

Australian Universities Face Student Referendum on Israel

August 21, 2025

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Thousands of university students across Australia are participating in a national referendum calling for action against Israel, to pressure both the federal government and universities to implement sanctions. The vote is being framed not only as a political statement, but also as a call to uphold human rights in response to the conflict in Gaza.

The referendum follows nearly two years of student-led protests, encampments, and sit-ins on campuses, highlighting widespread dissatisfaction with what students see as inaction on human rights concerns.

National Union of Students Education Officer James McVicar said the vote provides an opportunity for students nationwide to express their stance on whether universities should cut ties with companies involved in supplying weapons to Israel.

He expects more than 5000 students to register and cast votes over the coming week. “It shows that students are feeling anger, outrage, and horror at the images coming out of

Gaza,” McVicar said. He added that frustration is growing as both government and universities fail to respond to calls for stronger action.

Early results have already emerged. At Victoria University and Griffith University, students voted overwhelmingly in favour of urging the federal government to impose sanctions on Israel. The majority of campuses are scheduled to hold their votes in the coming days.

The referendum comes at a time of heightened scrutiny over universities’ handling of political activism. A recent report found that Melbourne University breached Victoria’s Privacy and Data Protection Act when it used its wi-fi system to monitor students and staff during a pro-Palestine protest in 2024.

Rachel Dixon, Victoria’s Deputy Commissioner, described the surveillance as a “significant breach of trust.” A separate inquiry in July concluded that the monitoring had contributed to a culture of self-censorship, discouraging students and staff from openly supporting pro-Palestinian movements on campus.

McVicar said the student vote aims to hold institutions accountable. “The point of the referendum is to put them under pressure to respond,” he noted. “It is a mass display of student democracy and an expression of the student voice directed at universities and the Australian government.”

The referendum coincides with broader activism, including a nationwide march for Palestine scheduled for Sunday. Organisers believe these events underscore the determination of students to link domestic university policies with international human rights issues.

As voting continues, the outcome may shape how universities across the country engage with companies and government policy connected to the conflict. While the process is student-driven, it also highlights broader questions about accountability, freedom of expression, and Australia’s role in addressing global human rights concerns.