

“Four Corners” covers up Labor and union role in Australian university restructuring

Mike Head
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The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship television public affairs program, “Four Corners,” this week produced an episode, titled *Campus Chaos*, that purported to expose the causes of the job destruction and pro-corporate restructuring wracking the country’s 39 public universities.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) leaders urged union members to watch and share the program and even hosted online watch parties. NTEU New South Wales state division secretary Vince Caughley sent an email to all members saying: “Four Corners is shining a light on the crisis in our universities.”

It did nothing of the sort. From the start to the finish, the show amounted to a whitewash of the true roots of the restructuring, accompanied by the destruction of some 4,000 jobs nationally over the past 18 months.

Most glaringly, there was not a single mention of the Albanese Labor government’s Universities Accord report, released in 2024. That document set out the blueprint for what is taking place—the total subordination of the tertiary education sector to the teaching and research requirements of the corporate ruling class and the development of a war economy.

In fact, the episode promoted those centrally responsible for the imposition of the Accord agenda. That is, Education Minister Jason Clare and the NTEU apparatus itself. The NTEU bureaucrats and their supporters have opposed and blocked any unified fight by university staff against the restructuring and job cuts, as have the officials of the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

“Four Corners” focussed on the destructive course closures and job losses at three universities—University Technology Sydney (UTS), Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Wollongong (UoW). But “Four Corners” hid the fact that the managements at these institutions each succeeded in

ultimately substantially pushing through their plans, slightly modified, with the help of “voluntary” redundancies agreed to by the NTEU.

In the latest instance, the UTS management announced in February that it will axe 121 academic jobs—about 10 percent of the university’s academic workforce—on top of around 200 professional staff positions. UTS will no longer offer undergraduate public health degrees and will cut teacher education and international studies courses, thus slashing health, humanities and education options for students.

That announcement came after the NTEU had diverted the anger and opposition of UTS staff and students, voiced at protest rallies, into a failed appeal to the Labor government’s Fair Work Commission for more time for consultation on the restructuring plan.

“Four Corners,” echoing the NTEU, falsely depicted the job cuts at UTS and ANU as the product of artificially-concocted financial deficits. Only one fleeting reference was made to fact that the level of federal government funding for domestic student enrolments has halved from 80 percent to 40 percent since the Hawke Labor government of the 1980s reintroduced student fees.

That statistic points to the reality of the systemic underfunding of universities of successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, for decades, forcing the universities to rely on corporate sponsorship and exorbitant fees charged to international students.

Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has intensified the financial pressure on universities by cutting international student enrolments, as part of a wider reactionary push to blame immigrants for the cost-of-living and housing affordability crises.

Labor also has continued the previous Coalition government’s Job-ready Graduates (JRG) scheme, which has hiked fees for three-year undergraduate humanities students to more than \$50,000, while stripping the

universities of about \$1 billion a year for teaching them.

In interviewing Clare, “Four Corners” said nothing about the slashing of international student numbers and permitted him to dodge the question of why the Albanese government has maintained the JRG regime.

Data has shown that new university enrolments by students with low socioeconomic backgrounds have dropped by 10 percent since the JRG regime was introduced in 2020. Yet “Four Corners” allowed Clare to again offer the excuse of referring the issue to Labor’s still-to-be-established Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).

To divert from Labor’s record, as its headline item, “Four Corners” reported: “Australia’s universities are paying external consultants and contractors an estimated \$1.8 billion a year without disclosing which firms they are hiring and what the money is being spent on.”

The program further disclosed that 12 of the 14 universities it surveyed had members of their governing councils “who had substantive roles as consultants from firms such as Ernst & Young, PwC, KPMG, Deloitte, McKinsey, and Boston Consulting Group.”

But “Four Corners” presented this corporatisation of the universities as something unknown, and even as an alarming revelation, to Clare and other Labor government representatives. Clare claimed that he was stunned by the news, saying it was “shocking” because “we invest a lot of money in our universities.”

Labor senator Tony Sheldon, an ex-Transport Workers Union bureaucrat who chaired an NTEU-backed federal parliamentary inquiry into university governance, described the \$1.8 billion figure as “shockingly high.”

The truth is that the hiring of corporate consultants to reshape universities along corporate lines is inextricably bound up with Labor’s agenda, spelt out in the Universities Accord report. Its core axis is a radical transformation of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the corporate elite and preparations for war.

That includes funnelling students into courses to meet the “skill shortages” designated in employer-government “national priorities.” Among these is the AUKUS military pact, which involves spending hundreds of billions of dollars to acquire US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range missiles and other hi-tech weaponry designed for use against China.

The Accord report called for “skills coalitions” of education providers, industry and trade union “partners” and a shift to “micro-credential” courses tailored to meet

the needs of employers and “work integrated learning” to embed students in industry throughout their courses.

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

The report proposed to tie funding to universities negotiating “mission-based compacts” with ATEC to “deliver Australia’s future skills needs” in such national priority industries.

The NTEU and CPSU share Labor’s pro-business and militarist agenda. The NTEU’s submission to the Accord panel called for a higher education sector that “provides the graduates with the necessary skill sets for future productivity.”

For years, despite claiming to oppose the corporatisation of universities, the union apparatuses have suppressed educators’ hostility to this transformation. They have blocked any unified mobilisation against it while pushing through enterprise agreements that enable such restructuring and promoting deadly illusions that Labor-majority federal and state parliamentary inquiries will stop the assault.

In order to fight this reactionary agenda, university workers and students need new forms of organisation. That means forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, that can link up with workers in struggle 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 plunge into barbaric and catastrophic wars.

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

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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