



SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES BILL 2024

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) and the Community Security Group (CSG) have been working together to address rising antisemitism in the Victorian Jewish community.

Among the many activities being undertaken in this regard, both organisations have been involved in supporting Jewish students and staff members at Victorian universities who have been victims of or witnessed anti-Jewish hate.

The JCCV and CSG supports the *Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism in Australian Universities Bill 2024* and urges cross-parliamentary support for this independent inquiry.

BACKGROUND

For more than 85 years, the JCCV has been the peak body for the Victorian Jewish community. Its history is rooted in diverse membership, democratic representation and robust advocacy. Its mission today is to ensure Jewish Victorians can live a safe and proud Jewish life. It represents 60 Jewish organisations, including the Victorian branch of the Australasian Union of Jewish Students.

The JCCV works in close partnership with CSG. CSG's mission is to protect Jewish life and Jewish way of life. One of CSG's key functions is to collect and record reports of antisemitism across Victoria.

Together, the JCCV and CSG publish the annual Victorian Antisemitism Report¹.

¹ <https://jccv.org.au/victorian-antisemitism-report/>



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Committee recommend that the Senate pass *the Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024*.
2. This submission agrees with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry that an Australian Human Rights Commission inquiry into the prevalence and impact of antisemitism, Islamophobia, the experience of First Nations peoples and racism at universities is not a satisfactory alternative to a commission of inquiry as outlined in the Bill.

VICTORIAN UNIVERSITIES

Jewish student leaders in Victoria have reported being actively marginalised for holding supportive views of Israel or for identifying as Zionists for a number of years, in particular within student unions. This has manifested in Jewish students being excluded from student union positions, isolated from political roles or prevented from speaking at student meetings.

However, the establishment of pro-Palestine “encampments” at Victorian universities during Semester 1 2024 led to a significant increase in the vilification, intimidation and marginalisation of Jewish students and staff members, as well as a glorification of violence, specifically against Israel.

It is the view of our organisations, based on extensive consultation with Jewish students and staff, that this behaviour was not adequately dealt with by universities. There was a broad feeling that university leadership seemingly relied on a supposed commitment to the freedom of speech of demonstrators above the rights and freedoms of others.

One result of this was a very large police presence at the JCCV-hosted Yom Hashoah community commemoration in April at Monash University. This commemoration is a sombre memorial to six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. It is held out-of-hours and, for many



years, it has been held in an auditorium at Monash University without incident or a police attending. With the establishment of the pro-Palestine encampment nearby, police risk assessments indicated that it was necessary for attendees to be protected by a large police presence for the first time in the event's history. This led to feelings of significant anxiety among Holocaust survivors and other patrons about the safety of attending this peaceful commemoration.

Then, with university leadership unable to move the aggressive pro-Palestine campaigners off campus, on May 7 2024, Victoria Police contacted the JCCV to help convene a meeting of Jewish student leaders from across Victorian universities to discuss safety and find ways for police to best support Jewish students. It was a stressful and confronting meeting for a very capable, but ultimately very young, group of leaders, whose role till then had largely been organising social events. While it was reassuring to know that police were cognisant of the growing issues and the officers involved treated all participants with the utmost sensitivity, it was also of great concern that such a meeting was required at all.

The JCCV and CSG continued regular engagement with these student leaders to provide security advice, logistical support and strategic and communications guidance. We heard from many students that the situation was negatively impacting on their studies, on their mental health and on their ability to participate fully in university life. In many cases, these same student leaders were meeting with university leadership over the same period. While they reported that they appreciated being contacted, they also spoke of feelings of frustration and futility at these meetings and, in many cases, at the inability of university leadership to uphold their own codes of conduct.

INCIDENT REPORTING

CSG has documented reports of antisemitism at Victorian universities. From January 1 to May 31 2024, CSG recorded 91 incidents deemed as antisemitic or suspicious (predominantly unknown individuals taking photos of attendees at Jewish events). Three-quarters of these incidents took place following the establishment of the first pro-Palestine on-campus encampments. These encampments, which last multiple weeks, clearly led to an escalation in hostility towards Jewish people at universities.

In engaging with Jewish university students and staff, it is very clear to both the JCCV and CSG that there is significant under-reporting of antisemitism. There are two fundamental reasons for



this under-reporting: (1) A lack of understanding about *how* to make a report and *where* to report incidents. (2) A lack of confidence that there is value in making a report.

The JCCV and CSG have done extensive work with Jewish university staff and students to raise awareness of existing reporting mechanisms. This work has been complicated by the fact that each university has a different reporting process; that some of these reporting processes are arduous; and that students are asked to report the same incident multiple times because there is no central data collection agency or information sharing arrangements.

The JCCV and CSG have also supported additional communications to the Jewish community emphasising the importance of reporting to both universities and to CSG and the ways in which these reports can help inform possible mitigation or disciplinary processes.

Even with this additional work, community consultation with student leaders has indicated that many anti-Jewish incidents at universities are not reported either to CSG or to university reporting mechanisms.

In May 2024, in response to a strong increase in reports of antisemitism at Victorian universities, CSG released a special report called “Jewish Community Incident Reporting on Victorian University Campuses”. This special report also includes definitional and methodological information about the data collected. Due to the sensitive nature of the information provided, this report has been made available to the committee on a confidential basis.

Not incorporated into the CSG report is the impact of antisemitism on Jewish academic and non-academic staff working at Victorian universities.

The JCCV has been supporting a number of Jewish staff members across different Victorian universities. In order to protect their identities, this report won't go into details on their experiences.

Staff member 1

An identifiably Jewish staff member was the victim of an assault near a pro-Palestine activity at a university. Police investigations are ongoing.



Staff member 2

A Jewish lecturer has repeatedly approached their faculty for support to deal with multiple interruptions by demonstrators spreading hateful, divisive and antisemitic rhetoric in lecture halls. The lecturer has been left feeling unsafe and without any mechanisms to prevent the unwanted and offensive interruptions.

Staff member 3

Two Jewish staff members from two different universities sought advice from the JCCV on directives they were given to work from home during the encampments. They felt this directive was being used by university leaders to cover up the fact they couldn't provide a safe workplace for Jewish staff. Both staff members felt they should not be directed to work from home as a mechanism to mitigate risk, rather the risk should be removed.

CONCLUSION

In light of the evidence above, it is clear that antisemitism at universities has had a significant impact on Victorian Jewish students, staff, and even the broader Jewish community. It is also clear that the situation has not been adequately addressed by university leadership, resulting in the need for police intervention or for Jewish individuals to be left in culturally and physically unsafe situations.

In a bid to hold universities to account, to strengthen safety mechanisms for all students, and to put in place policies and processes that prevent similar situations arising in the future, this submission calls for the Committee to recommend that the Senate pass *the Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024*.

In the eyes of the organisations preparing this submission, the advantages of a committee of inquiry over other types of inquiry, including the Australian Human Rights Commission, are:

- The commission would be undertaken by a Judge, an independent and unaligned figure.
- The commission's terms of reference are uniquely focussed on antisemitism, a growing and unique challenge. In contrast, the AHRC inquiry is expected to focus on racism against First Nations.
- The commission has been directed to consider antisemitism broadly and make practical recommendations both to universities and to legislators.



For this reason, this submission agrees with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry that an Australian Human Rights Commission inquiry into the prevalence and impact of antisemitism, Islamophobia, the experience of First Nations peoples and racism at universities is not a satisfactory alternative to a commission of inquiry as outlined in the Bill.

The JCCV and CSG thank the committee for the opportunity to provide this written submission. We urge senators to closely consider the information provided and would be happy to provide any additional information required.