



Arms and the academy

As public funding dwindles, universities appear to be turning to an unlikely source for money - arms companies. Mike Lewis, a member of the Campaign Against Arms Trade, questions the ethics behind these deals

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Uniting corporate profit and academic endeavour is an increasingly troubling issue for UK universities. It has some surprising supporters. When in April 2002 Nelson Mandela opened a lecture theatre at Oxford's new Said Business School he hailed the collaboration between universities and the corporate world. Bringing together academic research and the practice of the world of business, work, entrepreneurship and development, he argued, would benignly steer both global corporate power and academic inquiry towards health, education and peace. He drew moving parallels with the peaceful ending of apartheid, when "rivers of blood" were avoided through international pressure from politicians, students and business alike.

A new study suggests that rivers of blood are sometimes a more apposite description of the relationship between business and academia. Using the new Freedom of Information Act, The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) has found that 67 British universities and university colleges hold significant investments in the UK's major arms companies. As public funding dwindles, a group of institutions historically committed to internationalism and human progress have been forced into bed with companies whose profits rest upon sustaining international tension and equipping human rights abusers. Some 23 of the 30 universities with medical schools, for instance, invest in major arms exporters - a trade that an editorial in the leading medical journal *The Lancet* last month argued "threaten[s] human, and especially civilian, health and well-being." Liverpool University, whose law school runs a major international human rights programme, holds shares worth more than £1.4m in BAE Systems, a company that sold Hawk jets to Indonesia used in its 2003 assault on Aceh; and supplied fighter jet parts to Zimbabwe despite the country's involvement in the bloody Congo conflict.

But as well as traditional practices of endowment and investment, universities have found a new avenue to corporate wealth by commercialising research itself. Many of the largest university arms investors also work with the companies on campus through a swathe of new research partnerships. Desperately needed funding comes in return for departments becoming outsourced research facilities for private companies. As the ethics watchdog Scientists for Global Responsibility has shown, the arms industry has led the field here: from the guided weapons technology centres at Cranfield University and Imperial College, London, part-funded by arms company Qinetiq; to the 20 university technology centres bankrolled by military aerospace giant Rolls-Royce. Tellingly, only one non-academic will sit on the main engineering panel of the forthcoming research assessment exercise: an executive from BAE Systems.

Of course, some researchers will be entirely happy to contribute to military technology. But regardless of their views on particular products, commercialising entire departments and directing their output towards specific industries fundamentally reduces the ability of researchers to make moral choices about their work, especially at the start of their careers. Socially-concerned postgraduates may soon have to choose between following their consciences or joining the best-funded, most prestigious projects and departments.

The yawning funding gap that forces universities to sign away their souls is not inevitable. Ironically, arms companies are subsidised by public money to the tune of £890m annually - close to the £950m the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates will be raised each year by top-up fees. Public money that apparently cannot be found for education is stumped up for weapons, while government schemes encourage universities to provide cheap research facilities for these already over-protected companies.

That the deepening relationship between arms and the academy has gone substantially unchallenged marks a failure of university democracy. Financial decisions in most modern universities are isolated from the input of students and staff. Professionalised administrators often take even major strategic and research decisions independently of academics. Essential though this management expertise is, "lay" university members deserve a say over their institutions' financial and academic ties. And campus campaigns demanding such input should not be deterred by crackdowns on dissent, like Lancaster University's prosecution last month of six students who protested peacefully at a "corporate venturing" conference convened to encourage research partnerships with BAE Systems and other such companies (CAAT's investigations found that Lancaster holds shares in four arms companies, including BAE).

The biggest obstacle to cleaning up this web of ethically questionable connections is its sheer enormity. We need look no further than the Said Business School, emblematic of academia's new rapprochement with the business world. Who introduced Nelson Mandela that April day in Oxford? Wafic Said, the school's eponymous billionaire benefactor, endower of a chair in globalisation and ethics - and repeatedly reported as a key broker of the UK's largest ever weapons sale, the multibillion Al Yamamah arms deal with Saudi Arabia. It's high time we made ethics count in the commercialised academy.

- Mike Lewis is a member of the Campaign Against Arms Trade

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