



Consultation on Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024 (No. 2)

Submission by the Union for Progressive Judaism, August 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Union for Progressive Judaism of Australia, New Zealand, and Asia represents approximately one-fifth of the region's affiliated Jewish community. As a representative Jewish roof body, we serve 18 Australian congregations alongside schools, youth movements, young adult groups, and other communal organisations across the country. Our mission is to support and develop Progressive Judaism in the region, ensuring that our synagogues and affiliates can sustain and enhance their strength and vitality.

The young adults in our communities compose a diverse range of university students. Some are deeply engaged in university politics, while others prefer to avoid it altogether. Some are actively involved in the Jewish community, while others have a more tenuous connection to their heritage and culture. Although our members are diverse, our unique approach to Jewish practice often aligns them with other progressive communities. As a result, while their experiences with antisemitism may parallel those of other Jewish students, their deep involvement in both Jewish and non-Jewish progressive spaces lends a unique perspective to how they interpret and respond to these incidents.

In response to the *Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill*, we reached out to university students within our congregations and youth groups, inviting those who were uncomfortable making their own submissions to share their experiences of antisemitism with us.

The following incidents were reported as having taken place in the few years preceding October 7, 2023:

1. In a politics course on colonialism, a course convenor and lecturer suggested that the Holocaust was not a genocide because its victims were white, defending an assigned reading that argued Zionists adopted Hebrew to make Jews appear Middle Eastern. Despite being reported to the university, no action was taken. When the course was offered again, the lecturer began by acknowledging past accusations of antisemitism but proceeded to repeat the same statements, leading students to forgo further reports due to a lack of confidence in the university's response.
2. A Jewish student who mentioned visiting family in Israel at a club's stall during Orientation Week was subsequently told they were not welcome in the society. The student chose not to report the incident, dissuaded by friends who felt the university would not take action.
3. Many students shared that upon joining progressive clubs, their Jewish identity immediately led to questioning about their views on Israel and Zionism, with the implication that any connection to Israel could result in their exclusion from the group. Fearing that their complaints would not be taken seriously due to ambiguities regarding the relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, these incidents went unreported.
4. Some students wearing yarmulkes or Star of David necklaces reported being confronted by other students shouting "Free Palestine" in their faces.
5. A university student magazine published an article calling for "death to Israel." After the incident was reported in a local newspaper, a group of masked men dressed in black photographed themselves making a "Heil Hitler" salute in front of the local Holocaust museum. During a Student Council meeting to address the article, Jewish representatives were harassed and shoved while voicing their concerns. The university did not condemn the article, citing freedom of speech and claiming no control over the magazine. A formal complaint was subsequently filed with the Australian Human Rights Commission, which determined that the editors and author had engaged in racial vilification. While the editors accepted the ruling, issued an apology, and made a donation to the Holocaust Museum, the author refused to comply, leading to the eventual termination of the complaint by the Commission.
6. On the way home from class, an older member of the public yelled at a student wearing a yarmulke, stating, "this is where you belong, Jew," while pointing at her bottom.

Since October 7, 2023, most students shared that the frequency and intensity of antisemitic incidents have significantly increased. The following incidents were reported as occurring since the onset of the current Israel-Hamas war:

1. Students reported seeing antisemitic posters around campus, including some calling for a "global intifada" and others depicting Benjamin Netanyahu with an exaggerated nose.
2. In an open WhatsApp group created after October 7 for Jewish students across Australia to debrief their experiences on university campuses, somebody joined the group and wrote, "maybe you Jews deserve to be killed."

3. A graduate student who self identifies as an anti-Zionist Jew received death threats from other students due to their presumed connection with Israel.
4. Jewish students shared feeling threatened by comments made during regular “Free Palestine” protests on campus. A speaker was heard justifying the October 7 massacre by stating, “resistance is justified,” while another called for a Palestine “from the river to the sea, from Haifa to Tel Aviv” leaving Jewish students to understand that they were calling for the ethnic cleansing of Jews from Israel.
5. Several students recounted being pushed out of university clubs or losing non-Jewish friends on campus over their connection, or presumed connection, with Israel. For example, one Jewish student was told, “we don’t want your Zionist scum here”, and subsequently kicked out of their university’s socialist club.
6. In a Facebook Messenger group chat for a university’s ‘Autonomous Collective Against Racism,’ a photo of Jewish students was circulated, prompting jokes about how “white” they were.
7. A lecturer and tutor brought an entire class to a “Free Palestine” protest as part of their coursework. At the rally, a visibly Jewish student was singled out by protestors who questioned his presence, while none of his classmates were similarly interrogated. When he shared this experience with the class, the tutor did not encourage him to report the incident.
8. Three students across Victoria and New South Wales have been asked to leave share houses with their university friends due to “political differences” since October 7, despite not being politically outspoken.
9. In a tutorial discussion, a non-Jewish student began speaking by stating, “you know how we all hate Zionists and fascists?” The tutor did not address the remark.
10. A Jewish student shared with her tutor that Zionism was an important part of her identity, only for the tutor to share with the class that Zionism was a movement invented by Christians.
11. During a university project, a group member refused to speak with or look at a Jewish student after discovering she was Jewish.
12. Students distributing “Free Palestine” flyers refused to condemn Hamas, even when shown excerpts of Hamas leaders calling for the killing of Jews.

These incidents have contributed to a broader atmosphere of anxiety and alienation for Jewish students on campus. The following sentiments were shared by students who have not been personally harassed due to their Jewish identity, but nonetheless feel affected by the rise of antisemitism:

1. Some students recounted avoiding class due to concerns for their safety while others shared that they now feel incredibly apprehensive while on campus. Their fear is not only driven by antisemitic incidents but also by the normalisation of antisemitic discourse, which has made university life a trigger for their anxiety.

2. Jewish students report feeling as if many non-Jews are attempting to define Jewish identity for them, often suggesting that Judaism is solely a religion, denying Jewish peoplehood.
3. Our synagogues have seen an increase in young adults reaching out for the first time as they feel increasingly uncomfortable in their social circles at university.
4. Most Jewish students in our community empathise deeply with Palestinian suffering. Their concern on university campuses is not the presence of Palestinian advocacy but the normalised denial of any Jewish connection to the land of Israel, which, for them, coexists with the right of Palestinians to self-determination.
5. A significant frustration among Jewish university students is the lack of seriousness or concern with which their peers, academics, and university staff respond when they share experiences of antisemitism. This generates a feeling of helplessness and sense of personal or Jewish devaluation within the university culture and Australian society.

Based on these accounts and discussions with students about what they feel will be of support to them, we advocate for the following key priorities:

1. Education about Judaism:
 - a) Promote understandings of Judaism as a People and culture, in addition to a faith community.
 - b) Highlight the significance of Israel in Jewish history, culture, and religious practice.
 - c) Explore diverse conceptions of Zionism within the Jewish community.
2. Education about antisemitism:
 - a) Identify historical antisemitic tropes.
 - b) Provide examples of antisemitism across the political spectrum.
 - c) Distinguish between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitic rhetoric against the Jewish state, adopting the International Holocaust Definition of Antisemitism as an aid.
 - d) Promote greater awareness amongst university academics and staff about the impact of antisemitic speech on the Jewish students in their institutions.
3. Strengthening reporting structures:
 - a) Increase student awareness of how to access reporting mechanisms.
 - b) Enhance transparency in the reporting process.
 - c) Review and reform reporting procedures to ensure more efficient and effective outcomes.
 - d) Restore student confidence in reporting systems.
4. Support for dialogue processes:
 - a) Facilitate opportunities for politically and culturally diverse groups on campus to engage constructively and respectfully.
 - b) Create safe spaces for students to share their lived experiences of discrimination.
 - c) Encourage interfaith and intercultural exchange among students.



The Union for Progressive Judaism is unwavering in our commitment to combat antisemitism, seeking to ensure that all Jewish students can fully participate in university life. The testimonies and incidents detailed above underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and proactive measures to combat antisemitism on university campuses. These experiences of Jewish students in our communities reveal a troubling pattern of harassment, discrimination, and exclusion that not only undermines their safety and well-being but the integrity and credibility of Australia's academic institutions. This is unacceptable.

While antisemitism on campus is a multifaceted issue, it too often arises from the polarising dynamics surrounding Israel and Palestine. Accordingly, an in depth inquiry is necessary to develop recommendations towards a cultural shift in how Jewish students, their diverse connections to Israel, and their experiences of antisemitism are understood. Additionally, it is essential that further inquiry is mindful not to alienate Palestinian voices, as such an approach would only deepen the divide between Jewish students and their peers. By forming a judicial inquiry that can specify targeted strategies to combat antisemitism within a broader anti-racism framework, we hope that all students, regardless of background or identity, can pursue their education free from fear and prejudice.

The Union for Progressive Judaism welcome the establishment of a commission of inquiry into antisemitism on university campuses as a crucial step towards fostering greater diversity and inclusion in Australian universities.

Sincerely,

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Youth and Young Adult Chair

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Co-President

Larry Lockshin
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