

Students Offered Grants if they Tweet Pro-Israeli Propaganda

By [Ben Lynfield](#)

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This article was published in August 2013, but it is even more relevant today, as the world witnesses more attacks on Gaza and an important propaganda operation from Israel.

In a campaign to improve its image abroad, the Israeli government plans to provide scholarships to hundreds of students at its seven universities in exchange for their making pro-Israel Facebook posts and tweets to foreign audiences.

The students making the posts will not reveal online that they are funded by the Israeli government, according to correspondence about the plan revealed in the *Haaretz* newspaper.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office, which will oversee the programme, confirmed its launch and wrote that its aim was to "strengthen Israeli public diplomacy and make it fit the changes in the means of information consumption".

The government's hand is to be invisible to the foreign audiences. Daniel Seaman, the official who has been planning the effort, wrote in a letter on 5 August to a body authorising government projects that "the idea requires not making the role of the state stand out and therefore it is necessary to adhere to great involvement of the students themselves, without political linkage or affiliation".

According to the plan, students are to be organised into units at each university, with a chief co-ordinator who receives a full scholarship, three desk co-ordinators for language, graphics and research who receive lesser scholarships and students termed "activists" who will receive a "minimal scholarship".

Mr Netanyahu's aides said the main topics the units would address related to political and security issues, combating calls to boycott Israel and combating efforts to question Israel's legitimacy. The officials said the students would stress Israeli democratic values, freedom of religion and pluralism.

But Alon Liel, the doveish former director-general of the Israeli foreign ministry, criticised the plan as "quite disgusting". "University students should be educated to think freely. When you buy the mind of a student, he becomes a puppet of the Israeli government grant," he said. "You can give a grant to do social work or teach but not to do propaganda on controversial issues for the government."

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