

UK Labour government embeds arms industry in higher education through Defence Universities Alliance

Joe Mount, Robert Stevens
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Higher education internationally is being reshaped to meet the needs of the arms industry as ruling elites massively ramp up rearmament in preparations for war.

Britain's Labour government is directly enlisting universities as part of its society-wide war drive.

On June 9, the government announced that 24 universities and colleges had won a share of £80 million in funding for defence-related student places. The money is tied to a new Defence Universities Alliance (DUA), through which the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is reorganising teaching, research, and governance around the rearmament demands the US-led NATO military alliance.

Ministers presented it as a “student skills investment,” but this is a critical front of the restructuring of the British state and society for great-power conflict. Two days later, the defence secretary who oversaw the package, John Healey, resigned, demanding the Treasury spend billions more on the military than Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves would sanction.

The £80 million is the largest single element of a £182 million skills package unveiled last September as part of the Defence Industrial Strategy, announced by Healey. The Defence Industrial Strategy, for the first time, formally redefined Britain's “defence industrial base” to include universities.

The Office for Students (OfS), the universities regulator, received 112 bids requesting £384 million and funded 24. Of the £80 million, £50 million funds around 2,500 student places over five years and £30 million pays for new teaching facilities. A further £50 million establishes five Defence Technical Excellence Colleges in Blackpool, Plymouth, Lincoln, Rotherham and Yeovil.

The National Security Strategy, published in June 2025, is Labour's blueprint for militarising society in preparation for major wars. It pledges to “harness the nation's productive, industrial, technological and scientific strengths more closely to our national security objectives to an extent not

seen since wartime” and to “mobilise the nation in the common cause.” The MoD aims to “develop understanding of the armed forces among young people” in schools; expand the cadets to 180,000 children; and create a new Home Defence organisation.

The drive is subordinate to NATO at every point. The Strategic Defence Review, published last June, led by former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson, declared in its foreword—written by Healey—that “our defence policy is ‘NATO first.’” The government accepted all 62 of its recommendations. At the Vilnius summit of July 2023 NATO converted the 2 percent of GDP military spending target from a goal to aim towards into a mandatory minimum, affirming that “in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% will be needed.”

At NATO's Hague Summit last June, Starmer went further still, signing a commitment to invest 5 percent of GDP in defence and security by 2035.

The Defence Universities Alliance (DUA), launched in April 2026, is central to reorganisation of the universities to serve the militarist agenda. It is co-chaired by two MoD officials: the department's chief scientific adviser, Professor Tim Dafforn, and its director of growth and missions, Sherin Aminossehe.

Under the DUA Charter published on April 13, member institutions commit to “actively growing research and development activity and capacity in defence and national security relevant fields and technologies to support defence aims and objectives,” to channelling graduates into defence careers, and to ongoing MoD security screening—including disclosure of their overseas research funding.

The alliance's FAQ states that selected institutions “will be members of the DUA for life,” while the MoD reserves the right to monitor them and act should “any concerns develop over national security or behaviours against the aims of the DUA.”

This vague language enables the state to treat anti-war

research and dissenting academic work as a security concern.

The millions of pounds in funding available have strings attached. The Office for Students (OfS) guidance states it “must take into account advice from the MoD” and can “reject, suspend or rescind the award of this funding” wherever the ministry “holds or develops significant concerns” about an institution’s research collaborations or funding.

Membership of the alliance has not been made public. The MoD refused a freedom of information request by Action on Armed Violence for the list, citing commercial sensitivity.

But the Defence Industrial Strategy already made clear some of the leading academic institutional players. In a section: “High-Growth-Potential Frontier Industry Clusters”, the following areas of the UK and key institutions are noted. Belfast is “Recognised as a leading cyber security hub, augmented by Queen’s University Belfast’s Centre for Secure Information Technologies.” South Yorkshire is “Home to the University of Sheffield’s world-leading Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre. A growing defence cluster bolstered by BAE Systems’ new artillery factory.”

The Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor is home to the “UK’s leading region for computing, data science, space innovation; home to world famous universities and the Harwell Campus, digital primes, OEMs and the National Centre for Geospatial Intelligence.”

In South Wales there is “Regional cyber security and autonomous systems expertise bolstered by the Universities of South Wales and Cardiff and Airbus’ Cyber Innovation Hub.”

In the West of England, Cheltenham and Gloucester are, “Home to several leading space and aerospace companies, including Airbus and Boeing, with renowned universities and the National Composites Centre driving cross sectoral innovation.”

Greater London is “Home to world-leading research in quantum computing, including at UCL’s [University College London] ‘Q-Biomed’”.

Plymouth has “key defence ecosystem built around Plymouth & South Devon Freeport and the largest naval base in western Europe.” It boasts “R&D strengths in cutting-edge maritime technologies and drones, at the National Centre for Coastal Autonomy, SMART Sound Plymouth, the Maritime Autonomy Centre and the University of Plymouth.”

The beneficiaries of the research carried out by the universities are the arms corporations. According to the campaign group Demilitarise Education in their Annual Report 2026, BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce are the most

active private arms companies in British academia, with dozens of existing partnerships. BAE Systems reported record results for 2024: sales of £28.3 billion and underlying profit above £3 billion for the first time, citing the war in Ukraine and European rearmament. Rolls-Royce signed a roughly £9 billion submarine-support contract, the largest in its history.

Universities UK, the vice-chancellors’ lobbying body, holds a seat on the DUA’s MoD-chaired steering committee. Moreover, the overall DIS was envisaged as one based on “collaboration with devolved and local governments, industry, higher and further education providers and trade unions,” that “will deliver the skills the defence industry needs to foster growth and help protect our nation.”

The University and College Union (UCU), whose members face a wave of redundancies and a deepening funding crisis across the sector, has issued no significant statement on either the Defence Universities Alliance or the £80 million fund.

At least four UCU branches have carried motions in favour of demilitarising education, including Durham, Essex, Bristol, and Warwick. The Unison public sector union branch at the University of Bristol passed a similar motion on January 26. However, at the UCU’s annual Congress in May, Motion 46 “Demilitarising Higher Education—Welfare over Warfare,” submitted by the Warwick branch never reached debate due to procedural disruption and filibustering by the right-wing. A petition against the DUA among UCU members has secured 4,670 signatures.

In the days after the announcement of the DUA’s initial funding round, the only cry from Westminster was for faster rearmament, with the opposition Conservatives and Reform UK demanding a far larger military budget.

As the WSWS reported, the resignation of Healey as defence secretary was a calculated manoeuvre aimed at determining the outcome of the expected leadership challenge to Starmer. Former Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, set to be the sole challenger to Starmer, has declared his support for boosting rearmament. The main demand of the British ruling class on Burnham is that he fulfil his promise and slash welfare and social services at unprecedented levels to pay for rearmament.



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