



Defence Universities Alliance condemned as a threat to academic freedom

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Close up of a soldier's arm in camo with a union flag patch. A union flag is flying in the background. Defence

A growing group of academics, students, trade unionists, education advocates, and civil society organisations across the UK has condemned the Ministry of Defence's newly launched Defence Universities Alliance. They're warning that the initiative represents a dangerous escalation in the [militarisation](#) of higher [education](#).

[Demilitarise Education has released an official public statement](#) opposing the Defence Universities Alliance. Ten organisations and groups across the UK have endorsed the statement, including:

- World Beyond War.
- Action on Armed Violence.
- Loughborough Action for Palestine.
- Stop the War.
- Boycott, Divest, Sanction Group @ UCL.
- CND.
- People & Planet.
- University & College Workers for Palestine.
- Quakers in Britain.
- Campaign Against Arms Trade.

The endorsement signals growing cross-sector concern over the Defence Universities Alliance's potential impact on academic independence, democratic accountability, ethical research, and the future role of higher education in society.

Defence Universities Alliance – embedding militarism into education

The Defence Universities Alliance, which launched earlier this month, seeks to recruit twenty founding university members. Universities joining the alliance would commit to expanding research and development in so-called “defence and national security” technologies while strengthening [pathways into military-related industries](#)

The initiative fundamentally reshapes the role of universities, away from serving the public good and towards supporting military infrastructure, weapons development, and state militarisation.

Jinsella, co-founder and executive director of Demilitarise Education, said:

The Defence Universities Alliance is designed to lock civil society into the conveyor belt of perpetual war. University leaders must see past the facade of a “whole-of-society” approach to defence.

This isn’t about human security, it’s about arms-industry profits. Innovation in favour of creating the conditions for peace and conflict resolution should be coming out of universities, not war machines.

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NGOs warn that the alliance threatens academic freedom and institutional independence by encouraging universities to align research priorities with military objectives rather than urgent social, environmental, and humanitarian needs.

Under the [Defence Universities Alliance charter](#) universities would be expected to support the UK’s wider military strategy actively. This might be through defence-focused research partnerships, skills development, and closer collaboration with arms manufacturers and the defence sector.

Growing criticism argues this could fundamentally reshape the role of higher education by prioritising military and national security objectives over independent, socially beneficial research.

This could steer students and graduates into defence careers through targeted skills and career promotion. And it risks embedding a “whole-of-society” militarisation agenda that blurs the boundary between education, public institutions, and military priorities.

Concerns are also growing that increased institutional alignment with defence interests risks undermining academic independence, narrowing ethical debate on campuses, and redirecting public resources and expertise away from urgent social challenges such as inequality, healthcare, climate, and education.

The three major charter points embedded here are:

- Defence research prioritisation: universities becoming more focused on military/national security research.
- Defence skills and career promotion: students being channelled into defence-sector employment.

- “Whole-of-society” collaboration agenda: deeper institutional integration between universities, government and defence industry.

Iain Overton, of Action on Armed Violence, commented:

Universities should be places of critical inquiry and peaceful scrutiny. They are not extensions of the military-industrial complex. The growing alignment between higher education and defence interests risks undermining academic independence and distorting research priorities.

We have seen this in the past and that past has led, invariably, to war. We know this is the path, and yet we continue down it, blindly and without moral scruples.

Call for resistance and transparency

There are also concerns about the broader government agenda surrounding the Defence Universities Alliance, including efforts to expand military-linked career pathways and increase defence-sector recruitment through higher education institutions.

Commitments to the Defence Universities Alliance charter will see defence universities as part of the UK’s so-called “Defence Industrial Base”. This move erodes the political neutrality of higher education and risks academic freedom.

Organisations involved in the statement are calling on university communities across the UK to resist the initiative through collective action, democratic scrutiny, and public accountability.

The coalition is demanding:

- Full transparency regarding implications and discussions or negotiations relating to Defence Universities Alliance membership.
- Democratic oversight through university senates and governing bodies.
- Meaningful consultation with students, staff, and affected communities.
- Development of alternative partnership alliances.

Organisations supporting the statement are calling on university communities across the UK to resist the initiative through collective action, democratic scrutiny, and public accountability.

Union motions in favour of demilitarising education have now been adopted at six universities with further cross-campus organising to challenge the expansion of military influence within universities being encouraged.

Annachiara Canetta, Europe organiser at World BEYOND War, added:

At World BEYOND War we believe that educational institutions should imagine and build alternatives to militarism, not become increasingly entangled with it.

We oppose the Defence Universities Alliance and the normalisation of military influence in academic life, and we stand in solidarity with Demilitarise Education and all those resisting the Defence Universities Alliance.

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By [The Canary](#)

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