

**Presentation to Special Meeting of Academic Board
On Supporting Palestinian Students and Academics**

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Izzat Darwazeh
Professor of Communications Engineering,
Department of Electronic & Electrical
Engineering

Rachel Rosen
Professor of Sociology
Social Research Institute

We are pleased to be co-presenting this staff and student paper to Academic Board. It highlights concerns with UCL's continued investment in, and ties to, companies and organisations involved in war crimes and violations of international human rights law against the Palestinian people and others.

These links run contrary to UCL's mission, are incompatible with its ethical values, and place the university at risk of legal action.

As such, we urge you to support the paper recommendations, which call on UCL to:

1. review and report on said links, particularly where violations concern the targeting and destruction of academic institutions, the killing of academics and university students, and/or the undermining of academic freedom (recommendations a and b), and
2. seek to mitigate the impact of such violations, in this case through a scholarship and fellowship programme for Palestinians (recommendation c).

Ethical, reputational, and legal concerns

The paper recommendations are consistent with UCL's Mission which commits to '[engaging with the wider world ... \[for\] the long-term benefit of humanity](#)'. UCL's Policy for Socially Responsible Investment outlines a similar framework for using its funds to '[proactively bring about sustainable positive change in the world](#)'.

These are laudable goals and, as UCL's mission makes clear, academic freedom and the values of higher education are not just local issues. Universities have a responsibility to uphold these values wherever they are being destroyed, and certainly not to facilitate or contribute to their destruction.

Yet, UCL staff research highlights that at least 7% of UCL's investments in 2023 were in companies implicated in serious violations of international law in the context of military operations in the occupied Palestinian territory alone.

Here, the [International Court of Justice](#) has found a real and imminent risk of the right of Palestinians to be protected from acts of genocide, and the [International Criminal Court](#) has applied for arrest warrants for Israel's Prime Minister and Defence Minister, including for the crimes of starvation, extermination and persecution in Gaza. Notably,

the [International Centre of Justice for Palestinians](#) has warned UCL of the potential of criminal liability for supporting, aiding, and abetting war crimes through its investments contrary to the Rome Statute and the UK's own International Criminal Court Act.

By way of a few illustrative examples of UCL's links:

- [UCL's investments](#) in Google and Amazon were valued at more than £8.8 million in 2023, and UCL enjoys a "comprehensive" relationship with Google's subsidiary AI company: DeepMind. In 2021, Google and Amazon launched [Project Nimbus](#), a computing and AI contract with the Israeli government and military which is reportedly being used directly by [Israeli arms companies](#). Hundreds of Google workers have protested the use of their employer's technology to directly support "[the ongoing ethnic cleansing and ... genocidal bombing of Gaza.](#)"
- UCL has recently linked with Tel Aviv University via a government fund awarded to grow institutional partnerships. Yet, Tel Aviv University has "[produced materials to help Israel avoid accountability](#)", including at the ICJ, and to [support the Israeli military](#) in its assault on Gaza in which at least 40,000 people have been killed in the past 9 months, including over 15,000 children.
- UCL routinely platforms arms manufacturers like BAE Systems in teaching and careers fairs, and partners with them in research and advisory capacities. Yet [BAE Systems supplies the Israeli military with weapons which have been used against civilians in Gaza since 2008](#). UN experts recently called for BAE and other arms companies to cease the transfer of military equipment to Israel or '[risk being complicit in serious violations of... international humanitarian laws](#)'. Systems in teaching and careers fairs, and partners with them in research and advisory capacities. Yet [BAE Systems supplies the Israeli military with weapons which have been used against civilians in Gaza since 2008](#). UN experts recently called for BAE and other arms companies to cease the transfer of military equipment to Israel or '[risk being complicit in serious violations of... international humanitarian laws](#)'.
- UCL banks with Barclays, advertises it to new students, and has several strategic partnerships with the bank, despite [Barclays having billions of pounds of shares in and loans](#) for companies identified as providing arms to Israel for use in their assault on Gaza.

Such ethical, reputational, and legal risks are also of utmost concern to UCL students and alumnus. Students have some words to share today – note, they are afraid to show their faces due to the persecution the Palestine solidarity movement has faced across the UK:

[transcript of audio recording]

Since October, student open letters to UCL management have amassed a total of over 2000 signatures. We have been calling for our institution to end its complicity in the atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli military in Gaza, to divest, to

cut ties with arms companies, and to support Palestinian students and professors.

We came to this university having been sold by its self-titled reputation of being 'London's global university', the home of 'disruptive thinking' that challenges the status quo. Yet the last eight months have seen nothing but acquiescence to the status quo of Israeli impunity. It is essential that UCL redeems this reputation of global consciousness by ensuring access to the institution for Gazans seeking sanctuary.

There's been consistent action and protest from a number of student groups this year, coming together in one voice to express our solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and our discontent with UCL's complicity. We have grown, have held countless rallies, walkouts, disruptions, a five week long occupation of the Jeremy Bentham Room and an ongoing two month encampment. All of these spaces have been platforms for dialogue and political education, for many of us, enriching and extending what we are taught in our seminars and lecture theatres.

We've seen discourse about our movement become about campus safety and 'offensiveness', but the strength of student mobilisation this year has shown that what is truly offensive to UCL students is that our institution is not only silent, but actively invested in and tied to entities that are enabling the war crimes in Gaza.

There can be no academic freedom for Palestinians when every university in Gaza has been destroyed.

We need total transparency and disclosure now about UCL's investments and ties, and a commitment to review these in line with the most rigorous ethical guidelines, because **we** are the university. We urge you to support this paper and vote in favour of each recommendation before you today.

UCL's response

The Provost sent academic board members a paper late on Friday responding to the aforementioned concerns. Setting aside whether this was a reasonable and justifiable time frame for members to review, several points stand out:

1. It is positive that some companies linked to military operations and illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory have recently been excluded from UCL's portfolio. But if UCL has had a Socially Responsible Investment policy since 2020, why were they part of the portfolio to begin with? What protocol is in place for reviewing and potentially excluding other companies where there is a real risk of their involvement in war crimes and international human rights violations?

2. The Provost's paper opines that 'total avoidance' of problematic investments is 'challenging' and that severing links with Barclays would be difficult. Complexity cannot be a reason to evade the real risk of complicity in war crimes or human rights violations. Further, UCL already has a model for this: [it explicitly excludes investment in companies involved in the production and manufacture of tobacco and fossil fuels](#). The Provost's paper does not explain why this model cannot be replicated.
3. UCL cannot currently claim to be free from links to companies engaged in or enabling serious violations of international law. UCL must urgently implement a rigorous process for reviewing investments based on clear ethical principles developed by a working group of experts, including in international criminal, humanitarian and human rights law, scholasticide, and ethics, not simply investment specialists. Many in this room today are such experts and candidates for the working group recommended in this paper.
4. The Provost argues that academic freedom means staff have the right to carry out research even when some might find it 'morally wrong'. Yet, said research must not violate the law, and every UCL project undergoes institutional and ethical scrutiny. The question is: Against what principles are projects being reviewed? How are these principles being applied and their implementation evaluated? The paper recommendations propose to set up a review group to tackle these questions. And, there are already models for this – e.g., [UCL will not accept research funding from the tobacco industry](#). These models make clear that UCL's links with other problematic entities could be similarly monitored, prohibited and severed without violating individuals' academic freedoms.

Being a world leading institution

By committing to the reviews proposed in recommendations a and b of the paper before academic board, UCL would be joining world-leading higher education institutions in a long tradition of elevating ethical and moral principles through a process of review and disclosure, and potentially divestment and disengagement. The 1980s saw universities divesting from apartheid South Africa and, in the 2000s, from companies linked to the genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

More recently, [Queens University Belfast](#), [Trinity College Dublin](#), the [University of Copenhagen](#), the [University of York](#), and others around the world have committed to divestment from companies linked to the real and imminent risk of the right of the Palestinian people to be protected from genocide, with many others cutting ties to complicit Israeli institutions, including [76 Spanish universities](#).

Scholasticide and scholarships

While recommendations a and b do not focus on a particular State, company or conflict, but rather on the suggested process whereby UCL will ensure its compliance

with and accountability to its mission and legal obligations, Israel's military assault on Gaza over the last nine months has brought these concerns to the fore.

All Palestinian universities in Gaza and more than 80% of schools have been damaged or destroyed by Israel in what experts have described as a deliberate campaign of scholasticide. As of May, over 100 academics had been killed, and well over 5000 university students. How can we speak about academic freedom in such a context? These were esteemed institutions of learning and higher education. These were our current and future colleagues, and students we will never meet. These were our fellow humans.

Let UCL lead the way by fundraising and providing infrastructure for scholarships and fellowships for Palestinians who have been denied the right not just to fundamental academic freedoms, but to education itself in Gaza. UCL did this for [Ukrainians](#) in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – UCL can do this for Palestinians now.

Concluding points

Let us end on slightly more personal notes.

Izzat: As a Palestinian, I have witnessed with profound sadness and horror the ongoing bloodbath in Gaza and the unprecedented repression and killing in the West Bank, including attacks on Birzeit University, Al-Najah University in my town Nablus and others. This is in addition to unprecedented repression against Palestinians academics inside Israel's educational institutions. Every single university in Gaza has been razed to the ground. This is educide, scholasticide!

I am a member of a UK Palestinian academic network where we have zoom sessions with Gazan colleagues, who speak from their devastated evacuation camps, including my friend Aghar Alrayes, who was a postdoc at UCL, who lost 36 members of his family in different bombings. Yet, with all this devastation, these Gazans are determined not to be defeated and they want to carry on with life, studying and living whenever they can. We, the Palestinians are one of the most educated nations in the world, and we want this to continue, The Provost said (or was quoted saying "We are not the UN"). Fair enough. We cannot stop fascism from conducting all this killing, but we can help by offering people a chance when we can. And, we indeed can do so through scholarships and opportunities for Gazan students and academics.

We are the university that has, and will always, pride itself for allowing Jewish and Catholic students, and of course women as well, to study here when they were not welcome in other universities. Let us lead the way by establishing the scholarships proposed for Palestinians, at a time when 'Palestinian' is being used as a slur word by no less than a contender for the US presidency. This is what recommendation c is about and I urge you to support it.

Rachel: Along with countless other Jewish people around the world, I declare that the destruction of Gaza is not happening in my name nor for my safety. Similarly, as a UCL

professor, I want to be able to say that war crimes and human rights violations are not being aided and abetted by my institution, rather that our world-leading scholarship is truly directed towards '[the long-term benefit of humanity](#)'.

And so, we call on you to join us in supporting this important paper. We will be voting on each recommendation separately and understand the Provost will call for a vote by 11.45 today.