

17 December, 2020
Committee Secretary
Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security
PO Box 6021
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission by Dr Simon Leitch

To the Committee,

Regarding: Inquiry into national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and research sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. I do so as a former university lecturer and a holder of a PhD on Chinese foreign policy.

Australian universities are, at present, profit-making corporate entities which neither intend to serve Australia's national interest nor safeguard the liberal values which have allowed them to prosper. Current approaches to prevent foreign influence, interference and espionage do not work because universities and researchers have too many incentives to self-censor, under-report breaches, and voluntarily comply/collaborate with foreign governments and researchers. China is the largest and most sophisticated threat to the university sector, however, the methods it pioneered are now being utilised by other states, including India, Saudi Arabia, Iran and even Cambodia.

The Nature of the Threat

Universities have become a threat to national security via the following mechanisms:

- 1) Universities engage in research collaborations with foreign dictatorships, with much of the research having military-industrial applications. These technologies are eroding vital technological advantages of Western militaries and allowing domestic repression in adversarial regimes.
- 2) Universities are providing a forum for foreign agents to normalise their regimes and undermine the political will to meet the threat their states pose.
- 3) Universities are now corporations increasingly detached from the concept of national interest. They view their foreign ties as having similar importance to the country they are located within. This is a product of financial incentives from overseas students, corporations and governments.
- 4) Almost all of what Australian universities are doing is either legal or it requires a researcher to sacrifice their job in pursuit of proper regulation. Universities and their employees have tacit understandings about what can or cannot be said, and what is or is not up for criticism or scrutiny.
- 5) Few researchers find it worth their while to engage in disputes about technology theft, particularly if admitting to a breach devalues their intellectual property.
- 6) Academics are more concerned about their own financial security than they are about Australia's national security, which is partly why they see no moral obstruction to providing expertise to foreign dictatorships.
- 7) Large numbers of academics genuinely believe that science is somehow politically neutral. The submission to this Committee by the Australian Academy of Sciences sums up this mindset, as they posit that, *"Scientist-to-scientist engagement should transcend racial, cultural, political and religious beliefs, and provide a continuing opportunity for nations to engage in harmonious dialogue and co-existence."* One wonders how, exactly, providing

foreign dictatorships with advance technology to use in weapons transcends much at all, except for the interests of Western liberal-democracies.

The Myth of Academic Freedom

When I began my PhD, I assumed that free inquiry and free speech would be assured. What I found was a culture of self-censorship and creative language by which academics could pretend to be neutral, objective or dispassionate, but the aim of which was to appease a foreign dictatorship – in this case, China. Sometimes, this was done merely by omission. In much the same way as the universities who have sent a submission to this Committee have failed to mention Chinese influence, or China at all,¹ so too were there words we simply weren't allowed to say.

Some taboos, such as “the Three Ts” (Tiananmen, Taiwan, Tibet), were easy to avoid, however, there were more abstract linguistic and logical hurdles to master. For instance, despite the fact that there is no functional difference between Nazi Germany of 1938 and modern China, you could not make many of the obvious deductions about the role, nature or aim of such a fascist state, nor frame it as an ideological or military opponent. Likewise, rather than refer to Chinese news outlets as a propaganda department, and its journalists as political agents, which they are, we had to treat Chinese media as though it was the same as our own free media. When China-watching academics like myself (or our own ABC) made a statement such as “Chinese state media reports...”, we were doing the bidding of Beijing. We were playing a role in normalising that dictatorship and its organs. We were helping them make unfair equivalences and conceal their anti-democratic and anti-free media agenda behind a veneer of seemingly apolitical language.

The price attached to assisting Beijing's propaganda was surprisingly low from Beijing's perspective. All that was required to make academics modify their language was the denial of visas. When I was a student, I had many pro-PRC lecturers, and it was no coincidence that they were allowed to take field trips or holidays to China, whereas any serious analyst with the backbone to put the words “Tiananmen” and “massacre” together was simply not allowed to visit. Furthermore, universities have no desire to host academics hostile to Beijing. Although the tap of Chinese money and students is easily turned off, it need not come to that. A simple lack of invitations to conferences or the refusal of timely visas is usually enough to rally administrators to the foreign cause.

The crux of all this was that academics were (and still are) politically compromised but lacked any incentive to say they were politically compromised. Many academics have written to me to shamefully explain the same simple formula that has led to their silence on everything from concentration camps to organ harvesting, Hong Kong suppression to technology theft, and the simple fact is they have all profited from compliance and could have done nothing else if they wanted their academic career to continue.

One may notice the enormous numerical gap between those many academics that tweet in support of Black Lives Matter, or against President Trump, compared to those precious few who dare disparage an actual dictatorship. The difference is explainable by the incentive-deterrence structure of the protests, not by the moral dimensions of the issues at stake. There is simply no comparison between the rights of African-Americans in the USA and those of an average Chinese person, much less those of an ethnic minority or a political dissenter in the PRC, and academics are smart enough to know that.

¹ Of the eight university submissions viewable at the time of my own submission, only the University of Western Australia mentioned China by name, but only in a laughably contrived reference to a Chinese medicine program. Four of the eight submissions came from universities with Confucius Institutes.

But the simple fact is, the same attributes which make China a dictatorship are those that make it unprofitable for our academics to depart from the narratives it approves of.

In just the past few months, I have had social science academics publishing on both Indian and Cambodian affairs complain to me that they have experienced interference from collaborators or their own university administrators. Their research was approaching sensitive topics – sensitive, that is, to foreign regimes. If we do not alter the incentive structure for academics to speak out against attempts at political interference, even the weakest and most backward foreign actors will be able to direct our academics and control information streams, with disastrous consequences for a free society.

The Myth of Espionage

The submission to this Committee by the University of Queensland (submission 2) contains a fascinating conclusion by its authors – *“Australia’s espionage offences are more than adequate to address the threat of espionage faced by the Sector. Their physical elements encompass the breadth of ways in which information is handled for, and communicated to, foreign entities in the higher education sector.”*

Espionage is a problem. I know of several cases involving both Iran and China, however, the more serious issue is that no espionage is required for foreign governments to leverage Australian universities. Regarding China, we simply allow actual members of the Chinese military to conduct research here, whilst multiple members of the Chinese Academy of Science are imbedded in many of our engineering, computing and physics departments where they are absorbing information that will create the superweapons of the future.

It is the act of a blind and self-destructive society that we should have allowed university researchers to build careers by sharing information that will be, within our lifetimes, the strategic equivalent of the atom bomb in the last century. And just as many of the scientists whose work helped create that first superweapon were themselves opposed to secrecy, so too are too many of our researchers blind to the broader implications of collaboration with states that do not share our scientists’ lofty goals of harmony, openness and liberal politics.

Erroneously, many of our institutions rate the risk of their collaborations on the basis of which universities they are collaborating with. Some Chinese universities are considered higher risk than others. This is based on the false premise that there is a distinction between public and private research in China. Just as Huawei or WeChat are required to do whatever Chinese security laws tell them, so too is all information gathered by Chinese researchers liable to be used by the military or state-owned industrial conglomerates, if it has such an application. And it all has such applications, which is why the Chinese government allows its researchers to come here.

All collaboration with China is, effectively, legal espionage. When this verges into illegality through outright theft, the researchers have little support to pursue their claims. I know of researchers who were working on contracts partly funded by large defence corporations or the ADF, and in each case, when breaches occurred, the incentive was for silence, lest they embarrass themselves or admit their intellectual property had been devalued by being in the possession of a competitor.

The solutions to our problems are rather obvious, chief among them being: (1) a ban on research collaborations with citizens from a range of non-democracies; (2) a ban on universities receiving funds from those same states or the associated corporate entities by which those states attempt to conceal the PRC’s guiding hand; and (3) strict limits placed on undergraduate student intakes from those states. Universities should have to learn to live within the confines of Australia’s natural growth, and

that of like-minded states, rather than work to appease foreign dictatorships in a search for self-serving and (ultimately) self-defeating expansion.

Of course, none of this will be done, as the universities will never accept constrained growth, and I will be called (at best) ill-informed, or (at worst) racist or xenophobic, the latter two charges being the rallying cry of many modern dictatorships, all of which are well-aware of the vulnerability of the West to such accusations. As for the charge of xenophobia, we may ask ourselves what is there to fear, save concentration camps, a censored internet, organ harvesting, social credit scores, ethnic profiling, patriotic education, tear gas and the police baton? I know the answer, because I have asked the Tibetans, Hong Kongers, Falun Gong, Uighurs and Taiwanese, as well as liberal dissidents and exiles from lesser-known tyrannies.

It is those same distressed people whose fates have promoted me to write this, and whose fate I am yet to be confident that we will not share.

Yours,
Dr Simon Leitch

