

Western Sydney University “Green Paper” sets out pro-war and pro-business restructuring

Western Sydney University Rank-and-File Committee
6 November 2024

Western Sydney University (WSU) management is rushing to implement a 2025–2030 Strategic Plan Green Paper that outlines a pro-business and militarist “vision” for the university’s future.

Jointly published by Chancellor Jennifer Westacott, the former CEO of the Business Council of Australia, and Vice-Chancellor George Williams, the 30-page document is a blueprint for the transformation of WSU, a predominantly working-class university, to meet the requirements of big business and a war economy.

Similar plans are being developed across the Australian university sector, in line with the Albanese Labor government’s Universities Accord report. It demands a further restructuring of universities to satisfy both the employment and research needs of the corporate elite and preparations for war.

That means funnelling more students, including from Sydney’s working-class suburbs, into courses to meet the “skill shortages” designated in employer-government “national priorities,” which feature preparations to join a US-led war against China.

The WSU “Green Paper” was released in mid-September, allowing only a month-long “consultation period” for staff and students before the plan is finalised, in time to commence in January.

The Foreword by Westacott and Williams insists that due to government cuts to funding, which are expected to worsen, and Labor’s international student enrolment caps, the university “must focus more keenly on the most important aspects of our mission.”

The Foreword directly ties this “mission” to the Labor government’s pro-business agenda and war plans. It specifically nominates “the federal government’s signature policies to achieve net zero and A Future Made in Australia, as well as the nation’s partnerships with India, Japan, and the United States through the QUAD and with the United Kingdom and the United States through AUKUS, particularly Pillar 2.”

Both the QUAD and AUKUS are US-led military and strategic alliances directed against China. Australia’s membership in these partnerships is part of the Albanese

government’s commitment to the US war drive, which includes the escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia and the expanding US-armed Israeli onslaught in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, which is spiralling into a war against Iran.

The “net zero” and “A Future Made in Australia” programs are also about subsidising and building war-related industries, taking control over critical minerals that are mostly currently exported to China and protecting supply chains that will become crucial in the event of war.

The Green Paper’s “vision” centres on subordinating both teaching and research at WSU to these requirements. First of all, this means churning out students to meet the narrow skill needs of large employers.

The strategic plan demands a shift to a “work-integrated learning and industry co-designed and co-delivered curriculum” to “ensure our students are job-ready upon graduation.”

That flows from the Labor government’s continuation of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s Job Ready Graduates package, introduced at the start of 2021, which imposed higher student fees, around \$50,000, on arts and humanities degrees.

This is designed to financially push young people away from courses that are meant to offer intellectual nourishment, historical knowledge, critical thinking and cultural enrichment into science and technology courses.

A key objective of the Green Paper is the development of a “market-driven and industry relevant product suite” with “industry-driven and market-relevant education models.”

The strategic plan is to “position Western as the partner of choice to co-create real-world solutions to skills shortages, work-integrated learning, new models of education, and upskilling needs.”

That means introducing micro-credentialling and other short courses, narrowly designed to slot students into filling employers’ “skills shortages,” inevitably at the expense of deeper and broader learning and degree programs.

For WSU researchers too, there must be “collaborative research with industry partners.” Researchers must pursue

“public funding sources such as the National Reconstruction Fund (NRF) and A Future Made In Australia (FMIA).”

The Labor government has created these multi-billion-dollar funds to subsidise corporate investment in strategic industries, all related to developing wartime manufacturing, energy and raw materials capacity.

The Green Paper adds: “Private sector investment can further strengthen this.” In other words, WSU research must be increasingly funded directly by corporate sources.

The language is entirely corporate-speak. A key ambition is to “ignite transformative collaboration, translating research for impact and commercialisation.”

This “will attract investment and forge new capabilities to service growth markets such as space, defence, bio-med, semiconducting, advanced sensing, and clean technologies, establishing the University as a collaborator of choice.”

A related ambition is to “support Government’s sovereign capability agenda.” According to a government fact sheet, this consists of “capabilities that are critical to Defence and must be developed or supported by Australian industry.”

The government’s listed priorities include the development of hypersonic missiles and other weapons, combat vehicles, aerospace, submarine and warship building facilities, AI and surveillance and intelligence capacities.

Another WSU Green Paper ambition is to push researchers and students into “entrepreneurship.” The university is to “provide entrepreneurial skills and deliver acceleration programs that enable students and researchers to establish and grow their own startups and spin-out companies.”

As the WSU Rank-and-File Committee has warned, this document underscores the reality that the job destruction and pro-business restructuring currently being inflicted at WSU College, WSU’s preparatory college, is part of a wider project.

Long-time educators at the college are being purged. They are being forced to compete against each other in a brutal “spill and fill” process, with many being denied positions in the new structure despite their experience and qualifications.

From January, students will also suffer from the elimination of courses—especially in humanities and arts—and the introduction of “block mode” teaching that crams subjects into four-week periods.

WSU as a whole is becoming a prototype for Labor’s Universities Accord. Supposedly designed to boost participation by students from low socio-economic, outer suburban and regional areas, as well as indigenous students, the Accord seeks to channel them into war-related industries.

The government’s Accord panel, which featured Australia’s highest-paid CEO, Macquarie banking group’s Shemara Wikramanayake, nominated “areas of national priority like clean energy, critical technology, minerals and defence.” All these fields are related to the geo-strategic interests of Australian imperialism and its commitment to US war plans.

The Accord report advocated “skills coalitions” of tertiary

education providers, industry and trade union “partners.” One of its examples was:

“To support AUKUS, the University of South Australia is partnering with the South Australian Government, the Australian Industry Group and the defence industry to develop university degree apprenticeships to support the construction of nuclear-powered submarines.”

This pro-war agenda ties funding to universities “negotiating mission-based compacts” with a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission. These compacts will, first and foremost, require universities to “deliver Australia’s future skills needs.”

WSU is not alone in being reshaped along these lines. Last week, Southern Cross University in the northern New South Wales city of Lismore announced that it will axe its creative arts program. It will no longer offer a stand-alone Bachelor of Arts, or degrees in contemporary music, art and design, or digital media.

The leaders of the two main campus unions, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), share Labor’s pro-business and militarist agenda. They have repeatedly urged workers and students to support Labor’s Accord, promoting illusions that it will improve university conditions.

For years, the union bureaucrats have suppressed educators’ hostility to the ever-greater corporate transformation of universities, blocking any unified mobilisation against it while pushing through enterprise agreements that enable such restructuring.

To fight this reactionary agenda, university workers and students need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to link up with workers in Australia and worldwide through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is part of a broader necessary struggle against capitalism itself and its program of ever-greater corporate wealth and turn to war.

To discuss these issues and how to form rank-and-file committees, please contact us at rfc.wsu@gmail.com, or the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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