

**Australian universities and terrorism
by Anthony Bergin and Raspal Khosa**

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Introduction

A comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that incorporates defence of the Australian homeland is not solely the responsibility of the Australian Government or state and territory and local governments.

This point is explicitly recognised in the Australian Government's most recent counter-terrorism strategy paper, *Protecting Australia Against Terrorism 2006*. This publication outlines the importance of engaging the Australian public and private sectors to achieve our goals in protecting Australia against terrorism. Nowhere, however, is there any discussion in this document on the role of the universities in our overall counter-terrorism strategy.

Universities are potential terrorist targets. They may also be a source of personnel, knowledge and materiel for attacks on other targets. Our universities can assist in delivering counter-terrorism solutions through their research efforts and by their teaching programs that produce better educated security professionals and well-informed citizens. Universities can also contribute to raising community awareness about the risks of terrorism through various outreach activities.

Potential targets

Whilst there are many potential soft targets for terrorists and noting that terrorist attacks against academic institutions are rare, Australia's thirty-nine universities must be considered as potential terrorist targets. In 2005, Australian higher education institutions collectively had 957,176 students and 90,407 staff. With the hardening of high value targets such as government buildings, transport networks and other critical infrastructure, terrorists will turn to easier targets such as universities. Currently these institutions don't have any counter-terrorism plans, although they do have evacuation plans for emergencies.

The shock value of attacking a soft target such as an academic institution and killing and maiming large numbers of young people should not be underestimated. This was starkly demonstrated by the massacre of thirty-two

students and teaching staff at Virginia Tech University in the United States on April 16, 2007. This mass shooting was carried out by a lone gunman who was a student at that institution.

An attack on a university campus in Australia would have a detrimental effect on the economy. In particular it would adversely impact on overseas students' desire to study here. After an attack our universities may not be seen as safe places to study.

Universities are symbolic targets. Many Australian universities have campuses in overseas locations. These facilities may also be seen as targets for militant Islamists in their war against the West. Australia has been key protagonist in the War on Terror, and this has not gone unnoticed by violent jihadist groups in our region.

Universities represent the 'battle of ideas'. Historically they are sites of struggle. Universities are liberal, multicultural institutions which represent modernity. They are places where men and women, irrespective of background, gather to be educated in an open environment where they can challenge conventional wisdom.

Australian universities vary in size from the largest with 40,000 students—equivalent to the population of a medium sized town—to the smallest with 2,000 students. Most, however, range from 10,000 to 20,000 students. Individual campus populations that comprise students, academic staff and support personnel, might number in the tens of thousands at any one time. While some campuses are geographically expansive, many have concentrations of staff and students, making them very densely populated. This feature of campus life increases the physical vulnerability of universities.

By their very nature universities are public places, with freedom of movement making them difficult to police. Furthermore, universities operate according to timetables—this makes planning a terrorist attack easier. University mass gatherings such as graduation ceremonies, open days, and large sporting and cultural events are difficult to secure.

Our universities house infrastructure such as laboratories that contain hazardous materials or agents that might be targeted by terrorists. Several Australian universities host Jewish studies centres that may attract attention from a range of extremists. A Catholic university campus, for example, might also be viewed by some individuals or groups as a symbolic target.

Universities may also be targets because they have some very high profile individuals on campus. Furthermore, our universities are often visited by VIPs, or host the children of VIPs as students, some of whom may be regarded as high value targets by terrorists.

Providing resources

Australian universities expose students, whether Australian or foreign, to positive ideas such as critical thinking, tolerance and democracy. Almost all students are against terrorism and extremism. Last year the then Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (now called Universities Australia) re-affirmed its rejection of any form of racial vilification or discrimination on Australian

university campuses.

Universities, however, are also a potential source of recruitment of ideologically susceptible students by various extremist groups and have in some places become hubs of radical propaganda and fundraising for militant causes. Perhaps the most notorious example was the radical Islamist cell in Hamburg that operated among Middle Eastern and North African students who were enrolled at the Hamburg-Harburg Technical University in the late 1990s. Members of this group that was led by Mohammed Atta, later went on to become leading conspirators in the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

More recently, four would-be terrorist bombers who were jailed for life in Britain in May 2007, had either studied at British universities or used their facilities. The case of Babar Ahmad is also instructive. Ahmad ran a jihadist website from the University of London between 1997 and 2004. He has been indicted by a US grand jury and awaits extradition from the UK to the US. Terrorism experts now argue that the Internet has replaced the training camp as the principal recruitment tool. Universities, whilst just one of a number of potential sources of Internet access, do provide open Internet communications that have been exploited elsewhere and could be exploited in Australia.

Studies examining the broader patterns of Islamist terrorist networks have found that many of the leadership are tertiary educated. It should, however, be noted that among those convicted or accused of jihadist terrorism related crimes in Australia, only a few individuals have been university graduates. Many of those charged as a result of the high-profile *Operation Pendennis* counter-terrorism investigation in Sydney and Melbourne between November 2005 and March 2006 are tradesmen.

Whilst diversity of opinion at universities does not necessarily make them a terrorist recruiting ground, recruiting is made easier as universities thrive on this aspect of campus life. The increasing number of foreign students at Australian universities may be attractive targets for talent-spotting by extremist individuals or groups. Overseas students arriving here for the first time may be vulnerable targets. Some might want to explore their faith but then fall in with the wrong company.

In 2005, there were 175,589 overseas students (not including New Zealanders and permanent residents) enrolled onshore in Australian higher education institutions. Australian universities are now increasingly looking to the Middle East for students. Australia is already the third-most popular education destination for Middle Eastern students. The Saudi Arabian Government, for example, has turned to Australia to help educate its tertiary students following difficulties gaining visas for study in the US and Britain. The Saudis are supporting the education of their nationals in Australian universities with more than a billion dollar scholarship fund.

It's a Department of Immigration and Citizenship requirement that overseas students attend all classes. Their attendance must be recorded by tertiary institutions. But large numbers of foreign students also provide opportunities for potential terrorists to blend in. The improper use of student visas may see universities used to further terrorist intent. It's the role of the Australian Government, not the universities, to undertake background checks for student

visa applications.

Universities house materials that could be used as weapons either directly or indirectly, such as chemicals, hazardous materials in laboratories including pathogens and other dangerous biological material. Security standards for laboratories vary from one institution to another. Smaller, less resourced institutions are likely to have less effective controls over chemicals and various precursors.

Plant pathogens are not normally restricted in terms of access, except material imported into Australia. Restricting access is not likely to reduce the threat since these organisms are free in the environment. They can be isolated and produced by someone with fairly basic skills. This has significant implications for risks associated with agro-terrorism, which would adversely impact on our agricultural sector and cause severe damage to the economy.

A 2006 Australian Defence Department and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade publication, *Tertiary and Research Institutions: Export Controls – Your Responsibilities*, details a range of dual use technologies and chemical and biological agents that may be adapted to military applications and weapons of mass destruction programs, which are subject to specific export controls. This document recognises the problem of rogue states and terrorist organisations attempting to exploit university-based research for harmful purposes.

There are also dilemmas with respect to researchers attempting to access jihadi websites and the possession of terrorist literature. Two years ago a student at Monash University was questioned by police after purchasing and borrowing books on suicide bombings, a subject he was legitimately researching for his course on terrorism.

Developing solutions

Our universities can assist in countering terrorism through research that might assist to produce better policy approaches and strategies, developing counter-terrorism technologies and through teaching programs that produce better educated security professionals. Through outreach activities universities can raise community awareness on terrorism related issues. Universities can support staff with relevant expertise to assist government counter-terrorist agencies.

The Australian Research Council (ARC) has designated *Safeguarding Australia*, including 'protecting Australia from terrorism and crime', as one of its research priority areas. There are a number of university centres that are undertaking terrorism related work. The Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism is at Macquarie University. There is a Global Terrorism Research Centre at Monash University. The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University has undertaken work on terrorism. The University of Wollongong hosts a transnational crime prevention centre. The ANU has a National Centre for Biosecurity, whose interests include bioterrorism. An ARC-funded centre of excellence in policing and security has recently been announced. Griffith University is the lead institution, working in partnership with the Australian National University, the University of Queensland and Charles Sturt University.

The Australian Government has funded the *Research Network for a Secure Australia*, a multi-disciplinary collaboration established to strengthen Australia's research capacity for protecting critical infrastructure from disasters, including terrorist acts. The RNSA has an Advisory Board, chaired by the Attorney-General's Department, with the departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Defence also represented. The Australian Government further promotes collaboration on science and technology research related to terrorism through the National Security Science and Technology Unit in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and through the Publicly Funded Agencies' Collaborative Counter-Terrorism Research Program.

There are limitations in current terrorism research at our universities. They only have a small capacity to undertake classified work. A great deal of research at universities is basic, rather than applied research that's tied to specific counter-terrorism capabilities, although this is changing as universities become increasingly reliant on external funding for their work.

Social science research can provide policy solutions and inform our counter-terrorism strategies. While some Australian social science research has been well focused on user agency needs, much of this research has not demonstrated any immediate, short or even long-term direct application to counter-terrorism policy or capabilities.

During the Cold War Australian universities created programs in strategic studies, international relations and area studies. In an age of terror, Australian universities are now developing a range of education programs in terrorism and counter-terrorism. There are also sparse offerings in intelligence studies, although not closely tied to actual tradecraft. Some universities are large providers of law enforcement education that includes terrorism and counter-terrorism courses. Developing appropriate terrorism courses at our universities is proving challenging, as it requires a strong commitment to interdisciplinary studies.

These courses and programs appear to vary greatly in emphasis. There does not at this stage appear to be an overall consensus about what constitutes or should constitute a common body of knowledge in such programs. The trend is to have terrorism as an area of concentration within more traditional degree programs.

In terms of university outreach and service, universities have provided staff with expertise in terrorism to act as consultants to law enforcement and security agencies and have conducted some professional education courses for practitioners.

Future challenges

Universities will remain potential terrorist targets. This poses difficult challenges for protective security on campus, an issue brought into sharp focus for university administrators by the Virginia Tech massacre. These real security concerns must be balanced by the need for universities to be open institutions. Our universities should not be turned into armed fortresses.

The government has established the *Trusted Information Sharing Network* (TISN) for critical infrastructure protection. Part of the TISN is a Mass Gatherings Infrastructure Assurance Advisory Group. It assists business to share information on issues relating to generic threats and vulnerabilities associated with the built environment and public gatherings. Universities, especially university security services, should be included in the discussions of the mass gatherings advisory group of TISN.

Developing security practices and regulatory regimes in areas such as biological agents and hazardous materials, and keeping sensitive research out of the hands of potential terrorists, will pose challenges for both the Australian Government and the universities in devising security approaches that don't impair academic freedom. Some combination of a university and government control regime may be preferable to a completely independent body. More work is needed on this issue.

There is also the challenge of developing much stronger links between government and the universities on terrorism research. Universities have much expertise to offer government here as well as education and training courses. The university–government nexus, however, is very weak on national security. A regular information sharing forum should be established between the national security community and the peak body, Universities Australia. While universities would not welcome an overly prescriptive research plan that stifled creativity and innovation, the forum could cover issues related to research requirements as well as address education and training issues. The lead could be taken by the National Security Division in the Prime Minister's department. There is also scope for more discussion between the ARC and government agencies on some of the priorities for terrorism research.

One sensitive issue that would need to be canvassed at such a forum is the matter of academics monitoring students on behalf of security agencies. In the United Kingdom the Department of Education and Skills last December warned academic staff to log suspicious behaviour and report it to police, warning of serious, but not widespread Islamic extremist activity in British higher education institutions. It asked academics to vet Islamic preachers who have been invited to campuses and ensure that 'hate literature' is not distributed among students.

Many academics would argue that some of these practices undermine the trust needed between lecturers and students to freely exchange ideas and debate controversial issues. On the other hand, there is not a formal confidentiality arrangement between lecturers and students. As with Virginia Tech, there may be information available to university staff which might help warn about or avert a terrible incident. This would not just be a staff responsibility but also fellow students. Further to this, we must ask whether student services are adequately resourced to provide comprehensive support to students at risk.

Finally, the challenges of our universities developing integrated and relevant research and teaching programs in terrorism and counter-terrorism in Australia needs to be addressed. There should be established a national academic consortium to foster interest in terrorism and counter-terrorism research within our universities, to promote joint research, exchange information about academic programs and coordinate academic support for government agencies responsible for counter-terrorism.

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