

Explained: The £1bn-plus deals between UK universities and the arms trade

What if universities supported peace and development instead of fuelling the global military industrial complex?, asks Demilitarise Education

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Students graduate at the University of Birmingham, where the arms industry is heavily involved. (Photo: Christopher Furlong / Getty)

When I started campaigning to kick the military and defence sector off UK university campuses in 2017, little did I know that the organisation I would go on to co-found, Demilitarise Education, would discover [these partnerships](#) are worth over £1bn.

These are lucrative relationships, with money flowing between parties in the form of academic and research partnerships and investments. But £1bn is still far below the total we eventually expect to uncover.

What is the precise nature of these relationships, and how did the arms trade so closely enmesh itself in higher education?

In our findings so far, [research partnerships](#) account for £576m, or roughly 55% of the total figure. This is university research funded by weapons-producing companies and/or government bodies for military technology, aeronautics or other arms-related projects.

It often involves arms companies like BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce or QinetiQ directly as ‘industry partners’.

Accounting for £495m, or roughly 45% of the total, are [monetary investments](#). These are made by universities either directly in arms companies themselves, or indirectly through [third-party investments](#) or fund managers like Barclays, Lloyds or BlackRock holding shares in arms companies.

A small proportion of the figure (<0.1%) comes from consultancy fees, where private arms companies pay universities for their expert input into research, development, and business operations.

A further aspect is academic partnerships which, while forming only a small proportion of the monetary value of partnerships overall, are perhaps the most visible to students.

Academic partnerships include the development of learning and career opportunities between universities and the arms industry/defence sector, such as sponsored academic awards, careers fairs and graduate schemes.

From our research so far, the universities with the largest involvement in the arms trade are Bristol and Birmingham whose partnerships value above £50m.

King’s College London, the University of Sheffield and the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine are at around £40m, with the universities of Nottingham, Glasgow, Cambridge and University College London close behind.

The £1bn figure is just the tip of the iceberg – with many universities refusing to be transparent. By September 2023, we will have compiled research on every university in the country. This data will drive the campaign for total demilitarisation.

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Taking over universities

How did we get here? The arms trade takeover of universities can be partly explained in financial terms. In a commercialised, marketised context, universities have become increasingly driven by profit motives, by their bottom line.

The deep pockets of the arms industry give ample opportunity for them to exploit universities for weapons research and development.

This commercialisation process has changed how universities view their role and how knowledge is produced, as university research and education activities have been turned into a market into which arms companies can bid for space.

“These kinds of partnerships change the way that education is oriented”

Take for instance, the University of Sheffield. It launched the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) two decades ago with support from aerospace giant Boeing, with the Centre now boasting partnerships with the likes of BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce.

Doctoral researchers and engineering students in the AMRC work on projects like using robotics to [enhance](#) the manufacturing capacities of BAE Systems – a company for which arms account for 97% of total sales.

Or take the University of Bristol, which has partnered with the likes of Leonardo, QinetiQ and Rolls-Royce to offer a Master’s course in [Aerial Robotics](#) – essentially drone development.

These kinds of partnerships change the way that education is oriented. But they have not arisen solely through commercial, market processes, but have been spurred on by successive governments’ militarisation agendas.

Militarisation

The UK government sees major advantage in hosting weapons-related research in universities, and historically [fostered](#) such research ties when privatising publicly-owned research laboratories.

Government research bodies such as the Defence and Science Technology Laboratory (DSTL) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) regularly co-sponsor research programmes backed by weapons companies and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), supporting projects with public funds to bring military technology programmes into universities.

And while these bodies are classified as non-military, they commit enormous amounts of funds and energy towards [building](#) “national defence capability”. For instance, a £4.5m EPSRC and DSTL-sponsored [research project](#) on autonomous aircraft has been undertaken in collaboration with ‘industry partners’ including BAE Systems, Thales and QinetiQ.

These commercialisation and militarisation processes have been [described](#) as the *instrumentalisation* of education. Arms companies and military bodies treat universities as sites to further their profit or defence motives, undermining universities’ value-free and social-benefit model of knowledge production.

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Corporate profit

There is ample evidence of the ways in which the UK military and arms companies treat universities as key to achieving their corporate objectives.

Take, for instance, Physics and Astronomy Doctoral Training at the University of Exeter being [designed](#) in line with MoD priorities in the field of electromagnetic materials. This Doctoral Training is then run in partnership with the US Air Force, Thales and QinetiQ.

Or take the £12m [accepted](#) by the University of Bristol for research projects, titles of which are withheld, from BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, GKN and Northrop Grumman between 2017/18 and 2020/21. Over this period, Bristol accepted over £500,000 from the same companies for “consultancy” services rendered.

This is an urgent issue since arms-sponsored research agendas, particularly in engineering departments, undermine or distract from the ability of universities to create knowledge and innovation for the public good.

The military sector and arms industry make their profits from resource exploitation, conflict and the building-up of weapons reserves: the exact things generating instability. Research which could fuel peaceful, sustainable innovation can easily be crowded out, particularly given that defence research has [more links](#) to security policy making than research on human security.

Undermining values

When, back in 2018, I put it to Dame Nancy Rothwell, Vice Chancellor of the University of Manchester, that its research collaborations with BAE Systems undermined the values that the university should represent, [her response](#) was telling.

Rothwell suggested that while our government does it, why wouldn't they?

But it is not only that the government *does* it, it is that they actively encourage and co-sponsor companies like BAE in university research. The state, our educational institutions, private entities in the arms trade – they are all party to this military-industrial-academic complex.

“The state, educational institutions, private entities in the arms trade – are all party to this military-industrial-academic complex”

The concerns of a Yemeni student at the University of Manchester, whose relatives may have been killed by BAE-produced weaponry, appear to matter not: the national agenda of securitisation and militarisation mean that British defence manufacturing is being promoted even when it is [complicit](#) in serious human rights breaches.

Young minds from primary school all the way through to universities, are being manipulated into believing that war is normal and that British military operations actually help people.

The truth is, our security relies on the health of the planet and people, not on the health of our militaries, and military spending is [not based](#) on a sound analysis of national security.

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Tip of the iceberg

The way we document these partnerships is through our [university and arms trade database](#), which profiles every brick and mortar university in the country.

The first thing we track is whether a university has a stated policy regarding their relationship to the military and defence sector, before digging deeper into their partnerships to see if their ethical commitments hold up.

Along with student activists in our community, we use Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to try to pry open university files and find out about their specific partnerships: financial and investment ties, research projects, consultancy services, sponsorships, and academic or careers links.

But this is often not straightforward: information on university-arms trade research is often contractually protected, and universities withhold information on their investments to protect their “commercial interests”.

For instance, while the University of Glasgow [publishes](#) its investment information under its ‘[Socially Responsible Investment](#)’ commitments (its [£2.5m investment](#) in the arms trade not apparently violating its social responsibility), others like the University of Cambridge keep this information [hidden](#), withholding it on the basis of commercial sensitivity.

Beyond FoI disclosures, the database is also populated by [information drawn](#) from our partners, such as Stop Killer Robots in their excellent [report](#) on university involvement in autonomous weapons system development, and from information published by the likes of the EPSRC.

Partial demilitarisation

Some universities, [for example](#) Bedfordshire, Wrexham Glyndŵr and University of the Arts London, have made the first steps towards ending their partnerships with the arms trade.

But what we’ve seen so far has been partial demilitarisation – in either investments or careers – with exclusions for some companies based on criteria like where their arms are sold or the type of weapons produced.

Because of that, we created the [Demilitarise Education Treaty](#), a document which acts as a guide to change and comprehensive demilitarisation. Presenting university leaders with this evidence, from the dED database paired with the Treaty, is a powerful step within student demilitarisation movements.

The joint aim is the creation of a global precedent where it is unacceptable for universities to partner with the defence sector.

To create a more peaceful world, our universities should support and develop innovations to help us face modern-day security challenges – rather than investing in ones that negatively contribute to the increasing threats we face.