s new Australian Tertiary Education Commission, above all to serve “national priorities” such as defence and critical minerals.

Australian universities have been increasingly drawn into the US military orbit since the early 2010s, with Pentagon funding for their research rising from $1.7 million in 2007 to $60 million annually by 2022.

Conroy’s ADM Congress speech made the broader trajectory explicit. He boasted that defence spending had increased by $70 billion over the decade, with record spending of $35.2 billion on acquisition and sustainment in the past financial year alone, and that direct employment in the defence sector had grown by 14.5 percent in Labor’s first two years.

AUKUS Pillar II is an acceleration of subordinating universities to Australian imperialist interests and which are linked to Washington’s drive to assert its global hegemony, primarily through the escalating drive to war with China. The university restructuring forms part of Australian capitalism’s support for US-led operations worldwide, including the supply of components for F-35 warplanes deployed in Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

The turn to militarism is inseparable from a mounting assault on democratic rights, particularly on campuses.

Freedom of Information requests by former senator Rex Patrick have revealed the creation of a secretive Australian Federal Police unit—AUKUS Command—tasked with protecting AUKUS facilities and managing “public order” around protests.

The Albanese government is also rolling out an “antisemitism report card” for universities that will be used to police and potentially cut funding to institutions that fail to clamp down hard enough on protests, especially against Israel’s US-backed genocide in Gaza.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.

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