

A Critical Discourse Analysis of University Responses to Gaza Encampments: A Comparative Study of Columbia, Oxford, and Trinity College Dublin

Ibrahim M. Alsemeiri¹, Ciarán O'Carroll², Yousef M. Aljamal³

¹PALM Strategic Initiatives Centre, Gaza, Palestine

²School of Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

³The Hashim Sani Center for Palestine Studies at Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: i.b.m.alsemeiri@hotmail.com, ciaran.ocarroll@tudublin.ie, yousef.aljamal@ogr.sakarya.edu.tr

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Abstract

This study critically examines how Columbia University, Oxford University, and Trinity College Dublin responded to the 2024 Student Gaza Encampments through their official statements. While some universities framed their responses around free speech and campus safety, others actively rejected student demands, reinforcing ties with Israeli institutions. These responses reflect deeper ideological, geopolitical, and power dynamics that remain underexplored in existing literature. This research investigates how these universities construct and articulate their responses to the encampments, particularly in relation to student demands for academic boycott and divestment from Israeli institutions, and the discursive strategies they employ to present their positions. It explores how these strategies reflect institutional priorities, geopolitical concerns, and ideological influences, especially in light of Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza. Using a hybrid discourse analysis approach, this study synthesizes elements from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak, 2001), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (van Dijk, 2015), and Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2008). Findings indicate significant differences in how the three universities constructed their responses. Columbia and Oxford framed the encampments as security threats, using bureaucratic and procedural discourse to dismiss student demands for academic boycotts and divestment. Their statements prioritized institutional continuity and depoliticized the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. In contrast, Trinity College Dublin engaged more substantively with student concerns, situating its response within a broader human rights discourse while refraining from fully endorsing student activism.

This research reveals that universities do not operate as politically neutral spaces but as institutions embedded within national and geopolitical interests. It further highlights the absence of true academic freedom in the U.S. and the U.K., where institutional responses to student activism are often shaped by political and ideological pressures rather than the principles of free expression and academic inquiry.

Keywords

Gaza Encampments, Western University Responses, Genocide in Gaza, Institutional Power Dynamics, Geopolitical Discourse

1. Introduction

The Israeli military war on Gaza has led to catastrophic destruction, with mounting evidence of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and systematic war crimes ([International Court of Justice, 2024](#)). Entire neighbourhoods have been reduced to rubble, hospitals and schools deliberately targeted, and thousands of civilians, including scholars and students, killed ([Amnesty International, 2024](#)). The blockade on Gaza has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, leaving millions without access to food, water and medical aid ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)). International human rights organizations such as [Amnesty International \(2024\)](#) and legal experts including Frances Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Palestine, have condemned Israel's actions as violations of international law ([Albanese, 2024](#)), yet western powers remain divided in their responses, with some governments actively shielding Israel from accountability ([Alsemeiri et al., 2024](#)). Against this backdrop of unprecedented violence and increased global attention to the question of Palestine, the Palestinian struggle has gained renewed global attention, igniting mass mobilization and protests across the world ([Sathar, 2023](#)). This increased global attention drove the Student Gaza Encampments of 2024, where student protests on university campuses called for administrations to sever academic ties with Israeli institutions and divest from investments linked to Israel ([Kohli, 2024](#)). As spaces of intellectual discourse and socio-political engagement, universities often issue public statements on politically charged events, shaping public perception while reflecting their institutional values, political stances and commitments to academic freedom and inclusivity ([Oranburg, 2024](#)). However, there is a lack of systematic comparative research on how universities frame their responses to student-led demands regarding war on Gaza.

In response to the Israeli atrocities unfolding in Gaza, university students worldwide organised student encampments in 2024, demanding institutional actions against Israeli apartheid and genocide (for detailed discussion, see [Al Shihabi, 2025](#)). From the United States and Europe to Latin America and beyond, many students occupied campus spaces, set up tents and held continuous demon-

strations, calling for their universities to stop academic partnerships with Israeli institutions and divest from companies complicit in Palestinian oppression. [Buheji and Hasan \(2024\)](#) argue that these encampments became more than just physical spaces of protest; they symbolised a broader movement for justice, human rights and anti-colonial solidarity. As student activism intensified, universities faced growing pressure to take a stance, with faculty members, alumni and public figures joining the call for action. However, university administrations—historically resistant to political engagement—were forced to navigate the tension between upholding institutional neutrality and addressing the moral and political demands of their students ([Buheji & Ahmed, 2024](#)).

In response to the students' encampments, some universities issued official statements that played a crucial role in shaping public perception, managing dissent and asserting institutional authority. For example, Columbia University issued a statement on 29th April 2024 which framed the encampment and Israel's occupation primarily in terms of campus safety and academic freedom, rather than as a political or humanitarian crisis. While dominant discourses often marginalize Palestinian voices, digital activism has provided alternative platforms for resistance ([Delaney, 2016](#)). Social media has enabled students to challenge university rhetoric and expose institutional complicity in silencing pro-Palestinian activism ([Mahmoud & Ahmed, 2024](#)). However, research on how universities respond to these counter narratives—whether through repression, co-optation, or indifference—remains limited. This gap necessitates a closer look at how universities manage dissent and whether their discourse strategies reinforce existing power asymmetries.

2. Problem Statement

A common observation is that these statements varied significantly in their framing of the protests and their stance on Palestine. Some institutions sought to appear neutral by emphasizing principles of free speech and campus safety, while others explicitly rejected student demands and reinforced existing ties with Israeli institutions ([Zick, 2024](#)). A few statements acknowledged the humanitarian crisis in Gaza but carefully avoided political commitments. The language used in these communications strategically constructed narratives that either validated, delegitimized, or depoliticized student activism, reflecting broader ideological and geopolitical interests. Universities positioned themselves as arbiters of acceptable political engagement, balancing administrative control with the growing power of student-led movements ([Chenoweth et al., 2024](#)). These statements also expose deeper power structures, ideological biases, and geopolitical influences that vary across institutions and countries. Specifically, the discourse strategies employed by Western universities in addressing such divisive topics remain insufficiently examined. Therefore, this research aims to explore the intricate interplay between institutional authority, student agency, and the evolving landscape of activism within higher education, through critical discourse analysis of university re-

sponses to Gaza encampments at Columbia University, the University of Oxford, and Trinity College Dublin. By analyzing their framing strategies, this study reveals how these institutions shape narratives, assert authority, and navigate the tensions between student activism and administrative control, shedding light on the broader ideological and political contexts embedded in their public communications.

3. Research Questions

1) How do Columbia University, Oxford University, and Trinity College Dublin construct and articulate their official responses to the 2024 Student Gaza Encampments, particularly in relation to student demands for academic boycott and divestment from Israeli institutions?

2) What discursive strategies do these universities use to present their position on the protests, and how do these strategies reflect institutional priorities, geopolitical concerns, and ideological influences?

4. Literature Review

4.1. Institutional Discourse and Political Activism in Higher Education

A range of studies has explored how higher education institutions respond to political activism and international conflicts using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). [Garcia et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrate that the language used by institutions can either promote inclusivity or reinforce existing inequalities when addressing campus climate challenges. Similarly, [Hypolite and Stewart \(2021\)](#) examine institutional responses to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Their work suggests that, despite the use of inclusive language, these responses often serve to uphold current power structures. [Johnson and Justice \(2022\)](#) further highlight this issue by analyzing statements from university leaders during politically charged events. Their findings reveal a clear gap between the aspirational discourse of social justice and the actual practices of these institutions. Collectively, these studies underscore the complex role of language in shaping institutional identities and reveal a gap between inclusive rhetoric and the reinforcement of existing power structures. The recent Student Gaza Encampments exemplify this disconnect: by reclaiming campus space, student activists challenge institutional complicity in broader geopolitical injustices.

4.2. Student Gaza Encampments

According to [Hodali \(2025\)](#), a Gaza student encampment is an intentionally constructed, tent-based protest space established on university campuses by student activists. It represents a form of prefigurative politics—reorganizing traditional academic spaces into autonomous, collectively managed enclaves that subvert existing hierarchies. This reconfiguration serves not only to symbolically and physically reclaim space from institutional control but also to challenge the complicity

of academic institutions in perpetuating systems of colonial expropriation and militarized violence in Palestine. The encampments face external pressures—such as legal injunctions and rigid university policies that yield only minimal concessions—and internal challenges including organisational fatigue, unclear decision-making, and divisions over strategy, all of which undermine their cohesion and bargaining power (Al Shihabi, 2025).

Social media has been instrumental in shaping Gaza encampment protests by greatly improving the flow of information and shaping public opinion. It facilitates immediate sharing of events, empowering activists to rally support swiftly and effectively. This quick dissemination of information not only keeps participants updated on current events but also draws international attention, thereby amplifying the voices of those engaged in the movement. Sadiki et al. (2024) report that demonstrations have surged across university campuses in the United States and worldwide, partly due to social platforms' ability to galvanize collective action. Liu et al. (2023) further indicate that public trust in media affects how events are perceived, illustrating how social media reshapes narratives and engagement, particularly during crises.

Student Gaza Encampments represent a critical moment in university activism, with students across multiple campuses establishing protest sites to demand institutional divestment from Israel. These encampments, echo previous movements such as those against the Vietnam War and the Occupy movement (Hodali, 2025), have faced varied institutional responses ranging from negotiation to outright repression (Mahmood, 2024). Universities have cited concerns over campus security, disruption of academic activities and legal liabilities in their official statements. However, activists argue that these responses mirror broader patterns of institutional complicity in geopolitical injustices (Buheji & Hasan, 2024). A systematic analysis of how universities frame their discourse on the encampments is essential to understanding their role in shaping political and ideological narratives

4.3. Geopolitical Alignment and Institutional Discourse in Universities

The geopolitical alignment of universities plays a crucial role in shaping their institutional discourse. Research suggests that American and British universities often reflect state interests, given their financial ties to government bodies and private donors (Tamtik & Felder, 2024). In the USA, a historical scepticism towards international law—particularly regarding the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Cerone, 2007)—has influenced how universities position themselves in global conflicts. Historical events further underscore this influence. For example, the Vietnam War led to widespread campus protests as students mobilized against perceived injustices, prompting university administrations to adopt responses ranging from repression to engagement with student demands. The anti-war movement significantly influenced campus political activism, with violent episodes such as the Kent State shootings catalyzing further protests (Asregadoo, 2017;

Murphy, 1971; Martignago, 2018).

During the Iraq War, student protest movements emerged anew within a different geopolitical landscape. The events of 9/11 and subsequent military actions reinvigorated student political engagement, echoing patterns observed during the Vietnam era (Moffett et al., 2014). The complex interplay between institutional politics and socio-political unrest requires universities to balance the need to maintain order with the imperative of honouring free expression (Hollis, 2021).

Conversely, Irish universities—shaped by their colonial history and anti-colonial ethos—have adopted a more critical stance towards Israeli policies (Byrne, 2009). While some European universities have supported the ICC's rulings, inconsistencies remain, particularly in balancing legal commitments with political alliances (Steinberg, 2024). Collectively, this literature underscores the need for an in-depth examination of how geopolitical positioning influences university discourse on the Gaza encampments.

4.4. Universities as Political Actors

Universities have increasingly become active political actors, influencing regional and national policies through higher education governance frameworks. Institutional pressures urge them to engage in collaborative governance with industries and government entities, thereby playing a critical role in shaping innovation policies and regional development strategies. Research highlights that universities often act as mediators, consolidating networks and activating local governance mechanisms to foster economic improvement in their regions (Fonseca & Nieth, 2021; Fonseca, 2019).

Universities can leverage their research capabilities to inform evidence-based policy-making, thus contributing to governance in various sectors, including healthcare and education (Karomani et al., 2021). The intersection of these institutions with public policy reflects a growing recognition of their impact on national economic policies (Chen & Kim, 2022). The political engagements of universities often manifest through their participation in decision-making processes, influencing institutional governance as they navigate external pressures and opportunities (McCann et al., 2021). Therefore, their role is vital in not only contributing to knowledge production but also facilitating broader social and political changes through targeted policy involvement.

4.5. University Responses to the Gaza Genocide

The Israeli attack on Gaza has profound implications for university communities, influencing student activism, mental health, and educational dynamics. Many universities have witnessed escalating student activism, with pro-Palestinian movements urging institutions to rethink their policies regarding Israel, particularly concerning the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement (Goldstein et al., 2018). Some educational institutions are adopting innovative pedagogical approaches to equip students with an understanding of the Israeli attacks' im-

pacts on the conditions of Gaza, fostering critical discourse on citizenship and global issues (Hayat et al., 2024). The divergent experiences of students from conflicting backgrounds emphasize the necessity for universities to promote dialogue and collaboration to mitigate tensions among student populations (Gross & Maor, 2024). These responses are critical as academic environments aim to balance freedom of expression with fostering inclusive spaces for all students.

4.6. Discursive Strategies in University Responses to Political Controversies

Universities employ various discursive strategies to manage their public responses to controversial political events, as highlighted by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA examines how discourse functions within power structures and societal contexts, facilitating a detailed critique of underlying social dynamics by analyzing complex interactions between language, ideology, and power relations in institutional environments (Amoussou & Allagbé, 2018). Historical Discourse Analysis (HDA) further extends this examination by focusing on historical contexts shaping discourse practices, recognizing both continuity and transformation of power over time (Zhang, 2023). This method emphasizes the evolution of institutional discourses and their ongoing influence on social structures and cultural identities (Magfira et al., 2022; Amoussou & Allagbé, 2018). For instance, analyzing the historical evolution of political narratives through HDA can reveal how discourses justify or contest authority, thereby affecting public perceptions and actions (Al-Badri & Al-Janabi, 2022; Amoussou & Allagbé, 2018).

Neutrality rhetoric emerges as a prevalent institutional strategy, wherein universities position themselves as impartial entities fostering open discourse and academic freedom (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Yet, critics argue neutrality itself serves ideological ends by implicitly legitimizing dominant narratives and marginalizing alternative voices (Anwar et al., 2024). Additionally, securitization discourse frames student activism as a potential threat to campus order and safety, effectively depoliticizing and delegitimizing dissent (Pietrzak, 2024). Appeals to unity and civility are also common, aiming to contain controversy by emphasizing community cohesion over political division, often marginalizing certain perspectives in the process (Mulvey, 2024). These linguistic and rhetorical choices significantly shape institutional positions, mediating between maintaining control and responding to ethical demands from academic communities. CDA, HAD and Narrative Analysis by Riessman (2008) collectively provide robust analytical tools to dissect institutional language, revealing the mechanisms through which empowerment and marginalization are articulated within university responses to political events and controversies (O'Shea et al., 2024; Aperocho et al., 2022).

Despite this existing research on discursive strategies in university responses to political controversies, significant gaps remain. There is a lack of systematic analysis on:

- 1) How universities framed their responses to the 2024 Student Gaza Encamp-

ments.

2) The linguistic strategies used to justify their positions and whether they reflect broader geopolitical alignments.

3) The extent to which universities engage with or suppress counter narratives challenging dominant discourses on Palestine.

This study suggests addressing these gaps by applying HAD, CDA and Narrative Analysis theory to institutional statements, revealing how power structures, ideological commitments and geopolitical interests shape university discourse. By contextualizing university responses within broader historical and political frameworks, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of academia in contemporary struggles for justice and representation.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine and compare the public statements issued by Columbia University, Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University in response to the 2024 Student Gaza Encampments. It analyzes the linguistic choices, rhetorical strategies and narrative framing used to articulate their positions on the Israeli attacks on Gaza while exploring how colonial histories, institutional stakeholders and political alliances shape their discourse. Data will be gathered exclusively from the official websites of the three universities to ensure accuracy and reliability. A comparison will be conducted to identify similarities and differences in how each institution frames its response, considering geopolitical contexts, historical affiliations and institutional priorities. This analysis will highlight how language is employed to navigate politically sensitive issues and reinforce broader institutional and ideological alignments.

This study adopts a hybrid discourse analysis approach that synthesizes elements from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Narrative Analysis. DHA, developed by [Wodak \(2001\)](#), provides a historical and geopolitical lens to examine institutional discourse, while CDA, championed by [van Dijk \(2015\)](#), helps unpack power relations and ideological positioning. Additionally, Narrative Analysis, as explored by [Riessman \(2008\)](#), allows for an exploration of how universities construct broader narratives in response to student activism.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the study examines the following discursive strategies within university statements:

- 1) Framing
- 2) Metaphors
- 3) Presuppositions
- 4) Narrative structures
- 5) References to other discourses
- 6) Positioning of the institution
- 7) Power relations
- 8) Historical context

- 9) Geopolitical context
- 10) Lexical choices
- 11) Modalities
- 12) Voice and agency.

This hybrid approach enables a nuanced understanding of how institutional discourse is shaped by historical, political, and rhetorical factors. By situating these statements within their broader institutional and socio-political contexts, this comparative study examines how language constructs authority, reinforces ideological positions, and influences perceptions of legitimacy. Furthermore, it explores how discourse is strategically employed to consolidate power, justify actions, and suppress protest movements, particularly in relation to the Israeli attacks on Gaza.

6. Data Analysis

This analysis explores official institutional statements issued by Columbia University, the University of Oxford, and Trinity College Dublin regarding student-led encampments and protests connected to the 2024 attacks in Gaza. These communications, released between April and May 2024, serve as the primary materials examined.

The sources analyzed are statements authored by Columbia University President Minouche Shafik (2024), Oxford's Vice-Chancellor and senior leadership team (Tracey et al., 2024), and Trinity College Dublin Provost Linda Doyle (2024). These communications are examined through multiple lenses, including framing, metaphor, presupposition, narrative structure, intertextual references, institutional positioning, power dynamics, historical and geopolitical contexts, lexical choices, modality, and voice and agency.

6.1. Framing Analysis

1) Columbia University

a) Framing as Campus Order: Columbia frames the encampment and the Israeli attacks on Gaza in terms of campus safety and academic freedom rather than as a political or humanitarian crisis. This positions the university as an entity concerned with maintaining institutional order, presenting the protests as disruptive to the academic environment.

b) Neutrality and Power: The university portrays itself as a neutral enforcer of rules, making a distinction between free speech and maintaining a controlled campus environment. This framing deflects attention from political demands and emphasizes institutional authority.

c) Targeted Groups: The framing also suggests that the protests are unwelcoming for certain groups, particularly Jewish students, subtly implying that the protests create a hostile environment for some members of the campus community.

2) Oxford University

a) Separation of the Israeli attacks on Gaza and Protests: Oxford separates the

Gaza genocide from the student protests, treating the latter as a distinct issue from the broader political situation. This framing minimizes the connection between the protests and the larger geopolitical conditions.

b) Focus on Disruption: The protests are framed as disruptive and potentially escalating into violence, with the university's refusal to negotiate framed as a direct response to perceived prejudice and the lack of transparency from the protesters. This reinforces the university's position of authority and aligns with an institutional preference for order over political activism.

c) Moral Acknowledgement: While the suffering in Gaza is acknowledged, it is framed in moral terms but is disconnected from the university's role or policies, emphasizing that the institution is not taking a stance on the 'conflict' itself.

3) Trinity College Dublin

a) Humanitarian Framing: Trinity frames the Israeli attacks on Gaza as a humanitarian crisis and a violation of human rights, which situates the university's stance within a moral and legal framework.

b) Critique of Israel: The statement particularly condemns Israel's actions, describing them as a disproportionate onslaught, reinforcing a critical position on Israel's military actions.

c) Legal Framing: The university also incorporates legal discourse by referencing the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on genocide, framing the issue through the lens of international law and human rights.

6.2. Metaphor Analysis

1) Columbia University:

a) "Campus is roiled by divisions" (depicts unrest and tension).

b) "Creating a hostile environment" (frames the situation as unsafe and confrontational).

c) "A noisy distraction" (minimizes the protests as a mere disturbance).

2) Oxford University:

a) "Horrorified by the suffering" (emotionally charged but avoids taking a political stance).

b) "Escalation" (suggests increasing aggression from protestors).

c) "A deeply intimidating environment" (portrays the protests as threatening, not a form of civil resistance).

d) "Physically handling the receptionist" (frames protestors as physically aggressive).

e) "We lead by example" (positions the university as a moral authority).

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) "Dehumanization of its people is obscene" (frames Israel's actions as stripping Palestinians of their humanity).

b) "Ceasefire sounds too temporary" (implies a deeper, lasting solution is needed).

c) "Cornerstone of our identity" (positions academic freedom as a core insti-

tutional value).

6.3. Presupposition Analysis

1) Columbia University:

a) Notes antisemitism is a central issue in the encampment, highlighting Jewish students feeling targeted.

b) Assumes protests should be regulated, implying student activism should not disrupt campus life.

c) Presupposes that the administration and protestors are equally engaged in constructive dialogue.

2) Oxford University:

a) Assumes Oxford Action for Palestine (OA4P's) tactics crossed a line into criminal behavior.

b) Assumes violent actions were committed, based on the university's framing, without clear evidence.

c) Assumes disruptions to graduations and exams are unjustified, sidelining protestors' grievances.

d) Assumes OA4P lacks transparency, undermining their legitimacy as student representatives.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Assumes universal condemnation of violence, emphasizing the desire for a permanent end to "conflict".

b) Implies Israel's violations of international law by endorsing the ICJ ruling.

c) Assumes divestment is an ongoing process, not an immediate demand.

6.4. Narrative Structure Analysis

1) Columbia University:

Binary narrative: The university is a mediator balancing freedom of expression and campus safety.

a) Protestors are seen as disrupting order but engaging in good-faith negotiations.

2) Oxford University:

a) Victim-oppressor framing: University staff and Jewish students as victims of intimidation and violence, with protestors depicted as aggressors.

b) Moral vs. immoral actors: The university is framed as rational and ethical, while protestors are seen as immoral for escalating tensions.

c) Dialogue vs. disruption: The university claims to engage in dialogue with registered societies, contrasting it with OA4P's alleged refusal for good-faith negotiations.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Dual condemnation narrative: Acknowledges both October 7th and Israel's military response and emphasizes the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

b) Institutional responsibility narrative: Positions Trinity as a moral actor refining investments and supporting Palestinian students.

c) Individual choice narrative: Shifts responsibility for academic ties to individual academics rather than taking an institutional stance.

6.5. References to Other Discourse

1) Columbia University:

a) References civil rights laws to frame the response within a legal context of discrimination.

b) Mentions academic freedom, aligning with broader free speech and institutional autonomy discourses.

c) References the Advisory Committee for Socially Responsible Investing, linking decisions to ethical financial practices.

2) Oxford University:

a) References academic freedom and the “right way to disagree”, positioning the university within Western liberal democratic discourse.

b) Criminality references (“this is now a police matter”) invoke legal and disciplinary discourse, delegitimizing protests.

c) Comparison with other universities’ protests emphasizes Oxford’s “civilized” response, distinguishing it from tolerated protests elsewhere.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Cites international legal discourse, referencing the Genocide Convention and ICJ ruling.

b) Uses ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) framework, aligning with corporate responsibility in investment decisions.

c) Frames the war through human rights discourse, emphasizing violations of dignity and humanity.

6.6. Positioning of the Institution

1) Columbia University:

a) Positioned as a neutral arbitrator, enforcing policies while acknowledging student concerns.

b) No commitment to divestment but offers a procedural review for new proposals.

c) Emphasizes support for Jewish students while offering symbolic investments in Gaza, such as health and education programs.

2) Oxford University:

a) Condemns violence and criminal actions, emphasizing commitment to free speech and academic debate.

b) Frames itself as an active humanitarian actor, focusing on scholarships and rebuilding initiatives, rather than engaging in political actions like divestment.

c) Positions itself as a moral leader, rejecting intimidation and favoring “respectful dialogue”.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Positions itself as a mediator, claiming to have listened to many voices, pre-

senting a neutral yet principled stance.

b) Frames itself as an ethical investor, with a focus on progressive investment policies and commitment to regular updates.

c) Advocates for Palestinian education, emphasizing scholarships and engagement with the Palestinian Ambassador.

6.7. Power Relation

1) Columbia University:

a) Asserts authority by defining acceptable protest conditions and ultimately rejecting full student demands.

b) Protestors are allowed some space for negotiation but remain subject to university rules and decisions.

c) Shifts some responsibility for hostility to external actors, distancing the institution from internal conflicts.

2) Oxford University:

a) Maintains control by setting terms of engagement, such as negotiating without preconditions.

b) Refuses to recognize OA4P as legitimate negotiators due to lack of transparency.

c) Frames university-led dialogue as constructive while dismissing protestors' demands as unreasonable.

d) Police involvement solidifies institutional power, turning protests into legal matters.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Defends academic autonomy against external pressures, emphasizing freedom from state influence: "I do not want to see the erosion of academic freedom in Ireland."

b) Faculty retains control over collaborations with Israeli institutions.

c) Recognizes student activism but does not directly address the protests or their demands.

6.8. Historical Context

1) Columbia University:

a) References past campus activism to frame the university's stance as a continuation of upholding free speech and order.

b) Does not address colonial histories or the Palestine question, which can be seen in the context of U.S. support for Israel, aligning with policies that encourage occupation and colonialism.

2) Oxford University:

a) Avoids mentioning colonial legacies or Britain's role in Israel-Palestine.

b) Does not draw parallels with past student activism, such as the anti-apartheid protests. This silence could reflect the UK's alignment with Israeli occupation through continued political and military support.

3) Trinity College Dublin

a) Ireland's colonial past under British rule is implicit in the university's alignment with anti-colonial and human rights discourses, reflecting the historical struggles for Irish independence. Trinity College Dublin's emphasis on humanitarian framing and ethical investment resonates with Ireland's historical legacy of resistance against colonial domination—a legacy that has long influenced public policy and activism.

b) Trinity's stance contrasts with the U.S. and UK, who support Israeli actions, by emphasizing ethical investing and referencing past divestment movements in areas like fossil fuels, showcasing consistency in opposition to colonial practices.

6.9. Geopolitics Context

1) Columbia University:

a) Avoids taking a geopolitical stance, reinforcing institutional neutrality.

b) The refusal to divest from Israel aligns with broader U.S. political and economic ties to Israel, while references to Gaza investments acknowledge the humanitarian crisis without taking political action.

2) Oxford University:

a) Acknowledges Gaza's suffering but avoids positioning itself as a political actor.

b) Does not mention divestment from companies linked to Israel, maintaining an apolitical stance. The focus on scholarships and rebuilding signals humanitarian concern without engaging in structural economic or political action.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Recognizes global student activism and positions Trinity's response within the broader international debate.

b) Engages with international institutions, working with the UN, NGOs, and foreign embassies, while avoiding direct critique of Irish government policy, signaling alignment with international legal rulings.

6.10. Lexical Choices

1) Columbia University:

a) Strong condemnatory language is used against antisemitic speech and violence (e.g., "condemn," "abhorrent," "unacceptable").

b) No strong condemnatory language is directed at the Israeli attacks on Gaza.

c) The term "encampment" is framed negatively, described as "a noisy distraction" and "unwelcoming," minimizing its political significance.

d) "Constructive dialogue" frames the university's actions as reasonable, while failure to reach an agreement is portrayed as regrettable, not an institutional failure.

2) Oxford University:

a) Uses condemnatory language against the protestors: "violent action," "escalation," "intimidation," portraying them as disruptive.

b) Neutral, emotional language is used on Gaza (“horrified by the suffering”) but is less critical of the Israeli attack itself.

c) Strategic distancing OA4P: “prejudicial demands,” “not transparent.”

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Uses legal terminology: “Genocide Convention,” “ICJ order,” and “human rights” to frame the situation within an international law context.

b) Emotive language condemns Israeli actions: “Obscene,” “ferocious,” “dehumanization.”

c) Neutralizing language is used for investment updates, employing passive voice like “the portfolio will be updated,” avoiding explicit decisions.

6.11. Modalities

1) Columbia University:

a) Firm modal expressions (“must,” “will not,” “we urge”) reflect strong institutional authority.

b) Softer modalities (“we plan to explore,” “we offered to develop”) suggest conditional, non-binding commitments on issues like Gaza investments.

2) Oxford University:

a) Firm modal verbs like “We will not negotiate” and “There is no place for threatening actions” assert institutional control.

b) Hesitant modal expressions on Gaza support (“We have begun to work on,” “We are engaging with”) show uncertainty and non-commitment.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Strong modal verbs such as “I abhor and condemn all violence” and “We will continue to work with the Palestinian Ambassador” show absolute commitment.

b) Hedging on academic ties: “Some colleagues will see value... others will feel deeply uncomfortable” leaves room for differing perspectives.

6.12. Voice and Agency

1) Columbia University:

a) Dominant voice of the administration, particularly President Minouche Shafik.

b) Jewish students are given strong agency as victims who feel unsafe.

c) Student protestors are acknowledged but subordinated to university rules.

d) Palestinian students and activists are largely absent as active agents.

2) Oxford University:

a) University leadership holds the dominant voice, with protestors discussed rather than given voice.

b) Jewish students are acknowledged as victims.

c) Palestinian students’ grievances are abstracted.

d) OA4P is seen as disruptors, not legitimate dialogue partners.

3) Trinity College Dublin:

a) Institutional voice strongly condemns violence and supports Palestinian stu-

dents.

- b) Agency in academic collaborations is delegated to faculty, not the institution.
- c) Student agency is implied but not explicitly mentioned in the discourse.

7. Discussion

The official statements of Columbia University, Oxford University, and Trinity College Dublin in response to the 2024 Student Gaza Encampments illustrate how institutional interests, geopolitical alignments, and rhetorical strategies shape university responses to political crises. While all three institutions frame their positions around academic freedom, their approaches differ significantly. A key distinction lies in how student protests are framed. Columbia and Oxford construct the encampments as disturbances, invoking language of security, order, and procedural violations. This securitization discourse portrays student activism as a potential threat, prioritizing the maintenance of campus stability. In contrast, Trinity incorporates elements of civil resistance discourse, framing the encampments as part of broader democratic engagement. This response acknowledges the ethical dimensions of the 'conflict' and aligns with Ireland's historical political culture of resistance.

The tension between institutional neutrality and moral responsibility also plays a crucial role in shaping these responses. Columbia and Oxford emphasize neutrality, framing their positions around procedural commitments and avoiding substantive engagement with the ethical dimensions of the crisis. Their statements prioritize institutional continuity and assert that universities should remain neutral, distancing themselves from political positions. Trinity, however, takes a more morally engaged stance, explicitly condemning Israeli actions while maintaining institutional constraints. This contrast reveals how neutrality serves as a rhetorical strategy shielding universities from political accountability, while moral engagement challenges institutional detachment in moments of crisis.

Universities also function as political actors, often aligning with national geopolitical interests, either implicitly or explicitly. Columbia's response closely mirrors dominant U.S. political narratives, avoiding direct criticism of Israeli policies and reinforcing institutional stability over political engagement. Notably, Columbia University has dismissed students involved in the pro-Palestinian protests, further exemplifying its commitment to preserving institutional order. Moreover, the U.S. arrest of Mahmood Khaleel, a Palestinian activist, and his subsequent detention in an unknown prison reflects broader political actions that suppress Palestinian solidarity movements (Singh, 2025). Oxford's response aligns with the UK's diplomatic caution, maintaining an ambiguous stance. Trinity's response, however, reflects Ireland's governmental position on Palestine, grounded in a historical legacy of anti-colonial solidarity. These positions demonstrate how universities, despite claims of autonomy, are influenced by the geopolitical realities of their respective nations.

The framing of student demands further emphasizes institutional positioning.

Columbia and Oxford largely reject calls for academic boycotts and divestment, using procedural and legal discourse to justify inaction. Their statements emphasize institutional limitations and the complexity of financial entanglements, effectively neutralizing student demands through bureaucratic rhetoric. Trinity, while not fully endorsing divestment, engages with student concerns more substantively by framing the issue within human rights discourse and committing to discussions on ethical investment. This contrast highlights different institutional strategies for managing dissent, with Columbia and Oxford opting for rejection and Trinity engaging more meaningfully with the ethical implications of student demands.

The findings demonstrate that neutrality rhetoric employed by Columbia and Oxford was not solely about avoiding explicit political positions but also served as a strategic discursive tool to indirectly dismiss student demands. For instance, Columbia University's persistent framing of the Gaza encampments as primarily matters of campus security and institutional order allowed it to subtly undermine the legitimacy of student activism by labelling protests as disruptive ("a noisy distraction"). Similarly, Oxford University's insistence on separating its humanitarian acknowledgement of Gaza's suffering from its institutional policy effectively marginalized student activism, framing divestment demands as excessively political and thus outside the university's 'neutral' remit. By positioning activism as inherently disruptive or politically contentious, both institutions used neutrality rhetoric to implicitly reinforce the status quo, indirectly rejecting student demands without explicitly engaging with their ethical or political content.

Finally, legitimization and delegitimization strategies play a crucial role in shaping institutional narratives. Columbia and Oxford rely on appeals to tradition, legality, and procedural constraints to justify their positions, presenting student activism as disruptive or impractical. Their statements reinforce a discourse of institutional continuity, framing administrative responses as neutral and necessary. Trinity, on the other hand, does not dismiss student activism outright, instead integrating it into a broader ethical discussion. This difference reveals how universities either delegitimize student activism as radical and unreasonable or validate it as principled and necessary.

These differences in framing, positioning, and rhetorical strategies demonstrate that university responses to political crises are deeply embedded in broader ideological, historical, and geopolitical contexts. Rather than being neutral spaces, universities function as sites where discourse actively shapes and reinforces power structures. The responses of Columbia, Oxford, and Trinity reflect not just institutional priorities but also the wider political and ethical stakes of engagement with global justice struggles.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This research examines the discourse surrounding Gaza encampments as reflected in three official institutional statements. Although our analysis indicates possible

effects on stakeholders, a notable limitation is the absence of empirical data regarding how these groups perceived or responded to the communications. Collecting such evidence was not within the scope of this study, which focused on discourse analysis. Future investigations employing mixed methods are recommended to assess the tangible impacts of these statements. This could include an exploration of the long-term implications for student activism, faculty morale, and institutional reputations, potentially alongside comparative studies across diverse political environments to understand how different universities navigate these challenges.

9. Conclusion

This paper highlights how Columbia University, Oxford University, and Trinity College Dublin responded to the 2024 Student Gaza Encampments, revealing the tension between academic freedom and geopolitical pressures. Columbia and Oxford's focus on neutrality and security reflects how universities may prioritize institutional stability over engaging with political or ethical concerns. In contrast, Trinity College Dublin's response, though more ethically engaged, still stops short of fully endorsing the protests. The dismissal of pro-Palestinian students at Columbia and the arrest of Mahmood Khalil underscores the growing suppression of academic freedom in the face of political pressures. Given these findings, it is important that universities proactively establish clear ethical guidelines to engage responsibly and transparently with student activism. Specifically, universities should consider adopting the following measures:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Universities should clearly articulate their rationale when responding to student activism, explicitly grounding decisions in academic freedom, human rights, and justice. Columbia and Oxford's opaque approaches diminished trust, whereas Trinity's transparency bolstered its credibility.
- **Human Rights Discourse:** Institutional communications must incorporate international human rights principles, openly recognizing ethical and humanitarian dimensions. Trinity's direct engagement with human rights contrasted positively with Columbia and Oxford's ambiguous neutrality.
- **Protection of Academic Freedom:** Institutions should explicitly protect student and staff rights to political protest. Columbia and Oxford's punitive responses highlight the necessity of safeguarding academia as a site of free critical expression.
- **Rethinking Institutional Neutrality:** Universities need to critically reassess neutrality, acknowledging its inherently political nature. The analysis shows neutrality at Columbia, and Oxford obscured engagement with activist demands, implicitly endorsing dominant geopolitical positions.
- **Ethical Investment Reviews:** Institutions must regularly and transparently review investment portfolios in response to student divestment campaigns. Trinity's clear communication on ethical investments serves as an effective model

for institutional accountability.

Future studies should examine the long-term impact of these responses on student activism, faculty morale, and institutional reputations, as well as comparative research across different political contexts to better understand how universities navigate similar challenges.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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