

Manufactured statistics for a university beat-up - Pearls and Irritations

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The [Jewish University Experience Survey](#) of the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) and the Australian Union of Jewish Students (AUJS) was prepared by the [Social Research Centre](#), owned by the Australian National University. The Survey has gained lurid headlines in local Jewish media, the [ABC](#), and around the world.

The Social Research Centre has a considerable track record in social research. Why the Centre took on the brief – or at least did not present an explanation of its limitations leaves me baffled, because it doesn't even meet the standard that would be required by an undergraduate student doing an online survey. The politics of the ZFA represent a hard line on Israeli politics, even resulting in recent [chiding from other Zionist organisations](#). Furthermore, AUJS is no ordinary student club, but a national organisation linked to, and sponsored by Zionist organisations and philanthropists. It [runs political training seminars](#) for students in Canberra, and has access to the leadership of the Coalition and the Labour party. I doubt that many other student organisation and indeed other community organisations have such easy access to politicians.

With this background in mind, we can see that this Survey, on a [slick website](#), is in truth a skewed sample intended for political purposes: to beat up universities about an alleged epidemic of

antisemitism, using problems that have occurred in the US or the UK to argue that the situation is similar to that here. The Lobby's object: to have the highly contentious International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance [non-legally binding Working Definition of antisemitism](#) imposed on Australian universities. Thus far, universities have [by and large rejected](#) the Working Definition, but the Lobby won't take no for an answer.

Of course, we have every reason to be concerned about antisemitism on campus, particularly when it comes out in student political activity. There are real and disturbing instances of easily recognisable antisemitism, though these often appear to come from disturbed individuals or neo-Nazi infiltration, or sadly, simple bigotry, as the [Executive Council of Australian Jewry](#) fairly reports. In fact, there is every reason that universities, as much as anywhere else in Australia, have students and staff who are prejudiced not just against Jews, but against other communities as well, not to speak of Indigenous Australians.

However, the Survey cannot be considered a representative sample of Jewish students. It is compiled from a non-representative convenience sample of about 560 self-selected Jewish students on AUJS and ZFA lists over the past 5 years. It is stated on the website that it reflects the views of 1 in 14 Jewish students (that is about 7%). How we know the figure of Jewish students (7,840) was arrived at is unclear, since student enrolment does not ask for religion.

The Survey records "frequent encounters" with antisemitism. It lumps traditional antisemitic behaviour (language about Jews, holocaust denial, Nazi graffiti), in with Israel /Palestine politics and student perceptions of discomfort. In fact, there is, internationally, [considerable dispute](#) over the direct association of debate or opinions over Israel/Palestine with antisemitic sentiment. This is not acknowledged.

The largest category of respondents' concerns are "People or events that made you feel intimidated because of your Jewish identity". Certainly, given the salience of the Israel/Palestine issue, a good proportion of the responses must concern this, and in fact, in the qualitative responses in the report, we see this is the case.

Breaking down the data, it is clear that the respondents are in accord with AUJS and ZFA politics and thus more likely to volunteer responses and offer confirmatory responses to the questions. No discussion is made in the report of this limitation nor of the problems with online surveys appealing to a limited number of people with a particular motivation. Nor is it made clear to the lay reader that the presentation of percentages in slick graphics is meaningless in a non-scientific, skewed sample.

The religious orientation of students is in the Survey also indicative of their politics. The particular form of religious observance recorded in the survey is double that of the Jewish community as a whole as revealed in the 2017 [national study](#), and 88% of students felt that Israel was very or somewhat important to their sense of identity. In contrast, the 2017 study also showed that about only 70% of the Jewish population have a similar sentiment. This reinforces the observation that

the Survey reflects the views of a very skewed population. For all we know, non-AUJS less-religious Jewish students may have a very different view of the world and perception of antisemitism.

And what is to be made of the claim that 29% of staff were involved in antisemitic behaviour and that 70% of staff chose to ignore antisemitic incidents? That number (even if from a skewed sample), could set bells ringing at the NTEU. It is either true or manufactured, and demands a response from the NTEU. For example, is hearing a lecture about Israel-Palestine sufficiently discomfoting that “it makes you feel intimidated” because of your politics? But the hard-line pro-Israel lobby is not interested in such subtleties, even as Israel and diaspora Jewry is suffering a crisis over the politics of democracy, religion, the Occupation and even the existence of the State of Israel as an illiberal ethnocracy.

Thus, if there had been real and open curiosity, the survey would have developed a fine-grained study to explore the relationship between discomfort over public debate, demonstrations, or teaching on Israel/Palestine, perceptions of antisemitism and students’ needs to conceal their identity or avoid campus. But no. That is not investigated. And again, why did the Social Research Centre tolerate such research sloppiness?

Finally, the lack of faith in reporting of antisemitism in the report is a concern, but of course, given that some complaints are in the eye of the beholder and as suggested in the report, it is not just a matter, that universities “must listen to Jewish voices, as they do any other minority groups”, since, as I suggest, the Israel-Palestine issue, is arguably, not inevitably linked to antisemitism, but rather political opinion.