

Australian Catholic University

Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights

Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities

December 2024

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Australian Catholic University (ACU) acknowledges the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights regarding its inquiry into antisemitism at Australian universities.

ACU is a national, publicly-funded Catholic university with campuses in three states and one territory, and an overseas campus in Rome, Italy. The University has around 35,000 students and over 2,300 staff, and is open to people of all faiths and none.¹

As an institution deeply rooted in its Catholic mission and dedicated to upholding the dignity of the human person and fostering the common good, ACU unequivocally condemns all forms of antisemitism as well as any other form of racism, harassment, discrimination or intimidation on any of its campuses.

The University is committed to inclusivity and support for all individuals, regardless of their faith or tradition. As a university of service, an ACU education builds on the Catholic understanding of faith and reason working together in pursuit of knowledge and promotion of human dignity and the common good.² A distinct feature of a university education at ACU is the embedding of a Core Curriculum³ in ACU undergraduate courses, which acknowledges that education is more than just a degree – it is about developing the whole person and encouraging critical engagement with society for the promotion of human dignity and the common good.

ACU's engagement with the broader community includes ties with the Jewish community in Australia, encompassing initiatives such as the Ancient Israel Program, and partnerships with the Sydney Jewish Museum, Australian Friends of Hebrew University, Israel Museum Jerusalem, and Israel Antiquities Authority. These initiatives have provided exciting new study opportunities to ACU students and have enriched the intellectual and academic climate of the university as a whole.

Since the escalation of violence in Israel and Gaza, ACU has actively monitored its campuses for any signs of harassment or threats towards students and staff. The University has communicated its condemnation of violence, hate, and prejudice in all forms, while reinforcing available support services.

During May-June 2024, the sector's regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), sought fortnightly reports from all Australian universities on any complaints concerning student or staff conduct relating to academic freedom and freedom of speech or protest action, or related allegations of misconduct concerning the Middle East conflict on university campuses. ACU participated in this monitoring exercise and received no report of any such harassment or threats occurring towards students or staff, nor any encampments related to the conflict on its campuses.

Nevertheless, the University remains vigilant in ensuring its campuses are safe, welcoming and inclusive for all. The University will act swiftly and decisively against any threats to student or staff safety and welfare, supported by a comprehensive policy framework which includes staff and student codes of conduct, and complaints procedures and policies. In light of increased sector monitoring and the heightened safety concerns in Australian

¹ Student numbers refer to headcount figures while staff numbers refer to full-time equivalent (FTE).

² ACU. Our Values. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/mission-identity-and-values/our-values>

³ ACU. Core Curriculum. <https://www.acu.edu.au/study-at-acu/find-a-course/core-curriculum>

universities, ACU examined its policies to ensure effective responses to any incidents of alleged antisemitism, providing clear guidance for staff, students, and management on addressing any instances of antisemitic conduct, activities, communications or statements, should they arise.

Additionally, a range of measures and support services are in place to ensure students and staff have options to seek immediate assistance and report concerning behaviours that threaten safety and welfare. These include:

AskACU

AskACU centres provide support to students in person at visible and accessible AskACU spaces on each campus, online, via chat or SMS. Staff can triage questions and concerns to support networks within ACU. AskACU staff are equipped and trained to escalate urgent matters where necessary regardless of whether these matters occur on campus or are reported online, support students through more general non-urgent matters, and provide referrals or additional support.

Student Advocacy Service

Student Advocacy is an independent service for students. They support students who have experienced harassment and discrimination among other behaviours by helping them understand their rights to complain and notify ACU of what they have experienced.

Counselling and pastoral support

The ACU Counselling Service supports students who are experiencing a wide range of issues impacting on a student's wellbeing, including personal, study or mental health concerns. ACU Counsellors provide free and confidential appointments face to face, online, or via video. Students who may be distressed by recent events can access ACU Counselling and if necessary be referred on for additional support via external support services.

ACU students can also access a dedicated 24-hour Mental Health Support Line.

Additionally, ACU provides a specialised support service for staff members. The Employee Assistance Program provides a 24/7 service, rapid response times, emergency telephone counselling, a free-call communications network, and mental health online resources to support staff wellbeing. All staff members can access the program free of charge.

More broadly, ACU's campus ministry teams work across all campuses to support an inclusive university community and look after the pastoral needs and spiritual wellbeing of students and staff of all faiths or none.

As part of its commitment to support diversity and inclusion, ACU actively promotes interfaith dialogue, including through its parliamentary interfaith breakfasts⁴, and the Inter-religious Dialogue Network⁵, amongst others. Since 2014, ACU has hosted eight parliamentary interfaith breakfasts, facilitating respectful dialogue among

⁴ ACU. Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfasts. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/government-and-public-policy/parliamentary-interfaith-breakfasts>

⁵ ACU. Inter-religious Dialogue Network. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/inter-religious-dialogue-network>

parliamentarians and leaders of many faith communities. ACU's *Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry* also fosters research and scholarship in religion, philosophy, and history.

Concluding Remarks

ACU notes TEQSA is developing Sector Guidance and a Statement of Regulatory Expectations for Australian higher education providers to enhance the safety of students and staff across all Australian university campuses. Furthermore, legislation has recently been passed by Parliament to establish a National Student Ombudsman, which would include powers to investigate complaints regarding antisemitism and any other form of racism or discrimination. ACU looks forward to seeing the progression of these initiatives, in consultation with the sector, which may serve to strengthen efforts across the sector to assure the safety and wellbeing of students and staff, and ensure all have positive higher education experiences.