

A high-contrast, black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of several people walking across a light-colored surface. The shadows are cast long and dark, creating a sense of movement and anonymity. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

**FREEDOM  
FROM TORTURE**  
EMPOWERING  
SURVIVORS,  
REBUILDING  
LIVES

# NO QUESTIONS ASKED

**UK universities provide postgraduate security education to security personnel from torturing states**

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Front cover image: *Filo / Getty Images*

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# FOREWORD BY MUSA,\* A SURVIVOR OF TORTURE FROM GAMBIA

**I arrived in the UK after having fled torture in my home country, Gambia. I still remember the feeling of finally being in a country that is known for upholding the rule of law and standing against torture. I felt safe for the first time in a long time.**

When I learnt that some of the UK's most respected universities are providing postgraduate education to state security forces from places where torture is used to silence and repress, it was hard to believe. I was deeply shocked.

The UK has global influence but in recent years, it has been backsliding on its obligations to uphold the absolute ban on torture. The way that the UK and its institutions act can impact not just on its own citizens, but on the lives of people across the globe.

When I learnt that members of the security forces from all over the world, including my own, can access postgraduate security courses here in the UK, without any checks on the risks to human rights, I felt so let down. I would like to know that UK universities, that are known as the best in the world, are taking steps to avoid contributing to grave human rights violations.

Why risk supporting torturing security forces and building their skills? This could in turn send a message to their governments that torture with impunity has no consequences.

UK universities must meet their responsibility to respect human rights so that torture survivors in the UK and around the world are reassured.

These world-renowned institutions must maintain the highest standards in all aspects of their work.

UK universities must not be naive about the risk of contributing to human rights abuses. Admitting security students from states where torture is used as a tool to silence, without asking serious questions about the risks, is deeply irresponsible.

I want to live in a country that sets an example to the rest of the world, that torture is always wrong, and without exception prohibited. The UK has a responsibility to make sure that what happened to me, and so many others, doesn't happen with its support.

As a survivor of torture, I will stand up and call out any institution that ignores this responsibility. I hope that British universities are willing to listen.

*\*Name has been changed.*

# BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT: THE PROHIBITION OF TORTURE AS A UK PRIORITY

**The prohibition of torture is absolute. There are no exceptions. Yet, in the 21st century, around the world, we see the incidence and acceptance of torture rising. Across the globe there are many countries where torture is perpetrated with impunity.**

For forty years, as one of the world's largest torture rehabilitation centres, here in the UK Freedom from Torture has borne witness to the devastating impacts of torture on survivors who are seeking the safety they need to rebuild their lives. Through our work with survivors, we have gained a deep understanding of the impact of justice and accountability on the healing process.

Historically, the United Kingdom led the way in the evolution of an absolute ban on torture. Torture was ruled out by the English common law, and prohibited by the Magna Carta, as far back as the 13th century. Eventually the British stance prevailed in international law and the UK played a central role in drafting key international treaties including the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

As a major military player on the global stage and permanent member of the UN Security Council, it is vital that the UK leads by example in upholding its international obligations. Led by torture survivors themselves, Freedom from Torture holds the UK to account for actions which chip away at the prohibition on torture and risk being seen as a green light by torturing states.

In recent years, we have successfully demanded an end to UK training for Sri Lankan police that was more of a smokescreen for abuses than a means of improving human rights standards. We have exposed and ended UK training for

police in China that was linked to egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang. And we have won a battle to remove provisions preventing criminal prosecutions for British troops for crimes including torture after five years from the previous government's Overseas Operations Act.

This report places a spotlight on the provision of postgraduate security courses, without human rights checks, by British universities to students from repressive states where torture is perpetrated with impunity. This forms part of our work to ensure the UK acts as a global leader in upholding the absolute prohibition on torture, without fear or favour.





*Freedom from Torture, 2020*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The UK’s world renowned universities are delivering postgraduate education to members of state security forces including police, intelligence and military from countries across the globe where torture is widespread and used to achieve political goals. This report reveals that universities engaged in this type of course provision are, almost without exception, turning a blind eye to the risk of contributing to human rights violations in repressive states.**

Freedom from Torture’s investigation found that at least 12 universities across England are delivering postgraduate security courses to overseas students. Of these universities, only one was able to provide information about how it manages risks to human rights. Brunel University talks of scrutinising applicants with state security backgrounds for its “Intelligence and Security Studies” MA and rejecting applications “*where there is evidence that a prospective student has engaged in illegal activities, including human rights abuses, or intends to...*”.

Some universities have delivered tailored courses for overseas police training institutions. Both the University of Cambridge and the University of Huddersfield have provided programmes to police colleges in Hong Kong and Bahrain respectively. In both countries there are serious concerns about the role of the police in widespread human rights violations including torture.

Freedom from Torture’s investigation reveals that while Cambridge University was providing bespoke postgraduate education for Hong Kong Police College (HKPC), HKPC was simultaneously involved in teaching co-operation and exchange with the People’s Public Security University of China (PPSUC). The PPSUC trains and supplies police for Xinjiang, where human rights violations including torture have been carried

out on a scale amounting to crimes against humanity. The UK Government recognises that British organisations with indirect links to Xinjiang, are at risk of contributing to human rights violations in the region.

The University of Huddersfield has engaged in course provision for the Bahraini police service in the country’s capital Manama, at a police academy known as a “*torture hub*”, since 2018. Despite an outcry from human rights monitors, the University of Huddersfield is continuing its engagement with the Bahraini police in 2024.

From London to Liverpool, several universities across the country promote the benefits of their security courses to individual members of security forces around the world, as well as, in some cases, their organisations.

Derby University offers students on its MSc in “Police Leadership, Strategy and Organisation” the opportunity to “*undertake bespoke projects negotiated with your employer which will benefit your own organisation*”. Liverpool John Moores University’s “Covert Investigation and Specialist Intelligence” MSc offers students the chance to focus “*on a topic relevant to their own work environment*”. Both universities have accepted students from countries where members of the police and intelligence agencies are implicated in egregious human rights violations including

*‘Until steps are taken to address this gap, British universities will continue to offer easy access to members of the security forces in states where torture is perpetrated with impunity.’*

torture, without conducting human rights risk assessments.

University College London has accepted students on a postgraduate counter-terror focused course designed for security professionals from countries where a counter-terrorism narrative has been used to justify human rights abuses, including China.

The Chinese Government has consistently attempted to frame egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang as a response to terrorism and extremism. In the wrong hands, learning from the UK experience of counter-terrorism is at risk of being exploited to legitimise abusive policies.

The provision of security education can improve standards in contexts where the political will exists to do so, including with respect to human rights. However, without appropriate scrutiny through human rights due diligence, the risk remains that UK universities are enhancing the capabilities of members of the security forces in abusive states where torture and repression persist.

The UK Government recognises that its engagement with overseas security forces can involve risks to human rights. In the case of capacity building or training, the British Government, its departments and agencies, including the UK police, are required to assess

whether assistance might contribute to abuses. While the Government states, *“these types of activities will be in support of legitimate security or justice objectives...”* it also acknowledges that they, *“may also give rise to human rights, humanitarian law, political or reputational risks”*.

Conversely, UK universities are frequently providing postgraduate security education without asking questions about potential adverse human rights impacts. This includes institutions such as Cranfield University which conducts its “Counter-Terrorism” MSc at the UK Ministry of Defence’s official training academy and Derby University which runs a “Police Leadership, Organisation & Strategy” MSc that is led by a serving UK Police Chief Inspector.

None of the universities included in Freedom from Torture’s investigation have a policy setting out their commitment to respect human rights. Universities often refer to due diligence to respond to risk in other areas, but human rights are notably absent. Until steps are taken to address this gap, British universities will continue to offer easy access to members of the security forces in states where torture is perpetrated with impunity.

## Responses to requests for comment

Freedom from Torture received responses to requests for comment on the events described in this report from: Cambridge University, Huddersfield University, Brunel University and Cranfield University. Summaries of their responses are provided in the body of the report where relevant.

University College London, Liverpool John Moores University, the University of Derby, Birmingham City University, the University of Central Lancashire, as well as the Ministry of Interior Bahrain and Hong Kong Police College did not respond to Freedom from Torture’s request for comment. Informa Connect declined to comment.

# INTRODUCTION

**Universities across England are providing postgraduate security courses to nationals from some of the world's most repressive states. Courses with names such as "Covert Investigation and Specialist Intelligence" or simply "Policing" draw applications from around the world, including from countries where torture is used by the security forces as a tool to silence.**

The UK university sector is globally renowned and higher education is one of the UK's major exports, attracting international students from around the world. The UK's security forces also lay claim to a "world class" reputation that sees the UK providing training to counterparts around the world. Co-operation between the two sectors has supported the development of postgraduate security courses that are tailored to the needs of security personnel who wish to enhance their skills and gain an academic qualification.

This includes members of overseas police, defence and intelligence services. Access has been granted to nationals of numerous countries where torture is a tool of ongoing repression such as Bahrain, China, Egypt, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates to name a few. Many of these countries also retain and impose the death penalty, in some cases after so-called "*confessions*" are extracted through torture.

Universities providing these courses often benefit from connections to the UK police service. Teaching staff include serving and retired police officers, and a number of universities profess a close relationship with their regional police force and/or support from the UK police service or the Government in their course design and delivery.

When the UK Government or official security forces provide training or assistance to overseas security personnel, they are bound by requirements to identify and mitigate potential risks to human rights before engaging. However, there are no comparable requirements for universities delivering these courses which include some of the most prestigious not only in the UK, but in the world.

In some cases, UK universities have provided bespoke courses to overseas police training institutions without assessment of human rights risks, even when the partners' security forces have links to appalling human rights violations that raise immediate red flags. In many more cases, universities are offering postgraduate security courses to individuals where the only restrictions on entry relate to academic qualifications or relevant professional experience and the payment of fees.

In contexts where there is genuine political will to improve standards in policing and security, including with respect to human rights, access to security education from UK institutions can potentially reap benefits and help to spread good practice. However, granting unchecked access to security personnel from countries such as China, where torture is used as a tool to silence and thousands are executed every year after forced confessions and unfair trials, or Bahrain, where there are persistent reports of detention and torture of children, risks contributing to human rights violations.



For those countries where there is no evident commitment to effect security sector reform, accepting members of their security forces onto postgraduate courses can afford unwarranted legitimacy through a UK qualification and/or enhance skills and knowledge which are subsequently used illegitimately to silence and

repress. Unfettered access of security personnel to UK training and educational opportunities also sends a signal to repressive governments that abuses including torture can be carried out with impunity.



*Billion Photos /Shutterstock.com*

# KEY FINDINGS

- Out of twelve UK universities which provided information about their overseas intake on postgraduate security courses, only Brunel University showed any consideration of human rights risks, stating that it rejects applicants who they believe have engaged in illegal activities including human rights abuses;
- All twelve of the universities which provided information about the countries of domicile of students on postgraduate security courses, promote the benefits of their courses to members of the security forces worldwide and include intake from countries where torture is widespread;
- None of the universities which provided information have a human rights policy setting out their commitment to respect human rights;
- Two universities, Cambridge and Huddersfield, entered into partnerships with overseas police institutions to provide bespoke postgraduate courses for police in Hong Kong and Bahrain respectively, where there are serious concerns about the use of torture;
- While engaged in partnership with Cambridge University, Hong Kong Police College was simultaneously engaged in long-term teaching cooperation with China's national police university, which trains police for Xinjiang, where horrific human rights abuses including torture are carried out on a scale amounting to crimes against humanity;
- The University of Huddersfield's provision of a "Security Science" MSc for Bahraini police was carried out at Bahrain's Royal Academy of Policing, an institution referred to as a "torture hub". The relationship between the two institutions is ongoing in 2024;
- Between 2018 and 2023, at least four universities, including Cambridge, Derby, Liverpool John Moores and University College London taught students from China and/or Hong Kong on postgraduate security courses targeted at professionals;
- University College London, which is part of the elite "Russell Group", taught students from China on a counter-terrorism course designed for "security professionals whose role involves developing and implementing strategies to address the threat of extremism" between 2018 and 2022 when mass repression in the Xinjiang region was being carried out under the guise of fighting terrorism and extremism;
- Liverpool John Moores University has accepted students onto a course, "aimed at the covert and intelligence operative" from countries where state intelligence agencies have long histories of responding to peaceful dissent with torture. This includes Uganda, United Arab Emirates and Zimbabwe.
- Both Liverpool John Moores and Brunel University enrolled students from Saudi Arabia on "Intelligence and Security Studies" courses, targeted at security professionals to enhance their skills, after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by a 15-member squad of Saudi state agents in 2018;

*'None of the universities which provided information have a human rights policy setting out their commitment to respect human rights.'*

- Though Brunel University is the only university which gave information about managing human rights risks linked to its course provision, it has taught police, military, and other Government officials from countries around the world, including all six Gulf Cooperation Council states where human rights violations by security forces are rife;
- UK universities are accepting students on postgraduate security courses from three of the top five countries for executions named by international human rights monitors where there are regular reports of torture-tainted confessions leading to death sentences: China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
- Cranfield University teaches overseas students from defence, military and police on its “Counter-Terrorism” MSc which is partly conducted at the UK Government’s official Defence Academy. Here it has received students from India and Nigeria where serious human rights violations have been committed by security forces in the name of counter-terror;
- Some universities claim close ties with the UK Police Service in their course design and/ or provision, raising questions about whether requirements for UK police in managing human rights risks linked to overseas engagement are being overlooked;
- The Programme Leader for Derby University’s “Police Leadership, Organisation & Strategy” MSc which has been provided to students from countries including China and United Arab Emirates, is a serving UK Police Chief Inspector.



NurPhoto/Getty images



# WHAT IS TORTURE?

**The definition of torture put forward by the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT) is the internationally agreed definition of torture. Torture is any act by which someone deliberately inflicts mental or physical pain on another person for a specific purpose, in which the state is involved or is unable or unwilling to prevent it. Torture is an extreme abuse of power towards a defenceless person and a violation of their rights. Torture can be physical, for example, taking the form of physical assaults or beatings, electric shocks or simulated drowning, known as ‘waterboarding’. Torture can be psychological, for instance where victims are exposed to loud noise, or solitary confinement, for long periods of time. Torture can also be sexual, involving rape and/or humiliation.**

The prohibition on torture is absolute, meaning it cannot be justified in any circumstances. Furthermore, States must take positive steps to prevent it. And yet, in the 21st century, torture is still used by Governments, security forces and police across the world. Some people are tortured because of their religious beliefs or political affiliation. Others may be targeted just because of who they are, on the basis of their race or ethnicity, or their sexual orientation or gender identity. Torture is used to maintain social and political control, to punish, to intimidate, or as a way of getting information. Torture may also be used to force people to act against their will, such as by signing a so-called confession.

Whatever the circumstances, torture is always wrong and always absolutely prohibited. All States have a duty to prevent torture, whether carried out under their own authority or by others.

Freedom from Torture is one of the world’s largest torture rehabilitation centres. In our therapy rooms we work with survivors from countries around the world, including many of the repressive states referred to in this report. Our fight to ensure accountability for breaches of the torture ban is rooted in our deep understanding of the devastating impacts of torture.



*Zoka74/Shutterstock.com*



# PARTNERSHIPS WITH POLICE COLLEGES IN TORTURING STATES

**In recent years two UK universities, Cambridge and Huddersfield, have partnered with overseas police training institutions, in Hong Kong and Bahrain respectively, to provide postgraduate security courses. In both cases, there are very serious concerns about links to human rights abuses by the overseas police forces concerned. However, according to information provided in response to Freedom of Information requests, neither of the two UK universities conducted any checks on these partnerships to identify and assess risks to human rights.<sup>1</sup>**



Cambridge University is one of the world's oldest and most prestigious universities. It provides postgraduate security education to students from across the globe. *4kclips/Shutterstock.com*

# CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY AND HONG KONG

As part of an agreement with the Hong Kong College of Policing, between 2017 and 2020 Cambridge University, one of the world's premier universities, provided an MSt in "Applied Criminology and Police Management (Police Executive Programme)", designed for senior leaders, to three successive cohorts of Hong Konger students.<sup>2</sup> As part of the programme, Cambridge University lecturers flew to Hong Kong and students from Hong Kong attended lectures in Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> The Hong Kong Police Force described engaging in the programme "*with a view to developing future leaders in the Force.*"<sup>4</sup>

## Human rights in Hong Kong

The timing of Cambridge University's partnership with Hong Kong Police College coincided with a serious escalation in human rights violations in the territory as the Hong Kong Government attempted to clamp down on civil society, weaponise the law against perceived critics, and eliminate independent media.<sup>5</sup> Police played an instrumental role in the crackdown that followed mass protests in 2019 against a bill allowing for extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China.<sup>6</sup> Though the bill was eventually scrapped, in 2020, Hong Kong's draconian National Security Law,<sup>7</sup> seen as a response to the protests, was passed. Police arrested hundreds of protestors, activists and pro-democracy figures under the law.<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Groups have reported on beatings and torture in police custody meted out to those resisting the sweeping changes<sup>9</sup> that have brought Hong Kong into closer alignment with restrictions in mainland China.<sup>10</sup> The UK Government has also expressed growing concern about police misconduct, human rights and fundamental freedoms in bi-annual reporting on Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup>





Police in Hong Kong cracked down on mass protests in 2019 as part of a dramatic reduction in civic space. *PaulWong/Shutterstock.com*

Increasing repression and the role of police in human rights violations including torture in Hong Kong are not the only causes for concern about Cambridge University's Hong Kong partnership. A 2018 Hong Kong Police College report refers to the maintenance of a long-term training partnership with mainland China's top national police university, the People's Public Security University of China (PPSUC).<sup>12</sup> The PPSUC also talks of "cooperation with the Hong Kong Police Force and the Hong Kong Police College through lectures, seminars, and research".<sup>13</sup>

The PPSUC has multiple links to policing in China's Xinjiang region, evidenced in its public reporting, where repressive policies and egregious human rights violations on a scale amounting to crimes against humanity have been perpetrated against Uyghur and other minority communities.<sup>14</sup> These links include training and supplying personnel for police work in Xinjiang.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the Beijing-based

security university maintains a correspondence station in the Xinjiang capital Urumqi in cooperation with the Xinjiang Public Security Department, which is sanctioned by the USA for its role in human rights violations.<sup>16</sup>



PPSUC President Cao Shiquan has spoken proudly of the university's role in training and supplying police for Xinjiang. *Source: Public Security University of China website*

While mass repression in Xinjiang has been passed off by the Chinese authorities as a “counter-terror” initiative, it is widely seen as an attempt to strip Uyghur and other minorities of their identity and assimilate them into China’s majority Han culture. <sup>17</sup> Torture including beatings, electric shocks, solitary confinement, deprivation of food, water and sleep, exposure to extreme cold, and the abusive use of restraints, such as metal “*tiger chairs*” has been carried out on a mass scale. <sup>18</sup> These practices and other egregious abuses such as forced labour, forced sterilisation, and mass internment have received global condemnation, including by the UK Government. <sup>19</sup>

The PPSUC and Hong Kong Police College have consistently engaged in teaching exchange and cooperation. Delegations from the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) have attended PPSUC’s Mainland Development Programmes; and Hong Kong Police second a Chief Inspector every year to lecture students at PPSUC. <sup>20</sup> This raises questions about whether personnel destined for Xinjiang are amongst the beneficiaries. The relationship between the two Chinese institutions was well established during Cambridge University’s relationship with Hong Kong Police College. <sup>21</sup>

## Repression in Xinjiang

According to the United Nations, upwards of a million people have been held in Xinjiang’s internment camps, euphemistically entitled “Vocational Education Centres” where individuals can be placed for “*deradicalisation*” and “*re-education*”. Most have never been charged with any offence or been seen in a court of law. Some of the absurd reasons given to justify detention include travelling; living abroad; number of children; religion; WhatsApp access and calls overseas. Amnesty International has described torture as an “*inescapable aspect of daily life for every detainee*.” <sup>22</sup> In 2022 a leaked cachet of documents from the camps revealed a highly militarised environment patrolled by armed police empowered to shoot dead attempting escapees. <sup>23</sup> Thousands of haunting images of detainees aged between just fifteen and seventy-three were uncovered. <sup>24</sup>

Hong Kong Police College also has a direct connection to Xinjiang’s police force. At the time that it was partnering with Cambridge University, Hong Kong Police College and Xinjiang Police College were directly interacting as members of Executive Council of the “International Forum for Police Education Cooperation” (IFPEC), a Beijing-led platform for exchange and cooperation on police education. <sup>25</sup> Xinjiang Police College was sanctioned by the USA in 2019 for its role in egregious human rights violations in the region. <sup>26</sup>





Xinjiang Police College has been sanctioned for its role in human rights violations in the region. *Source: Xinjiang Police College Website*

Such is the scale of the human rights violations in Xinjiang that police from all over China have been drafted in under a programme euphemistically entitled “Xinjiang Aid”. Police from any part of the country are therefore at risk of involvement in the appalling abuses carried out in the region.<sup>27</sup> One such former policeman who blew the whistle on his deployment in Xinjiang described methods of torture used to extract so-called “confessions” including denial of food, sexual violence, electrocutions, and waterboarding.<sup>28</sup>

In January 2021, in view of the gravity of the situation in Xinjiang, the UK Foreign Secretary introduced guidance to ensure British organisations are not complicit in human rights violations in the region. The guidance states that *“businesses that directly or indirectly provide goods and services to authorities in Xinjiang... are at risk of unintentionally facilitating or being otherwise complicit in human rights violations.”*<sup>29</sup> Given this directive, Cambridge University’s relationship with Hong Kong Police College, an institution engaging directly with bodies supplying police for Xinjiang, raises clear concerns.

The cross-party Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK parliament has previously noted the risks of research partnerships between the UK university sector and Chinese actors linked to repression in Xinjiang, as well as failures in managing these risks, stating that UK universities *“should take much greater care in investigating those they work with”*.<sup>30</sup> Lessons should be learned from such findings. Despite the high-risk context, Cambridge University told Freedom from Torture that it did not carry out any human rights checks on its partnership with Hong Kong Police College.<sup>31</sup>

## In response to Freedom from Torture’s request for comment on these events:

The Institute of Criminology at the Cambridge University stated: “*The Institute of Criminology does not work with the Hong Kong Police. The Institute taught three cohorts of Hong Kong Officers from 2017 as part of a contract with Hong Kong Police. As soon as the Chinese Government stepped in to restrict democratic freedoms we acted quickly and terminated the contract. Democratic values are a critical part of the Applied Criminology and Police Management programme*”.

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY AND INDIA

Cambridge University proudly declares it has a “*long history of educating police managers*”. At the same time as it was engaged in partnership with Hong Kong Police on the Masters in Applied Criminology and Police Management, a wholly owned subsidiary of the university, Cambridge Enterprise, was also providing a Mid-Career Training Programme for senior police officers at India’s national Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Police Academy.

This training programme was part of a long-term relationship stretching back to 2010. At this time the university announced its Institute of Criminology had signed a contract worth £2.4million with India’s National Police Academy to provide mid-career training for 420 police executives over three years.<sup>32</sup> This was the beginning of a sustained association which was ongoing until at least 2020 when the university was engaged in a two-year programme to train 600 mid-career police chiefs in India.<sup>33</sup> The programme included areas such as drug trafficking and hostage negotiation.<sup>34</sup>



The Chief Justice of India has described police custody as the most dangerous place in the country for human rights. [pjhpix/Shutterstock.com](https://www.pjhpix.com)

In 2021, in what was seen as a response to long-standing reports of police brutality and torture, India’s Chief Justice made the shock claim that the site of the gravest threat to human rights in the country was in police custody.<sup>35</sup> Amnesty international has talked of a rapid deterioration in the human rights situation under the leadership of Narendra Modi since 2014, including through “*criminalisation of dissent*”.<sup>36</sup>

# CASE STUDY: INDIA'S USE OF COUNTER-TERROR LEGISLATION

***“I never imagined the scenes I’d seen in horror movies of people being abducted by a foreign Government and violently tortured could become a reality for someone in my family”.***

Gurpreet Singh Johal on the arrest under anti-terrorism legislation and subsequent torture of his brother Jagtar, in India <sup>69</sup>

Concerns have been expressed about India’s use of counter-terrorism legislation to *“rampantly...silence dissent”*. Human rights groups have reported the use of counter-terrorism law against activists, journalists, peaceful protesters, and critics going about their legitimate work.<sup>70</sup> In 2017, British national Jagtar Singh Johal was arrested and detained on charges brought under anti-terrorist legislation which incur the death penalty. Johal reported being brutally tortured, including by electric shocks, into making a so-called *“confession”* while held incommunicado. The charges against him are described by a UK human rights monitor as *“trumped up”*.<sup>71</sup> The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions has described Johal as a human rights defender for his work highlighting human rights abuses against the Sikh population in India and maintains that his continued pretrial detention is lacking in legal basis and is arbitrary.<sup>72</sup>

# Huddersfield University and Bahrain

The University of Huddersfield entered into an agreement with Bahrain's Ministry of Interior to provide a bespoke postgraduate programme to members of the Bahraini police force between 2018 and 2020.<sup>37</sup> Over the three year period a total of 79 Bahraini students participated in the course which covered areas such as "Investigative Psychology", "Cyber Security", and "Forensic Science" with teaching provided by Huddersfield staff at Bahrain's Royal Academy of Police in the capital, Manama.<sup>38</sup> This venue has been described as a "torture hub".<sup>39</sup> In 2024, the University of Huddersfield's relationship with the Royal Academy of Police is ongoing with, according to Bahrain's state media, "plans to enhance academic work and scientific research".<sup>40</sup>

Bahrain is a highly repressive state where fundamental freedoms are systematically denied. Independent media are banned and no political opposition is tolerated.<sup>41</sup> Perceived critics of the Bahraini Government including human rights defenders have been detained and tortured for speaking out.<sup>42</sup> The Government has denied access to independent human rights monitors including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture.<sup>43</sup>

Torture in Bahrain has been described as "systematic" and "widespread" by the UN Committee Against Torture.<sup>44</sup> Human rights groups including Amnesty International have reported on the use of torture, including beatings and electrocution, to obtain confessions that have led to death sentences.<sup>45</sup> Examples cited in the UK parliament of torture in Bahrain that preceded forced confessions and manifestly unfair trials include the application of electric shocks to the chest and genitals, sleep deprivation, beatings and attempted rape".<sup>46</sup>

In 2022, Human Rights Watch and the Bahrain Institute for Human Rights and Democracy documented the cases of eight men who were

sentenced to death based on confessions that were alleged to be extracted through torture. Torture was reported to have taken place at venues including Bahrain's Criminal Investigation Directorate of the Ministry of Interior as well as the Royal Academy of Policing.<sup>47</sup> Despite these reports, the University of Huddersfield's partnership with the Royal Academy of Policing has continued to develop.<sup>48</sup>

In response to a Freedom of Information request about its course provision for the Bahraini police, in 2023 the University of Huddersfield told Freedom from Torture that, "The University does not carry out human rights due diligence on any of its Home or International students".<sup>49</sup>

In 2024 the University of Huddersfield confirmed that it continues to engage in course delivery for the Bahraini police. Reporting by Bahrain's state media on the university's partnership with the Royal Academy of Police indicates that there is significant ongoing cooperation between the two institutions including "security programmes, workshops and training courses".<sup>50</sup>



## In response to Freedom from Torture’s request for comment on these events:

The University of Huddersfield stated that it established the course for the Bahrani police “after discussions with relevant Embassies and Ministries, having undertaken all proper due diligence and legal matters at the time”.

The university further stated that, “as specific allegations have been brought to our attention, additional due diligence has been undertaken, including, but not exhaustively: liaison with Embassy officials in the UK and Bahrain and liaison with independent human rights organisations in Bahrain.”



John B Hewitt/Shutterstock.com

# ACCESS TO UK EDUCATION BY SECURITY PERSONNEL FROM TORTURING STATES

Altogether twelve British universities offering postgraduate security courses to overseas students responded to Freedom from Torture's enquiries. All of the universities promote the value of their courses in online marketing material to security professionals. However, when asked only four out of the twelve were willing and/or able to provide information about the professional status of their students, and the information provided varied.

In response to Freedom from Torture's requests for information, some universities cited privacy concerns as a reason for not disclosing details of student employment. Others indicated that they do not hold employment data. These included those universities with courses where prospective students are asked to disclose their employment in the application process and/or the university openly refers to teaching serving security professionals or states that the course has been designed for them.

For example, in response to enquiries by Freedom from Torture about student employment, Brunel University stated it does not record information about employment of students enrolled on its "Intelligence and Security Studies" MSc "*routinely or centrally*".<sup>52</sup> However, an online introduction to the course, which has since been removed, stated, "*We have taught police, military, and other Government officials from the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Belgium, Japan, Jordan, the Gulf, the Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, Botswana and many other nations beside.*"<sup>53</sup>

By piecing together responses to our enquiries with publicly available information about course design and student profiles, it is apparent that British security education is easily accessible to security personnel from torturing states. Some examples of this are presented below. Student intake on postgraduate security courses in the UK includes from states that the UK Government views as hostile, which may raise additional questions about risks to national security.<sup>54</sup>



University College London welcomes students from all over the world to its postgraduate security courses.  
*Sergii Figurnyi/Shutterstock.com*

Part of the distinguished Russell Group of Universities, University College London (UCL) describes itself as “a prestigious brand that is recognised around the world.”<sup>56</sup> As such, it may be seen as an alluring prospect to those seeking to enhance the status of their security operations.<sup>57</sup>

UCL provides two postgraduate security courses for professionals, “Policing” MSc, which “particularly welcome[s] applicants with professional experience in policing”<sup>58</sup> and “Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism” MSc, for “security professionals whose role involves developing and implementing strategies to address the threat of extremism”.<sup>59</sup>

UCL appears to recognise the role of human rights in policing, through a module on “ethical policing” in its “Policing” MSc. Conversely

however, it does not have any policies in place to assess human rights risks linked to its course provision. The course, which is delivered by “experienced practitioners and researchers working in counter-terrorism, intelligence, law enforcement. . .” has accepted students from countries including China, Hong Kong and Indonesia.

UCL’s “Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism” MSc has a clear target market. According to the course introduction, “The programme began as a degree intended to support the career development of security practitioners... to allow professionals to combine learning on the MSc with a demanding day job.”<sup>60</sup> In recent years, students from a number of countries where there are real concerns about counter-terrorism and human rights abuses including China, India, Indonesia,

Lebanon, the Philippines, and Pakistan have joined the course.<sup>61</sup>

In the post 9/11 era, growing misuse of anti-terror legislation and policies have severely undermined the absolute prohibition on torture and prompted the United Nations to establish a dedicated monitoring mechanism.<sup>64</sup> Examples of this have been seen around the world. For instance, the Philippines' 2020 "Anti-Terrorism Act" has been widely criticised for undermining human rights and facilitating an environment conducive to abuses, including torture.<sup>65</sup>

UCL's "Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism" MSc includes options on "Prevention and Disruption" and "Assessing Extremism

Risk". The Chinese Government has consistently framed abuses in Xinjiang as a counter-terrorism response. Xinjiang's brutal internment camps, where hundreds of thousands of Muslims are reported to have been held without charge,<sup>66</sup> have been described by the Chinese Government as a means of "integrating preventative measures... in accordance with the law to prevent the breeding and spread of terrorism".<sup>67</sup> It is of significant concern that the learning from the UK experience of preventative policing, which aims to stop vulnerable people from being drawn into extremism, could be exploited to justify China's policies of mass repression in Xinjiang.<sup>68</sup>

### **In response to a question from Freedom from Torture about human rights checks on prospective students:**

UCL responded, that they "...commit to having ethically-aware and responsible educational content woven throughout the courses. More specifically we welcome applicants to both courses from all over the world to help spread good practice in policing and counter terrorism..."<sup>73</sup> The university did not however, supply any information about scrutinising potential human rights risks of its course provision.





Liverpool John Moores University received 279 overseas students on its postgraduate security courses between 2018 and 2022. *Philip Brookes/Shutterstock.com*

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) offers an array of postgraduate security courses through the Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies (LCAPS), its distance learning platform, in collaboration with Informa Connect.<sup>74</sup> This includes courses with titles such as “Terrorism, Policing and Security”; “Intelligence and Security Studies”; “Covert Investigation and Specialist Intelligence”; “Policing and Criminal Investigation”; “Counter-Terrorism Studies”; “Security Studies”; “Intelligence and Security Studies”; “Security and Terrorism Law” and “Security Management”. Between 2018 and 2023 the university’s Centre for Advanced Policing Studies, provided these courses to 279 students from outside the UK.

LJMU told Freedom from Torture that it does not hold records of the employment status of students on postgraduate security courses. However, prospective students are asked to submit professional certificates, a CV and a

personal statement explaining interest, under admissions criteria. Promotional material for courses emphasises their value to security professionals and admissions criteria refer to, “*Suitable work experience such as policing, security or military work*”.<sup>75</sup> Programmes are described in terms of their “*vocational nature*”.<sup>76</sup>

LJMU’s “Intelligence and Security Studies” MSc is described as “*ideal for professionals seeking career advancement in intelligence settings, law enforcement, defence...*”.<sup>77</sup> The introduction to the course states the importance of understanding how threats to national security “*can be neutralised*”.<sup>78</sup> Course modules include Counter-terrorism and Intelligence analysis.<sup>79</sup> Between 2020 and 2023, intake included students from China where a counter-terrorism narrative has been exploited to justify mass repression in Xinjiang.

Between 2018 and 2023 students from countries including Israel, Rwanda, Saudi Arabi and United Arab Emirates also undertook the

“Intelligence and Security Studies” MSc. In all of these countries there are serious concerns about human rights violations, including torture, by the security forces.

For example, in 2018, the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent critic of the policies of Saudi Arabia’s de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, sent shock waves around the world. He died at the hands of a 15-member squad of Saudi Government agents at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. In 2020 the UK announced sanctions on 20 Saudi nationals for their alleged involvement, including the country’s Deputy Intelligence Chief.<sup>83</sup>

According to promotional material, another postgraduate security course offered by LJMU, “Covert Investigation and Specialist Intelligence”

MSc is “*aimed at the covert and intelligence operative*”.<sup>84</sup> The course’s “Covert Techniques” module includes topics such as “Physical surveillance techniques”, “Interception of communication (telephone and mail)” and “The development of digital surveillance”.<sup>85</sup>

An online advertisement for the course states that it draws students from a “*wide variety of military and law enforcement backgrounds*”. Since 2020, students have joined the course from Zimbabwe, United Arab Emirates and Uganda. In all of these countries there are serious and long-standing concerns about the use of pervasive surveillance by state intelligence agencies against dissenting voices. There are also concerns about human rights violations including enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture .

## **Torture of British academic by United Arab Emirates security agents**

In May 2018 British academic Matthew Hedges was arrested in Dubai on suspicion of spying for the British Government during a two-week research trip. He was detained for six months before being convicted on charges of espionage and sentenced to life in prison. Shortly afterwards he received a pardon and was released, allowing him to return to the UK. Hedges subsequently launched legal action against UAE officials in relation to the torture he endured during his detention.<sup>88</sup> He reported being subjected to months of incommunicado solitary confinement in a windowless room, and being forced to take medication up to ten times higher than the recommended dose. He also faced prolonged interrogations and threats. At one point he tried to take his own life.<sup>89</sup>

For example in 2022, Human Rights Watch documented the unlawful detention and torture of Government critics and opposition supporters, often in so-called “safe-houses” under the authority of Uganda’s national intelligence agency, the Internal Security Organization (ISO). Survivors spoke of beatings, shackling, injections with unknown substances, and electrocution. Rape and sexual violence were also reported.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly in Zimbabwe, in 2023, a group of international human rights organisations issued a joint call to Zimbabwe to “*investigate the escalation of abductions, torture and killing of political activists*”.<sup>91</sup> The statement, which referred to the country’s long history of such abuses, included cases such as that of a 22-year-old student, Tawanda Muchehiwa who was abducted in July 2019 – one day ahead of a planned national anti-corruption protest. CCTV

footage revealed the student was forced into a car before he was abused and tortured for three days.

Prospective students on LJMU's "Covert Investigation and Specialist Intelligence" course are advised that the "*vocational nature*" of the programme is enhanced by a dissertation, that may focus "*on a topic that has particular*

*relevance ... to their own work environment*".<sup>92</sup>

This emphasis on the contribution to the workplace raises significant concerns about its potential use in contexts where covert intelligence gathering is frequently used by the security forces for nefarious purposes.

## Rwanda: Surveillance state

Rwanda is a highly repressive state where dissent is brutally suppressed: Human Rights Watch has reported, "*Time and time again we have witnessed people's lives being destroyed for speaking out about injustice in Rwanda. It can start with surveillance... but can rapidly escalate to passports being confiscated, prosecution, torture, disappearance, or even death*".<sup>93</sup> In 2021 the UK Government called on the Rwanda Government to investigate "*extrajudicial killings, deaths in custody, enforced disappearances and torture*".<sup>94</sup> Beyond the country's borders, control, surveillance, and intimidation of Rwandan refugee and diaspora communities have been reported across the globe. Rwandans living abroad often self-censor and refrain from political activism for fear of seeing their relatives back home targeted, including with torture. Human Rights Watch has reported on the situation of Rwandans around the world who told them they were in contact with local law enforcement or intelligence agencies regarding their safety, including in the UK.<sup>95</sup>

Despite very public indications of torture by the security forces in states from which LJMU draws students on its postgraduate security courses, the university does not carry out any human rights checks.



# BRUNEL UNIVERSITY

Like Liverpool John Moores University, Brunel University taught students from Saudi Arabia between 2018 and 2023, on a postgraduate course entitled “Intelligence and Security Studies”. Brunel emphasises the vocational nature of the course, and has described its global student intake as drawn from police and military as well as “Government officials” in an online introduction to the course which has since been removed.<sup>96</sup>

Between 2018 and 2022, 244 overseas students enrolled on the course.<sup>97</sup> Brunel accepted students from all other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates, alongside Saudi Arabia.<sup>98</sup> The

region’s poor track record on human rights is well known. A 2022 report, on the relationship between the UK and GCC for The House of Lords notes: “Critics of continued engagement suggest it could risk the UK being seen to condone continuing human rights abuses”.<sup>99</sup> Amnesty International reports that abuses including torture, perpetrated against dissenting voices by several states has produced, a “chilling effect ... across the region, where very little, if no space at all, is left for any freedom of speech”.<sup>100</sup>



Brunel University scrutinises applications for its “Intelligence and Security Studies” course for risks to human rights. *Adning/Shutterstock.com*



## Saudi Arabia: women human rights defenders imprisoned and tortured

In 2021 prominent Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul was released from prison after more than two and a half years. A courageous advocate for the campaign to legalise driving for women in Saudi Arabia, al-Hathloul was detained in 2018 along with ten other women activists and eventually charged under a vague counter-terror law. The women reported torture including flogging, electrocution, waterboarding and threats of rape, while in detention. During a visit to a psychologist while in custody, supposedly to help her recover from her experiences of torture she had endured, Loujain reported being blindfolded and duct taped to a wheelchair.<sup>101</sup>

Students on Brunel's "Intelligence and Security Studies" MSc have access to an "extensive speaker series, with invited experts from the Government and private sector, and access to intelligence seminars in the UK".<sup>102</sup> The course overview describes content on areas such as, "the role of intelligence officers in assessing and countering threats to national security... with a strong focus on skills development" and "clandestine collection disciplines".<sup>103</sup>

Questions should be asked about how the application of such skills may be used in highly repressive contexts. Brunel is, however, the only university that reports implementing any human rights risk management in its postgraduate security course provision. See the section entitled "Human rights risk management failures" below.

### In response to Freedom from Torture's request for comment on these events:

Brunel University stated "We, as a university and as programme teaching faculty, are completely committed to lawful and ethical standards within security. Appropriate professional standards, management and oversight are cornerstones of legitimate security practices in democracies, and we keep that at the centre of all our teaching and learning".

The university stated that the Intelligence and Security Studies MA, teaches that "torture is unacceptable, does not work and has no place in legitimate security practices... as part of a curriculum that is completely committed to lawful and ethical standards of security".

Brunel University further stated their support for "democratisation and security sector reform amongst our students" and described placing emphasis on "ethics, governance and the role of intelligence services in democratic Government". Brunel detailed a number of related modules and topics in their curriculum such as their intelligence ethics module, "which deals explicitly with the unacceptability of torture, that it does not work, and that it has no place in legitimate security practices".

# UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

The University of Derby describes its MSc in Police Leadership, Strategy and Organisation as “*For ambitious police professionals - in the UK and overseas...*”.<sup>109</sup> The university emphasises factoring in police service needs in its course design, not only in the UK but, “*more internationally, policing services within Malaysia, Qatar and the UAE...*”<sup>110</sup> In 2019 five nationals from the United Arab Emirates participated in the course. Prospective students are offered the opportunity to “*...undertake bespoke projects negotiated with your employer which will benefit your own organisation*”.

The course overview refers to the university’s “*superb network of contacts*”, from UK Chief Constables and Crime Commissioners, to the

representatives of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, and the College of Policing.<sup>111</sup> In addition, the programme leader is a serving UK police Chief Inspector.<sup>112</sup>

Despite apparently extensive links to the UK police service, no human rights risk assessments are being carried out by the University of Derby on its course provision. The involvement of the UK’s official police service raises questions about whether their own required risk assessment procedures for overseas engagement are being overlooked, when they are working with universities.



Electric Egg/Shutterstock.com

Cranfield University is a self-declared knowledge provider to global military and Governments.<sup>113</sup> The University has held a teaching and research contract with the UK's Ministry of Defence for four decades.<sup>114</sup> Course provision for its "Counterterrorism" MSc is partly conducted at the official Defence Academy of the UK, on a secure military site in Oxford.<sup>115</sup> According to the UK Government the academy delivers, "*world-class professional defence and security education to students from the UK Armed Forces, Civil Service, industry and overseas*".<sup>116</sup>

Cranfield University told Freedom from Torture that overseas students on its Counter-Terrorism MSc courses come from defence, military, police and other professional employment, though they would not disclose which professionals came from which countries, citing privacy concerns. Cranfield also indicated that course intake includes students from countries where torture has been perpetrated in the name of counter-terror, such as India<sup>117</sup> and Nigeria<sup>118</sup> both of which retain the death penalty for terror related offences.

Human Rights Watch has documented torture by Indian police of alleged Muslim militants, describing it as part of a tradition of unlawful methods used to force confessions from groups deemed a security threat.<sup>119</sup> In 2022 the monitor expressed concern about India's efforts to expand its influence on the international counterterrorism stage, citing its role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), "*an alliance with a reputation for heavy-handed counterterrorism. . . dominated by serial rights offenders China and Russia*".<sup>120</sup> India's track record of human rights abuses in the name of countering terrorism should be seen as a red flag for any UK university offering counter-terror education.

Despite the risks, Cranfield does not have any policies in place to assess human rights risks linked to its course provision.<sup>121</sup> According

to official guidance, any overseas security assistance provided by the UK Government, its departments and agencies must include assessment of related human rights risks. Use of UK defence facilities in Cranfield's course provision without any such an assessment, raises questions about whether the UK Government is failing to observe its own guidance.



Cranfield University is a partner of the UK Ministry of Defence and conducts course provision at the Defence Academy of the UK. *William Barton/Shutterstock.com*

## In response to Freedom from Torture's request for comment on these events:

Cranfield University stated that it "*acts in accordance with UK Government guidance on international student applications and complies with relevant guidance relating to the UK Ministry of Defence*".

The university also advised that "*For some courses such as the Counterterrorism MSc, additional security clearance checks are required. The University has comprehensive policies relating to ethics, integrity and our Prevent duties.*"

# TORTURE AND THE DEATH PENALTY

International students undertaking UK postgraduate security courses often come from countries which retain the death penalty. According to recent data, this includes three out of the five countries carrying out the highest number of executions: China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.<sup>122</sup> In all three countries there are allegations that torture is used to obtain so-called “*confessions*” which lead to death sentences.

China is reported to execute thousands of people every year, though the exact numbers are kept a secret by the Government. Torture and forced confessions are described as integral to the criminal justice system.<sup>123</sup> Human rights groups have consistently reported on forced confessions as the basis of most convictions.<sup>124</sup>

Survivors describe beatings with hands, police batons, electric batons, hammers and iron bars; exposure to extreme temperatures; stress positions; deprivation of sleep, water, and food and spraying with pain-inducing substances into noses and onto genitals. These horrific practices are frequently carried out whilst detainees are restrained in metal chairs known as “*tiger chairs*”.<sup>125</sup>

In recent years Amnesty International has expressed its concern about the secretive use of the death penalty in Xinjiang, after grossly unfair proceedings, as part of the Chinese Government’s campaign of violence targeting minorities within the region.<sup>126</sup>

In 2020 and 2022, Liverpool John Moores University enrolled students from Egypt on its “Counter-Terrorism” MSc, designed for counter-terrorism and security professionals.<sup>127</sup> In 2020, 37 people were sentenced to death for terrorism offences in Egypt following a trial that human rights groups labelled unfair and allegations that defendants were subjected enforced disappearance and torture.<sup>128</sup> In 2018, a group of UN human rights experts called for a halt to all executions in Egypt, expressing serious concern about “*an apparently continuing pattern of death*

*sentences handed out on the basis of evidence obtained through torture or ill treatment*”.<sup>129</sup>

In 2022, Saudi Arabia executed 196 people. This was the highest number for 30 years and triple the previous year’s figures.<sup>130</sup> The following year, human rights monitors called for a halt to the imminent execution of seven young men in Saudi Arabia who were children at the time of their alleged crimes. Amnesty International has spoken of their “*unfair trials marred by torture-tainted confessions*”.<sup>131</sup> In 2018, a UN human rights monitor reported on use of anti-terror laws to justify torture, the brutal suppression of dissent and barbaric application of the death penalty following “*gross miscarriages of justice*”.<sup>132</sup>

Human rights groups have provided extensive reporting on how Bahrain hands out death sentences following grossly unfair trials to defendants who have been tortured. Human Rights Watch has stated that those accused report being suspended in the air, beaten with metal bars, given electric shocks to their genitals, blindfolded, sleep deprived, and threatened: “*In case after case, courts convicted defendants of the crime of homicide and sentenced them to death based solely or primarily on confessions that the defendants (or co-defendants) alleged were coerced through torture and ill-treatment*”.<sup>133</sup>

Concerns that the provision of UK security assistance could indirectly lead to an execution have seen the UK police service decline to assist overseas investigations without assurances that capital punishment will be taken off the table.<sup>134</sup> In annual human rights reporting the UK Government continues to stress its opposition to the death penalty “*...in all circumstances, as a matter of principle*”.<sup>135</sup> UK universities must consider the risks of providing postgraduate security education to security personnel from states that impose the death penalty, especially where there is a risk of so-called “*confessions*” being extracted through torture.



# HUMAN RIGHTS RISK MANAGEMENT FAILURES

***“If we believe a student has engaged in illegal activities, including human rights abuses, or intends to, we screen them out”.***

Brunel University on managing the risk of accepting students involved in human rights violations.



The UK's former Prime Minister with his Bahraini counterpart. The UK has friendly ties with many states which have poor human rights records. *Dan Kitwood/ Getty Images*

Only one university, Brunel, indicated that risks to human rights were included in its assessment of international students' applications for postgraduate security courses. Brunel told Freedom from Torture that, "...we vet for human rights and ethics when speaking to students with Government backgrounds."<sup>136</sup>

Brunel asserted that it does not accept students on its "Intelligence and Security Studies" MA from "adversary states" or, "organisations known to regularly violate human rights".<sup>137</sup> Brunel also advised that they ask applicants "from state

*security backgrounds about their professional roles and duties".* They told Freedom from Torture that "If we believe a student has engaged in illegal activities, including human rights abuses, or intends to, we screen them out".<sup>138</sup>

While Brunel does appear a step ahead of its peers as the only university that was able to provide any information on identifying and responding to human rights risks in its postgraduate security course provision, it should be recognised that it is not only UK "adversaries" that have poor human rights

records. In fact, there are many countries with which the UK enjoys friendly relations which have appalling human rights records. Brunel's "Ethical Framework" does refer to the "*application of human rights standards in our business*" as a key area of the university's

business and governance framework, but it does not provide greater detail through a stand-alone human rights policy.<sup>139</sup>

## UK allies and torture: United Arab Emirates

In its concluding observations following the review of United Arab Emirates, the United Nations Committee Against Torture expressed concern about, "*a pattern of torture and ill-treatment against human rights defenders and persons accused of offenses against State security*".<sup>140</sup>

In 2020 Abdullah al-Shaamsi was sentenced to life in prison following his arrest two years earlier, at the age of just 19, while still in high school. He was subject to incommunicado detention, prolonged solitary confinement, and torture. Al-Shaamsi described beatings, electric shocks, and having his fingernails pulled out. Evidence of his crimes, presented to him a month before a trial described as "*grossly unfair*" by Human Rights Watch, included tweets and online competitions he had participated in when he was just seventeen.<sup>141</sup>

The UK's enjoyment of strong bilateral relations with a foreign state should not be seen as an indicator of the state's human rights record.

With the exception of Brunel, no other UK university which responded to Freedom from Torture's enquiries provided any information to indicate that they have established any processes to assess human rights risks in relation to the provision of security postgraduate courses. Furthermore, there is currently no requirement for them to do so. This lack of consistency suggests that a student whom Brunel deemed to be too high risk to accept on their course, could simply apply to another UK university where they would be free of scrutiny.

It is notable that universities are addressing risk management in areas other than human rights. Many refer to due diligence in other contexts. Cambridge University's "*Risk reporting template*" includes categories such as research, environment, and reputation but it makes no mention of human rights

risks.<sup>142</sup> Cambridge University also maintains a dedicated committee tasked with scrutinising engagement with "*external parties that might give rise to significant public interest and/or pose a reputational risk to the University, including sponsored research, executive education...*".<sup>143</sup>

Despite the recognition of "executive education" as a potential risk factor, no human rights due diligence has been undertaken on the Hong Kong Police College partnership described above, nor on the university's wider intake on its ongoing "Applied Criminology and Police Management (Police Executive Programme)" MSc.<sup>144</sup>

Due diligence is however conducted on new research partnerships to assess reputational risk of any new "*funding relationship or collaborating third-party*".<sup>145</sup> This is undertaken in line with Cambridge University's core values

which are listed as “*freedom of thought and expression*” and “*freedom from discrimination*”.<sup>146</sup> This raises questions about whether these values are being upheld in the provision of tuition to overseas police from repressive states.

University College London (UCL) also recognises the use of risk-based due diligence, which it describes as aiding “*the early identification of risks that may impact research or [its] good name and standing*”.<sup>147</sup> UCL refers to assessment of potential ethical, legal, financial, and national security risks before entering into a collaboration with third party funders and partners. However, as with Cambridge University, human rights risks are not mentioned.

UCL alludes to situations that may give rise to greater risks than others, such as working in conflict-affected areas or with “*vulnerable*

*populations*”. Under current guidance, however, the provision of policing and counter-terrorism courses for members of overseas security forces, would not trigger due diligence checks. Such an inclusion could assist the university in managing potential and actual adverse human rights impacts of its course provision.

It is of note that under its policy on “Freedom of Speech and External Speakers”, the University of Huddersfield states that it is “*committed to promoting the principles of freedom of speech and academic freedom*”.<sup>148</sup> However, it does not appear to have transferred these values into its engagement with the Bahraini police. This is especially concerning in view of attacks in the country on academic freedom<sup>149</sup> in recent years, as well as on academics themselves.<sup>150</sup>

## **In response to Freedom from Torture’s request for comment on these events:**

Brunel University told Freedom from Torture that they “*evaluate applications closely as feasible to try to ensure that our students have not been involved in any human rights violations or are officials of organisations that are known to have human rights issues*”. They described “*scrutinising applications thoroughly, with particular attention to applicants’ CVs as well as their academic qualifications*.”

The university described conducting detailed interviews and asking applicants from state security backgrounds about their professional roles and duties: “*Where there is evidence that a prospective student has engaged in illegal activities, including human rights abuses, or intends to, we reject their application*”.

Brunel stated that its “*assessments have at their core the highest professional and ethical expectations*.” and that, “*If some individual students come from states where, at some point in the past, there have been human rights failings, we are sending back to those states individuals who have been taught a better way*”.

# HUMAN RIGHTS RISK MANAGEMENT REFERENCE POINTS

## OVERSEAS SECURITY AND JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

The risks involved in the provision of training and assistance to overseas security personnel are acknowledged by the UK Government through its guidance on conducting Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA) assessments. The guidance emphasises that overseas security assistance must meet “British values, including human rights and democracy”.<sup>151</sup>



When the UK police provide overseas training, they are required to carry out human rights checks.  
*Thomas Dutour/Shutterstock.com*

In the case of capacity building or training, the British Government, its departments and agencies, are required to assess whether the provision of overseas security assistance might contribute to abuses. Guidelines published by the National Police Chief’s Council make clear that, “Particular attention should be paid to the risks of contributing to the use of the death penalty and torture”.<sup>152</sup>

While the OSJA assessment has been criticised for being too weak, lacking transparency and failing to adequately uphold the UK’s international obligations, it does recognise the risks involved in advancing the skills of overseas security forces.<sup>153</sup> In contrast, UK universities are providing education targeted at security professionals to students from across the globe - including those countries where torture



and the death penalty are present - without any formal processes in place to assess and respond to human rights risks.

A number of universities emphasise their links to the UK police service in their postgraduate course provision. For example, Birmingham City University which has accepted students on its Security Studies MA from around the world, describes its “*strong ties*”<sup>154</sup> to West Midlands Police. Derby University references the role of the College of Policing, in its course design.<sup>155</sup> The University of Central Lancashire, which offers courses including “Counter-Terrorism” MSc, “Criminal Investigation” MSc

and “Cybercrime Investigation” MSc claims, “*strong links with counter terrorism agencies and the police service.*”<sup>156</sup> Cranfield University has privileged access to Ministry of Defence premises in its course provision. Brunel lists “*experts from the Government*” as part of its speaker series.<sup>157</sup>

These links raise questions about whether required risk assessment procedures for the UK Government and police service are being overlooked when supporting British universities providing security education to overseas personnel.<sup>158</sup>

## THE ACADEMIC TECHNOLOGY APPROVAL SCHEME

In certain circumstances the UK Government recognises that the provision of education and sharing of expertise by UK universities can have adverse consequences. Through the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS), the Government applies scrutiny to students and researchers from certain countries proposing to study at postgraduate level and above in areas relating to military technology and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>159</sup>

Students applying for these courses must apply for, and be granted, ATAS certification by the UK Government before they can be accepted on a programme. The ATAS scheme asks for information from prospective students on

areas such as service in the security forces, employment history, referees and details of any financial sponsors for the proposed studies. These screening criteria could provide a reference point for assessing human rights risks linked to the provision of postgraduate security courses.

# CONCLUSION

British universities up and down the country are willing to blindly accept police, military, and Government officials from states where torture by the security forces is widespread onto courses designed to enhance their skills and advance their careers. Questions must be asked about how the fruits of this type of postgraduate security education may be exploited, especially in highly repressive contexts where the expression of legitimate dissent is brutally suppressed.

The UK's own security forces are bound by requirements to investigate risks to human rights before engaging their overseas counterparts in capacity building. In cases where the UK police service or Government are supporting the provision of postgraduate security courses by universities without implementing human rights checks, consideration should be given as to whether official guidance is being overlooked.

In recent years at least two British universities have provided bespoke programmes to overseas policing institutions in countries which have a well-documented association with use of torture. The University of Huddersfield's relationship with an institute known as a "torture hub" in Bahrain, continues. The links between Cambridge University partner, Hong Kong Police College, and policing in Xinjiang revealed in this report are especially alarming, given the mass scale of torture carried out in that region in recent years.

Currently, UK universities are free to provide security education without any scrutiny of human rights risks. Only one university in the UK that was included in Freedom from Torture's investigation, Brunel, acknowledges the need to implement human rights checks when offering members of overseas security forces educational opportunities to enhance their capabilities.

If British universities are to ensure that their provision of higher-level security courses is conducted responsibly, it is essential that they understand who they are providing education to, and how that could be used in the wrong hands. Part of the process of assessing human rights risk is to collect relevant data and to probe further where red flags are raised. In an increasingly insecure world, UK universities cannot continue turning a blind eye to the risk of contributing to human rights violations in repressive states.

Universities are addressing risk management in other areas. Many refer to due diligence in other contexts but management of human rights risks appears to be a significant gap. As a matter of urgency, the university sector must step up and meet its responsibility to respect human rights by conducting human rights due diligence on overseas applications for postgraduate security courses.

Unless there is a consistent response across the sector to account for potential adverse human rights impacts, individual efforts will probably be of limited value. Without such measures, British universities will continue to offer easy access to security personnel from torturing states and send a message to their Governments that torture and repression can be carried out with impunity.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## UK Universities

- Undertake robust risk-based human rights due diligence on all overseas applications for postgraduate security courses and report publicly on these efforts;
- Publish a human rights policy.

## UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

- Ensure that provision of UK education for overseas security personnel which enjoys Government support or assistance, is subject to an Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessment with reference to relevant country guidance issued by the UK;
- Make all Overseas Security and Justice Assistance assessments transparent and accessible to Parliament and the public, with permissions for justifiable redactions;
- Review implementation of Xinjiang human rights guidance by UK universities.

## National Police Chiefs' Council

- Ensure that all overseas police training or education taking place with the support or participation of the UK police is subject to rigorous human rights risk assessments and relevant permissions;
- Require that, as a condition of engagement with the UK police, UK universities are conducting human rights risk assessments and publicly reporting on their efforts to do so.

# ANNEX 1

## IDENTIFYING RELEVANT UNIVERSITIES

Freedom from Torture used search tools on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website to compile a list of universities offering postgraduate courses in security related disciplines. A more in-depth look at the courses on offer was then undertaken to determine which courses appeared designed to appeal to professionals in security sector roles and which marketed their value to overseas candidates. This generated a list of 22 universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Freedom of Information requests were submitted to the 22 universities identified. Questions were asked about the demographics of students participating in relevant courses over a period of 5 years between 2018 and 2023. Particular attention was paid to their country of domicile and employment status. Information was also requested about the conduct of human rights due diligence on applications by course providers, and broader human rights policies. Questions were asked about overseas course provision and relationships with overseas state security, Government or educational institutions.

Out of 22 universities, three refused to disclose information, six were disregarded because their student intake in the 2018 to 2023 period did not include international students and one was not running the course advertised. The remaining 12 universities provide varying levels of information about student demographics, recruitment practices and management of human rights risks. We were able to supplement this information with a review of publicly available material including university webpages, promotional videos, course brochures and news sources.

The 12 universities which did supply relevant information are Birmingham City University, Brunel University, Cambridge University, University of Central Lancashire, Cranfield University, Derby University, Huddersfield University, Liverpool John Moores University, Portsmouth University, Salford University, University College London and University of West London.

Between them, these universities have accepted students on postgraduate security courses from countries including: Australia, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Belgium, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Cameroon, China, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, France, Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Iraq, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Jersey, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Malta, Mauritius, Montserrat, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Portugal, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Slovakia, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Sudan, Tanzania, Trinidad & Tobago, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United States, Turkey and Zimbabwe.



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