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IPAN's Vision: An Independent and Peaceful Australia

28 February 2025

IPAN Submission to: People's Inquiry into Free Speech on Palestine at Australian Universities

Dear Inquiry Panel,

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute this written submission provided on behalf of its 50 organisational and 200 individual members

IPAN is a national body comprised of peace organisations, faith organisations, trade unions and environmental and anti-nuclear groups. IPAN campaigns for an Australia that acts independently of foreign influences and alliances, seeking and promoting peaceful and mutually beneficial relations between Australia all countries.

The matters being considered by the People's Inquiry are extremely important and urgent. Universities have always played a fundamental and very central role in Australian society. As centres of learning and sites of thought and knowledge dissemination, universities have, in particular, long fostered critical thinking amongst their student bodies. It follows then that students will apply these critical thinking skills to all aspects of their lives.

Students at universities across the country have recognised the plight of the Palestine people and demonstrated this in the various encampments established on campuses around Australia. IPAN believes these activities were a legitimate expression of concern regarding violations to the human rights of a people being oppressed.

University leadership should encourage, not silence, opportunities for debate. This is the most effective and legitimate way for the young to develop and practice critical thinking skills and determine opinions. Although students should be commended for taking the initiative to express their views, IPAN is concerned that this has not been the experience at various campuses across the country.

IPAN certainly acknowledges that the encampments and the messages articulated by students have challenged university governance officials by bringing into clear focus the deep connections between the sector and the military industrial complex. These connections are evident, for example, in the receipt of grants from weapons manufacturers and a willingness to undertake joint research and investments with such entities. The result has been a profiling of the complicity of universities in the oppression and genocide of the Palestinian people.

Rather than attempting to silence students, however, we believe that universities need to respond to the times by listening deeply to the students' messages and by having uncomfortable conversations amongst themselves about what the implications of deep embedment with the military industrial complex means for both institutions of higher learning and for broader society. There further needs to be mature consideration of the change of direction required.

Unfortunately, this is not what we have seen. Instead, universities have doubled down and downplayed the extent and significance of their involvement in the matters outlined above. They have also unfairly targeted students who are merely using their critical analytical skills to live out what they believe. Such actions on the part of students must be commended.

Universities should be places that advances the development of humanity.

The 2024 response across the country to the encampments, protests and other actions represents a huge, missed opportunity. Universities could have shown leadership by encouraging dialogue across different points of view and ensuring a safe environment for all students. Instead, divisions were fuelled by conflating criticism of Israel's actions towards Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank with 'anti-semitism.'

We also emphasise that the position adopted by many university students on Palestine aligns with the stance taken by highly reputable international organisations such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), UNICEF Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Save the Children. Each of these organisations has called out the devastating and unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has resulted from what possibly amounts to genocide (ICJ still to rule on this).

It seems extraordinary that universities, traditionally bastions in the search for truth, have stifled the voices of those who dare to speak truth to power. Universities are influential institutions whose opinions matter. Remaining silent on a genocide will only reinforce the continuation of that genocide.

In fact, the responses of various universities to the encampments seems at odds with the purpose and values statements of the universities – for example, Curtin University, Melbourne University and the ANU – see text box.
i ii iii

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.

Excerpts of University purposes/values

Curtin University Values ‘Our five core values are integrity, respect, courage, excellence and impact. Working in partnership we will make a difference for people and our planet.’

Melbourne University Purpose: Our purpose is to benefit society through the transformative impact of education and research.

‘The Australian National University (ANU) is unlike any other university in Australia. Founded in 1946, in a spirit of post-war optimism, our role was to help realise Australia’s potential as the world recovered from a global crisis. **That vision**, to support the development of national unity and identity, improve our understanding of ourselves and our neighbours, and provide our nation with research capacity amongst the best in the world, and education in areas vital for our future, has been our mission ever since.’

Broad concerns have been expressed across the Australian community about the militarisation of Australia’s education. Such infiltration is occurring in the school as well as the tertiary sector. IPAN is highly critical of the Australian Government in driving such an agenda. While the AUKUS ‘agreement,’ for example, was instituted by a previous administration, it was mindlessly embraced by the current government. In a March 2023 AUKUS announcement, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated that “*working together, our universities and Research Institutes will collaborate to train more Australians in nuclear engineering*”. Various developments since that announcement have seen the university sector become more militarised and more geared towards achieving AUKUS objectives.^{iv} IPAN believes, however, that universities have a strong responsibility to make decisions independent from political influences and in accordance with their stated values and purpose.

Concerns have been expressed to IPAN that responses by some Universities to pro-Palestine activism on campus and demands for divestment from Israel may have been unduly influenced by outside political pressure and financial concerns.^v


Universities should and must advocate for freedom of speech, human rights and unwavering respect for humanitarian and international law. Concerns exist that the responses of several universities to the encampments and other on-campus actions did not meet the required commitment to upholding these ideals. Suspension or expulsion of students by universities merely for respectfully and non-violently holding, voicing and acting upon opinions is contrary to the established ideals of institutions of higher learning. Fundamentally, IPAN believes that universities have a responsibility to listen carefully and deeply to the diverse voices within their community and to respond as a site that values and advocates for free speech and human rights. To that end, we recommend as outlined below.

Recommendations

- That universities listen deeply and respond supportively to the diversity of voices within their own community
- That universities provide an avenue for rational debate and freedom of expression
- That universities comply with their own codes of conduct and policies on academic freedom, and freedom of expression.
- That universities do not attempt to silence students through suspension and expulsion
- That universities do not commit acts of harassment against students for exercising their right to respectfully express their views
- That universities stay true to their core values and purpose and critically examine their involvement with the military industrial complex

IPAN thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We look forward with optimism and hope to the outcome of the Inquiry process.

Yours sincerely



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ⁱ <https://www.curtin.edu.au/about/values-vision-strategy/>

ⁱⁱ <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/vision#:~:text=Our%20purpose%20is%20to%20benefit,make%20profound%20contributions%20to%20society.>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.anu.edu.au/about>

^{iv} [For more info on this – see Erin Curti’s presentation at the 2024 IPAN National Conference 5/10/24](#)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UL0Zr_zjOmY&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fipan.org.au%2F&source_ve_path=MTM5MTE3LDI4NjY2 Starts at 46 mins 15 sec

^v IPAN (ACT) Submission to People’s Inquiry into Free Speech on Palestine at Australian Universities