

NSW universities increasingly integrated into Australian military build-up

By Hugh Peters
21 February 2019

As students begin classes in 2019, universities are increasingly integrated into a military build-up, bound up with Australia's frontline role in the escalating US-led confrontation against China.

On October 15 last year, the state Liberal government of New South Wales (NSW) launched the Defence Innovation Network (DIN), aimed at expanding military research at campuses across the state.

The initiative, first announced in late 2017, is part of a broader push by Labor and Liberal-National governments at the state and federal levels to subordinate university research ever more directly to the needs of the arms industry and the military itself.

The network will function as an intermediary between the government, defence companies and universities. NSW Minister for Trade and Industry Niall Blair stated: "This Network will act as a broker—one where it can hear the problems facing industry and find the right people in our universities to solve them." The DIN was initially allocated a \$1.25 million budget. By the time of its official launch, the figure had reached \$5 million.

Underscoring the importance of DIN, the launch was attended by a number of prominent political, academic and defence industry figures, including Assistant Minister for Defence Senator David Fawcett, Minister Niall Blair and NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer Professor Hugh Durrant-Whyte.

The network has been founded under the aegis of the Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG) and the NSW state government, in collaboration with seven major universities: Macquarie University, the University of New South Wales, the University of Sydney, the University of Technology, the University of Newcastle, the University of Wollongong, and Western Sydney University.

The Defence Science and Technology Group (DST Group) is the Australian Department of Defence's principal agency for military research and development.

Operating on an annual budget of \$400 million and with a staff of 2,300, it works closely with the defence industry, universities and the scientific community to develop military technologies and capabilities.

The DST Group has been instrumental in the militarisation of Australian universities. In 2014, it announced the formation of the Defence Science Partnerships (DSP) program. According to Dr Alex Zelinsky, then the group's chief defence scientist, it would "provide a uniform model for universities to engage with Defence on research projects and ensure a consistent approach to intellectual property and cost sharing."

The DST Group has since been working to establish state-wide defence and university networks similar to the DIN. In 2010, it oversaw the formation of the Defence Science Institution (DSI) with the University of Melbourne and the Victorian government. In January 2018, it launched the Defence Innovation Partnership (DIP) in collaboration with the South Australian state government, Adelaide University, the University of South Australia and Flinders University.

The DIN has announced it will fund and promote research projects in the fields of:

- AI, cyber, autonomous systems and electronics;
- Aerospace, radar, sensors, antennae;
- Signal and image processing;
- Materials sciences and prototyping;
- Mathematical and statistical modelling;
- Quantum technologies and intelligence; and
- Advanced human performance.

DIN has made the development of advanced drone technologies a central focus of its work.

Drones have become an increasingly important part of US-led wars of aggression throughout the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. They have been used extensively to carry out mass surveillance and "targeted killings,"

which amount to extra-judicial murders.

The network is determined to meet growing demands for new drone technology. Even before the official launch, the DIN contributed \$650,000 in funding towards research to resolve problems in drone detection, as well as for the use of artificial intelligence systems in mine detection.

In October last year, DIN announced the Drone on Demand project, which includes researchers from UTS, the University of Sydney and UNSW. The project aims to develop “specialised, custom-made drones using 3D printing.” Such drones could eventually be built during combat and on the battlefield. The designs are also intended to be stealthier than existing drone models, with special rotor blades to minimise sound.

As well as simplifying the ability of the defence companies to exploit academics and researchers already working at participating universities, the network is seeking to cultivate a layer of academics ready made for the needs of the defence industry and the military.

It currently offers 14 defence scholarships for PhD students, as well as 30 defence internships for PhDs. It has also formed a partnership with the Australian Sciences Institute to provide \$230,000 in funding to place 30 specialist PhDs in the defence industry over three years.

The launch of the DIN is another step in Australia’s preparations for war. The Australian political establishment has committed itself to the US-led confrontation with its geopolitical rivals, especially China and Russia.

In November 2011, Australia, under the Greens-backed federal Labor government, served as the launching pad for the “pivot to Asia,” a vast US-military build-up directed against China. The Labor government signed a military agreement with then President Barack Obama, providing for the expansion of US basing arrangements and the ever greater integration of the Australian military into the US war machine.

This collaboration has been deepened by every government since. In 2016, the Liberal-National Coalition government, with the full support of the Labor Party opposition, boosted military spending to \$495 billion over a decade. Some \$195 billion alone is earmarked for military acquisitions.

The advanced technologies that the DIN and similar university defence networks are seeking to develop are viewed by the Australian ruling elite as essential to the catastrophic conflicts that they are preparing.

The expansion of military research has gone hand in hand with ever greater restrictions on research grants.

The federal government has imposed a “national interest” test for nationally-funded research grants, while cutting overall research funding outside military and intelligence-related fields. The Department of Defence, invoking “national security,” has demanded the unrestricted ability to prohibit the publication of research, as well the right to warrantless entry, search, questioning and seizure powers to monitor compliance with its decisions.

Successive governments have worked in concert with university management to develop extensive ties between US defence companies and Australian universities. In 2017, Lockheed Martin opened the \$13 million Science, Technology, Engineering Leadership and Research Laboratory (STELaR Lab) at Melbourne University. This is the arms manufacturer’s first multi-disciplinary R&D facility outside the United States.

In October last year, Lockheed announced that it would be the first partner of the University of Adelaide’s Australian Institute for Machine Learning (AIML), a research centre dedicated to developing artificial intelligence technologies.

Lockheed has the closest ties to the Pentagon. It is involved in developing high weaponry, including the Hellfire-II missiles used extensively in Washington’s wars of aggression.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), as the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party and the world Trotskyist movement, is committed to the fight to build an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against the source of conflict, the capitalist system.

As part of this struggle, the IYSSE over the coming year will expand its exposures of the militarisation of universities and fight to mobilise students, staff and academics against the subordination of their campuses to the war preparations of the ruling elite.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>