

Dear friends, You may have read in yesterday's and today's *The Australia* paper few articles attacking Griffith university for accepting funding (\$100,000) from the Saudi Embassy. The article also attacks the Griffith Islamic Research Unit (GIRU) and accuses GIRU (and by extension the staff and students of GIRU) of being extremists who follow and promote a wahabi ideology espoused by Osama Bin Laden.

I can assure you that the articles are misleading, have taken things out-of-context and full of baseless accusations. Griffith University and other friends and colleagues are outraged by these articles and have responded to these accusations. Prof Ian O'Connor, Vice-Chancellor of Griffith University, responded (see below) and will be speaking to the media today. Griffith's media team is also responding appropriately. The response and feedback of other friends and colleagues is also listed below for your perusal.

You are familiar with my views and activities. I have worked tirelessly over the years to build bridges of understanding between the Islamic and wider community and strengthen communities through open and respectful dialogue. After our mosque was burnt down in 2001, I went to places such as Gympie, Waga Waga, Rockhampton, Mackay and many other places to foster respectful exchange and understanding between the Islamic and the wider Australian community. The success of these initiatives was recognised by many local and regional newspapers. I have established the Griffith Islamic Research Unit to undertake serious research that can produce credible outcome that can help the Australian Muslim community contextualise their understanding of Islam and to help them work with and not in conflict with the Australian society. Recently, Dr Halim Rane graduated from GIRU with academic excellence. His thesis was exceptional and based on relevant research and statistics, it demonstrates why Palestinian non-violence would be more conducive to their liberation struggle than violent resistance and how this is a legitimate and authentic form of jihad consistent with the higher objectives of Islam – a necessary realisation for Islamic militants if the conflict is to find a just resolution.

My positive and moderate message has always been consistent in the private and the public sphere. That is why I have credibility within the Australian Muslim community and many other Australian friends - Christians, Jews and others. This false accusations made by *the Australian* makes me so sad because of the negative repercussions it will have on the wider Muslim community. It will demoralize sections of the Muslim community particularly the youth who would argue that it is no use trying to fit-in mainstream society. By attacking Griffith University, GIRU and myself, the Australian will widen the gap between the Islamic and the wider community. This is so draining for me and many members of the Muslim community. We are tired of having to prove ourselves all the time.

I'm writing to you as a friend whose work you are familiar with. In order to minimise the potential damage that the Australian Muslim community may face, I would like to request that you write to the Australian and other media outlets explaining what you know of my work and that of GIRU.

Below are samples of the support that we have already received.

Thank you

Dr Mohamad Abdalla

Founding Director, Griffith Islamic Research Unit
Co-Director, National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies

Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance
Mt Gravatt campus, Griffith University
Social Sciences Building (M10)
Room 5.15
Brisbane, Queensland 4111, Australia
Telephone +61(7) 3735 6983
Facsimile + 61(7) 3735 6985

Dear Colleagues

You may have read this morning's *Australian* which featured a highly inflammatory article about our Griffith Islamic Research Unit --including many distortions of fact.

The Griffith Islamic Research Unit (GIRU) is doing important work in the Australian community. Its central aim is to promote a Wasatiyya or balanced understanding of Islam and Muslims. Through its strong academic, community and government partnerships it provides a forum where scholars, intellectuals and students can have conversations which ultimately help cultivate an informed public and a more sustainable pluralistic society.

Last year GIRU's achievements led to the federal government announcing its inclusion in the first National Centre for Excellence in Islamic studies.

Dr Mohamad Abdalla, director of GIRU, recently attended the Prime Minister's 2020 Summit to discuss strengthening communities, supporting families and social inclusion. He has eleven PhD students working with him, including the former deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato Sari Anwar Ibrahim.

With an endless supply of important work being championed by our talented staff, we do not have sufficient funds internally to resource all opportunities. We frequently work in partnership with government, industry, the community and our international peers to secure external funding to support these endeavours.

GIRU has enjoyed strong financial support from the local community. In addition the Saudi government donated \$100,000 to the Centre to support its work. The Saudi government imposed no restrictions or demands on use of the funds. Standard practices were followed in sourcing and accepting this donation, which has been on the public record since the day it was made.

It is not unusual for universities or any organisation to discuss with donors whether they wish to be publicly recognised for their philanthropy or take a more private path.

Several leading universities of the world have entered into similar Saudi partnerships — including Harvard University and Georgetown University in the United States which each accepted in 2005 donations of \$20 million from a Saudi businessman and member of the Royal family to finance Islamic studies.

Which brings me to my final comments on this morning's article — the only 'inference' that I heartily concur with from today's coverage is that we are indeed a 'top uni'.

Ian O'Connor, Vice-Chancellor Griffith University

I write to express my support for the work of the Griffith University's Islamic Research Unit, which was portrayed in an unfavourable light in a front page story of The Australian today (22/4). Over the last few years, I have seen many examples of the type of work this Unit engages in. From my experience, their approach pursues exactly the sort of reasoned, open engagement and discussion of contemporary issues surrounding Islam that so many people call for, (including The Australian on many occasions). Any suggestion or inference that they promote Wahhabism or any other extremist or violent form of Islam is simply not consistent with the extensive body of work this Unit has openly engaged in.

It is hardly helpful for Muslims in Australia to keep being told they must make more links to the wider community and promote better understanding and open examination of the concerns about Islam, when those who do keep getting subjected to distorted public attacks. Such attacks just encourage Muslims to stay out of the public domain, and for institutions such as Universities to shy away from being constructively active in this area.

For better or worse, it is a reality that modern Universities need to seek sizable amounts of funding from a variety of sources, as well as take in large numbers of overseas students. Presumably we will never adopt the extremist position which argues that Muslims should be prohibited from entering Australia at all, so surely it is better that students from Saudi Arabia who study in Australia get exposed to liberal democratic values via bodies which have a genuine understanding of mainstream Islam and its values, traditions and thoughts?

Griffith Uni's Islamic Research Unit is such a body, and whilst it is legitimate to examine its funding sources, it would be more accurate - not to mention fairer and more productive - to look at the work that it does, which in my experience has been both valuable and specifically aimed at engaging the wider community.

Andrew Bartlett - Queensland Democrat Senator since 1997

Mohamad

The behaviour of The Australian is outrageous. I hope you know that you have a huge amount of support and goodwill within the University.

Professor John Dewar

Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic)

Griffith University

Qld Australia

Tel: +61 7 3735 5447

Fax: +61 7 3735 7507

Mobile: 0418 980 509

www.griffith.edu.au/landt

Hi Mohamad,

I agree that today's commentary in the Australian is even more outrageous, but if anything reinforces the importance of the work GIRU does for the broader community. The bias, bigotry and intolerance espoused by the reporter and editor can be damaging, but clearly illustrates how ignorance and lack of understanding can breed intolerance. In short, there may be a silver lining in this insofar as it shows the extent of misunderstanding across some in the Australian community, and the important work you are doing in building bridges across communities.

Imagine if the rest of the world defined Australians based upon what Pauline Hanson stood and stands for....the reporter/editor are asking people to believe that Saudi Arabia speaks with one voice in supporting extreme Islam, etc...ridiculous!!

As always, I'm happy to discuss the issues-next steps with you whenever is convenient---but if anything, don't feel you should change course with what you are doing--it's too important.

The sad irony in this, is that the reporter and editor of the Australian are demonstrating a level of intolerance that they accuse other countries of having....but in the end they're trying to sell papers.

regards,

Paul.

Professor Paul Mazerolle
Director, Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice
and Governance and the Violence Research Program
Griffith University
Editor, ANZ Journal of Criminology
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia 4111
Tel: 07 3735 6994 or 3735 6907
Fax: 07 3735 6985

Dear Mohamad

I saw you in the distance in the Great Hall, but couldn't catch up with you as you strode purposefully away! I just wanted to sympathise with you on the receiving end of that scurrilous beat-up in today's Strine and assure you of any support I can give.

best wishes

**Prof Ian Lowe
School of Science, Griffith University
Nathan 4111
Australia
telephone 07 3735 7610, facsimile 07 3735 7656**

[An inflated attack of Griffith Uni's Wahhabi boost](#)

Irfan Yusuf writes:

Jesus Christ is reported as once declaring: "Ask and ye shall receive." But when it comes to Griffith University's dealings with foreign embassies, Richard Kerbaj reckons what Christ really said was: "Ask and we'll treat it as begging and attach lots of Wahhabi ideological strings."

His [article](#) in today's *Australian* claims Griffith University in Brisbane "practically begged the Saudi embassy to bankroll its Islamic campus for \$1.3 million." The headline (which Kerbaj probably didn't write) screams: "Top uni 'begged' for Saudi money".

And what was the size of the bankroll? \$1.3 million? \$1 million? \$500,000? Nope. A measly \$100,000, representing just under 7.7 % of the total funds required. And the rest of the money? Where did it (and will it) come from? Perhaps from [another](#) government...

Kerbaj makes much of criticism from Dr Mervyn Bendle, an academic from James Cook University, who is critical of Griffith for accepting the donation. Kerbaj describes Bendle as a "senior lecturer in the history of terrorism". Though that's not quite how [James Cook Uni's website](#) describes Dr Bendle.

Kerbaj also repeats the mantra that the official religion of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabic (known as Wahhabism) "is espoused by al-Qaida." Yes, Dicky, that's true. But then Wahhabism is also

espoused by many Saudi scholars, both religious and secular, with little truck for Mr bin-Laden and his gang of not-so-merry men.

And what has been the impact of this Saudi largesse? Well, at the Griffith Islamic Research Unit's most [recent conference](#), the Saudi Ambassador did manage to give a speech. Then again, so did Indigenous Elder Auntie Valda Coolwell and Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services. As did staunch critics of Wahhabism such as myself and an openly [anti-Wahhabi American imam](#) now based in Sydney who left a university in Saudi Arabia to study religion under Turkish scholars hostile to Wahhabism. In fact, the place was virtually stacked out with anti-Wahhabists. If my religion allowed gambling, I'd be prepared to place money on the fact that you'd see more Wahhabis at World Youth Day events. If influence is what they wanted, the Saudis certainly aren't getting value for their dollar at Griffith Uni.

Send your tips to boss@crikey.com.au, submit them anonymously [here](#) or SMS tips and photos to 0427 TIP OFF.