

I rather dislike the insulting expression "pearl-clutching" - meaning the exaggerated expression of outrage - but a report in The Times suggests a certain amount of pearl-clutching over the proposed merger of King's College London and Cranfield University.

The report by the newspaper's Education Editor ([thetimes.com 25th May](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/king-college-london-cranfield-merger-2023-05-25)) quotes various KCL academics who have concerns about the merger. A member of the Faculty of Natural, Mathematical and Engineering Sciences said the merger was a "ploy to generate income from the war effort," a claim contradicted by other critics claiming that healthy KCL finances would be used to bail out Cranfield.

It would appear that the objectionable "war effort" means the defence of the United Kingdom, and that, underlying many of the criticisms, is the belief that defence activity is inherently "sinister".

The Times' headline "We're not here to build war drones — King's College staff angry at merger" conjures up a ludicrous vision of stereotypical professors being set to work on production lines building drones.

Critics fail to mention that both universities are already involved in delivering academic provision at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. KCL incorporates multiple departments and research centres connected with defence and security studies and - of particular relevance to BAFF - defence medicine, and personnel welfare.

Whether the proposed merger is indeed the right way to go for the two universities is not for me to say. Matters affecting staff including pay, structures, consultation and ethics are for the institutions concerned and their academic bodies and staff representatives.

Certainly, universities always should be places where competing ideas and opinions can exist and be debated. Conscientious objection by individuals must be respected and catered for.

Academics and students have every right to debate changes affecting them, and to expect their institutions to act ethically.

Defence activity is surely not, however, inherently unethical in a democratic country which seeks to follow the rule of law.

Douglas Young