UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
Inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

Dear Committee

Submission to the inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

On behalf of Universities Australia (UA), thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia. UA represents Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Our members are deeply committed to fostering safe, respectful and inclusive environments across their physical and digital campuses for all students, staff and campus users.

Right wing extremism is not new in Australia, but in recent years it has become more visible and a growing threat across our society and in our communities. At the outset, I want to convey our strong view that in addressing this societal issue, we do not narrow our focus to any one ideology. Instead, we should accept that no form of extremism is acceptable and approach dealing with this problem in broad terms – taking into account the full breadth of the political and religious spectrum reflected in Australian society as well as the various socio-economic factors which contribute to extremist ideology.

Universities, like the communities they exist within and serve, are culturally diverse places, attracting students and staff from all ethnic and religious backgrounds. People from over 140 countries study and work at our institutions, which reflects the vibrant, multicultural nation that Australia is. Diversity is what makes our campuses and our country stronger and more successful through the unification of different cultures, experiences, beliefs and traditions.

Overwhelmingly, Australians and those who call it home live and breathe cultural and religious diversity. We are fortunate that the many and varied cultures that make up Australia's fabric co-exist peacefully and as one. That's why Australia is recognised as one of the world's great multicultural success stories. It's also down to the common values that unite us – freedom, democracy, the rule of law and equality of opportunity.

Recent global events have served as a reminder that the confluence of cultures in our communities and on university campuses, physical and digital, can sometimes lead to discord, even if such cases are in the minority. Our members seek to always foster welcoming and safe environments for their communities, encouraging students, staff and campus users to share their diverse views through respectful dialogue and peaceful means.

This goes to the heart of why higher learning institutions exist. Universities are beacons of free speech, debate, expression and discourse. They are places where ideas are freely and openly discussed and debated, no matter how popular or unpopular they are, and should remain so if it is done safely, respectfully and in accordance with the law.

It is an important balance, and one that our members constantly strive for while maintaining their responsibility under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* to uphold the principles of academic freedom. Universities do not condone any form of racism, threats to safety, hate speech, intimidation, threatening speech, bullying or harassment. Codes of conduct or student charters exist at all universities to educate students and staff on their responsibilities. Individual institutions have also implemented a range of measures that support diversity, wellbeing, inclusion, equity, and access that underpin the various strategic action plans across the sector to promote good and respectful behaviour.

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At a whole-of-sector level, UA has partnered with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to combat online abuse and its impact on students and staff at universities. Together, we developed a suite of resources to help university communities be safer online through building greater awareness of online safety risks, providing guidance on how to prevent, prepare for and respond to online safety incidents, and supporting student and staff wellbeing.

I have attached to this letter a comprehensive summary of what universities are doing to address extremism. UA is open to working further with the Committee, including by connecting Committee members with experts focused on combating extremism in the community and online. A lot of work to understand what drives problem behaviours is done in our universities and this expertise may be beneficial to the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Luke Sheehy
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ADDRESSING EXTREMISM – EXAMPLES FROM THE SECTOR

Addressing online safety and abuse

In the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent shift to remote teaching and learning, online safety became a high priority for universities. In 2020, Universities Australia (UA) and the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) entered a partnership to combat online abuse and its impact on students and staff at universities. The Toolkit for Universities suite of resources aims to help university communities be safer online through building greater awareness of online safety risks; providing guidance on how to prevent, prepare for and respond to online safety incidents; and supporting student and staff wellbeing.

In 2021, UA and eSafety piloted the Safer Online: Awareness to Resilience (SOAR) with four universities to build on the Toolkit for Universities and develop whole-of-institution approaches to preventing and responding to online abuse and safety concerns. The SOAR project training included a focus on how various online harms have impacted universities within Australia and overseas, how universities respond to online abuse, and better understanding of the complexities of university settings. UA and eSafety chaired a panel discussion with two of the participating universities for the 2022 Australasian Universities Safer Communities Symposium, exploring the benefits and challenges of implementing SOAR across the sector.

University student clubs and societies often conduct club activities online and use social media platforms such as Discord and Facebook to form group chats and forums. The situation can present a challenge for the sector as these platforms are not university-authorised technology, thus there can be a grey zone when it comes to initiating misconduct proceedings where there is an allegation of concerning behaviour online. Regardless of whether misconduct proceedings can be initiated, universities provide impacted students with support.

Students may also experience or perpetrate behaviours of concern (i.e., sharing violent extremist ideologies, image-based abuse, threats, stalking, bullying, harassment, racial vilification, incitement of violence etcetera.) via university-authorised technologies, so universities have established polices outlining acceptable IT use, social media guidelines and what potential consequences apply for breaching these policies.

UA has provided guidance to address online safety in the 2023 Sexual Harm Response Guidelines. The Guidelines recommend adding a component on online safety to unit outlines within the institutions' learning management systems, where information on reporting, internal and external support services, links to codes of conduct, misconduct guidelines, IT and social media policies are easily available for students and staff to access. Further recommendations include ongoing education for students and staff on navigating online safety, what constitutes harmful online behaviours, and complement the education with training on how to support those who have experienced harmful online behaviours. Although this resource was developed within the context of prevention of sexual harm, it is also relevant for other harms and applicable to combatting extremism.

Establishment of internal threat assessment and management teams

To ensure there is clarity with regard to who is responsible for identifying and managing problem behaviours, thus avoiding governance gaps, several universities have established specialist internal threat assessment and management teams, such as Safer Community, which deals with all types of problem behaviour from sexual harm and gender-based violence to threats, violence, stalking and discrimination. Having Safer Community structures in place also ensures senior leadership have visibility of these matters across their campuses.

The first of these was established at Monash University which set up a Safer Community service in response to an absence of a central point for information gathering and sharing to assess risks, develop management strategies, lead awareness and capacity building. The Safer Community models, which are now implemented across a number of universities are diverse in their remit,

organisational placement and resourcing. Despite this diversity they share a set of common principles which include:

- ☐ Ensuring Safer Community is positioned as the central response service to assess and manage all problem behaviours across the university.
- ☐ Strong coordination between Safer Community and prevention teams (such as Respectful Relationships/Communities if the two are separate) to develop resources and deliver training to increase awareness and build internal capacity to recognise, report and respond to problem behaviours on physical and digital campuses.
- ☐ Strong working relationships with university governance, integrity, and legal units to coordinate investigations and findings of misconduct; and
- ☐ Ensuring that staff working in Safer Community have specialist expertise and backgrounds in relevant skills such as forensic and clinical psychology, social work, criminology, legal, social justice, community services, so that staff operating in this environment have knowledge of threat assessment and management planning.

Provision of ongoing professional training and development to counter problem behaviours

Staying current with leading practices and being aware of emerging risks is crucial to developing effective measures to counter violent extremism. Many Australian universities are conducting research to ensure the sector is using best practice. It is equally important to have strong networks with threat assessment and management professionals working within and outside the sector, to inform response and prevention initiatives.

Universities have engaged extensively with the Asia Pacific Association of Threat Assessment Professional (APATAP), which is the region's key body in the cross-disciplinary study and management of threatening individuals and behaviours. In addition to hosting a yearly conference and contributing to the Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, APATAP provides a range of professional education seminars in threat management to universities and other stakeholder groups. In 2020, APATAP held a series of webinars on right-wing extremism, sovereign citizen ideology and COVID conspiracies, which flourished during the pandemic. Members of APATAP have advised universities on the assessment and management of problem behaviours, while providing specialised training to threat assessment and management teams on risk assessment tools.

The yearly Australasian Safer Communities Symposium (AUSCS) also provides an opportunity for staff working in universities that support the response and prevention of problem behaviours to convene, discuss and observe leading practices on fostering safe environments across diverse university communities. The theme of the 2023 AUSCS was "*From challenges to solutions: creating a safer environment for university students*". Members of APATAP and other organisations that specialise in the assessment and management of problem behaviours, regularly present at and attend the yearly Symposium, ensuring universities have strong networks with specialists working in the field.

Adoption of anti-racism and antisemitism commitments

Universities are collaborating with students and staff from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to develop anti-racism action plans and strategies. Advisory bodies such as the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Advisory Group consisting of students and staff with a direct pathway to senior leadership have been established to prioritise the voices of CALD communities.

The UA Indigenous Strategy 2017-20 was the first sector-wide initiative that brought all member universities together to achieve common goals to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education. The new UA Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 is focused around five key themes, one of which is addressing racism and cultural safety. Universities have also launched their respective Indigenous action plans outlining approaches to improve the experience of Indigenous students and staff to create culturally safe environments.

Targeted communications reinforcing that universities celebrate diversity and do not condone harassment, discrimination, vilification, or violence of any kind are regularly rolled out across campuses. Several universities have adopted the 'Racism. It Stops with Me' campaign and provide training to all students to clarify behavioural expectations in a multicultural society which includes respecting fellow students and staff regardless of their backgrounds. These strategies explicitly reference antisemitism, Islamophobia and urge students and staff who experience or witness these problem behaviours to report to their university. In the wake of the Hamas/Israel conflict, universities have been reaching out individually to Palestinian and Israeli students and staff to offer one-on-one support and to ensure they are aware of the spectrum of support services available to them.

The Safer Community service provides a single point of reporting for all issues of racism and other problem behaviours. Investigation of matters of racism that involve the display of posters and materials on campus or online are prioritised, while targeted prevention to address specific concerns are undertaken in collaboration with Respectful Relationships/Communities. In addition to the Safer Community service, some universities also have Harassment and Discrimination Contact Officers, who are trained to provide confidential information and support to students with concerns relating to discrimination, harassment, bullying, vilification, and victimisation.

Commitment to academic freedom and freedom of speech

Preserving academic freedom and freedom of speech are principles that need to be grounded in countering violent extremism across university campuses, noting that there are certain responsibilities that come with upholding both principles. Exercising freedom of speech needs to be balanced with preventing racial hatred, discrimination and vilification, including incitement of these behaviours and violence against individuals and groups based on their race, nationality or ethnicity. Universities have made strong commitments to upholding academic freedom and free speech, which are reinforced in Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech Policies. These policies are interlinked with codes of conduct in place which explicitly state racism, racial vilification, discrimination, harassment and intimidation are not tolerated, and outlines potential consequences for individuals or groups engaging in problem behaviours.

Training for academic and professional staff, student leaders and students to recognise and report incidences of problem behaviours within university settings are regularly provided. Some universities provide tailored training sessions for students from countries whose governments are likely to be monitoring their activities, to assist those students navigate their security online. Academic staff are provided with professional development opportunities to ensure students are taught in a transparent, equitable and inclusive manner, while regular reviews of the curricula are undertaken to ensure course content and learning materials accurately reflect the histories of discrimination, outcomes and impact of disadvantaged groups and their contributions to Australia and global societies.

Universities promote the right to have respectful discussions about controversial topics without fear of censure and it is important that this right continues to be protected, regardless of varying political views of what is, or should be allowed to be discussed in academia and on campus grounds. Refusal to acknowledge historical and current events taking place nationally and on a global scale, limiting or altogether avoiding controversial discussions of current and historical events, differences between communities and their experiences of harms, risks distorting representations of diverse community groups. This may subsequently alienate vulnerable individuals who may be prone to adopt violent extremist views due to misinformation and circulation of various conspiracy theories.

By promoting open and respectful dialogue, universities aim to build trust, and collective student engagement towards fostering a safe, supportive, and inclusive campus culture through identifying, safely addressing, and reporting behaviours of concern across their physical and digital campuses.

Increased mental health support for students

Providing continual access to mental health services is an important element of countering extremism among young people. Research has demonstrated how mental health frameworks are being increasingly accepted in policies to counter violent extremism, as a number of people who are vulnerable to adopting extremist ideology can suffer from mental health concerns, which can also arise due to stressful events when participating in terrorist groups and integration with extremist ideologies.

Universities provide confidential counselling support to all students, which can be accessed in-person, via phone or online. Many universities offer specialist counselling support such as Queer counsellors who have experience in supporting students with diverse sexualities, sex and gender identities, Indigenous counsellors to provide culturally sensitive support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and men's counselling and wellbeing programs to encourage men and male identifying students to have more conversations about their mental health and help other men struggling to find their voice and identity. Academic and professional staff can refer students to in-house counselling and seek expert advice on how to support students who may show signs of social withdrawal, disengaging from studies, or engaging in a cycle of negative thinking.

Many universities' counselling services extend their hours of operation to accommodate increases in demand around certain events, such as the Hamas attack on Israel or during unprecedented times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to in-house counselling support which normally operate during business hours, universities have established 24-hour crisis lines, which students can access anonymously if they wish to. Staff can also contact the 24-hour crisis line to make a referral for a student.

University counselling services speak with cohorts of students and staff throughout the academic year to promote services and encourage access, particularly leading up to the start of a new semester, and in the time leading up to exams and final assessments. They host regular awareness campaigns and initiatives such as R U OK and Mental Health Week and take part in staff and student induction sessions together with Safer Community, Career Services, Academic Development Advisors and other student services to ensure all members of the university community are provided with information on the full extent of support available for students.

24-hour security presence on campus

In addition to maintaining collaborative relationships with local police and monitoring of advice from relevant authorities, universities have 24-hour security patrols on campus grounds, supported by CCTV. Security teams offer an extension of services, including booking security escorts to accompany students and staff to public transport and around the vicinity of university campuses. Security services have close contact with local police and work collaboratively with internal response teams such as Safer Community and student counselling services to ensure incidents are handled effectively. Senior management and relevant staff receive incident reports outlining what actions have been taken and if any other follow ups are required.

University security services are involved in reviewing events proposed to be held on campus to ensure that appropriate risk assessments are conducted, and due diligence is undertaken on invited speakers before events are allowed to proceed. Security teams are also heavily involved in standing up Incident Response Teams and holding workshops with executive staff and internal threat assessment and management teams to discuss and test various scenarios which may rise, including identifying strategies on how and when to approach an individual or group where is potential for safety concerns.

Establishment of multi-faith Chaplaincy and contact with local religious leaders

Several universities have established multifaith centres which provide spiritual guidance, personal advice, support, and referrals to students of all faith. The team of Chaplains are available to all students, with specialised services for international and migrant students, Muslim, and Jewish students. Some multifaith centres extend their services to students' immediate families. Multifaith Chaplains are accredited by the Council for Chaplaincies in Tertiary Institutions, and students are

required to tap their ID cards to access the centres. The multi faith centres host faith and cultural club events, spiritual wellbeing activities such as mindfulness and yoga, and leads prayers.

Following the events of 7 October 2023, universities have been in contact with local religious leaders, specifically working with representatives from Jewish student groups, the Australian Union of Jewish Students, and the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation for advice and to understand improvements that can be made to support Jewish students and reduce barriers to reporting. Universities have also been engaging with the Islamic Students Societies and maintaining open lines of communication to assess how to better support students from Palestine and other Muslim countries who may be impacted by the heightened geo-political tensions.