

The University of Sheffield and growing links to the arms trade by academic institutions

Joe Mount
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The University of Sheffield in the UK has links with defence contractors that supply components for war planes used by the Israeli military in their genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.

The connections to the aerospace industry are operated through the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC), a technology park that houses dozens of external firms, including weapon manufacturers, alongside its research facilities. The AMRC's industrial membership includes Rolls-Royce, Boeing, BAE Systems and Messier-Dowty, plus 60 other organisations. The AMRC boasts, "We can reduce the time taken to make a component from 40 hours to just three. We can take an assembly process down from 60 minutes to 60 seconds. And we can take 10 years of production and do it in 10 weeks."

BAE Systems, the sixth-largest arms company in the world, funded research projects involving academics at the AMRC worth £8.5 million between 2012 and 2022. The British multinational company produces components for F-35 fighter-bomber planes, contributing approximately 14 percent of their total value.

Lockheed Martin, the giant American defence contractor, produces the F-35 warplanes in collaboration with companies such as Northrop Grumman and BAE. Lockheed sells hundreds of these high-tech killing machines each year to the US, Britain, Italy, Israel, and other regimes around the world.

The Israeli air corps has used these aircraft in successive onslaughts against the Palestinians.

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) gets most of its advanced military hardware from the US, including the F-35 Lightning II jet fighter-bombers which it first deployed in 2017. Although most of the Israeli fleet comprises the older F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, the F-35 planes are in active use in the offensive on Gaza, including for air strikes.

Israeli carpet-bombing of the small enclave has killed tens of thousands and levelled entire civilian areas. The Israel Defense Forces have also conducted precision air strikes against noted militants, anti-war activists, and writers.

Among British universities, the University of Sheffield has the most significant, long-term links to the aerospace industry, including major arms manufacturers.

Between 2012 and 2022, a total of £72 million worth of research funding was received from firms such as Rolls-Royce, Boeing, BAE Systems, and GKN according to a freedom of information (FOI) request seen by local newspaper *The Star*. These funds average £6 million per year and comprise approximately 5 percent of the total research income of the entire university.

Rolls Royce is the largest contributor and funds around £4 million per year in research and services. Rolls-Royce Holdings makes a third of its £12 billion annual revenues from arms sales.

Boeing funds an average of £1 million worth of work each year.

BAE Systems gives over £800,000 per year to fund research projects into automated manufacturing using advanced robotics. A team of academics employed by the AMRC performed research that used next-generation robotics to help automate the manufacturing processes used to create F-35 planes more cheaply and efficiently.

These researchers were actively involved in the deployment of this technology for the production of deadly weapons. The process was introduced at the BAE factory in Samlesbury, Lancashire to speed up the production of fuselage panels for hundreds of F-35 jets, saving the company over £15 million over five years.

BAE Systems, whose military contracts are worth over £20 billion annually, gave the AMRC team their "Chairman's Award" to acknowledge the value of their support. One of the academics involved, Adrian Hirst, boasted, "My highlight was the F-35 countersinking work we did for BAE Systems. It was challenging, high precision work that we saw through from initial idea to execution on the shop floor at BAE Samlesbury. I really felt like the work we had done was making a difference in UK manufacturing."

BAE Systems supplies aircraft, tanks, and missiles to the

American, British, and Saudi governments. The company has benefited from the spread of war around the world, with the militarisation of capitalist governments creating new orders worth over £1 billion that have increased the company's revenue by 7 percent.

BAE sold £15 billion worth of war materiel to the monarchic Saudi regime during its ongoing intervention in the Yemini civil war waged since 2015.

Alongside BAE, dozens of British companies are involved in the supply chain for the F-35 fighter-bomber. The production and export of these components is encouraged and facilitated by Rishi Sunak's Conservative government and opposition political parties, including Labour.

Sheffield University is the biggest recipient of aerospace industry funding in the UK. The details of these research projects are mostly hidden from public view. In response to a FOI request, Sheffield University stated, "The University acknowledges the public interest in openness and its sources of funding and how this funding is used. We recognise a particular interest in accountability regarding the involvement of the University with private companies that could be perceived to be 'arms companies'.

"This is, however, set against the public interest in allowing the University to operate fairly and equally within the commercial environment that it operates within. The University determines that there is a greater public interest in allowing this to continue and that were this not to be the case its core functions of teaching and research would be likely to be negatively impacted."

Last year South Yorkshire was granted "investment zone" status by the Conservative government, along with 11 other English regions. Academic research is being primed to play an even greater role in attracting investment from corporations. The *Financial Times* noted, "Each zone will be focused around existing research institutions and industrial clusters, with up to £80mn of support — a mix of grants and tax breaks — available to help attract further jobs and private investment." The newspaper noted that the AMRC had just "received a £29.5mn research grant from the Aerospace Technology Institute".

The FT cited Steve Foxley, chief executive of the AMRC, who "welcomed the additional boost provided by investment zone status and said the central role of higher education in the policy was key." Foxley said of companies including Boeing, Rolls-Royce, Spirit AeroSystems and McLaren 'I really think with the investment zones I can attract investment from the industrial partners that we work with.'"

Most UK universities accept blood money from aerospace companies and the arms trade, including prestigious institutions such as King's College London, Cambridge, Oxford, and Imperial College London. These firms gave

over £23 million per year in research funding between 2013 and 2021, according to FOI requests by the charity Action on Armed Violence (AOAV). Some institutions refused to provide details for commercial or national security reasons, so these figures underestimate the reality.

The British government also funds research and business collaborations with institutions in Israel that are complicit in the Netanyahu regime's genocide. Universities UK, the organisation of university management, announced its "Israel innovation researcher mobility scheme" last spring and awarded the funds to 12 universities, including major institutions such as the University of Leeds and University College London.

The links between academia and the arms trade go beyond research. These companies are invited to employment fairs to recruit young engineers and managers onto their career development programmes.

This corruption has provoked a series of student demonstrations on campus. Dozens of students protested and occupied university buildings in Sheffield at the start of the 2022 and 2023 autumn semesters to put pressure on university management to dissociate the institution from companies complicit in war crimes.

The draconian response of the university leadership was to spend £40,000 on private investigators to spy on student activists. This is part of a broader wave of victimisations of students opposing the Israeli onslaught and expressing solidarity with the Palestinians.

The marketisation of higher education means that universities are increasingly run like businesses, treating students like consumers and exploiting their workforce. Research interests are increasingly dominated by the interests of the ruling class. The relentless attacks on pay and conditions for workers in higher education provoked a long-running national industrial dispute from 2019, sold out last year by the University and College Union.

Students and young people must turn to the working class, including university staff and lecturers, in a common fight against capitalism which is the root cause of war. A new anti-war movement must adopt a socialist perspective and be directed against all the bourgeois governments and political parties that represent the interests of the ruling class.



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