

‘There was nothing to do but take action’: The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them

Josh Freeman



Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI Report 185

About the author

Josh Freeman has been Policy Manager at HEPI since July 2023. He has written previously on free speech issues including in the HEPI report *No Platform: Speaker Events at University Debating Unions*. His other research includes the cost of student living, the experiences of trans and non-binary students and student attitudes to generative AI. He was also a co-author of the 2024 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this report, without whom this research could not be undertaken, for offering their time and valuable contributions. I am grateful to all those who helped convene interviews and who commented on the report's many drafts. Thanks also go to the HEPI team, Carole Cox, Lucy Haire, Nick Hillman, Emma Ma and Rose Stephenson, for their contributions and efforts to bring this paper to publication; and the HEPI Advisory Board, particularly Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow, for their pertinent feedback. Any errors remain my own.

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	8
1. Nature of encampments	15
2. The institutional response	35
3. Role of other organisations	50
4. Conclusions and recommendations	59
Appendix A: List of institutions that had an encampment	65
Appendix B: Motions passed by students' unions at institutions with an encampment	67
Endnotes	69

Executive summary

In the summer of 2024, during one of the most intensive periods of student protest since the Vietnam War, pro-Palestinian protestors established encampments at 36 UK higher education institutions. The protestors swapped halls for tents and some spent weeks or even months camped out on university lawns. They argued that institutions were partly responsible for any harm done to the Palestinian people and called for UK universities to contribute to the rebuilding of higher education in Gaza. The protestors hoped to use the protests, which varied in intensity across the UK, to force institutions to accept responsibility and change their approach.

This report investigates these protests and the response to them by UK higher education institutions. The research is based on interviews with nearly 60 student protestors, senior institutional leaders, students' union officers, Jewish students and others with expertise on the protests.

Chapter 1 finds that:

- Students were motivated by feelings of anger and powerlessness related to the war in Gaza. Though the encampments were sparked by similar protests on US university campuses, UK students often joined encampments for very personal reasons. Students were often protesting for the first time, for reasons related to freedom of speech, mental health or tuition fees. In comments that show the influence of social media, two interviewees explained, on separate occasions, that 'genocide is being livestreamed to our phones'.
- Encampments tended to be democratic in structure and protestors often relied on donations from staff, students and local people. Some encampments experienced infighting between students who wanted to compromise and those who wanted to hold out for a different deal with the institution. They regularly swapped tips with other encampments via WhatsApp and Signal group chats. 'Externals', who were not members of the institution, often joined encampments and probably extended the duration of the protests.
- The impact of the encampments on staff and students was significant. They did not generally prevent the ordinary functioning of institutions.

The continuous nature of the encampments made many Jewish students fearful for their safety and some members of encampments engaged in antisemitic behaviour, including writing antisemitic slogans in Arabic and using antisemitic tropes but with the word 'Jewish' replaced with 'Zionist'. The presence of encampments may also have emboldened other students not involved in the protests to engage in antisemitic behaviour. Some Jewish students joined encampments and held *Shabbat* dinners there and some encampments took efforts to prevent antisemitic behaviour. Protestors reported being subject to Islamophobic discrimination by institutions and students. Some protestors were victims of harassment and, in at least one case, were assaulted by other students.

- Students used social media to build support for the cause by making a seemingly distant conflict seem personal for students and staff. The most widely shared posts attacked institutions and senior staff directly for their alleged complicity in genocide or mistreatment of protestors.

Chapter 2 finds that:

- Most institutions allowed encampments to remain and sought to engage with protestors. This was mainly possible because the encampments did not prevent most institutions from functioning normally. Many higher education institutions changed their approach from June and July 2024, moving to disband encampments by taking legal action, as campuses were needed for graduations and open days. A few institutions never tried to engage with the encampments. Institutions engaged extensively with Jewish students, but support was sometimes less than promised.
- Meetings between protestors and institutions did sometimes take place, but due to the lack of common ground between their views, these meetings were often tense or even hostile. Repeated meetings did sometimes help build rapport and defuse tensions. But students often feared institutions were not negotiating in good faith or planned to renege on commitments, while institutions felt students were simplifying a complex issue.

- Institutional action seen as excessively punitive by students and staff tended to build support for the protestors' cause. By contrast, institutions able to build trust with protestors had more constructive conversations and some encampments disbanded as a result.
- Communications from institutions were often particularly fraught, with students feeling like they were being treated with 'suspicion' and 'fear'. Those adopting a more 'human' approach had a more positive reception from both protesting students and the wider student and staff body.

Chapter 3 finds that:

- Where students' unions were able to play a supporting role, they mediated and passed information between institutions and protestors. However, their influence was often limited because they were seen as partisan. Some had their independence infringed by institutions or were expected to control the protestors. Others lost the faith of protestors because they were not seen as supportive enough, sometimes because of restrictions imposed by charity law.
- In having a very different stance from protestors, the Government put institutions in an awkward position. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the broad consensus made it straightforward for institutions to condemn Russia; by contrast, the lack of consensus on this topic meant institutions rarely made strong political statements, which was highlighted as being hypocritical by protestors. As a result, many institutions regretted making statements about Russia and resolved instead to avoid political statements entirely. There was a consensus that, in England, the Office for Students failed to help institutions deal with contested free speech like the 'river to the sea' chant.

Chapter 4 recommends that:

- Institutions should be guided by four principles: protecting freedom of speech; protecting student and staff wellbeing and safety; ensuring the institution continues to function well; and ensuring students' genuine concerns are represented.

- Where institutions allow encampments to remain, they may be able to build constructive working relationships with protestors and should show due concern for their wellbeing. But they must make sure the wellbeing and safety of others, especially Jewish students and staff, are protected. Institutions may benefit from setting clear expectations of student behaviour and taking disciplinary or legal action when these expectations are not met.
- Students' unions are uniquely placed to represent the student voice and should ensure the full breadth of student opinion is represented. They may be able to facilitate a dialogue between protestors and institutions if they can build trust with both sides, but this is a delicate tightrope to walk.
- In implementing the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, the Department for Education (DfE) and Office for Students (OfS) should consider its impact on student protests and how it can be used to create space for discussions about contentious issues.

Introduction

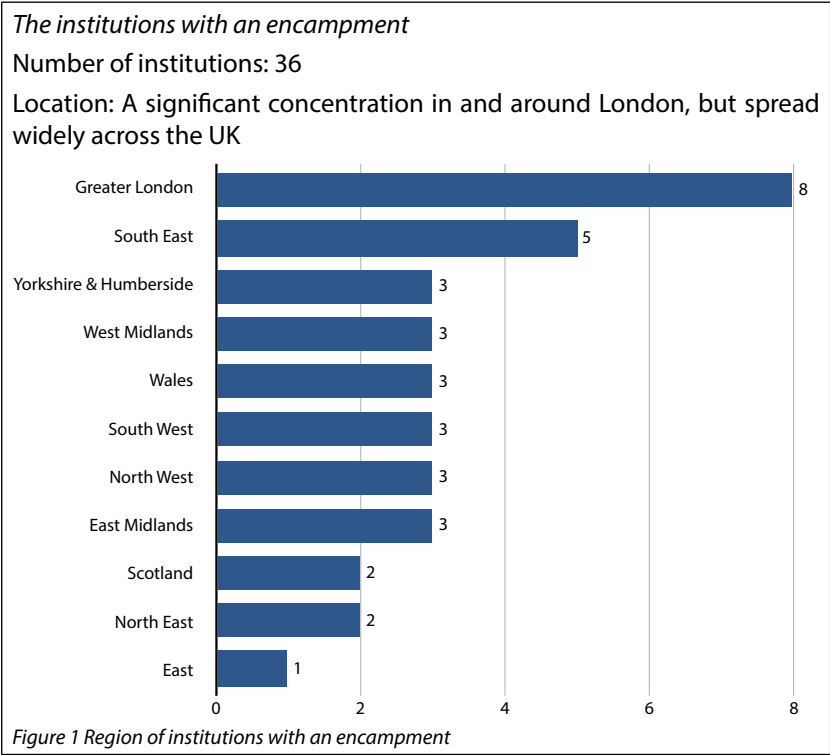
There is a deep and complex history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In recent years, this has included destructive air strikes and ground incursions by Israel against Gaza, and bombardments of Israel by Hamas, the UK-proscribed terrorist group which governs the Gaza Strip.¹ The conflict intensified in the autumn of 2023, when Hamas launched a ground and air incursion into Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) subsequently launched a significant military campaign in Gaza. The attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023 left around 1,200 people dead, with a further 251 taken as hostages. In Israel's subsequent military campaign in Gaza, over 40,000 people have been killed and a significant proportion of the population have been forcibly displaced.² The International Criminal Court (ICC) requested arrest warrants both for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, and Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas, though Sinwar was killed before one could be issued.³ Evidence collected by UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese suggests Israel committed genocide in Gaza, but Israel, the US and others have vigorously contested this claim.⁴ On 15 January 2025, a ceasefire deal was agreed between Israel and Hamas.⁵

The official UK position shifted since 7 October 2023, partly as a result of the change of government in July 2024. In the early stages of the conflict, official statements by the Conservative Government stressed Israel's right to self-defence.⁶ In February 2024, the Government called for a 'pause' in fighting.⁷ The opposition Labour Party initially stressed Israel's right to defend itself and, in February 2024, called for an 'immediate humanitarian ceasefire'.⁸ On winning the July 2024 General Election, the new Labour Government then called for an 'immediate ceasefire'.⁹ In September 2024, Foreign Secretary the Rt Hon David Lammy moved to suspend 30 of the 350 arms licences the UK holds with Israel, saying there was a 'clear risk that they might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law'.¹⁰

Students have protested about the situation in Palestine and Israel many times in the past but protests reached a new level of intensity in the 2023/24 academic year. In the US, UK and elsewhere, students staged rallies and disrupted events protesting against Israel's campaign. On 17

April 2024, the situation in the US escalated with students establishing the first tent encampment at Columbia University, New York. The next day, under authorisation from university leadership, police entered the encampment and arrested more than 100 students.¹¹

Subsequently, more than 100 encampments were established in the US.¹² On 26 April 2024, the movement spread to the UK, with the University of Warwick the first of 36 UK-based institutions, including 21 of the 24 members of the Russell Group, to have an encampment. In the months since, UK institutions have experienced a heightened period of student and staff activism. The full list of institutions with an encampment is available in Appendix A.



Most encampments were established in May 2024, with the number of active sites peaking in late May and decreasing gradually in June and July 2024.

Institutions with an active encampment

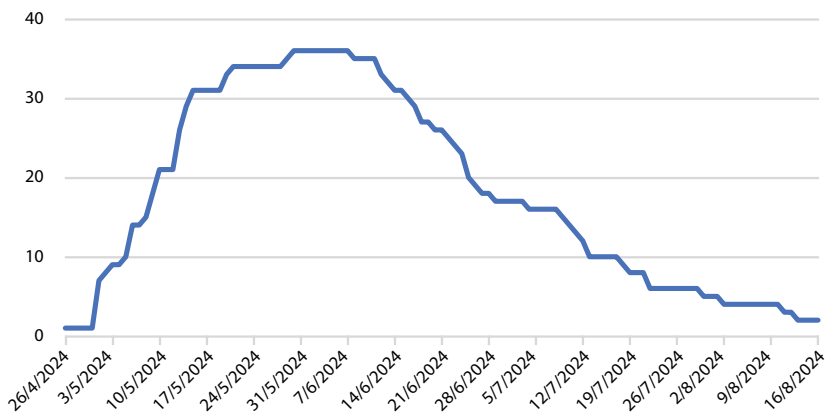


Figure 2 Number of institutions with an active encampment over time, between 26 April 2024 (when the first encampment was established at Warwick) and mid-August 2024

Key developments in the UK, 2024

26 April 2024: First encampment set up at the University of Warwick.

1 May: Encampments set up at a range of locations including Manchester, Bristol, Swansea, Newcastle and Sheffield.

8 May: Students at the University of Edinburgh announce they will go on hunger strike. The hunger strike will continue for several weeks.

24 May: 17 people, including 12 current students, are arrested after a sit-in at the University of Oxford the previous day.

30 May: The number of institutions with an encampment peaks at 36.

13 June: After discussions with protestors, the University of Reading, under existing ethical investment policies, commits to divesting from Barclays. Protestors had criticised Barclays for its financial ties to defence companies.

17 June: The London School of Economics (LSE) becomes the first university to evict an encampment, situated indoors, citing health and safety concerns.

25 June: The University of Oxford clears the long-standing encampment in front of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, citing risks to public safety and its collections.

7 July: Seven students at SOAS University of London are arrested after police are called to the encampment.

10 July: The Universities of Birmingham and Nottingham are granted possession orders, allowing them to evict encampments on their campuses.

31 July: Only five encampments remain.

Demands

In each case, the encampments made demands of their universities. The precise number and nature of the demands varied in each case, but they tended to converge around the same broad areas:

- **Investments**, specifically the demand for institutions to disclose their investments in industries allegedly enabling Israeli actions in Gaza, such as defence industries, divest from these industries and review institution-wide investment policies to prevent such investments from being made in future.
- **Cutting research and other ties with organisations allegedly linked to the conflict**, such as Israeli universities, research with a potential dual application linked to the conflict and global corporations engaged in research that may be linked to the conflict.
- **Supporting higher education in Palestine**, as protestors note all higher education institutions in Gaza have been destroyed in the conflict and call for funding to restore the sector, when possible, as well as scholarships and wider support for Palestinians looking to study in the UK.¹³
- **Protecting free speech and academic freedom**, particularly the right to protest without facing disciplinary action.

- **Publicly condemning the actions of Israel**, calling for a ceasefire and using certain language like 'genocide' to describe Israel's campaign.

Some encampments have also made demands focused on other campaigns not directly related to the conflict in Gaza, such as the University College Union (UCU) campaign against redundancies and demands to end collaboration with defence industries more widely.¹⁴

While many institutions have experienced protests, the encampments represented a unique challenge. Some took place at institutions that had seen few protests in their history. Being fixed, semi-permanent and (usually) outdoors, the encampments were a very different form of protest, including being longer-lasting and more visible, compared with rallies or occupations.

Purpose of this report

This report focuses on the encampments established on UK university campuses in the 2023/24 academic year. Using the Cambridge English Dictionary definition, an 'encampment' is taken to be:

*A group of tents or temporary shelters put in one place.*¹⁵

The presence of some form of (temporary) structure distinguishes encampments from other kinds of protest like occupations or sit-ins. One edge case is the encampment at the London School of Economics which was indoors, but this is still considered an encampment as there were tents. Some institutions, such as Oxford and Goldsmiths, had more than one encampment at different times and locations.

In being different from previous protests, the encampments put different pressures on institutions and required a different response. It is therefore important to consider what an effective response may look like. This phenomenon also marks an opportunity to understand how universities can manage contentious issues when they arise on campus. The need to do so is not merely hypothetical: several institutions have already experienced protests in the 2024/25 academic year.

Much has already been written about the encampments in both a global and UK context. This report is intended to advance the discussion in two ways. First, it goes behind the scenes, drawing on extensive discussions

with those involved to paint a detailed picture of protestors' motivations and the events that unfolded. Secondly, it critically assesses the response to the protests by higher education institutions and develops a practical framework for how institutions could respond to similar protests in the future.

This is not a foreign policy paper. I do not pass judgement on the merits of the arguments made by protestors, institutions or others. Equally, the language used on this topic is sometimes interpreted as signalling the author's allegiances to a certain point of view. It is hoped the report discusses these issues in a balanced and sensitive way. In the event that the language or approach cause offence, we would welcome feedback.

The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** considers the nature of the protest encampments: students' motivations; the way they operated and their structure; the disruption they caused; their reasons for decamping; the wider support they received among staff and students; and their use of social media.
- **Chapter 2** considers institutions' responses to the encampments.
- **Chapter 3** looks at the role of other organisations: students' unions (SUs), government and national regulators.
- **Chapter 4** develops a framework for how institutions might approach similar challenges in the future.

Methodology

The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with student protestors, university staff, students' union officers, Jewish students and others involved in the encampments and the response to them. Overall, 41 interviews were conducted with 57 people, of which:

- 14 were student protestors;
- 19 were university staff, of whom three were vice-chancellors, nine were other members of the senior leadership team and seven were staff involved in the response in other ways;
- Eight were students' union (SU) officers;

- 10 were Jewish students or student representatives and three were other representatives of the Jewish community; and
- Three were others with expertise on aspects of the protests.

Ultimately, at least one person was interviewed from 24 of the 36 institutions with an encampment.

Almost all those spoken to for this report preferred not to be identified. A small number were happy to speak on the record and they are acknowledged in the text. I am very grateful for all of the contributions, without which this report would have been impossible.

The report also draws extensively on information in the public domain, such as public statements made by higher education institutions and student unions and social media posts by encampments and others. Public data is taken both from institutions from which someone was interviewed and no one was.

1. Nature of the encampments

Motivations for protesting

In April and May 2024, pro-Palestinian protestors set up tents on campuses across the UK. They were frequently situated prominently on campuses, near entrances or next to major buildings. A number remained as campuses were abandoned for the end of the academic year. The scale and duration of the protests were historic and reminiscent of wide-ranging protests against the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

The interviews first sought to recognise students' motivations. Many students felt powerfully about the situation in Gaza:

[This has been] going on for 76 years. ... This has not just come out of nowhere ... we have cared about it very deeply for a long time, but the media and public weren't paying as much attention. Genocide is being livestreamed to our phones.

The '76 years' phrase is also used frequently in Instagram posts. It refers to the period since when the UN adopted a proposal to partition the territory into a Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jewish state in 1947 and Israel declared independence in 1948.¹⁶ Images like that in Figure 3 are used to show how Palestinian land has, protestors claim, been repeatedly reduced in size by Israel.¹⁷



Figure 3 Instagram post of a poster depicting alleged changes to Palestinian land, LSE Solidarity Encampment

The feeling that genocide is being 'livestreamed' via social media was mentioned more than once. It speaks to the unfiltered and often highly distressing images depicting violence in Gaza and Israel that students may see frequently on social media.

For two Palestinian students, encamping was:

The least I could do to even feel an ounce of what people in Gaza felt.

My duty as a Palestinian to aid my people and alleviate their concurrent pain in Gaza and elsewhere but I recognised there was not much I can do independently.

It is also likely that some students' views strengthened over time. The encampments offered a space where Gaza was the centre of students' lives. Encampments had whiteboards with daily updates describing the situation in Gaza. Inevitably, students' values and beliefs tended to coalesce around the same ideas.

Almost all the students interviewed said they were inspired by the global movement, particularly the first encampments in the US:

It was infectious seeing students in other places do it – students started to understand they can do it.

The protests in the US made us realise this was viable and essential for the university to listen.

There was also a domino effect local to the UK:

There was a fear that [students at the institution's main rival] were going to set up an encampment and we didn't want to be outdone.

Our university is not as complicit – or so I thought. But [we] were all seeing universities in the UK and US doing encampments and they needed solidarity, that's kind of what drove us.

The events at Columbia and other US universities therefore appear to have been the 'spark' that motivated students to set up encampments. Some university staff told me that as soon as they heard about events at Columbia, they expected the encampments to spread to the UK.

As noted in the Introduction, the encampments were not the first demonstrations for Palestine on university campuses in the 2023/24 academic year. For some students, the encampments were an escalation, other institutional processes having been insufficient:

We tried to use more agreeable means to get the university to change its stance. Even in 'more peaceful times,' it didn't bear any fruits. So ... this felt like a logical progression.

We weren't getting as far as we wanted ... so we looked at the feasibility of an encampment.

[There was a] responsibility to expose the institution ... universities do not want to listen and be led by students.

[You can] have people at a demonstration and there's no trace in two hours.

The prevailing sense of university inaction was aggravated by the contrast with the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At that point, many institutions moved immediately to make political statements and provide support for Ukrainian students, without needing to be prompted. Students said:

With the response to Ukraine being so fast, it added fuel to the fire: we've seen they can [take these steps] if they want to.

The only difference you can see [between the way the institution acted around Ukraine and around Palestine] is skin colour and ethnicity.

Clearly, the encampments wanted their demands to be met. But many encampments also had other objectives which sometimes took precedence. Being keenly aware of their place in the global movement, some considered their main role to be increasing support for it at their institution:

It was never like: we're here until the demands are met and we're not leaving. ... It was more about how by holding physical space, we can build the movement, so [we] can apply pressure later.

[We] are still working on our demands, but that is secondary to the

empowering of people – we are thinking beyond the university – what would it mean for [the] city?

As one Academic Registrar summarised more cynically:

Sitting in meeting rooms on campus with me and the COO [Chief Operating Officer] and going over the process for honorary fellowships, investment and pension funds is not very arresting if you want to be part of the movement for free Palestine.

But perhaps one of the most striking things about the interviews with students is that many were motivated by factors which, at least at face value, go far beyond the situation in Gaza. They often refer to factors in students' personal lives. The following testimonies illustrate the range of other motivations for students:

Students feel ... a lot of fear about speaking up. [The institution] has a big international student community, and they are policed and threatened with being reported to the Home Office.

It's our money, it's our tuition money that is funding genocide.

People feel there is a community where they are and that they could do something. A lot of it comes from mindless doomscrolling.ⁱ A lot of people were quite mentally ill, a lot of people struggling with deep depression, but it's been somewhere you could go. ... It's a place people started to feel safe in, it feels infectious. ... By the end of the first week, I felt faith in other students.

The encampment is a space away from capitalism – [I] didn't know people could organise like this – no one has any prescribed power, nor centralised management – it's magical.

It is clear from these statements that encamping was not just about Gaza. Students were motivated by wider grievances, often with their institutions. They felt that institutions were not taking seriously their concerns around Islamophobia, tuition fees, staff pay and pensions, mental health or the freedom to protest. These issues were rarely mentioned in encampments'

i Doomscrolling: spending too much time reading negative news stories on social media. In this case, it is taken to mean scrolling through content depicting events, particularly violence, in Gaza.

official demands but they appear to have been significant motivators to join the protests.

Structure and daily functioning of encampments

Of the encampments we heard about, the structure and setup tended to be similar. They were intended to be highly democratic. All major decisions were 'collective' and put to a vote of everyone on the encampment.

However, these strict democratic processes could sometimes be difficult to sustain. Some decisions were taken by individuals or small groups. Sometimes, encampments were formed by, or were later joined by, Palestinian societies (such as 'Friends of Palestine' societies), left-wing political societies or campaign groups. Prominent individuals in these societies tended to take leading roles in the encampments:

Hierarchies do arise or they don't, depending on who you ask. Certain people get more involved. ... Some people spend 80 hours or more a week on camp, so they have more responsibilities.

To operate, students divided the responsibilities between each other, with different teams completing different tasks:

We split into working groups. There was a cleaning group, for cleaning up after meals; a strategy group, for [deciding] actions and protesting against the uni; a food group for feeding everyone; a logistics group, for managing donations coming into the group. There were 10-15 groups in the end.

Many students said they thoroughly enjoyed living on the encampment. They appreciated being surrounded by like-minded people motivated by the same cause. Others described 'magical nights' like communal dinners or encampment-run events. But others found conditions deeply challenging:

- Several said they and others were struggling to sleep;
- Others noted that interpersonal dynamics could be very difficult and that they had struggled to deal with problematic behaviour from members of the encampment; and

- A number highlighted negative responses from other students including harassment and assault, set out below.

A common criticism of the encampments from institutions was that many participants were not students or staff, but 'externals', alumni or even people who had nothing to do with the institution. Some students acknowledged there were some external members, but stressed the movement was student-led. Others were proud that their encampment had broader influence and impact. Several mentioned their links to local communities, who were sometimes involved in running encampments, making food, sleeping in tents (and thereby allowing some students to return temporarily to their accommodation) and adding numbers to encampment-organised protests.

It is very likely that the involvement of external individuals helped encampments continue for longer and campaign more energetically. They provided supplies and food, occupied tents overnight so students could return to their accommodation and participated in activities. They also boosted morale by giving students the energising sense they were having a positive impact.

Though students were generally reluctant to discuss it, some encampments experienced significant differences of opinion which sometimes appeared to drift into factionalism. Typically, camps were split between students who were willing to strike a compromise with the institution in exchange for decamping and those who wanted to hold out until all their demands were met (or in some cases, continue even if the institution agreed to everything). Interviews highlighted at least two cases where an institution agreed to meet some of the encampment's demands, leading to some students leaving, only for others to remain behind because they felt the 'deal' did not go far enough.

The horizontal, democratic structures of encampments may have exacerbated issues of negotiation. Institutions reported having productive conversations with some students, only for others in the encampment to have a different perspective in subsequent meetings. Sometimes, encampments shifted position entirely.

A few encampments also referenced how they worked together sharing 'best practice' and coordinating their approach. The encampments were sustained and strengthened by complex networks, particularly in London, where there was a high concentration of encampments. Mutual support included swapping detailed tips across Signal and WhatsApp groups, sharing legal advice, attending rallies at each other's institutions, answering calls for support at critical moments such as evictions and sharing online content.

Disruption and harm to students, staff and institutions

As one student mentioned, the protests were 'meant to be disruptive'. The encampments themselves were often an inconvenience to institutions, particularly those situated prominently on campus. They were usually highly visible (and intended to be), including to visitors and other students and staff.

Students from the encampments also used a range of disruptive activities, of the kind institutions are more used to, alongside running encampments. These included:

- Unauthorised entry into staff meetings, including cases where students accused staff present of being personally complicit in genocide or personally responsible for the deaths of Palestinians, causing significant distress, and another case where a vice-chancellor lost their hearing for hours because they were shouted at through a megaphone.
- Disruption to graduation ceremonies and open days.
- Vandalising university buildings with slogans and accusations against university leadership, and, at one institution, with 'dark' and 'sexualised' language.
- The use of language some find offensive, such as the 'river to the sea' chant, or insults naming vice-chancellors and other senior staff and suggesting they were personally culpable for violence.
- Forcing the postponement and rescheduling, on police advice, of a debate at the Durham Union about Palestine and, in another case at Cambridge, trapping Peter Thiel, founder of US software company Palantir inside the Cambridge Union debating society for a short period.¹⁸

For some students and staff, the presence of the encampment was distressing:

[Some staff] found the whole experience deeply frightening and upsetting. They don't feel they can come in, are worried about the building being blockaded, they had to change their route through campus.

For Jewish students and staff, the period after October 2023 was exceptionally challenging. The Community Security Trust (CST), a charity which monitors antisemitism, recorded 272 university-related antisemitic incidents in the 2023/24 academic year, the highest number on record and five times the number recorded in the previous academic year. Many of these occurred in October and November, immediately following the attack on 7 October 2023, but significant numbers also occurred in subsequent months, including May 2024.¹⁹ Of the incidents that occurred in the first half of 2024, a significant majority contained 'discourse relating to Israel, Palestine and the Middle East'.²⁰

The sharp increase in antisemitism was the basis for the *We've Had Enough* campaign run by the Union of Jewish Students (UJS), which at the time of writing has received more than 3,300 signatures online.²¹ The challenge for Jewish students was exacerbated by the very frequent sharing of political messaging, and sometimes antisemitic content, online. Students also described feeling at risk of being personally targeted if their contact details were available online.

The students and Jewish representatives we spoke to described cases of antisemitism allegedly perpetrated by members of encampments, including:

- antisemitic messages written in Arabic by protestors to disguise them;
- antisemitic conspiracy theories or tropes with the word 'Jewish' replaced with 'Zionist' or 'Israel' – for example, graffiti at one university saying Israel harvests Palestinian organs and posters at another claiming the media and politicians are 'Zionist funded'; and
- the use of the phrase 'intifada until victory' – the CST notes the word 'intifada' is ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways, but argues its widespread use after the 7 October Hamas attack suggests implicit support for the attack by some users of the phrase.²²

The Jewish students I spoke to described a range of consequences of the encampments for them, from discomfort at having to see the encampment every day to feeling fearful and intimidated. They worried about appearing to be visibly Jewish on campus and some, particularly those who held prominent positions such as President of the university Jewish Society, feared being identified and targeted. Students avoided the encampments if they could, but the prominent sites chosen sometimes meant this was not possible. One representative of the Jewish community told us:

People felt very on edge. They'd had enough – they were not feeling at home at a place that should feel like home.

However, it would be wrong to argue that the protests were necessarily antisemitic or that everyone protesting was antisemitic. A Jewish student criticised this narrative, saying they had friends in the encampment and they themselves had attended some events. There were cases of encampments hosting *Shabbat* dinners and Jewish speakers, others where Jewish students camped. Other encampments, such as at LSE, received public support from Jewish students and staff.²³

But even in cases where the protest organisers collaborated with Jewish students and staff or strongly enforced prohibitions on antisemitic language and behaviour, the presence of an encampment may have emboldened other students on campus to engage in such behaviour. Students told us antisemitism had become 'normalised'. Sophie Dunoff, CEO of the University Jewish Chaplaincy, which employs chaplains across dozens of UK universities, said:

The fact that the encampments were allowed to continue in the way they were encouraged others who would never join the encampment ... There was a student last week ... students blocking the corridor moved out of the way and as he walked past, they shouted 'Free Palestine'. The slogan is not necessarily antisemitic, but when you shout it at an identifiable Jew, that's antisemitic. The encampments emboldened that kind of behaviour.

Those targeted included the Jewish chaplains helping to support student safety and welfare.

Among the most contentious discussions is on the use of the word 'Zionist'. The CST says the following about Zionism:

*Zionism is the name of the political movement that created the modern State of Israel in 1948. Since then it has come to mean the belief that Jews are a people and that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state. Anti-Zionism, conversely, is the belief that Israel should not exist or that the Jewish people do not have a right to national self-determination.*²⁴

It is therefore important to note that being a Zionist is distinct from supporting the policies of the government of Israel.

The encampments were typically overtly anti-Zionist with chants such as, for example, 'We don't want no Zionists here'. They argued that this is legitimate because Zionism is a political ideology and therefore can be subject to legitimate debate, many Zionists are not Jewish and many Jews are not Zionists. The Jewish students we spoke to considered this to be an attack on them as Jews, partly because some references to Zionists drew on antisemitic tropes and partly because Zionism is particularly important to the identity of many Jews, though not all. Recent UK-wide surveys suggest 60% to 80% of British Jews consider themselves Zionists while a smaller proportion describe themselves as anti-Zionist.²⁵

Lord Mann, the Government's Independent Adviser on Antisemitism, told us the small size of most encampments meant it would be wrong to attribute the significant increases in on-campus antisemitism to them. Of much greater concern, in his view, was the targeting of Jewish students in places they could not move away from such as classes or accommodation. He argued that rather than focusing mainly on 'flashpoints', institutions should pay more attention to the 'isolation', 'ostracization' and 'intimidation' of Jewish students which occur daily.

Those involved in the encampments were also subject to reported abuse, harassment and hate crimes from students, staff and members of the public who were opposed to the protests. Several students said they had been verbally and physically harassed or assaulted by other students or members of the public, and one student said photos and videos of them were sent to and published by national media.

Since October 2023, Islamophobia has been on the rise nationally, including in higher education.²⁶ In interviews, Muslim students described feeling discriminated against by their universities: one described how their Islamic Society said, since the encampment was set up, 'we know that indirectly [our] university are dealing with us differently now'.

In the public domain, there are also some recent reports of Islamophobia directed at students:

- The LSE Islamic Society published a report titled 'Exposing Institutional Islamophobia: The relationship between Islamophobia and the Suppression of Palestinian Rights Advocacy at the LSE'. The report describes how students wearing a *keffiyeh* [headdress] were intimidated by other students. The report argued Muslim students were not taken seriously by the institution because 'their concerns are trivialised' by the lack of action from their institution.²⁷
- On social media, QMULAction4Palestine at Queen Mary University of London described being physically assaulted on campus saying two students 'attacked our encampment and sprayed urine on students in tents'. They blamed the institution's 'disregard and ridicule' for the safety of Muslim and Arab students.²⁸

These examples are not exhaustive and instances of Islamophobia may be much wider than reported.

In addition to the significant impact on individual students and staff, there were also consequences for the overall functioning of institutions. Some encampments were situated in places used for important events like graduations. In these cases, institutions had to decide whether to negotiate or forcefully remove the encampment.

Being a different form of protest, institutions had to invest significant resource to address the encampments and the new challenges they posed. One interviewee reported spending an 'inordinate amount of senior management time' on the response to the encampment – 'mostly talking' with key stakeholders from the institution.

But it was surprising to learn encampments often did not, by themselves, significantly disrupt the normal functioning of institutions. Staff reported that they could usually avoid the encampment if they wanted to and carry on with their jobs, for example. Levels of disruption seen on US campuses

were rarely matched in the UK. In one case, students in the encampments were given a timetable of exams taking place nearby and were quiet while examinations occurred. In another case, students started occupying popular sites to ‘photobomb’ graduation photos but quickly stopped, probably because of the reaction they received from other students. A number of promised marches, entries to buildings and graduation protests did not materialise or were smaller than anticipated.

Why was the disruption less than many expected? Recall that protestors sought not only to pressure their institution to accept their demands, but also to build support for the movement among students and staff. Angering significant sections of the community might therefore be counterproductive. One student protestor said:

Management are the target, not students. ... If we piss off lots of students, it doesn't help us at all, management will call us an intimidatory group.

Instead, encampments spent much more time hosting a range of events open to all, ranging from teach-ins and seminars to arts and crafts, singing, board games, poetry and film screenings. These events were good for morale but also very often included members of the community not otherwise involved in the encampments, enabling protestors to build support for their campaign.



Figure 4 Instagram post by Students of Alareer Square (Encampment at the University of Liverpool)²⁹



Figure 5 Instagram post by Aston for Palestine³⁰

The surprisingly undisruptive nature of the encampments may also have been key to their longevity. Several institutions said they did not remove their encampment because they did not need to; most could function more or less normally with an encampment present, at least until June 2024. Around this time, there was an increase in legal action as institutions sought to reclaim land normally used for graduation ceremonies, open days and in preparation for 'Welcome Week' events.

Reasons for decamping and the potential for 'recamping'

As noted above, sustaining an encampment was a challenging operation. It required groups of students to organise themselves and provide for the basics – food, equipment, cleaning supplies, toiletries. It was physically uncomfortable and could be mentally taxing. Some became anxious about the possibility of disciplinary action and vulnerable to backlash from other students. Most had to carry on with their studies while camping. And after all that, they still needed to find the time and energy to run the events – protests, vigils, teach-ins and so on – which they felt would advance the cause.

As a result, many reported it was essential to keep morale and enthusiasm high while remaining a cohesive unit. Many encampments appear to have simply lost momentum as students became tired or wanted to go away over the summer. One student set out the situation in some detail:

We didn't have the numbers to sustain the action. As we were approaching the end of the year, the biggest organisers had to go home or had other pre-planned things to do. [A few days] before we decamped, we lost two of the main organisers ... we were losing people, so we couldn't do the basics of leafletting, making our presence known. The camp became more of a hindrance than a help. And we were tired. In bigger encampments, there are people who can take over so others can have a week off. We were telling people who had booked an afternoon off that they needed to stay as we needed numbers.

Others collapsed due to disagreements between groups of students who wanted different things:

The first group were initially happy with the agreement, but other students in the encampment were not happy. So some said they were going, but others wanted to go further.

In this case, a diminished form of the encampment continued.

Even if they decamped for other reasons, usually students wanted to declare 'victory' and take the moment to point to their successes, as in Figure 6.

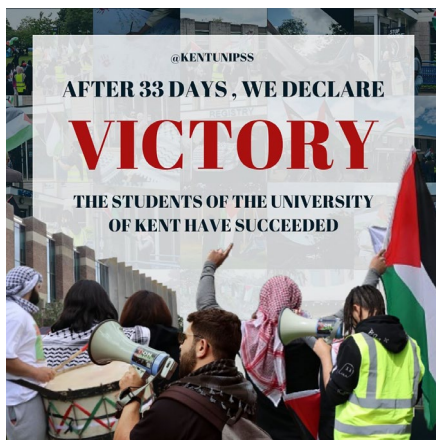


Figure 6 Posted on Instagram by University of Kent PSS [Palestine Solidarity Society]³¹

Many observers raised concerns about encampments returning at the start of the new academic year.

University staff said they were preparing for encampments but also expected other forms of protest:

In winter, you get occupations, not encampments.

Students were asked whether, or under what circumstances, they would 'recamp'. Some were tight-lipped, but others were happy to share:

If there's an appetite for a camp and people are willing, and we can keep engaging in other protest actions, then there will be crop circles on the lawn again in September.

The deciding factor most often mentioned was holding institutions to account. If institutions were seen to be breaking their promises, students may feel the need to recamp to put the 'pressure' back on.

Some campuses have already seen protests in the 2024/25 academic year, but they never reached the same intensity as in spring and summer 2024.

I would argue that encampments are unlikely to become a permanent feature of campus protests. Encamping is uncomfortable and tiring; it takes up lots of time and it puts protestors at risk of backlash from others and disciplinary action from their institution. It requires large numbers to sustain and is susceptible to splits and factionalism. The wave of encampments occurred in large part because of the existence of a global student movement, but without this, there would have been fewer and smaller encampments, if any. By contrast, rallies and disruption to events require much less planning and demand only a few hours of people's time, so these forms of protest are likely to remain the most popular.

Wider support

Student protestors have taken every opportunity, both in interviews and in online posts, to stress the level of wider support they have from other students and staff on campus. Figures 7 and 8 are taken from encampments' social media posts, with many other encampments using the same messaging.³²



Figure 7 Instagram post from Cardiff University Staff for Palestine



Figure 8 Instagram post from the LSE solidarity encampment

Encampments may make these sorts of arguments because having high support is good for morale, which can be important for sustaining the encampment. Being popular also adds legitimacy and weight to the cause and their demands and, for some, is the main reason they encamped in the first place.

But there is also a tension between advocating for the encampment's demands and seeking to increase support among students and staff. This is well-illustrated by the decision of some encampments (but not all) to allow other groups, such as Marxist societies, existing campaigns (such as around ending associations with defence industries) and UCU members, to join encampments. On the one hand, by wrapping their message up with others, they could widen the net and speak persuasively to a wider group of students. On the other hand, they sometimes diluted their message and, by associating with other campaigns with ambitious requests, made it more difficult for the institution to accept their demands.

In several cases, institutional leaders condemned staff involvement:

UCU was absolutely using the encampment to push its narrative on redundancies. This was not helpful for the encampment – their campaign had nothing to do with redundancies.

More active members of the staff body were using it as a means of pushing their message. This bordered on being extremely manipulative of students.

By contrast, students sometimes praised the involvement of staff, either for their direct support (as they joined the encampment) or indirect help in putting pressure on the leadership to take action.

One student protestor interviewed was campaigning both against their institution's investments and staff redundancies. When challenged on whether it was consistent to demand the institution lose a major source of revenue at such a fraught time for its finances, they argued the failure to divest was more damaging:

[The institution is] pushing international students away. Gulf students say they are boycotting [the institution]. Many, such as Bangladeshi students, feel very uncomfortable and say that the institution is working to kill Palestinians. On an open day, people were outraged, students were thinking about coming here but now may not.

To the extent that it is possible to generalise, the consensus among institutions was that the balance of opinion may lean towards the

encampment's demands (even if not always its methods), with two vital caveats: most of this support is passive, in that most students and staff do not feel strongly enough to act on it; and there are a large number of others, including but not limited to some Jewish students and staff, who are opposed, sometimes very strongly:

[We have] a left-leaning academic and student community. The balance of opinion at [the institution] is that Israel's response is too harsh ... [but only] 15-20 are angry.

In one example of how most support is tacit, an institution said:

In comparison with the Marking and Assessment Boycott, there is tiny traffic from students. To the bulk of our students, it [the conflict] is not on their radar. We have had a few hundred emails on divestment, but they are the same people writing over and over, with the same template.

A Jewish student suggested a moral consensus developed:

Everyone is going to the protests ... [It is] something they do to prove they are a good person.

Social media and narratives

Social media played an important role both in building momentum and support for encampments and in controlling the narrative around the protests. In the same way that institutions communicated through statements and emails, the protests dominated Instagram feeds, with graphics, photos and videos used to share their experiences with the wider community.

The most popular posts on Instagram pages were often attacks on institutions, rather than criticisms of Israel or references to the situation in Gaza. As of early August 2024, the most-liked post on the 'Oxford Action for Palestine' page was about the University's alleged destruction of a garden built by protestors (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Screenshot taken from an Instagram video, Oxford Action for Palestine

This attempt to set the narrative was phrased in very strong terms and was sometimes unpleasant and personal. Senior leaders were often targeted by name on social media and accused of enabling genocide. At one institution, students used AI to criticise the Vice-Chancellor on what appeared to be institutionally-branded posters. Attacks on institutions were ubiquitous among the protestors, with students accusing them of perpetuating ‘state violence’, ‘repression’ and ‘epistemicide’ [the destruction of knowledge systems, particularly traditional or indigenous knowledge], of ‘vilifying’ and putting ‘huge financial pressure’ on students, seeking to ‘prohibit’ them from exercising their ‘peaceful right to protest’ and describing institutions as ‘scared and clearly terrified’ of student activism.³³ They described their institutions as ‘complicit’ or claimed they actively support genocide:

I don't think we [the institution] should be taking blood money.

Posts about the ‘SOAS 7’ and the ‘Oxford 17’, each referencing students who were arrested, were very widely shared by encampments across the country.

In some cases, encampments issued direct responses to institutional statements and posted them online. One example is this notice to vacate issued by University College London (Figure 10).

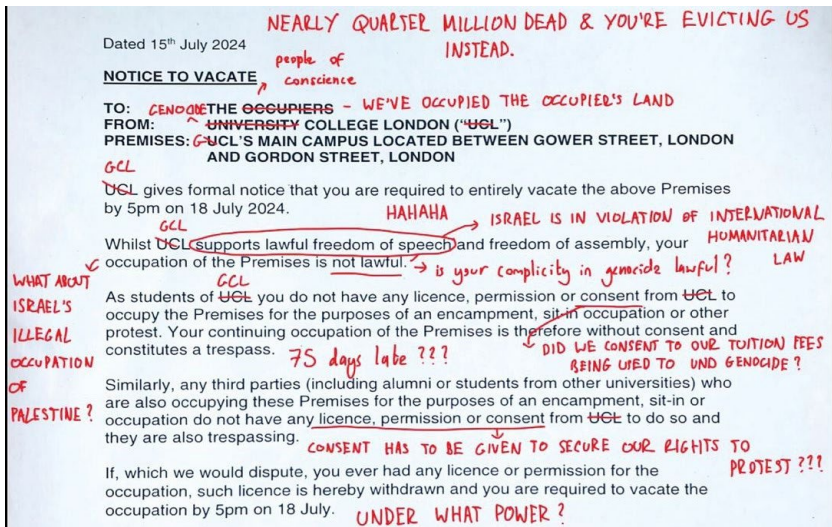


Figure 10 Instagram post by UCL Stands for Justice³⁴

Some encampments used social media as a tool to share the struggles they faced both when encamping and advocating for Palestine within universities. They highlighted alleged breaches of the duty of care they claim universities have towards their students. (Whether there is such a legal duty is contested.)³⁵

On social media, posts were used to push the encampments' narrative. When an institution acted in a way the encampment disliked, it was seen as typical behaviour from a malicious actor. But when an institution took positive steps (in the view of the encampment) it deemed the institution to have capitulated to protestors.

The fierce criticism of institutions and individuals was clearly motivated by students' strong beliefs in the cause. But it was also an effective method for gaining support and traction online. Claims about the actions of institutions were shared frequently on social media, very often reaching

a wider pool of students than with posts about the situation in Gaza. This may be because they hit closer to home and were more personal for many students than a conflict taking place thousands of miles away. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, students' motivations for protesting are often very personal and go beyond their views on the conflict:

We have a banner saying '[This institution] funds arms'. When people hear about what [the institution] did, they're like 'shit'.



Figure 11 Alleged attacks on a student at Bangor University. From the Instagram page of the Student Federation for a Liberated Palestine³⁶

2. The institutional response

Institutional priorities

For higher education institutions, there were three clear priorities:

- (1) protecting the freedom of students and staff to express themselves;
- (2) protecting student and staff wellbeing and safety; and
- (3) preventing disruption to the proper functioning of the institution.

Principles (1) and (2) applied to protestors themselves and all those who might feel affected by the encampment, such as Jewish and Israeli students and staff, other students, leadership, prospective students (especially on open days) and members of the local community.

Connected to (3) is the idea, raised by several staff, that institutions should not go too far in unconditionally accepting protestors' demands. One staff member leading their institutional response said:

A lot of conversations fell down because we said, while for you Palestine is the most important thing right now, our responsibility is managing [the institution].

Other priorities varied. Some staff made clear the importance of listening to protesting students. Robert Van de Noort, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Reading, said:

I'm getting older, but my students stay the same age. The need to listen to students is strong. They don't need to have an encampment to come and see me.

Others disagreed, saying whatever protestors' views, the encampment was not a legitimate forum to raise concerns. One senior leader, citing 'externals' who had joined the encampment, said:

We engage with the Students' Union as they are the democratically elected representatives, not with some small group of people, most of whom have nothing to do with the University or its community.

Common to both responses is the need to hear the 'authentic' student voice, whoever institutions judge to represent it. When asked why they

engaged with protestors, one senior leader at a Russell Group university said:

It is instinctively what we would have done. We didn't gain an awful lot, but we can say hand on heart that we did it. It was right that we did it.

Therefore, a suggested fourth principle should be:

- 4) Ensuring students' genuine concerns are represented and, if appropriate, acted on by university leadership.

It seems reasonable to judge institutions by the criteria they set themselves and so, for the rest of this chapter to evaluate institutions' responses by these four principles.

Some student protestors and students' union officers suggested institutions were strongly motivated by reputational concerns. Institutions themselves never mentioned this but it is likely to be a factor. An institution succeeding at the above four criteria is likely to protect its reputation effectively.

Engagement strategies

Some institutions took the establishment of an encampment as an opportunity to set the terms of the relationship.

Some took the opportunity to remind students of institutional codes of conduct, going as far as to give students printed copies of key rules. Institutions returned to these rules, often framed as 'red lines', when they were broken. Conditions included:

- requiring the encampment to be peaceful and not disrupt the normal functioning of the university;
- bans on 'externals' (not affiliated with the university) joining the encampment;
- requiring the encampment always to engage in discussions with the institution; and
- discouraging the use of certain words and phrases which were likely to make some students uncomfortable.

Perhaps because they were presented early and framed as red lines, these initial conditions were usually kept to, even when later requests by institutions were not met. This strategy was important because, as one students' union officer noted, many of the students involved were not experienced protestors:

Students who [protest] regularly will know the consequences. Normal protest rallies happen often enough that students know the consequences. The unique nature of the encampment made it very different ... We as a Students' Union have no idea where they [senior leaders at the institution] sit on encampments.

SOAS University of London Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib described how the School's initial statement sought to strike a balance, indicating understanding for students' anger and respecting their right to protest but setting four ground rules: the camp should not expand, disrupt exams, target individuals in the community, or engage in violence. Getting this balance right is difficult, he argues: peaceful protest must make you uncomfortable and be inconvenient, or it is not protest. He therefore suggests it is necessary to think carefully about the parameters of peaceful protest at academic institutions.

Tracey Slaven, Chief Operating Officer at the University of Aberdeen, said they were lucky to 'bump into' students as they were setting up:

We gave them two sets of guidance: one about their responsibilities, but the one we were really stressing was about keeping themselves safe.

This intervention served two helpful purposes, allowing Aberdeen to set clear rules (and raise awareness about external groups who might try and join the encampment) while also establishing a productive relationship, especially when senior staff visited the encampment early on to speak to students. Clear demonstrations that the institution cared about student wellbeing were well received, particularly because of the reportedly high number of students in encampments facing mental health challenges. A staff member at a different institution said:

It was not particularly strategic but ended up being right. We prioritised their welfare, safety and access to food. Those initial conversations set a tone of being less adversarial.

After the initial establishment of an encampment, the institution must decide whether and how to engage in discussions with its members. This decision was sometimes fraught:

Some people believe we should never have negotiated with protestors ... I disagree a lot with what the students say, but they do care, they are very passionate and it comes from a good place. So it was important to talk and make concessions where they had a really good point.

The 36 institutions with an encampment took quite different approaches overall: some engaged immediately; some only after several weeks or months had passed; and some never sought to set up substantive talks.

Most of the institutions I spoke to described making significant efforts to engage with protestors, but they invariably found it challenging to set up meetings. They described how students (who possibly feared disciplinary action) wore masks to hide their identities or wanted a promise not to be disciplined. Some protestors insisted on speaking only to certain staff, such as the vice-chancellor. Institutions also set their own terms but often had to compromise on these to secure meetings.

When they did eventually take place, meetings were often extremely difficult affairs for all involved. One vice-chancellor reported:

We wanted to let them speak and be listened to. They said we [staff] weren't listening; I said we were sorry and wanted to listen. There was lots of anger and distress, all being directed at the University. Doing all the things [they] want us to do is not going to stop children dying in Gaza, but we held back from saying all that. That hour we let them rant at us and release all that anger and stress.

Others said:

There were a couple of very tense meetings between camp members and [senior staff]. Everyone came away feeling dreadful.

They were never able to see that the situation is more complex. That's what disappointed me – they had a very simple view. There is pure evil, Israel, and pure victims, in Gaza and the West Bank. It is not that simple and we never felt we could have a nuanced discussion.

But the meetings were often productive affairs. Staff testimonies included:

The purpose was to listen ... There were some raised voices, but it went relatively well. It was about repeating [why we could not meet all their demands].

They saw we're not the hostile enemy they had constructed in their heads.

And some students were also relatively positive about negotiations:

[We have] had two meetings over the course of the encampment. ... We have made some progress and they were amicable to have the discussion, as it helps them identify what they're not seeing. ... The first meeting was rocky, as we were setting up rapport, but the second was better.

The encampment escalated and this led to the University agreeing to meet on students' terms. It led to bi-weekly meetings between students and the leadership. The most exciting bit is that the next step of negotiations will be student-led.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, students often found the negotiations frustrating or pointless. The same grievances tended to reappear:

- Language was used that students felt was inappropriate, such as describing investments as 'kosher'.
- Students felt the institution was not negotiating 'in good faith'. This was frequently related to the pace of change at institutions. In students' eyes, they were simply too slow to respond to the protests and act on their commitments, often taking months. For students camping in uncomfortable conditions, a single day felt like a long time. Students were also frustrated by institutions setting red lines on key issues, such as political statements and divestment.
- There was a lack of trust that commitments would be adhered to: 'I feel our demands will be diluted, and diluted, and diluted'. Many said they were continuing to camp as a way of holding the institution to account. Others threatened to recamp if they felt promises were broken and there was at least one institution where they did so.

The primary risk with speaking to protestors is that the institution is seen to 'capitulate' to protestors while ignoring the views of, and impact on, other students and staff:

If you engage on certain demands, the list gets longer.

Most institutions interviewed, however, avoided this with several strategies:

- setting up regular meetings with Jewish students and staff, often through Jewish societies, in partnership with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS);
- issuing regular communications to the whole institutional community, sometimes as often as twice a week, to keep them informed on progress;
- rather than rushing through the changes proposed by protestors, taking time to consider them and the views of others before adoption, while keeping protestors informed to prevent a sense of 'roadblock' – one institution adopted 'working groups', which included student protestors, to consider the impact of the reforms; and
- working with the students' union – see Chapter 3.

An unexpected challenge some institutions faced was that they felt they had already met some demands. These institutions had little to offer in discussions with students. Students often reacted badly to being told this, accusing institutions of lying. It is an understandably difficult thing to be told their hard work has been for nothing.

We already disclose everything [on our investments] – though they [the protestors] claim we don't. This meant we couldn't concede anything, so it was maybe harder [for them] to walk away.

I don't think they knew what the endpoint would be. ... They won't take yes for an answer.

Institutions could make progress by showing students they were being listened to. Many institutions did learn from the protests and, in their view, made genuine improvements to institutional policy as a result. One institution which changed its practices said:

We haven't suffered in terms of value for money but feel much better about it ... [it is better] aligned to the charitable objectives of the University. Where the University can genuinely improve its actions, we'll do so.

Others said:

Our investment policy hasn't been reviewed in a number of years, so it was probably time to review it anyway.

I'm really proud of our students. The way they handled themselves and acted with the SU and University was impressive.

On the other hand, institutions argued that many of the protestors' demands were simply unfeasible, particularly demands for public condemnation of Israel, preventing academics from engaging in research with Israeli institutions (as these restrictions would impinge upon academic freedom) and ending certain investments. On this, the statement from the leadership of the London School of Economics, which is worth reading in detail, explains why caution on investments is needed:

The repercussions of a decision to divest will not be borne by today's students or faculty, as any decline in investment value – a product of reduced worth, increased volatility, and lost compounding – will not happen for some time. Instead, the costs of any action now will be felt by future students and faculty. A decrease in average returns as small as 2%, for instance, will after just a decade mean reduced resources of anywhere from 15-20% less than would otherwise have been the case.³⁷

The ultimate goals of discussions should be learning, on the one hand – these examples suggest institutions still have much to learn from their students – and explaining, on the other, why some demands are not feasible. There is some evidence of students modifying their demands to focus on more achievable areas, though it is difficult to know how far discussions influenced these decisions:

Their priorities have shifted. In the first meeting, they were very focused on involvement in the defence industry. Then it switched to scholarships.

Some institutions sought to go further and agree on a joint statement with the encampment, but this strategy brings risks:

From an early stage, the aim was to work towards a joint statement. In the end, this didn't happen because they insisted on using words like genocide which we certainly couldn't use ... In retrospect ... if we had produced a joint statement, it would have been viewed as political.

Disciplinary and legal action

The difficult events at the University of Columbia meant most UK institutions were reluctant to take legal action unless absolutely necessary. At one institution, staff were told: 'Don't call in the NYPD [New York Police Department]'. Instead, institutions (having swapped tips with each other) adopted a relatively uniform approach: allow encampments until they pose a risk to the normal functioning of the university (or, in a small number of cases, where the encampment poses an unacceptable health and safety risk) and then move to evict them.

Some institutions took a different approach. One interviewee described how notices were passed to student campers at 7am on the first day saying the encampment was illegal and they could be taken to court. Other institutions began the process of drafting legal documents immediately, though it would take some time for them to bring their case to court. In these cases, institutions usually did not make significant efforts to engage in talks with student protestors.

This more confrontational approach could be convenient for senior leaders. These institutions were able to take out court orders covering the entire campus, precluding a return by the encampment in the autumn. It also set a clear example that illegal protest activity would not be tolerated. But being more confrontational ran several risks:

- It may have been (or been seen as) unnecessarily punitive. Protestors could more easily frame themselves as engaging in a struggle against a malicious actor, increasing support for them among the wider student and staff community. Some of the biggest protests erupted in response to students being arrested or being disciplined by an institution. Like at Columbia, the net effect may be to amplify the encampment's influence rather than curtailing it.

- It did not stop students protesting in other ways.
- Institutions missed the opportunity to learn from their students and address their genuine grievances.
- Due to a worsening of the relationship, it was more difficult for institutions to support students' wellbeing.
- It may have motivated some students to remain for a longer period, as it would be 'giving up' to leave while court action was ongoing.

On that last point, one sabbatical officer said:

The encampment told me: We know we're not going to get all our demands, and we put excessive things in as a bargaining tool. Scholarships are a middle ground, they'd be happy if they got these. The encampment really just wanted some form of commitment. So they decided they wouldn't leave until they were forcibly removed.

As most interviews were conducted before the 2024/25 academic year, it is difficult to say with confidence what the long-term impacts of such an approach might be.

Our discussions with students show that legal action is a difficult process for them. In one case, a student was reportedly expected to cover legal fees of up to £50,000.³⁸ Some encampments, having opted to stay after a court order was issued, were evicted by campus security in the early hours of the morning. One student protestor said it was difficult to know how to behave:

We don't want to make assumptions about what they [the institution] might or might not do. Their conduct has been very unpredictable – we didn't think we would be taken to court.

One senior leader argued legal action was a poor use of money at a time when their institution was paying severance packages.

There was also at least one case where the institution affected by the protests did not have ownership over the land where the encampment was established, complicating legal action. This issue aside, institutions easily won the legal action they took to remove protestors: any delays tended to be procedural, related to giving students time to find legal representation and build a case, rather than to do with the strength of institutions' legal arguments.

A further consideration here is that punitive action against students and encampments plays into the narrative that institutions are suppressing student activism. As noted, the most popular social media posts tended to refer to students being arrested or facing disciplinary action, with videos showing alleged mistreatment of students being widely shared.

By contrast with those who took legal action, there were a number of institutions that took relatively *laissez-faire* approaches with their encampments. These institutions let their encampments continue in the hope that they would end before the summer. As the Introduction shows, most did so. But again, it is too early to say what the impact will be in the long run, for example, whether the institutions without court orders will see greater activism in future.

Institutions varied even more in their willingness to use disciplinary action. Some offered amnesties for students contingent on them leaving by a certain time, though these offers were often refused. But there was consensus that offering students unconditional amnesties for the future was impossible:

It would create two categories of students ... it would give them a carte blanche for any kind of behaviour.

Some institutions were reluctant to pursue individual students with disciplinary action. Sometimes this was by necessity because students could not be identified; at other times, it reflected the unique situation:

It's a special situation, an emotional issue. It's okay to call this a one-off. Though some have said we are setting a bad precedent by allowing this behaviour.

Yet others said they wanted to allow free speech as much as possible and worried taking disciplinary action would prevent this, even when there were cases which broke institutional rules. Some were therefore willing to overlook relatively minor breaches of institutional codes of conduct. But they said they would act if students violated codes of conduct more substantively.

Adam Habib, Vice-Chancellor at SOAS University of London, has spoken previously about the importance of consistency around student protests

and free speech. He explained SOAS's approach, including the eventual decision to pursue legal action, as follows:

At the start, there were individual occurrences of students breaking the rules, but the encampment as a whole kept to them. So it was about identifying and disciplining [students] on an individual basis. [But since then] they have gone beyond boundaries repeatedly ... violations are so widespread [that] while there is a legitimacy to their cause, the encampment has lost legitimacy.

There is a balance to strike between allowing some peaceful but disruptive protest but preventing significant threats to student or staff safety or the functioning of the institution.

Communication

Among the most difficult challenges was communication. Chapter 1 explained that institutions come up against concerted and well-networked efforts by encampments to set the narrative. Two senior leaders at different institutions argued:

Their account is totally wrong. But they are not lying – they believe what they think. They live in their world and have their language; we live in ours. We stopped trying to correct them as everything was being twisted and turned. It is like talking to the Russians.

We were pulled up at almost every stage for calling the situation a conflict or war. They wanted 'genocide' to be used.

Very frequently, institutions said that the statements released by encampments were baseless, untrue, untrustworthy or not well-founded in academic research.

One suggestion was that institutions should consider line-by-line rebuttals to counter misinformation (though there are no clear cases where an institution adopted this approach). This strategy is not advisable, as it would probably be seen as petty and is unlikely to persuade students who distrust university statements.

More effective was a mature, balanced approach to communication with a distinctly human touch. One institution described how they changed their

communication strategy part-way through the protests with great results. Their account is worth reproducing at length. They had been told by the students' union that their communications were landing badly:

There was a tone shift. We were saying what we had been saying, that we haven't taken a stance and we won't. But it was about saying that [protestors] are part of our community; acknowledging that university should be a challenging place to be in; and in that context, they have something to contribute and may know more about this issue than we do. We should be coming in with humility, not approaching it as a situation we have to stop.

It felt like our communications were drafted by a committee, to take out emotion and prevent an emotional reaction. The warmer tone of communication was received well by almost everyone.

Poor communication by institutions was a key complaint of the students and sabbatical officers we spoke to. In trying to strike a balanced approach, some statements simply seemed aloof, failing to mention key terms like Palestine or acknowledge the risk (or actual occurrences) of racism. These statements matter a lot because they are the only contact most students have with senior staff. In some cases, seemingly minor omissions set a negative tone with protestors or the wider student body that institutions were not able to repair even months later.

One cause may be that, at times, institutions forgot protestors were ultimately their students with their own worries, challenges and motivations. One sabbatical officer said:

[Protesting] students are treated with suspicion and fear; communications have had that underlying rhetoric like if you're 'scared' or [saying] it's 'threatening'. [It's about] treating them as human beings.

Other factors affecting the relationship between institutions and protestors

Though relations between institutions and encampments were never friendly, some were significantly more functional than others. Where this occurred it was invariably easier to reach a resolution. There are other factors affecting the relationship here, beginning with the role of security services. One head of security at a prominent university said:

46 'There was nothing to do but take action': The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them

Trust is like a crystal ball: if you drop it, it will take years to get it back. They are still our students and we'll look after them ... Early on, we'd meet them every day to check in.

There were even some cases of encampments developing genuinely close personal relationships with security officers. This was possible because security teams were at some distance from university leadership (and so could not necessarily be held responsible for institutional failures to act on their demands) but also because regular contact, particularly on wellbeing issues, inevitably meant both sides got to know each other better.

Equally, there were a number of cases where the 'crystal ball' was dropped. Two cases were reported where security teams or cleaners had removed posters or murals they didn't know were of significance to the encampment, and these had to be returned. In other cases, security were perceived as having failed to act when students needed help. One student said:

[Security staff] claim to do daily welfare visits with the institution and the Students' Union. But they are minimal. There is a lack of care for our safety. I was handing out flyers and a guy was physically squaring up to me and shouting in my face ... security allowed him to walk around campus for the rest of the day.

It is not always easy to know how to behave and security staff are not professional counsellors. But security staff can helpfully keep in close communication with encampments and provide wellbeing support where possible.

Other institutions also described productive steps taken by other ostensibly neutral individuals, such as the chaplaincy, the students' union and even professional mediators. When there are more points of contact with an encampment, there are more opportunities to look after students' wellbeing and gain a genuine sense of an encampment's dynamics.

Student and staff welfare and security

Lastly, this chapter discusses the various ways institutions acted to support the safety and wellbeing of their students and staff. Immediately after an encampment was established, some institutions made sure the

protestors had access to bathroom facilities, either with temporary toilets or in adjacent buildings. In some cases, protestors were issued with special passes so even participating non-students could use the facilities (the alternative being that protestors were, sometimes chaotically, using each other's access cards). Many established regular wellbeing checks and some altered security arrangements to ensure encampments were properly protected at all times.

In terms of supporting Jewish students, those interviewed gave very mixed reports. Most agreed that the communication between institutions and Jewish societies ('JSocs') is now very effective. Lord Mann said:

Universities have done very well. They've learned so much in the last three years ... They didn't used to speak to Jewish students, so things used to fester and blow up.

Effective communication with JSocs was one of the Union of Jewish Students' five asks of institutions, which also included education about antisemitism and the setting of clear 'red lines' on antisemitism, such as around the phrase 'globalise the intifada'.³⁹

Students described often being met by very senior university staff and described these staff as receptive and supportive. But they were frequently disappointed by how this support translated into action. Sometimes this was because of the slow pace of change at institutions, meaning promises took much longer than expected to deliver. In these cases, the burden to follow up and manage the university response frequently fell on a few Jewish society leaders. Careful consideration is needed to make sure the expectations of individual students are manageable. Similarly, though chaplains play an important role, they cannot be expected to support all Jewish students alone.

Some but not all of the Jewish students and representatives we spoke to argued institutions should never have allowed encampments to remain. Others felt such protests can be 'legitimate' but felt institutions must take swift action against antisemitism and breaches of the rules. Students described how institutions had claimed to be hamstrung by the need to protect free speech and so frequently did not act on reports of antisemitism, even in cases students saw as clearly antisemitic.

Students' unions were also sometimes able to act as a bridge between concerned students and institutions.

Some highlighted the particular risk, both to student protestors and others, of having externals living in encampments who were not affiliated with the institution. They posed a risk because they could be anyone with any intentions and because, unlike students, institutions cannot take disciplinary action against them.

Because of this risk, institutions took extensive steps to prevent externals from joining, including threatening to dismantle encampments if they allowed others to participate. In many cases, this was a challenging exercise, particularly where encampments were in public spaces to which the institution could not control access. In interviews it was reported that there were cases where encampments originally let externals join but later asked security to remove them. Where externals were believed to have joined encampments, it was useful for institutions to have sources of information about encampment dynamics and working relationships between them and security officers so they could ask for help if needed.

3. Role of other organisations

Students' unions

A students' union (SU) is a democratic body representing students' interests at university. Most, if not all, students' unions are registered as charities because they are non-profits that exist to further the educational purposes of the institutions to which they are attached. Consequently, and as discussed below, students' unions are subject to charity law.

Interviews with those involved suggest it was extremely difficult for sabbatical officers to get everything right on encampments. In a few cases, however, the difference they made was enormously positive. Some staff said:

I cannot praise the SU highly enough. They did an astonishing job at understanding the drivers for both sides.

We got really good input, advice and support from the SU. ... They have great staff who are really used to dealing with difficult and sensitive topics.

Where the SU was able to have a positive impact, sabbatical officers tended to play at least one of three complementary roles:

- as a **mediator**, supporting both encampments and institutions to reach a resolution;
- as an **intermediary**, passing 'intelligence' between encampments and institutions; and
- as an **advocate** to make sure the voices of all students are heard.

As discussed in the previous chapters, it was typically difficult for institutions and encampments to meet and, even when they did, to have useful conversations. Having links to both sides, students' unions were sometimes able to form a bridge between the two, facilitating dialogue. Several students' unions released statements respecting the right to peaceful protest, encouraged engagement and offered to mediate.

Some students' union officers who had contacts in the encampments went as far as organising meetings:

50 'There was nothing to do but take action': The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them

They [staff] asked the students' union to facilitate meeting with the university and campers, which we said 'yippee' to, because we had called for them to talk.

Sometimes, SU officers encouraged their institutions to speak to the protestors. As students' unions can claim to represent the student body, this tended to legitimise the encampments and make a meeting more likely:

They [the SU] released statements in solidarity. That gives us the feeling of being supported by an official body.

In other cases, SU buildings provided a neutral space where staff and student protestors could meet.

Another strength of SU mediation was that SU officers could explain students' views in a way that was more palatable to institutional staff. One SU President said:

They [staff] find the students' union more reasonable as we phrase things without the emotion that comes on the ground.

SU officers' relationships with protestors also sometimes meant they could act as an additional source of wellbeing support.

Alongside, or instead of, their role as mediators, SU officers used their relationships with both sides to pass useful information, 'intelligence' or 'tip-offs' between institutions and protestors:

They offered us intelligence, they gave us a handle on what's going on in the camp.

The SU President was good in holding our feet to the fire – it was them who said that the comms [tone shift] landed.

In other cases, institutions asked SU officers to pass on instructions to encampments (although, as discussed below, this sometimes crossed into undermining SU independence).

Similarly, student protestors said they sometimes received useful messages through their students' union:

We got an inside tip, that said that if we didn't announce we were leaving, they would [abandon an agreed review of the encampment's demands] and start disciplinary action.

[The SU President] facilitated meetings with the university, gave us information – this is what the university is thinking, this is what they plan to do next. [They] have that inside knowledge ... can do things for us, facilitating meetings, advocating for us.

Finally, some students' unions played a role in advocating for other students, particularly those whose views might otherwise have not been represented:

You don't need to endorse views to listen to them, to show you care.

One officer where the SU had taken time to work with the Jewish Society said of the encampments:

We had a good relationship with them, they felt they could come to the SU. It was credit to our neutral stance that we could have dialogues without alienating them.

In other cases, SUs were able to take the demands made by encampments, consider them alongside the views and interests of other students and take a more moderate approach with the institution.

There are two reasons, however, that it was very difficult to be effective as a students' union officer. First, given the intense differences of opinion between different parties, it was very common for SUs to be considered partisan – in support of the other side – by either the institution or encampment (or sometimes both). Being perceived in this way severely limited any positive impact the SU might have had.

Encampments often shunned their SU, accusing it of being a 'pawn' or 'tool' of the institution, for various reasons:

The SU is a pawn for the university – their lobbying power is contingent on when they get permission.

[The] University doesn't give them that much power to do things – we put motions through the SU and well, they pass but the university doesn't listen.

Students' unions [are] a facade of representation – the University attempted to put the SU in between students and the University.

[We] can't put our trust in the SU, it has failed time and time again – charity law means the board won't ratify motions.

This demonstrates the importance of having a genuinely independent students' union. It appears there were a number of cases where both institutional and SU staff overstepped this boundary and tried to make SU officers act as an extension of the institution. Such cases make it difficult for the SU, especially sabbatical officers, to be 'honest brokers' who act in favour of students' interests even when the institution finds these uncomfortable.

In two examples of how institutions may have gone too far, one officer said how their students' union executive asked them:

To tell the encampment to stop.

Another officer said:

We were banned from visiting [the encampment].

In another striking case, the 'block grant', SUs' main source of funding provided by institutions, was brought up in a conversation around an SU's role in responding to the encampment.

Other institutions had the issue of SU independence very much in mind:

Both sides were very clear that there's no blurring of the role: we wouldn't lean on them or expect them to do the job. We were doing it in the proper capacity.

Conversely, there were cases where the SU was considered by institutions to have lost legitimacy because its ties to the encampment were too strong. The sabbatical officers interviewed were clear they represented all students, but because of motions passed by members of the SU, many were simultaneously mandated to support the encampment or its demands:

They [the SU] were not hugely [helpful]. They were aligned to the camp and policies.

[They] struggled. [They] don't speak for the whole student body.

In one case, a sabbatical officer described how their university undermined the students' union by telling them:

[Officers are] only elected by x number of students.

There may be truth to these statements. But rather than undermining the positions of elected officers, it might be more productive to work with the SU to create an effective process for dialogue with all groups of students. When the main mechanism for students to contribute to institutional policy does not function properly, it may explain why many students choose to bypass their unions and channel their frustrations through protest.

Sabbatical officers walked a perilously thin tightrope. They were constantly expected to demonstrate their neutrality or, in some cases, explicitly to demonstrate to both the institution and encampment they really sided with them. In some cases, it took only a single perceived breach of trust for the encampment or institution to lose faith in their students' union. Only a few expertly struck a balance:

[They] worked well while trying to tread a careful path – it isn't an SU protest. They were broadly supportive of its aims but kept a level distance.

Students' unions must also do all of the above within the restrictive confines of charity law. SUs must adhere to their charitable objectives: actions that fall outside of these objectives ('*ultra vires*') are not permitted. Most often, the primary objective of a students' union is the advancement of education, so any action undertaken by the students' union should facilitate this goal. This means a campaign on the cost of student living, for example, would be acceptable as there is a clear link to education. But campaigns viewed as overtly political or that are not considered to align with the union's charitable objectives, such as a motion in support of Palestine, would not be.

In practical terms, this may not prohibit students' unions from making statements in support of Palestine, especially if they are doing so because of a motion passed by the student body (as in doing so, they are fulfilling

the educational function of being a forum for debate). The problem begins when a motion resolves the students' union to take a specific action, such as lobbying their institution for investment reform. When resources or staff time are put into undertaking these actions, it is highly likely to be *ultra vires*.

This may explain why students were so frustrated at inaction by students' unions even when a motion had been passed that committed the SU to a stance. From the outside, it appears that the SU executive was simply choosing to ignore the democratic will of the student body. But had the SU executive acted as the motion required them to, they might have been in contravention of charity law, with implications for the students' union as a charity and them personally as the trustees of the charity. Effective communication is needed so students' unions do not appear to be ignoring the student voice.

However, there is a positive side to the fact that motions do not bind union staff. Even being mandated to support Palestine does not, in practice, prevent SU officers from performing all the useful roles described earlier in this chapter. They need not (and in some cases, must not) throw in their lot with encampments and lobby the institution uncritically for protestors' demands. Instead, students' union staff can continue to maintain positive relationships with both sides while seeking to help resolve the dispute.

There is a second reason why elected union officers had such a difficult time. The intensity of the disagreements and the pressure of handling the protests made the experience physically and emotionally exhausting for many SU officers. They had to balance the relationships with both the institution and the encampment. Many sabbatical teams had been navigating this polarising topic since October 2023. The concerning impact on officers' wellbeing was clear in the interviews.

In some cases, students' union officers were suspended, followed by months of investigations and uncertainty. In other instances, officers even resigned. Some incoming officers were still waiting to hear whether they are allowed to take their SU posts part-way through the autumn term.

An officer described how from October 2023:

It was scary – there were a lot of hate crimes against Muslim and Jewish students, which was difficult to support. On one hand, students were creating very safe spaces and then there was this insidious flipside outside of the university. Tweets making it toxic within campus ... The way higher education became a battleground. Students' names were in [national newspapers].

Another officer said how they had been working tirelessly on the inside to mediate between both university and students, but unless they packed it all in and joined the encampment, the protestors were unsatisfied.

Institutions said:

[The SU President] was very helpful but under enormous pressure. Because it's so divisive, it's almost better if the SU stays out of it. It cuts right through and puts people into opposing camps.

The SU was mandated to support the camp. ... They had a pretty horrendous year. They caught the tail end of the Marking and Assessment Boycott. They were tied in helping us, they wanted more of an interlocutor role than they could have because they had the formal role of supporting the protest.

Many institutions said the protestors should have taken their grievances through the students' union. But this may not always be possible, because of the need for the SU to remain neutral and represent all students, and because the issue may be too complex and strongly felt for the SU (and its limited capacity) to handle. SU staff can play a powerful supporting role, but the toll on individuals suggests institutions might be cautious about asking too much from their students' unions. This places some obligations on institutions to handle protests and student grievances themselves.

Government and action by regulators

In interviews university staff were asked whether the actions of the UK government, devolved governments and national regulators had been helpful. A number contrasted the situation with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022:

56 'There was nothing to do but take action': The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them

[In 2022], the UK made a clear pronouncement that Russia has invaded Ukraine, so it was easier to fall in line ... The complexities of [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] and the UK Government's position, made this more difficult.

It's a matter of fact. At the time of the Ukraine invasion, research funders required the withdrawal of funds, so we had to participate in the withdrawal of research. That's not at all true in this case.

Students frequently highlighted this apparent inconsistency in behaviour:

After Russia invaded Ukraine, [my institution] immediately reviewed all investments, gave special access to wellbeing for Ukrainian students and created research partnerships with [Ukrainian universities]. None of this happened with Palestinian universities.

After accusations of being 'hypocrites', several senior staff said that, on reflection, the statements their institutions made on Ukraine were a mistake and the institutions would avoid political statements entirely in the future.

On this issue, institutions were put in a difficult position, caught between a government strongly supportive of Israel's right to self-defence and on-campus protests about the welfare of Palestinians. This is one reason why, though several institutions mentioned being called into Downing Street to discuss antisemitism, none said they had changed their behaviour as a result. Another said of their devolved government:

They've left us to it. That may have been the best thing.

We asked some English universities about the impact of the Office for Students (OfS), particularly in reference to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. The current Labour Government, having paused the implementation of the Act, has since announced it will be implemented but some of its strongest provisions will be repealed.⁴⁰

A representative of the Jewish community described the Conservative Government's 'see-saw' approach to the issue. They felt the Government cared strongly about antisemitism on campus, but found itself in a difficult position because of the Act, which appeared to protect much of the speech Jewish groups were most concerned about.

The consensus was that the Office for Students had missed an opportunity to support institutions, particularly with challenges around difficult language, and perhaps struck the wrong tone with its communications to institutions:

[On language], the line is very unclear. Some guidance from the free speech tsar would have been helpful, such as on the 'river to the sea' chant. At one point the Government was calling on us to clamp down on it, but we thought that would be illegal. There is clearly a mixed message from free speech legislation.

The OfS is not in the slightest bit helpful. Their understanding of the challenges we're facing in universities is utterly banal.

I had expected institutions' obligations under Prevent to come up, as we understand some students have been referred under this legislation; however, it was rarely mentioned either by students or institutions.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

In one interview, a member of staff asked:

Students agree with the sentiment [of the protests] – but who actually wants to uproot their lives for Palestine?

Irrefutably students did, in large numbers, risk uprooting their lives for Palestine. Many, including a number of Palestinian students, undeniably did so because of a passionate belief in the validity of the cause. But many were also motivated by their safety, wellbeing, sense of belonging and ability to make themselves heard. These were protests which were sparked by a global movement but sustained by local ones, supported by networks between institutions and which touched and were touched by local communities. For a conflict taking place so far away, students' reasons for protesting were often very personal.

It is therefore wrong to suppose that everyone in the encampments was a hardened protestor used to disciplinary action or that they all shared a vision for what the encampments should achieve. The encampments captured the imagination of many students because they spoke to issues which matter even to those who know little about foreign policy. On social media, they highlighted alleged injustices against students and staff and framed institutions as hostile actors, which proved compelling at boosting support. But by taking such a strong stance, it became very difficult for the encampments to find common ground with institutions, and negotiations became deeply challenging.

The breadth of their appeal suggests a need for institutions to understand why students protested in such large numbers: why so many feel sufficiently disenfranchised by institutional processes to set aside their home luxuries, sleep and, in some cases, physical safety to join the protests. At a minimum, protestors, many of whom are facing great strife in their own lives, should be treated with the same humanity as they would any other member of the institution, if they are indeed a member. This is not easy and may take a great toll on staff and institutional leaders. But when institutions can act in a responsible and considered way, moving past perceived infractions to see the bigger picture, they are more likely to make progress.

Protestors are not without responsibilities. No student should feel unsafe on campus and no one should be able to break codes of conduct with impunity. As the different responses to the Ukrainian and Palestinian crises show, the perception that institutions are behaving inconsistently can put a wrecking ball through university culture. Expectations should be clear and fair, and consistent action should be taken against students who break them, even if doing so is unpopular. This does not mean acting punitively, however, and there is an important balance to strike between protecting freedom of speech and ensuring student wellbeing.

In light of the challenges of acting in this area, and unusually for HEPI, we refrain from making specific recommendations. Instead, we make some suggestions that the various participants involved – institutions, students' unions and the authorities – should consider when developing their responses.

Institutions

At every stage, the response should be guided by the four principles identified previously mentioned:

- (1) protecting the freedom of students and staff to express themselves;
- (2) protecting student and staff wellbeing and safety;
- (3) preventing disruption to the proper functioning of the institution; and
- (4) ensuring students' genuine concerns are represented and, if appropriate, acted on by university leadership.

The first decision to make is whether to allow an encampment to remain. This should depend on whether the institution can continue to ensure student and staff safety and the functioning of the institution – principles (2) and (3) – with an encampment on site. If the encampment does remain, institutions may benefit from taking the following steps:

- In the first hours of the encampment's formation, building a working relationship with members of the encampment, perhaps by having senior staff visit the encampment in person. This may facilitate communication and help senior staff protect protestors' wellbeing.
- Setting clear expectations of protestors and explaining the consequences of breaches of codes of conduct, including outlining

disciplinary processes, particularly because many students may not have protested before.

- Showing due concern for student wellbeing, ensuring they have access to basic facilities and implementing a process so students with wellbeing concerns have a confidential, trusted place to air them.
- Establishing robust communication processes with Jewish students and staff and other groups which may be significantly affected, noting the need to avoid placing undue burden on individuals.
- Taking steps to prevent 'externals' from joining the encampment, including requiring externals to leave, though this may be difficult to enforce.

Institutions should carefully consider how to communicate with the community about the encampment. Particularly effective communication may be compassionate but firm, reinforcing the requirement for protest to be peaceful and students to meet expectations of conduct, but demonstrating genuine concern for protestors' and others' wellbeing. For some institutions, this might mean adopting a warmer tone than previously. The tone might be achieved by having students, such as sabbatical officers, review statements before they are published.

Institutions should then consider whether and how to engage with protestors. Such engagement should be viewed not as negotiations but as listening exercises, an instance of the right every student should have to give their view on the direction of their institution. The students' union may usually be the most appropriate forum for any student, including members of an encampment, to share their views. However, as discussed elsewhere, there are good reasons to believe the students' union may lack the capacity or working relationship with the encampment and institution to play this role. If so, it may be necessary to find an alternative forum, including conversations with senior staff directly, and no student group with a material interest should be privileged above others.

Such engagement is not without risk for staff. However, it may also serve an important purpose for both sides. For encampments, it is an opportunity to make what may be legitimate and important criticisms of the running of an institution and to voice wellbeing concerns. For

institutions, it is a chance to understand students' underlying motivations for protesting and therefore what actions the institution might reasonably take to bring the encampment to an end. It is also a chance to consider the validity and practicability of protestors' criticisms. Importantly, it is also a chance for protestors to be and feel listened to. These talks may be difficult but represent powerful opportunities for institutions to rebuild relations with disenfranchised students.

Alongside any engagement, institutions should consider how to respond to violations of codes of conduct. Some institutions deployed formal or informal 'amnesties' and did not take disciplinary action, but there is a concern such a stance sends the message that future protestors can act with impunity, with serious consequences for affected students and staff. When disciplinary action is difficult – for example, when protestors cannot be identified – or the encampment overall makes it impossible to protect student and staff wellbeing or the functioning of the institution, legal action may be appropriate as a last resort. Each institution must set its own standard for what constitutes 'significant' disruption, but as protests are intended to disrupt, some might be tolerated. Regardless, even in the process of launching disciplinary or legal action, institutions should seek to support student wellbeing and consider carefully the potential harms to students of related decisions, such as passing on legal costs.

This research suggests the students' union is likely to be more effective in its role of representing the student voice if it is allowed to act independently.⁴¹ In the short term, institutions might benefit from purposefully engaging with students' union officers, who have their own political mandates and may be better in touch with the mood among students. In the long term, institutions should support the SU in building strong processes for listening to students and establish a strong relationship with each cohort of sabbatical officers.

Throughout, institutions should canvas a range of views and support the wellbeing of all groups who may be affected.

Students' unions

In Chapter 3, it was noted students' unions have the potential to play three useful roles:

- (1) mediators, supporting both encampments and institutions to reach a resolution;
- (2) intermediaries, passing 'intelligence' between encampments and institutions; and
- (3) advocates, making sure the voices of all students are heard.

Students' unions must be a place where students can have conversations on these issues. The topic of Palestine is not new to students' unions: students have and continue to pass motions to mandate their unions to act (see Appendix B). These motions are an important expression of the student voice, but SUs should also create spaces to engage with the full breadth of student opinion.

To be effective mediators and intermediaries, SUs must maintain functional working relationships with both institutions and protestors. This is a narrow line to walk. The following strategies may support SUs to do so:

- Engaging at every stage with the full range and complexity of student views.
- Adopting a careful communications strategy, noting concern for student wellbeing and an understanding of the positions of different groups, while not rushing to take a strong stance.
- When making statements or hosting discussions with students, clearly explaining the constraints imposed on them by charity law – not that they cannot act politically, but that they usually cannot commit resources to motions that do not further their charitable objectives, to manage students' expectations effectively.
- Distinguishing between the collective position of the students' union on the one hand and the stances of individual elected officers on the other, so elected officers can remain true to their own views and the mandate they were elected on, while allowing the students' union to remain apolitical, follow charity law and be representative of the wider student body.

Government and national regulators

In England, there remains a lack of clarity about the language students can and cannot use and institutions' roles in acting on this language. Government pronouncements on this issue, especially when they are

on dubious legal footing, are likely to be unhelpful. In implementing the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, the Department for Education and the Office for Students should consider its likely impact on student protests and contentious debates on campus and ensure it serves to create spaces for constructive dialogue among those with opposing views.

Staff

Though this may only reflect the actions of a minority, reports that small numbers of staff joined encampments to push their own agendas are concerning. By adding new demands to encampments' already long lists, students' concerns may be crowded out, making it less likely they can reach a consensus with institutions and possibly prolonging encampments, with implications for those students involved. Staff, particularly those with a pastoral role, should also consider whether they can fulfil their responsibilities to support all their students if they have joined an encampment. These considerations must be carefully balanced with the right of staff to express their own viewpoints.

Protestors

It is not the purpose of this report to give formal recommendations to those who would join encampments. Students watching the scenes unfold in Israel and Gaza made sacrifices to create and join encampments. Their right to peaceful protest is important and it is recognised that with protest comes some disruption. Yet those encamping are urged to consider both institutional codes of conduct and the impact of disruption on other individuals throughout any future protest. Anyone struggling with their wellbeing is encouraged to reach out to their institution's wellbeing services or local support services, if they feel comfortable doing so.⁴²

Appendix A: List of institutions that had an encampment

- University of Aberdeen
- University of the Arts London
- Aston University
- Bangor University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- Cardiff University
- Durham University
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Exeter
- Falmouth University
- Goldsmiths University of London
- Imperial College London
- University of Kent
- King's College London
- University of Lancaster
- University of Leeds
- University of Leicester
- University of Lincoln
- University of Liverpool
- London School of Economics (LSE)
- University of Manchester

- University of Newcastle
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- University of Portsmouth
- Queen Mary University of London
- University of Reading
- School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS University of London)
- University of Sheffield
- Swansea University
- University of Sussex
- University College London (UCL)
- University of Warwick
- University of York

Appendix B: Motions passed by students' unions at institutions with an encampment

This is a list of motions related to the protests passed by the 36 students' unions in Appendix A in the 2023/24 academic year. There may have been others where the websites were not accessible to the public or not updated with recent motions.

- Israel-Palestine Ceasefire Motion (Aberdeen SU).⁴³
- Demonstrating Solidarity with Palestinian Students and Community for Aston (Aston SU).⁴⁴
- Bangor University Should Divest From Companies Profiting From The Genocide Of The Palestinian People (Bangor SU).⁴⁵
- The Students Union Should Not Partner With Companies On The BDS List (Bangor SU).⁴⁶
- Arms Trade Policy (Birmingham Guild TBC).⁴⁷
- Support ongoing climate campaigns working to cut all ties between Cambridge University and the fossil fuel industry (Cambridge SU).⁴⁸
- Ceasefire Now (Cardiff SU).⁴⁹
- Solidarity with Palestine (Durham SU).⁵⁰
- University to divest from and cut research ties with contentious companies (Edinburgh Students' Association).⁵¹
- No to occupation! No to imperialism! Solidarity with Palestinian youth and workers! (Falmouth & Exeter SU).⁵²
- Motion on Solidarity with Palestine (Goldsmiths SU).⁵³
- The impact of the ongoing conflict in Israel-Palestine on Lancaster students (Lancaster SU).⁵⁴
- Should LUU further support humanitarian efforts underway in Palestine? (Leeds SU).⁵⁵
- Proposal to support Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions (Leicester SU).⁵⁶
- Should LSESU seek dialogue with LSE Senior Leadership to press for full

and meaningful divestment from fossil fuels and weapons, including indirect investments? (LSE SU).⁵⁷

- Should the SU (Students Union) boycott and divest from Israel? (Manchester SU).⁵⁸
- Motion for a Ceasefire (Newcastle SU).⁵⁹
- 'Should the Students' Union implement the motion "End University of Nottingham Complicity in Israeli War Crimes"?' (Nottingham SU).⁶⁰
- Several Oxford colleges passed motions, including:
 - JCR Statement of Solidarity with the people of Palestine and the Oxford Action For Palestine (OA4P) Encampments
 - St Antony's GCR Motion to call for the resignation of Vice-Chancellor Professor Irene Tracey following the events of 23 May 2024.⁶¹
 - St Antony's GCR Motion in solidarity with Palestinians and those affected by the war in Gaza.⁶²
 - Oriel JCR OA4P Support Motion.⁶³
- Should Students' Union incorporate Apartheid-Off-Campus Week in the Students' Union Liberation Calendar? (Queen Mary SU).⁶⁴
- Should the Students' Union lobby Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) to negotiate with the QMUL Encampment for Palestine and agree to the following demands from the Encampment? (Queen Mary SU).⁶⁵
- Student Union Endorsement of SOAS Liberated Zone Demands (SOAS SU).⁶⁶
- Should the SU lobby the University to divest from unethical banks, including Barclays, which are financially invested in the arms trade, unsustainable, and extractive industries? (Sussex SU).⁶⁷
- Lobby to end UCL's relationship with arms companies (UCL SU).⁶⁸
- Warwick SU to support Muslim, Arab and Palestinian students in face of Islamophobic and racist attack (Warwick SU).⁶⁹
- Warwick against genocide in Gaza (Warwick SU).⁷⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Reuters, *Hamas and Israel: a history of confrontation*, May 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-israel-history-confrontation-2021-05-14/>
- 2 Yolande Knell, Merlyn Thomas and Paul Brown, 'More than 40,000 killed in Gaza, Hamas-run health ministry says', *BBC News*, 15 August 2024 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn49v0nzv3ko>;
Rasha Khatiba, Martin McKee and Salim Yusuf, 'Counting the dead in Gaza: difficult but essential', *The Lancet*, Volume 404, Issue 10449, pp.237–238, 20 July 2024 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01169-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01169-3/fulltext)
- 3 UN News, *ICC issues arrest warrants for Netanyahu, Gallant and Hamas commander*, United Nations, 21 November 2024 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157286>
- 4 United Nations, *Rights expert finds 'reasonable grounds' genocide is being committed in Gaza*, 26 March 2024 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>;
Orhan Coskun, 'Turkey will bid to join ICJ genocide case against Israel, source says', *Reuters*, 7 August 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-will-bid-join-icj-genocide-case-against-israel-source-says-2024-08-07/>;
Steve Holland, 'Biden: What's happening in Gaza is not genocide', *Reuters*, 20 May 2024 <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-whats-happening-gaza-is-not-genocide-2024-05-20/>
- 5 David Gritten, 'Gaza ceasefire reached by Israel and Hamas', *BBC News*, 15 January 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly9vx3d0j3o>
- 6 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Dame Barbara Woodward DCMG OBE, *The UK supports Israel's right to self-defence in line with the UN Charter: UK statement at the UN Security Council*, Gov.uk, October 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-supports-israels-right-to-self-defence-in-line-with-the-un-charter-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>
- 7 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Dame Barbara Woodward DCMG OBE, *The UK calls for an immediate pause in fighting, then progress towards a sustainable ceasefire*, Gov.uk, February 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-calls-for-an-immediate-pause-in-fighting-then-progress-towards-a-sustainable-ceasefire>
- 8 Sam Francis and Henry Zeffman, 'Labour calls for immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza for first time', *BBC News*, February 2024 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68346129>;
'Keir Starmer writes to Labour councillors over Gaza stance', *BBC News*, 19 October 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67144203>
- 9 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, The Rt Hon David Lammy MP, *Foreign Secretary calls for immediate ceasefire in Gaza on first visit to the Middle East*, Gov.uk, 14 July 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-calls-for-immediate-ceasefire-in-gaza-on-first-visit-to-the-middle-east>
- 10 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Department for Business and Trade, The Rt Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP and The Rt Hon David Lammy MP, *UK suspends around 30 arms export licences to Israel for use in Gaza over International Humanitarian Law concerns*, Gov.uk, 2 September 2024 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-suspends-around-30-arms-export-licences-to-israel-for-use-in-gaza-over-international-humanitarian-law-concerns>

- 11 Johanna Alonso, 'More Than 100 Students Arrested at Columbia', *Inside Higher Education*, 18 April 2024 <https://insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2024/04/18/columbia-encampment-cleared-students-arrested-suspended>
- 12 Sam Cabral and Ana Faguy, 'What do pro-Palestinian student protestors at US universities want?', *BBC News*, 3 May 2024 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-68908885>
- 13 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *UN experts deeply concerned over 'scholasticide' in Gaza*, April 2024 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>
- 14 University and College Union, *Your support is needed*, updated 11 October 2024 <https://www.ucu.org.uk/your-support-is-needed>
- 15 Cambridge English Dictionary, *encampment*, 2024 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/encampment>
- 16 United Nations, *The Question of Palestine*, 2024 <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>
Center for Israel Education, *Israel's Declaration of Independence*, 2025 <https://israeled.org/resources/documents/israel-declaration-independence/>
- 17 LSE Solidarity Encampment, *Palestine 1947-today [image 8]*, Instagram, 25 May 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C7ZFRmgo4DE/?img_index=8
- 18 Elliot Burrin and Will Dixon, 'Explained: Why did Durham University postpone the Union's debate on 'Palestinian leadership'', *Palatinate*, <https://www.palatinate.org.uk/explained-why-did-durham-university-postpone-the-unions-debate-on-palestinian-leadership/>; Elliot Burrin and Will Dixon, 'Explained: Why did Durham University postpone the Union's debate on 'Palestinian leadership'', *Palatinate*, June 2024 <https://www.palatinate.org.uk/explained-why-did-durham-university-postpone-the-unions-debate-on-palestinian-leadership/>
Wilf Vall and Omar Burhanuddin, 'Pro-Palestinian students disrupt Peter Thiel talk at Cambridge Union', *Varsity*, May 2024 <https://www.Varsity.co.uk/news/27574>
- 19 Ethan Lierens, *Campus Antisemitism in Britain 2022-24*, Community Security Trust, December 2024 <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2024/12/09/117-increase-in-campus-antisemitic-incidents>
- 20 Community Security Trust, *Antisemitic Incidents Report January-June 2024*, 2024 <https://cst.org.uk/research/cst-publications/antisemitic-incidents-report-january-june-2024>
- 21 Union of Jewish Students, *We've Had Enough*, 2024 <https://www.ujts.org.uk/enough>
- 22 Eleni Courea and Neha Gohil, 'Gove accuses UK university protests of "antisemitism repurposed for Instagram age"', *Guardian*, 21 May 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/21/gove-accuses-uk-university-protests-of-antisemitism-repurposed-for-instagram-age>
- 23 LSE Liberated Zone PS, *LSE Jewish Voices Sign the Open Letter supporting the encampment for divestment*, Instagram, 22 May 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C7RRP_-l-BX/?img_index=1
- 24 Community Security Trust, *Anti-Zionism*, 2025 <https://cst.org.uk/antisemitism/educational-resources/anti-zionism>
- 25 Cambridge Dictionary, *Zionist*, 2024 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/zionist>

70 'There was nothing to do but take action': The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them

David Graham and Jonathan Boyd, *Jews in the UK today*, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, February 2024 <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/jews-uk-today-key-findings-jpr-national-jewish-identity-survey>;

Campaign Against Antisemitism, *Almost 70% of British Jews are hiding their identity and almost half have considered leaving Britain since 7th October*, new CAA polling shows, November 2023 <https://antisemitism.org/almost-70-of-british-jews-are-hiding-their-identity-and-almost-half-have-considered-leaving-britain-since-7th-october-new-caa-polling-shows/>

- 26 Steve Swann & Emily Atkinson, 'Police record rise in religious hate crimes after Israel-Gaza war', *BBC News*, 29 December 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67836607>;
TellMAMA, *Survey of British Muslims After October 7th Shows A Rise in Anti-Muslim Abuse*, 2 August 2024 <https://tellmamauk.org/survey-of-british-muslims-after-october-7th-shows-a-rise-in-anti-muslim-abuse/>
- 27 LSESU Islamic Society, *Exposing Institutional Islamophobia: The relationship between Islamophobia and the Suppression of Palestinian Rights Advocacy at the LSE*, June 2024 <https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/5ec85562-d55c-4da7-a316-eceb6884c9d9-Islamophobia-Report--June-2024--LSESU-Islamic-Society-.pdf>
- 28 QMUL Action For Palestine, *LISTEN TO US*, Instagram, 23 May 2024 https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7Tja_bN_Gz/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==
- 29 Students of Alareer Square, *Onboarding Day*, Instagram, 12 June 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Hyss1Nxb_/?hl=en
- 30 Aston for Palestine, *Arts and Crafts for Palestine*, Instagram, 2 June 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7tI-o5lJ5w/>
- 31 University of Kent PSS, *After 33 Days, We Declare Victory*, Instagram, 13 June 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C8J-Nr_sDok/?img_index=1
- 32 LSE solidarity encampment, *Divestment Referendum Results*, Instagram, 5 June 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C71r2Spq6aK/?hl=en-gb&img_index=1
Cardiff University Staff for Palestine, *Nearly 1,000 Signatures*, Instagram, 23 June 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C8jt3gBluAW/>
- 33 Rameen Siddiqui, *Epistemicide: Intellectual Genocide and Eurocentric Modernity*, Modern Diplomacy, April 2023 <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/04/13/epistemicide-intellectual-genocide-and-eurocentric-modernity/>
- 34 UCL Stands For Justice, Instagram, 16 July 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C9fa2bslGJu/>
- 35 Robert Abrahart and Balwant Kaur, *Does the government have any legal basis for asserting a duty of care to students in higher education under Common Law?*, HEPI Blog, 31 October 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/31/does-the-government-have-any-legal-basis-for-asserting-a-duty-of-care-to-students-in-higher-education-under-common-law/>
- 36 Student Federation for a Liberated Palestine, *Bangor University: Assault & Arrest of Graduate Student*, Instagram, 16 August 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/C-vukQRlK36/?img_index=1
- 37 London School of Economics, *LSE's Response to 'Demands from the Student Voice'*, June 2024 <https://t.co/AaKSzAfOy1>

- 38 Nathan Clarke, 'Birmingham student told to pay "£50k" after university takes court action against her', *Birmingham Live*, 11 July 2024 <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/birmingham-student-told-pay-50k-29523516>
- 39 Union of Jewish Students, *Edward Isaacs' Speech To Downing Street Round-Table 8 May 2024*, 9 May 2024 https://www.ujs.org.uk/edward_isaacs_speech_to_downing_street_round_table_8_may_2024
- 40 Juliette Rowsell, 'Government "to implement" England's campus free speech act', *Times Higher Education*, 15 January 2025 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/government-implement-englands-campus-free-speech-act>
- 41 Michael Natzler, *What is the student voice? 13 essays on how to listen to students and how to act on what they say*, HEPI Report 140, August 2021 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/08/05/what-is-the-student-voice-13-essays-on-how-to-listen-to-students-and-how-to-act-on-what-they-say/>
- 42 Student Minds, *Find Support*, 2024 <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/findsupport.html>
- 43 Aberdeen University Students' Union, *Israel Palestine Ceasefire*, February 2024 <https://www.ausa.org.uk/resources/6045/Israel-Palestine-Ceasefire/>
- 44 Aston Students' Union, *Emergency SU Council - Monday 20th May: Demonstrating Solidarity with Palestine Students*, 20 May 2024 <https://www.astonsu.com/referenda/motion/12/8/>
- 45 Bangor University Students' Union, *Bangor University Should Divest From Companies Profiting From The Genocide Of The Palestinian People*, 2024 <https://www.undebbangor.com/thestudentvoice/bangor-university-should-divest-from-companies-profiting-from-the-genocide-of-the-palestinian-people>
- 46 Bangor University Students' Union, *The Students Union Should Not Partner With Companies On The BDS List*, 2024 <https://www.undebbangor.com/thestudentvoice/the-students-union-should-not-partner-with-companies-on-the-bds-list>
- 47 Guild of Students, *Your Idea: Arms Trade Policy*, April 2024 <https://www.guildofstudents.com/representation/youridea/?idea=532>
- 48 Cambridge SU, *Support ongoing climate campaigns working to cut all ties between Cambridge University and the fossil fuel industry*, November 2023 <https://www.cambridgesu.co.uk/file/19334/Support-ongoing-climate-campaigns-working-to-cut-all-ties-between-Cambridge-University-and-the-fossil-fuel-industry/>
- 49 Cardiff Students' Union, *Annual General Meeting*, 23 November 2023 <https://www.cardiffstudents.com/pageassets/your-voice/democracy/agm/Annual-General-Meeting-Agenda-2023-ENG-with-Amendments.pdf>
- 50 Durham SU, *Solidarity with Palestine*, November 2023 https://assets.prod.unioncloud-internal.com/document/documents/111646/020bcd8c183443c61eee625330b67bd4/Solidarity_with_Palestine_WEB.pdf
- 51 Edinburgh University Students' Association, *How we're supporting student groups campaigning on divestment*, 8 May 2024 <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/newsandblogs/article/supportingstudentcampaigners>; University of Edinburgh Students and Staff Divestment Movement, *Divestment at the University of Edinburgh: Breaking from Balfour's colonial legacy*, Mondoweiss, 16 June 2024 <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/06/divestment-at-the-university-of-edinburgh-breaking-from-balfours-colonial-legacy/>

- 52 Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union, *Student Forum*, The SU, 2024 <https://www.thesu.org.uk/voice/representation/democracy/forum/>
- 53 Goldsmiths SU, *Motion on Solidarity with Palestine* <https://www.goldsmithssu.org/pageassets/activism/democracy/policies/active/Motion-On-Solidarity-with-Palestine.pdf>
- 54 Lancaster SU, *Union Assembly Minutes*, December 2023 https://assets.prod.unioncloud-internal.com/document/documents/117842/04be7850b2453bdce41b2929aa7c2e7b/Union_Assembly_Minutes_05.12.23.pdf
- 55 Leeds University Union, *Better Forums, Summer 2024: Results*, 2024 <https://www.luu.org.uk/news/2024/06/05/better-forums-summer-2024-results/>
- 56 Leicester Union, *Motion for Palestinian Solidarity and to Support BDS (Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions)* <https://www.leicesterunion.com/pageassets/voice/democracy/council/policies/BDS-Amended-Proposal-2.pdf>
- 57 LSE Students' Union, *Should LSESU seek dialogue with LSE senior leadership to press for full and meaningful divestment from fossil fuels and weapons, including indirect investments? - The 'Yes' case*, June 2024 <https://www.lsesu.com/referenda/case/51/F/>
- 58 Students' Union University of Manchester, *Student vote on BDS Policy Suggestion: Outcome and next steps*, May 2024 <https://manchesterstudentsunion.com/news/article/outcome-of-student-vote-on-bds-suggestion>
- 59 Newcastle University Students' Union, *NUSU Statement: Call For A Ceasefire In Gaza*, April 2024 <https://nusu.co.uk/news/article/statement-mar24>
- 60 University of Nottingham Students' Union, *UoNSU Update on recent Policy and Trustee Board Decision*, July 2024 <https://su.nottingham.ac.uk/news/article/trustee-board-decision>
- 61 Oxford SU, *St Hugh's JCR - JCR Statement of Solidarity with the people of Palestine and the Oxford Action For Palestine (OA4P) Encampments*, 2024 <https://www.oxfordsu.org/referenda/motion/512/868/>
- 62 St Antony's GCR, *Motion to call for the resignation of Vice-Chancellor Irene Tracey following the events of May 23rd 2024*, Oxford SU, June 2024 <https://www.oxfordsu.org/referenda/motion/526/895/>
- 63 Oriel JCR, *OA4P Support Motion*, June 2024 <https://www.oxfordsu.org/referenda/motion/530/902/>
- 64 Queen Mary Students' Union, *Annual Student Meeting*, 2024 <https://www.qmsu.org/pageassets/studentmeeting/Motion-1-revised.pdf>
- 65 Queen Mary Students' Union, *Motion-5-Amended* <https://www.qmsu.org/pageassets/studentmeeting/Motion-5-Amended.pdf>
- 66 <https://soasunion.org/pageassets/agm/AGM-Motions-Reviewed-2.pdf>
- 67 SOAS Students' Union, *Annual General Meeting 2024*, 2024 <https://sussexstudent.com/news/article/ref-spring-2024-results>
- 68 Students' Union UCL, *Lobby to end UCL's relationship with arms companies*, June 2024 <https://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up2307/lobby-to-end-ucls-relationship-with-arms-companies>

- 69 Warwick SU, *Warwick SU to support Muslim, Arab and Palestinian students in face of Islamophobic and racist attacks*, 2024 <https://www.warwicksu.com/referenda/motion/133/388/>
- 70 Warwick SU, *Warwick against genocide in Gaza*, 2024 <https://www.warwicksu.com/referenda/motion/133/389/>

President

Bahram Bekhradnia

Trustees

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone (Chair)

Mary Curnock Cook CBE

Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow

Professor Sir Chris Husbands

Professor Nick Pearce

Director

Nick Hillman

Advisory Board

Alison Allden OBE

Professor Nishan Canagarajah

Anne-Marie Canning MBE

Andy Forbes

Professor Julie Sanders

Professor Iyiola Solanke

Professor David Sweeney CBE

Partners

Advance HE

Ellucian

Elsevier

GatenbySanderson

iQ Student Accommodation

Instructure

Interpath

Jisc

Kaplan

Kortext

Lloyds Bank

Mills & Reeve LLP

QS Quacquarelli Symonds

Research England

Studiosity

Taylor & Francis

Technology1

Times Higher Education

Unite Students

UPP Foundation

This report investigates the establishment of pro-Palestinian protest encampments at 36 UK universities during the 2023/24 academic year, analysing their motivations, structure and impact and the responses to them by institutions and students' unions. It provides a detailed framework for managing such protests in future, balancing freedom of speech, student wellbeing and the well-functioning of institutions.



Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

January 2025 978-1-915744-39-5

Higher Education Policy Institute

99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX

www.hepi.ac.uk

Printed by BCQ, Buckingham

Typesetting: Steve Billington, www.jarmanassociates.co.uk