Open Guidelines: The Foreign Interference Problem in Australian Universities

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Asia-Pacific Research, November 18, 2019

Region: Oceania

Theme: Justice, Politics

Education has always been a political matter, whatever the apolitical advocates of it think it is. In Australia, it has proven sectarian, ideological, and skewed, often on the issue of funding. At the schooling level, private institutions receive more worldly goods from the taxpayer than state institutions. It is an absurdity that has become commonplace and unchallengeable.

At the university level, Australia's increasingly muddled and confused institutions are facing various crises in terms of an over reliance on foreign student numbers and, it must be said, an encroachment upon academic freedoms. The hoodwinked within these places assume that the threat is external: the personal interference of education ministers, for instance, in the awarding of grants.

Now, the political interference engineered by other states if figuring heavily in discussions that serve only one purpose: the greater regulation of academic life. In August this year, Education Minister Dan Tehan established the grandly named University Foreign Interference Taskforce "to provide better protection for universities against foreign interference."

The one state that loomed large shadowing the entire affair was the People's Republic of China, though the bureaucratic scribblers have been careful to avoid any direct finger pointing. In recent months, Beijing's influence, actual or purported, has been alleged on Australian university campuses. Much publicity has been given to clashes between pro-democracy Hong Kong protesters and pro-mainland opponents. In July, a particularly violent encounter took place in the Great Court of the University of Queensland, featuring a range of attacks including acts of vandalism on the so-called Lennon Wall of solidarity. Such campus encounters have had the legs to make it on the US news circuit, figuring both in the *Washington Post* and *Vice*. Australia's main ally, in other words, has taken note.

Australian universities have also been targets of cyber attacks. In November 2018, an email was sent to a senior staff member working at the Australian National University. Opening the email resulted in the attaining of access to the ANU network. The university subsequently decided that some 15 individuals have been involved in the operation deemed, in the words of ABC reporter Stephanie Borys, "so sophisticated" as to leave "the nation's leading security experts shocked." While ANU tiptoed around the issue of attribution, Tom Uren of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) nailed his colours to the mast. "It's likely to be China, frankly, they've got strong interests in Australia for a number of different reasons."

China continues to remain Australia's Big Yellow Bogeyman, keeping watchful eye and occasionally mauling cybersecurity. Universities in Australia have also been accused of providing shelter for research that has been put to rather invidious ends. Both the University of Technology Sydney and Curtin University [announced reviews](#) on funding and research approval procedures in July after links with the PRC-owned CETC, a military tech company, were scrutinised. CETC, it transpires, had developed an app for the benefit of Chinese security forces to target Uighur citizens in Xinjiang.

In August, Alex Joske of the APSI [teased out](#) the implications of links between Koala AI Technology, a Chinese artificial intelligence start-up staffed by Australian-educated scientists, and the University of Queensland. The broader lesson here, he argues is that "Western universities and even government funding may be used to help carry out research as well as train, fund and recruit AI-enabled state surveillance."

The problems in pursuing such regulations are evident from the start. What constitutes measurable interference? An audacious cyber-hack is one thing; but research that crosses boundaries and disciplines are not so easily assessed. Numerous cross-collaboration ventures between university staff in Australia and those in other countries take place. The measure, then, of what constitutes an unwarranted intrusion is hard to make. Given that much technology serves a dual-use purpose, the problems become even more pressing. [According](#) to the Vice-Chancellor of University of Sydney Michael Spence, "you don't stop making kitchen knives just because they can be used to murder someone."

Besides all that universities, certainly those based upon the US-model, have served to be annexes and extensions of the military industrial-corporate complex, making a mockery of the very idea of interference as a viable concept. What matters is whose complex one is feeding and who is permitted that degree of meddling.

The Taskforce's role was to [investigate four areas of interest](#): cyber-security in terms of boosting resilience against "unauthorised access, manipulation, disruption or damage"; the deterrence of "undue influence, unauthorised disclosure or disruption to our research, intellectual property, and research community, while protecting academic freedom"; the issue of foreign collaboration to ensure transparency, "undertaken with full knowledge and consent, and in a manner that avoids harm to Australia's interests"; and culture and communication "to foster a positive security culture" regarding "research and cyber resiliency".

The [guidelines](#) were released this month, and give the reader a set of hashed observations. "These guidelines recognise university autonomy. They are not intended to be prescriptive." Not exactly persuasive, that. The authors acknowledge that the universities already have a pre-existing structure in place "to ensure a positive security culture." (Why bother, then?) But the guidelines note that universities should "outline the requirements for staff, students, contractors and honorary staff engaging in international collaboration, proportionate to the risk." Foreign interference threats are to be incorporated into existing frameworks, with necessary authorities overseeing "security risks and are responsible for risk mitigation strategies."

Universities are encouraged to do their homework on the background of research partners and their links with foreign governments. Research, for instance, might be manipulated or altered "into particular areas". Greater scrutiny of funding sources is also suggested. Reporting mechanisms designed to prevent a subversion of freedom of speech are

advanced as necessary precautions. The policing of student populations is also outlined as a problem worth targeting.

What this particular circus of political indulgence does is ignore far more critical problems within the university, which has bred its own threats that have little to do with Beijing, Moscow or any interfering aspirant. From the Vice-Chancellors to underqualified heads of department, ideas are being murdered in the cradle. Expression is being drowned by a mindless form of spread-sheet fascism: if you cannot reduce the intellect to power points, dots of merciless mediocrity, you simply won't cut the mustard. You are a threat to be silenced, forced to eat the sludge of a bumpkin class.

The guidelines have provided management gluttons a perfect chance to expand. It is worth noting that the guidelines were themselves developed with the acknowledged assistance of managerial heavy weights and cerebral lightweights: Vice-Chancellors from University of Newcastle, La Trobe University, University of Queensland and RMIT University and a range of grey suits in the guise of the CEO of Universities Australia Catriona Jackson and Chief Executive Vicki Thompson of the Group of Eight.

The agitprop has already been drizzling from various university bureaucrats. Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University Deborah Terry [provides](#) a fine example of this. "The intent is not to add to the regulatory or compliance burden of universities, nor to contravene university autonomy – but to enhance resources and intelligence to further safeguard our people, research and technology."

The prospect for needless, wasteful employment in universities is very much in the offing. With such guidelines come job creation opportunities: the need for a team comprising a vacuous pro-vice chancellor who, in turn needs equally vacuous deputies and deputy deputies. Such ventures only bleed funding and serve no purpose other than self-aggrandizement on the part of management, much of which can be done away with at the stroke of a pen. No one, apart from happy accountants, would notice the difference.

If the education minister can be thankful for one thing, the guff about interference will serve to create employment in the worst monstrosities of the tertiary sector. With a fall of student numbers, Australian universities will face another deserved crisis, much of it of their own making. In the meantime, fortifying universities against the terror of external interference will be embraced with fatuous reverence.

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