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China tries to gag UK universities

Beijing targets critics on campuses, MPs warn

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The Chinese government has attempted to curb criticism on British campuses of its regime by pressuring universities into limiting academic freedom, MPs have said.

“Alarming” evidence of Chinese interference has been found by the Commons foreign affairs committee, which says that it appears to be coming from the embassy in London.

The MPs are particularly concerned that the battle for Chinese student fees and other investment “should not outweigh” longstanding international standards of academic freedom. In its report, *Defending Democracy in an Age of Autocracies* the committee found:

- A pro-vice-chancellor at an unnamed Russell Group university cancelled a speaker after contact from the Chinese embassy.
- An unnamed vice-chancellor came under pressure from the Chinese embassy and asked one of his senior academics not to make political comments on China for a specified time.
- Evidence that the state-backed Chinese Students and Scholars Association was being used to watch students in Britain. One witness, a Uighur Muslim, said that she was monitored and her family in China harassed after she became politically active.
- Officials from the China-funded Confucius Institute, which runs language and cultural programmes overseas, confiscated papers mentioning Taiwan at an academic conference.

The MPs accused universities of “not being alive” to the risks to academic freedom that were caused by growing dependence on Chinese revenue. They said that government guidance on the problem was “non-existent”.

There are more than 100,000 Chinese students at British universities, a number that has risen sharply in recent years. They are by far the largest group of overseas students, paying annual fees of up to £40,000. There are also many partnerships between British universities and Chinese institutions. MPs said that there was a “significant threat” of hostile state actors “misappropriating research output, including the seizing of research data and intellectual property”.

There had been a debate in the United States and Australia about this risk to academic freedom, but none in Britain, the report said, adding: “The [Foreign Office’s] role in advising universities on the potential threats to academia from autocracies is non-existent. There is no evidence that it has considered the threat from autocracies to academic freedom, which underpins the quality of UK higher education, nor engaged sufficiently with other departments to develop a co-ordinated response.”

It urged the Foreign Office and universities to develop a strategy within a year and explore what “market incentives”, such as vast fee income, “may serve to undermine academic freedom in the UK”.

The report cited a decision by the London School of Economics to halt a proposed China studies scheme funded by a pro-Beijing venture capitalist after concerns about academic freedom.

It also highlighted a recent Sunday Times article which suggested that managers at the University of Nottingham, one of two British universities with a branch in China, had pressured academics to cancel events relating to Tibet and Taiwan at the university's Chinese and British campuses after complaints from Chinese officials.

The university said that it "safeguards our academic freedoms and independence in more than 40 countries", adding: "Any reports of political influence at our campuses are very much wide of the mark."

The report also cited evidence that the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which is partly financed by the Chinese government, was an instrument of interference. "Its stated aim is to look after Chinese students, but it also reports on them to the embassy and authorities, tries to stop discussion of topics sensitive to China and takes more direct action under guidance of the embassy," the MPs were told.

They added in their report: "While autocracies seek to shape the research agenda or curricula of UK universities, or limit activities on university campuses, not enough is being done to protect academic freedom from financial, political and diplomatic pressure."

The Chinese embassy has been approached for comment.