

UK: University of Sheffield paid private investigators £40,000 to spy on anti-war students

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A freedom of information request obtained by the University of Sheffield (UoS) student newspaper, *The Tab*, reveals that the university spent just under £40,000 hiring private investigators to spy on students. The students were allegedly involved in occupations of university facilities to protest its links with the arms industry.

From September 2022 until January 16, 2023, the UoS paid £39,615 to Intersol Global to snoop into the lives of two students.

In February 2022, the Sheffield Action Group (SHAG) occupied three buildings to protest the university's wanton vandalism in closing its world-renowned Archeology department. The occupations took place while university lecturers and staff members of the University and College Union (UCU) were holding nationwide strikes for improved pay and conditions.

During October last year, a group of SHAG activists occupied the UoS's Diamond building to protest the university's partnership with Rolls Royce, Boeing and BAE Systems. The students' Twitter account dated October 24 called for "no war criminals on campus or in careers fairs."

Last month the *Guardian* revealed that two students received letters on November 9 last year informing them an independent investigator had been hired by Sheffield University due to the "serious nature" of the event and that "a report of alleged misconduct by you is the subject of an investigation in line with the university's regulations relating to the discipline of students".

An accompanying document said the regulations broken related to "the improper interference, in the broadest sense, with the proper functioning or activities of the university", and that the students could face suspension or expulsion, fines of up to £750 and bills of up to £1,000 for

any damage to property.

One of the students, Martha, told the *Guardian* the pending investigation during her final year of university had induced "suicidal thoughts".

"I became quite unwell in January and found it really distressing that there was this process happening, and I didn't know what I'd even been alleged to have done, or know how long it was going to last. It left me in quite a suicidal position because I felt there was no way out. It feels like, how have they got my name? There can be no evidence that I was there."

The other student being investigated by Intersol Global, who requested anonymity but uses the name Erin, received the letter while on a gap year abroad in the Netherlands. Once Erin replied, it took three weeks for Intersol Global to respond. "They haven't provided any evidence of their allegation, nor have they outlined what it was or what regulation the allegation breaches," the accused student said.

Bank statements since provided confirm Erin was not in Sheffield, as well as statements from witnesses the university said it would contact. "They have consistently worked from the assumption that I am guilty," Erin said.

Erin's parents have written to the vice-chancellor of Sheffield saying they believe the university has neglected its duty of care. Erin added, "At the end of all this I have to go back to Sheffield and do another year and write my dissertation and that leaves me quite uncomfortable and distressed."

Eve Spiekermann, a spokesperson for student campaign group People and Planet, told the *Guardian*, "Sheffield University's response to student protest by hiring a private investigator to spy on their own students is alarming and clearly demonstrates the upside down priorities of the university: instead of scrutinising their

own institutions' ties with arms companies that are making a profit of war and destruction, the university more readily invests funds and capacity to profile and police the student body."

Spiekermann added, "Leaving the investigation and allegations against the two student activists hanging for months certainly impacts on the students' ability to study, participate in student life and continue campaigning for a more equitable and just university system."

Approached by *The Tab* for comment, the UoS justified their methods saying universities across the UK are hiring third party companies to carry out investigations. People and Planet have reported underhand tactics by private contractors and collusion between universities and corporations at other universities, including Warwick University collaborating with British Petroleum to survey a student climate activist involved with People and Planet.

A UoS spokesperson defended the university's relations with the arms industry saying, "For many years the University has undertaken research with a wide range of global manufacturing companies, including Boeing and Rolls-Royce. Our connections with industrial partners mean we can help to influence positive change and accelerate more sustainable manufacturing practices."

The UoS launched their Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) with support from aerospace corporation Boeing, with AMRC now boasting partnerships with BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce. Numerous doctoral researchers and engineering students at the AMRC work on projects such as using robotics to improve the manufacturing capacities of BAE Systems, the London-based corporation for which military arms account for 97 percent of their total sales. It is the largest defence contractor in Europe and ranked the world's seventh largest.

A report issued in February by Demilitarise Education found that military and defence partnerships on UK university campuses are worth over £1 billion.

The report notes, "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."

Demilitarise Education notes, "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."

According to Demilitarise Education the universities with the most significant involvement in the arms trade are Bristol and Birmingham, with partnerships valued above £50 million. King's College London, the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine and the University of Sheffield have partnerships valued at around £40 million, with the universities of Nottingham, Glasgow, Cambridge and University College London just behind.

As NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine escalates, Britain's ruling class is stepping up the militarisation of higher education and research institutions, already deeply integrated with the armed forces and private military contractors. Military funding is concentrated in institutions and departments, predominantly engineering, where the armed forces and arms dealers have special authority. Such funding is considered a prestigious source of investment, from which other grants and opportunities will flow. Military contracts are fiercely competed for and proudly advertised by higher education institutions.

To wage a successful struggle against the growing influence of the military on campus requires the adoption by students of the socialist, anti-war perspective of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). On Sunday, April 30, the International Committee of the Fourth International, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the *World Socialist Web Site* will hold an online global rally to celebrate May Day 2023. All those who seriously oppose the militarisation of higher education should register and attend.



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