

Australian Labor government steps up war-related crackdown on university research

Mike Head
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Federal Education Minister Jason Clare last week vetoed 13 university research projects amid a renewed media campaign against any collaboration with researchers from alleged enemy countries, notably China, Iran, Russia and North Korea.

By publicly announcing his move, Clare sent a further message of the Labor government's total commitment to US militarism, whether it be the war against Iran, the genocide in Gaza or the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

A wartime-style atmosphere is being created in the universities and more broadly, backed by threats of punishment of researchers and universities that fail to comply with ever-more extensive national security guidelines.

To avoid public scrutiny, Clare refused to provide any details about the banned projects or the universities involved, instead citing vague "grounds relating to the security, defence or international relations of Australia."

In order to reject the Australian Research Council's (ARC) funding short-list for the projects, Clare invoked arbitrary ministerial powers under the ARC Act that also allow him to "have regard to any other matters that the Minister considers appropriate."

Clare is not the first education minister to politically intervene to overrule proposed rigorously-assessed ARC grants, but he is the first to do so openly, rather than surreptitiously as occurred under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government in 2017 and 2021.

The Albanese Labor government is going beyond its Coalition predecessor in blocking potentially scientific research. It is seeking to match similar measures being taken by its US and UK partners in the AUKUS alliance, a multi-billion dollar program of weapons and bases preparing for war against China.

Clare is also having legislation drafted to force universities to comply with a growing barrage of national security and foreign interference laws and regulations. The legislation will impose "threshold standards" for university registration by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). In effect, this is a threat to deregister any universities whose academics breach these rules.

A spokeswoman for Clare said he had vetoed the ARC grants based on the "advice and recommendations of relevant agencies," which include Home Affairs, Defence and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic political surveillance agency.

"The government is taking further steps to strengthen research security at universities," she told the *Australian*, the Murdoch media's national flagship. "Research security considerations will be added to the regulations governing Australian universities through the Higher Education Standards Framework. Contractual terms in future grant agreements between universities and the ARC will also be strengthened."

While the government refused to provide details of the blocked grants, the *Australian* said it could reveal that they involved "sensitive" drone, cyber security and alternative energy collaborations with scholars from other countries, "over concerns they could be weaponised by Australia's enemies."

As well as direct war preparations, the crackdown on university staff is part of growing conflicts over energy and other strategic resources. The newspaper reported: "Mr Clare also cancelled public funding of foreign collaborations involving breakthrough energy projects that could deliver huge commercial benefits to Australia's trade rivals."

This witch hunt follows redoubled claims by the *Australian* that researchers have "teamed up with scientists from Iran and China to research drones, as well as cyber security." It is in line with similar offensives by the Trump administration in the US and the Starmer government in the UK.

In the US, the Securing Innovation and Research from Adversaries Act, introduced last week, prohibits joint research projects, co-authorship, data sharing, personnel exchanges, and other forms of co-operation with black-listed entities. It applies to all recipients of federal research funding, including universities, national laboratories and companies with alleged links to China's military-industrial base.

While welcoming Clare's intervention as a first step, a May 19 editorial in the *Australian* demanded that the Labor government go further. It declared: "Stronger action is needed to stop and prevent collaborations with Chinese military researchers and those in other nations hostile to Australia's interests. New analysis has revealed more than 6,000 joint projects with People's Liberation Army-linked institutions in the past six years alone."

These unsubstantiated claims are said to be based on a report by AI-led intelligence company Strider Technologies. Featuring former intelligence agency officials and operatives on its staff, Strider has contracts and close links with the US government and its partners in the Five Eyes surveillance network—the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Previous such claims have been based on flawed evidence as the rising number of Chinese academics and their international colleagues who are publishing articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The Strider allegations are equally dubious. One example cited by the *Australian* editorial involved a masters student at the Australian National University (ANU), Boyang Zhang. He worked with counterparts at China's National University of Defence Technology on anti-jamming technologies. ANU said the 2023 study was not a joint research project and the student "appears to have listed ANU as their institution."

Clare wrote to the ARC last month demanding that it "focus on addressing threats of espionage and foreign interference affecting Australia's research sector." In 2024, the ARC had already issued a new 13-page Research Security Framework, which states that individual researchers are "responsible for ensuring that all foreign affiliations, associations and funding are declared" in funding applications. "Funded projects involving researchers with undeclared affiliations may be terminated."

The revised ARC rules also require universities to "report to the ARC promptly when research security risks are identified." The document insists: "Universities are responsible for safeguarding the research they conduct and must conform to a range of regulatory and legislative requirements designed to protect Australia's research and national interests." It cites a list of no less than 11 such legal requirements.

These include the Albanese government's 2024 Safeguarding Australia's Military Secrets (SAMS) Act, which threatens jail terms of up to 20 years for "training" non-citizens in the use of software or technology with possible military applications, unless the non-citizens come from Five Eyes countries.

Another is Labor's simultaneously passed Defence Trade Controls (DTC) Amendment Act, which sets prison terms of up to 10 years for "supplying" or disclosing military-related or "dual-use" goods, technology or services on a Defence and Strategic Goods List (DSGL) to non-Australian citizens, with the exception of US and UK authorities and companies.

The DTC provisions particularly threaten researchers because "supplying" can cover simply sharing research results—which is integral to the development of science and technology. In addition to imprisonment, fines of nearly \$800,000 apply for individual researchers and almost \$4 million for corporate bodies, including universities.

This takes to a new level measures that were first introduced by the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in the 2012 DTC Act as part of its support for the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to confront China.

These laws enforce the "whole-of-government and whole-of-nation" war effort outlined in the Albanese government's 2023 Defence Strategic Review and 2024 National Defence Strategy, directed against Russia and China, which made specific reference to aligning universities and sections of industry more directly with the needs of the military.

The Albanese government introduced this legislation despite objections by researchers, research organisations and sections of business because of the crippling impact it will have in many

scientific fields that depend on international collaboration.

Labor's 2024 Universities Accord also 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.

At the same time, 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. Substantial 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.

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 Coalition government's "Job-ready Graduates" program that seeks to herd students into such programs by imposing far higher fees for humanities and social science courses.

By embedding national security mandates into university registration thresholds, the Albanese government is creating the conditions for it and the military-intelligence apparatus to police every aspect of university life, alongside the suppression of student anti-genocide and anti-war activity and protests.

The main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have blocked any unified fight against Labor's militarist agenda. To defeat this historic assault, educators and students have to build new forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees—guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective based on social and human need, not the dictates of the corporate elite and the war machine.

To discuss these issues, register to join the upcoming public meetings called by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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