Australian Labor government further intensifies war-related powers over university staff

Mike Head
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Foreign Minister Penny Wong last week introduced a late amendment to Australia's Foreign Relations Bill to extend to individual academics her new powers to outlaw university relations with designated overseas bodies or colleagues. The legislation then passed the Senate last Thursday.

This move further highlights the Labor government's creation of a witch-hunting wartime-like atmosphere in universities, directed against any research or teaching cooperation with institutions in countries deemed to be threats to Australian national security or foreign relations, particularly China, Russia and Iran.

Under Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Amendment Act 2026, research partnerships involving individual academics are now covered by the government's crackdown, not just university agreements with overseas institutions. All collaborations—sharing knowledge with overseas colleagues—are now under intensive surveillance.

Australian universities are required, for the first time, to identify research projects conducted by employees who are working with colleagues "employed or engaged by foreign entities."

Universities must have policies and procedures to assess whether the collaborations "adversely affect, or are likely to adversely affect, Australia's national interest" or are "inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy." They "must take reasonable steps to implement the policies and procedures."

The legislation gives Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government far-reaching powers to veto, cancel or impose conditions on any university projects or researcher-to-researcher collaborations that Wong deems to be a threat.

Adding to the potential for war-related political intervention, the government rejected calls to define "national interest." It insisted that a foreign minister must have a broad discretion because the term's meaning "shifts with time."

In effect, that means aligning even further with the criminal war offensive by US imperialism, including the genocide of Palestinians, the illegal assault on Iran, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and a vast military build-up in the Indo-Pacific targeting China.

Universities must report all dealings with any institution in China, Iran, Russia, Belarus, Brunei, Vietnam or Laos on the government's Foreign Arrangements Register. By contrast, arrangements with Australia's Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partners—the US, UK, New Zealand and Canada—are exempt, making plain the connection to war preparations.

Labor's amended legislation gives the domestic political surveillance agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), powers to surreptitiously investigate universities without notifying them. Wong now has powers to then use secret ASIO reports to terminate any research or teaching programs and block any challenge in a tribunal or court.

Thousands of university research or student exchange agreements with overseas counterparts are threatened with termination. The Foreign Arrangements Register currently lists 14,396 such partnerships, half involving China or Hong Kong.

The legislation further extends the scheme to the many overseas campuses of Australian universities—which necessarily involve arrangements with foreign governments.

It also covers all agreements by Australian states, territories and local governments with foreign entities. Wong already had powers to scrap these deals, such as Victoria's Belt and Road Initiative with China, which the former Liberal-National Coalition government provocatively vetoed in 2021.

But Wong will now have stronger oversight and controls, including to impose conditions on state government deals at any time.

Since taking office in 2022, the Labor government has gone beyond its Coalition predecessor in blocking potentially valuable scientific research. It is seeking to match measures being taken by its partners in the AUKUS alliance, a multi-billion dollar program of weapons and bases preparing for war against China.

In April, Wong wielded extraordinary powers she already had to veto two data transfer agreements between the University of Sydney and universities in Russia and Belarus.

Earlier this month, she ordered the closure of two major programs at the Australian National University and the

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University of Queensland, each involving cooperation with Chinese partners. Wong gave the two universities no prior consultation, nor any review process.

That was just two weeks after the Pentagon added more Chinese institutions to its blacklist of 130 institutions from China, Iran and Russia alleged to be "engaging in problematic activities." This demonstrates that the Albanese government is moving in close collaboration with the Trump administration, which has ordered US universities to cut such ties.

In May, as part of the government's crackdown, Education Minister Jason Clare invoked ministerial powers to veto and overturn Australian Research Council funding for 13 university research projects, citing unexplained national security concerns.

Between March and June, Clare's Education Department also wrote to at least 26 universities twice, warning them against relations with universities in any countries that have been subjected to Australian government sanctions. Sydney's Macquarie University was ordered to end enrolments by post-graduate students from Iran.

According to the latest Australian Sanctions Office annual report, there are now 3,511 such sanctions, with the listed countries including Russia, Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Sudan.

Individual researchers or universities can face major criminal penalties. For example, failing to register foreign activities under the scheme carries up to five years' imprisonment, while sharing technology in breach of the Autonomous Sanctions Act carries up to ten years' imprisonment and corporate fines exceeding $3.6 million.

Sanctions offences are strict liability offences for bodies corporate, meaning that it is not necessary to prove any fault element (intent, knowledge, recklessness or negligence) for a university to be found guilty.

In addition, the Albanese government's 2024 Safeguarding Australia's Military Secrets Act 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.

Labor's Defence Trade Controls Amendment Act 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.

These developments are ratcheting up tensions with the Chinese government. Its Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a news briefing this week that Beijing opposed Australia's "overstretch" of the concept of national security to restrict or suppress normal international cooperation in education and research.

The Albanese government is seeking to police every aspect of university life. It has also threatened to strip accreditation and funding from any university that it alleges to have failed to sufficiently silence campaigns by staff and students against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Universities Accord Labor's demands 2024 rest of universities to satisfy the employment and research demands of the corporate elite and preparations for war. For funding, universities must sign "mission-based compacts" with Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve "national priorities", such as defence and the mining and processing of strategic critical minerals.

The main campus trade unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), have blocked a unified fight against Labor's militarist agenda and the restructuring, which has eliminated almost 4,000 university jobs in the past two years.

This month, the government 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, as well as repressing opposition to this war drive.

To oppose this plunge into militarism and political censorship, educators and students need to 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.

To discuss these issues, and for assistance in forming rank-and-file committees, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
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