Australia: Labor government tightens war-related powers over universities

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In another sign of war preparations, the Albanese Labor government is moving on multiple fronts to escalate its imposition of strict controls over Australia's universities, particularly targeting any links to universities in China, as well as Russia and Iran.

This week, Foreign Minister Penny Wong wielded extraordinary powers under Australia's Foreign Relations Act to order the closure of two separate programs at the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Queensland, each involving cooperation with Chinese partners.

There are clear indications that the government is moving in close collaboration with the Trump administration, which has aggressively ordered US universities to cut such ties. Wong intervened two weeks after the Pentagon added further Chinese institutions to its blacklist of 130 institutions from China, Iran and Russia "engaging in problematic activities."

The Labor government is simultaneously pushing legislation through parliament to give the domestic political spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), powers to surreptitiously investigate universities without notifying them. The legislation would hand the foreign minister powers to then use secret ASIO reports to terminate any research or teaching programs and prevent any challenge in a tribunal or court.

A new national interest test for the Foreign Arrangements Scheme will give Wong powers to veto or impose conditions on any projects she considers will affect the national interest—a sweeping term that includes national and economic security, that is, anything that affects the interests of Australian imperialism and its allies.

Universities will be forced to report all dealings with any institution in China, Iran, Russia, Belarus, Brunei, Vietnam or Laos. Every education and research institution in those countries will be deemed to be liable to engage in hostile activity.

The ASIO Act will be amended too, ending ASIO's requirement to notify universities when making a formal security assessment. This would mean that a university could not seek review in the Administrative Review Tribunal or Federal Court.

Wong's orders to "terminate" the ANU and Queensland programs show how far such political censorship of civilian scholarly activities can extend, under the cover of banning research or teaching that allegedly could be of "dual-use" benefit to a designated enemy.

The University of Queensland's collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, for example, involved research on pain relief derived from Australian native plants.

Likewise, in April Wong vetoed data-transfer agreements between the University of Sydney and two medical research institutes in Russia and Belarus. The university said the agreements involved anonymised patient data on drug-resistant tuberculosis.

As part of the government's crackdown, the Education Department wrote to universities twice in March to June this year warning them against relations with universities in any countries that have been subjected to the growing list of Australian government sanctions.

According to the latest Australian Sanctions Office annual report, the government imposed 444 new sanctions in 2025, taking the total to 3,511 financial sanctions, travel and trade bans and restrictions on commercial activities. The countries now sanctioned include Russia, Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Sudan.

In May, Education Minister Jason Clare invoked ministerial powers to veto and overturn Australian Research Council (ARC) funding for 13 university research projects.

These measures are being accompanied by a media witch hunt against academics who even visit certain countries for personal reasons, including a University of Sydney professor who visited his parents in Iran before participating in a research conference in Turkey.

Jasmina Joldic, the Education Department's deputy secretary of higher education, research and international, wrote to University of Sydney vice-chancellor Mark Scott, saying sanctions applied to "all forms of academic engagement, including travel, even when the activity is not research-related."

Similar letters were sent to at least 26 universities, including Sydney's Macquarie University, instructing it to end enrolments by post-graduate students from Iran.

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Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese Labor government has gone beyond its Liberal-National Coalition predecessor in blocking scientific research. It is seeking to match 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.

Revised ARC rules require universities to "report to the ARC promptly when research security risks are identified." Universities must now ensure that their research conforms to "a range of regulatory and legislative requirements," citing 11 such provisions.

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 allies in the Five Eyes global surveillance network—that is, the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand.

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

The Albanese government introduced this legislation despite objections by research organisations and sections of business because of its crippling impact in many scientific fields that depend on international collaboration.

As in the US and Europe, 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.

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 government has made unprecedented threats to strip accreditation and funding from any university that it alleges fails to sufficiently silence campaigns by staff and students against the US-backed Israeli Gaza genocide. Last month, Clare imposed, by ministerial regulations, Threshold Standards that require institutions to adopt formal definitions of antisemitism and demonstrate ongoing action to prevent it.

Threshold Standards legislation amendments would also compel universities, under threat of deregistration, to enforce the barrage of national security and foreign interference laws and regulations that ban research partnerships.

Labor's 2024 Universities Accord mandates 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 (ATEC), above all to serve "national priorities" such as defence and the mining and processing of strategic critical minerals.

Labor's moves enforce the "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-nation" war effort outlined in its 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.

This month, the government went further. It unveiled a bipartisan parliamentary inquiry into the country's "preparedness" for war. Harnessing the economy and society as a whole to war means slashing social programs, like disability services and public education and health, to pay for massive military spending, and repressing opposition to this war drive.

In office since 2022, the Albanese government has more fully integrated Australia, via the AUKUS pact, US basing arrangements and the Pine Gap spy and targeting base in central Australia, into the developing US-led global war, including the genocide against the Palestinians, the illegal assault on Iran, the war against Russia in Ukraine and a vast military build-up in the Indo-Pacific targeting China.

Universities Australia, the university management peak body, has pledged to work closely with the government. Its submission to a bipartisan parliamentary intelligence committee inquiry into the Foreign Relations Amendment bill said the universities "recognise their important responsibility to identify and manage risks associated with international engagement. Effective research security and foreign interference safeguards are essential to protecting Australia's national interest."

The main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have remained silent on this offensive, signifying their complicity in it. Since Labor took office, they have blocked any unified fight against Labor's militarist agenda and the Universities Accord-driven restructuring that has eliminated almost 4,000 university jobs in the past two years.

To defeat this historic assault, educators and students must build new independent 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.

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