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Internationalisation and Securitisation in UK Higher Education
An Exceptional Case

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the current condition of the UK Higher Education sector, which it treats as an 'exemplary case'. It examines two distinct and interrelated elements of the 'polycrisis' - internationalisation and securitisation. It argues that UK higher education is shaped by both an internationalised and now faltering business strategy and by the contested consequences of Britain's geopolitical and military choices. Internationalisation is now perceived by policy-makers to give rise to new security risks, a perception which is linked to a concern for securitisation, and a consequent threat to academic freedom. By placing securitisation policies and internationalisation in the same frame, the article considers the significance of the Prevent Duty both for academic freedom and for the recruitment of international students. It concludes that UK higher education has not found a way of overcoming its policy tensions and that unless changes take place at Government level its new reluctance to prioritise international recruitment will worsen problems of funding and lead higher education into a renewed spiral of austerity to adapt aggressive austerity policies.

Keywords
Internationalisation, tuition fees, securitisation, academic freedom, UK higher education, Brexit, Palestine.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse two elements of the *polycrisis* (Morin and Kern 1999; Juncker 2016) in the UK Higher Education systems and through this analysis to understand its current condition. The first relates to aspects of internationalisation and its consequences for the financial sustainability of UK Higher Education Institutions; the second is about the implications of securitisation policies for academic freedom. The elements are both distinct and interrelated and their relationship has significant implications for the viability and overall shape of UK Higher Education.

Internationalisation is a relatively new, broad and varied trend in higher education, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales and stakeholders. Its impact on regions, countries, and institutions varies according to their particular contexts (de Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G.; 2020, Introduction). It is often associated with the concept of 'academic mobility' (for both staff and students) though more recently scholars have also discussed curriculum internationalisation and/or citizenship development (ibid.) In this article, I focus on 'internationalisation', in the form of the recruitment of overseas students, as a business strategy for UK higher education, pursued both by government and individual universities in the context of changes in the funding systems of UK HEIs. It is a strategy which has become essential to the viability of the UK higher education, which thus presents an exceptional case, when compared with other higher education systems in Europe.

Internationalisation took off as a business strategy in the period of 'high globalisation' - of increasing inter-connections between national economies, of political arrangements which facilitated such connections and of opportunities for global mobility on the part of at least some sections of the global population. These integrative developments were always qualified by the existence of conflict and inequalities on a global scale but they were strong enough to provide a basis for internationalisation strategies in higher education. With the growth of nationalist populism and the rise of military tensions between NATO countries, Russia and China–'internationalisation' as business strategy faces new complexities, while at the same time, universities have become sites where some of the major conflicts of world politics are played out, creating new areas of contestation between academic staff, students, university administrations and external political actors. In this latter context, certain issues have

come to be regarded as threats to the security of British society. They are said to require a response that sets limits to customary academic freedoms and rights of political expression in the name of promoting security. This trend towards 'securitisation' (Mason 2013) has included legislation, policing, systematic surveillance, and injunctions to prevent certain forms of collective action. The trend applies across a range of issues, with the common connecting thread that they are attempting to manage critical and oppositional responses to the UK's geopolitical strategy.

UK higher education is thus shaped by both an internationalised and now faltering business strategy and by the contested consequences of Britain's geopolitical and military choices. I begin my discussion of these intertwined processes by discussing the changing relationship between universities and the state and how it provided conditions for the emergence and establishment of internationalisation as a strategy for survival which also contained within itself the seeds of destabilisation. I then move on to place securitisation policies in the context of internationalisation, considering in this light the especially the significance of the Prevent Duty for academic freedom and for the recruitment of international students.

1. The relationship between Universities and the State - the path to internationalisation

In order to understand the significance of current policy in relation to both internationalisation and securitisation, we need to situate it in the context of the complex and changing relationship between universities and the British state (Russell 1993, Collini 2012). Until the late twentieth century universities operated under arrangements whereby, despite broad constraints and periods when there were major interventions by government, they were able to exercise considerable autonomy from religious, commercial and governmental pressures. Even where universities were initially constituted as religious foundations (Oxford, Cambridge, Durham) much of the time there was considerable scope for unorthodox views. Where they were private foundations, they were not usually run 'for profit' (see Traianou 2015). Though they often served a vocational function, this was usually framed as a matter of providing a liberal education; this was characteristic both of ancient foundations like Oxford, Cambridge, and the Scottish universities founded in the 15th and 16th centuries and - almost as much - of the universities founded in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ideas

of university autonomy continued to be influential even when universities became dependent for their funding primarily on central government (Russell 1993). It is possible in the late twentieth century to trace a trend away from this model of what might be called patronage funding towards an investment model, which gathered pace considerably in the 1980s. This change had two aspects, with government seeking to play a more interventionist role in relation to the organisation and practice of universities, and at the same time encouraging universities to operate more in the manner of commercial enterprises, responding to new demands and opportunities, and securing external funds so as to reduce the proportion of their finance coming from taxation (Brown 2010). The changes partly stemmed from the growing size of the university sector and the considerable demands that it placed upon public finances, but it also resulted from periods of economic austerity, and from important ideological and political changes in the UK which called into question the idea of the university as an institution which was both publicly funded and autonomous (Jones 2015).

Significant changes came with the 1988 Education Act which introduced a 'vast new machinery designed to make universities more "accountable" for the public money they received' (Russell 1993:7) at the same time as student numbers increased to the point where nearly half the age cohort was enrolled in higher education. The Act also abolished academic tenure, in the expectation that this would open up the way for rationalization within universities, including the closure of some departments, to increase efficiency. Although there was considerable initial opposition from vice-chancellors to the 1988 Act, it slowly laid the basis for a new institutional division between academic staff, now more insecure in their status and employment, and a cadre of university managers, charged with achieving 'value for money' in a volatile funding environment. What Holmwood calls 'neoliberal forms of governance' emerged, that sought to 'manage public activities by finding proxies for market mechanisms' and by exposing universities to 'market' pressure (Holmwood 2019: 640-1). As these forms became embedded, academic behaviour was increasingly shaped by an economic logic. Resistance to the effects of this logic became an increasingly prominent part of academic life, in which adherence to an idea of academic autonomy was counterposed to new orthodoxies. The words of one departing academic, a Professor of Archaeology at Cardiff, could equally have been spoken in any number of universities: 'Management's vision for a post-academic university … ought to be an oxymoron, but for the managerial elite clearly is not. This view is I think both profoundly wrong and

deeply unrealistic. What it is not is an academic vision – that is, a vision that pays any respect to the founding principles of the institution, nor to the tradition of enquiry that the word 'academic' represents.' (Shipton 2025).

1.1 Tuition Fees and the Global student market

Market mechanisms could not in themselves raise funding levels in the sector. Only financial resources engineered by governments could do that. The main political parties acknowledged that 'sustaining future economic growth and social mobility in an increasingly competitive global knowledge economy will require increased investment in higher education.' (Browne 2010: 14). But at the same time, neither party was willing directly to provide that investment. The alternative they found was to greatly increase the level of student fees and to loan students the money to pay them. When tuition fees for home students were introduced in 1998, institutions were allowed to charge up to £1000. In 2004 this maximum was increased to £3000. In 2010, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government empowered universities to charge fees up to the level of £9000 per year, introducing at the same time a system of long-term loans, placing on students a burden of debt. It was hoped that this debt would secure the funding of universities, most of whose income would come from students via fees (McGettigan 2013: 13)[2].

With the new financial system came other changes: an emphasis on the student as a consumer whose satisfaction would be measured and used to hold universities to account, the withdrawing of government funding for the teaching of arts, humanities and social sciences undergraduate degrees, the entry into the system of private-for-profit colleges, increasing commercial pressures on conventional universities (McGettigan 2013; 2014).

Student opposition to this policy was fierce and sustained, contributing to the rise of an anti-austerity social movement (Palmieri and Solomon 2011; Myers 2017). Faced

[2] Undergraduate tuition fees for UK students are a maximun of £9535 per annum, except in Scotland: Scottish students do not pay fees to attend Scottish Universities. International undergraduate students pay between £111,000 and £38,000 per annum, with a median fee of £22,000). Postgraduate fee levels are more diverse. The average fee for an international taught postgraduate student is £17,100. For a home postgraduate taught student fees range between £9000 to £13000. International undergraduate students pay between £111,000 and £38,000 per annum, with a median fee of £22,000). Postgraduate fee levels are more diverse. The average fee for an international taught postgraduate student is £17,100. For a home postgraduate taught student fees range between £9000 to £13000.

with this opposition, political leaders became averse to increasing course fees in line with inflation so that within a few years, the cost of providing university education outstripped the value of the fees; universities, which had temporarily benefited from a boost to their income, found themselves facing new financial problems.

For universities and for government an important part of the answer to these problems lay in the recruitment of undergraduate and postgraduate international students. Over centuries of development UK universities had accumulated material and immaterial resources that made them attractive destinations for students; English was a world language, UK qualifications were universally recognised. These advantages were mobilised for the purposes of recruitment (Cannings, Haltrebeck, & Conlon 2023).

In 1980, the Thatcher government had introduced the principle that all new international students should pay the full cost of their education, with no public subsidy. Before 1980, international students were generally charged the same fees as UK students, with some even receiving public funding. From 1980 institutions were expected to charge fees that covered the full cost of the course, with a minimum of £2,000 for arts courses, £3,000 for science courses, and £5,000 for clinical years of medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science (Williams 1984).There has been a steady increase in the fees since then and a differential has developed between home and overseas fees. By 2013, the BBC was reporting that in 2014 'students from outside the EU will pay up to four times the fees charged to UK students' (Burns 2013).

Despite the costs, international student numbers grew rapidly. In 2015/16, the number of new overseas entrants to UK universities was around 231,000 (Home Office 2016 Accredited Official Statistics: Study). By 2022/23 this had risen to 459,000 and in all, there were 758,855 overseas students studying at UK universities, 26% of the total student number. (House of Commons Research Briefing, 2024). By the early 2020s, income from international student fees had become essential to universities, with international undergraduate students paying an average of £22,000, against £9250 for home students. (Ibid). Fee income from all international students across the UK was £12.1 billion in 2023/24, representing 23% of total university income, compared with around 5% in the mid-1990s (ibid). In more prestigious and research-intensive institutions income from overseas students was even more important. The income cross-subsidised other activities, notably the teaching of UK students and research activity in disciplines where it was more difficult to achieve grant funding. (Btitish Academy 2025). Seen in terms of ‘economic benefit’, it was estimated in a report for

the Higher Education Policy Institute (London Economics 2023) that over the entire period of their studies the 2021/22 student cohort would generate £41.9 billion to the UK economy. The Conservative Government of 2019-2024 set an aim of increasing 'the value of international students even further, with year-on-year increases in student numbers expected up to 2030 (International Education Strategy 2021).

1.2 Internationalisation as a problematic 'Spatial Fix' strategy

From the perspective of government and of university management, internationalisation appeared largely as a benefit to the United Kingdom. (Relatively) free academic movement of students and staff into the UK sustained the university sector and compensated for inadequacies of funding from domestic sources. In this sense, it had the role of what the economic geographer David Harvey called a 'spatial fix', a means by which economic problems are overcome by reorganising geographical space, and by finding new markets and resources outside the space of a regional or national economy which can defer or mitigate those problems (Harvey 2006). Having found one fix in the form of student debt, UK policy had now found a second in student recruitment on a global scale.

As with student debt, however, the spatial fix perpetuated old problems as well as generating new ones. The increase of international student recruitment did not resolve the issues of managerialism, academic freedom and educational purpose which had troubled higher education for several decades (Traianou 2015). In some ways, it made them more acute, as universities emphasised the pursuit of student numbers often above basic research or academic breadth, with arts, languages and social sciences being placed especially at risk (Holmwood and McGettigan 2011; Newfield 2021). On courses which were successful in recruitment terms, increases in student numbers frequently added to problems of workload. (Giannakis and Bullivant 2015).

There are wider problems. Habib (2023) and Habib and Hastings (2025) claim that the pursuit of national economic benefit has negative global consequences. The UK model of mass international recruitment of education is 'effectively directed towards sucking out resources from countries far more impoverished than the UK, to essentially cross-subsidise domestic citizens' (Habib 2023). Its effect is to 'weaken institutional capacities and human capabilities in the majoritarian world at precisely the moment when such societies require an enhancement of capabilities to address the local manifestations of transnational challenges like climate change, pandemics, food

insecurity and war' (Habib and Hastings 2025). For Habib (2023), UK universities are 'effectively pursuing short-term financial strategies that could compromise the global community's collective long-term future'.

The spatial fix is also problematic in its own terms. The UK rapidly developed a business model for higher education predicated upon continuous growth in international student numbers. As we have seen, large numbers of universities came to depend upon international recruitment as the means to sustain their basic functions; in the process, their positions became more fragile. However, the business model they had adopted was a fragile one.

1.3 Internationalisation, geopolitical changes and the politics of security

Internationalisation in higher education, at one point celebrated by policy-makers as an unequivocal benefit, is now also in some senses a source of trouble for UK governments. To understand this, it is important to locate it in a geopolitical context that goes beyond the financial predicaments of universities. The UK's recent 'Strategic Defence Review' sets out the government's perspective on this context, a perspective in which the sense of 'polycrisis' (Morin and Kern 1999; Juncker 2016) is evident. 'For the first time since the end of the Cold War,' the Defence Review says, 'the UK faces multiple, direct threats to its security, prosperity, and democratic values. The world itself is beset by volatility and deep uncertainty.' (Ministry of Defence 2025). This sense of threat, which extends beyond the military dimension, has become a keynote of policy and is having an impact on higher education.

The most obvious form of impact stems from issues of migration. Societal breakdown in Africa and West Asia has increased the number of migrants. Post-2008 austerity in Europe created conditions in which parties of the right could make migration a mainstream political issue; centre-left parties adopted many of the policies of the right, committing themselves to maintaining a hostile environment for migrants. In Britain, after Brexit, the UK set up new immigration barriers for EU citizens, with increased visa complexities and higher costs. (UK Trade and Business Commission 2024). Attendance requirements for students, restrictions on family entry added to difficulties for both students and academic staff. EU students had to pay fees at international, rather than UK levels. The subsequent fall in EU student numbers was initially covered by a rise in recruitment from other countries. But this rise too has now reversed, for several reasons, including the high costs of tuition and a policy reversal

which prevented migrants, including academic migrants, being joined by their families. (House of Commons Research Briefing 2024). It has been suggested, too, that domestic politics, themselves shaped by global populist trends, have contributed to recruitment problems (Blake 2024). In 2024, safety concerns, heightened by far-right protests against immigration and a subsequent 'travel warning' issued by countries like Nigeria, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, may have had such an effect (Blake 2024). The populist turn of the Conservative government, with its rhetoric of 'stop the boats' may also have added to this effect. The financial imperative of international student recruitment is thus in tension with political discourses in which themes of risk, threat and security play an important part. In this way, 'internationalisation' became entangled with the politics of security.

These were the conditions in which, in 2023/24 there occurred a decline of 3.5 per cent in international student numbers (HESA 2025) - leading the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2024) to warn of the financial risks which universities would face if assumptions about future growth in international student numbers proved optimistic, and if global events and tensions worked to depress recruitment. The House of Commons Education Committee (2025) warned of the 'perfect storm' that was hitting UK universities, as a consequence of 'tuition fees having barely increased in a decade, pressure on research funding and government immigration policy which is leading to the number of international students falling.' Given the current government's perception that migration is a force for instability (Defence Review 2025), its pledge to 'take back control of our borders', its perception that 'net migration levels seen in recent years have been completely unacceptable' (Gilbert and Hattenstone 2025) and its description of a period of relatively high immigration in the early twenty-first century as a 'squalid chapter in our history' (Prime Minister Keir Starmer in the Guardian 12th May 2025) it is not unlikely that the storm will intensify.

These sharpening tensions within policy are signs of the way in which geopolitical tensions are being played out in UK universities. Perhaps of even more consequence, long-term, is the question of China. China is at one and the same time a country whose students (and, increasingly, researchers) are vital to the financial viability and research strength of UK universities, and a state identified by the UK government as a 'sophisticated and persistent challenge', which is increasingly leveraging its economic, technological, and military capabilities, seeking to establish

dominance in the Indo-Pacific, erode US influence, and put pressure on the rules-based international order. Chinese technology and its proliferation to other countries is already a leading challenge for the UK, with Defence likely to face Chinese technology wherever and with whomever it fights.' (Defence Review 2025: 28)

At this point, the difficult relationship between the dynamics of internationalisation and those of securitisation is clear. The security agenda is likely to set increasingly strict limits on academic engagement with China, at the same time as it prompts a new government interest in the military significance of higher education. The consequences for UK universities may well be felt both financially, and in terms of a new set of topics (especially questions of war and peace) around which a chilling effect is created.

1.4 The consequences for academic freedom

Academic freedom in the UK is a contentious matter, as it is elsewhere, and it has long been so. Some writers define it in terms of the freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without those concerned placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions (Russell 1993: 1−2). Here the emphasis is mostly on free speech as a civil right (see Hammersley 2025). Other writers interpret academic freedom to refer to a form of professional autonomy, relating to university academics as an occupational group. Thus, Haskell (1996: 54) declared that '…the heart and soul of academic freedom lie not in free speech but in professional autonomy and collegial self-governance'. So in this case, the main emphasis tends to be on the need for considerable autonomy in the spheres of research and teaching (Post 2006, Fish 2014). As many scholars have argued over the past three decades, academic freedom in UK higher education, in both the senses outlined above, has been eroded (Allen 2025). Since 2016, the EU anti-integration rhetoric of Brexit combined with austerity, xenophobia, racism, research-stifling audits and an increased emphasis on securitisation policies have placed academic freedom in greater danger, in ways that are discussed below.

2. Securitisation

The controversies over migration policies, described above, are only one element in a more general geopolitical situation. 'Securitisation' has developed in response to a series of political emergencies (van der Pijl 2013), of which terrorism is the most prominent. The UK's strategic commitment to military involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan had domestic political consequences in the form of bombings and knife attacks in British cities (2005-2023). The response of UK governments has included the introduction in 2005 of the Prevent duty (see Prevent Duty Guidance 2023). In 2025, this duty was extended to universities, which are by law required to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and extremism and so to embed Prevent into everyday working arrangements. 'Terrorism' is defined as the use or threat of action which involves serious violence against a person, serious damage to property, serious risk to the health or safety of the public, or serious interference with an electronic system (Terrorism Act 2000). Extremism means 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (Home Office Revised Prevent Duty Guidance 2015). Extremism, thus, does not necessarily involve law-breaking: it is not a crime to oppose fundamental British values. From a Prevent perspective however, it 'can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists then exploit'; it has a place on a spectrum of 'radicalisation' and those who manifest signs of 'extremism' are find themselves involved in Prevent's system and database. (Home Office 2015).

Institutions of higher education, like other public authorities, have a statutory duty to pay due regard to individuals at risk of radicalisation. Staff must undertake training to identify the signs of radicalisation and to report at-risk individuals – students and colleagues – to their institution's Prevent safeguarding team. The teams will discuss their concerns with counter-terrorism police officers, with individual 'suspects' being considered for referral to a de-radicalisation programme. The criteria for referral include particular actions or speech acts, and also what are perceived as personality traits or experiential conditions which may dispose individuals to terrorism - an 'identity crisis', 'feelings of failure', a 'sense of grievance' 'low self-esteem' and so on. (2015 UK Government Home Office Prevent Guidance). Securitisation thus involves a heightened level of observation of individuals by university staff of all kinds: porters, academics,

cleaners, administrators (Nabulsi 2017). In addition, universities must have measures in place to monitor external speakers invited onto campus, and to deny a platform to any that may be judged to be 'extreme' (Holmwood 2023). In 2023/4 more than 40,000 meetings on higher education sites were reported to Prevent for monitoring. Most were cleared to go ahead. 1440 were allowed to proceed with some modification. 440 were rejected. (Office for Students Report 2023-2024).

The resources devoted to Prevent in higher education are considerable. The government's Office for Students reported in 2023/24 that 80,000 staff were identified as 'key' to its operation. Its impact is likewise extensive. 'Most academic staff,' writes Holmwood, 'will have received some training, probably in the form of a government provided e-learning module setting out the "signs" of radicalization for which they should be on the lookout' (2023: 26).

The tension between Prevent and established conceptions of university culture have been frequently noted (Holmwood 2023; Whiting et al 2020). The National Union of Students declared at its 2015 conference "Prevent and the Government's 'anti-extremism' agenda have been used to create an expansive surveillance architecture to spy on the public and to police dissent." (Allen 2025). The Oxford University Students Union (2017) responded to the extension of Prevent to higher education with a defence of the traditional purposes of the university: 'the central purpose of a university is to provide a space for intellectual inquiry, investigation and debate'. 'Hence,' the Students Union went on, 'the restriction of freedom of expression (such as through the Prevent duty) hinders the ability of HEIs to serve this core function. The real risk, as has been demonstrated, is that of bureaucratic policies increasingly corroding existing rights, freedoms and liberties in university settings.' In this account, new measures of securitisation were at odds with the values of freedom of expression and academic freedom.

The Prevent Duty's initial concern was with 'Islamic' extremism and terrorism. As the extent of right-wing extremism became more apparent, its perspective was expanded. However, the government appointed 'independent reviewer' of Prevent concluded in 2023 that: '[his] research showed that the present boundaries around what is termed by Prevent as extremist Islamist ideology are drawn too narrowly while the boundaries around the ideology of the extreme right-wing are too broad'. Prevent was refocused accordingly, with 'Islamic' extremism and terrorism at its core (Shawcross 2023). Muslim students have complained that the chilling effect of Prevent leads to self-

censorship and self-silencing and 'limits possibilities for critical teaching and learning which is predicated on notions of openness and mutual exchange' (Danvers 2021: 1264; Abbas et al. 2021). Students report that they consciously control their speech, engaging in self-censorship - especially on topics such as terrorism, fundamentalism or military conflict - lest they are perceived to be 'at risk of radicalisation' (Saeed 2019; Guest et al. 2020). Prevent hampers freedom of speech and assembly, threatens student activism and forces Muslim students to hide their Muslim identity to avoid being labelled as 'radical' or 'vulnerable' to terrorism (Zempi and Tripli 2022). Nabulsi (2017) lists some of the pervasive effects of the 'Prevent' culture: 'risk assessments' relating to academic events; a student questioned about their mental health, on the grounds that it might be a symptom of 'radicalisation'; police intervention in the planning of academic events; difficulties encountered in booking rooms for meetings to do with 'Islamic' topics; the scrutiny of guest lists in advance of social events.

2.1 Securitisation in relation to Palestine

The Prevent Duty, with its apparatus of surveillance, is a project through which the work of thousands of people is explicitly directed by the state. Not all forms of securitisation are directed in this way. They have emerged in more complex ways, through the work of a diversity of actors, some embedded in government agencies and universities while others are active in think tanks and pressure groups. In the case of Palestine, which has been the focus of much governance activity since 2015, a securitisation project has been produced through the co-ordination of these actors, both planned and relatively spontaneous.

The working definition of antisemitism published in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is intended to address a perceived threat to Jews. Manifestations of this threat might be directed 'toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.' They might also include 'the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity' (IHRA 2016). By 2024, the definition had been endorsed by 45 national governments, including in 2016 that of the UK. Within the UK, more than 270 units of local government had adopted it as well as three-quarters of all universities (Gorden 2024). In higher education, the definition has been used both proscriptively and educatively - as a framework for identifying antisemitic words and actions as part of a

disciplinary procedure, and as a resource for the curriculum of training programmes in antisemitism (University College London 2023). Notwithstanding the support it has from university managers, the IHRA has been much criticised for its conflation of antisemitism with criticism of the state of Israel (Gordon 2024; House of Lords Library 2025).

The adoption of the IHRA has taken place in the context of Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank and its frequent attacks on Gaza (Shlaim 2024). The definition has been deployed in response to rising criticism of Israel and what its supporters have presented as an attendant threat to Jews outside Israel. In the UK, civil society organisations including the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council and the Community Security Trust have been particularly strong advocates (Klug 2018), pressing universities to adopt the definition in response to a political climate that represented 'an existential threat to Jewish life in this country' (*Jewish Chronicle, Jewish Telegraph, Jewish News*, quoted in Klug op cit). Another significant actor has been the UK government. In 2020, the Secretary of State for Education wrote to universities to urge more institutions to adopt the IHRA's working definition, since the number of bodies that had adopted the definition remained "shamefully low". He said would "consider options" to increase adoption, including "directing the Office for Students [OfS] to suspend funding streams for universities at which antisemitic incidents occur and which have not signed up to the definition." Universities UK, the collective body of university vice-chancellors, urged all its members to adopt the definition (House of Lords 2025).

The adoption of the definition by universities has led to a number of incidents and investigations: a report by the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) documented 40 cases between 2017 and 2022, which it claimed demonstrated 'how the definition has been used as a basis for claiming that lectures, research, speeches, social media posts and campus activism amount to antisemitism for simply being critical of Israel and/or Zionism'. (ELSC and BRISMES, 2023: 17). Although in nearly all cases, the allegation of antisemitism had been rejected by investigative or disciplinary panels, ELSC/BRISMES argued that the process acted as a deterrent to research and teaching on topics that had become controversial. In the most high-profile case, a professor of sociology was dismissed by Bristol University following complaints of antisemitism. An employment tribunal ruled that his dismissal was unfair, though he was not reinstated. (Guardian 5th February 2024 'UK professor

suffered discrimination due to anti-Zionist beliefs, tribunal rules'). Beyond these specific cases, there was a widespread perception of an implicit coercion to avoid certain topics on Israel/Palestine. (Lukman et al. 2021; see also Gould 2018; Behar 2022). Researchers on one research project reported that 'although our participants generally understood that the IHRA definition does permit criticism of Israel, the level of tolerable criticism was below what they perceived as legitimate. Jewish students, Israeli academics and members of Palestinian solidarity organisations alike expressed serious concern about the "chilling effect" created by the IHRA definition and how free speech on Israel/Palestine, is or may be discouraged' (Lukman et al. 2021: 4).

From October 2023, the question of 'securitisation' in relation to Palestine was posed even more sharply. Universities saw a wave of protests against Israeli action in Gaza and against what was perceived by many staff and students as UK support for it. In the course of the following two years, securitisation has emerged as a contested process, reminding policy-makers that what is happening abroad can have significant repercussions at home. Universities have seen student encampments and demonstrations, demands for universities to divest from arms companies and renewed calls for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. The then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, called a meeting with vice-chancellors, to urge them to take 'personal responsibility' for the safety of Jewish students. (Guardian, 2024a) Many university administrations responded forcefully to protest (BRISMES 2025). A study by the civil rights organisation Liberty (2025) found that 28 universities had launched 'disciplinary investigations against students and staff in connection with their Palestine activism' (ibid). At least nine universities 'had received briefings on student protests from private intelligence and security companies'. (Liberty 2025). Universities initiated disciplinary actions against individual students for participating in protests; took out litigation directed at student organisers in order to remove student encampments; called police on to campus to forcibly remove student protesters, leading to arrests and, in some cases, injuries to students; oversaw situations in which university security staff reportedly assaulted and harassed student protesters. In these ways a securitisation agenda, closely connected to government policies for containing opposition to its geopolitical choices, has had an increasing impact on universities.

In counterpoint to the intensified securitisation of universities, students and staff renewed critiques of what they saw as the complicity of their institutions with war crimes and human rights violations. Staff and students at the London School of

Economics and Political Sciences, Newcastle University, Warwick University and Birkbeck, University of London were among those who claimed to have 'investigated our institution's ties to the violation of Palestinian rights', analysing investment policies, partnerships with companies, and research links with 'Israeli institutions linked with human rights violations'. (Shatz 2025: 20). In this way, as Shatz has noted of the United States, 'the question of Palestine became 'entangled with other concerns: antiracism, intellectual freedom … the right to assembly, cosmopolitanism, social justice, opposition to right-wing authoritarianism and neoliberalism. (Shatz 2025: 18)

3. Conclusion

Internationalisation, in relation to student recruitment, extended the economic logic of the contemporary university, driven to seek new spatial fixes in an effort to escape crises of underfunding. Its current difficulties suggest the limits of that logic, as business plans run into difficulties created by political reactions to the free movement of students and by new tensions in inter-state relations. UK higher education has not found a way of overcoming these difficulties. Securitisation, meanwhile, as a response to political emergencies provides less a solution to the 'existential threats' that some of its proponents have identified than a set of measures which threaten academic freedom and make universities into sites of permanent conflict. The UK's recent Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, which asserts the importance of academic freedom, recognises these problems without removing the securitisation policies which currently put this freedom at risk: Prevent and the IHRA remain in place.

At the time I am writing this article my university is undergoing its third 'restructuring' programme. Since 2024 more than 100 members of academic staff, making their decisions in pressurised conditions, have accepted either voluntary severance packages or enhanced redundancy deals. During this process, questions of internationalisation and securitisation have not been remote issues: controversies over the cost of a review of 'antisemitism' and over the responsibility for shortfalls in international student recruitment have been part of the soundtrack to redundancies.

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