

The Militarised University: Where Secrecy Goes to Thrive. “The Military University Industrial Complex”

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For anyone wishing to bury secrets, especially of the unsavoury sort, there is one forum that stands out. Call it a higher education institution. Call it a university. Even better, capitalise it: the University.

This is certainly the case in Australia, where education is less a pursuit of knowledge as the acquiring of a commodity, laid out spam for so much return. On that vast island continent, the university, dominated by a largely semi-literate and utterly unaccountable management, is a place where secrets are buried, concealed with a gleeful dedication verging on mania.

In its [submission](#) to what will hopefully become the Australian Universities Accord, the Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP) notes the following:

“Unfortunately, university managements are increasingly disconnected from and unaccountable to academic values and academic communities. Students, Government and granting bodies, pay universities to deliver services according to academic values, but academics are impeded from working in accordance with academic values by interfering management. Further, the managers themselves do not work in accordance with academic values.”

Those in the defence industry have taken note. By turning such institutions of instruction into supply lines for research and development in armaments, they can be assured of secrecy conditions the envy of most intelligence agencies. Consulting, viewing, gaining access to relevant agreements, documentation and projects for reasons of public discussion is virtually impossible. These are always seen as “commercial” and “in confidence”.

Only the overly fed and watered members of the University Politburo are granted such access. Entry into the arcana of its deliberations is ceremonially tolerated via Academic

Board meetings or Senatorial deliberations. Furthermore, academics throughout the university sport a reliable, moral flabbiness that will prevent them from spilling the beans and airing a troubled conscience, even in cases where leaking the documentation might be possible. Middle class, mortgage-laden status anxiety is the usual formula here, one that neuters revolutionary spirits – not that there was much to begin with.

Across Australia's universities, the AUKUS military initiative between the US, UK and Australia, primarily focused on developing nuclear powered technology for a new submarine design, has titillated the managerial wonks of the tertiary education sector. In September, the Defence Department [announced](#) that 4,000 additional Commonwealth supported places (CSPs) for undergraduate students would be funded as part of its "Nuclear-Powered Submarine Student Pathways" strategy.

Institutes have sprung up running short courses to rake in the cash, such as the UWA Defence and Security Institute, which [proudly claims to have created](#) the "essential course for those seeking to gain a greater understanding of AUKUS Pillar 1 (nuclear powered submarines) and the impacts for Western Australia and beyond." A course running for thirteen hours does not seem particularly hefty, but this is a field of glitz over substance.

Image: Elbit Systems 900 take off (cropped & levels) (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)



Then come the true villains of the piece, the arms manufacturers and companies that make the military-university-industrial complex intimate and obscene. One of interest here is Israel's Elbit Systems. For years, it has hammered out a reputation for manufacturing such lethal products as the Hermes 900 drone, which was [first deployed in 2014](#) against targets in the Gaza Strip. It supplies the lion's share of drones used by the Israeli Defence Forces for strikes and surveillance (the figure may be [as high as 85%](#)).

The company has managed to beef up many an activist's resumé. Members of the Palestine Action group claim to have scored a victory in securing the permanent closure of two of Elbit's sites in 2022, including the London head office. "The cracks in Elbit's warehouse windows," the organisation [trumpeted](#) in August this year, "do not simply represent cosmetic damage but also symbolise the crumbling foundations of Elbit's relationship with the British State's so-called defence interests."

The corporation has also fallen out of favour with a number of investors. HSBC and the French multinational AXA Investment Managers divested from the company in 2018 and 2019 [given its role](#) in producing and commercialising cluster munitions and white

phosphorus shells. In May 2022, the Australian sovereign wealth fund, Future Fund, [excluded](#) Elbit Systems Limited from its investment portfolio for much the same reasons.

Despite this blotched and blotted record, Elbit could still stealthily [establish a bridgehead in the university sector](#) down under through its creation, in 2021, of a Centre of Excellence in Human-Machine Teaming and Artificial Intelligence in Port Melbourne. Elbit Systems of Australia (ELSA) had two special clients: the state government of Victoria, which provided some funding via Invest Victoria, and RMIT University's Centre for Industrial AI Research and Innovation. The two-year partnership with ELSA's Centre of Excellence was intended to, [according](#) to ELSA's then managing director and retired Major General Paul McLachlan, "research how to use drones to count the number of people in designated evacuation zones, then to co-ordinate and communicate the most efficient evacuation routes to everyone in the zone, as well as monitoring the area to ensure that everyone has been accounted for."

Despite such seemingly noble goals, the opening ceremony in February 2021 had a distinctly heavy military accent, with senior representatives from the Royal Australian Airforce, DST (Defence Science and Technology) Group and the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group (CASG). No one present could deny that technology used in the context of civilian evacuations in the face of natural disaster could just as well be deployed in a military security context. As Antony Loewenstein [has observed](#),

"If you partner, as a state or a university, with a company like Elbit, you have blood on your hands because the record of Elbit in Israel-Palestine, on the US-Mexican border and elsewhere is so damned clear."

Since the Hamas attacks on Israeli soil that took place on October 7, the ELSA-RMIT-Victorian relationship has seemingly altered. A war of horrendous carnage is being waged in the Gaza Strip. Activists claim to have scored a famous victory in securing the university's hazy termination of any partnership with ELSA.

"This is a significant victory for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in Australia," [claims](#) Hilmi Dabbagh of BDS Australia. "Australian universities have been put on notice that they will be targeted if they partner with any Israeli company or institution complicit in human rights abuses and attacks on Palestinians."

Such confidence is admirably fresh, if a touch green. It is worth looking at the [university statement](#), which is revealing in ways that have been entirely missed in the enthusiastic pronouncements of the BDS movement. The university claims to "not design, develop or manufacture weapons or munitions in the university or as part of any partnership. With regard to Elbit Systems, RMIT does not have a partnership with Elbit Systems or any of their subsidiaries, including Elbit Systems of Australia (ELSA)." Such wording avoids the language of termination, leaving the question open as to whether it ever had an arrangement to begin with, with its requisite project links. This will, as with much else, be deemed commercial, in confidence, and buried in the bowels of secrecy we have come to expect from the antipodean university sector.

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