

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel

Jeremy Leibler, President
Ginette Searle, CEO
Dr Bren Carlill, Director of Public Affairs

Executive Summary

This submission focuses on student wellbeing. A recent survey commissioned by the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) reveals that two-thirds of Australian Jewish university students have experienced antisemitism on campus. However, 85 per cent of students did not submit a complaint after the most impactful incident in the last 12 months. Their reasons for not doing so include that they didn't think it would make a difference, that they didn't think the university would take it seriously, that the complaints process was too complex, that the complaint wouldn't be kept confidential, that it would affect their grades, or that they wouldn't be believed.¹

Submitting a complaint about discrimination should be a last resort. The worrying levels of antisemitism on campus requires efforts to make relevant stakeholders—though, in particular, complaints-handling officials—aware of how modern antisemitism manifests. It is vital that any discussion about antisemitism on campus by universities or other stakeholders includes engagement with the elected, representative roof bodies of the Australian Jewish community.

We urge the Panel to consider:

- How universities should seek out or otherwise understand student experiences and concerns about discrimination, given that students are not making official complaints;
- A thorough examination of university complaints procedures to determine how to improve confidence in making complaints among students;
- Whether a national model should be created to standardise how complaints about discrimination are handled;
- Establishing an oversight body, such as an ombudsman, to whom students unsatisfied with the way their university handled a complaint can turn;
- Including education about modern antisemitism at universities and, in particular, for complaints-handling officials, in any national student charter the Panel ultimately recommends;
- Recommending that all universities adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism; and
- Discussing how to tackle antisemitism on campus with elected, representative roof bodies of the Australian Jewish community, such as the Australasian Union of Jewish Students and the Zionist Federation of Australia

¹ The full list of reasons can be found in the Jewish University Experience Survey report, p. 10.

REPRESENTATION. ADVOCACY. CONNECTION.

• **President** Jeremy Leibler • **Chief Executive Officer** Ginette Searle • Israel Director Moriah Ben-David

• **Constituent Organisations State Zionist Councils of:** ACT • New South Wales • Queensland • South Australia • Victoria • Western Australia

• **Affiliated Organisations:** Ameinu • ARZA • Australian Forum of Russian Jewry • Australasian Union of Jewish Students • Australian Zionist Youth Council • Friends of Likud • Jewish National Fund Australia
• Maccabi Australia • Mercaz Masorti Australasia • Mizrahi Organisation • National Council of Jewish Women Australia • Union for Progressive Judaism • United Israel Appeal Australia
• Women's International Zionist Organisation •

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel. The Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) is an elected, representative roof body of the Australian Jewish community. This submission will focus on student wellbeing.

The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report highlighted, among many other issues, the following areas for further consideration:

Strengthening institutional governance:

- Improving student wellbeing and safety, including empowering students on matters that affect them
- considering development of a national student charter to ensure a consistent national approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of students²

The Interim Report also noted higher education institutions’

obligation to students to foster belonging, social inclusion and cohesion within the institution... However, the Review has heard [that] significant issues of student safety on campus, mental health and a lack of culturally safe spaces continue to corrode relationships between students and their institutions.³

The Interim Report’s potential proposals for consideration for the Final Report included:

- developing a national student charter, in collaboration with domestic and international students, ensuring a national commitment and consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students
- strengthening the role for the Commonwealth Ombudsman in student complaints, for both international and domestic students⁴

The ZFA supports these proposals, but also believes the Panel should explore the evidence of significant problems that exist in universities’ complaints procedures. ZFA research shows that Jewish students do not make complaints about antisemitism on campus, and believes that the reasons for this are likely replicated across other minority groups and the student body more generally.

A survey of Australia’s Jewish university students

The ZFA, with the collaboration of the Australasian Union of Jewish Students, and the financial assistance of the Scanlon Foundation, commissioned the Social Research Centre to carry out a nationwide survey of Jewish university students. The survey sought to understand:

- The levels of antisemitism experienced by Australian Jewish tertiary students on campus;
- Whether Jewish students are modifying their behaviour to avoid antisemitism on campus; and
- Whether Jewish students are submitting complaints about antisemitism on campus and, if not, why not.

A summary of the survey results, as well as the survey report, is attached to this submission.

² Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, p. 22

³ Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, p. 132

⁴ Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, p. 138

The results were very concerning:

- Close to two-thirds of Jewish students have experienced antisemitism on campus;
- Over half have hidden their Jewish identity in order to avoid antisemitism. (This figure rises to two-thirds among those who have experienced antisemitism on campus, showing that experiencing such discrimination has long-term consequences);
- One-in-five Jewish students have avoided campus altogether in order to avoid antisemitic people or incidents. (Among female students, this figure rises to one-in-four);
- Students who, by clothing or jewellery, are identifiably Jewish experience higher levels of antisemitism than those who aren't; and
- Both staff and students participated in antisemitic incidents. When considering the most impactful incident that happened to them in the last 12 months, 28 per cent of respondents reported that staff participated in the incident. In those incidents where staff were present but not involved, in a worrying 78 per cent of occasions, respondents reported that staff ignored the antisemitic behaviour.

Australian Jewish University Experience Survey

Key results



64%

ALMOST TWO-THIRDS OF JEWISH
STUDENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED
ANTISEMITISM AT UNIVERSITY.

The survey, carried out in March and April this year, had 563 valid respondents. Of these, 429 are current students, and 134 had finished university within the last five years. The 2021 census recorded 6217 Jewish tertiary students in Australia.⁵ This means the number of current students that completed the survey is approximately equivalent to seven per cent of the total current Jewish tertiary student population, or one-in-14 Jewish students.

⁵ Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

University complaints processes

Of particular relevance to the Panel are the survey responses regarding university complaints handling.

Respondents who reported experiencing antisemitism at university in the last 12 months were asked to consider the most impactful incident in that 12-month period. They were asked a series of questions about it.

They were asked whether they submitted a complaint. Eighty-five per cent of respondents said no. This evidence aligns with our experiences in discussing antisemitism with university administrations. Before this survey was commissioned, we approached numerous universities with our concerns about antisemitism on campus. The universities would, of course, condemn antisemitism and all other forms of discrimination, and then suggest that they don't have an antisemitism problem on their campus, as evidenced by the lack of complaints made by Jewish students.

We urge the Panel to consider:

- How universities should seek out or otherwise understand student experiences and concerns about discrimination, given that students are not making official complaints.

The survey asked respondents who did not submit a complaint after the most impactful antisemitic incident in the last 12 months why they chose not to.

There was a wide variety of reasons. Over half reported that they didn't think it would make a difference, and just less than half that they didn't think the university would take it seriously.

Other reasons included concerns that the complaints process was too hard, that the complaint wouldn't be kept confidential, that it would affect their grades, or that they wouldn't be believed.⁶

This problem is not limited to just one or two universities. The 563 respondents came from 32 different universities (although the top 10 universities, in terms of numbers of respondents, account for 80 per cent of total respondents.)

Among those top 10 universities, in terms of numbers of respondents, the rate of students **not** submitting complaints after the most impactful antisemitic incident in the last 12 months ranged from 70 to 100 per cent.

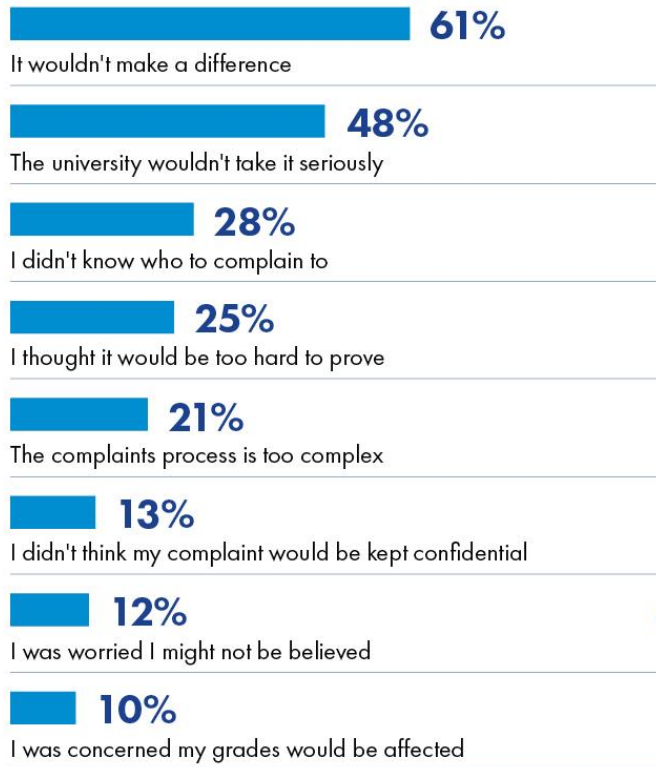
As the Panel noted in its Interim Report, universities have a duty of care for student wellbeing.⁷ The evidence uncovered by the Jewish University Student Experience survey reveals not only that antisemitism is widespread at universities, but also that students are worried that, should they make a complaint, they wouldn't be believed or they might be personally or academically punished for doing so.

Among the 14 per cent of respondents that did submit a complaint after the most impactful incident in the last 12 months, only 14 per cent were satisfied with their university's response.

⁶ The full list of reasons can be found in the Jewish University Experience Survey report, p. 10.

⁷ Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, p. 132

Why didn't you make a complaint?



Finally, the survey asked all respondents whether they had confidence in their university's complaints process. A national average of only 37 per cent of all respondents said they had confidence. However, among those students that have experienced antisemitism on campus, only 26 per cent are confident about making a complaint.

When asked whether they would be more confident about making a complaint if their university adopted a definition of antisemitism, 76 per cent of all respondents said they would be. This result is likely because university staff typically have an incomplete understanding of how modern antisemitism manifests. Adopting a definition of antisemitism (that is accepted by the Jewish community) would increase Jewish students' confidence that they are being listened to. This would, consequentially, increase Jewish student confidence in university complaints handling procedures.

Notwithstanding that universities should also develop ways to hear student concerns outside of the complaints procedures, students won't make complaints if they have no confidence in the complaints-handling process.

We urge the Panel to consider:

- A thorough examination of university complaints procedures to determine how to improve confidence in making complaints among students;
- Whether a national model should be created to standardise how complaints about discrimination are handled; and
- Establishing an oversight body, such as an ombudsman, to whom students unsatisfied with the way their university handled a complaint can turn.

Making campuses a safe space

Submitting an official complaint about an antisemitic incident on campus should be a last resort. The levels of antisemitism at universities, and the disturbing range of how that antisemitism affects Jewish students (such as Holocaust denial or minimisation; tropes about Jewish greed or power; being involuntarily singled out or excluded over issues relating to Israel; or discrimination based on religion or race), reflects very poorly on many universities.

It is clear that, in their efforts to make universities a safe and welcoming space for ethnic and religious minorities, universities are failing Jewish students. At the very least, universities ought to implement educational programs as to the nature of modern antisemitism and how it manifests. Such educational programs are particularly important for those university officials who handle student complaints. If these officials have an incomplete understanding of modern antisemitism, they will not be able to adequately handle student complaints. The Zionist Federation of Australia (being an elected, representative roof body of the Australian Jewish community), along with the Australasian Union of Jewish Students, endorses the internationally-recognised International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism as the most accurate guide to understanding how antisemitism manifests today, and urges all Australian universities to adopt the definition as part of their efforts to make campuses more welcoming for Jewish students.

When a university or another relevant stakeholder—including the Australian Universities Accord Panel—considers how to address antisemitism on campus, it is vital that they engage with (and listen to) the Australasian Union of Jewish Students, as well as representative roof bodies of the Jewish community, such as the Zionist Federation of Australia.

We urge the Panel to consider:

- Including education about modern antisemitism at universities and, in particular, for complaints-handling officials, in any national student charter the Panel ultimately recommends;
- Recommending that all universities adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism; and
- Discussing how to tackle antisemitism on campus with elected roof bodies of the Australian Jewish community, such as the Australasian Union of Jewish Students and the Zionist Federation of Australia.

Conclusion

Thank you for your important work in improving universities, and the university experience. We urge the Panel to consider:

- How universities should seek out or otherwise understand student experiences and concerns about discrimination, given that students are not making official complaints;

- A thorough examination of university complaints procedures to determine how to improve confidence in making complaints among students;
- Whether a national model should be created to standardise how complaints about discrimination are handled;
- Establishing an oversight body, such as an ombudsman, to whom students unsatisfied with the way their university handled a complaint can turn;
- Including education about modern antisemitism at universities and, in particular, for complaints-handling officials, in any national student charter the Panel ultimately recommends;
- Recommending that all universities adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism; and
- Discussing how to tackle antisemitism on campus with elected roof bodies of the Australian Jewish community, such as the Australasian Union of Jewish Students and the Zionist Federation of Australia.