

Erasure in the Academy

Surveillance, Punishment
and Silencing on Palestine



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

May 2026

We acknowledge the sovereign owners of the land on which we work and learn, recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. Wherever we are in this country, we are on stolen land. Sovereignty was never ceded.

We also acknowledge the impact of settler colonialism both here in Australia and in Palestine. Palestinians continue to be subject to Israel's illegal occupation, apartheid and genocide. In the last two years, Israel has destroyed every university in Gaza.¹ This report, and the work of staff and student activists across Australian university campuses, reflects our shared humanity and our commitment to a free Palestine.

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Disclaimer

Please note the opinions and views expressed in written submissions and oral testimony to the Inquiry are those of the individuals and organisations responsible. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the panellists or those involved in the organisation and administration of this Inquiry. Every effort has been made to maintain the integrity of the original testimony through the excerpts included in this report.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals and organisations contributed to the work of the People's Inquiry. We thank the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, the Jewish Council of Australia and the National Union of Students for their endorsement and support of this Inquiry. We acknowledge the work of Students for Palestine, both for their staunch advocacy for Palestine at universities across the country and for their leadership in bringing people together for this Inquiry.

We extend our deep gratitude to Suvendi Perera and Joseph Pugliese for their comments and suggestions, as well as to Marque Lawyers and Jennifer Robinson for their legal advice. We appreciate Megan Guy and Yasmine Johnson's diligence in organising the public hearings, Katie Shammass for attending the Sydney hearing as a panel member, Lauren Skinner's high-level administrative co-ordination, and Dr Susie Latham's extensive research and analysis. Thanks to Max Hall for copyediting and designing the report.

Executive summary

This report incorporates the experiences of students and academics from 21 Australian universities. The Inquiry received 156 submissions from student clubs, student and staff unions, community groups, Palestine advocacy associations, Jewish groups and human rights organisations, and other concerned individuals.

We held public hearings where more than 30 students and staff detailed what they had witnessed at institutions traditionally regarded as bastions of free and critical thinking, and sites for the interrogation of facts, history and society. What we heard confirmed the findings of the Inquiry's *Preliminary Report*:

Australian universities have restricted the free speech and academic freedom of staff and students on issues related to Palestine.

Australian universities have targeted students and staff who express support for Palestine.

Universities have used existing policies and devised new policies in an opaque way to target and censor students and staff expressing support for Palestine.¹

Buckling under a concerted campaign from politicians, the media and pro-Israel lobby groups, university administrators have gone to extraordinary lengths to shut down pro-Palestine activism. Universities have policed speech, obstructed events, censored classroom content, intervened in teaching, changed policies to restrict

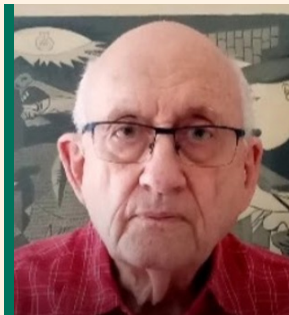
and police protest, surveilled staff and students, disciplined individuals engaged in peaceful protest, applied grossly unfair double standards, and weaponised antisemitism to shut down legitimate criticism and protest of Israel's actions in Gaza. Across the sector, we've seen these tactics used to threaten and intimidate anyone who dares speak up for Palestinian rights and against the atrocities Israel is committing in Gaza.

Palestinian, Arab and Muslim students and staff have been disproportionately affected, with some describing how their very presence is constructed as threatening and noting that they are more frequently targeted with surveillance and disciplinary proceedings. Many of the testimonies starkly reveal the underlying anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic and anti-Arab racism that is explored more fully in the recent Australian Human Rights Commission report, *Respect at Uni: Study into antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism and the experience of First Nations people*.²

The repression of free speech on Palestine on university campuses betrays the core mission of a public university and presents a broader threat to our human rights and democracy. The evidence presented to the Inquiry deserves the full attention of the Albanese Labor Government and anyone who cares about public education, democracy and human rights.

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1. The People's Inquiry into Campus Free Speech on Palestine, *Preliminary Report* (2025), <https://www.palestineinquiry.com/preliminary-report>. Isabella Michie and Ali Benton, "All universities in Gaza have been destroyed. What does this mean for Palestinians?" *ABC News*, 7 June, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-07/gaza-lost-generation-of-students-academic-say/105379150>.
 2. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Respect at Uni: Study into antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism and the experience of First Nations people* (2026), <https://humanrights.gov.au/resource-hub/race/respect-at-uni-study-into-antisemitism,-islamophobia,-racism-and-the-experience-of-first-nations-people>.

Panel members



Honorary Professor Gill Boehringer is Co-Chair of the Monitoring Committee on Attacks on Lawyers of the International Association of People's Lawyers, a member of the Judges Panel of the Permanent People's Tribunal, a former Panellist for the People's Tribunal "An Inquiry into the 'Business Improvement Program' at the University of Melbourne," and a member of Philippine–Australia Union Link, and the environmental action groups Future Sooner and Clean Water For Rivers.



Professor Linda Briskman holds the Margaret Whitlam Chair of Social Work at Western Sydney University. She conducts research, writes and teaches in the fields of human rights, migration and anti-racism, and has won awards for her work. She was co-convenor of the People's Inquiry into Detention. Linda is a member of the advisory committee of the Jewish Council of Australia and is on the committee of management of the Australian Council for Human Rights Education.



Sister Patricia Fox is a retired lawyer. She is currently Chair of the Australian Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines, spokesperson for the Asia-Pacific region of the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines, spokesperson for the Philippine Australia Solidarity Association, committee member of the International League of People's Struggles, Australia, and Victorian secretary for Pax Christi.



James McVicar is a leading organiser of Students for Palestine in Melbourne. He was the 2025 National Union of Students Education Officer.

Patrons' notes



I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to every person who wrote a submission to this Inquiry, appeared as a witness, and contributed to the administration, research and writing of this Report, and to every person who has raised their voice for Palestine and against Israel's genocide over the past two and a half years. It has been a privilege to be a Patron of this Inquiry, which is a crucial step in hearing and documenting the injustices staff and students have been subjected to at campuses around this country, to hold universities responsible and accountable, and to turn the tide of repression and suppression.

Since the genocide in Gaza began, students and staff at universities have led the way in calling out and rallying against Israel's war crimes and atrocities, but rather than upholding the tenets of academic freedom and freedom of speech, their institutions have responded by resorting to harsh measures to silence dissent when it comes to justice for Palestine.

To those who have spoken up, your courage is a beacon of hope in a world too often clouded by fear and silence. University campuses should be political spaces where students and staff are encouraged to speak out and stand against injustice. I hope this Report is one step towards a future where this is once again the reality.

Senator Mehreen Faruqi
Deputy Leader of the Australian Greens



This Inquiry is an Australian initiative, in accord with other actions, both large and small, by people all over the world to stand up for the right to express a view on this most burning issue.

I speak as a researcher for over 30 years on genocide and crimes against humanity, particularly in Cambodia, and as a Vice-President of the Permanent People's Tribunal, an organisation that grew out of the struggle for free speech to stand against the US war in Vietnam (in which Australia was also involved).

In over 50 sessions over 50 years, the Tribunal has shown the power of people's actions and inquiries, the necessity to look behind the official view of events, to analyse and to stand with people asserting their right to justice and indeed to their very existence. Victories fought for and achieved, against that war in Vietnam and against the crime of apartheid in South Africa, epitomise

the value of such people's initiatives.

As a student in Australia in the 1960s, I had the privilege of being a part of those two world-wide protest movements. At that time, it was the university campuses that were alive with teach-ins, seminars, conferences and research, leading the way for great social change. It grieves me today to see our campuses being degraded into instruments of policing, a process echoed and enforced by many of our own academics, now in positions of authority within administrations.

This People's Inquiry has opened the door to document the extent to which Australian tertiary institutions have gone to renege and even extinguish this history. I am proud to stand with both students and staff who have come forward to give their personal testimonies not only of the repression they have faced but also of their determination to reclaim traditions of free and honest inquiry and earnest debate—the very objectives our universities claim to pursue.

Dr Helen Jarvis
Vice-President, Permanent People's Tribunal

List of abbreviations

5A — Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism
ABC — Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACAR — Autonomous Collective Against Racism
AFP — Australian Federal Police
AJA — Australian Jewish Association
ANU — Australian National University
ARC — Australian Research Council
ASECA — Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism
BIPOC — Black, Indigenous and People of Colour
ECAJ — Executive Council of Australia Jewry
FOI — Freedom of information
FPM — Free Palestine Melbourne
HESP — Higher Education Standards Panel
HRLC — Human Rights Law Centre
IDF — Israeli Defence Force
IHRA — International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance
IPAN — Independent and Peaceful Australia Network
JCA — Jewish Council of Australia
MUIS — Monash University Islamic Society
MUMA — Monash University Museum of Art
NSWCCL — NSW Council for Civil Liberties
NTEU — National Tertiary Education Union
PCS — Palestinian Cultural Society
QuAC — USYD Queer Action Collective
QUT — Queensland University of Technology
TEQSA — Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency
UA — Universities Australia
UNSW — University of New South Wales
UOW — University of Wollongong
UQ — University of Queensland
UTS — University of Technology Sydney
UWA — University of Western Australia
VC — Vice-Chancellor

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Introduction

The 156 submissions and more than 30 oral testimonies that are the basis of this Final Report make for painful and disturbing reading. Many of the individual stories that students, staff members, and other activists have shared with the People's Inquiry into Campus Free Speech on Palestine ('the Inquiry') would be enough to disgrace the institution in question. Together, they are an indictment of the higher education sector. Our university leaders speak often of *excellence*, *courage*, and *free inquiry*. As you read this report, some more appropriate words might occur to you, as they did to the Inquiry's panellists: *hypocrisy*, *censorship*, *complicity*.

Our universities have made great efforts to try to silence those who spoke out for Palestinian rights. That is the unavoidable conclusion from the many and varied stories that make up this report. Free inquiry has been subverted by censorship. Knowledge has been stifled by repression. People's lives here in Australia have been turned upside down because they dared to speak up for Palestinian lives.

Background to the People's Inquiry

The idea of a People's Inquiry into the suppression of free speech on the question of Palestine emerged out of discussions between members of Students for Palestine in the wake of the campus Gaza solidarity encampments that swept across the country and globally. These encampments had been met with serious attacks and restrictions, with universities changing or attempting to change policies in response to the protest movement. This Inquiry was formed in 2024, with a coalition of academics and students looking for a way to collate and share the experiences of their peers across the country, who were facing similar attacks and attempts to silence and punish supporters of Palestine.

Students for Palestine were joined by the Australian Greens, the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, the Jewish Council of Australia, the National Union of Students, experts in People's Inquiries and academics. Representatives formed a Panel to gather and assess the evidence. An administration committee was formed to support the Panel's work. During 2025, Terms of Reference were developed, submissions were received, and public hearings were held in Sydney on 15 July, Melbourne on 18 July, and online on 15 August.

A Preliminary Report was published in August 2025, drawing on a sample of submissions.

The decision to establish a People's Inquiry acknowledged that these were not experiences that were going to be listened to or examined through ordinary, government or university-led inquiry processes. People's Inquiries originated with the Russell Tribunal, named after Bertrand Russell who, together with Jean-Paul Satre and others, organised the 1966 people's tribunal that investigated the USA for war crimes in Vietnam. The Russell Tribunal evolved into the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, which has existed as an international organisation since 1979.

People's Inquiries have since then sprung up in many countries as mechanisms to seek justice of a kind that cannot be achieved through legal, government or corporate institutions. They have become important mechanisms for examining instances of injustice, oppression and human rights abuses, gathering evidence directly from individuals and communities affected. A peoples' tribunal into Palestine, known as the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, ran from 2009 to 2014.

The context of the People's Inquiry

At the time the Inquiry was established, there were significant instances of suppression of free speech occurring across a range of areas, in particular in workplaces, the arts and the media. The scope of this Inquiry focuses on university campuses alone, while acknowledging that these experiences have not been restricted only to higher education institutions. The Inquiry focuses only on Australian campuses, noting that similar trends have been observed on university campuses in many countries.

Universities have long been important sites of activism and protest against injustice with student movements historically leading broader societal movements against oppression. They are founded on principles of academic freedom and freedom of debate, and to watch these principles be so quickly eroded is a deeply concerning trend that has had, and will continue to have, a chilling effect on our society and our fundamental right to protest. These are core tenets of democracy that are under attack both inside and outside university campuses.

Over the past two years, as supporters of Israel have gone to increasing lengths to label any and all critique of Israel as antisemitism, universities have become a crucial site of contest. Many pro-Israel figures have labelled universities as 'hotbeds' of antisemitism in the wake of the Gaza encampments, and the government-appointed Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism has identified universities as a key area of focus, introducing 'report cards' to assess how well universities are combatting antisemitism under the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition.

In the aftermath of the horrific, antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi Beach in December 2025, pro-Israel organisations and commentators were quick to link this tragedy with the pro-Palestine movement, particularly on university campuses. We utterly reject the false narrative that this terrorist attack was in any way related to university staff and students who have advocated for Palestinian rights. One can both stand against antisemitism and be pro-Palestine. Indeed, those involved in this Inquiry stand strongly against antisemitism and all forms of racism.

The silencing of people at universities stands in direct contravention of regulatory standards. The Higher Education Support Act 2003 includes legal definitions of "academic freedom" and "freedom of speech." These core principles, legislatively enshrined in university charters and policies, stand as cornerstones of our universities' missions. Yet they have repeatedly been violated without consequence, as evidenced by the powerful testimonies in this report.

The Inquiry similarly comes at a time when corporatisation is strangling the higher education sector. As university managers pay lip service to free speech and diversity of thought, academics find their academic freedom limited and are increasingly targeted for exercising it. With jobs being threatened in what is labelled a fiscal crisis, academics

who threaten the pursuit of the business model are seen as risky to the entrepreneurial project. Even more disturbing is that universities profit by engaging in partnerships with and investing in the very companies that supply component parts to the Israeli Defence Force for weapons used to massacre Palestinians.¹

Testimonies to the Inquiry and findings

The body of the report draws on the evidence, provided through written and oral testimony, to the Inquiry.

The overwhelming finding of the Report is that university managers and external commentators have gone to extreme lengths to silence, repress and shut down advocacy for Palestine on our university campuses.

It should be acknowledged that university managers engaging in this silencing and repression have been wholeheartedly enabled and encouraged by politicians from both major parties and the mainstream media, who have lied and misled the public in relation to the genocide in Gaza and the nature of the pro-Palestine movement.

The very existence of a genocide is denied and questioned by major party politicians and the media, despite overwhelming evidence from renowned international human rights organisations and findings by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, the International Association of Genocide Scholars and many others. Additionally, Palestinians, including many Palestinian journalists, have been targeted and killed for providing firsthand photographic and video evidence of Israel's violence and atrocities in Gaza.

In reading this report, we urge you to remember that these stories are also stories of the courage and humanity of the people who shared them. Some have requested anonymity, but they all deserve to be recognised. At risk of personal and professional consequences, the educators, workers, students and community members who shared their stories with us took action because they knew it was right. In so doing, they stand as part of a long and proud history that has played out on our campuses from the students who converted university buildings into sanctuaries for draft resisters during the Vietnam War to the academics who held the famous teach-ins against the crimes of imperialism.

We are proud to have played a part in bringing together and sharing the stories of such people. We are confident that the years to come will only vindicate them further, once the full scale of destruction in Gaza has become impossible to conceal. The Inquiry was convened for that very purpose. As Omar El Akkad has aptly named his recent book: *One day, everyone will have always been against this*.

1. See, for example, Gabrielle Katanasho, "Universities, Israel, and weapons companies: National student vote takes on hot-button issue," *SBS*, 28 October, 2025, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/article/national-student-vote-takes-on-hot-button-issue/2ux25f0la>; and Henry Belot, "ANU bought shares in Israeli weapons maker after pledging to stop controversial arms investments," *The Guardian*, 5 November, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/nov/05/anu-bought-shares-in-israeli-weapons-maker-after-pledging-to-stop-controversial-arms-investments>.

The silencing of free speech on campus: Evidence to the Inquiry

This section presents evidence provided to the Inquiry in 156 submissions and in personal testimonies at hearings held in Sydney, Melbourne and online. They relate to events at 21 universities across Australia. The evidence is organised into six themes aligned with the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

1. **Free expression threatened**—infringements on the rights of staff and students to engage in public political discussion, including rights protected by law.
2. **Policy shifts to thwart protest**—universities' revision of free speech and academic freedom policies to curb pro-Palestinian protest.
3. **Discipline and surveillance**—mechanisms that target staff and students for their beliefs, research, speech or activism in support of Palestinian rights.
4. **Erosion of natural justice**—the inadequacy and unfairness of disciplinary processes, and their impact on civil and political rights.
5. **Differential treatment**—disparities in how universities respond to advocacy for Palestine compared with support for Israel and the institutional harm this has inflicted on vulnerable cohorts of students.
6. **Defining antisemitism**—the role and effectiveness of definitions, particularly the IHRA definition, in a university context.

The sections that follow present testimony from submissions and hearings. Centring the voices of those directly affected, this evidence challenges the prevailing narrative of campuses as 'hotbeds' of antisemitism. Instead, it points to a broader pattern: university repression of pro-Palestine expression across protest, teaching, research and public speech is systemic, not isolated.

1. Restriction of free speech and academic freedom

One of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry was to gather information about:

1. Infringements on the rights of university staff and students to free and public political discussion and expression, including but not limited to rights sourced in or protected by:
 - a. the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
 - b. the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities;
 - c. the Commonwealth Constitution; and
 - d. the common law.

The principles of free speech and academic freedom are legislatively enshrined in Australian law. This section presents a range of testimonies that evidence how these core university principles were selectively suppressed or violated by a number of universities when staff and students engaged in legitimate pro-Palestine activities on campus.

The most publicly visible forms of protest were the encampments established by students in April and May 2024. Just over a week after the first camp was set up at the University of Sydney, Vice-Chancellor Mark Scott told the *The Sydney Morning Herald* he was allowing it to remain because:

Over the years you can go back to the Vietnam War, the conscription debate – there have always been strongly held views and intense debates ... That's part of who we are. Our instinct is never to pre-emptively shut down free speech and debate and the right to protest ... The test of free speech is not that everyone is happy with what everyone is saying.²

However, complaints asserting the camps were antisemitic by the Australasian Union of Jewish Students and a pledge by Senator Sarah Henderson, at the time Shadow Minister for Education, to establish a Senate inquiry “to investigate how antisemitism can be shut down” quickly gained wide publicity.³ Referring to the camps, Senator Henderson claimed vice-chancellors had failed to lead, stating, “the University of Melbourne and University of Sydney, in particular, have become hotbeds of antisemitic activism, in flagrant breach

2. Daniella White, “‘Part of who we are’: Why Sydney Uni vice chancellor allows protest camp to stay,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May, 2024, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/part-of-who-we-are-why-sydney-uni-vice-chancellor-allows-protest-camp-to-stay-20240430-p5fnpk.html>, accessed 14 October 2025.

3. Christopher Harris, “No-go areas for Jewish students: Pro-Palestinian university camps grow,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April, 2024, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/no-go-areas-for-jewish-students-pro-palestinian-university-camps-grow-20240429-p5fnee.html>, accessed 29 October, 2025; Sarah Henderson, “Senate inquiry into antisemitism on campus a test of leadership for Prime Minister Albanese,” 9 May, 2024, <https://sarahhenderson.com.au/senate-inquiry-into-antisemitism-on-campus-a-test-of-leadership-for-prime-minister-albanese/>, accessed 14 October 2025.

of university policies and codes of conduct which are not being adequately enforced.”

The following month, a legal team began recruiting academics and students to a class action against the University of Sydney “over allegations of failing to safeguard its students from antisemitism.”⁴ Students and their supporters told the Inquiry that around this time, universities started undermining the camps. Students from Deakin University said:

The university closed the central walkway of the campus and the location of the encampment. This significantly reduced the number of students walking past. This constituted a clear attempt to end the protest, impede the ability of students to engage freely with it, and restrict its effectiveness and reach.

University of Newcastle and students from the Australian National University (ANU) reported power to their camps being cut and toilets near the ANU camp being locked so student ID cards were needed to gain after-hours access to buildings, enabling students to be tracked. Students from ANU and Deakin University told the Inquiry that university security conducted ‘welfare checks’ on students at 2 a.m. as a means of discouraging protesters.

University of Newcastle students described security staff arriving at 6 a.m., tearing down tents with students still inside them and removing food and personal belongings from the encampment. Universities also began to issue directions to protesters prohibiting the use of particular words and phrases. Campers at the University of Queensland (UQ) were told not to display a banner saying “Refaat Alareer Hall,” use “intifada” in printed material or to chant “out, out, Israel out.” Justice for Palestine Magan-djin told the Inquiry:

All such prohibitions were accompanied by the threat of disciplinary action for non-compliance and were not adequately justified [or] founded on any legal or policy basis. All such directions provided to the students of the UQ Gaza encampment appear to have breached UQ’s Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Policy.

University of Wollongong students were emailed a directive not to chant the following phrases on university grounds: “globalise intifada,” “intifada, intifada, intifada,” and “from the river to the sea.” Students were also emailed words and phrases that were prohibited from being displayed on signs or written in chalk on university grounds: “intifada,” “from the river to the sea,” “1500 kids are dead UOW complicit,” “Bisalloy and UOW support war,” “Al-Shifa lawn,” “this Uni supports war” and “colonisation.” The emails threatened students with disciplinary proceedings for doing so.

An ANU student told the Inquiry:

The approach is to equate anti-Zionist slogans with antisemitism. Slogans such as “No one is free until Palestine is free” were falsely described as attacking “religious beliefs,” and it was claimed that such slogans were “a personal attack” on

4. Rob Harkavy, “Lawyers mull antisemitism class action against university,” *International Comparative Legal Guide*, 13 June, 2024, <https://iclg.com/news/20848-lawyers-mull-antisemitism-class-action-against-university>, accessed 16 October, 2025.

those grounds.

At Monash University:

During the encampment protests, security guards verbally informed students they could face disciplinary charges for using the phrases: From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free, Zionist or Zionism, *intifada*, and that they could also be disciplined for accusing any person of supporting or endorsing a genocide. Security refused requests to provide a list of prohibited words or phrases in writing and began confiscating ‘prohibited’ materials. Materials confiscated included a sign belonging to a Jewish student which said, ‘Jews against Zionism’ [and] a banner belonging to a student which said, ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’.

Following the New South Wales state government’s plans to ban the phrase ‘globalise the intifada’ after the Bondi terrorist attack, Jewish writer and academic Peter Beinart argued:

Does anyone really think that banning the phrase “globalise the intifada” would have stopped this father and son, who were evidently connected to ISIS, from having committed this terrible attack ... It’s simply a grave violation of people’s basic, fundamental rights to say that you can’t use the phrase “globalise the intifada.”

Intifada is an Arabic word that means uprising. It doesn’t mean uprising against Israel or Jews. It means uprising in general. The Arab Spring was often referred to as an Intifada. An Intifada, like any uprising or any revolutionary political movement, can be violent or nonviolent ... even if “globalise the intifada” is interpreted, or meant by the speaker, as a call for violence, we allow people to call for violence on the streets all the time.

If people protest in defence of Ukraine’s right to fight against Russia and protest for their government to give arms to Ukraine, they’re protesting in support of Ukrainians using violence ... if someone goes out in a protest and says, Israel has the right to defend itself, I stand with the IDF, in the wake of what Israel’s been doing in Gaza, those are endorsements of violence. People have the right to say those things. People have the right to participate in political speech ... around a whole range of different things. People often endorse violence of various forms that they believe will serve their political ends.⁵

In an episode of ABC television panel show Q and A, Arabic speaking journalist Maher Mughrabi, who is of Palestinian parentage, had the following exchange with host Patricia Karvelas:

Maher Mughrabi: ... the word fight has a lot of associations. When you say

5. Peter Beinart, “Don’t Ban ‘Globalize the Intifada,’” *The Beinart Notebook*, 23 December, 2025, <https://peterbeinart.substack.com/p/dont-ban-globalize-the-intifada>.

you're going to fight for your rights, you can mean that you're going to take up a petition, or you're going to campaign, or it can mean that you're going to start punching people out, or it can mean that you're going to pick up a gun, right? Fight can mean all those things. Are they going to ban the word fight on university campuses? *Intifada* is a word that means ... to shake off.

Patricia Karvelas: Yeah, but it has a particular memory in Israel.

Maher Mughrabi: That may be, but it has a particular memory for Palestinians as well, which is of civil disobedience.

Patricia Karvelas: Jewish people remember it in a very specific way, in the form of suicide bombings and deaths in Israel.

Maher Mughrabi: So, forbid the word on that basis? ... If the government ... makes one community's view on a word the metric, one community that here enjoys more political power than the Arab community does at the moment, where does that end, precisely?⁶

Many academics and students who gave evidence to the Inquiry argued freedom of speech restrictions on university campuses were applied in a racially loaded manner that revealed double standards in relation to whose voices could be heard and whose were censored and suppressed. Multiple submissions noted the word *intifada* is used to describe a rebellion, resistance movement or social uprising. A Students for Palestine group argued that the banning of its use:

Not only breaks the principle of freedom of speech, but actually betrays a particular anti-Palestinian (and anti-Arab) bias of the university, in banning a non-English word because it is perceived as “threatening.”

The University of Western Australia (UWA) Students for Palestine club told the Inquiry it planned an event to paint a banner with the phrase “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free”:

This event was cancelled after the UWA stated that usage of the phrase would breach UWA Policy if used in non-academic contexts. The official description for the banner paint defined the slogan as “a call for peace, freedom, and democratic rights for all people living in the region between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.” The University issued a warning that Students for Palestine could face disciplinary action or disaffiliation if we proceeded with it.

ANU students told the inquiry that the university informed them of a complaint about displaying a banner saying “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free” on a stall. The university argued that many people consider the phrase antisemitic and that its use

6. ABC Q and A, “Gaza, Ukraine and the public space,” YouTube video, posted 27 May, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDj-aDbbQb0>, 19:35.

was unnecessary. While emphasising their right to free speech, protest and academic freedom, it cited the student code of conduct to order students not to use the phrase in writing or verbally. A Curtin University academic told the Inquiry:

At Curtin University students were threatened with expulsion for using the term “From the River to the sea.” The students had no hearing [and] were not allowed any right of reply. This was a purely an intimidatory undemocratic act at the behest of the Zionist lobby who tried to conflate [threat with] the pro-Palestinian camps calling for peace, justice and human rights for all Jews, Palestinians, Christians and Arabs living between the river and the sea and divestment from arms contracts with Israel.

Several submissions to the Inquiry contested the meaning of the phrase ascribed to it by universities. A Jewish academic told the Inquiry:

The way in which Palestine is discussed at universities prioritises Zionist understandings of what constitutes knowledge about Palestine. For example, the chant ‘from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,’ is patently not antisemitic, but is a call for liberation and freedom for all people.

A student argued:

The call is for equality in a demonstrably apartheid state – as confirmed by the International Court of Justice ruling [and] multiple reports from human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (2022)⁷ and B’Tselem (2021).⁸ Conversely – the term has been used by Israeli leaders for colonial effect. The original Likud Charter used this terminology,⁹ the right-wing UK Israeli Ambassador used this terminology.¹⁰ Netanyahu presented a map at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023 which had no mention of Palestine on it and a continuous representation of Israeli territory from the river to the sea.

A Queensland lawyer with over 50 years of experience argued:

If our university policies (and our laws) are to be founded on principle, equivalent conduct needs to be treated equally. Not to do so would be discriminatory, somewhat ironically in the context of anti-discrimination policies. Justice

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7. Amnesty International, “Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians,” 1 February 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/>, accessed 15 October, 2025.
 8. B’Tselem, “A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is Apartheid,” 12 January, 2021, <https://www.btselem.org/apartheid>, accessed 15 October, 2025.
 9. Jewish Virtual Library, “Likud Party: Original Party Platform,” 1977, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/original-party-platform-of-the-likud-party>, accessed 15 October, 2025.
 10. Robert Tait, “World should recognise Israel’s historic claim to land from river to sea, minister says,” *The Telegraph*, 22 May, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/11624355/World-should-recognise-Israelis-historic-claim-to-land-from-river-to-sea-minister-says.html>, accessed 15 October, 2025.

demands that the same principles apply to all. It is reasonable to consider this merely an expression of a political viewpoint. It is capable of numerous shades of meaning. It should be treated as a legitimate expression of opinion and protected under our free speech ethos.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) ACT branch told the Inquiry it was concerned that the ANU was not complying with its policy to ensure academic freedom and freedom of speech. It argued:

The ‘duty to ensure that no member of staff and no student is subject to threatening or intimidating behaviour’ is not being observed in relation to the actions of ANU Executive towards participants in the ANU Gaza Solidarity encampment ... a legitimate and peaceful form of protest ... exercising lawful speech under the policy. NTEU notes that the topic of protest is controversial. However, NTEU also notes that the ‘duty to foster the wellbeing of staff and students’ importantly ‘does not extend to a duty to protect any person from feeling offended, shocked or insulted by the lawful speech of another.’

This point was also emphasised by the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC), who argued:

International human rights law provides a principled framework for balancing competing rights and interests. It is designed to protect against racial hatred and incitement to violence, while also safeguarding controversial and uncomfortable speech that does not meet that threshold. As such, it offers a far more rigorous and protective standard than the increasingly common appeals to “safety” or the avoidance of “offence” or “discomfort” ...

Nevertheless, UWA students advocating for Palestine told the Inquiry they were instructed that even making a true statement could still constitute inappropriate behaviour if it caused others to be distressed, offended or fearful. Similar statements were made to students across many institutions.

Policing speech

The Inquiry heard that, despite university positions on speech and actions about Palestine being unclear and evolving, consequences for perceived breaches were serious. An academic described attending an event for RMIT NTEU members:

... To come together for poetry readings, short speeches and quiet shared reflections about the genocide in Gaza one year on. The gathering was held outside on campus in a public area. Around 13 people participated in the event. Someone was in the middle of offering an Acknowledgement of Country when around four armed police walked towards our gathering. They had clearly been called by the university. There was also a large number of security guards encircling our group from a distance of around five metres. There were more security people and police than there were people attending the teach-in. I was so shocked that the university would call the police on its own employees. It was

such a peaceful gathering and many of us shed a tear.

Universities also called the police on students. University of Melbourne students said ten police attended a pro-Palestine rally attended by about 30 people, calling it “an unprecedented police presence on campus, in direct response to Palestine solidarity activity.”

Swinburne University students told the Inquiry that posters that mentioned Palestine were removed and police were called when they were collecting signatures for a student general meeting to discuss the University’s ties to Israel. Police told students the University could request police remove them from campus if they did not stop.

Both students and staff also reported that even indicating support for Palestine in passive ways was policed by universities. A student reported:

In one discussion regarding research profiles on the university website, a head of department stated that someone needed to monitor the profiles to ensure “people aren’t just putting up stuff saying Israel is bad and saying free Palestine.” As an Arab woman, this comment was deeply unsettling. It revealed an implicit censorship that discouraged any acknowledgment of or advocacy for Palestinian issues. Knowing that any mention of Palestine in my profile would likely be scrutinised was both confronting and disheartening. This experience was particularly troubling given that my research and career deeply intertwine with justice and sovereignty.

An academic told the Inquiry that, after they ‘liked’ posts on social media:

I had several meetings with leadership. I was requested not to talk about Gaza or the Israel–Palestine conflict, nor wear any Palestinian symbols or cultural attire. I was specifically told not to wear a keffiyeh on campus.

An ANU staff member was told a direction from “higher-up” prohibited displaying symbols of support for Palestine in the workplace—even a watermelon—because they are political. However, their display of rainbow pride and Indigenous rights material had never been deemed inappropriate.

The demonisation of watermelons is reflected in a document distributed at the 2025 Australian Mayors Summit Against Antisemitism, at which various symbols and phrases were ascribed preposterous meanings by supporters of Israel. A watermelon was described as “a subtle yet insidious threat” that represented “the desire to replace Israel with a Palestinian state.”¹¹

Several submissions to the Inquiry outlined the rights to free expression enshrined in various instruments. The group Demilitarise RMIT said:

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that: “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds”. The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities likewise states that,

11. Combat Antisemitism, “Antisemitic Symbols since October 7” (2025), <https://combatantisemitism.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Antisemitic-Symbols-Report-2025.pdf>, accessed 25 October, 2025, 5.

“every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief,” including the right to “freedom of expression which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, whether within or outside Victoria.”

Yet, restrictions on speech reached absurd levels across multiple universities. Queensland University of Technology (QUT) students were told by university management:

“You should avoid using phrases like from the river to the sea or the G-word.” When we asked him if he meant ‘genocide’, he said yes. He elaborated that phrases like “QUT supports genocide” is something “the university would take very seriously.” He denied that he was restricting our right to free speech. However, he also maintained that use of the word ‘genocide’ by our members could result in discipline. He warned against correlating the weapons companies’ presence on campus with the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

These directives were sometimes delivered by campus security personnel. University of Technology Sydney (UTS) students told the Inquiry they were:

Approached by security regarding leaflets advertising a forum titled “Exposing UTS’ ties to genocide.” This forum discussed the university’s memorandum of understanding with Thales, a French weapons company, which supplies armed drones to the IDF. Security staff, wearing body cameras, took photos of the leaflets and the student ID cards of activists, and then instructed them to cease handing out leaflets because their use of the word “genocide” was offensive, and would not be permitted. Head of security had been instructed to advise us that UTS management’s decision to ban the leaflet was because the material could cause emotional harm to those who disagreed with us. Activists were forced to proceed with a new version of the leaflet and poster which censored the word genocide.

Another student reported:

Security guards were following students putting up posters advertising pro-Palestine rallies on campus; the security guards tore down posters, and claimed they were told by their bosses to take down anything that had the word ‘genocide’ on it – they had been instructed to prevent the distribution of material that criticised Israel, and the University of Melbourne, for complicity in the genocide of the Palestinian people.

This systematic removal of posters advertising events about Palestine by university security and cleaning staff occurred across several universities. University of Wollongong (UOW) students told the Inquiry:

UOW has made a concerted effort to remove all posters or printed media placed around the University ... footage shows high-ranking employees of Menzies group, contracted to do facilities management at UOW, removing Pro-Palestine

media or media critical of UOW's ties to Israel.

La Trobe University students had a similar experience:

One student was emailed by the University's security service in regard to posters for a student union election prior to October 7 2023 that read "Free Palestine." After October 7 2023, this student was told the university took antisemitism seriously and was threatened with disciplinary action if further posters were put up. The poster made no reference to Israel or Jews ... Posters put up about the Student General Meeting were also frequently removed by security including official pinboards for club and student union announcements and events.

At RMIT, a student "was assaulted by an RMIT Security Officer while putting up posters relating to an event on campus that was discussing Palestine. The Security Officer was required to offer an apology."

Students of a club involved in advocacy for Palestine at Adelaide University described its attempt to restrict their ability to hold information stalls:

Throughout O-Week and Week 1, the club received multiple complaints. The emails cite a breach of the student misconduct policy without citing a specific section. University administration, sometimes accompanied by numerous security guards, would come to our stalls daily and inform us the stall was against university policy and request we pack down. The university says the main issue was not using the booking system ... [and] argued that not booking stalls was a threat to student safety. The policy against stalls is not a new policy, but our ability to run stalls has never been contested in this organised way by the university.

University of Sydney students told the Inquiry:

Pro-Palestine murals in the Graffiti Tunnel were erased. Palestinian flags were banned from being displayed at the December Info Day.

Students for Palestine QUT told the Inquiry they were instructed by security to remove an A-frame advertising a student meeting. When they pointed out that another club had displayed one earlier, they were told:

"This is different" because "This is political propaganda." He later said, "We do treat your club differently to other clubs" and "You have an outside agenda."

Similarly, when some QUT students were handing out leaflets for a special general meeting, they were told to move on by security:

We were wearing QUT Guild t-shirts and handing out Guild-endorsed leaflets. We explained the Guild is constitutionally required to inform students about this meeting and their right as Guild members to attend. The security supervisor said, "Campus is supposed to be apolitical." He ignored our statement of our right to free speech and threatened to call the police on us for trespassing.

Deakin University staff members told student protesters that two emails sent to staff a week apart, which had communicated the purpose of the encampment and advertised protests in support of it, had been deleted from their inboxes by the university. Deakin also removed from its IT system a petition which accumulated over 500 staff and student signatures in one day supporting the students' rights to protest and exercise free speech, and opportunities to engage in critical discussions related to Palestine and Gaza on campus.

Several submissions referred to industrial rights to academic freedom and freedom of speech enshrined in NTEU Enterprise Agreements. However, academics told the Inquiry they were also specifically instructed not to use specific words and phrases while advocating for Palestine.

In 2024, an NTEU branch asked staff to record any censorship of their anti-genocide or pro-Palestinian views as well as any retaliation to the expression of those views. Staff reported the targeted removal of posters from office doors or shared spaces, being told by their supervisors “not to post anything ‘political’ on our Teams Site” and that teaching a tutorial at the student encampment “would endanger my contract.” One respondent said a direction to remove a poster from their door was “an act of censorship and curtailment of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression.”

Such directives were often justified by reference to university policies such as staff use of IT facilities. An academic who had ongoing research collaborations with Palestinian researchers included a “Scholars Against the War on Palestine” logo in their email signature. They were ordered to remove it immediately despite the logo clearly indicating their position does not imply endorsement by their institution.

A submission to the Inquiry from HRLC on freedom of speech, academic freedom and the right to peaceful assembly stated:

These rights are foundational to democratic societies and critical to the functioning of universities as spaces for inquiry, dissent, and political engagement ... policies and actions that undermine the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, academic freedom, and privacy on campus ... risk having a chilling effect on intellectual freedom, political engagement, and democratic participation on campus.

Obstructing events to suppress free speech

Another way university managements repressed and censored free speech on Palestine was by deploying bureaucratic mechanisms to block, ban or hamper events, including fundraisers, talks and film screenings. As evidenced below, the concerns cited as justification for these impediments, and the threat of disciplinary action against those organising events, were often ludicrous.

Students organised a bake sale to raise money for the family of a student in Gaza. The Inquiry heard:

The stall was decorated with a keffiyeh, a poster that said, “One child is killed every 10 minutes in Gaza,” and stickers and flyers promoting the National Week of Action for Palestine. As the stall was being set up, USyd Protective Services

took pictures without consent, then approached the organisers, questioning if they had “booked” a space for their stall – a draconian rule established following the student encampment. The security guards then demanded the organisers shut down the bake sale. When questioned afterward, [university management] said it was due to legislation related to what food can be sold on campus, citing concerns that the items at the bake sale may contain nuts.



The bake sale at the University of Sydney

A student involved in the bake sale was later emailed by the university about a complaint “in relation to erecting a temporary structure on campus.”

Students at UQ explained how the university attempted to block a screening of the film *Israelism*, which follows Jewish Americans learning more about Israel and Palestine:

The email from the University read: “We understand the film scheduled to be screened in the Great Court this Saturday 18 May is unclassified. It is unlawful to screen an unclassified film in a public space in Queensland, which would include the University. Under UQ policies, unlawful conduct or illegal activities are prohibited on University land, so the proposed screening must not proceed.”

This information is false. The Queensland government website clearly states that “educational, current affairs, religious, social sciences and natural history films” are exempt from classification rules. The organisers contacted the government classification department and confirmed there was no legal reason to bar the screening. This was communicated to the university through email, and the screening went ahead after being postponed for a week.

University of Sydney students were told their encampment needed to be shut down because it was damaging the lawns. Deakin students noted that after marching to the library on the second last night of the encampment, some received written warnings alleging “a breach of Deakin’s Conditions of Library Use Procedure.” A student told the Inquiry

they experienced:

Gaslighting and deflecting [of] the issues, implying that the concerns of students and staff about genocide carry no weight ... [A colleague] insisting that students are not being punished for protesting but for property violations (e.g. limiting access to fire extinguishers during occupations) ... It is upsetting to me to find these intellectually bankrupt positions pushed onto me in my close working relationships with seemingly reasonable, progressive academics. To me, this speaks volumes about the politics of university management.

UWA students told the Inquiry their academic freedom had been infringed by the university cancelling a meeting:

It was with great anticipation that we planned to host Mr. Sami Hamdi as part of his notable Australian tour to give a talk “Geopolitical situation of Muslims in the West, and the lack of Leadership.” This event was meant to be an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue and learning. Unfortunately, we have been informed 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, our attempts have been in vain. The decision to uphold the cancellation has been deeply disheartening ... The alternative location booked was Cannington Leisureplex, and it was also cancelled by them due to external pressure.

[We] wish to express our profound dissatisfaction, frustration and disappointment with this outcome ... academic freedom, the cornerstone of educational institutions, should be vigorously defended and not undermined. We assert that fostering well-being also includes upholding the diversity of thought and the robust exchange of ideas. We stand firm in our commitment to academic freedom and assert our right to engage in meaningful dialogue. We will continue to seek avenues to voice diverse perspectives and engage in open discourse.

UWA also effectively banned another meeting later that year. Reporter Barry Healy told the Inquiry that the Palestinian Cultural Society (PCS) student club organised a speaking event featuring Indian left-wing intellectual Vijay Prashad, titled “Palestine: Hyper-imperialism and the Global South.” They booked a university theatre for the afternoon of 6 November, printed and distributed posters. Students were told to stop publicity until they received formal authorisation, following which they heard nothing for weeks.

I contacted the UWA vice-chancellor’s office ... pointed out that Prashad would be speaking at Murdoch on the evening of November 6 and asked why there was a problem at UWA ... I received no response, but the PCS were notified they could use another, smaller and less well-known venue on UWA campus. However, the permission came with a caveat that effectively made the event

impossible. UWA directed that because examinations would be in progress the event would have to be on the evening of November 6, exactly at the same time as the Murdoch event. A PCS spokesperson said: “The administration tangled us in classic bureaucratic snares. They didn’t officially ban the event, which they know would be a scandal. Their hands are technically clean, but the effect is the same.”

Club members then booked the Rod Evans Community Centre, a public venue operated by the Perth City Council. The booking was verbal, by phone and the PCS received an email stating that the Centre was “able to accommodate you.” However, the day following the booking, Perth City Council staff notified the PCS that there “had never been a booking” and in any case the venue was not available for “political events.” I quoted the PCS spokesperson saying: “If we were not Palestinian, neither the university nor the City of Perth would be clamping down on our right to free speech and academic freedom. Every day, we watch in horror as our own family members appear on the news in Gaza; why must we then struggle just for the right to call for an end to our suffering?” Finally, the event was successfully held at the Boorloo Activist Centre.

Room bookings were also used to obstruct an event at RMIT:

In early August 2024, Demilitarise RMIT was invited to partner an event with Free Palestine Melbourne (FPM) and the Jewish Council of Australia (JCA). The event was a panel discussion between Saree Makdisi and Louise Adler to discuss Makdisi’s book, *Tolerance is a Wasteland* (2022). Saree Makdisi is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California. Louise Adler is an editor, publisher and leader across the arts sector in Australia.

Demilitarise RMIT booked a room for the event to be held on Thursday, August 29. On the 20th of August, we received notification that more information and a security risk assessment form were required. On August 23, 2024, we received an email that they would be cancelling the room booking because “the conflict in Gaza is something that is affecting so many in our community and our priority is to ensure that everyone in our RMIT community feels safe and included.”

Organisers argued that disallowing an expressly interfaith, inclusive event impinged on their right to protected political activity as expressed by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, stating:

We have briefed a number of organisations interested in the University’s decision, including the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, National Tertiary Education Union, and Australian Palestine Advocacy Network, given our regular collaboration with these and other groups to host successful and peaceful public discussion events. If RMIT upholds the decision to cancel the room booking, we will regrettably need to make a public statement outlining the reasons for a venue change.

The decision was then reversed, and the event went ahead. RMIT soon after attempted to alter significant policies affecting room booking and guest speakers.

Students from UOW described “having multiple room bookings for public meetings rejected, one of which was a meeting titled ‘Palestine, Apartheid and Colonialism’ with the event description ‘Come along and learn about the history of Palestine. 75 years of occupation, colonisation and apartheid in Palestine.’”

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry that securing a room for this Inquiry to hear from students and staff was obstructed by the university. Despite a room booking being made a month earlier, at 7 p.m. the evening before it took place, the university required organisers to agree by 9 a.m. to supply a list of attendees and to allow a security presence, the event being recorded, the recording being handed to the university, and university representatives to attend the hearing.

Academics for Palestine South Australia described how a request for a non-political fundraiser for victims in Gaza through UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières’ Gaza appeals was rejected. The reason given was that “the nature of the current conflict in the Middle East is too politically sensitive to allow for the University’s official involvement.” They also noted that one university medical school refused to share a request for support for remote teaching, resource sharing, research collaborations, administrative assistance or funds to help continue the education of medical students in Gaza, stating, “unfortunately, at this time, the University is unable to support your request” despite “sharing community concerns regarding the distressing situation in the Middle East.”

A University of Melbourne medical student told the Inquiry they were not allowed to hold a stall about Palestine at a conference for medical students, framing the prevention of war as a public health issue. This was despite a letter published in *The Lancet* medical journal labelling Australian medical leadership’s silence on the issue a moral failure. At the conference, electronically submitted questions about Palestine were also deleted.

A University of Queensland student told the Inquiry, “A group of early career scholars organised a series of talks on Palestine/Israel at the department. After the first talk, the Department shut down the series.” An academic at a university in Sydney told the Inquiry, they were:

Banned from running an academic seminar, and a public symposium about Palestine on ‘security’ grounds. We eventually ran the academic seminar but were banned from advertising it publicly to colleagues at other universities. This is completely unprecedented. Academics never have to ask permission to run academic events, let alone have the right to do so denied.

Another academic told the Inquiry their university refused permission for an event featuring a globally regarded academic:

Unfortunately, at a meeting allegations were made about [their] public position, these followed closely after comments about their nationality and views on the situation in Gaza. These allegations were untrue however coloured the approach of the senior leadership team, who ultimately refused permission on the basis of there being an unacceptable risk associated with the event. The nature of the risk was not articulated, nor was there any opportunity to ameliorate it ... the knee jerk reaction to refuse permission lacked courage and betrayed

the aims of the university and its commitment to academic freedom.

Murdoch University students told the Inquiry:

We tried to organise a vigil on campus to pay tribute to lives lost. We planned for a Murdoch University academic to do a lecture on the genocide. We had also planned for one of our members, who is Palestinian, to read a poem in Arabic which has been passed through her family. We were unable to get approval from campus security who claimed that any speeches would make our event a protest rather than a vigil. We were forced to abandon this event, as without approval from security we were concerned that it would result in disciplinary action.

University of Sydney students described Vice-Chancellor Mark Scott personally declaring a meeting by student activist group Solidarity was to be banned. The meeting was entitled “Palestine, the Case for a Global Intifada” and was banned on the grounds that it “may be linked to support for terrorist activities.”

“Safety reasons” were the grounds given by Macquarie University for cancelling an on-campus talk, ironically related to political suppression of free speech in the workplace. The event featured a teacher, a doctor and an academic. Despite initially receiving approval to advertise the event using the university’s branding, within an hour of advertising, university support was withdrawn. When organisers suggested hosting it online, they were told they could not use the University’s Zoom account.

University concerns about reputational damage were widely reported to the Inquiry. Monash Student Association took issue with a student code of conduct introduced in March 2025, which includes the requirement not to adversely affect Monash University’s reputation or to disrupt any University-related activity. Some submissions argued reputational damage was connected to pro-Palestine actions which called for universities to cut ties with weapons companies connected to Israel’s attacks on Gaza. RMIT students argued:

Staff and students must submit a risk assessment for approval prior to booking a facility for ... “events or activities that are likely to expose RMIT to significant financial or reputational risk.” It could be considered a “reputational risk” for students and staff to call out RMIT ties with weapons companies.

Universities and weapons companies

Students and staff referenced the financial partnerships of many Australian universities with arms manufacturers implicated in the Gaza genocide. Former Greens Senator for NSW, Lee Rhianon, told the Inquiry:

Thirty-seven Australian universities participate in the Defence Science Partnership, a program that opens up research pathways with the Australian Defence Department. This partnership is how some of the world’s largest arms companies gain access to publicly funded university facilities and grants and univer-

sities boost their own budgets by signing up. Public money gained in this way links armaments companies with leading academics and top students working on AI, cyber security and specialised scientific, engineering and communication fields ...

These companies are working closely with the Israeli authorities ... Safran made a half million dollar grant to ANU... Flinders University offers internships with defence companies like BAE Systems, Northrup Grumman, Naval Group ... The University of Sydney receives millions of dollars from the US and Australian governments for military research ... that is then sold to companies like Thales ... Lockheed Martin and Boeing are entrenched in a number of our universities.

The involvement of arms manufacturers in higher education like all corporate involvement has been an attractive pathway for successive federal governments. Both Labor and coalition governments have regularly cut back on the budget they allocate to our universities.

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) told the Inquiry universities' deep ties with weapons companies were being prioritised over concerns of students:

As publicly funded institutions for the common good, universities should operate independently from the military industrial complex. Fee-paying students are active stakeholders in a university and must have the right to ask questions and express concerns about ties between their own institutions and companies with military-industrial links.

A Western Sydney University student told the Inquiry three students were arrested after a protest demanding the University stop investing in weapons companies and research partnerships, such as its International Centre for Neuromorphic Systems. The Centre works with defence forces and weapons companies including BAE Systems, which has been linked to the Gaza genocide. UOW students also highlighted financial ties between their university and weapons manufacturing:

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 Bisalloy Steel manufacturing.

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry that they believed the institution's ties to Israel, including an exchange program, and its desire to deepen its defence programs were behind the repressive measures it deployed:

The university's crackdown on the articulation and mobilisation of anti-Israel sentiment is exactly in line with its chosen solidarity with genocideers and their supporters.

A University of New South Wales (UNSW) student told the Inquiry:

University managers defend Australian imperialism and its ties to the US and Israel. Defend its ties to defence research and its investments in weapons companies. UNSW has a whole Australian Defence Force Academy campus in Canberra. It's been given a billion dollars to build a new defence campus which is going to be at the cutting edge of nuclear engineering research and degrees. You can study a Masters of War at UNSW. You can take courses on explosives. The university doesn't like having its bloody hands exposed.

One submission to the Inquiry detailed a staff member submitting a question in an all-staff forum which referenced the university's partnerships with defence companies supplying "the Israel Defence Force's genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine." The question was not answered in the forum. When replies to questions not addressed were later sent to staff, the question had been changed to reference "defence companies with ties to Israel."

Classroom censorship

University restrictions on free speech also impinged on learning spaces and academic work. The inquiry heard that Monash University directed academics to take specific actions to censor the physical environment, including:

Review and remove any materials unrelated to unit content that might impact the learning atmosphere, including posters, whiteboard content, materials left on tables, or notices on entry and exit doors ... In online learning settings, consider if virtual backgrounds and online images may cause harm to some students and impact the learning environment ... Do not allow non-unit related announcements to be made in the classroom.

This extended at a different university to an academic being reprimanded for having allowed an announcement before the lecture started:

A student gave an announcement before class about a protest against the genocide in Gaza. This is in keeping with norms at the university. I received an email from my manager regarding my conduct, stating students should not be allowed to discuss the Israel–Gaza conflict, even before the class.

A University of Melbourne student trying to give a lecture announcement was told by a staff member they should not use the words "ceasefire" or "anti-Zionist." Following a lecture announcement about a protest in support of Palestine, every student in a University of Sydney class received a message stating:

The classroom is "not the forum for the expression of political opinions about contemporary armed conflicts which can be very stressful for students and staff who do not share the same views, and feel uncomfortable – for reasons like race, ethnicity, gender or religion – trying to express their views which may be contrary."

Academics for Palestine South Australia noted that universities' silence on Gaza stood in stark contrast to their actions in support of Ukraine, which included statements, fund-raisers, public speaking events, official gatherings, support resources, published articles and blogs. Their submission stated that "informal conversations around the Ukraine conflict were a welcome topic among staff." They went on to say:

No South Australian university ... used the words 'Palestine' or 'Gaza' in any communication until ... UniSA's VC mentioned Gaza in passing as one of the major ongoing conflicts along with Sudan and Ukraine ... We are deeply concerned about the way in which South Australian Universities have turned their backs on what is one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our generation.

Highlighting the contrast, an academic told the Inquiry:

Since October 2023, individual researchers and academic units at the University of Melbourne have been explicitly prohibited from issuing statements of solidarity with Palestine, and Department heads have been threatened with disciplinary consequences for doing so.

A senior postgraduate student with extensive experience in the human rights sector told the Inquiry they were not involved in any protest activity, but after discussing their research relating to Gaza with other scholars, were advised to avoid doing so as it could make another student uncomfortable:

I pointed out that discussing Gaza is perfectly legal and I am well aware of the boundaries of lawful speech. I was quite upset. It's difficult work to support people facing annihilation (at the time of discussion, Gaza had been deprived of food for months and children were starving to death) is not enough, being silenced even when speaking in the most measured way, together with draconian measures taken against students, feels like erasure of a people from the academy.

They were trying to do the right thing and look out for me so that I would not get in trouble in a context of very vague rules. The real problem is the University's broad policy statements and vague definitions of antisemitism, rooted in IHRA definitions, [which] lead staff to interpret any criticism of Israeli policy as potentially antisemitic or offensive. I didn't even criticise Israel – I simply stated complications with humanitarian efforts.

A submission to the Inquiry outlined the censorship of an engineering student's post to a class discussion board. The subject focused on the critical evaluation of engineering projects, including their ethical, financial, and sustainability dimensions:

In their post, the student encouraged classmates to reflect on the ethical implications of engineering companies and universities that contribute to the ongoing genocide in Palestine – including UTS's own partnerships. The student contextualised their post using content from the class's ethics module and invited

peers to sign a petition and attend a peaceful rally, as part of broader civic engagement and ethical reflection. The post was not inflammatory, discriminatory, or personal. It specifically focused on the ethical responsibilities of engineers and institutions – consistent with the course’s learning outcomes.

However, the university responded by removing the entire discussion tab from the Canvas class site and informed the student that their post had been taken down because it “impinged on the academic freedom of others.” The university’s justification is deeply ironic, given that the student was exercising academic freedom in precisely the way the subject intended: by critically reflecting on real-world engineering ethics.

A Monash student told the Inquiry:

I attended a forum that was hosted by the NTEU and the student association. A Lebanese woman who was studying architecture wanted to have a major project redesigning her apartment building in Lebanon that had been destroyed in an IDF attack, and she was told she would not be allowed to do this because it would be controversial.

An art student told the Inquiry they were asked to change an artist statement to either delete the word genocide or substitute it for war. The student stated that this had changed “the messaging into a both-sides narrative that mainstream media portrays rather than the settler-colonial genocidal violence of Israel that Amnesty International has reported as genocide.” A group of academics and students also criticised art censorship at Monash University, highlighting the:

Indefinite postponement of the exhibition *Stolon Press: Flat Earth*, which was scheduled to open at the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) on May 8, 2025, including works by Khaled Sabsabi. In mid-February Sabsabi was announced, alongside curator Michael Dagostino, as Australian representatives to Venice Biennale 2026. A mere six days later, under pressure by *The Australian* and the Liberal Party in Parliamentary Question Time, Sabsabi’s position was revoked by the board of Creative Australia under the guise of ‘social cohesion’. To see Monash University governance not only contributing to the silencing of Sabsabi, in the context of widespread anti-Arab racism on campus, but also overriding the authority and autonomy of its own University Museum of Art, demonstrates the deep issue of racially motivated censorship on campus and its application throughout research, publishing, and art.

Even more concerning, the university climate of censorship extended to course content, particularly in subjects related to justice and ethics, human rights, international law, settler colonialism, apartheid, imperialism, and the history and geopolitics of the ‘Middle East.’ One academic stated:

Overall, it is very difficult talking about Palestine, Israel, or Gaza in classes. 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. This has only heightened since the university has seemingly adopted the Universities Australia definition of antisemitism. There is a general feeling that it supports the Israeli narrative of events, only allows discussion within this ‘acceptable range’ and would rather staff and students be quiet and ignore the atrocities that we see daily on the Palestinian people.

A University of Melbourne academic told the Inquiry that a tutor was dismissed following him showing videos of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) in Gaza during a class on state violence:

This tutor was left without any employment very suddenly. There was a real culture of fear, especially among the other casual tutors, that they could also be expelled because no real formal justification was given. Other tutors have of course also been talking about Palestine, because that’s the nature of the subject we were teaching. We were talking about state violence and colonialism. I believe the university is working on some teaching modules, on how to tackle sensitive matters. I think they’ll be really interesting to see.

Another academic told the Inquiry:

There has been a broader effort to restrict critical discussion of the genocide in Gaza. Educators have been cautioned against “one-sidedness”. In 2022, the university adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and earlier this year endorsed a national university sector statement which dangerously conflates criticism of Zionism with antisemitism. This position defines even well-established forms of political critique as potentially discriminatory. The current climate makes it clear those who speak out in opposition to apartheid, imperialism and racial colonial violence are not protected by the principles of academic freedom.

Another explained that interference across universities extended to changing exam questions and what is said in lectures. The same issue was reported by a Sydney academic:

I would like to attest to the widespread fear I sense in the campus about any discussion of Palestine. I hear stories about whole units getting cut because of this fear. I was warned to be careful about referencing any “current conflicts in the Middle East” due to audits and student complaints.

A social work academic reported being told “to not raise Gaza, Palestine or the genocide,” arguing the direction undermined their profession’s commitment to advocacy, activism, social justice and human rights. Another academic told the Inquiry they knew of two cases where junior colleagues were “prevented from teaching Palestine-related material in their classes.” A group of psychology academics argued:

Academic freedom is integral for the exploration of complex aspects of human behaviour. We have provided education around colonisation, dehumanisation,

stigma, and systemic oppression – each of which the Palestinian people have been subject to for over 74 years. When seeking to provide meaningful, real-world examples in class, psychology educators are able to include the Jewish Holocaust. However, due to the increased efforts of Zionist lobby groups to censor courses that provide a critical perspective of Israel, academics are not permitted to provide examples of the Palestinian experience in our course curriculum, assessments or class discussions, despite clear evidence to support each claim.

Academics from Western Australia noted the role the University of Sydney’s in-principle acceptance of recommendations in the Hodgkinson External Review Report, including a “civility rule” criticised by HRLC and the NSW Council for Civil Liberties (NSWCCL), which effectively banned “basic forms of political expression at Sydney University.”¹² The academics stated:

The report recommends ... requiring speakers to ‘make the meaning of contested words and phrases clear to the audience’ ... The [NSWCCL] ... has expressed concern that the restrictions would breach the University of Sydney Act 1989, which prohibits the university from disciplining students for expressing their political views or beliefs. The approach outlined by the Hodgkinson report also affects academics and university staff.

Academics could be placed in the position of having to censor students’ speech. Many academic disciplines, including politics, law, history, international relations, and even nursing and medicine teach material related to Palestine or the current war in Gaza. A fear of sanction under the ‘new civility rule,’ should academics be deemed to have not properly contextualised contested words and phrases (albeit, in a Kafkaesque twist, that no such list of words and phrases exists) means that academics would be stifled from properly teaching their own material. This would create a chilling culture of fear and silence, as many academics will feel that it is better to avoid such topics completely for fear of facing disciplinary action.

Academics told the Inquiry that students complained about course content, including reading lists, course outlines and guest speakers. Staff from the University of New South Wales reported:

Zionist students complained, on multiple occasions, about the inclusion of a foundational text in settler colonial studies by Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” into the reading list of a course in politics and international relations. They claimed the text is antisemitic because it refers to Israel and Zionism as a settler colonial project, with some students citing the IHRA to request that the text be removed from the reading list.

12. New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties, “Media Statement: Endorsement of Hodgkinson Report at University of Sydney Would Breach the Law: NSWCCL Says,” 28 November, 2024, https://www.nswccl.org.au/hodgkinson_report, accessed 22 October, 2025.

An academic who teaches social science subjects on human rights, the Holocaust, racism, genocide, colonialism, coexistence, and diversity reported:

Last year was the most distressing teaching semester of my academic career. My student cohort is always diverse. It has never been tense to teach in this space before. I was informed there had been an anonymous complaint about an upcoming guest lecture to be presented by a Palestinian academic. The student complaint arrived weeks before the lecture, yet it claimed that the content was biased. I was quizzed on the content and was asked to add more ‘balanced’ material that includes the Israeli perspective.

In one seminar a group of law students told me they were nervous about speaking in class about Palestine. One wanted to share some thoughts about what was happening in Gaza and asked me, “Am I allowed to say this?” We had a conversation as a class about it and I reassured them that of course this is a safe space for us to explore difficult topics and no one should be fearful. Two female Muslim students began to cry and shared that they had been shut down and told off by another tutor when they tried to discuss Palestine. They said they felt constantly singled out and frightened to open their mouths.

The experiences of staff and students outlined above demonstrate how hollow legal protections for academic freedom are. In 2021, the Higher Education Support Act 2003 was amended to define academic freedom as follows:

- a. The freedom of academic staff to teach, discuss, and research and to disseminate and publish the results of their research;
- b. The freedom of academic staff and students to engage in intellectual inquiry, to express their opinions and beliefs, and to contribute to public debate, in relation to their subjects of study and research;
- c. The freedom of academic staff and students to express their opinions in relation to the higher provider in which they work or are enrolled;
- d. The freedom of academic staff to participate in professional or representative academic bodies;
- e. The freedom of students to participate in student societies and associations;
- f. The autonomy of the higher education provider in relation to the choice of academic courses and offerings, the ways in which they are taught and the choices of research activities and the ways in which they are conducted.

The evidence to this Inquiry demonstrated repeated and systemic failures by universities to uphold academic freedom, as defined above.

2. Changing policies to outlaw protest

A second Term of Reference considered by the Inquiry was:

4. Whether Australian universities have:
 - a. Altered their campus freedom of speech or academic freedom policies in response to pro-Palestine activity in a way which limits or stifles freedom of speech and political expression; and
 - b. in doing so, whether they have failed to adhere to any regulatory frameworks including but not limited to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.

The Inquiry heard overwhelming evidence that campus policies were comprehensively changed and expanded to prohibit pro-Palestine actions and that many did so in cooperation with the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA).

Since 2009, the University of Sydney's *Campus Access Policy* has been a page and a paragraph long.¹³ In June 2024, it was transformed into an 18-page booklet. One student noted that the updated policy included many of the recommendations made to American universities by the right-wing pro-Israel campus group Stand with Us as "best practices for anti-Israel demonstrations on campus."

Students described a requirement to give advance notice of any demonstration as "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." Others noted that "basic activist activities such as putting up posters and setting up stall tables [are] subject to approval by the University under this policy."

In September 2024, *The Guardian* reported on calls for the resignation of University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor, Mark Scott, over his decision to allow the encampment to remain. The Australasian Union of Jewish Students, other pro-Israel groups and 60 current and former University of Sydney staff had called for Vice-Chancellor Scott's resignation. Sarah Schwartz from the Jewish Council of Australia commented that it "seems to be a really concerted campaign against him ... aimed at sending a clear warning to other universities to not allow Palestinian solidarity, discourse, or events."¹⁴

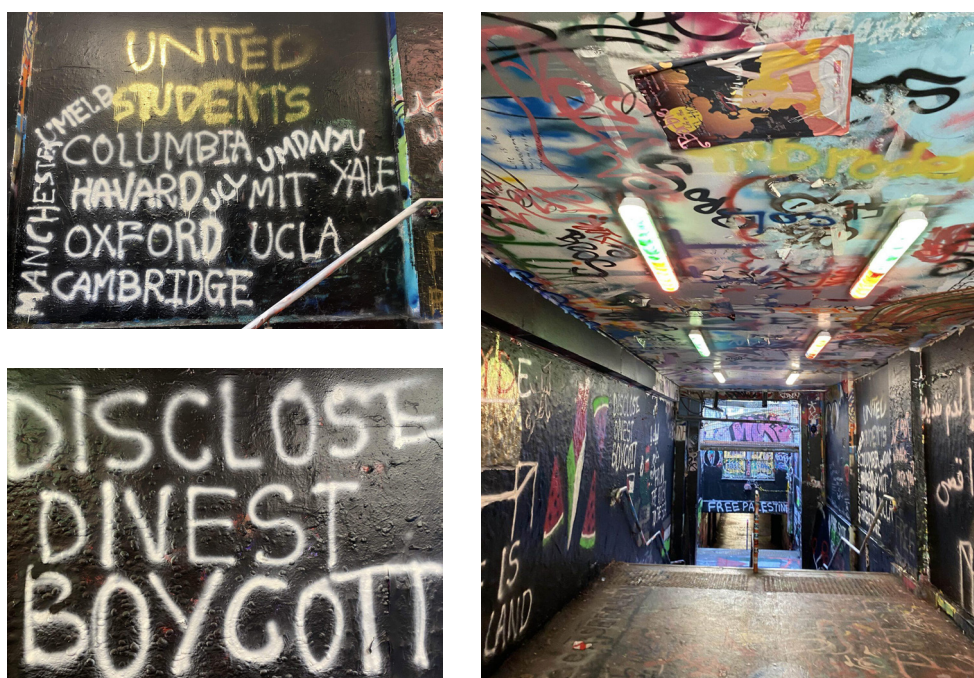
Vice-Chancellor Scott responded that the protest was legitimate and did not breach the university's code of conduct.¹⁵ Students told the Inquiry that the student code of conduct and other university policies had since changed:

13. University of Sydney, *University of Sydney (Campus Access) Rule 2009*, archived 21 April, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240421080215/https://www.sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDOC2011/143&RendNum=0>.

14. Tory Shepherd, "Campaign demanding University of Sydney vice-chancellor resigns is 'dangerous', Jewish Council warns," *The Guardian*, 25 September, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/sep/25/mark-scott-university-of-sydney-vice-chancellor-resignation-campaign>, accessed 25 October, 2025.

15. Ibid.

On Monday the 27th of May 2024, a University of Sydney spokesperson admitted to student newspaper *Honi Soit* that the University had removed pro-Palestine graffiti from the university's Graffiti Tunnel, and stated that the university was "revising its approach" to how it approaches freedom of expression in the tunnel. It stated that "The University will now leave graffiti unless it is in breach of the law or our policies and codes of conduct."



The University of Sydney graffiti tunnel

The students provided pictures of graffiti that had been removed, which included watermelons, the names of US campuses holding pro-Palestine encampments, and the words 'disclose, divest, boycott'. They noted that no other political messaging had been removed. But what was also removed from the university's website was a proud reference to the graffiti tunnel as a place of interest, noting its historic role in anti-war student activism.¹⁶

In January 2025, *The Guardian* newspaper reported criticism of changes to other University of Sydney policies, which included:

Requiring anyone who "displayed" a banner, defined as "placing or holding materials in a location where they can be seen", to receive prior permission or risk breaching university policies. Staff would also be prohibited from sending bulk emails to colleagues on political subjects, unless they had "expressed interest" on receiving communications on that topic ... revisions include prohibiting students from addressing the beginning of lectures and classes on "any subject matter", sanctioning university organisations which incorrectly displayed post-

16. University of Sydney, "Places of Interest," archived 30 March, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240330024457/https://www.sydney.edu.au/engage/visit/places-of-interest.html>.

ers and prohibiting attaching banners to footbridges.¹⁷

A University of Melbourne student told the Inquiry of new regulations there were similarly worded, threatening “serious misconduct for staff or students who take part in protests that are indoors, block building entrances, interrupt the university’s functioning, and so on.”

Monash University students described new policies on “lecture bashing” and regulations about “erecting structures” as violations of “its own Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Policy.” A UQ academic told how new rules stipulated that “protests and the use of microphones could not proceed without the University’s prior approval.”

UOW students told the Inquiry the following in relation to new restrictions on signage, demonstrations and camping:

On September 5th 2024, UOW quietly updated their Campus Access and Order Policy after 24 years without alteration. It is clear that some alterations were made specifically to suppress Pro-Palestine protests on UOW campus.

Deakin University students told the Inquiry that new policies were introduced to limit the erection of structures, camps, and banners and the distribution of leaflets and posters. An ANU student told the Inquiry that, under a new policy:

The only visual media allowed on campus is to be put on limited designated areas and must be linked to an approved club or group. This is an attempt to trace political opinions and associations back to individuals again highlighting the heightened policing on specifically pro-Palestinian advocacy.

UNSW students told the Inquiry that its new *Campus Access Policy*:

States that demonstrators must provide the university with 48 hours’ notice ... paired with an ‘Event Information Risk Form’... it asks protest organisers to tell UNSW of the ‘subject matter or content’ of an event and ‘has the speaker(s) been accused of, or found to have made previous statements and actions which are below scholarly standards or any other content that may cause harm (e.g., unlawful discrimination, harassment, defamation, disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, incitement to violence)?’

The form also asks what investigations into speakers organisers have done and whether the psychosocial safety of people on campus has been considered. In the climate where ‘psychosocial safety’ of people who *politically* are challenged by speech has been used to stifle speech, this amounts to a permit system on campus for activism ... the new policy gives the university the right to remove any advertising of off campus events ... The policy only allows flyers “associated with events and activities for affiliated clubs, societies, or organisations” to be

17. Caitlin Cassidy, “University of Sydney criticised for plan to ban protest banners being displayed without prior permission,” *The Guardian*, 21 January, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/jan/21/university-of-sydney-criticised-for-plan-to-ban-protest-banners-being-displayed-without-prior-permission>, accessed 26 October, 2025.

handed out on campus.

Following the University of Melbourne being investigated for misusing Wi-Fi login data, the Inquiry heard that:

In January, the introduction of new [university wireless terms of use] state that the University Wi-fi network may be monitored by the University for a range of reasons, including ‘to assist in the detection and investigation of any actual or suspected unlawful or antisocial behaviour or breaches of University policies.’

The NTEU University of Melbourne branch told the Inquiry new restrictions on campus included those that threaten the “safety and wellbeing of staff, students and visitors” or disrupt university operations, with the university threatening disciplinary action for breaches. A University of Melbourne student told the Inquiry that a University-wide email sent in late 2024:

opened by stating that “The ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict and subsequent activism has challenged our principles and the boundaries between academic freedom, free speech and racism.”

It went on to announce the current work of the university’s Anti-Racism Action Plan, the first two dot points of which were:

1. “Reviewing [their] policies and procedures to ensure they appropriately address and respond to all forms of racism, including antisemitism.”
2. “Facilitating specific training to address antisemitism for [their] Executive leadership, colleagues in [their] Safer Community Program, and those who oversee [their] formal complaints processes.”

Attempts to co-opt student unions

Some submissions to the Inquiry outlined how universities used student unions to enforce changed policies restricting free speech on Palestine by having them direct clubs to comply with regulations, under the threat of losing funding.

University of Western Australia students submitted a letter from the student guild to pro-Palestine clubs stating: “the Guild and Guild clubs must refrain from using phrases and slogans that are contrary to the University’s policies (in either written or verbal form) at any time or place on campus.” These clubs were told their events and “any Guild associated event relating to the current Middle East crisis” would require event management plans, including measures to ensure safety, 10 days in advance. The letter went on to state that:

Breaches of conduct and behaviour by students will result in additional action to be taken by the Guild’s Misconduct Tribunal following on from the University’s own discipline process. The University expects the Student Guild to

monitor the actions and behaviours within the Guild precinct and to apply its own regulatory instruments alongside all of the University By-Laws and Code of Conducts [*sic*]. If any clubs are noncompliant on an ongoing basis, then the University may ask the Student Guild to disaffiliate those clubs ... Disaffiliation ... would mean that club can no longer undertake any activity at the University campus.

A Curtin University student told the Inquiry the University and student guild signed a Memorandum of Understanding during the encampment which called for it to be terminated, without consultation with encampment members and without engaging with the demands of the encampment, namely “the need for Curtin University to sever its ties with Israel or any companies involved in the arms trade.”

Adelaide University students told the Inquiry that, following the encampments, an updated agreement between the student union and clubs included “substantial changes,” such as making the clubs liable for the behaviour of their members.

Some clubs that advocated for Palestine were disaffiliated from student unions, including the Palestinian Society of UOW and the Students for Palestine UNSW club. Students told the Inquiry that the UNSW disaffiliation:

Occurred on the basis that the club’s ‘recent events may not have adequately prioritized the psycho-social safety for participants.’ This happened after the successful Student General Meeting for Palestine organised by the Students for Palestine UNSW.

Others faced barriers to establish clubs. Students for Palestine Murdoch University told the Inquiry:

It took several months for us to become a guild club, during which we had to time and again ensure we would be peaceful and not protest or ‘disrupt’ ... we had to incorporate specific clauses into our constitution and club plan centred on peace and education rather than protests ... they were unable to provide reasons for the extra hurdles and long wait, other than to say that as a political club our application is more complex than others ... we believe this process has limited our ability to organise collective action on campus and demand change. Instead, we feel we can only run activities that are educational, and protected under academic freedom, or do not disrupt campus ... We were prevented from putting posters in the [student wellbeing hub frequented by international students] with information about our club. Hence, even when we have tried to organise educational events on campus we are prevented on the basis of ‘safety.’

A University of Melbourne student told the Inquiry that a student union Students’ Council meeting, at which a series of motions were moved by pro-Palestine activists, was videoed by a member of campus security.

The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency

In considering whether university policy changes failed to adhere to regulatory frameworks such as those of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, the Inquiry heard that TEQSA was intimately involved in creating the changes and that these were inextricably linked to its work with Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism, Jillian Segal (herself a former university Deputy Chancellor), and its endorsement of antisemitism definitions that equated criticism of Israel with antisemitism.

Friends of Palestine WA and Students for Palestine WA told the Inquiry that a request to show the documentary *On My Land* by Palestinian director Mohamad Zwhara was obstructed by Curtin University. Requirements relating to insurance were changed, and organisers were required to “commit to Curtin University’s position on freedom of speech and safety” and update a “risk assessment document to address physical security, emotional security and communication/misinformation.”

The university stated, “In light of recent requirements from the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) the University has updated the room booking process and requirements.” The email provided the following link to a notice from TEQSA.¹⁸ The linked page included summaries of meetings between Vice Chancellors, the Minister for Education and the Special Envoy on Antisemitism, Jillian Segal, which discussed “issues around social cohesion” and the “conflict in the Middle East.”

TEQSA endorsed Jillian Segal’s plans to have universities adopt restrictive definitions of antisemitism at an October 2024 meeting. There she:

spoke about current work between her office and the Group of Eight universities to develop a definition of antisemitism and identify training for university staff. This definition and the training once developed will be shared with all universities via Universities Australia.¹⁹

A February 2025 Universities Australia media release which announced its definition of antisemitism similarly stated:

UA’s members have agreed to work with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) to ensure we have a harmonised approach to dealing with these issues ... UA will provide this definition to TEQSA and request that it works with the HESP to best determine the positioning of the definition within the Higher Education Standards Framework ... This definition has been developed for incorporation

18. Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, “Ensuring wellbeing and safety in higher education,” <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/news-and-events/latest-news/ensuring-wellbeing-and-safety-higher-education>, accessed 15 October, 2025.

19. Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, “Social Cohesion Roundtable Meeting with Vice Chancellors,” 31 October, 2024, <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-11/social-cohesion-roundtable-meeting-VCs-31-Oct-2024-meeting-summary.pdf>, accessed 26 October, 2025.

into relevant complaints schemes and disciplinary processes as soon as practicable and will also be used to educate about antisemitism.”²⁰

UNSW academics told the Inquiry:

The actions of Zionist groups and the Envoy so far has proven to be guided not by genuine care to antiracism; they are driven, first and foremost, by the aim to shield Israel from criticism. It is important to note that the envoy is not a neutral professional appointment, but a political one. She is no expert in race, racism, or antiracism. Her qualification for this position is being the former president of the Executive Council of Australia Jewry (ECAJ) and a staunch Zionist.

As Noam Peleg puts it: “As an Envoy, Segal now holds a government position, has the mandate to represent Australia in International fora, and is doing the job of a prominent Zionist organization in a formal capacity, and with the legitimacy and resources (an office and staff funded by the government) that such position comes with. Bluntly put, it is a state-sponsored McCarthyist office.”

Universities, capitulating to Zionist and political pressure, are threatening to dismantle core principles of academic freedom and the right to protest. Rather than protecting staff and students against McCarthyist attacks, universities are using administrative measures, and introducing new ones, to limit Palestine related activities on campus in the name of psychosocial safety. In doing so, universities are creating an environment of intimidation designed to create a chilling effect among students and staff.

3. Discipline and surveillance

The Inquiry Terms of Reference also tasked it with exploring:

2. Unfair or unlawful targeting of staff and students for discipline and surveillance due to their beliefs, research, speech or protest in support of the rights of Palestinians.

The Inquiry heard that both students and staff involved in pro-Palestine speech, actions and academic inquiry were subject to in-person and electronic surveillance by other campus users, security staff, pro-Israel groups and university management. Many were subject to severe disciplinary sanctions with potential life-long financial, career and emotional consequences. This facilitated the self-censorship of staff and students, undermining a learning environment founded on the exercise of academic freedom of speech.

Rights to privacy, freedom of opinion and expression and peaceful assembly are pro-

20. Universities Australia, “Statement on Racism,” 27 February, 2025, <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/statement-on-racism/>, accessed 26 October, 2025.

tected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Many Australian states also have laws or charters which protect the right to free expression and peaceful assembly. The Human Rights Law Centre told the Inquiry that the High Court of Australia “has interpreted the Constitution to imply a freedom of political communication” and that in a 2017 case involving environmental activist Dr Bob Brown, it ruled that laws restricting peaceful protest violate that freedom if they are not “justified and proportionate to achieve a legitimate objective.”²¹ The Centre argued:

An assembly is considered peaceful if its organisers and participants do not intend to incite or engage in violence [which] in this context refers to physical force against others that is likely to result in injury, death, or serious property damage ... University protests, including encampments, often challenge institutional or societal norms in ways that may be disruptive or controversial. However, disruption and causing offense alone are not sufficient grounds to deny protection of these assemblies under international law ...

Australia ... has dual obligations regarding peaceful assemblies; to refrain from undue interference, and to actively facilitate them. This includes providing an enabling environment for assemblies, such as blocking off traffic, maintaining public order, and ensuring that assembly participants are protected from violence including from police, counter-demonstrators or private actors. On university campuses, this means that authorities must accommodate the specific nature of campus protests, including extended demonstrations, ensuring they can occur peacefully without disproportionate interference. Security measures must also be content-neutral and proportionate to the specific circumstances of the protest.

Surveillance of students

ANU For Palestine told the Inquiry ANU spent over \$840,000 for security to surveil the student encampment around the clock. Despite claiming it was to protect protestors, they “failed to prevent harassment of students camping and often engaged in the intimidation themselves.” They gave examples of:

a hostile student entered the encampment late at night and began shouting and physically shaking tents where people were sleeping. This individual had to be physically removed from the encampment by two students, while security staff watched and failed to intervene ... security began to conduct unannounced ‘health and safety’ inspections, where personnel would enter the main marquee area from 11pm to 3am without permission or forewarning and leaving once they had confirmed there were people in the marquee area. Students often slept in this area and having personnel let themselves into the tent in the middle of the night was completely inappropriate and an extremely uncomfortable expe-

21. *Brown v Tasmania* [2017] HCA 43

rience for students.

They also described how ANU:

tracked student protestors via social media content, key card data, and in-person surveillance. Documents obtained under Freedom of Information demonstrate that ANU was actively maintaining a list of names of identified pro-Palestinian students. Many testified they had been excessively filmed and photographed by ANU Security at all hours of the day and night.

Deakin students told the Inquiry students participating in that encampment were also subject to surveillance. Initially students accessing the camp were made to present ID, which was recorded. Later security also conducted 'welfare checks' on campers by:

violently shaking tents, shining torch lights inside them, and loudly shouting 'welfare check!' This serious invasion of privacy was a terrifying experience. It wasn't at all clear who was doing this or what they were trying to do. It was even more frightening given that the Monash University camp had been attacked previously in the middle of the night by right-wing supporters of Israel ... this represented another attempt by the university to intimidate the protesters, discouraging people from continuing to protest.

Students told the Inquiry both the University of Queensland and Monash University installed surveillance cameras at the campsites:

which is unprecedented for a campus protest. Students at the encampment were regularly questioned and made to produce ID by university security guards. These guards refused to intervene when student supporters of Israel arrived and behaved in a physically violent way.

Students for Palestine at University of Sydney told the Inquiry that their freedom of information (FOI) request:

revealed evidence of near-daily surveillance of the USYD SFP social media posts and even level of engagement from supporters. Months after the encampment, the University evidently combed back through social media accounts to search for measures to discipline members for. In one video, a student tapping on the window of the Michael Spence Building for a fraction of a second was used by the University for a disciplinary proceeding of "intimidating conduct."

The University of Melbourne NTEU branch told the Inquiry that Melbourne University used CCTV footage and Wi-Fi login data to identify about 20 students and three staff participating in encampment and sit-in protests and formally caution many of them. This prompted an investigation by the Victorian Information Commissioner, which found this was not a reasonably expected use of Wi-Fi login data. A group of academics from various universities told the Inquiry of "students and staff being warned 'off the books' that their emails and correspondence are being monitored by University of Melbourne and

migrating Palestine-related emails to their personal addresses, and onto Signal, in order to avoid university surveillance.”

A University of Western Australia student told the Inquiry that when the student guild held a Club Freedoms Festival event to object to new restrictions on all clubs, one speaker was warned that if they used the phrase “From the River to the Sea” or said anything offensive to executive staff, the university would be watching and they should expect disciplinary action against the student and the clubs of which they were a member.

Students for Palestine Curtin University told the Inquiry an FOI request revealed the university:

had been tracking our activities and treating us with suspicion ... a redacted emailer wrote, “Today I noticed members belonging to the group Students for Palestine on campus which is very unusual for a Sunday. They were not partaking in any activity, but my gut feeling say[s] we need to be alert.” They have tracked our social media, as seen in one email, “Attached is the post and the caption from the Students for Palestine WA Instagram. Also screen grabbed a photo shared to their story of them on the road yesterday. Been saving everything to this file.”

A University of Wollongong student told the Inquiry that clubs’ administrators “demanded we remove a video that we posted on Instagram for the UOW Palestine Society, questioning the Chancellor and inviting him to the Student General Meeting.”

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry that a panel discussion including academics Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah and Associate Professors Peter Slezak and Jake Lynch “examining Sydney University’s role in the genocide in Gaza” was moved at the University’s direction to a venue where the meeting could be recorded. An email warned “participants at the event must not engage in any antisemitic, racist or unlawful conduct ... The university may use the recording of the event as it considers appropriate, including in relation to any complaints or concerns arising from the event.”

The Inquiry also heard that, in response to complaints, a university’s management had listened to recorded lectures and seminar discussions. An academic told the Inquiry:

This alarmed me. Classrooms should be comfortable and trusting environments where students feel safe to explore ideas, however clumsily. They are learning about a topic and learning how to express themselves. I am distressed at the idea ... where a clumsily worded response from a student in class is reported and subjects them to disciplinary proceedings.

Pro-Palestine activists from several universities described that security staff were routinely deployed to watch every activity they conducted. UNSW students described how a staff–student forum:

was met with an unprecedented response by Campus Security, with two security officials observing the meeting from inside the room. Campus Security does not attend, record or monitor any other public, political events that are regularly held by student clubs.

They also noted that security staff now “all wear body cameras which according to FOI has been used to ascertain student identities for the purposes of surveillance and disciplinary action.” University of Queensland students told the Inquiry:

The university administration organised security to be at every event organised by Students for Palestine. Whether it is a forum or a “chai tea and chat” casual meet-up, the university sent multiple security personnel to watch the event. No other groups or activities at UQ have the same observable and persistent level of surveillance. We believe this creates a perception that students who support Palestine are a greater security risk than other students on the campus.”

An academic reported witnessing similar actions at University of Melbourne:

I have seen security staff stop a student from chalking to promote a pro-Palestine campus event, while ignoring other students chalking to promote their social events. This student had her student ID recorded by the security officer.

One student told the Inquiry they had no idea why they were pulled out of class by security:

I was terrified and confused. Two security people asked for my student ID. They scanned it and told me it was expired, that I need to get it renewed. I am an obvious student of colour, was wearing my keffiyeh. They knew I was a student, as they knew which classroom I would be in.

After the student approached student services with concerns about being racially profiled, they:

got a call from Security asking if I wanted to book a meeting. They quickly became accusatory and aggressive. I reminded them I was here because I was worried I was being profiled during class, but they only gave a cursory apology and went straight to accusing me of putting pro-Palestine stickers on campus. They made reference to one sticker with the Israeli flag and a red circle cross across it, one of the stickers for the BDS boycott movement, and used it to accuse me of putting up an antisemitic sticker.

ANU students said many had experienced “senior security staff following them around campus between their classes for no evident reason other than they were wearing keffiyehs and/or being known to be involved with pro-Palestine activism on campus.” Students at Adelaide University and Deakin University told the Inquiry security had demanded they show student ID cards while “promoting a pro-Palestine meeting and wearing a keffiyeh” and “wearing a T-shirt that said ‘Free Palestine’ with a picture of a fist in the colours of the Palestinian flag.” Monash University students told the Inquiry:

Student pro-Palestine activists have reported security guards following them around campus. This has not been limited to students actively engaged in Palestine activism – students who have engaged in protests in the past have report-

ed being followed while doing activities unrelated to Palestine, such as getting lunch, walking to class, or using university services. One student reported being followed for an afternoon while she was visiting Monash Connect (the student services department).

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry:

I noticed I was being filmed by some people at that rally that I recognized as campus security, so I thought it might warrant talking back to the university, asking where these complaints came from. They cited two separate complaints that the content of my speech was harmful to students and the university, in their reply, revealed that it was two security officers who had made those complaints.

Another student told the Inquiry:

I was chatting to some Sydney University security staff following exams. I was wearing a Palestinian T-Shirt and one of the guards confided that they had actually been directed to closely watch anyone wearing anything Palestinian-related in particular as it was “offensive to some people.”

RMIT students were subject to discipline by security for facilitating weekend entry to a lecture theatre for a peaceful meeting. The Inquiry heard:

Security made no demands of the students or anyone else in attendance and there was no tension. It was unprecedented and excessive for RMIT security to pursue charges, especially as this behaviour was found not to amount to misconduct by RMIT’s judicial system. RMIT’s report cited the wearing of keffiyehs as having the potential to cause “anticipatory anxiety or fear” to staff and students despite there being no complaints being made of the event. This conveys racial prejudice towards Middle Eastern, Muslim, or Palestinian students and political prejudice to any who support Palestine.

The Inquiry heard from several University of Sydney students about being surveilled while staffing information stalls during Orientation Week. They described the intimidation and psychological distress this practice caused already vulnerable cohorts of students:

The USYD Queer Action Collective (QuAC) had a stall to inform new students about our campaigns. We hung a large banner that read “Queers for Palestine” behind our stall and the stall next to us, which belonged to the USYD Autonomous Collective Against Racism (ACAR). Many of the students manning both stalls also wore keffiyehs. Each morning, USYD Campus Security photographed the students putting up the banner. Campus Security also took photos of the stall throughout each day.

At least one USYD Campus Security officer was also stationed across from the stalls from approximately 9am to 4pm. Other stalls, including other political

clubs and activist collectives, did not have security personnel assigned specifically to monitor them.

Community members engaged in harassment of [the] stalls, stealing a pride flag, photographing and filming organisers without their consent, shouting and comparing Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims to the KKK. The security officer did not attempt to stop this harassment and racialised discrimination.

One of the students staffing the stalls told the Inquiry how this had affected her:

One guard stared at me for prolonged periods, stood extremely close to the stall and, whenever I left to get food or use the bathroom, would watch me closely. I was setting up the stall alone ... the same guard that had been intimidating me all week was standing next to the stall, staring at me, with nobody else around.

This has been extremely distressing for me, particularly as a woman, wherein I am often intimidated for my pro-Palestine activities by male security guards when I am alone. I now feel unsafe from harassment, stalking, and surveillance at the University ... That even the promotion of an anti-racist organising group can warrant trouble from USyd Protective Services highlights the oppressive nature of the university.

Surveillance by other students and pro-Israel groups often involved students' pictures being taken and shared publicly online without permission, putting them in danger. UTS students told the Inquiry:

During Orientation Day 2024, a photo of the Palestinian Youth Society stall was taken without consent. The image later appeared on the Australian Jewish Association's (AJA) social media platform ... The post included clear images of the stall and executives of the Society, alongside the caption, *Israel erased from the map*.

We were informed by an ally that they had seen messages in a student group chat, where individuals were sharing pictures of us, discussing mass reporting our photos and encouraging others to report us ... We were also told that another student group lodged a complaint with UTS management about the presence of a watermelon at our Orientation-Day stall, which was handed out to those who signed up.

These actions reflect a broader and deeply concerning pattern in which Palestinian students are photographed, surveilled, and targeted simply for participating in peaceful cultural and political expression. The unauthorised circulation of our images – especially when they appear on hostile platforms like the AJA – has a clear chilling effect and contributes to the notion that we are being watched and reported simply for existing visibly on campus. Despite the seriousness of these incidents, no institutional acknowledgment has been offered to date.

A Deakin student told the Inquiry she had shared within a private group, “Deakin University Online Students 2024 (Official),” which is run by university staff, a poster advertising Palestine Solidarity Week activities and information about the NTEU Deakin Solidarity Group. Another student criticised her post and it was deleted. Later, a screenshot of her post, including her name and face, was shared on the Facebook page of an academic at another university with the comment, “WHY is the OFFICIAL Deakin community for all current online students promoting a PALESTINE SOLIDARITY week at the university? How are JEWISH students supposed to feel safe?”

Another Deakin student was filmed by a staff member when she attended a pro-Palestine protest on campus. *The Age* newspaper reported that the footage was shared with pro-Israel group Project A, which has links to Deakin staff and students, and which then “circulated footage of [the student] during a protest at the university’s Burwood campus ... under the mistaken belief she had breached a ban by attending.” The footage was also sent to *The Age*. The report noted, “Deakin University did not respond to questions about the disciplinary process or whether it was appropriate that staff film and share footage of students.”²²

A Palestinian student told the Inquiry she was invited to speak on an anti-racism panel. When emails opposed her involvement, instead of defending her, the university added an extra speaker—an academic with ties to a company that partners with the Israeli military—and delayed publishing her biography, while publishing those of other panellists. The student told the Inquiry she felt these decisions sent clear messages:

That the university viewed my identity and advocacy as something that needed to be “balanced out” ... that my presence was inherently controversial or unsafe ... that I was being erased or sidelined. As a Palestinian woman from Gaza, this was nothing short of devastating. I was asked to smile and speak alongside someone with institutional ties to the very machinery of destruction that has killed members of my own family and contributed to the devastation of my homeland.

Further, she later found herself publicly accused of antisemitism, identified by name, university and role by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry because she wore a necklace with a map of Palestine in the photo that accompanied her biography for the panel.

In the same way as 16-year-old Victorian school student Zaina Amro had her image removed from the cover of a local council magazine which originally celebrated her extensive volunteer work because she wore a necklace depicting Palestine, the university appears to have removed the photos of all panel speakers in response to this complaint.²³ The student told the Inquiry the accusation and the university’s actions and inactions exposed her:

22. Alex Crowe, “Suspended student wins new hearing on protest amid concern over staff conduct,” *The Age*, 20 August, 2024, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/suspended-student-to-appeal-punishment-for-protest-amid-concern-over-staff-conduct-20240816-p5k31j.html>, accessed 20 October, 2025.

23. Gemma Grant, “My identity was dismissed”: Teen scrubbed from Bayside newsletter over Palestine necklace,” *The Age*, 10 December, 2025, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/my-identity-was-dismissed-teen-scrubbed-from-bayside-newsletter-over-palestine-necklace-20251210-p5nmdy.html>, accessed 26 January 2026.

to significant public risk. I was effectively doxxed as a student, not for anything said during the panel, but simply for existing as a Palestinian in a public-facing space ... The institutional response to this experience reflected a clear failure in the duty of care. I was placed in a compromising position, treated as though my presence was a liability, and left without adequate support or protection.

Academics from UNSW made a similar point about universities treating Palestinian students as a liability, saying:

Universities have been treating Palestine activism as a threat and through a criminalised and securitised lens. Western Sydney University placed police, campus security, private security, and metal detectors at a recent graduation ceremony in a move that turned students, their families and the community in Western Sydney – many of whom are Arabs, Muslims, and people of colour – into a threat. And at UNSW, the university found it appropriate to have security with body cameras filming a peaceful staff vigil to mark a year to the genocide as part of the NTEU Day of Action on Palestine.

Discipline of students

Students and their supporters told the Inquiry how universities stymied the encampments and other pro-Palestine actions by systematically targeting the students leading them for individual disciplinary action. The potential consequences of suspensions and expulsions are far-reaching and include losing tens of thousands of dollars already invested in university fees, loss of career aspirations and even deportation for international students. A La Trobe academic told the Inquiry:

Students who are paying fees are being prevented from exercising their freedom of expression. Numerous students have faced disciplinary action including expulsion or suspension threats, having to defend themselves before a panel of senior university staff. These students are effectively being deprived of a future career they have been working hard towards. This is a very serious threat for any student, particularly if an expulsion was recorded on their transcript.

Encampment leaders were sent emails demanding camps be shut down. These emails often asserted this did not infringe on the right to protest, debate or political speech. They then explicitly threatened individual student protesters with formal disciplinary action if they continued the protest encampment. Discipline was framed as warranted for a failure to follow a “reasonable direction” under university regulations or non-compliance with student conduct codes. Students were often told the disciplinary process was confidential and they would be penalised if they told anyone other than a support person about it. The Inquiry heard that at Deakin University and the University of Melbourne, support people cannot hold legal qualifications and that at RMIT, the student misconduct committee is not bound by rules of evidence. Monash students told the Inquiry:

Nine students received disciplinary notices regarding their participation in the

Monash Gaza Solidarity encampment, threatening potential expulsion or suspension. These students were informed they had no right to seek legal assistance and were not allowed to have copies of evidence against them.

The NTEU ACT branch told the Inquiry that seven ANU students were directed to attend a meeting with university management. They were threatened with disciplinary action for failure to follow a reasonable direction if they did not attend and then follow a direction to disband the camp. When asked how those students had been chosen, management “disclosed that ANU has had its Security staff surveilling the encampment and compiling lists of participants.” A student present when police were called to dismantle the encampment told the Inquiry:

I was terrified. As someone who already navigates racial and religious profiling, waking to a camp surrounded by police and security was one of the most traumatic experiences I’ve endured on campus. We were treated like criminals for standing in solidarity with a people under siege. That day, I didn’t feel like a student – I felt hunted. We were watched, surveilled, and tracked like a threat ... The silence from ANU leadership in response to Islamophobic graffiti, the defacement of our art, and the open hostility shown towards Muslim and Arab students only made its aggressive suppression of peaceful pro-Palestine protests more condemning. As a *hijabi*, every time I walk through campus, I feel the weight of that double standard – hyper-visible, hyper-policed, and unsupported.

Deakin University students told the Inquiry at least seven students received written warnings for their participation in the encampment and one received a formal warning for her role in leading it. The Inquiry also heard of several instances apart from the encampments where universities targeted individual students for collective actions. Every student who spoke at the NTEU’s National Day of Action for Palestine at the University of Sydney:

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.

An ANU student who had acted as a media liaison for ANU For Palestine was individually threatened with legal action over the group’s Instagram name and profile picture. Another university told protest organisers they were responsible for the actions of every protest participant and threatened that they could be disciplined if “unacceptable behaviours” occurred. One submission told the Inquiry:

Two members of the USYD [Students for Palestine] collective were handed a disciplinary complaint from the University of Sydney for a Student Strike for Palestine protest, under the grounds that we had not notified Sydney University of our planned demonstration ... and that megaphones were used on university grounds without permission. The protest we had organised consisted of no more than 30 people and was highly peaceful.

A student investigated months after protesting an Israeli entity told the Inquiry:

I found it laughable that the University reversed the power dynamics to make myself, a Palestinian student, the supposed perpetrator of racism towards a racial supremacist institution which to this day still occupies my homeland and resources; the war criminals known as the Israeli army. On top of being dragged through a private investigation, the University told me that if I spoke to anyone about the investigation it would have severe consequences. I don't expect much from colonial institutions like Australian universities, but I expect that students are able to protest genocide and war crimes without repression and gag orders. I hope things change for future generations of students.

Another student told the Inquiry, "I can only assume the University's intent is to engage in suppression of student civil rights while avoiding any public criticism that would rightfully arise as a result of their suppression."

Warning letters served an "iron fist in a velvet glove" purpose. Despite regularly asserting that no finding had been made against students or that no punishment would be issued, they often also noted that this "reminder of" their obligations would be considered were any future issue to arise. Letters also sometimes drew students' attention to other policies and, despite confidentiality requirements, asked them to share these "reminders" with "those necessary."

Selective use of confidentiality was also reported by a student who met with student clubs' staff and found the staff had been provided with details of the student's disciplinary proceedings by university management as a means of pressuring clubs staff to suspend the club the student belonged to.

Students were subject to formal disciplinary processes for organising student meetings, peaceful sit-ins, making announcements in lectures and advocating divestment from weapons manufacturing companies.²⁴ A student activist told the Inquiry her pro-Palestine actions were provided as evidence in a misconduct case over an unrelated issue. Another told the Inquiry:

Instead of respecting students' right to political expression, the university launched a misconduct process against me, drawn out over six months ... my university has failed to uphold its obligations to protect freedom of speech and academic freedom. I was initially given just five working days to respond to these serious charges – under threat of penalties such as suspension. The university then took nearly four months to respond, leaving me in a state of prolonged uncertainty.

Students at the University of Adelaide were even disciplined for planting an olive tree "as a symbol of Palestinian identity, and a memorial to the encampment" despite some students being warned not to. They were accused of damage to university property by digging a hole.

24. Jack Stubley, "Pro-Palestinian ANU student wins expulsion appeal," *Honi Soit*, 13 September, 2024, <https://honisoit.com/2024/09/pro-palestinian-anu-student-wins-expulsion-appeal/>.

The soil in question is an unofficial student garden space, used by postgraduate students and already planted with flowers, but the University has never before taken issue with this use of the space ... After the tree was planted, the University tracked social media to identify the students involved and issued them with warning emails. Not long after the planting, the tree was torn out.

Many submissions explained how disciplinary processes exacerbated the stress and costs for students involved in them. The ACT branch of IPAN, the peace network, told the Inquiry several students at ANU were subject to:

unfounded charges of misconduct which banned them from the ANU campus and in one case involved expulsion from the University. In all cases, the charges were eventually either withdrawn or found to be groundless and the penalties rescinded. However, the penalties inflicted were arguably in themselves a violation of student rights and caused considerable distress. The investigation process took an inordinate amount of time. In addition, much publicity was given in the media to the charges of misconduct, but very little was given to the findings that the charges were baseless.

For example, two international students were charged with making antisemitic gestures at an online meeting in May 2024. The charges were eventually found to be false, but not before a great deal of publicity had caused the students charged immense distress. To our knowledge, the University management did not publicly acknowledge that the charges were unwarranted until the Vice-Chancellor admitted as much before a federal parliamentary inquiry. Furthermore, despite repeated requests, University management have never apologised in private or in public to these students or any others falsely accused of misconduct.

University of Sydney students told the Inquiry a transgender international student and asylum seeker was accused of property damage, unauthorised protest and:

was threatened with suspension for writing Palestine solidarity statements on a whiteboard using a non-permanent marker. "USyd invest in weapons manufacturing (Thales, Lockheed Martin), USyd supports genocide in Gaza. USYD Vice-Chancellor Mark Scott supports Gaza Genocide. From the river to the sea Palestine will be free. As of 13 January 2025, 46,600+ dead in Gaza. USyd cut ties with genocide." The university used CCTV footage and electronic student card tracking to identify the student.

The university claimed that writing on the whiteboard "was protest activity on university lands, that it damaged property and that the writing was graffiti, which is obviously wrong and absurd." It refused a request for an extension to the disciplinary process, which knowingly endangered the student's life as suspension would have "triggered the cancellation of her student visa and potentially led to her deportation to danger, in violation of international protections against refoulement."

One of the most distressing and abusive cases of student discipline presented to the Inquiry involved a first-year Palestinian student who spoke publicly about atrocities be-

ing committed against civilians, including her family, in Gaza. Following a complaint that alleged her statements were untrue, she was given days to prove her claims were factual, that she had not acted to create division at the university and to comment on her statements' relationship to the university's bullying policy. She replied with a long document including many links to information supporting her claims, including graphic videos. Months after providing this response the university informed her it would take no further action against her. She told the Inquiry:

Having to prove my people's genocide – especially in such a short deadline with the threat of having limited support put me in a terrifying position. I believe this was an attempt to intimidate and silence me from continuing my pro-Palestine activism for the rest of my academic career – to 'nip it in the bud' ... informing me I was under effectively a gag order, despite it not being an official investigation ... posed a severe psychological threat to me. Furthermore, they informed me I must not 'victimise' the person who made the complaint. This is protecting Zionist interests. The University neglected their obligations to me under their antiracism policy. I strongly believe this complaint was made with racist intentions, and the University chose to protect that and use it to intimidate me.

Since then, I have been terrified to make a wrong move on campus. I have been afraid to speak at rallies, engage in stalling, to wear my keffiyeh in class, to even use the printing resources at the University to print pro-Palestine and anti-Zionist material. My activist presence on campus has been heavily limited since then. I don't want my education to be threatened by calling for [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] on campus. The racialised claims made against me – that I was sowing discord and division on University campus simply for speaking up about the genocide of my people – and the University enabling this behaviour through its bureaucratic processes is discriminatory and restrictive of my rights.

A submission to the Inquiry from the Human Rights Law Centre said it had:

... raised serious concerns about repressive and disproportionate measures taken by universities in response to student and staff advocacy for Palestine. We have written to multiple universities ... about their policies and actions that undermine the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, academic freedom, and privacy on campus ... We are particularly concerned by decisions to suspend or expel students for peaceful protest, and by policy shifts that conflate discomfort or disagreement with particular viewpoints with grounds for disciplinary action.

Such measures risk having a chilling effect on intellectual freedom, political engagement, and democratic participation on campus. In some cases, they may also be inconsistent with universities' obligations under human rights legislation, including the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*, as well as the implied protections for political communication in the Australian Constitution. These responses point to a worrying trend in which some univer-

sities treat protest and dissent as threats to be managed rather than rights to be upheld.

The Inquiry heard that intense surveillance and threats of disciplinary procedures by university management facilitated the self-censorship of staff and students, thereby undermining a learning and teaching environment founded on the exercise of academic freedom of speech.

Surveillance of academics

Surveillance of academics often took place with the help of students and staff who objected to their support for Palestine. A submission from Educational Researchers for Palestine argued:

Some staff and students, with Israel/Zionist sympathies, monitor and report those who are critical of Israel and Zionism claiming they are antisemitic.

An academic told the Inquiry they attended a peaceful lunch-time demonstration:

to draw attention to the university's involvement with Israeli universities and defence corporations. We listened to rousing speeches by students and invited guests, including several prominent anti-Zionist Jews. The event was attended by about 100 people. Mid-way through, a close colleague who was not attending the demonstration approached and began overtly taking photos of me. Although no words were exchanged, the encounter felt deeply intimidating because this person is a vocal proponent of Zionism and a staunch defender of Israeli's military occupation of Palestine. I immediately began wondering what he would do with the photos. Where might they be posted, shared, unfairly captioned or misinterpreted? Would my opposition to the war be misconstrued as antisemitism? It was a chilling experience that made me question my right to free speech.

A professor who acted as a marshall at pro-Palestine meetings on campus described receiving an email from the university leadership before a rally directing him to:

make sure the wellbeing and safety of staff would be safeguarded and supported and that the activities at the rally must not give rise to any students or staff feeling offended or unsafe. I interpreted this as code for suggesting the rally could endanger the wellbeing and safety of students who don't agree with the pro-Palestine activism and that these activities might be considered antisemitic and hence could result in disciplinary measures. So there was an underlying threat in that email.

Others in the collective received the same email. That collective pretty much faded away afterwards. I'm transitioning into retirement, so I'm not that worried about disciplinary action. But other staff, much younger and at different career stages, had to take implicit threats more seriously ... I thought it was

really an ugly way to repress fair concerns among the student population about what was going on and [the university's] involvement.

Another academic told the Inquiry they had to defend themselves against false accusations from a colleague:

A member of staff approached my boss to make the vexatious allegation that I had been involved in “leaking” the 600+ strong WhatsApp chat that Israel-aligned people were using to co-ordinate targeted harassment, deplatforming and workplace termination campaigns against people standing in solidarity with Palestine. While I was in possession of a copy of the chat prior to its public release, I had not published it. Instead, having seen the names of several colleagues on the participant list and identified strategies shared in the chat to doxx or harass other academics, I privately notified a handful of students and staff engaged in Palestine solidarity activities to be careful about the targeting we might expect based on our visible displays of solidarity e.g. wearing our keffiyehs at work.

Having explained this, I was reassured I would not be disciplined for something I did not do. The whole incident left me feeling extremely paranoid, and that I was being surveilled within and/or outside of the workplace. I don't know how they could have come to the conclusion that I must have been involved in releasing the chat unless they had noticed me like and repost tweets and Instagram posts about the chat's contents by/in support of people who were named and targeted. Myself and this staff member do not follow each other on social media as far as I am aware. I don't know if they are surveilling me, but I have to assume they or someone else in the office are.

Another told the Inquiry:

I spent the semester feeling like I was under surveillance. I knew that academic colleagues in the '5A' (Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism) were checking my online course portal to see what I was teaching. I knew that students were feeding complaints back to AUJS.

An RMIT staff member told the Inquiry that after they signed an NTEU open letter calling for an end to genocide:

A student saw my name and wrote to the Equity and Inclusion team, calling me an antisemitic Hamas supporter who should be fired. A boss called me and the first thing they said was that I should think about what I put my name to in the future.

A casual academic told the Inquiry that following a class in which they discussed Gaza, the university received a student complaint of harassment and causing mental distress. Facilitated by an external pro-Israel organisation, it requested their dismissal.

A La Trobe University academic told the Inquiry that a staff member who signed an

open letter requesting the university cut ties with Israel was called to a confidential meeting:

They were given a talking-to for ‘creating division’ among staff members on the basis of those who signed and those who did not sign the letter ... This caused them a lot of anxiety, especially as they did not draft the letter.

Another academic told the Inquiry:

I felt like I had to self-monitor every utterance. I was terrified that I might say something that would lead to a full disciplinary process. It made it impossible to teach in the relaxed and engaging way that I am used to. What outraged me is that I have spent my entire career teaching (and living) anti-racism and co-existence, so to be accused of perpetrating racism in the form of antisemitism was shocking.

I have never in my long academic career experienced anything like it. I have never had a dean monitor what I teach or request ‘balance.’ I have never had a student complaint. I know of at least five other colleagues who had complaints, which again was simply unprecedented. One discovered that the complaint documents had metadata that revealed the complaint had been authored by [an academic], despite purporting to come from a student.

Discipline of academics

The Inquiry heard that a senior University of Queensland academic told a PhD student that talking or writing about Palestine is a “career killer.” A submission to the Inquiry agreed, arguing, “It is routine to hear of colleagues having their careers impacted because they are Palestinian, or because they speak up for Palestine.”

Academic staff were disciplined in similar ways to students with universities deploying spurious reasons, drawn out and intimidating processes, insidious warnings and confidentiality clauses. An academic told the inquiry they sent an email:

from my university email address inviting staff and students in my school to [a vigil in solidarity with Palestine], as it is common practice for staff and students to advertise external/internal events using this email list. The event was organised with colleagues of various backgrounds including Jewish. I was told that there had been a complaint to the VC and that I had contravened the IT Policy. It was intimidating as a junior staff member to be called into such a meeting – I felt that was part of the point. In the meeting there was repeated mention that the problem was not the ‘content’ of the email e.g. ‘It’s about the use of emails to reach out to staff and students’ [but also told] this is obviously a very charged political event – using university email might make students feel that it’s the university’s view.

An academic who was involved in a protest told the Inquiry they received an official

caution:

Although this was couched as a caution for entering a building without permission (the building I work in every day), it was obviously a caution against participating in a protest. There is no doubt in my mind I received this caution because the administration wishes to intimidate academic staff who express public opposition to the actions of the state of Israel.

An academic who spoke at a protest told the Inquiry he was told by university management people might assume he represented the university's position.

The meeting ended cordially but with the implication that the University would be monitoring any future public comment ... these disciplinary procedures violated principles of free speech and inquiry, violated due process, and were designed to be exemplary and intimidating for the university community, including both students and staff. As a result of these events, I decided to avoid further public comment.

Jewish academic Peter Slezak told the Inquiry:

I have been subject to complaints by leading Jewish organizations arising from my remarks at speeches to campus rallies for Palestine. Specifically, the complaints concern my remark that Jewish students should feel "uncomfortable" about Israel's genocide in their name. It is relevant that I am well-known to be Jewish and the son of Holocaust survivors. The same complaints against me were made on an earlier occasion when I made the same remarks to a student meeting at UNSW. On the first occasion I was summoned by the Dean of my Faculty to inform me that no action would be taken in response to the complaints. However, the vexatious complaints are an attempt to intimidate and silence anyone who speaks out about the moral and political issues confronting us.

An academic told the Inquiry they were reprimanded, partly on the basis that comments could damage her university's reputation:

I was called in for a meeting ... in regards to a letter of concern I wrote about the Israeli delegation attending [a] conference In it I stated my position as a General Practitioner and a tutor at [the university], and expressed my concern and disappointment that the various heads of hospitals and universities were participating in a conference hosting a delegation from a state being accused of genocide with warrants out for the arrest of their leaders.

During this meeting they advised that my email had been sent around various other organisations like the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the Zionist Federation of Australia who were alarmed that a tutor at [the university] had these views and mentioned [the university] in the email. ... their message was basically ... not to implicate [the university] or make it seem I was speaking

on behalf of the University ... Apparently having such opinions would potentially make students feel less safe in the classroom

An NTEU branch submission to the Inquiry included two examples of student complaints about class content. One academic said:

I've had to meet twice about class material after a student complained that I was showing bias on Palestine. The first time I was fine with having [senior staff] check in and find out what the situation was and get info about the subject I was teaching but the second meeting to get more information for me was alarming. It felt like surveillance and second-guessing my capacity as an educator. Even if the purpose was to use that information to support my case the implications of these meetings are that staff are vulnerable, the university is prioritising students who support Israel over the integrity of their staff and encouraging a culture where every complaint should be catered to.

Another described being presumed guilty following a student complaint about a tutorial:

I had dedicated half the class to giving an overview, with quotations of a recently published essay very carefully arguing why Palestinians in Gaza were unable to mourn the catastrophe of the genocide taking place there – because it was not over. The author I discussed is herself Jewish. When my manager contacted me about this [they] implied, but was deliberately oblique, that the charge was antisemitism.

There was no questioning as to my side of the experience, nor the opportunity to provide an official rebuttal. It felt very one-sided. I have no idea how this complaint has been recorded by the University, but it is the first time in 15 years of teaching that I have been summoned in this way to receive this very obliquely conveyed 'charge.' It's the inequality of a student complaint being taken seriously – but no equivalent serious interest in my professional perspective.

An academic from a different university described a student complaining prior to classes beginning that reading material incited prejudices and antisemitism, despite it including key Israeli scholars. They were asked to remove content despite the unit having been approved by the school prior to the complaint and received a letter warning the incident would be considered should any future issues arise. They said:

My concern is that the quality of scholarly work is being assessed by management and not my peers, because the conflict and violence taking place is controversial. This is the first complaint I've received since teaching for over a decade, and my teaching evaluations affirm my dedication to student engagement and satisfaction.

Another academic whose social media posts have been the regular subject of complaints to their university, none of which have been found to constitute misconduct, told the Inquiry:

It's not quite lawfare, but it is similar. It is the weaponisation of internal disciplinary processes and internal organisational regulations, with the pure purpose of harassing Palestine supporters. There is just an enormous amount of that going on.

Submissions to this Inquiry resonate with the finding made by a US report into the repression of campus speech on Palestine:

Pro-Israel and right-wing advocacy organizations – including those without any campus presence – have driven the surge in antisemitism investigations; in at least 78% of the complaints we analyzed, such groups either represent complainants or act as complainants themselves.²⁵

As for students, the consequences of pro-Palestine action for academics were exceptionally serious and often went beyond the sanctions of official disciplinary action. The Inquiry heard several examples of casual academics losing work.

A sessional academic told the Inquiry that after participating in a pro-Palestine action, a previous offer of work was rescinded and no others “were ever made-in stark contrast to the previous years, when I was offered plenty of casual teaching and research work.” They found this particularly shocking given research interests of the centre included human rights and war crimes. Another said:

I discussed the genocide in Gaza in one of the lectures, and it was a topic of conversation in tutorials. After this, in a staff meeting, the Head of School advised all staff not to discuss ‘controversial topics’ in classes. I was not rehired in any capacity after that semester, despite having employment since I did my PhD and was, prior to this, having increased responsibilities and a strong research record.

Another casual academic was informed about a student complaint related to teaching which addressed violence in Gaza. They told the Inquiry, “I was advised to ‘keep a low profile’ which I interpreted to mean avoid talking about Gaza and Israel/Palestine more broadly.” However, they were later told they would not be offered any further work. The Inquiry also heard that a university failed to renew the long-term associate position of an academic who delivered a teach-in to an encampment.

Academics whose pro-Palestine speech resulted in public accusations of antisemitism told the Inquiry that while they received support from the NTEU, many of their colleagues remained silent. A report by Academics for Palestine WA and SA, *A Climate of Fear: An Empirical Report on the Suppression of Speech on Palestine*, found self-censorship is “driven by a rational, widespread fear of professional and economic consequences.”²⁶

25. American Association of University Professors and Middle East Studies Association, *Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine* (November, 2025), https://mesana.org/pdf/Discriminating_Against_Dissent_Report.pdf, 2.

26. Academics for Palestine WA and Academics for Palestine SA, *A Climate of Fear: An Empirical Report on the Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Australia* (December, 2025), <https://academicsforpalestinewa.substack.com/p/a-climate-of-fear-an-empirical-report>, 15.

One academic's testimony to the Inquiry echoed this finding:

Fear of loss of friendship, of reputation, of job ... Fear is a friend of self-censorship ... Targeting senior members of academic staff, professors, stripping them of authority, is a very serious matter. It's a serious matter for collective reasons. Because if they can do it to me, they can do it to you.

There are probably many members of staff here who feel that what is going on is a genocide, and it will be remembered, and it is of historic significance, but they don't do anything, and they remain silent. They let that bird of self-censorship sit on their shoulders. How to break this? There are many ways of doing it ... but a tribunal of this kind, speaking to others about it, refusing self-censorship, not being a coward, being brave. I think we all have that capacity.

A University of Sydney academic told the Inquiry:

One of my previous colleagues, who's now moving up the ranks, said to me, "Look, I know what's going on. I've been to Palestine, but I've also got a family of two to feed, so I can't speak up."

Serious threats to their personal safety also gave academics other rational reasons for fear. One told the Inquiry:

There were ... anonymised non-university messages – dickhead, Jew hater, communist, idiot professor. Then came gunshots. Gunshots on my mobile phone.

Several submissions to the Inquiry referenced the case of Macquarie academic Randa Abdel-Fattah, whose prestigious \$870,000 ARC Future Fellowship grant was suspended, despite over 750 academics signing a petition opposing the suspension. She has described her experience as the result of:

a coordinated campaign, and I say coordinated with conviction because the people who did it gloated about it. A coordinated campaign between pro-Israel Zionist organisations, the Coalition and Murdoch media.

This is how the pro-Israel lobby operates. They make you such a headache for an institution that it is easier if you don't exist in that institution ... I'm pretty sure that my academic career has been irreparably damaged because I'm no longer dealt with on the basis of my academic credentials, my academic history and what I have to offer ... I'm now constructed as a risk and a liability. The anti-Palestinian racism is now on full display.

It is a moral depravity to even have to talk about this, for me to even have to think about how my colleagues might react to a tweet in which I am talking

about a man-made famine or bombs dropping on tents.²⁷

Abdel-Fattah was also targeted after Clare Wright, professor of history at La Trobe University, invited her to discuss her book *Discipline*, which is about the censorship of Palestinian voices, as part of a panel for the August 2025 Bendigo Writers Festival. Pro-Israel lobby group 5A wrote to La Trobe, which sponsored the Festival, saying her appearance would “pose a direct threat to the Jewish community in Australia” but suggesting that if it went ahead, it could be balanced by “the inclusion of a representative from one of the mainstream Jewish Zionist organisations on the same panel.”²⁸

Instead, just days before the Festival, La Trobe University issued a code of conduct to participants requiring them to “avoid language or topics that could be considered inflammatory, divisive, or disrespectful” and to “comply with La Trobe’s anti-racism plan, including the contentious definition of antisemitism adopted by Universities Australia in February.”²⁹

Wright says this “could only be read as an attempt to stifle the freedom of academic speech of the one Palestinian writer who was on the program, as a response to a letter received from a Zionist organisation.”³⁰ Abdel-Fattah withdrew, along with 52 other participants, and both the opening and closing events were cancelled. She told *The Guardian*:

How ironic that they would invite me, knowing what my book is about, on a panel called ‘reckonings,’ where I’m going to be discussing a book on silencing Palestinians – and then attempt to silence me.³¹

In December 2025, Randa Abdel-Fattah reported “After a 10-month exhaustive, rigorous investigative process, I have been cleared of all allegations raised against me and my employment suspension has been lifted and my ARC Future Fellowship reinstated.”³²

Just weeks later, in January 2026, Abdel-Fattah was again the target of a pro-Israel

27. Unmute, “Anti-racism scholar ‘ruined’ by Israel lobby,” *Al-Jazeera*, 2 September, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/2025/9/2/aje-onl-um-randa-abdel-fattah-020925>, accessed 20 October, 2025.

28. Kerrie O’Brien, “Letter to Bendigo Writers Festival flagged concern over Palestinian author,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August, 2025, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/letter-to-bendigo-writers-festival-emerges-flagging-concern-over-palestinian-writer-20250818-p5mnpd.html>, accessed 31 December, 2025; Antoun Issa and Alex McKinnon, “Pro-Israel group lobbied La Trobe and Bendigo Writers Festival over Palestinian academic’s inclusion,” *Deepcut News*, 18 August, 2025, <https://www.deepcutnews.com/p/exclusive-pro-israel-group-lobbied>, accessed 31 December, 2025.

29. Dee Jefferson, “How the Bendigo writers’ festival’s code of conduct caused a walkout and claims of censorship,” *The Guardian*, 22 August, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/aug/22/how-the-bendigo-writers-festivals-code-of-conduct-caused-a-walkout-and-claims-of-censorship>, accessed 31 December, 2025.

30. Kerrie O’Brien, “Bendigo Writers Festival unlikely to go ahead next year,” *The Age*, 12 December, 2025, <https://www.theage.com.au/culture/books/bendigo-writers-festival-unlikely-to-go-ahead-next-year-20251212-p5nn47.html>, accessed 31 December, 2025.

31. Jefferson, “How the Bendigo writers’ festival’s code of conduct caused a walkout and claims of censorship.”

32. Sarah Basford Canales, “Pro-Palestine academic Randa Abdel-Fattah cleared of wrongdoing after investigation into research grant,” *The Guardian*, 23 December, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/dec/23/pro-palestine-academic-randa-abdel-fattah-cleared-of-wrongdoing-after-investigation-into-research-grant-ntwnfb>, accessed 31 December, 2025.

group. Norman Scheuler, from the Jewish Community Council of South Australia, told the ABC that his organisation sent a letter requesting her removal from the Adelaide Writers' Week "a few days"³³ before its board issued a public statement explaining it had disinvited her because:

Whilst we do not suggest in any way that Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah's or her writings have any connection with the tragedy at Bondi, given her past statements we have formed the view that it would not be culturally sensitive to continue to program her at this unprecedented time so soon after Bondi.³⁴

This decision was fully backed by Adelaide Writers' Week's major funder, South Australian Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas.

Abdel-Fattah described her removal from the move as:

a blatant and shameless act of anti-Palestinian racism and censorship and a despicable attempt to associate me with the Bondi massacre ... the Adelaide Writers Festival Board has stripped me of my humanity and agency, reducing me to an object onto which others can project their racist fears and smears. I, a Palestinian who had nothing to do with the Bondi atrocity, am somehow a trigger for those in mourning and ... should therefore be persona non grata in cultural circles because my very presence as a Palestinian is threatening and 'unsafe'.³⁵

Senior lecturer Dr Victoria Mason, who has advocated for Palestinian human rights for decades, told the Inquiry that suppression of speech around the issue is not new. One example she gave related to a roleplay exercise she was contracted to design and run on the Middle East for a leadership program for WA youth at Curtin University. Following extensive lobbying by a pro-Israel group, the roleplay was removed from the program despite it being a central, and highly successful, part of the program for eight years.

In 2013, while an academic at the ANU, she convened a conference titled 'Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories' which examined economic, social and cultural rights in Palestine. She told the Inquiry:

The aim of the conference was to discuss human rights in Palestine in the same way that other global human rights issues were discussed – within a rigorous, mainstream and academic forum. The invited speakers were leading academic, NGO and policy experts on issues such as the rights to water, adequate food, and education. They included then-UN Special Rapporteur on the OPT Professor Richard Falk; Professor Hilal Elver, who later became the UN Special

33. Thomas Kelsall, "Former Adelaide Festival leaders pressure board to reinstate Palestinian author," *ABC News*, 10 January, 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-01-10/adelaide-writers-week-board-letter/106216140>, accessed 12 January, 2026.

34. Adelaide Festival, "Adelaide Festival Board Statement," 8 January, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260109234117/https://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/news/2025/adelaide-festival-board-statement>, accessed 12 January, 2026.

35. New Arab Staff, "Australian festival cites 'Bondi sensitivity' in bizarre decision to drop Palestinian writer Randa Abdel Fattah," *The New Arab*, 8 January, 2026, <https://www.newarab.com/news/australia-festival-drops-palestinian-writer-over-bondi-attack>, accessed 12 January, 2026.

Rapporteur on the right to food; Professor Jeff Halper, who is the co-founder and director of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions; Dr Sara Roy from the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard; Anat Litvin, who was the director of Physicians for Human Rights Israel; and Bahram Bekhradnia, who was the director of the Higher Education Policy Institute in the UK and the author of multiple World Bank reports on education in Palestine.

Dr Mason noted, however:

There was significant lobbying against the conference. In the lead-up, hostile comments — including deeply misleading characterisations and defamatory statements about conference speakers — were made by pro-Israel groups and some media outlets. There was high level and aggressive lobbying to try to have the conference cancelled, and myself censured, up to the level of my Vice Chancellor — including by the then-Israeli Ambassador.

Pressure also came from groups such as the pro-Israel lobby group NGO Watch, who petitioned the British Academy, the UK Ambassador to the UN and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, among others, about the conference as it was partially funded by a British Academy grant. Dr Mason told the Inquiry:

Ultimately the Australian Federal Police (AFP) had to attend the conference to ensure the safety of the presenters and the attendees. Fire alarms also went off repeatedly throughout the program, though most frequently during the keynote presentation by the UN Special Rapporteur Professor Richard Falk.

The AFP officers present confirmed to Dr Mason there was no smoke and no fires, and that it was very likely sabotage. Similar lobbying and pressure were applied when Dr Mason convened a 2024 symposium on Gaza at Murdoch University. She recounted that emails containing unfounded accusations against speakers were sent to sources across the University and petitioning against the symposium went up to the level of her Vice-Chancellor.

Dr Mason also discussed the difficulties of giving expert academic comment to the media on Palestine. She told the Inquiry:

Despite all the findings of key international bodies (such as the ICJ and other UN bodies) and NGOs (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), the mainstream media still routinely fails to fully and equally report the human rights realities on the ground for Palestinians in the way that it would for other situations, such as in Ukraine. The mainstream media appears too nervous about potential backlash to report the expert academic comment you give them in a fulsome way — that Israel's occupation is illegal, that it is undertaking a settler-colonial project, that it has created a reality of apartheid for Palestinians, that it has committed the crime of genocide in Gaza, and that as part of that genocide it has targeted journalists, health care workers and humanitarian workers.

And if the mainstream media do report parts of your analysis, they tend to follow it up with a quote from a pro-Israel group saying that no such thing is occurring. It is a case of bizarre “two-sideism” that the media wouldn’t apply to other cases. For example, they wouldn’t give a quote from an expert academic about the illegal Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine and then follow it up with a quote from a pro-Russian organisation denouncing and dismissing the expert opinion. Palestine is subjected to conditions unlike any other situation in the world.

Dr Mason told the Inquiry she also often received abusive messages when quoted in the media about Palestine. She said that abusive messages became so common that she stopped having a landline in her office after the 2013 conference. She said, however, that people would also email abuse and other problematic material. One example she gave was being repeatedly emailed by a pro-Israeli Professor for a number of years. These emails at times included “really offensive material” taken from sites that alleged that human rights violations against Palestinians were actually faked and staged by “Pallywood.”

Another academic, Professor Sujatha Fernandes, told the Inquiry her lecture slides were photographed and she was subjected to a university disciplinary process after using Palestine as an example in her teaching. She said:

I gave a lecture on ... various theories of power. I’ve been teaching this for about five years. I always end with about 15 minutes where I choose a contemporary example that helps illuminate some of these theories. I thought it would be a good topic to discuss media representations of Palestine. I presented it in theoretical terms ... I said the media is functioning as an apparatus of power and I went through very detailed examples.

I gave this lecture in March. It wasn’t till May that I was contacted by *The Australian* newspaper saying some Jewish students have made a complaint about you and we’re running an article about you tomorrow and can you comment ... That came out with a full page cover story, a photo of me and my lecture slides ... saying Jewish students felt uncomfortable and I needed to be dealt with by the university.

They kept referring to me as “the Indian born academic”. There was nothing wrong with being Indian born, but I was born in Australia. It was interesting to me the way this article was framed, to make me out to be this foreigner who has come here. That was the first of five hit pieces *The Australian* ran about my 15 minutes at the end of that lecture.

It went on to *Sky News*. It was reported broadly, a lot of people saw that article and it prompted a university investigation. I’m not allowed to discuss the university investigation. The other thing that happened was I started being attacked online. At the same time as I was getting the most nasty horrible emails, I was also getting very nice emails of support and one woman wrote to me. She said I’m a Jewish woman, this happened to me, *The Australian* attacked me and I just want to let you know there is a slide circulating on Facebook with all your

contact information. She sent me the slide.

I was being attacked on Facebook, on Twitter, via both my email addresses. It was really bad for a couple of weeks, but it did continue for the next four or five months because *The Australian* articles continued. Another one was a front page hit piece. One attacked my ARC grant; said I support the rape of Israeli women and therefore my ARC grant should be taken away from me. They contacted the ARC. I had people calling the university to say I should be fired.

You think people will have your back and they'll reach out. Very few people actually did. Across my school, I heard from maybe two people. Across the humanities people were a lot more supportive. The union was incredible in supporting me, but my own colleagues were quite silent through all of this. It was eye-opening, it was disturbing. It was hard to adjust to that reality of how do you work with people when they know all this stuff's happened to you.

Two or three months into it, I would get an email saying "Request for information about research assistance" in the subject heading. I'm doing a research project; this is the kind of email I might get. I open it and it's a horrific email about rape. The repercussions will continue, I can see that.

The university would not reveal to me who the complainants were until quite late in the process. With the help of the union, we found out that there were some pro-Israel students from the class who had gone to ECAJ, and it was ECAJ, an outside body, who put in the complaint.

It is interesting, just to know what does get you in trouble and what doesn't. Because before I gave this lecture, we had the whole 1000 new students entering the university and we were asked to participate in *The Great Debate*, wear a hat and gown and talk about power. So in my speech I gave a five minute talk all about Palestine and power, I talked about the media and I got such resounding applause I won *The Great Debate*.

In late 2024, three University of Sydney academics and two students lodged a complaint of racial discrimination against senior lecturer in linguistics Dr Nick Riemer and Professor of Politics John Keane, which is currently being heard by the Federal Court. Dr Riemer has explained the case against them to *ABC Radio National*:

What the complainants are trying to do is get a legal ruling that whenever anyone criticizes Zionism, it's intrinsically antisemitic ... we understand Zionism as the commitment to a Jewish ethno state in historic Palestine ... that was achieved in 1948 by military means, ethnic cleansing, mass expulsion, hundreds of thousands of refugees ... the last two years have shown us what that commitment means, and the idea that criticising that somehow amounts to code or explicit criticism of Judaism is inexplicable to me.

The idea that Zionism has an intrinsic connection to Judaism, it's just some-

thing that's factually wrong. The original Zionists were Christians. It then got picked up by a section of the Jewish community in Europe, but it was also ... deeply unpopular in many segments of the Jewish community in Europe in the early 20th century, as Zionism was getting going, and it's still highly unpopular. You only need to look at the large number of anti-Zionist Jewish organizations that exist around the world. Jewish Voice for Peace in the United States, Jewish Council of Australia here, these are all organizations which oppose the genocide, which oppose what Netanyahu has been doing, and want to see equality for Palestinians and Israelis.

... the applicants have trawled through my social media ... I've been involved in activism for Palestine for quite a long time, I've written a book about the academic boycott of Israel, which is non-violent means of placing pressure on Israeli universities, which are a key part of the whole Israeli state machine of anti-Palestinianism ... The complainants are just saying that basically, every time I myself have criticised, or I've shared others' criticisms of Zionism ... what I'm really doing is criticizing Jews. And the reason that I'm criticizing Zionists and Zionism is that really deep down I am antisemitic, and that's an accusation that I just reject categorically.

I think it goes against the *prima facie* meaning of the words Jewish and Zionist. They mean different things ... Jewish people regularly distinguish between Judaism and Zionism ... there's the Zionist Federation, the Jewish Council. These terms are used and understood to mean different things ... I've regularly said that I stand with Jewish opponents of Zionism, and that antisemitism is a base and abhorrent form of racism, just as all racisms are ... what we're seeing ... is Israel supporters use of accusations of antisemitism to discredit opponents of practices of the State of Israel towards Palestinians.

I'm not Jewish, and my dad wasn't Jewish. My dad's parents didn't identify as Jewish. My dad was Hungarian. He died five years ago. He born in '36 in Budapest. He and his parents were counted as Jewish under the Nuremberg laws. My grandfather spent time in a labour camp, in a Nazi fascist labour camp from which, actually, he escaped twice. My dad and his mum lived underground under assumed names, in cellars into the kitchen, hiding from the Nazis. I have members of my extended family who ended up in the death camps. The idea that Zionists are calling me, of all people, antisemitic, it's deeply insulting to me personally, and that's the least important part of it.

The most important part is the way that this debases the very necessary fight that we have to have against antisemitism and all forms of racism. Because ... antisemitism is abhorrent. It's not more or less abhorrent than any other form of racism. It's equally abhorrent. So we shouldn't be exceptionalising it in the way that we so often do ... one of the benefits for the applicants in initiating this process against us is that it ties us up in this extremely protracted and also expensive legal debate.³⁶

36. Sunday Extra, "Anti-Zionism on trial," *ABC Radio National*, 12 October, 2025, <https://www.abc.>

Role of the media

The surveillance and discipline of students and academics described in this section corroborates the findings of the *A Climate of Fear* report. It described a pattern of institutions across education, health, the arts and the public service managing the risk of potential bad publicity by:

cancelling events, banning symbols, and issuing ‘neutrality’ directives – so that external actors never have a reason to intervene. When this pre-emptive silence fails, or when an individual refuses to self-censor, the ‘feedback loop’ of active suppression described below is triggered.

1. An individual speaks or posts online in support of Palestine.
2. An external actor (e.g., a doxxer, an organised lobby, a media outlet) screenshots, decontextualises, and sends the content to the individual’s employer or regulatory body.
3. The institution, now ‘aware’ of a ‘complaint’, is pressured to ‘manage risk’ or uphold its ‘neutrality’ policy.
4. The institution then silences the employee through formal HR mechanisms, validating the fear of “professional consequences” for all other employees and justifying widespread self-silencing.

This ‘feedback loop’ reveals a critical failure of institutional duty ... many institutions ... become participants in the suppression, choosing to manage their own reputational risk by silencing their employee rather than standing by their staff’s right to personal expression.³⁷

In January 2026, *The Australian* newspaper ran a story referencing a report compiled by the Israeli Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism purporting to identify the key generators of antisemitism and anti-Zionist/anti-Israel opinion in Australia. Language in the report consistently conflates anti-Israel sentiment and actions with antisemitism.

It names prominent politicians including Labor Friends of Palestine convenor Anthony D’Adam MLC, Greens Adam Bandt and Senator Mehreen Faruqi, and Senators Lidia Thorpe and Fatima Payman. The pro-Palestine groups named include the Students for Palestine group at the University of Sydney and University of Melbourne for Palestine. Noting the report included a photo of him and his partner, D’Adam claimed the Israeli government was seeking to intimidate and discredit critics.

Writing to ask Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke to investigate whether the report constituted foreign interference in Australian politics, D’Adam cited *The Australian’s* story

[net.au/listen/programs/sundayextra/anti-zionism-on-trial/105880192](https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/sundayextra/anti-zionism-on-trial/105880192), accessed 6 February, 2026.

37. Academics for Palestine WA, *A Climate of Fear*, 10–11.

as an impact of the report, which it used to “attack a number of Australian politicians, community activists and non-government organisations.”³⁸

Adelaide Writers’ Week director Louise Adler also linked News Ltd publications to the vilification of pro-Palestinian activists. Speaking in the wake of the Bendigo Writers Festival boycott, before Adelaide Writers’ Week succumbed to the same fate, she told *The Guardian* the arts community should show courage and support artists. She stated the Adelaide festival required solely that writers comply with “Australian laws regarding racial discrimination, vilification, hate speech and incitement to violence”:

We have witnessed a succession of pre-emptive buckles by arts managers second-guessing risk-averse boards who collectively (with management) are concerned about the reputational damage, the withdrawal of desperately needed sponsorship, and the relentless media campaigns that lobby groups can and do orchestrate with the help of News Ltd.³⁹

The Inquiry heard that several other pro-Palestine academics and students were subject to media campaigns demonising them for their views. However, the suppression of pro-Palestine voices and the promotion of pro-Israel ones was not limited to News Ltd media. In December 2023, hundreds of Australian journalists signed an open letter calling for an improvement in coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict by taking the following steps:

1. Adhere to truth over ‘both-sidesism’ ...
2. Centre the human tragedy ...
3. Apply as much professional scepticism when prioritising or relying on uncorroborated Israeli government and military sources to shape coverage as is applied to Hamas ...
4. Give adequate coverage to credible allegations of war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, and don’t avoid using the term “Palestine” where appropriate ...
5. Provide historical context when referencing the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel ...
6. Provide full and fair coverage of Australia’s growing anti-war movement ...
7. Be transparent about journalists who have been on all-expenses paid trips to Israel organised by pro-Israeli government groups ...

38. Anne Davies, “NSW MP asks home affairs minister to investigate potential foreign interference after Israel ‘targets’ him in dossier,” *The Guardian*, 7 January, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/jan/07/nsw-mp-asks-home-affairs-minister-to-investigate-potential-foreign-interference-after-israel-targets-him-in-dossier>, accessed 12 January, 2026.

39. Jefferson, “How the Bendigo writers’ festival’s code of conduct caused a walkout and claims of censorship.”

8. Trust Australian journalists of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and Jewish backgrounds to do their jobs.⁴⁰

In response, signatories from the *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* were told they would no longer be allowed to cover the conflict. A report of a meeting to discuss this decision said:

Editors stressed that their decision to sideline staff who had signed the letter was motivated by a desire to protect their mastheads' reputations from a perception of bias. They argued that the bans - while saying they were hesitant to use the word "ban" to describe them - were not punitive and were set to last as long as the conflict does. A point of contention was the "hypocrisy" of treating staff as potentially biased for signing the letter about media coverage, while not applying that same standard to staff who've attended sponsored trips to Israel.⁴¹

A list of "journalists and politicians who have taken part in organised tours to the Middle East on the dime of lobby groups or governments, or at their own expense" has been published by *Crikey* and includes senior editors and journalists from outlets including *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Advertiser*, *The West Australian*, *Sky News*, *Seven Network*, *Nine Network*, *Network 10*, *SBS* and *2GB*.⁴²

4. A lack of natural justice and its chilling effect

A fourth issue the Inquiry's Terms of Reference tasked it with exploring is:

3. The adequacy of university disciplinary procedures and policies in the context of controversies over free speech; these procedures' adherence to principles of natural justice; and their effect on staff and students' civil and political rights; and whether Australian universities have adhered to their own policies regarding freedom of speech and academic freedom in relation to Palestine.

The Inquiry heard of numerous instances in which natural justice and procedural fairness were compromised or ignored when staff and students were disciplined by universities.

40. Quentin Dempster, "Journalism, propaganda and war," *Pearls and Irritations*, 14 December, 2023, <https://johnmenadue.com/post/2023/12/journalism-propaganda-and-war/>, accessed 7 January, 2025.

41. Cam Wilson, "Nine editors double down in 'tense' Israel-Palestine letter meeting amid subscription cancellations," *Crikey*, 29 November, 2023, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/11/29/sydney-morning-herald-age-letter-israel-palestine-gaza/>, accessed 7 January, 2025.

42. . Daanyal Saeed, "Which Australian journalists and politicians have gone on trips to Israel and Palestine?" *Crikey*, 3 November, 2023, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/11/03/australian-journalists-politicians-trips-israel-palestine-dutton/>, accessed 7 January, 2025.

University of Queensland students told the Inquiry:

The evidence presented illustrates a troubling divergence between the University's stated commitment to open intellectual inquiry and its recent pattern of selectively restricting Palestine-related speech ... Management has fostered an environment in which students and staff cannot rely on the procedural safeguards that ordinarily protect scholarly debate. These measures have not only chilled critical engagement with one of the most urgent questions of our time but have also exposed fundamental weaknesses in the University's governance of free expression ... contrary to natural-justice standards embedded in UQ policy.

ANU staff members told the Inquiry:

when students had asked for the specifics of allegations made against them, they were reportedly told not only that University management does not have to disclose this information to them, but were not informed of whether they had breached the Code, even when they asked repeatedly.

Deakin students told the Inquiry one student's disciplinary process, which included compulsory anti-protest "counselling":

was an affront to the concept of natural justice ... she was not presented with any of the complaints relevant to her case ... written complaints had not been presented to her prior to the hearing, nor were they during it ... she was suspended for Trimester 2 ... After submitting an appeal ... [her] suspension was overturned. She was, however, required to engage with Deakin's 'Safer Community' program.

These sessions began with the presumption that activism is counterposed with community safety ... [She] was asked incredibly invasive questions, including about her mental health and the impact of the discipline process on her ... [She] would be interrogated and criticised for her activism.

A student at another university was suspended before they received formal allegations against them for social media posts critical of the actions of a pro-Israel group:

Bound by the condition of confidentiality, I could not explain to my professors and peers why I was absent from my course ... the university claimed my speech had the possibility of being interpreted as antisemitic. The disciplinary process, including the campus ban ... has been delayed without explicit reason several times ... The whole process has undermined the principle of presumption of innocence as I received a severe punishment at the commencement of the process, based on allegations that never materialised.

It is clear what the intent of the University is – to silence any criticism of the State of Israel or the ideology of Zionism as quickly as possible. In the event I

am exonerated, it is probable my degree will still be delayed by a full year, and the University will achieve their desired objective of punishing me for exercising my free speech in defence of human rights and international humanitarian law.

An academic explained how complaints against staff were also often shrouded in secrecy:

I was called into the Dean's office. The conversation was Kafkaesque.

Dean: "We have received an anonymous complaint about your teaching related to Palestine."

Me: "What specifically about my teaching?"

Dean: "I can't say specifically, because that could breach the student's anonymity."

Me: "How can I respond to the accusation unless I know what I said that was the problem?"

Dean: "I can say only in general terms that there were several examples. That you were not presenting all sides of the debate."

Me: "Can I know whether it was one of my students who complained?"

Dean: "No. And you cannot tell anyone of the existence or nature of this complaint."

Another told the Inquiry:

In the case of my dismissal as a casual teacher, there has been a complete absence of transparency and procedural fairness. I have yet to sight the actual complaint or have an opportunity to reply to the accusations made.

An academic told the Inquiry that imposing confidentiality means universities are not accountable for their actions and that delaying responses to complaints "has the effect of holding a protracted threat over our heads." Another academic subject to disciplinary proceedings said the confidentiality requirement was:

one of the most stressful things, to have to move through an entire semester with these things hanging over your head, not allowed to tell anyone or ask for support from colleagues, family or friends. I felt like I couldn't breathe all year. I ended up breaking down in tears at the end of the last day of semester, the stress of it had built up so much.

Academics from UNSW told the Inquiry they saw the use of confidentiality clauses as precluding "one of the most effective lines of defence against political targeting": "the

ability to leverage public pressure against universities.”

The Inquiry heard multiple examples of how opaque disciplinary measures had created a chilling environment of self-censorship. One academic told of another who initially agreed to speak at a book launch, later refusing due to its links to Palestine and the current environment at universities.

The Inquiry was told that following Kellee Green winning the Queensland Music Awards 2025 Jazz prize for her instrumental composition *River to Sea*, and speaking about Gaza while accepting it, Brisbane City Council withdrew funding from the awards. While over 2000 musicians and artists signed a letter of support, one noted:

I was disturbed by how many of my former friends and colleagues who are staff at university music departments and institutions were afraid for their jobs if they put their name to this public statement. Artists are frequently coping with precarious incomes and inconsistent work opportunities, which contributes to an ease of intimidation.

An academic told the Inquiry that a colleague complained that their pro-Palestine activism “was making our workplace culturally unsafe for them as a Zionist”:

My line manager spoke to me about it and ... I agreed not to send any more whole of centre emails on the issue but that I would continue to be active on campus. As a result of this complaint, I was much less confident in speaking openly about the atrocities happening in Gaza at work.

Another explained how the climate affected the limited events discussing Palestine which had cleared bureaucratic obstruction:

I ran an event where the speakers were going to talk about Palestine, in relation to ideas of empire. The event wasn't on Palestine in particular, but they wanted to make links. We decided to take it out of the blurb because we thought it would cause problems. So, they only spoke about it at the event. At another institution, we were running a workshop, and we did reference Palestine in the blurb. But we encountered complaints before we even ran the workshop. That contributed to us censoring more in the workshop. We were concerned about someone who comes to events and records them without consent, and then uses those recordings to make complaints to university management. It's trying to manoeuvre within a system that doesn't enable a free exchange of ideas and debate around Palestine. You're constantly having to make strategic decisions to enable it to happen in some way without it being shut down before we get there.

Academics for Palestine South Australia told the Inquiry:

A colleague mentioned at a staff gathering she would be attending a pro-Palestine rally. A senior leader advised her to not attend as the ‘conflict was complicated.’ Since then, although she privately sympathises for Palestinians, she has not attended any rallies or publicly shared her thoughts about the current and ongoing genocide.

Students from the University of Wollongong told the Inquiry:

This climate of fear and censorship undermines the very foundations of academic freedom. Scholars and students are increasingly hesitant to engage in honest discourse about Palestine, fearing reputational damage, professional retaliation, or expulsion. This has led to a dangerous narrowing of political expression on campus, where critique of a foreign state's policies is treated as hate speech, and where solidarity with an oppressed people is framed as extremism.

Students told the Inquiry how individual targeting of student leaders had a broader chilling effect, even when they were eventually found not guilty:

[University management] emailed two students to issue a formal directive to end the camp within 48 hours which stated that failure to comply would constitute general misconduct. The same two students were emailed notice of discipline proceedings against them [for] failing to comply with the directive to end the camp. The notice also cited clauses relating to damage to property, injury to a person and disruption of "good order" in the university, but no specific allegations of this nature were made. The two students were later found not guilty of general misconduct. However, the discipline process had facilitated the intimidation of participants of the encampment.

As well as the potentially enormous financial and emotional costs of disciplinary action, students from Palestinian, Muslim and Arab backgrounds faced other consequences including public vilification. An ANU student told the Inquiry:

ANU's use of disciplinary threats against pro-Palestine students has created a climate of fear. This has deterred many students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, from voicing their political beliefs. Muslim students were especially targeted. Many of us withdrew entirely from public displays of solidarity for fear of repression and retaliation.

Many students who once joined in vigils, teach-ins, and solidarity events have withdrawn in fear of being surveilled, punished, or doxxed. Others avoid even attending discussions or expressing support online, scared of the university's retaliation or being ostracised in academic spaces. The cost of speaking out for Palestinian students, for visibly Muslim women, and for our allies has been made deliberately high.

Murdoch Students for Palestine members told the Inquiry:

Members of our club have repeatedly expressed anxiety and concern about the potential consequences of being associated with or involved in club activities. Given the events in other universities both internationally and domestically, international students have noted concerns of unfair disciplinary action leading to the loss of their student visa and deportation. We consider the university's inability to support our club and reassure us of their own policies as contrib-

uting to this anxiety and self-censorship. ... In these circumstances we refrain from protesting and other types of contentious action to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our members.

As a club we have had to jump through hurdles other clubs have not, time and again reassure the University we are 'peaceful' and not disruptive, been prevented from promoting our club and our cause, had to cancel events where 'speaking' would take place, and reassure our members of their safety without any support from the Guild nor the University. These experiences have greatly restricted our activities as a club and our ability to voice our horror at the events unfolding in Palestine. We ask, what is campus free speech if we cannot raise our concerns and advocate for Palestinian rights for fear we might 'disrupt'?

Many students told the Inquiry their experiences had disillusioned them about higher education. A University of Melbourne student said, "At no point did the protests or encampment make me feel unsafe – but the university did. Melbourne University does not care for the safety or wellbeing of its students, nor their right to free protest."

Describing ANU calling police to end the encampment, a student there said:

Myself and many of my friends were extremely distressed at the overt suppression of pro-Palestine activism, the threat of arrest, the distrust we felt in the organisation we came to for education, and the fear that individual students involved in the protection of the encampment would be targeted and face severe consequences. I was not a key organiser of the encampment but many of my close friends were and express significant distress and distrust in the university to this day.

A University of Melbourne student explained her disillusionment with the institution:

As a first-year student I undertook the very expensive mandatory subject 'Arts Discovery,' which 'emphasizes decolonization of mindsets and spaces, encouraging students to imagine "New Futures" and create critical and creative interventions.' I was excited and inspired to be exposed to these ideas. I also genuinely believed the University was committed to these ideals. We have worked hard to hold our University to account, to pressure them to cut ties with weapons manufacturers, and to end academic partnerships with Israeli universities.

Due to my activism, I have been taken through disciplinary proceedings. Like many others, I received a formal reprimand. The atmosphere on campus is oppressive and depressing. Scope for campus protest and activism has been greatly limited and we are uncertain as to what is allowed. The same is true in the classes: I mainly stay silent these days as I don't know what I am allowed to say given the University's efforts to stifle free speech on Palestine.

I also notice the effect that this has had on my teachers. My tutors are mainly PhD students or academics on short-term contracts. They are obviously under pressure to avoid being pro-Palestine or even mention Palestine. Despite this,

they sometimes express support. I have been really disgusted by the lack of solidarity coming from white tenured academics. Surely their privilege shields them to some extent from Zionist targeting, but they have been largely absent from campus activism, which has been left to students and young staff on insecure contracts.

Melbourne University law school teaches about justice and fairness. It runs an international human rights program. It has more than 90 continuing staff. They have remained largely silent while students have been surveilled on campus ... and while the University has adopted the Orwellian IHRA definition of antisemitism.

For many people who made submissions to the Inquiry, universities prioritising commercial dealings and controlling dissent through discipline exposed them as failing to fulfil their fundamental roles. A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry:

As a student concerned with the complicity of my university in genocide, there are many things I couldn't have imagined at a university that publicly advertises its commitment to free, open debate ... I couldn't have imagined being locked in a stuffy, unventilated room by university security for a peaceful sit in against Sydney Uni's ties with Tel Aviv Uni, a Uni that is directly involved in maintaining the system of occupation and apartheid in Palestine through its collaboration with the IDF and Israeli weapons manufacturers.

I couldn't have imagined having to face near daily harassment from Zionist agitators at the USyd Gaza solidarity encampment and watch Campus Security sit by ... or when university management sent out all student emails describing members of the encampment as intimidatory and having "endangered the health and well-being of students and staff"

ANU students argued:

profit and political pressure are being prioritised over the rights of students to express solidarity, demand justice for Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and criticise the institution's support of genocide. We must be especially cognisant of the Palestinian students who are being told, implicitly and explicitly, that their grief is disruptive, their resistance is unwelcome, and their voices do not belong in the university space.

This sentiment was echoed by Queensland academics who argued:

universities have shown their complicities in this genocide, not only through weapons and business ties, but monumental efforts (security, surveillance, policies, lobbying etc.) to silence their own students and staff. Crucially, universities have also chosen not to speak out about the genocide while their counterparts in Gaza are razed. This demonstrates the limits of their purported role as places of critical thought and intellectual freedom.

Educational researchers for Palestine made a similar point:

Universities have allowed themselves to be intimidated by politicians and special interest groups. They have tried to bury discussion of a colossal human tragedy under a mountain of managerialist double speak. They have sacrificed the notion that knowledge must be free and fearless. They have become timid and small minded and have implicitly encouraged staff and students to be the same. They have corrupted truth and undermined trust and collegiality.

Students involved in advocating for Palestine highlighted how censorship on campus contrasted with university claims to free speech and critical thinking. A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry:

You cannot teach critical thinking by punishing the students who practice it ... To take the question of Palestine seriously, I think, would mean challenging the university's own role in the genocide, its partnerships with weapons manufacturers, its research ties with Israeli institutions, and its relationship with the pro-Israel lobby. Palestine is rendered unspeakable, not because it is too complex, but because it's too clear.

A University of Melbourne student told the Inquiry:

A lot of the students you saw being targeted by disciplinary measures were students who were studying teaching, who were studying nursing, studying to become doctors, lawyers, social workers. It's the exact students that you would want to care about genocide, about the children in Gaza, about justice and humanity ... many of whom worked really hard to study at this university, who had a lot of hopes and aspirations coming to a place like this, to learn critical thinking, to engage in free debate about issues ... I think it's a moral betrayal from the university.

5. Differential treatment and institutional harm

The Inquiry Terms of Reference charged it with exploring:

5. Whether Australian universities have treated students and staff advocates for Palestine differently from students and staff speaking, organising, and protesting in support of Israel.

The Inquiry found universities treated pro-Palestine staff and students more harshly than those supporting Israel. It also found universities failed in their duty of care by not protecting these individuals from reported harassment, abuse and violence, and by not hold-

ing perpetrators accountable, resulting in institutional harm.

University of Adelaide students told the Inquiry that while students who participated in the encampments were disciplined, those who verbally and physically attacked them were not:

On four separate nights, participants in the Gaza Solidarity encampment at the University of Adelaide faced violent attacks from improvised explosives made of commercial fireworks. On two nights these caused damage to tents, with several tents set alight by sparks from the fireworks on one night. Fortunately, nobody was physically injured, but participants were shaken and disturbed. It was only luck that nobody was sleeping in the tents that set fire at the time.

University of Adelaide administration failed to respond adequately to this political violence. No support, such as counselling, was offered by the administration to those victimised, and the investigation into these attacks was seemingly dropped early on. Students at the encampment instead had to take our own steps to protect ourselves and investigate these attacks by operating night watches and collecting what video evidence we could. At least one of the fireworks was launched via a drone from directly above the camp. We believe that if we had been there for another cause, there would have been more outcry about the attacks and more support offered. Instead, the victims of these attacks faced disciplinary proceedings and campus bans. All those who received warning emails, disciplinary action or campus bans were victims of the fireworks attacks.

University of Sydney students also reported differential treatment:

We were heavily monitored and spoken to several times about our protest causing intimidation. However, we know of no similar levels of monitoring or action taken against supporters of Israel for genuinely threatening behaviour. In one incident, the pro-Israel body the Australian Jewish Association made a post on X (below) ... against the encampments (around the same time as pro-Israel students had thrown fireworks into the tents of an Adelaide encampment). In the same week, we had several pro-Israel supporters drive around our camp several times blaring music and yelling, including on one instance shaking our tents in the middle of the night, as well as attaching a large wooden structure with an Israeli flag above us. To our knowledge the University made no statements or took any action against any pro-Israel individuals responsible for this behaviour.



Australian Jewish Association Twitter post

A University of Queensland student told the Inquiry:

The messaging coming from the pro-Palestinian encampment faced intense scrutiny from UQ even though it tried to be rigorous in excluding people who could be antisemitic or defensive of Hamas terrorism, whereas the pro-Israeli government encampment was openly and overtly racist against Palestinians and faced no scrutiny at all.

Monash students told the Inquiry the Monash University Islamic Society (MUIS) and Monash for Palestine clubs organised a fundraiser with Palestinian Australian New Zealand Medical Association. Originally scheduled by students for Friday 4 October, the University instead offered them the choice of 5, 6 or 7 October. After considering “the scale of the event, booking costs and weekend availability” they accepted Monday 7 October. The students told the Inquiry:

The fundraiser was approved by the necessary channels within the University including the selected venues, security and senior management. MUIS received notification of the cancellation on 8:00 AM on Sunday 6 October 2024, a day prior to the event. The reasons were provided as ‘staff and student concerns’ and ‘inappropriate choice of date’ despite this being the date selected by the university. The abrupt cancellation incurred devastating financial costs. Sponsors were no longer able to attend which strained stakeholder relationships. No benefit could be gained for the catering and logistics that had already been paid for.

On that date the University permitted a vigil with the group *Stand with Israel*. The date marked the start of a destructive conflict which significantly impacted Palestinian students, Muslim and Arabic students as well as Jewish Students. Therefore, favouring a *Stand with Israel* vigil without any similar event allowed

for Palestinian students, portrays a bias towards Zionist perspectives, which, in the context of a deeply sensitive and multifaceted conflict, may leave Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab students feeling marginalised and unheard.

The fundraiser aimed to provide humanitarian relief and aid to people affected by an ongoing crisis and war. Nonetheless, external media painted the choice to hold any fundraiser as ‘sickening’ and ‘abhorrent.’ Senator Sarah Henderson commented on the fundraiser, describing it as ‘anti-Jewish.’ The University was silent on the matter despite the severe public backlash experienced by students who were consequently labelled as ‘ Hamas sympathisers’ and ‘ Terrorists.’ The cancellation of the fundraiser was a particular cause of pain and trauma for Palestinian, and more broadly Arab and Muslims students on campus.

A Jewish academic told the Inquiry they spoke at a peaceful protest where:

A group of Jewish Zionist people, including students, walked up to us in an intimidating way, wrapped in Israeli flags. One of these people performed the ‘Sig Heil’ gesture at our Palestine solidarity gathering, with the clear implication that we were Nazis, or sympathetic to Nazis. Such views are anathema to a proudly Jewish woman like myself and the other Jewish speaker (a student at the university), and at the very least insulting to the non-Jewish attendees. I felt directly targeted by this clear act of antisemitism by supporters of Israel.

This demonstration stood near our protest, filming us, shouted Islamophobic, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian slogans, and their presence was domineering and disruptive. One of the ways they disrupted was to bring an Israeli agitator (a person who is not a staff member or student), who tried to goad other people into arguments, while a camera was shoved in their faces. There have been other Palestine-related events on campus where pro-Israel people chose to attend and disrupt, including abusing the university’s complaints mechanisms with false claims.

I’ve received aggressive hate mail (both via email and hard copy) due to my public position about Palestine. This includes visceral language around sexual abuse and torture, and some (such as the evangelical Christian pamphlets with handwritten notes to me) explicitly target my Jewish identity.

A Palestinian student told the Inquiry she was harassed by Zionist students, led by a Christian Zionist, during a student election.

I ran in the election for my student union presidency at the University of Sydney. I am a Palestinian student, and was vocal about the atrocities we were witnessing in Gaza and the campaign to bring justice for Palestinians was part of my policy platform. I was very vocal in my campaign that I am Palestinian and Muslim.

She approached me to intimidate me and let me know that “if elected you would

become the first Israeli president of our student union,” despite that she knew I was Palestinian, not Israeli. These words are assimilationist in their intent and effect. This is anti-Palestinian racism and trying to shut down my right to free speech on campus.

During the election, there was a debate between me and two other candidates. In this debate, two Zionist audience members tried to yell “ Hamas supporter” and “you support terrorism” each time I was speaking. Similar comments were made on the livestream. In my time at university, I did not feel I was able to speak freely and that my lived experiences as a Palestinian were constantly met with extra scrutiny or that I was dehumanised in ways my peers weren’t. I make this submission in the hopes that things might change for future generations of Palestinian students at Australian campuses. Everyone should get to feel they belong in Australia, but not everyone does.

The experience of Palestinian students and academics suggests that even those taking the greatest sensitivity when discussing the plight of their families and communities were subject to censorship. A Sydney student told the Inquiry:

I was invited to present at a university-hosted forum showcasing student leadership on issues relating to racism and equity. My presentation focused on racism reported on campus, as well as the importance of creating space for honest, respectful, and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about Palestine as part of fostering an inclusive and anti-racist environment.

At no point in my presentation did I reference Israel, Judaism, or any religious group. I spoke to my lived experience as a Palestinian student, including the fact that my family in Gaza is trapped under rubble. I encouraged students and staff not to shy away from conversations rooted in human rights and noted that no religion calls for genocide to reinforce that such discussions should not be framed as attacks on faith or identity.

During the presentation, a student in the audience reacted with visible discomfort and hostility – frequently whispering to another attendee and directing prolonged stares at me. Following the presentation, the student confronted a staff member in front of me, claiming that my contribution had made the space uncomfortable due to her Jewish identity and that my presence was “intimidating.”

A formal complaint was later submitted, which appeared to object not to any specific language or conduct, but rather to the fact that the presentation addressed Palestine. The complaint framed the inclusion of Palestine as inherently problematic – raising serious concerns about the limitations placed on Palestinian students’ ability to speak openly, even in spaces designed for equity and justice.

This complaint led to a meeting regarding ensuring student comfort. During

this meeting, it was also raised that the same student had felt intimidated by pro-Palestinian motifs worn by staff members – such as pins or clothing – during the event. The framing of peaceful, symbolic expressions of solidarity as threatening reflects a broader and increasingly worrying trend in which Palestinian identity is treated as inherently political or dangerous, regardless of context.

In the weeks following the complaint, the same individual continuously monitored the Palestinian Youth Society's social media. We can provide at least 10 examples of interactions suggesting active surveillance. She has also been seen attending Palestinian-led protests on campus, where she has filmed students in a targeted and confrontational manner, focusing the camera on individuals while standing at a distance, often accompanied by peers.

These actions form part of a broader pattern in which Palestinian students – particularly those who speak publicly – are subjected to scrutiny, misrepresentation, and attempts to discipline their presence through formal complaints or social monitoring. That a presentation grounded in lived experience, which explicitly avoided generalisations and religious references, could lead to formal institutional follow-up speaks to the increasingly constrained environment faced by Palestinian students on campus.

Academics for Palestine South Australia told the Inquiry that an academic from Gaza who had lost 26 family members over 13 months was invited to present at an Academic Board meeting. Despite the trauma involved in this, he dedicated significant time to prepare. However:

The presentation was stopped abruptly after at least one academic board staff member was visibly upset and left the room. We recognise the duty of care to staff members, however this duty of care must be provided to all staff members including the Palestinian-Gazan member of staff who pleaded to the Chair to not cancel his delivery. The result was i) there was no opportunity to discuss the actions of universities worldwide, and our detailed recommendations to the University for urgent actions on Gaza; ii) increased trauma for a Gazan staff member already very traumatised by the events in Palestine. This incident shows the uneven way in which the University chose to interpret its duty of care.

Israel-IS and Stand With Us

The Inquiry heard that two pro-Israel groups jointly held events at UTS, University of Sydney and University of NSW in April 2025. Israel-IS is an Israeli advocacy group formed by three ex-IDF soldiers whose mission is “transforming how the world sees Israel.”⁴³ Stand With Us “challenges misinformation and fights antisemitism utilizing interdepartmental

43. . Israel-is, <https://www.israel-is.org/en/home/>, accessed 23 October, 2025.

resources and legal professionals.”⁴⁴ The university events platformed serving IDF soldiers. A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry the exercise was:

trying to garner sympathy for what IDF soldiers had gone through. There was a virtual reality experience where you could experience what was happening on October 7 and IDF soldiers who were on the ground on October 7 invited to give a talk. We thought it would be in a very secluded space on campus, but it was held in the board room. It was a very disgusting display of the university’s complicity but also direct support and physical protection of the Israeli regime. They had security guards walled across the building.

UTS students told the Inquiry:

Most concerning, the event was explicitly marketed with reference to the speakers having served in Gaza ... For Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students – many of whom have lost family members or have themselves fled Gaza – this was not a matter of political disagreement. This was a direct act of institutional harm. Members of the Palestinian Youth Society at UTS include students who have recently fled the genocide. By allowing this event to go ahead, UTS effectively platformed individuals affiliated with a military responsible for war crimes and ongoing atrocities in the very place these students call home. UTS took the risk that the soldiers on campus may have directly participated in the killing or displacement of their family members.

A Palestinian student told the Inquiry:

Our families were still buried underneath rubble. Our friends were still searching for the remains of their loved ones, and the university brought in their murderers. Internally, UTS has labelled the word genocide as a psychosocial threat, but the IDF, the military force responsible for the genocide, was not.

UTS students reported that when they objected to university management, they were told they would not be allowed to protest and were threatened with misconduct charges if they did so:

In defending the event, the university stated, “The university has carefully balanced the rights and responsibilities of all our students in the current climate, including the right to freedom of lawful expression. This is an important principle to ensure that all voices in our community can be heard in a safe and respectful manner.”

A peaceful protest was ultimately held in defiance of these suppressive conditions and was met with a disproportionate security presence. This incident highlights a deeply flawed and discriminatory approach to free expression at UTS. While military representatives tied to active warfare were platformed and

44. . Stand With Us, <https://standwithus.com/about/>, accessed 23 October, 2025.

protected, students advocating for justice, peace, and Palestinian liberation were surveilled, silenced, and threatened.

The universities' actions stand in contrast to the perspective of Chris Sidoti, former human rights commissioner, international legal expert and member of the UN independent international commission of inquiry that found Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. He told the National Press Club:

Anyone, whether an Australian citizen or not, who seeks to enter this country, having served in any arm of the Israeli military in Gaza since the 7th of October 2023, should be treated as a suspect and investigated and if necessary prosecuted. We have Australian domestic criminal offences relating to the commission of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide anywhere in the world.⁴⁵

Monash students told the Inquiry their university allowed a commemoration of Israeli fallen soldiers to take place on campus. They told the Inquiry:

It is utterly appalling that the university would allow for such an event to proceed given repeated expressions as to how this event would impact the well-being of the university community, particularly Palestinian staff and students ... The ongoing oppression faced by the Palestinian people at the hands of the IOF (Israeli Occupation Forces) is a reminder of the urgent need for justice and accountability. It is bizarre that the University will go ahead with an event that 'hero-washes' those accountable for blatant human rights violations towards the Palestinian people. The event displayed a lack of consideration for the safety and wellbeing of students on campus.

Active targeting and harassment

Many people told the Inquiry students were actively targeted and harassed by pro-Israel students and organisations. A Jewish academic who visited the University of Sydney encampment told the Inquiry:

Zionist agitators came to the encampment to disrupt them. They were goading the students and I was there with my small child and I was quite worried for him because of their aggressive behaviour ... the students remained calm while the agitators, who were wrapped in Israeli flags, danced and mocked the students, tried to rile them up, shouting at them, confronting them and getting in their face, without success. The students were staunch and steadfast and calm and it's a great honour to stand with them, then and now. Jewish pro-Israeli organisations tarnished their protests as antisemitic and unsafe for Jews. These claims were outrageous.

45. ABC News, "Ben Saul and Chris Sidoti address Press Club on Palestine recognition," YouTube video, posted 1 October, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/live/MoUMmkQ5sAg>, accessed 23 October, 2025.

A Monash student told the Inquiry:

We were subject to quite significant counter-protests from student supporters of Israel, but also, late at night, we had middle-aged men, some of whom identified as IDF soldiers, come to the encampment and destroy property. When members of the encampment were physically assaulted by pro-Israel students, they were not stopped by security. They knocked down tents while people were asleep inside. They were blaring music, Israeli songs glorifying massacres in Gaza. Also carrying Israeli and Australian flags, playing the national anthem. Maybe there was one disciplinary proceeding, that might have been by the police rather than the university. But against the members of the encampment, nine of us were subject to discipline from the university.

University of Melbourne students told the Inquiry:

We had Zionists who came in the middle of the night with motorcycles. They were riding their motorcycles through the tents, obviously trying to intimidate people who were sleeping in the tents. We had rocks that were thrown at buildings and broken windows. There was never any accountability for our safety.



Still from video posted on AJA Facebook; AJA Twitter post

On 2 May 2024, pro-Israel group the Australian Jewish Association posted a video of a man waving an Israeli flag at the University of Sydney encampment at night, with the caption, "What happened at 4am at the Sydney Uni Hamas camp?" It also signalled in a post that it was gathering supporters to confront the encampment the following day.

Members of UTS Palestinian Youth Society told of being:

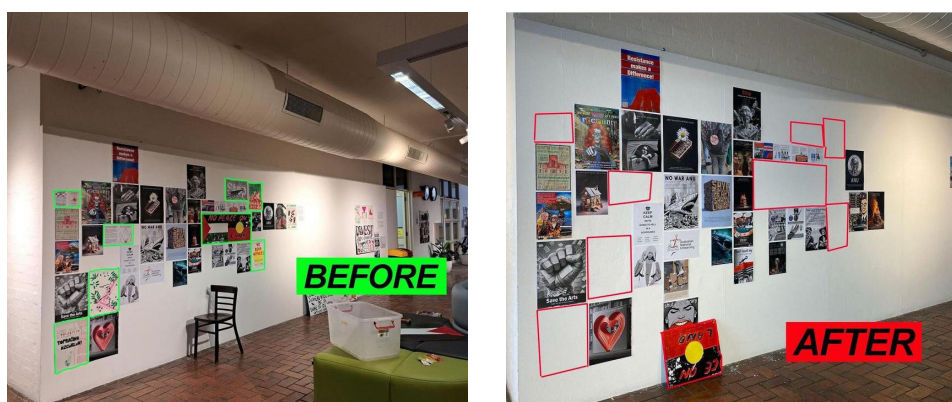
approached and cornered by an older individual who engaged in aggressive and targeted questioning, asking if members supported Hamas and terrorism. This deeply inappropriate and loaded question seeks to conflate Palestinian identity

and activism with extremist violence. The individual was repeatedly asked to leave. Eventually, UTS Security was contacted, but no outcome or update has been provided to the students involved.

ANU students told the Inquiry that an exhibition of pro-Palestine art was vandalised after hours, within 24 hours of its installation. Given the timing of the vandalism and the need for card access, the perpetrators should have been easily identifiable. However, the exhibition organisers were never informed of an outcome. Students told the Inquiry:

ANU likely monitored the key card access associated with identified pro-Palestine students at the encampment, but refused to do the same for the vandalism of student artworks ... Following the exhibition theft and vandalism, management initially made an offer of a second exhibition for the impacted students and staff. However, this offer was reneged, on the grounds that the public display of the Palestinian flag had been deemed a 'security risk.'

Staff offered the organisers of the original exhibition the use of the space for a new exhibition with political and anti-war themes, but under the condition that any artworks displayed would not contain references to Palestine, the current genocide in Gaza, or University ties to weapons manufacturers or the state of Israel. This offer was refused as a blatant attempt to suppress artistic expression and free speech in relation to Palestine activism.



The vandalised exhibition of pro-Palestine art

Academics from Queensland universities told the Inquiry:

Various forms of harassment, intimidation and violence were inflicted upon students participating in Palestine advocacy by Israel supporters, including one instance of a credible bomb threat during a Student Union vote on a pro-Palestine motion. Despite these incidents, UQ did not subject the pro-Israel encampment or pro-genocide students and staff to the same surveillance as the Gaza encampment.

We are not aware of any actions taken by the university to address the harass-

ment levelled at pro-Palestine students and staff in the past 18 months. This disparity demonstrates UQ's surveillance and security as a tool for repression and intimidation rather than genuine concern for student and staff safety.

ANU students also told the Inquiry that an outer brick wall of a space designated for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) students was decorated by those students in solidarity with Palestinians. It was defaced on three occasions, two of which were reported to the university. Following the final defacement, and before a planned event to redo the mural, the university:

emailed the BIPOC Department requesting that the event not proceed and warning against using the phrase 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' ... The BIPOC community came together to reinstate the mural. Just over 12 hours later, the ANU itself erased the entire mural overnight ... Shortly after, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor contacted the BIPOC Department, accusing them of 'breaching a university directive' and even attempted to demand payment for the 'cleaning' ... then allegedly warned that if the BIPOC Department did not comply with ANU's directives, that the university may revoke the safe space entirely.

UTS students told the Inquiry a Palestinian student was harassed by a male student while handing out flyers:

He asked whether she attended the weekly pro-Palestine rallies at Town Hall, claiming those rallies "entice violence" while asserting that pro-Israel rallies "promote peace." The student continued to escalate by asking if she "knew what genocide meant" and then attempted to film her without consent. Despite her repeated requests for him to step away, he physically cornered her, asking if she supported Hezbollah or Hamas.

UTS Security later identified the individual involved, and a caseworker was assigned to manage the matter under student misconduct protocols. Despite the severity of the incident – including racial profiling, intimidation, and filming without consent – the outcome communicated to the victim was that the university would "have a chat with him." No formal disciplinary action has been documented or shared with the victim, and no written outcome was provided. Instead, she received an informal phone call with no prior warning.

This response was grossly inadequate, especially given that the incident was captured both on CCTV and by a fellow student on video. The failure to address this matter with the seriousness it warrants sends a damaging message to Palestinian students: that their safety and dignity can be violated with little to no consequence for the perpetrator. This inconsistency is striking when compared to the scrutiny applied to peaceful pro-Palestinian activity on campus. Palestinian students are repeatedly asked to moderate their speech and presence, while those who harass and intimidate them are met with little more than a conversation.

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry that while they staffed pro-Palestine club tables, campus security guards:

never intervened when Zionists would come up and try and argue with us. But they also had a separate security guard watching the Jewish students association table, and he'd intervene as soon as anyone wearing a keffiyeh would go up to the table.

The Inquiry heard that Jewish students who felt uncomfortable in class were accommodated. An academic noted:

The Dean called me in to say there was a Jewish student who felt 'unsafe' in my class. The resolution we came to was that I had to exempt them from attending tutorials for the rest of semester and only expected to follow recorded lectures; that they could skip any content that made them feel uncomfortable; to offer an alternative assessment; and bring in independent markers for their work. I had never been anything but kind and welcoming to that student. I knew their background and their views and reassured them that all views were valid in my classroom, but that sometimes new ideas can feel uncomfortable. If anything, I had marked them generously on early assignments and went out of my way to acknowledge their unique perspective and experience. The other students were likewise all respectful and tolerant debaters in class.

But the Inquiry was told universities took little action when Palestinians, Muslims and Arabs on campus were actively intimidated. An academic said:

I had the misfortune of teaching a student who fist pumped, audibly cheered and celebrated whenever I mentioned any incident in my class that involved the slaughter of Palestinians and Lebanese – the current genocide, 1982 Sabra and Shatila, the 2006 July War in Lebanon, the 1948 Nakba. This student filmed me in class and sent these videos as texts (according to students sitting behind him).

He called for my deportation. Some students were disturbed by all this and in the third week of class submitted a formal complaint anonymously. They expressed fears for my safety. I also submitted a formal complaint. Several days later a staff member from student misconduct reached out to me. He informed me there was little the student misconduct team could do. When I pressed him as to why, I was told it is not clear the student has breached code of conduct policy and that I had insufficient evidence. I requested clarity on what sufficient evidence would look like and was told that if another student filmed the offending student's behaviour that would be sufficient evidence.

When I informed the student misconduct team member that I would not ask a student to record their peer, he became irritated with me and abused me for being rude and difficult. When the union took my case, HR promised they would deal with the student. Several months later they changed their tune, having spo-

ken to a few people who decided too much time had passed to discipline the student.

I understand this example is not exactly about restricting free speech on Palestine but it did impact my capacity to teach clearly and effectively. The university's lack of action against the student not only highlights a double standard, but also shows who and what discourse are not being restricted.

The behaviour also impacted students. Another academic at the same university told the Inquiry:

I had a Lebanese Muslim student come to me after class to ask me, as someone she trusted, what to do about the fact that there was a student in another of her units who constantly makes racist anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab remarks. She became teary and said it made her feel ashamed and furious but that she was scared to say anything so stopped attending lectures.

Students at a different NSW university told the Inquiry that a Palestinian student was:

subjected to ongoing intimidation and discomfort due to the conduct of another student known to have recently served in the Israeli military. Throughout the semester, this individual frequently stared at the Palestinian student during class in a persistent and unsettling way. His behaviour was observed not only by classmates but also by individuals outside the classroom. This consistent behaviour created a distressing and unsafe learning environment.

On one occasion, the Palestinian student was overheard speaking about personal circumstances involving her family overseas. In response, the student loudly asserted his religious and organisational affiliation in a manner that was clearly intended to intimidate and disrupt. The same individual also made generalised and offensive comments about Islam in a classroom setting.

Given the power imbalance and the highly charged political context, the presence and conduct of this individual caused significant discomfort and fear. For students with direct connections to communities experiencing ongoing violence, the experience of being monitored or antagonised by someone with a recent military background is retraumatising and unacceptable.

Another student told the Inquiry they were discouraged from discussing the racial, national and political context of texts such as *Orientalism* by Palestinian author Edward Said and *Refugees* by David Miller. When they were told not to speak about Palestine as well and complained about cultural insensitivity:

I was told I am too sensitive, too emotional, too fixated on the war, and of course, too radical for their institution. I was removed off my practicum list and was almost not allowed to attend. I had to escalate the issue and eventually sat with a psychologist for her to clear me as an 'emotionally stable' person. I

have been called by a peer a ‘radical’ in front of a teacher who stayed silent. I have been called a terrorist sympathiser by a classmate as well ... Being an Arab at [university] has been difficult, especially since 7 October 2023.

ANU students told the Inquiry that a Jewish student asked the university for access to an autonomous space for Jewish students. When university leadership realised the student had been involved in pro-Palestine activism, they were told it was:

“not a space for challenge or debate” despite the student making no indication that they intended to initiate any such behaviour ... the ANU ended by saying the student needed to be an official member of the Australasian Union of Jewish Students branch on campus to be granted access. One of AUJS’s four pillars is Zionism and representatives and members of AUJS have been openly derisive towards anti-Zionist Jewish students at ANU. This requirement has been neither advertised nor formally enshrined anywhere, and none of the other autonomous safe spaces on campus require club affiliation to access. The ANU had only ever described the space as for Jewish students, not AUJS members. This student reported it felt like the ANU was dismissing their Jewish identity and prioritising the political beliefs of other students over their ethnicity and religion.

Social media

The inquiry heard universities protected pro-Israel students and staff, even when they discriminated against other Jews. An academic told the Inquiry:

As a Jewish and Hebrew speaking academic, I have received vitriol ... and experienced antisemitism on campus ... due to my public writing, work and position on Palestine. I regularly receive hateful and threatening emails and messages, which focus on my Jewish identity ... I have received post mail of an evangelical Christian nature, as well as vitriolic messages from Jewish and Hebrew speaking people, which accuse me of being a traitor and wish explicit harm on me.

Another academic told the Inquiry their comments on the University of Sydney social media platform Viva Engage were censored despite being found not to breach any policies. They told the Inquiry, “Yet other comments in favour of Israel, or about how could people who hold pro-Palestine views still hold positions in the university, remain.” This view was shared by another academic who said:

While pro-Palestinian activity has prompted an extensive crack-down on speech, Viva Engage, has regularly since October 7, 2023, been the site of anti-Palestinian racism of a virulence and toxicity that beggars belief. This has included the extraordinary claim that Palestinians are ‘inbred,’⁴⁶ references to

46. The comment in full: “Palestinian Arabs have about 22-44% inbreeding rate? If we reduced the

‘the animals in Gaza,’ or a comment during the temporary ceasefire that ‘on the bright side it’s only two days to go until we can see them getting relentlessly carpet bombed again!’.

Israel-supporting staff have also attacked Palestine supporters, characterising them in various contexts as ‘scum,’ ‘sick,’ ‘brainwashed,’ ‘antisemites’ or ‘racists,’ motivated by ‘petty political purposes,’ guilty of propaganda ‘worthy of Joseph Goebbels,’ on a ‘slippery slope’ likely to lead to terrorism, and deserving of dismissal from the university. I mention this not to argue that these staff members should be censored – they shouldn’t – but as evidence of the anti-Palestinian climate which has been normalized at the university.

A third University of Sydney academic told the Inquiry:

Two weeks ago, half a dozen of us, and some of my colleagues are experts in international law and human rights, were actually suspended from Viva Engage, one of them purportedly because he used an emoji that might have been interpreted as being insulting, and the emoji in question was a brain.

A student told the Inquiry:

I have documented instances of a staff member doxxing pro-Palestinian student protesters to hostile online groups of over 7,000 people (some of the commenters who discussed violence/rape in relation to the female student) and radio interviews labelling student protesters “extremists,” “terrorists” and “pro-Hamas,” which is not only untrue and dangerous but also utilising racist tropes. Fearing for the students’ safety, I have reported these incidents, but no action has been taken. This person has also been reported in the media.

It is hard to believe that on one side you have restrictions on freedom of speech, and on the other, you have such a profound means of intimidation against those who are speaking out by staff, to the extent it could endanger students and not have any sanction. This stark double standard – staff acting with impunity while students are punished or censored – is profoundly unjust and undermines trust in the University’s commitment to fairness, consistency and academic freedom.

An ANU student told the Inquiry the university seemed more concerned about antisemitism than other forms of racism:

I saw posters relating to pro-Palestinian events and activism torn down and vandalised by hateful and racist stickers or graffiti, and nothing was done to investigate the perpetrators, however, there was an increased dialogue about the “antisemitic” and “hateful nature” of pro-Palestinian posters and stickers on campus. There was an increased concern for Jewish people on campus and

amount of inbreeding in that population we could prevent genetic diseases and birth defects by a substantial amount. They should also be educated not to shoot and rape people too.”

a safe autonomous zone was created, however there was not the same level of concern for Palestinian or Muslim people who were threatened by the anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic graffiti that would be found around the encampment or on campus.

Disciplinary action

A Deakin student was disciplined for making others feel unsafe when she criticised “the behaviour of a small group of right-wing supporters of Israel who had shouted racially vilifying remarks at Palestinian, Lebanese, Jewish and Aboriginal speakers” during a rally for the opening of the Deakin encampment, and for an argument with one of these counter-protestors.

During the argument, the counter-protester had attempted to hit her with a flagpole, and later that day he assaulted a Muslim student, spitting on them and making derogatory, Islamophobic comments towards them. He had also been involved in a physical attack on the Monash Gaza Solidarity encampment a few nights prior. No disciplinary action was taken against any of these counter-protesters by the university, although at least one staff member and one student were involved.

Despite the student who was disciplined making their own complaint to the university, Deakin did not discipline the staff member.

Later, she was approached by the student who had previously tried to hit her with a flagpole. The Inquiry was told:

He began yelling at her and called her an antisemite. [She] walked away, however this student remained outside the library waiting for her to come back. [She] made a complaint to the university, but as far as we are aware, no action has been taken. Both are examples of individuals carrying out potentially threatening behaviour against [her] and not being sanctioned for it. In contrast, [she] was dragged through a months-long discipline process and initially suspended.

In another example of a university abrogating its duty of care to students who experienced traumatic assault, two attacks on female Muslim students at Deakin, in which they were approached by a man, accused of being Hamas sympathisers, racially abused and spat on were not pursued by the university despite complaints being made. Students told the Inquiry:

This is a clear double standard, where the university more aggressively pursued discipline cases against pro-Palestine student activists, rather than pro-Israel counter-protesters. We are unaware of the university publishing anything about these Islamophobic attacks. This contrasts starkly with repeated references to ‘unacceptable behaviour’ of pro-Palestine protesters during the camp.

University of Queensland students told the Inquiry:

Differential treatment is demonstrated by the University’s swift policing of pro-Palestine speech while failing to curb anti-Arab harassment; in effect, the

institution protects one cohort's sensitivities at the expense of another's basic safety.

A Palestinian academic told the Inquiry they believed they were discriminated against after being the victim of racial abuse by a colleague:

Shortly after October 7th, a colleague with whom I shared an office began using inflammatory and offensive language directed at me, referencing my Palestinian background. This incident was witnessed by another colleague who told him to stop. The following day, while alone in the office, he resumed. This time, he used language that was Islamophobic, misogynistic and dismissive of my identity. I left the room in tears as I walked to teach my class.

I reported the incident to school management. I chose not to lodge a formal complaint as I did not feel strong nor supported enough to go through that process. Nonetheless, I was moved to a separate office, and he was instructed not to contact me. The Head of School expressed empathy and ... assured me the school has no tolerance toward racist and Islamophobic views.

[He] faced no formal consequence for his misconduct [and] was later promoted to a higher academic level. This outcome has left me feeling deeply hurt and excluded. I am now working at another institution, but I continue to carry the pain and injustice of what happened.

Palestinian distress ignored

The *A Climate of Fear* report on repression of speech about Palestine across healthcare, academia, public service and the arts, which analysed 527 responses, found a “significant and measurable ‘Palestine exception’ to free speech.”⁴⁷ For Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims, it reported “a striking and measurable disparity across every metric of silencing” including lower perceived freedom, higher experience of discrimination, greater risk and actual silencing.”⁴⁸

A Palestinian academic told this Inquiry it felt like the pain and loss of Palestinian staff and students was not acknowledged:

Between 2023 and the present, I have worked across multiple universities. During this time, I observed that institutional statements in response to the war on Gaza often centered abstractly on inclusion, respect, and safety. These values were frequently used to caution staff and students, particularly those speaking in support of Palestine, about the perceived risks of voicing their views. What these statements failed to acknowledge was the lived experience of Palestinians and Arabs within the university community, and the profound impact this war has had on us.

47. Academics for Palestine WA, *A Climate of Fear*, 4.

48. Ibid., 12.

I have experienced deep grief and loss through close friends and family members affected by the war. Being asked to self-censor or being made to feel that raising these realities is somehow unsafe is what creates an unsafe environment. I wrote to express my concerns with the language used by management and the possible effect it will have on affected staff and students. I received no response. A Jewish, pro-Palestine colleague, however, did receive a reply to a similar message. I followed up with a second email, reiterating both my disappointment at being ignored and my concerns. Only then did I receive a response, one that merely repeated vague references to support services, without demonstrating any genuine empathy or acknowledgment of the specific harms experienced by staff like myself.”

A UTS student speaking on behalf of Palestinian students there said:

This is a testimony of abandonment, dehumanisation and institutional betrayal. We have documented case after case of racial, religious, political and gender-based harassment. Palestinian women have been sexually harassed by students and verbally targeted by staff.

One of our members was cornered by a man who demanded she define genocide, filmed her without consent and interrogated her about terrorism and backed her into a corner. Another endured invasive and humiliating sexual rumors spread about her by an Israeli student. When we reported these violations to the university, we were not met with protection, but with silence, an informal phone call, no record, no disciplinary action and no public acknowledgement.

Our trauma was rendered invisible in classrooms. We have been penalized for highlighting Palestinian stories, singled out for wearing a keffiyeh, dismissed for mentioning Gaza. A tutor once looked at a student from Gaza in the eyes and called her trauma too dramatic. Another dismissed the term apartheid entirely in an international law class. Palestinian students have been marked down, mocked, ridiculed and scrutinized, not treated as students, but as disruptions.

We are being followed, filmed, reported and profiled. Our social media is monitored heavily; our faces are apparently circulated in private chats. The university has offered no condemnation, no reassurance, and not even a check in to ask if we are safe.

What’s happening at UTS is not isolated. It’s part of a national pattern of silencing Palestinians under the guise of balance, civility and safety, but we are not safe. We are not heard, and we have done everything asked of us. We don’t want symbolic inclusion. We demand structural change. We demand an end to the censorship of Palestinian students, recognition of the racialized, gendered and political violence we’ve endured, accountability, real, public, unapologetic for the harm inflicted upon us by this university and its staff, and we demand that anti Palestinian racism be treated with the same seriousness as any other form of hate.

The precarious nature of much academic employment also particularly impacted Palestinian staff members. A submission to the Inquiry described one feeling:

It's horrible as a Palestinian academic to find out that the person in charge of your tenure is someone that supports the genocide of your people. [Universities] like to purport themselves as being places of free speech, places that value the multicultural nature of staff. But there's always an exception with regard to Palestine. As a result, I'll be very, very careful in terms of attending events, in terms of who I collaborate with, who I write with ... [A university manager] here, made a statement showing a lot of sympathy for the victims of the Nova Festival, but none whatsoever with regards to the ongoing genocide. And that person is going to be in charge of handling my complaints. It's almost like if you speak up about Palestine you have your job security questioned, or you remain silent. It's just a horrible predicament to be in.

A University of Melbourne academic told the Inquiry, "It's always been Muslim or Indigenous or black, people of colour tutors who have been targeted, while other people who are in more privileged positions, or more protected positions, have received lesser charges." An NTEU delegate there agreed, stating, "The people who are being targeted with the most extreme forms of discipline and oppression are those who are in insecure employment situations, who are racialised, who are marginalised."

A University of Sydney student made the same observation:

It's very hypocritical the way the university utilises the term safety. It's obvious that for a lot of the disciplinary cases and the surveillance, it's targeted towards students who are of Middle Eastern backgrounds, Arab students, international students. They obviously have no concern for the safety of these groups.

This sentiment was echoed by Queensland academics:

Students and staff subjected to increased surveillance, constant threats of disciplinary action, and abuse by Israel supporters have been left feeling penalised and abandoned by the institution responsible for ensuring their psychosocial safety on campus. The weaponisation of antisemitism by UQ against Palestine advocates has only further eroded these relationships and had a significant negative impact on the well-being of subjected students and staff who no longer feel comfortable participating in university life.

At no point throughout the UQ Gaza Encampment did the university express concerns over increased racism and Islamophobia on campus or provide support to students and staff subjected to abuse by Israel supporters. A clear double standard has been applied to the university's obligations under the WHS Act to ensure the physical and psychosocial safety of campus attendees as it relates to their proximity to Palestine advocacy.

The sentiment was also expressed by a Sydney student:

I am a Palestinian from Gaza. This is deeply personal to me. Each day, I hear more from family, friends, and community members whose lives have been shattered by the ongoing genocide. To be silenced or surveilled while trying to advocate for their freedom – on a campus that claims to uphold human rights and critical thought – is not just disappointing; it is retraumatising.

Over the past year, pro-Palestinian students at UTS have been met with disproportionate policing, disciplinary threats, and institutional indifference. Meanwhile, events that platform Zionist perspectives – including those involving individuals with ties to the Israeli military – have been allowed to proceed without resistance. This blatant double standard has put the safety and well-being of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students at risk.

An academic told the Inquiry that her recognition of her university's double standards was the reason she publicly expressed her support for Palestine:

I choose to wear my keffiyeh in the classroom as I feel the need to signal to students that peaceful protest is important and valid. I also do this because I work at a university where there are many students who are Muslim. I feel that universities have not given due consideration to the feelings of Muslim students (or other pro-Palestine students including Jewish pro-Palestine students). These students are witnessing a genocide in Gaza but come to campus and see universities respond with efforts to appease the supporters of the Israel Government's genocidal policies. It is cruel and heartless.

A submission from Demilitarise RMIT highlighted the injustice of Palestinian voices and experiences being suppressed:

A fundamental point which is often omitted from these conversations is the legitimate right of Palestinians employed or studying at Australian universities to engage in robust critical commentary on issues pertaining to their homeland. Too narrow a focus on the issue of academic freedom risks undermining the ability of Palestinians to comment freely on issues that are central to their being and identity.

6. The role of antisemitism definitions

Lastly, the Inquiry Terms of Reference tasked it with looking at:

6. The nature, role, and effectiveness of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism in a university context

Submissions to the Inquiry overwhelmingly criticised the IHRA definition of antisemi-

tism, and the Universities Australia definition based on it, for their conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism.

In July 2025, Justice Stewart of the Federal Court found, in a case brought by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, that an “ordinary, reasonable listener” would understand that criticism of Israel, the Israel Defence Forces and Zionism were not about Jewish people in general and not antisemitic:

That person would understand that not all Jews are Zionists and that disparagement of Zionism constitutes disparagement of a philosophy or ideology and not a race or ethnic group. Also, political criticism of Israel, however inflammatory or adversarial, is not by its nature criticism of Jews in general or based on Jewish racial or ethnic identity ... it is not antisemitic to criticise Israel.⁴⁹

In 2017, the lead drafter of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, Kenneth Stern, told a US government committee considering antisemitism at universities, “Students need not be protected from disturbing ideas, quite the opposite; they should welcome the opportunity to learn how to wrestle with ideas that make them uncomfortable.”⁵⁰ He outlined the definition’s use in court cases as the basis of complaints:

about educational programs about the occupation of the West Bank, films that promoted the Boycott/Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, classroom materials challenged as one-sided and anti-Israel, and a program entitled “Arabs and the Holocaust,” which asserted that Israel’s creation was a “tragedy” for Palestinian Arabs. When all these cases lost, their proponents ... argued that even if the cases lost, they had what seemed to them a positive benefit – they chilled pro-Palestinian expression.⁵¹

The consequences, which he condemns, are strikingly similar to the findings of this Inquiry. He said:

An “Israel Apartheid Week” event was cancelled as violating the definition. A Holocaust survivor was required to change the title of a campus talk, and the university mandated it be recorded, after an Israeli diplomat complained that the title violated the definition. Perhaps most egregious, an off-campus group citing the definition called on a university to conduct an inquiry of a professor (who received her PhD from Columbia) for antisemitism, based on an article she had written years before. The university then conducted the inquiry. And while it ultimately found no basis to discipline the professor, the exercise itself was chilling and McCarthy-like. My fear is, if we similarly enshrine this defini-

49. Jamie McKinnell, “Federal Court orders series of Islamic preacher Wissam Haddad’s lectures be removed from social media,” *ABC News*, 1 July, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-01/federal-court-sydney-wissam-haddad-lectures-social-media/105480506>, accessed 26 October, 2025.

50. Kenneth Stern, “Written testimony of Kenneth S. Stern,” *United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary Hearing on Examining Anti-Semitism on College Campuses*, 7 November, 2017, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/ju/ju00/20171107/106610/hhrg-115-ju00-wstate-sternk-20171107.pdf>, accessed 22 December, 2025, 12.

51. *Ibid.*, 7.

tion into law, outside groups will try and suppress – rather than answer – political speech they don't like. The academy, Jewish students, and faculty teaching about Jewish issues, will all suffer.⁵²

Stern also asked the committee to:

Imagine a definition designed for Palestinians. If “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, and denying Israel the right to exist” is antisemitism, then shouldn't “Denying the Palestinian people their right to self-determination, and denying Palestine the right to exist” be anti-Palestinianism? Would they then ask administrators to police and possibly punish campus events by pro-Israel groups who oppose the two-state solution, or claim the Palestinian people are a myth?⁵³

Israeli professor Neve Gordon argues that the IHRA definition operates to reinforce the identification of individual Jews with the state of Israel and has echoed Stern's encouragement of discomfort in tertiary education:

I'm a professor of human rights and international humanitarian law ... And there were four or five reports by the major international, global human rights organizations and by the major Palestinians and Israeli organizations claiming that Israel's an apartheid regime. The Israeli organization B'Tselem calls it a regime of Jewish supremacy, and so let's say I teach one of these reports in my class, and I have a Jewish student in my class, and the Jewish student, due to this kind of identification that was created throughout their lives between their identity and identity with Israel, will feel extremely uncomfortable and ... probably offended by this report. Now, what is going on here is this feeling of discomfort is real.

I have no problem with this feeling of discomfort. Indeed, I think people should be uncomfortable in the face of apartheid, certainly in the face of genocide, and I think a university setting is a setting that should actually make people uncomfortable, because comfort makes us numb intellectually. So I think that is ... something that we should try to do with our students ... But what ... has happened often ... is that this sense of discomfort is then translated to a sense of safety. So a feeling of discomfort becomes being unsafe. So we have two different connotations going on, *feeling* conflated with *being* and *discomfort* is conflated with *unsafe* ... I don't think teaching an apartheid report makes anyone unsafe. I do think it might make some people uncomfortable...⁵⁴

In particular, he has blamed the illustrative examples included in the definition for facilitating the equation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism:

52. Ibid., 14–15.

53. Ibid., 9.

54. Palestine Justice Movement, “Conversation with Professor Neve Gordon - The Weaponisation of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism,” YouTube video, posted 12 December, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-H_UwhJR1I, accessed 29 December, 2025, 18:50.

The problem with the definition is that attached to it are 11 illustrative examples that seven of them touch directly on Israel ... One ... is the claim that you cannot say that Israel's a racist endeavour, even though the country itself has many laws that privilege Jews over Palestinians. It has roads that Jews can go on, and Palestinians in the West Bank cannot go on. It has the right of return to Jews, but Palestinians cannot return, even though these Jews that have the right to return have never lived or even set foot in Israel. So of course, Israel's a racist endeavour, and yet to say that you can be accused of antisemitism.

Another important example is the idea that you cannot, in the same sentence, mention Israel and the Nazis and the Nazi policies ... Can't we compare the policies of the Israeli government with certain policies of the Nazi regime in the 1930s? Compare is not conflation, and comparisons often expose and shed light. That's what we do for our work here in academia, is compare, because they shed light about certain similarities and certain differences. And then you will try to explain why is this similar, and why is this different? But just to make that comparison transforms you into an antisemite.⁵⁵

Academics from the UNSW told the Inquiry the definition:

implies the censorship of entire bodies of scholarly work in settler colonial studies, genocide studies, political philosophy, race studies and other disciplines that seek to unpack the colonial racial underpinnings of the Israeli regime and the Zionist project.

... any suggestion that Israel is an apartheid racial state is thus deemed antisemitic — despite the consensus in the human rights community that Israel is practicing the crime of apartheid as determined by several UN Special Rapporteurs and a host of human rights organisations. The definition could also be used to suppress and negate discussion of the case brought by South Africa at the International Court of Justice that accuses Israel of violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide or the advisory opinion handed down by the same court on the illegality of Israeli occupation and on Israel's discriminatory ... legislation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which contravene international prohibitions on racial segregation and apartheid...

In advancing the IHRA definition of antisemitism, its advocates tapped into the language of antiracism. But beneath the appeal to social justice lies a dangerous ideological move to characterise criticism of Israel (a state) and Zionism (a political ideology) as antisemitism (a form of racism against Jews). The conflation of Zionism with Judaism and, by extension, of anti-zionism with antisemitism aims to justify political repression in the service of protecting a colonial racial state.

55. Ibid., 41:45.

The Inquiry heard that definitions of antisemitism played a pivotal role in silencing freedom of speech in Australia. An NTEU branch argued:

Because the University can be ambiguous and evasive about the nature of the supposed grievance, the chilling effect of the disciplinary processes is enhanced: disciplining staff not only serves as a warning to others, the ill-defined reason for the discipline fosters a culture of fear, suspicion and self-censorship. We are deeply troubled by the prospect that this is the desired outcome of the University's actions.

Though not always made explicit, these complaints equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism. Since the University has adopted the IHRA's working definition of antisemitism, the University is compelled to respond to these complaints however trivial or tangential. This unfortunate scenario looks likely to continue after the February 2025 'Universities Australia Statement on Racism.'

An academic told the Inquiry that the conflation of Zionism with Jewish identity in the UA definition could lead to malicious complaints and equated a political position with a protected identity. UNSW academics also argued that an emphasis on psychosocial safety:

seeks to tacitly enshrine Zionism as a protected identity in legislation. When claims of antisemitism fail to register with universities (for example, universities in this country mostly did not accept that labelling Israel an apartheid colonial state is antisemitic as the IHRA definition seeks to advance), then the language of safety and psychosocial harm – and its focus on feelings rather than actual safety – is leveraged to do the work of censorship, silencing, and political repression.

Psychosocial harms to be censored in the name of Zionist feelings include criticisms of Israel, protests against Israel, solidarity with Palestine, speaking of Palestinian liberation, teaching about Palestine (especially in relation to Israeli colonialism, apartheid, and genocide), the visibility of Palestinian cultural and political symbols, and public events on Palestine. To be clear, none of these examples should be understood as psychosocial hazards. Rather, they are things that make Zionist supporters of Israel uncomfortable. Accepting these as legitimate causes of psychic harm sends the message that the discomfort of Zionists trumps the material realities of a genocide, as well as the scholarly and political movements that allow us to make sense of, and oppose, that unfolding reality.

A group of academics from a variety of universities argued the UA definition created “a situation where one political ideology must not be criticised and one area of historical analysis must not be attempted. This flies in the face of critical thinking and freedom of expression.” UNSW Staff for Palestine noted that:

such regulations do not exist in relation to other nation states, religions, or political ideologies. As such, we oppose the weaponisation of anti-racist princi-

ples, cultural safety, and psychosocial safety to insulate Israel and Zionism from analysis and critique.

Former NSW senator Lee Rhiannon told the Inquiry that the pro-Israel lobby:

influences universities via direct pressure on administrators and academics, by promoting pro-Zionist narratives, via the activities of Zionist student associations and by building partnerships with Israeli universities and research institutions ... The Israeli-Jewish lobby have succeeded in having a number of universities adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism ... The IHRA definition has been used as a tool to assert that criticism of Israel is antisemitic. This is then used to justify shutting down pro-Palestinian events on campus.

Impact of conflating anti-Zionism and antisemitism

One result of classifying anti-Zionist sentiment as antisemitic is an exaggeration of the prevalence of anti-Jewish attitudes. When considering the attitudes of Australians towards Jews, the Crossroads 25 Survey concluded:

these findings do not support an interpretation of a sharp increase in Judeophobic attitudes ... The Scanlon Foundation social cohesion survey provides evidence to support the interpretation that there has been no major increase in negative sentiment towards Australian Jews ... Negative attitude to Jews was at 9% in 2021; this has increased to 13% in 2024 and 15% in 2025, but this minor increase is consistent with the increase for five of the six faith groups considered. Thus, negative attitude to Hindus increased from 10% in 2023 to 14% in 2025, towards Sikhs from 12% to 16%, and towards Muslims from 27% to 35%. A further context for establishing the significance of the negative attitude to Jews is provided by the finding that it is marginally lower and close to the level towards Christians, which was at 13% in 2021, 16% in 2023 and 18% in 2025.⁵⁶

However when asked “Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, who do your sympathies mainly lie with?” the same study found a marked change among young people between 2021 and 2025:

Within the younger age group there has been a substantial increase in sympathy for Palestinians; among those aged 18-24, 25% “mainly sympathised” with Palestinians in 2021, 44% in 2025, among those aged 25-34, 21% in 2021, 37% in 2025.⁵⁷

The ability of young people to distinguish between Jewish people and the actions of the

56. Andrew Markus, *Crossroads 25: Attitudes of Australians on Jews and Israel* (The Jewish Independent, October 2025), https://jewishindependent.yourcreativeagency.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/TJI_Crossroads-Report-25_Complete_DIGITAL.pdf, accessed 29 December 2025, 22–23.

57. *Ibid.*, 24.

Israeli state is also reflected in research commissioned by Antisemitism Envoy Jillian Segal. Despite serious methodological flaws,⁵⁸ it concluded:

many participants expressed support for Jewish communities while also criticising the actions of the Israeli state. They differentiated between Judaism, as a religion, and Zionism, as a political movement which they associated with colonialism and so could be condemned.⁵⁹

Rather than seeing this as a legitimate political position, the research frames it as a lack of knowledge and understanding, to be remedied by education.

Classifying pro-Palestine and anti-Israel slogans and actions as antisemitism also results in an overestimate of antisemitic incidents, as raised by the Jewish Council of Australia, Louise Adler, NSW Police and a US report on repressing campus speech on Palestine.⁶⁰ However, Jewish academics and students told the Inquiry they disagreed with the overreach of these definitions for additional reasons. One said:

I am Jewish and was raised in the Jewish community. I am expert in Jewish history, and I bring that expertise to bear in my submission. To understand how the restrictions on speech about Palestine occur, we need to understand the techniques used to enforce these restrictions ... the IHRA working definition of antisemitism ... has always been used to shut down conversation about the truth of what Israel and Zionism are, and what Palestine and Palestinians have experienced.

This definition, as well as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the new Universities Australia definition (which was originally created as a definition for the [Group of Eight] universities), conflate Jewishness and Zionism; inaccurately describe Jewishness; attempt to make it impossible to accurately describe Israel's settler-colonialism; and are not useful tools to fight antisemitism. Indeed, they can be understood to exacerbate antisemitism.

The only way to fight racism is to fight it collectively, and to fight it where it primarily lies: in the far right. These definitions, in contrast, provide misleading

58. Gwenaël Velge, "The Science of Silence: The Special Envoy's Report Weaponises Data," *Academics for Palestine* WA, 2 December, 2025, <https://academicsforpalestinewa.substack.com/p/the-science-of-silence-the-special>, accessed 29 December, 2025.

59. ASECA, *Antisemitism in Australia: Findings of research commissioned by Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism* (November 2025), <https://www.aseca.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-11/2025-aseca-research-findings.pdf>, accessed 29 December, 2025, 8.

60. Tory Shepherd, "Acts of hate are on the rise in Australia – but naming them is proving fraught," *The Guardian*, 9 January, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/jan/09/acts-of-hate-australia-antisemitism-islamophobia-ntwnfb>, accessed 10 December, 2025; Louise Adler, "The special envoy's plan is the latest push to weaponise antisemitism in Australia, as a relentless campaign pays off," *The Guardian*, 12 July, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/12/the-special-envoys-plan-is-the-latest-push-to-weaponise-antisemitism-as-a-relentless-campaign-pays-off-ntwnfb>, accessed 26 October, 2025; Michael McGowan, "Revealed: NSW Police 'significantly' overstated antisemitic attacks," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October, 2025, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/revealed-nsw-police-significantly-overstated-antisemitic-attacks-20251009-p5n19a.html>, accessed 26 October, 2025; American Association of University Professors, *Discriminating Against Dissent*, 2, 10.

information about where antisemitism exists, how it is produced, and how it can be understood. They are wilfully inaccurate. They try to elevate antisemitism above all other forms of racism. They produce anti-Palestinian racism. They try to erase Palestinians, as well as First Nations people. They are harmful and dangerous ... And indeed, these approaches attempt to elevate Zionism to a protected identity category, rather than recognising that it is a political ideology espoused by both Jews and non-Jews.

The Loud Jew Collective submitted:

We are appalled by Universities Australia's (UA) recent adoption of a definition of antisemitism that aligns closely with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition. The IHRA definition has already had a chilling impact on academic freedom around the world and we believe it will intensify the already significant vilification of academics, students and others who support Palestinian rights.

This move comes in the context of deafening silence from universities about the ongoing genocide in Gaza which has killed at least 50 000 people, about 55 per cent of whom are estimated to be women, children or elderly. Countless tens of thousands have been horribly injured, maimed and traumatised. The legacy of this horror will be with us for generations. Yet, it is the academics, students and others who have the courage to speak up about this flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and norms, who are being targeted with weaponised accusations of antisemitism.

As a Jewish organisation we reject this appropriation of legitimate concerns about antisemitism, as one among a number of forms of racism, to stifle criticism of Israel and the atrocities it is currently committing. It is quite extraordinary that in the light of the overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of this definition of antisemitism that the Group of Eight have developed a wordy, incoherent and unenforceable definition of antisemitism based on the IHRA definition, including the racist and ahistorical assertion that, "Zionism is a core part of ... Jewish identity."

Zionism is a political ideology that emerged in the late 19th century and has always been contested as a response to the millennia of persecution Jews faced in Europe, despite its current hegemony in official Jewish institutions. There are more Christian than Jewish Zionists. Judaism is a set of religious beliefs dating back thousands of years. It appears that the actions of the Universities Australia are the result of political pressure, rather than a meaningful attempt to address all forms of racism on campus.

Another Jewish academic said that as someone critical of Zionism, such definitions made her less safe. A student told the Inquiry her concerns about them were ignored by her university:

I have made a complaint as a student on the grounds that as a Jewish person I believe the definition itself is racist and antisemitic (besides the fact that it threatens academic freedom and is intended to silence any criticism of the State of Israel). My complaint was dismissed and the complaint response states that I am not allowed to share the response with anyone.

Students for Palestine Monash submitted that including “calls for the elimination of the State of Israel” in the Universities Australia definition “opens the possibility of subjecting a student or staff member to discipline if they call for a single state with equal democratic rights for Jews and Muslims.” A University of Melbourne student argued that:

The conflation of opposition to Israel, politically, with antisemitism, misconstrues the issue of Palestinian liberation, and staff and student support of it, as coextensive with the vilification of Jewish people. This is simply false, and immensely damaging; this idea has been animating much of the rhetoric from the chancellery in the period since October 7 2023; even when they are not mislabelling specific actions as antisemitic, they insinuate to the broader university community that pro-Palestine protest is, in its nature, antisemitic.

University of Wollongong students received emails stating that pro-Palestine protests and graffiti were “creating an atmosphere that students and staff find unsafe, intimidating and uncomfortable, which is causing distress and fear; causing students and staff to either avoid the impacted areas, or not attend campus altogether; and causing distraction and impact to study and peaceful enjoyment of the campus.” The emails banned students from saying or writing phrases including “Intifada,” “From the river to the sea,” “colonisation,” “Al-Shifa lawn,” and “This Uni supports war” because they breach the University’s Anti-Racism and Cultural Safety Policy. Students told the Inquiry:

UOW’s definition of cultural safety would, in our opinion, have no relationship to the aforementioned words and/or phrases were it not for the university adopting the IHRA definition of antisemitism into the policy, which explicitly connects the religious, racial and cultural elements of Jewish identity to the State of Israel. By our assessment, none of the aforementioned words and/or phrases are in any way connected to Jewish religious, racial, or cultural identity.

An academic from the University of Western Australia made the case that no definition of antisemitism was needed:

The role of university administrators is to enforce applicable State and National Government laws, not to create new laws. Australia has strong anti-discrimination laws that address all forms of hate-speech. Every person and institution in Australia is subject to those laws, and there are ample provisions for enforcement of them without introduction of new laws and regulations by university administrators.

Impact on academic freedom

The Inquiry received submissions about the impact of antisemitism definitions on academic freedom. UNSW academics explained:

In Australia, academic freedom is guaranteed and protected in legislation and in some collective enterprise bargaining agreements. Academic freedom is a core principle of higher education. It encompasses the rights of scholars, researchers and students to engage in the pursuit of knowledge, research, teaching and dissemination of knowledge without undue interference, censorship or reprisal. Academic freedom ensures that individuals have the autonomy to explore diverse perspectives, challenge established paradigms and contribute to the advancement of society through critical inquiry and scholarship. This fundamental freedom is not only integral to the flourishing of intellectual environments but is also deeply inter-twined with broader human rights principles.

A University of Sydney student told the Inquiry that two reports on free speech on Palestine by the European Legal Support Centre connected restrictions to the IHRA definition:

Both reports look at 96 case studies between them over a five year period between 2017 and 2022 and conclude adoption of the IHRA definition leads to suppression of freedom of speech in its “catch all” phrasing. This is off the back of an open letter to the UN General Secretary in April 2023 from 104 human rights organisations, raising concerns on the IHRA definition and possible use by the UN making it more difficult to call out human rights violations.

NTEU La Trobe Staff for Palestine told the Inquiry they were concerned that:

If La Trobe University adopts Universities Australia’s February 2025 definition of antisemitism this will stifle teaching, research and university discourse on Israel’s ongoing actions in Palestine. This includes discussion and teaching of recent decisions of international legal institutions such as the International Court of Justice, which has found allegations that Israel’s actions are genocide, ‘plausible.’ Such stifling undermines the university’s obligations, as a public institution, to stand against war crimes and crimes against humanity, including genocide.

Another academic also argued the definition undermined the ability of staff and students to advocate for “decolonisation, self-determination and justice for Palestinians in academic studies or research.” A human rights academic had a similar concern:

We focus on elevating people who are voiceless, including vulnerable Indigenous groups and those in the Global South. We seek to empower our students with the tools they need to address current and emerging human rights crises, and that includes major ongoing conflicts and acts of genocide as is currently taking place in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Recently, students have expressed a hesitancy to engage in these important debates as a direct response to the Universities Australia Statement on Racism (27 February 2025). The statement notes that campuses should be free of all forms of racism, but goes on to exclusively focus on antisemitism ... we stand against all forms of racism, including antisemitism. Our concern, therefore, is ... in how antisemitism is defined and now being used to cultivate a culture of fear that suppresses academic freedom of expression, and the human rights set out in UDHR Article 19. Universities Australia and individual universities around Australia need to stand against antisemitism, Islamophobia, Arabophobia and all forms of racism.

A UNSW academic, citing an article published in *Overland*, argued that the definitions of antisemitism adopted by universities enabled distortions:

The UA definition states that “Substituting the word ‘Zionist’ for ‘Jew’ does not eliminate the possibility of speech being antisemitic.” Yet as my colleague Dr Jumana Bayeh writes, “No one is substituting words. Critics of Israel – not least those of us in higher education – know the words we use and what they mean. We know Zionism is a political ideology and a Jewish person is someone who belongs to a particular faith. Just because Israel and the envoy want to confuse them for political purposes, it does not mean those who use them are at all confused.”⁶¹

61. Jumana Bayeh, “Silencing Palestine: Universities Australia and the new definition of antisemitism,” *Overland*, 31 March, 2025, <https://overland.org.au/2025/03/silencing-palestine-universities-australia-and-the-new-definition-of-antisemitism/>.

Conclusion

The People's Inquiry systematically examined the nature and extent of the restriction on free speech, academic freedom and peaceful protest on Palestine at Australian university campuses. These restrictions not only present an existential threat to the university sector, but also to democracy in this country.

The submissions received and the testimonies at our public hearings demonstrate that we face a multifaceted problem involving not only the students, staff and administrators, but external forces and interests. The latter includes governments, mainstream media and pro-Israel lobby groups.

While there is a strong and honoured tradition of university student and staff protest and freedom to speak freely on conflicts elsewhere in the world, it is unequivocally not the case when it comes to the criticism of Israel. The impact has included suppression of protests and events, and interference in teaching and research. Chillingly, the attempts at silencing have led to fear of speaking out as the repercussions become increasingly evident, with Muslim, Palestinian and Arab staff and students in an acutely precarious position.

Alleged antisemitism has been a major justification for restricting speech and protests critical of Israel. This is significantly based in the false conflation of criticism of Israel with hatred of Jewish people. The appointment of an antisemitism envoy has reinforced this conflation, which has been cemented by the introduction of a 'report card' into how universities handle alleged antisemitism.

The recommendations below integrate the findings of the Inquiry and respond to the terms of reference. Although the problems that have been exposed require addressing by governments and media, we confine our recommendations to the university sector in keeping with the scope of the Inquiry.

We conclude our analysis by emphasising that a critical role of universities is to support academic freedom, rigorous critique and debate without fear, threats or enforced systems of silencing. Universities should exercise moral authority by encouraging their staff, students and guests who are acting from conscience and compassion for suffering to speak out on global injustices. To that end, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Restriction of freedom of speech and academic freedom

1. Universities must uphold rights to free speech, academic freedom and the right to peaceful protest in accordance with Australian legislation that enshrines these principles and in line with relevant international law.
2. Universities must not interfere with academic staff's pedagogy and teaching materials because it references the situation in Palestine.

Reform of policies outlawing peaceful protest

3. Universities must repeal or modify policies that have been introduced to restrict intellectual inquiry, diversity of thought, political discourse, peaceful protest and campus activism.
4. Universities must consult with students and staff, including with unions and diverse student groups, when considering policy changes.

Privacy and surveillance

5. Universities must respect the privacy of staff and students, and cease the unnecessary surveillance of staff, students and guests when they are exercising their rights to free speech, academic freedom and peaceful protest.

Disciplinary procedures

6. University disciplinary procedures must meet the standards required for natural justice.
7. Universities must ensure the independent investigation of discrimination and other complaints against their staff and students.
8. Universities must stop threatening students and staff accused of misconduct with punishment for communicating the situation to others, and must not commence unwarranted disciplinary proceedings against students to act as 'warnings.'

Differential treatment, institutional harm and abrogation of duty of care

9. University management must recognise, cease and recompense the institutional harm caused by their failure to exercise a duty of care towards staff and students who engaged in legitimate pro-Palestinian activities. Banning of films, guest speakers, art, the tradition of announcements in class and other peaceful pro-Palestinian activities must end.

Racism and definitions of antisemitism

10. Antisemitism should not be conflated with criticism of Israel.
11. Universities must deal with antisemitism and Islamophobia in the same way as they deal with all other forms of racism and discrimination.
12. Universities should work constructively to ensure the implementation of all recommendations of the Final Report of the Human Rights Commission's Racism@Uni study.
13. Universities must reject definitions of antisemitism and replace them with policies that guard against all forms of racism. This avoids Jewish exceptionalism that can have a reverse impact by fuelling antisemitism.

Transparency and complicity

14. Universities must publicly disclose their investments in and funds received from companies and organisations that support Israel's defence industry and war efforts.
15. Universities must divest from all weapons companies, as these partnerships are at odds with the public mission of universities.

Terms of reference

The purpose of this Inquiry is to establish:

1. whether the human rights of student and staff supporters of Palestine have been violated by governments and university administrations; and
2. whether Australian universities are upholding their obligations to staff and students regarding freedom of speech and expression, and therefore academic freedom as it relates to Palestine.

The Inquiry also seeks recommendations on how the rights of free speech, inquiry and assembly be best protected on university campuses.

This Inquiry is tasked with considering the following matters:

1. Infringements on the rights of university staff and students to free and public political discussion and expression, including but not limited to rights sourced in or protected by:
 - a. the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
 - b. the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities;
 - c. the Commonwealth Constitution;
 - d. the common law.
2. Unfair or unlawful targeting of staff and students for discipline and surveillance due to their beliefs, research, speech or protest in support of the rights of Palestinians;
3. The adequacy of university disciplinary procedures and policies in the context of controversies over free speech; these procedures' adherence to principles of natural justice; and their effect on staff and students' civil and political rights; and whether Australian universities have adhered to their own policies regarding freedom of speech and academic freedom in relation to Palestine;
4. Whether Australian universities have:
 - a. altered their campus freedom of speech or academic freedom policies in response to pro-Palestine activity in a way which limits or stifles freedom of speech and political expression; and,
 - b. in doing so, whether they have failed to adhere to any regulatory frameworks including but not limited to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021
 - c. Whether Australian universities have treated students and staff advocates for Palestine differently from students and staff speaking, organising, and protesting in support of Israel;
5. The nature, role, and effectiveness of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism in a university context;
6. Any related matters related to the above topics that may assist in the inquiry in its deliberations.

