

Briefing – Lobby to end UCL’s relationship with arms companies

Date: May 2024

Audience: Union Executive

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

UCL’s current relationships with arms companies (companies whose main activity is the development, production or sale of weapons) is through research partnerships, sponsorship of academic departments/centres and advisory boards.

UCL has previously cited BAE Systems as a sponsor for the UCL Centre for Ethics and Law (the page no longer exists), and currently has the Chief Counsel, Compliance and Regulation at BAE Systems on their Advisory Panel.¹

Other BAE Systems senior leaders are also present on the Industry Advisory Board of the UCL Centre for Systems Engineering, whose main role is to advise the department on how well the content in the education and training activities matches with the expectations and needs of industry.²

When looking at UCL’s current research-related relationships with arms companies, Demilitarise Education hosts the ‘University & Arms Database’ which brings together information regarding university research with the defence industry. According to this database, UCL has at least four current research partnerships with defence companies.³

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In the Provost’s update in May 2024, he highlighted that UCL staff and students ‘*should be free to conduct research within the law on any subject that they choose, and in collaboration with anyone operating in any country that is not the subject of UK sanctions*’.⁶ In the same update, the Provost outlined the different procedures that research on ‘dual use’ goods, services or technologies (research involving or generating

¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ethics-law/people>

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/systems-engineering/people/industrial-advisory-board>

³ <https://ded1.co/data/university/116/research>

⁴ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ethics-law/people>

⁵ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/systems-engineering/people/industrial-advisory-board>

⁶ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/may/provosts-update-understanding-our-approach-ethical-research-and-investment>

materials, methods, technologies or knowledge that has potential to harm humans, animals or the environment) goes through for approval.

Through UCL's Code of Conduct for Research, the university requires researchers to 'be aware of and follow all the legal and ethical requirements relevant to the area of research'.⁷ Any research that involves human participants or the collection and/or use of their data requires ethical approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee.⁸ 'Dual use' research is considered 'Sensitive Research' and those involved in it have a duty to carefully consider the risks and consequences associated with the research before it is undertaken.⁹

UCL Council (the most senior decision-making body at the university) approved the Policy for Socially Responsible Investment in 2018, with it coming into effect in December 2019.¹⁰ This policy is used to inform the investment managers on how UCL defines responsible investment, setting out that the 'University will adopt investment strategies that seek to minimise and ideally eliminate irresponsible corporate behaviour'. There is a focus on environmental sustainability and a commitment to not invest in companies involved in the production and manufacture of tobacco. The policy asserts that companies engaged in 'armament sales to military regimes' is not acceptable but makes no other mention of the sales of arms or arms companies. As of 2023/23, UCL does not invest in any arms companies.¹¹

What would change if the policy was successful?

UCL would publish the details of their relationship with arms companies and end existing relationships with arms companies.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

Universities have held relationships with arms companies and have undertaken weapons research since the First World War, for example Imperial College London was once a focal point for chemical weapons research.¹² Whilst the nature of this type of research has changed over the years, it is still the case that research undertaken at universities across the UK is used to develop current and future weapons technologies.

Since 2013, universities in the UK have received at least £190 million in research funding from arms companies.¹³ These companies have been accused of failing to undertake adequate human rights due diligence despite war crimes risk.¹⁴

Whilst there have been several universities who have announced divestment from arms companies (removing

⁷ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/ucl-code-conduct-research/your-responsibilities/individual-responsibilities>

⁸ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research-ethics/do-i-need-ethical-approval>

⁹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/sensitive-research>

¹⁰ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/sites/finance/files/socially-responsible-investment-policy.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/home/annual-report-financial-statements-and-investment-portfolios>

¹² <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/history/college-developments/>, <https://caat.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/02/CAAT-Weaponising-Universities-WEB-1.pdf>

¹³ <https://aoav.org.uk/2021/uk-universities-funded-190-million-from-major-arms-manufacturers-since-2013/>

¹⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/arms-companies-are-washing-their-hands-their-responsibilities-new-report>

any investment in arms companies), there are no UK universities who have committed to sever all ties with arms companies.¹⁵

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

There could be legal implications in relation to the impact on academic freedom. While ‘dual use’ research with national security implications is legally restricted, research that can be utilised in defence and weapons is still legal in the UK. Given the current regulatory focus on academic freedom, any move to restrict the types of legal research undertaken at a university may be extremely limited in scope.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

In 2021, a similar policy was ratified at Union Executive which lapsed on 11/10/2023.¹⁶

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

Yes. If this policy was successful, there would be a reduction in research funding and some PhD projects would have to end prematurely.

Are there any sustainability implications to this policy proposal?

N/A

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this policy proposal?

N/A

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The relevant sabbatical officers would meet with relevant UCL senior leaders to discuss the transparent disclosure of UCL’s relationship with arms companies, how to share the information with the wider UCL community, and how to end existing relationships with arms companies.

¹⁵ <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/news/2024/responsible-investment/>, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/27608>

¹⁶ <https://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up2101/lobby-to-end-ucls-relationship-with-arms-companies>