

Cambridge University's planned involvement with military propaganda programme exposed

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Cambridge University made a bid to take part in a military propaganda scheme designed by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD).

In 2017, the MoD announced it was seeking an academic partner to create a centre to conduct psychological research in its efforts to build a stronger military. As part of the Human Social Science Research Capability (HSSRC) programme, according to an MoD presentation, the centre would be involved in the “targeted manipulation of information in the virtual and physical domains to shape attitudes and beliefs in the cognitive domain.”

The six major areas of research the programme would focus on are: personnel, training and education, humans in systems, human performance, and, notably, understanding and influencing human behaviour.

Influencing human behaviour, the MoD claimed, would follow a “full-spectrum approach” in order to “achieve geopolitical and strategic aims, including military, non-military, overt and covert means, within the rule of law.”

As reported by *Varsity*, Cambridge University was one of the four finalists in the running to house the proposed centre. According to documents obtained by the paper, Cambridge proposed to make a bid for the centre in partnership with the private defence firm, Frazer-Nash Consultancy, which would “provide the primary interface with industry and cover work that requires high levels of security clearance.”

If selected, the HSSRC programme would have provided Cambridge researchers with £20 million for research projects as well as £6.9 million in “core funding.” This amount, the proposal stated, “will provide a significant surplus over the actual cost to the University of managing the programme.”

Cambridge also estimated that, as prime contractor, it would be in a better position to compete for additional research funding associated with the programme amounting to £42 million, over a four-year period, with the potential for a three-year extension.

The programme was meant to be housed in a new research centre, to be known as the Centre for Strategic Futures, with the possibility of transforming it in the long term to a “profit generating programme management consultancy.”

Varsity reports that the proposal, discussed during a General Board of Faculties meeting in June 2018, had the support of the Heads of the School of Arts & Humanities and School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The Head of the School of Clinical Medicine, Professor Patrick Henry Maxwell, was quoted as supporting the proposal because it could contribute to supporting students’ mental health, while the MoD described it as designed to deliver a “skilled and capable workforce equipped ... to meet Defence requirements.”

The document published by *Varsity* is redacted and generally describes the proposed research centre by means of sanitized language characteristic of the corporate world. The sinister substance of the proposal is, however, unmistakable: there are ongoing and well-funded attempts on the part of the government’s armed forces to covertly influence the UK population.

A *Guardian* article reporting on the MoD’s “secret cyber-warfare programme” illustrated more vividly the Orwellian character of these efforts, which are reported to go back at least to Britain’s 2010 Strategic Defence Review.

In describing one of the few concrete instances of manipulation that have been exposed, the *Guardian* reports how “chatbots—computer programmes that make

human-sounding small talk and which have been used in everything from customer relations to sex industry marketing—could take on military roles in intelligence and propaganda operations to influence targets.”

Quoting other defence industry reports, the article describes how “an influence bot could be deployed in both covert and overt ways—on the web, in IM/chatrooms/forums or in virtual worlds.”

Concerning “the adverse effect that the unmasking of a non-declared bot would have on the subject, and their wider group,” the report advises, “for the bot to withdraw if it thinks it may be compromised. In the early days, it may be better that the bot activity is declared and overt—in the same way as much broadcast and UK plc promotional activity.”

The fact that prestigious universities such as Cambridge are making these kinds of sordid activities their business is alarming. The university’s proposal exposed by *Varsity* notes with satisfaction the financial windfall that would result from its adoption. It identified as the proposed head of the programme an English professor who writes on Beckett, along with six unnamed “academic theme leaders,” looking forward to the promising interdisciplinary collaborations that could result from it. This shows just how widespread and normalized a culture of collaboration with government and military efforts on the part of faculty appears to be at Cambridge.

However, Cambridge’s involvement with the HSSRC programme has not gone without opposition among staff, with *Varsity* reporting last Friday that 41 academics have signed an open letter of protest.

Addressed to Vice-chancellor Stephen Toope and the director of the University’s Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), Professor Steven Connor, it states, “We do not believe that the role of a public university is to involve staff in armed conflicts by acting as a supplier of contract research to the MoD.”

It concludes, “We are also appalled that, according to the minutes of General Board, ‘the potential reputational risks’ associated with participation, were to have been “mitigated by a targeted communications effort, fully funded through the programme.” In other words, one of the first targets of ‘information manipulation’ would have been the very people whose taxes pay for the research in the first place, including members of staff and students at the University not involved in the programme. We call on the University and CRASSH not to seek future

funding under this or similar schemes.”

The proposal was brought up to the university’s General Board for consideration because its authors feared a potential backlash, given the nature of the programme and its connection to the MoD. They reassured the board that the “potential reputational risks” of being involved in the programme, could be “mitigated by a targeted communications effort.” In other words, the new propaganda centre offered assurances that it would simply deploy its techniques on the university community in order to pre-empt opposition.

These efforts are further exposure of the lies of Theresa May’s Conservative government and its surrogates in the media, who are attempting to convince a sceptical population that the most pressing danger to democracy are the sinister efforts on the part of Russia to deceive and manipulate public opinion. As this report exposes, it is the government that is in fact systematically engaged in these kinds of operations.

While Cambridge University ultimately decided to pull its bid to lead the programme, its level of collaboration with the defence industries and the MoD remains staggering. *Varsity* earlier reported that at least five of the colleges in the University of Cambridge had investments in arms manufacturing companies totalling over £6.5 million. Emmanuel College holds the largest amount, with nearly £2.9 million invested in two arms companies, Airbus SE and United Technologies.

Moreover, Cambridge’s decision to move on does not halt the MoD’s efforts to find a reliable academic partner. Nor is there any information about which universities remain in the running for it.

It should be noted that Cambridge recently granted a prestigious fellowship to Noah Carl, a proponent of eugenics, and is attempting to intimidate students who have protested his appointment.

Rather than centres of science and learning, universities in major capitalist countries are becoming more and more closely integrated with business, government and the military.

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