

Australian government cuts international student numbers by decree

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Australia's Labor government is so intent on slashing the numbers of international students in the country that it has now resorted to potentially unlawful means to do so via a ministerial directive.

Having failed to get its proposed student enrolment caps through parliament last month, the Albanese government last week issued a new immigration Ministerial Direction 111, despite warnings that it could be illegal.

Signed by Assistant Minister for Citizenship Julian Hill on December 18, the direction orders the slowing of the processing of visas for overseas students once their intended university or other tertiary education provider hits 80 percent of the government's previously announced cap.

Direction 111 seeks to ensure that Labor achieves its goal of reducing enrolments by 53,000 (or 16 percent) on 2023 levels, eliminating thousands of jobs in the process in universities and private colleges.

Legally, however, the immigration department is required to process each visa. The government could try to sidestep that requirement by shifting resources to delay processing and put an effective halt on selected applications.

"Legally the government is obligated to process all offshore visa applications in a timely way... It would be illegal to deliberately engineer a backlog in order to use it as some sort of de facto cap," former Immigration Department deputy secretary Abul Rizvi told the *Australian*.

Once again, Albanese's government is seeking to outdo the openly right-wing Liberal-National Coalition in making international students, and immigrants more broadly, scapegoats for the worsening housing and cost-of-living crisis affecting millions of working-class households.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said: "[Coalition leader] Peter Dutton wants to talk tough on migration but has voted to let it rip when it comes to international students."

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on overseas migration, released this month, showed there were 207,000 international student arrivals in 2023–2024, a decrease from 278,000 in 2022–23.

The attack on international students forms part of Labor's plans to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. The Coalition has vowed to cut annual net migration even further, to 160,000, which could reduce annual international student inflows to less than 15,000.

This offensive mirrors those by the political establishments in the US and Europe—now spearheaded by US president-elect Donald Trump's pledge to mobilise the military to deport millions of immigrants. This agenda seeks to divide the working class and divert mounting social and political discontent in reactionary nationalist directions.

International students, who make up an estimated 4 percent of the rental market nationally, are not the cause of the lack of affordable housing for workers and their families. The soaring rents and home mortgage payments are the result of profiteering by billionaire property speculators and developers.

This has been intensified by the Reserve Bank of Australia's hiking of interest rates to try to drive up unemployment and cut real wages further, backed by the efforts of the Labor and trade union bureaucrats to keep imposing below-inflation pay deals on workers.

The cuts are also part of the government's anti-China agenda, in line with Labor's commitment to the US economic and military confrontation with Beijing. The universities to be hardest hit are those, such as the University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, Australian National University (ANU) and University of New South Wales, with the highest proportions of students from China. They are set to have their 2025 international student enrolments reduced by close to 15 percent, compared to 2023 figures.

Direction 111 replaces Direction 107, which cut numbers by slowing visa processing for smaller universities and students from countries with an alleged higher risk of breaching visa rules in order to work or stay in Australia.

Under Direction 107, there already had been a 60,000 decline in the number of student visas granted in the 2023 to 2024 financial year. Regional university student commencements dropped by 30 percent from 2023 to 2024.

This year, the Labor government also more than doubled non-refundable student visa application fees from \$710 to \$1,600—the highest in the world—slowed visa processing and imposed harsher English language requirements and “genuine student” tests.

In this month’s Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), Labor went further. It increased the application charge for temporary graduate visas by 14.75 percent from next February, estimated to increase government revenue by \$1.7 billion over five years.

The country’s 39 public universities have been thrown into further chaos by the government’s latest decree, announced just weeks before the start of 2025 courses. Labor’s moves have already triggered more than 2,000 job losses at universities in recent weeks alone, especially in the humanities and arts, including at ANU, the University of Canberra, James Cook University, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of Wollongong.

While allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for nuclear-powered AUKUS submarines and other weaponry, Labor is continuing to starve the universities of adequate funding. This is exacerbating a crisis produced by their ever-greater reliance on exorbitant international students’ fees because of years of funding cuts by successive Labor and Coalition governments.

This financial squeeze is also aimed at forcing the chronically under-funded universities to integrate themselves more fully with the demands of big business and the military, as set out earlier this year in the Albanese government’s Universities Accord.

The Accord insists that universities must reshape both their teaching and research in partnership with employers, and in line with the building of a war economy, including through the AUKUS pact, in preparation for a US-led war against China.

International students have been treated as cash cows as a direct result of the “education revolution” imposed by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013. This “revolution” created a corporate-style market, which forced universities to fight each other for full fee-paying international enrolments.

Since barely scraping into office again in 2022, Labor’s support has disintegrated among workers and youth because of the gutting of living standards and its backing for the US-armed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is trying to prop up the government. Far from opposing the attack on international students, the NTEU has effectively lined up behind it, while blaming university managements, not Labor, for the job losses.

NTEU national president Alison Barnes issued a media statement, saying: “Vice-chancellors have already shown a willingness to use changes to international student arrangements as fig leaf to cover their own failures, and unfairly threaten job cuts. The scaremongering must now end once and for all.”

Previously, the NTEU urged its members to sign a petition to ask the government to “phase in” the enrolment caps, claiming this would save jobs. Months later, it is ludicrously calling for “an iron-clad commitment from universities and the federal government that this ministerial direction will not lead to a single job being cut.”

A public online forum in September, organised by educator and staff rank-and-file committees at Western Sydney and Macquarie universities, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), passed an important resolution opposing Labor’s cuts to international students and calling on workers to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees to fight the cuts and the resulting job destruction.

The motion defended the basic rights of workers and young people to live, work and study wherever they choose. “This is essential to forge an international movement against war and austerity and the underlying capitalist profit system itself,” it stated.

If you agree with this call, contact the Committee for Public Education, the educators’ rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact