

The University as Political Actor: A Bloody Business

Written by Andrew Edwards

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ANDREW EDWARDS, JAN 14 2008

“Our greatest investment is in our intellectual assets” working to address “challenges from the environment to medicine” proudly proclaims University College London (UCL) Provost, Malcolm Grant. UCL runs an MSc Systems Engineering course in partnership with BAE Systems, Britain’s largest arms company, responsible for producing artillery guns, munitions and missiles, even warships and nuclear submarines, and whose customers include the repressive Saudi Arabian secret services, the Israeli Defence Forces, the US army and the Indonesian forces responsible for violently extinguishing West Papua’s secession movement. The students enrolled on this particular course are certainly tackling challenges, but it verges on the surreal to place them in a range between the environment and medicine. Then again, the arms trade plays a special role in UCL’s greatest investments. It holds over £800,000 worth of shares in Cobham, the company that supplies and maintains military aerospace and defence systems in over 100 countries. These shares mean that UCL invests more money in the arms trade than most (potentially all) other universities.

UCL is far from an atypical example of a university whose research and investment interests have questionable ethics. In fact, the stance they take on these matters is largely typical of that taken by the UK’s most prestigious unis. Oxford, Cambridge and Bristol University are all heavily involved in research with arms manufacturers and invest in these companies via pension fund shareholding.

Students around Britain are not blind to the immorality of profiting from acts of violent state repression and from threats of war. They see that investing in companies which do so is also then questionable in the extreme, and have been engaged in long-running battles to persuade their universities’ boards of finance to divest from the arms trade. The key to these campaigns has frequently been in the hard currency of economics, demonstrating to the Finance Directors that a profitable portfolio is entirely possible without resorting to firms which thrive from war and insecurity and that excluding these firms is actually the only truly viable long-term strategy for investment. The campaigners across the country have met with varying degrees of success. At London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, the militant Student Union won a quick victory with almost immediate divestment. St Andrew’s University was the scene of a longer battle, with a full four year campaign required for the Board of Finance to both shed the arms trade shares and commit to an investment policy that precludes this. Despite making progress, there still seems a long distance to go for student campaigners at Manchester University and UCL, their Provosts and Finance Directors insisting to this day on the legitimacy of the vast sums they invest in those who profit from arms.

But it has become possible to envisage the day when universities, institutions run for the public good, no longer deem their aims and objectives as compatible with investing in the arms trade. Rooting out the arms companies’ infectious presence in our education system through military research with universities, involving far more deeply ingrained and systemic practices, will take much, much longer. The extent of this research, carried out in collaboration with and on behalf of arms companies, is revealed by a new report recently published by Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Study War No More. The university research projects detailed by this report have innocuous, obscure and often bizarre titles, hiding more sinister objectives, although some light is occasionally shed on their nature. Cambridge University has worked to develop new ‘flash powder’ explosives for an MoD agency. BAE Systems funds training in military target recognition techniques at Edinburgh University. The University of Bristol is researching the behavioural effects of fear in conjunction with the recently privatised arms dealer, Qinetiq, a project with a distinctly sinister air of science fiction to it.

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Students and staff at campuses around the UK may be abhorred to learn that equipment for killing and maiming other human beings is being conceptualised, designed and assembled in laboratories and buildings where they work and study. The arms companies are keen to cash in on this cheap, but productive, source of research and design, yet another reward to the most highly subsidised industry in Britain. Even if the government had not long ago decided that the private sector is the solution to the funding crisis in higher education and was opposed to engaging the UK's brightest young minds in such lethal endeavours, these practices are justified as legitimate by many lecturers and senior academics also. The Study War No More report highlights how they believe the decision-making regarding research funding should come down to lecturers' own personal conscience and how others are too "ill-informed" to warrant the right to influence this.

Campaign Against Arms Trade disagrees. Arms companies should have no place in universities, nor in any sphere of public education. University boards of finance should have ethical investment policies in place that specifically preclude arms companies and a greater degree of democracy and transparency needs to be introduced to the decision-making involved in research and its funding. The arms trade is a deeply abhorrent industry, that thrives and profits off death and intimidation, war and insecurity. It is a morally unjustifiable trade which should be consigned as a relic of our past.

Andrew Edwards is the University Network Coordinator at Campaign Against Arms Trade. For the last six months, he has helped build up the network and its campaigns at universities and student conferences throughout the UK. Outside of CAAT, Andrew studies African politics and Swahili at the School of Oriental and African Studies.