

Australian university union funding report covers up Labor government's restructuring agenda

Mike Head
22 October 2026

Facing growing discontent among university staff over job cuts, declining real wages, rising workloads and deteriorating conditions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) last week issued a report partially documenting the chronic underfunding of Australia's 39 public universities.

It highlighted the fact that federal government subsidies to private schools totalled \$20.6 billion in 2026, almost two and a half times the approximately \$8.4 billion in federal funding provided to the public universities via the Commonwealth Grant Scheme.

The NTEU's report shows that funding per university student has fallen by 10 percent in real terms since 2013, while funding for private school students has risen by 25 percent in real terms. A graph in the report indicates that the gap has widened faster under the Albanese Labor government since 2022 than under its Liberal-National Coalition predecessors.

Between 2013 and 2023, real government funding per university student fell by 8 percent, from \$15,290 per student to \$14,067 per student. By 2024, the most recent year for which university funding data is available, it had fallen to \$13,770, a 10 percent decline on its 2013 value.

When the funding is measured by student headcount, taking into account that many students study part-time, it fell to \$10,038 per university student by 2023. By contrast, over the decade to 2023–24, real government funding for private school students rose from \$12,225 per student to \$15,262 per student.

By 2024, some university courses, including in arts and humanities, received as little as \$1,236 in annual federal funding per student—just 8 percent of the average \$15,262 in total government funding per private school student.

But the NTEU report is silent on Labor's underlying agenda—the funnelling of more than \$50 billion a year, and rising, into military spending in preparation for war, while gutting social spending, including on public education and

health, spearheaded by the cutting of \$38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) over four years.

Aside from the pouring of money into private schools, the NTEU report focusses instead on one aspect of the Labor government's record—its continuation of the previous Coalition government's Job-ready Graduates (JRG) scheme, which charges students more than \$50,000 for a three-year arts or humanities degree, loading them up with huge debts, while slashing the funding for universities providing those courses.

Under this scheme, for example, in 2024 the government per-student contribution for communications courses was just \$1,236 per year—92 percent lower in real terms than the indexed pre-JRG rate of \$15,249.

The report avoids mentioning, however, that Labor promised during the 2022 election campaign to abolish the JRG regime, but has since rejected numerous calls to do so. Also not mentioned is the main reason for Labor's stance. Apart from cutting university funding by almost \$1 billion a year, the JRG scheme is designed to try to push students into lower-fee science and technology (STEM) courses to meet the needs of the military and employers.

That is completely line with the Albanese government's record of transforming Australia into a base for a US-led war against China, providing the Pentagon and US military companies access to 110 facilities, and its stated goal of making Australia one of the world's top 10 weapons exporting countries.

In an email sent to its members accompanying its report, the NTEU appealed to them to send postcards to Education Minister Jason Clare asking him to scrap the JRG, as if postcards would change the government's policy.

According to the NTEU, repealing the JRG would fix university funding and reduce student fees to "fair levels." What the union means by fair levels is not specified. It certainly does not mean the abolition of university fees,

which is what is required to recognise education at all levels as a basic social right.

The truth is that scrapping the JRG scheme would still mean under-funding universities, while saddling students with huge fees and debts. Even before the JRG's introduction in 2021, as the report itself shows, the universities were increasingly starved of adequate funding, while students incurred debts for life.

Moreover, the Albanese government is applying extra financial pressure to the universities by setting caps on international student enrolments, and hiking their visa application fees, cutting off revenue from the exorbitant fees that universities charged them to seek to overcome their underfunding.

The NTEU report makes only passing reference to the slashing of international student numbers. This policy is part of the government's bid to match the anti-immigrant One Nation and the Coalition in making international students, along with immigrants and refugees, scapegoats for the cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis that has intensified since the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran commenced on February 28, which the Labor government rushed to support.

In fact, the NTEU campaign aligns itself with the Labor government's underlying agenda of war and austerity. Its report says universities need funding because "national security depends on domestic breakthroughs in cybersecurity, geopolitics, advanced manufacturing and defence technology." By defence technology, the report means the development of weapons production.

The NTEU report says "a strong public university system is vital to Australia's sovereign and strategic capacity" and funding must "reflect our national priorities."

It also says universities are needed to provide the skills to deal with "geopolitical uncertainty, misinformation and attempts by hostile actors to interfere in domestic politics." That is a thinly veiled reference to unsubstantiated claims of foreign interference by China, Russia and Iran.

This aligns with the Labor government's creation of a 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.

In August, the government introduced an amendment to Australia's Foreign Relations Bill to extend to individual academics, as well as institutions, new ministerial powers to outlaw relations with blacklisted overseas universities, research bodies or colleagues.

Labor's 2024 Universities Accord ties funding to the government's "national priorities," which include the AUKUS military pact against China and the mining and supply of strategic war-related critical minerals. Universities

must now sign "mission-based compacts" with Labor's new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to serve such priorities.

Far from opposing this agenda, the NTEU and the other main campus trade union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), are negotiating and seeking to push through a new wave of enterprise agreements that will further facilitate restructuring and outlaw industrial action for three years under Labor's anti-strike Fair Work Act, which bans stoppages outside narrow bargaining periods.

Over the past two years, hundreds of university courses, particularly in the humanities, such as teaching, languages, archaeology and media, have been disbanded or merged, along with the elimination of nearly 4,000 jobs.

That followed more than 4,500 redundancies during 2020 and 2021, during the first stages of the COVID pandemic, when the NTEU opposed any unified struggle.

This record demonstrates why educators and students together need to build new independent forms of organisation—rank-and-file committees—that will develop and fight for demands based on social and human need, including high-quality free education for all, not the dictates of the capitalist elite and the war machine.

To discuss these issues and how to form rank-and-file committees, contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the educators' rank-and-file network initiated by the Socialist Equality Party:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact