

## Behind closed doors – military influence at UK universities

**Chris Langley summarises SGR's latest research on military influence at UK universities, highlighting a range of serious concerns and making recommendations for reform.**

SGR has been active since 2003 in uncovering the many ways in which the military sector is involved in science, engineering and technology (SET) in the UK. In order both to promote informed debate and to push for change in this area, we have used our assembled research to produce reports, articles and presentations, and to network with a number of different groups and individuals, including a great many academics. All of this activity has generated considerable interest and discussion in a wide variety of fora both in the UK and abroad. These activities have also provided the opportunity for many in the SET community to give voice to their fears about the loss of the traditional academic ethos in the UK.

This June saw SGR launch an in-depth study of the more subtle, but nonetheless significant, aspects of military involvement in a sample of 16 universities in the UK (see Box). The study, entitled *Behind Closed Doors*,<sup>1</sup> describes the impact on both individuals and universities of the increasing military involvement with the UK academic community.

Growing military sector involvement with universities in the UK over the past twenty years can be traced to two major trends. The first is the increasing dependence on high-technology, weapons-based approaches to tackling complex security threats, most recently as part of the so-called 'War on Terror'. This 'Revolution in Military Affairs' is discussed in detail in SGR's 2007 report, *More Soldiers in the Laboratory*.<sup>2</sup> The second trend is the rapid commercialisation of universities, which encourages them to work more closely with large corporations in teaching, training and research. This trend is encouraging universities to prioritise work that yields short-term economic benefits, with the real danger that free enquiry and the pursuit of socially and environmentally orientated work are marginalised.

In 2002, the efforts to involve UK universities in military partnerships were stepped up. In this year, three new programmes – the Defence Technology Centres, Defence Aerospace Research Partnerships and the Towers of Excellence – were launched. Then,

in late 2006, the government published its Defence Technology Strategy, which marked a further concerted push to involve universities.

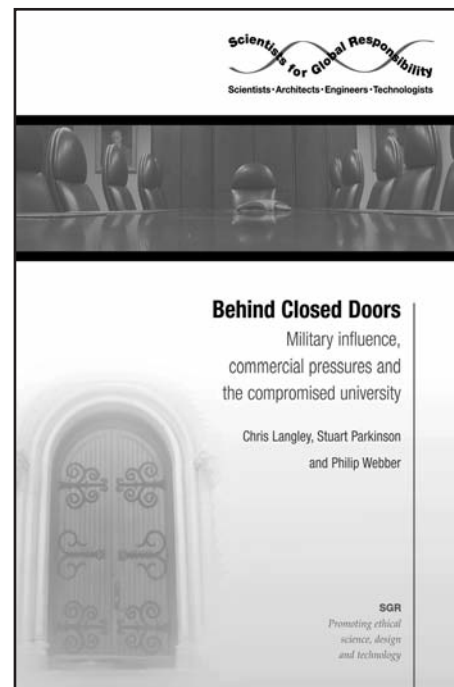
As we pointed out in previous reports and presentations, there are a number of major concerns that relate to the growing military-university links, not least the way in which such collaboration can contribute to the marginalisation of alternative approaches to dealing with a broad range of security problems. In *Behind Closed Doors* we look at this issue in more depth, using the Freedom of Information Act, interviews with senior university staff and other sources of information to examine the ways in which both military and related commercial involvement affects researchers and the traditional ethos of universities.

### Secrecy and skewed research agendas

Our findings reveal much higher levels of military involvement – both corporate and government – than officially acknowledged, together with a disturbing lack of openness and accountability on the part of universities and other institutions. Our data also raise serious concerns about bias in research agendas. Questions are also raised by our investigation about the value for money of public expenditure in UK universities.

*Behind Closed Doors* assembles data illustrating that military involvement with the funding and governance of research, teaching and training at UK universities is far more prevalent than is generally acknowledged. The financial data that we collected in this study indicates that official figures for military funding at universities underestimate the extent considerably, possibly by as much as five times.

The present study indicates that a very high proportion of the over 100 universities in the UK receive military funding. For example, 42 out of 43 UK universities investigated in this and three previous studies have been found to receive funding to pursue military objectives (data on the other university was inconclusive). A worrying trend became clear: high prestige universities and departments of engineering and physical sciences were over-represented in university-military partnerships. This trend can potentially limit the availability of skilled staff for work in alternative civilian areas, and thus reduce access



### Case study universities

Birkbeck College, London  
Bournemouth  
Bristol  
Cambridge  
Edinburgh  
Exeter  
Imperial College, London  
Leeds  
Leeds Metropolitan  
Newcastle  
Oxford  
Plymouth  
Sheffield  
Southampton  
University College, London  
West of England

to independent expert advice. Indeed, lucrative contracts from this highly profitable sector can be very appealing to researchers on tight budgets. But, as we pointed out in *Soldiers in the Laboratory*,<sup>3</sup> it is important to remember that funding is only part of the influence exerted by the military within academia.

A further observation arose during the study concerning the prevailing ethos found within universities in the UK today. Universities present themselves, on their websites and in promotional material, as open, accountable institutions yet, when challenged during this study, they fell well short in a

number of important respects. These included the difficulties that we encountered in trying to locate detailed, comprehensive data on the different kinds of military involvement in universities. It was apparent that this is due to a combination of incomplete record-keeping, commercial restrictions, pressures on researchers and, most disturbingly, evasiveness of officials. We found that senior university academics, corporations and researchers are very reluctant to discuss details of their activities when they are related to military involvement within universities, despite these institutions receiving significant public funding or co-funding. Therefore we were frustratingly unable to learn more about such issues as intellectual property rights, teaching direction and openness in partnerships involving the military sector. Even details of the publications that arose from military funding were withheld by some of those universities approached using the Freedom of Information Act.

Our interviews and discussions with many at the sample of 16 universities that we investigated showed that there is considerable disquiet among non-military funded university staff about growing military presence within their institutions. One of the main concerns is related to general worries about the power of vested interests – especially large

corporations – to influence the research agenda and make it more ‘conformist’ and less transparent. Another concern, about which we heard, was that high-technology, weapons-based approaches to dealing with security threats or other global problems are unduly given priority over, for example, political, diplomatic or other non-technological approaches. Funding and other pressures mean that these staff members, and presumably others in similar situations, often feel unable to express their concerns openly, and see their views as marginalised.

## Agenda for change

*Behind Closed Doors*, building on our previous investigations, suggests a number of important recommendations, in order to curb the undue influence of the military sector and to re-invigorate the traditional academic ethos. Our recommendations are directed at universities, researchers and government. We encountered a number of difficulties while collecting data, which led us to feel strongly that universities need to remember that they are publicly-funded institutions and should therefore be more accountable. University managers too should be more open and transparent about the funding that their university receives and be responsive to legitimate scrutiny, like ours. Secrecy damages both the health and the public perception of science and technology.

During the course of the research for *Behind Closed Doors* and earlier *More Soldiers in the Laboratory*, it became clear to us that steps need to be taken as a matter of urgency to ensure that Freedom of Information requests are properly dealt with and that the legislation is understood and requests are acted upon promptly and efficiently.

Additionally, there needs to be much greater realisation by senior academics and university managers that military involvement on campus is an area of serious ethical concern among members of staff and students, as well as in the wider community – and that there consequently needs to be a much wider debate on this issue.

Over the past five years, SGR's programme on military influence on science and technology has looked at a range of issues, including many related to the military involvement in UK universities – as funders and partners in research and as framers of teaching programmes. Our work strongly suggests that professional and policy circles must give greater recognition to the fact that there are viable and effective alternatives to the dominant high-technology, weapons-based approach to security problems. At present, thinking within the military

sector still owes much to outmoded notions of where threats lie and is coloured by the power of multinational military corporations, influencing the choice of response.

Furthermore, academics throughout the UK must feel able to speak openly about and question prevailing orthodoxies, including the growing commercialisation and militarisation of UK universities. The predominant commercial ethos across the university sector must be examined in detail and where necessary challenged. Many in the UK realise that our universities are too important for their independence to be compromised by over attention to business objectives.

There are some encouraging signs that the UK government, in its National Security Strategy launched in March 2008, recognises that security is about much more than weapons and their support platforms, but how these signs might actually translate into action is going to be critical. As scientists and concerned citizens, we urgently need to have a fully informed and open discussion in the UK on the role of universities in society, their damaging commercialisation and their involvement in the security strategy that we adopt.

**Dr Chris Langley is SGR's principal researcher. He is either sole or lead author of the SGR reports, *Soldiers in the Laboratory*, *More Soldiers in the Laboratory* and *Behind Closed Doors*. For more information about SGR's latest work in this area, see p.4.**

## References

1. Langley C, Parkinson S, Webber P (2008). *Behind Closed Doors: Military influence, commercial pressures and the compromised university*. SGR.
2. Langley C, Parkinson S, Webber P (2007). *More Soldiers in the Laboratory: The militarisation of science and technology – an update*. SGR.
3. Langley C (2005). *Soldiers in the Laboratory: Military involvement in science and technology – and some alternatives*. Editors: Parkinson S, Webber P. SGR.

All three reports can be downloaded from:  
<http://www.sgr.org.uk/ArmsControl/MilitaryInfluence.html>

Paper copies can be ordered from the SGR office - please phone 01303 851965 or email <[info@sgr.org.uk](mailto:info@sgr.org.uk)> for prices.

## The main findings<sup>1</sup>

- There is significantly more research and teaching supported by the military at UK universities than officially acknowledged. Data from our sample indicates that military funding could be as much as five times higher, and be present in the vast majority of universities.
- Universities, when challenged during our study, were lacking in openness and accountability. For example, detailed data on military involvement was very difficult to obtain, and many senior staff either refused or were reluctant to speak to us – especially if they received military funding.
- Many academics who did speak to us expressed concern at the levels of military involvement in teaching and research.
- Military corporations, despite claims of transparency and corporate responsibility on their websites, refused to respond to our requests for detailed information on their partnerships with universities.