Comment

The Australian Catholic University and Challenges after the 7 October Hamas Massacre

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For Jewish students and staff on Australian campuses, the almost immediate upsurge of antisemitism and anti-Jewish attacks in the response to the 7 October Hamas massacre in southern Israel was highly distressing. The attack stands as one of the most traumatic events in modern Jewish history since the Holocaust. Over 1,193 were murdered on that day, with 251 being taken as hostage.[1] As Bar-Halpern and Wolfman stress, the trauma created within the Jewish community was triggered not only by 'the events themselves, but also from the response of others in the aftermath'.[2] Despite the brutality and atrocities of this pogrom, for Jewish people worldwide, the response of glorifying Hamas and blaming Israel for the attack lifted a veil on age-old antisemitism, also known as Jew-hatred, breaking inhibitions and allowing this oldest hatred to resurface in stark and unsettling ways.[3]

It is important to stress that the anti-Jewish attacks on university campuses, which manifested themselves both overseas and in Australia after October 7, did not suddenly emerge in a vacuum. They were part of a growing trend which began with the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in South Africa in 2001. Subsequently, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions ('BDS') movement emerged, especially on university campuses. These developments were heightened by the accusations of apartheid and settler-colonialism against Israel,[4] with the theoretical constructs of intersectionality and critical race theory adding to the growth of campus antisemitism.[5] This situation has further deteriorated since 2021, evidenced by a study conducted in the first half of 2023 which showed that most Australian universities have become increasingly toxic for Jewish students.[6]

The academic response to the immediate intensification of antisemitism post October 7 was the formation of the Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism ('5A'). It expanded quickly as Jewish staff — both academic and professional — found themselves deplatformed,

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[1] October 7th Geo-visualization Project, *Mapping the Massacre* (Web Page,7 October 2023) <https://oct7map.com/>.

[2] Miri Bar-Halpern and Jaclyn Wolfman, 'Traumatic Invalidation in the Jewish Community after October 7' *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* (13 May 2025) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2025.2503441>.

[3] Anti-Defamation League, *One Year Later: Antisemitic Trends Post 10/7* (Report, 10 February 2024) <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/one-year-later-antisemitic-trends-post-107>. See also Herbert D Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, 'October 7 as a Turning Point in Jewish History', (Blog post, October 18 2024) <https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/resources/blog/october-7-turning-point-jewish-history>.

[4] Adam Kirsch, *On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence and Justice* (Norton, 2024).

[5] Suzanne D Rutland, Unpublished Expert Report for Riazaty v UMSU Inc (Supreme Court of Victoria, S ECI 2023 01945, 25 October 2022). See Daniel Ian Rubin, 'Hebcrit: A New Dimension of Critical Race Theory' (2020) 26(4) *Social Identities* 499.

[6] Social Research Centre, The Jewish University Experience Survey July 2023, *Zionist Federation Australia* (Report, July 2023) <https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/AUA_inter_tranche7_166%20Zionist%20Federation%20Australia%20Attachment.pdf>.

https://doi.org/10.55803/J185W

cancelled, and even doxxed. A core value of universities is academic freedom, including free, scholarly, and respectful debate. Since 7 October, this core value has been undermined with strident protests, university encampments, and 'cancel culture'. Tribalism has continued to be entrenched, with a polarising effect, so that Jewish students and staff who believe Israel has the right to exist have felt excluded.

Within this broader picture, the experience at ACU as a Catholic university is of interest. All ACU students must take core units on ethics and social justice. The teaching of very popular courses on the archaeology, history, and language of Ancient Israel and the Bible contributes to a better understanding among ACU students of the ancient Jewish connections to the Land of Israel, helping to increase this positive atmosphere. While not all students take these courses, the courses are in the humanities, a field which often tends to be a focus of anti-Zionist attitudes which can also become antisemitic. The ACU is the only Australian university continuing to offer these courses, reflecting its religious connections and creating a different atmosphere for Jewish students and staff after 7 October. These units are coordinated by Professor Gil Davis who has found the university management to be very supportive.[7]

Apart from these units, there are other factors that have created a more positive atmosphere for Jewish students and staff. The university management prohibited posters dealing with the Israel-Gaza conflict. When a campus is covered with anti-Israel posters, this creates a very difficult environment, as do the encampments, which also were not permitted at ACU. As well, international speakers including Israeli academics have regularly given talks at the university with full support from the senior executive without any issue or blowback. For example, Professor Wayne Horowitz from the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University[8] was Professor Davis' guest in giving public lectures, lectures, and tutorials in May 2025. He was warmly welcomed by the university management and there were no protests or problems.

Other Israeli academics have been visiting speakers at ACU without any issues. which contrasts with other Australian universities. For example, representatives from the Lowy International School at Tel Aviv University were invited to participate in the University of Sydney's Study Abroad Partner event held on 23 March 2024. However, after the Israeli representatives set up their stall, they experienced a student and staff pro-Palestinian sit-in, with the protesters shouting antisemitic and anti-Israel slogans. After an hour and a half, they were forced to close their stall and were escorted out by the university security.[9]

The combination of strong management at ACU, imposing limits on the physical environment in terms of posters and encampments, combined with its more religious ethos with Biblical Studies and Ancient Israel courses, has contributed to a more positive experience for Jewish students and staff. However, research is needed to get a clearer picture of the comparative nature of the experiences of Jewish students and staff across the university sector and the comparative situation with religiously-affiliated universities in terms of these experiences.

[7] Email Correspondence between Suzanne Rutland and Gil Davis (6 June 2025) (on file with the author).
[8] See 'Wayne Horowitz', *Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (Web Page, September 2025) <https://archaeology.huji.ac.il/people/wayne-horowitz>.
[9] Peter Kohn and Sharon Desiatnik, 'Israeli Academic Recounts Ordeal' *Australian Jewish News* (28 March 2024) <https://www.australianjewishnews.com/israeli-academic-recounts-ordeal/>.