Ultimate Classroom: War propaganda in Australian schools

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4 August 2026

A gameshow television program, *Ultimate Classroom*, completed its second season on Australia's Network 10 in March, following the first season in September 2022. The program, still available for streaming, is a full-throated promotion of militarism, seeking to counter the animosity toward war among young people.

In each program a member of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) sets a problem for six teenagers arranged into two competing teams of three each. The tasks relate to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) learning, and include activities like programming drones, designing robotics, building structures and solving complex code-breaking puzzles.

The students are mentored by two hosts, much-publicised mathematics teacher Eddie Woo and TV presenter and gaming expert Stephanie Bendixsen, along with ADF specialist personnel, such as military engineers, cyber specialists and flight instructors.

In series 2, episode 2, students were set two tasks, the first involving aiming lasers at a target using mirrors and the second designing an all-terrain rover that can carry personnel and goods. The students were introduced to ADF members, communications system coordinator Adelaide and mechanical engineer Daniel, who offered advice while Woo tutored the students on some scientific principles, such as the law of reflection and the science of springs.

The producers of the program were careful not to mention the real-life military application of the technology the students were grappling with. The program did not mention that the lasers can trigger lethal consequences.

Before the section on the rover, the students were shown a video on the ADF's Bushmaster armoured vehicle. But they were not shown that it was deployed in US wars against Afghanistan and Iraq and more recently sent to Ukraine to join the US-NATO war against Russia.

The Bushmasters can be used to transport troops in war environments, in rescue missions to ferry injured troops and to transport logistics and utility gear such as battlefield cargo, fortification supplies and engineering supplies.

The program is designed to meet the needs of the military to channel students into the armed forces. This is a travesty of education and science, which should be dedicated to fully developing young people as human beings and to meeting the needs of humanity.

Most immediately, *Ultimate Classroom* has been funded by the ADF in collaboration with Channel 10, Paramount Plus and advertising firm Universal McCann to redress a recruitment crisis, particularly with Gen Z. Yet a Department of Defence survey of 400 viewers of the program found only a 7 percent increase in those favouring joining the military in a STEM career.

On the Defence website, Defence Force Recruiting national media manager Jessica O'Mara said: "Ultimate Classroom aims to attract prospective candidates to a STEM career, ultimately leading them to apply for a role within the ADF. The goal was to entertain and inspire our target audience through broadcast and digital channels, while shifting their perceptions of what a career in the ADF can offer."

Despite a higher reported intake in 2025, the ADF has an overall workforce deficit of roughly 3,500 to 4,500 personnel below its authorised strength of 62,700, which the Labor government is seeking to lift to 69,000 by the early 2030s, in line with its increased military spending.

University of Tasmania Professor Robert Hoffman and RMIT University lecturer Maria Teresa Beamond wrote on the Conversation website in June 2024: "Gen Z is turning away from military service in record numbers. We're trying to understand why." They quoted the then Defence Chief General Angus Campbell telling a Senate inquiry: "Not only is the Australian military failing to achieve planned growth, it is actually shrinking."

The authors, who received funding from Department of Defence, said one reason was a "declining willingness of Gen Z to identify with, and fight to defend, their nation." The academics conducted interviews of 19 serving soldiers. They found that the "black-and-white picture of 'my country right or wrong' has been muddied following media

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coverage of alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan."

In 2020, the official Brereton Report found "credible evidence" that Australian special forces had murdered 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners between 2009 and 2013, among a host of other war crimes.

Although the imperialist war against Afghanistan ended in a debacle in August 2021, such atrocities have continued, including the genocide in Gaza, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-Israeli war against Iran. The Australian Labor government has supported all these barbaric interventions and further integrated the ADF into the US military machine.

The corralling of students into military industry careers is now the open aim of the Albanese government.

In 2024 the government's Defence Industry Development Strategy paper outlined several strategies to "inspire early learners and primary students across the country to continue to engage with STEM opportunities, while encouraging secondary students to pursue vocational and tertiary STEM studies."

Programs have been developed intervening directly into schools. The Schools Pathways Program is a joint initiative of the federal, South Australian and Western Australian state Labor governments that explicitly targets STEM students, particularly in schools catering to students with a low socioeconomic background.

A similar program is running in schools in the Hunter Region in New South Wales. These programs involve some of the major armament manufacturers such as Boeing, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems and Thales.

The ADF spent $11 million on the Schools Pathways Program from 2024 to 2026. Another $5.1 million was allocated to South Australia and Western Australia to produce connections between schools and the defence sector.

In 2023 the Department of Defence, the Australian Submarine Agency and the Department of Education provided considerable funds under the Nuclear Submarine (AUKUS) Pipeline Funding. That included a $128.5 million Higher Education Bridge allocated over four years to fund STEM disciplines like nuclear engineering, physics and naval architecture.

The contradiction is stark—the same governments that starve schools and universities of funds find money to tie education to the military buildup.

Ultimate Classroom is part of a growing international phenomenon. In Germany, the state broadcaster's children's news program *Logo!* has been transformed into a platform for promoting conscription and military recruitment, with moderators attacking children who express anti-war views. In Britain, the Army's "This is Belonging" campaign targets working-class schoolchildren. In Poland, military indoctrination programs have been introduced into schools.

The teachers' trade unions have remained silent on *Ultimate Classroom*. In 2023, the Australian Education Union federal executive issued toothless statements criticising AUKUS and noting "with deep concern the recent launch by the Defence Department of a 'Nuclear-Powered Propulsion Challenge' in Australian schools."

That was an education competition program associated with the AUKUS nuclear submarine project. It invited Year 7–12 students to design nuclear propulsion plans for a chance to win a trip to the Stirling naval base in Western Australia.

Similar resolutions were adopted by state teachers' unions, but no action was taken except to issue calls for the Albanese government to discontinue the competition. While the government did not renew this program, in March this year it launched the $15.8 million Propel: Australian Submarine Scholarship program. It provides up to 3,000 university scholarships for students pursuing priority STEM fields to feed directly into the nuclear-powered submarine enterprise.

The Albanese government is transforming Australia into a frontline state for US war plans against China through AUKUS. It requires a population that accepts militarism as normal and even exciting. A game show that makes weapons technology look like a fun classroom challenge is a revealing addition to that project.

The working class has no interest in preparing its children for war. The scientific and technological capacities that capitalism subordinates to the military would, under socialism, be directed toward solving humanity's most pressing problems: climate change, disease and poverty.

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