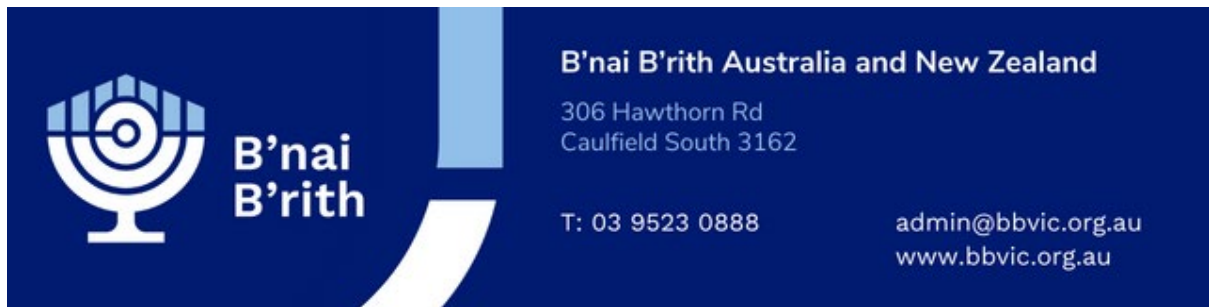




19 August 2024

Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024

SUBMISSION BY B'NAI B'RITH

Thank you for accepting our submission from the B'nai B'rith organisation of Australia New Zealand (BBANZ).

BBANZ is a Jewish community service organisation which was established in Australia in 1944, as part of B'nai B'rith International, which was founded in New York in 1843. Since its inception B'nai B'rith has promoted harmony, tolerance and human rights and fought against discrimination. It helps those in need in the Jewish and broader community. The community has grown to more than 100,000 members.

In Australia, B'nai B'rith has 700 members, predominantly residing in Sydney and Melbourne.

Australia has provided an overwhelmingly good home for its Jewish community, which traces its history from the arrival of eight Jews on the First Fleet in 1788. However, since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Australian Jews have been shocked by the explosion of antisemitism. Jewish schools, homes, businesses and individuals have been targeted by abuse and physical attacks.

One particular area of concern to us and the wider community are the occurrences at universities since 7 October 2023. Like many immigrant families, Jews have strongly encouraged their children to attend university if they have the opportunity, to increase their chances of a meaningful and successful life for themselves and to contribute to society. Many Jews have become academics and university leaders, and the universities have benefited from our communal support.

It is our understanding that the Senate will consider the need for an Inquiry into whether or not to establish an independent judicial commission to investigate antisemitism at Australian universities. We hope the Inquiry will also focus on university's responses to the heightened antisemitism and racism on their campuses, which has led to a frightening and unsafe environment for Jewish students. To assist the inquiry, B'nai B'rith has interviewed four current Jewish students at Monash University in Melbourne to further the understanding of their campus experiences over the past year. The number interviewed by us is small (mainly due to time constraints), but we feel the interviews reflect the tenor of events on a leading Australian university campus.

The four students were interviewed in mid-August 2024.

B'nai B'rith strongly urges the Senate to agree to hold an independent judicial commission with the powers of a Royal Commission to investigate antisemitism on campuses. Such an inquiry can compel the testimony of witnesses and the production of documents. Witnesses to the inquiry can be provided with anonymity if needed.

B'nai B'rith believes that strong action is required by government to deal with the wave of antisemitism that our universities are now experiencing. We recognise that this is a complex area for government to deal with. We have been advised that current State and Federal laws are sufficient to deal with anti-racial and discriminatory behaviour. The difficulty seems to relate to a failure to enforce existing laws.

A summary of the four student interviews is set out below.



Dr Benny Monheit

President

B'nai B'rith Australia/New Zealand

Student Interviews:

Interviewee: J3 (Engineering student, Monash University)

Date: 11 August 2024

Student J told us that the overall impact of the encampments at the Clayton campus of the university was to create large “no go” zones for Jewish students. Those Jewish students who did dare to approach the encampments were screamed at, cursed and threatened and as a result had to retreat, out of fear that they would be assaulted.

The general atmosphere was one of intimidation and vitriol.

The campus was plastered with hostile advertisements, posters and signs. Posters put up by Jewish students were torn down by university staff the same day, whereas those put up by the protesters were allowed to stay. The various social media outlets used by the protesters were highly structured, professionally designed and pervasive.

The vast majority of the protesters were from the far-left socialist groups; there did not seem to be many Muslim students involved, some of whom stated that they were not all enthusiastic supporters of the encampments.

There were very few administrative staff present at the encampment; their stated attitude was generally not to intervene because of “freedom of speech” issues and to just wait until everything blew over.

Some acts of violence were witnessed, mostly caused by outsiders who were eventually removed by the police.

There were many cases of academic staff members (lecturers and tutors) openly sided with and promoted the protests. In some cases, the lecturers excused students to leave class to attend the protests, thereby missing class deadlines

without penalty. The Jewish students were left disadvantaged by this unfair treatment, and overall, they were left uncomfortable and too scared to object.

Interviewee: **G1** (Arts student, Monash University)

Date: 19 August 2024

Student G said that the anti-Israel protesters' encampments were extremely disruptive to campus life, especially for Jewish students who were constantly harassed, yelled at and cursed for being Jewish.

Jewish students walked around campus in a state of shock and fear and were scared to go near the de facto "no go" zones around the encampments. The constant chants added to the climate of intimidation.

While some of the protesters were known to be Muslim students, the majority were from the various far-left and socialist groups. In some cases, off-campus protesters joined the campus protests.

Two tutors were particularly one-sided and antagonistic. In a Global Studies class, one tutor repeatedly insisted that the Jewish student justify Israel's actions in Gaza, while the other consistently framed all discussions around the conflict in Gaza. The student felt threatened by the tutor's linking her to and blaming her for the war.

The Jewish students felt that they could not complain about this to a hostile administration because of the risk of academic repercussions.

Representations by Jewish students to the campus administration were answered with "freedom of speech" arguments or "let's just let it all blow over." Until the very end, the Jewish students felt let down by administrators who ignored their pleas for intervention.

Interviewee: L1 (Engineering student, Monash University)
Date: 19 August 2024

Student L told us that walking near the areas of the campus that had been occupied by the protesters was a constant source of agony to the Jewish students who were frequently intimidated and threatened. They avoided entering the actual encampments for fear of physical assault.

The protesters were dominated by the political far-left and socialist clubs, of which there were many on campus. Jewish students who in the past sympathised with these groups found themselves shunned and vilified. On many occasions, outside protesters invaded the campus, and some even boasted of being out on bail.

There were some limited counter-protests by Jewish students, but their freedom of speech was not recognised, and they were constantly being harassed and interfered with.

Overall, the academic staff in the STEM fields (science, technology, etc.) did not display outright hostility to the Jewish students. However, there were numerous cases of professors, lecturers and tutors in the humanities departments taking a very hostile and aggressive attitude to the Jewish students in their areas.

When Jewish students complained to the university administration about the intimidating behaviour of the protesters, they were told that they could not meet administrators, rather they were told to “send an email.” Consequently, the Jewish students felt that they were unrepresented in the university.

The leaders of the main student organisation (Monash Students Association) were extremely hostile to any comments put forward by Jewish students, and was unprepared to publicly support Israel, causing distress to many of the Jewish students.

Interviewee: T3 (Computer Science student, Monash University)

Date: 11 August 2024

Generally speaking, Jewish students are worried, distressed and scared. Large parts of the campus are hostile to Jewish students, and they avoid these areas for fear of physical violence.

While most of the protesters are members of the socialist clubs, they have been joined by sympathisers from outside the campus. They refuse to discuss any of the issues with Jewish students, going so far as to threaten them with violence. When the Jewish students try to explain Israel's side to uninvolved students (particularly international students), they find that they are too scared to even listen, let alone support Israel's position.

From the point of view of the Jewish students, many of the university staff either support the activities of the protesters or they are too scared to lift their heads and object. When classes were disrupted by protesters' blaring megaphones – in contravention of the university's code of conduct – the staff members refused to enforce the code.

The officially recognised university Monash Student Association has pointedly refused to support the Jewish students' concerns, siding wholeheartedly with the protesters. In fact, at this very moment, the MSA is voting on a motion that calls for the elimination of the State of Israel.