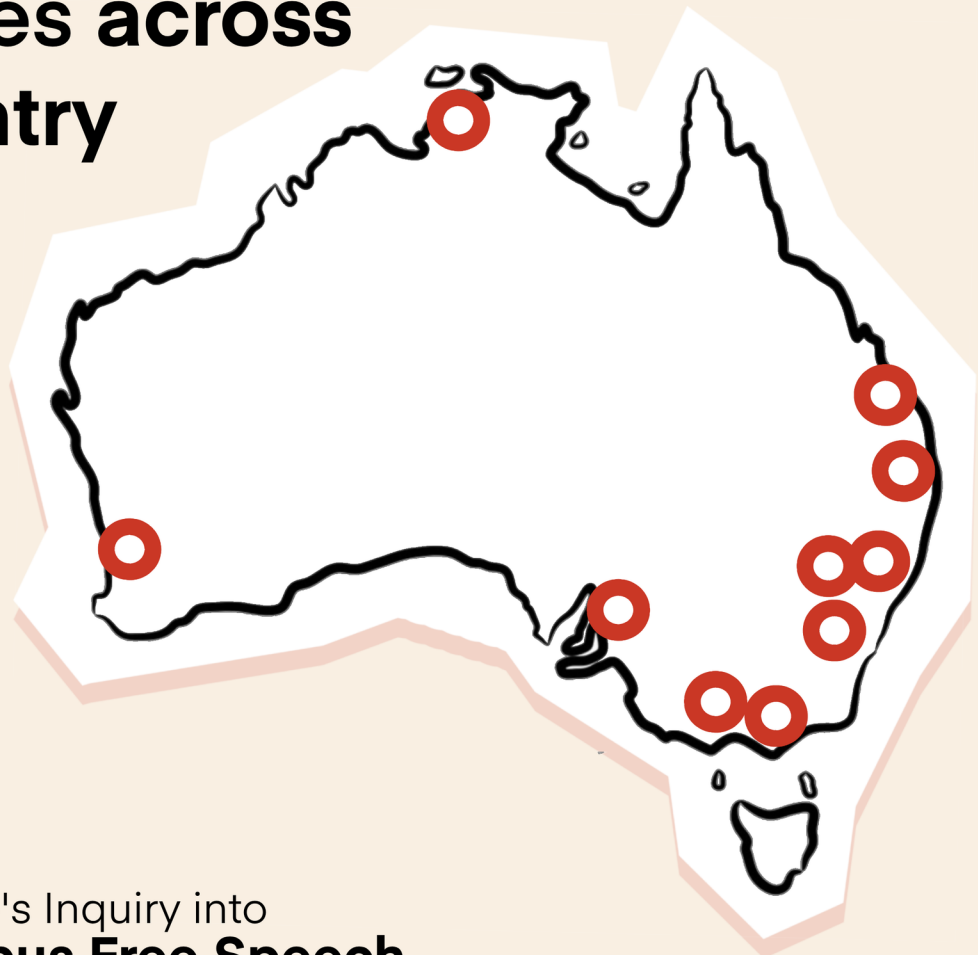


Don't talk or write about Palestine: it's a career killer

Preliminary Report of the People's Inquiry

We have received over **150**
submissions from 20 uni
campuses across
the country

June 2025



People's Inquiry into
**Campus Free Speech
on Palestine**

Don't talk or write about Palestine: it is a career killer

Preliminary Report of the People's Inquiry into Campus Free Speech on Palestine

Introduction

Palestine is a “career killer”. That was the advice given by a senior academic at the University of Queensland to a PhD student, according to a submission received from a former student and staff member. In short, if you talk or write about Palestine, don’t expect to have a career at an Australian university.

The submissions reviewed by the People’s Inquiry into Campus Free Speech on Palestine so far confirm this shameful reality. Voices have been silenced. Some have refrained from commenting on Gaza and the plight of the Palestinians in acts of self-censorship for fear of losing work or harming their career prospects.

This Preliminary Report provides extracts from 32 randomly selected submissions, demonstrating the unjustified restrictions on academic freedom, free speech and the right to peaceful protest that have produced a climate of fear on campuses across the country. That a large number of submissions were made “in confidence” is evidence in itself of a pervasive climate of fear on our campuses of repercussions for speaking out about Palestine.

The People’s Inquiry Panel has outlined **three preliminary findings** pending a more thorough assessment of the more than 150 submissions:

- 1) Australian universities have **restricted the free speech and academic freedom** of staff and students on the question of Palestine;
- 2) Australian universities have **targeted students and staff** who express support for Palestine for **surveillance and discipline**;
- 3) Universities have used existing policies and devised new policies in an opaque way to **target and censor students and staff expressing support for Palestine**.

The staff and student submissions from more than 20 Australian universities provide robust evidence that suppression of speech on Palestine is widespread and systematic.

There is a bitter irony in the fact that, as governments around the world are finally starting to condemn the brutal war on Gaza alongside a chorus of rebuke from human rights bodies and the United Nations, university staff and students are dealing with serious consequences for saying things that are now commonplace to hear even from Israeli politicians, for example, that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war. Even a former Prime Minister of Israel has stated that Israel is guilty of war crimes.¹

The People’s Inquiry aims to give voice to those whose viewpoints have been vindicated, yet subject to suppression in a climate of fear intentionally created by university administrations in tandem with those justifying Israel’s actions. It draws inspiration from people’s inquiries that have been held here in Australia and around the world that have gained recognition for their bold and critical advocacy against injustice.

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/01/world/video/gps0601-olmert-gaza-israel-war-crimes>

Public hearings

As part of the process of the People's Inquiry, public hearings are being organised to give an opportunity to university staff and students to share their experiences and for the People's Inquiry Panel to gain further information and insights.

Registration for public hearings can be found here: <https://forms.gle/qYfchPri14viaZo66>

Observers and media are welcome and should also register via the form or by contacting contact@palestineinquiry.com.

What we heard

“There is a general feeling of fear and repression throughout the university, and an expectation that staff will be punished for speaking on this topic in a ‘non-approved’ manner.”

— submission of a Monash University staff member to the People's Inquiry

Finding # 1—Don't talk about Palestine: Australian universities are restricting speech on Palestine

The People's Inquiry received multiple submissions detailing cancellation of events (e.g., films, guest lectures) on campus related to the question of Palestine or the Middle East in general. These cancellations appear to be motivated by a desire to restrict legitimate speech on the question of Palestine.

A submission from the president of the Muslim Students' Association [MSA] at the University of Western Australia [UWA] details the cancellation by the university of a talk hosted by the MSA to be given by Mr. Sam Hamdi:

“It was with great anticipation that we planned to host Mr. Sam Hamdi at the Social Sciences Lecture Theatre as a part of his notable Australia tour. This event was meant to be an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue and learning. Unfortunately we have been informed by the university that our booking has been unilaterally cancelled at UWA and that the event will not proceed on campus due to concerns about “potential prejudice to the University's duty to foster the well-being of staff and students”.

Despite our efforts to comply with every request made by the University's executive team, including a two hour long meeting with the /deputy Vice Chancellor of research, Deputy Vice chancellor of Operations, and the /director of Campus Management on the 9th of May, our attempts have been in vain. The decision to uphold the cancellation has been deeply disheartening.”

At nearby Curtin University a screening of the Oscar-winning Palestinian documentary *No Other Land* organised by Friends of Palestine Western Australia (FOPWA) and Students for Palestine Western Australia was prevented from going ahead. FOPWA's submission details the events that followed the initial room booking:

“On 25th March - one day before the scheduled film screening - FOPWA was advised of new conditions for the venue booking, firstly by phone and then by email. Use of APAN’s public liability insurance by FOPWA was declined. Additionally, the previous offer to charge FOPWA “a 10% surcharge to cover University insurance requirements if your organisation does not have its own insurance policy” was withdrawn. This had been a longstanding University policy for external bookings, which FOPWA had utilised previously.”

It is notable that Curtin University cited “recent requirements from the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA)” as the reason for the apparent changes to room booking policy. The communication from Curtin included a link to a webpage on the TEQSA website which linked to communications from TEQSA to higher education providers². The letter referred to a situation of “heightened tensions and violence” and directed universities to consider such actions as “reviewing settings and permissions for events that may escalate tensions”. Thus, directives to shut down events related to Palestine are coming “from the top”, i.e., from a government body.

In their submission to the People’s Inquiry, the Young Greens club at the University of Wollongong (UoW) stated:

“We are concerned that free speech and the right to democratic assembly have been curtailed at UOW. We have been silenced and asked not to protest against the university for complicity in its contractual obligations with Israeli weapons companies as well as bisaloy steel manufacturing.”

What is clear from the above submissions is that universities have acted to restrict speech and activities related to the question of Palestine whether by students, staff, or external organisations. Often these restrictions are justified on the basis of ensuring student and staff “wellbeing” without any apparent evidence or supporting information.

Finding #2—Surveil and discipline: police state tactics on our campuses

One of the more disturbing revelations from several submissions made to the People’s Inquiry is the use of various means of surveillance of students and staff by universities in relation to speech or activity related to Palestine.

One such example is the use of lecture recording equipment to monitor university staff in their classrooms. One confidential submission from a professor in the social sciences described experiencing “the most distressing teaching semester of my academic career”. This experience included a “Kafkaesque” meeting with the school Dean to discuss a complaint from a student about which the submitter was not allowed to know or report any details:

² URL:

<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/news-and-events/latest-news/ensuring-wellbeing-and-safety-higher-education>

“The dean then revealed that they had listened to all my recorded lectures, including discussion with students during the interactive seminar time. This alarmed me. Classrooms should be comfortable and trusting environments where students feel safe to explore ideas, however clumsily.... I am distressed at the idea a Dean can listen into recordings of seminar discussions and potentially have a situation where a clumsily worded response from a student in class is reported and subjects them to disciplinary proceedings.”

Surveillance has extended to students and student clubs, as detailed by a submission made by pro-Palestine student group Students for Palestine at the University of Sydney (USyd SFP):

“On November 6 2024, Students for Palestine submitted an Information Access Request (GIPA) [see attached] which despite heavy censoring revealed a backlog of evidence of near-daily surveillance of the USYD SFP social media posts, daily updates on Instagram Stories and even level of engagement from supporters in comments of our social media.

Months after the encampment, the University evidently combed back through our social media accounts to search for measures to discipline our members for activity engaged in during the encampment. In one video, a student tapping on the window of the Michael Spence Building for a fraction of a second as part of a student protest was screencapped and used by the University as the basis for a disciplinary proceeding against this particular student, who was accused of “intimidating conduct”.

Surveillance methods have become positively Orwellian, as detailed in a submission from a collective of PhD students and staff from several universities known as “The Withhold-Outs”:

“University of Melbourne has used wifi to track students and prosecute them for being involved in protests. Subsequently, University of Melbourne changed its wifi terms and conditions (see policy section below) to force everyone to accept ongoing surveillance, rather than respond to criticism that the university breached privacy regulations.”³

A submission from the Students for Palestine group at Melbourne University noted that when this Wi-Fi tracking technology was first introduced at the university in 2016, it came with assurances that it could not be used to identify students.

Staff and students being eavesdropped upon by lecture recording equipment; having their social media accounts combed through; and being tracked through their phones when they connect to university Wi-Fi networks—when it comes to Palestine, our universities are acting more like secret police agencies than institutions of education and free inquiry.

Finding #3—University policies are targeting pro-Palestine staff and students

Where existing campus policies have not given universities a strong enough hand to deal with pro-Palestine speech and activism, they have introduced new ones.

³ This was reported in The Age on 7 July 2024:

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/the-university-vowed-not-to-spy-on-students-now-it-s-using-tracking-data-to-punish-them-20240704-p5jr3y.html>

Probably the most high-profile example so far is the Campus Access Policy (CAP) introduced by the University of Sydney in June 2024. The CAP is referred to in several submissions, including the submission made by the University of Sydney's Students' Representative Council (SRC):

“Repeatedly, the Campus Access Policy 2024 has been used to shut down fair political demonstrations and even bake sale fundraisers on the topic of Palestine. One of the cases that comes to mind relates to the NTEU's National Day of Action for Palestine. This event involved speakers from many different groups and organisations, most of whom had no part in organising the demonstration. However, every speaker who was a student who spoke at the event was served a letter from the university's student affairs unit. The letter highlighted that the Campus Access Policy had been violated as this demonstration had been held without proper due notice, and that because such students spoke at the protest, they have been identified as potential organisers, hence the violation.”

The SRC later refers to the CAP's requirement of 72 hours' notice for protests on campus:

“The CAP's requirement for notice of any demonstration is incompatible with international human rights standards, particularly those outlined in General Comment 37 of the UN Human Rights Committee, which emphasises the importance of spontaneous protest.”

One former student at the University of Sydney who now works as a lawyer assisting asylum seekers wrote an impassioned submission regarding the university's response to pro-Palestine activists:

“The restrictive rules forbidding protests have impacted my clients, many of whom are seeking asylum in Australia on the basis of their political views, some of whom have attempted to express those views on campus, including at Sydney University, and have been suspended from their studies because of their actions in taking part in protests. This has then led to cancellation of their student visas, in turn cancelling their Bridging Visa A with access to work rights and Medicare, leaving us to have to apply for a Bridging Visa E, with no guarantees of work rights or Medicare.

What's upsetting to me about this is not only that my clients have fled countries where they were not free to express themselves, but that my own country, and my former University, has become more restrictive than some of the countries I am assisting asylum seekers to claim asylum from.”

In other cases, universities have used existing policies to restrict activities related to Palestine, as detailed in a submission by a senior academic at Macquarie University (MQU):

“In February and March 2024 several colleagues in MQU's Faculty of Arts organised an on-campus talk related to political suppression of free speech in the workplace. We included people across affected professions (a teacher, a doctor, an academic) and received approval to advertise the event using MQU's branding. Within one hour of

advertising we were contacted by our Executive Dean of Arts, via our Head of School, and told we could not hold the event on campus for “safety reasons”. The event was one week away and the Dean claimed that was insufficient time to ensure safety measures could be put in place. An unknown clause was activated in an MQU policy that allowed a Dean to postpone an event if safety was deemed an issue. We were told the Dean needed at least 4 weeks to deal with safety issues.

Knowing we could not proceed, we said we would shift to online only. We were forbidden from using MQU’s zoom account. It was not just safety that concerned the Dean but that the university risked reputational damage. Thankfully APAN allowed us to use their zoom account and we proceeded with the event.

We were also told a protocol would be put in place for future events. The faculty manager was charged with devising this protocol. To this date no one has seen the protocol.

This is a noteworthy (but not isolated) example of a university using a policy related to safety to shut down an event that was—ironically—discussing suppression of free speech and Palestine. When it was proposed to hold the event on Zoom, the rationale of “safety” was replaced with concerns for “reputational damage”. Finally, the university responded by proposing to introduce a new policy that would presumably better empower them to justify future event cancellations.

Next Steps

The findings from this preliminary assessment are sufficient to raise serious concerns about the state of free speech rights and academic freedom at Australian university campuses.

We have presented evidence from submissions detailing, among other things, the unilateral cancellation of political and cultural events; the shutting down of a bake sale fundraiser for Gaza; the surveillance and monitoring of university staff and students for their views on Palestine; and international students losing access to work rights and Medicare tied to their visa status for their participation in pro-Palestine protests.

Having received sufficient prima facie evidence of serious breaches of freedom of speech and academic freedom on Australian university campuses in relation to the question of Palestine, the People’s Inquiry will proceed to the second stage of public hearings and preparation of a final report with findings and recommendations.

People's Inquiry Personnel & Supporting Organisations

Panel

James McVicar, convenor (National Union of Students)

Hon. Prof. Gill Boehringer (Macquarie University)

Prof. Linda Briskman (Western Sydney University)

Sister Patricia Fox (Pax Christi Victoria)

Lama Qasem (Australia Palestine Advocacy Network)

Patrons

Sen. Mehreen Faruqi (Australian Greens)

Dr. Helen Jarvis (Permanent People's Tribunal)

Supporting Organisations

Australia Palestine Advocacy Network

Institute for Collaborative Race Research

National Union of Students

Students for Palestine Australia

Further information

Further information on the People's Inquiry, including the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, can be found at palestineinquiry.com

For media interviews, please contact:

James McVicar

0481 992 434

education@nus.asn.au