

Anti-China witch-hunt targets Australian universities

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On August 21, the Australian government convened a “crisis meeting” with representatives of the universities and the intelligence agencies, as part of a hysterical campaign alleging pervasive “Chinese influence” throughout society.

Little has been revealed about what was discussed at the closed-door meeting. It was called amid demands by senior political figures and the corporate press for a crackdown on ties between Australian and Chinese research institutions, supposedly because they threaten “national security.”

The official purpose of the talks was to set “guidelines” governing collaboration with Chinese academics. As well as Education Department officials, the gathering was attended by representatives of the Home Affairs Department, which oversees the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and the Australian Federal Police. Representatives from the Group of Eight, the country’s elite public universities, participated, along with members of university security and computer departments.

The *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) reported that the major universities had agreed to the meetings after briefings by Education Minister Dan Tehan earlier this month.

The article declared that the “university sector has allowed itself to become dependent on Chinese students.” It stated: “The government and its security agencies feel the sector has become compromised, and over past weeks and months the sector has been given multiple briefings by such agencies as ASIO, the Home Affairs Department, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Defence Signals Directorate voicing concerns about Chinese influence.”

The article said the “security agencies” were

particularly concerned about research partnerships involving Australian and Chinese universities. After the meeting, Tehan insisted that universities would “likely” have to “liaise more closely with national security agencies.”

Lurid claims that such collaboration aids the Chinese military have played a central role in an anti-China campaign spearheaded over the past two years by the government, the Labor Party, the Greens and the corporate media.

These unsubstantiated assertions have been based almost entirely on the claims of the intelligence agencies. In 2017, for instance, the *Guardian* warned against a \$100 million “innovation precinct” at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), unveiled the previous year by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.

The *Guardian* trumpeted “defence fears” over the centre. It was funded, however, by private Chinese corporations, and focused on non-military research projects, including marine technologies, solar and wind power generation and the development of nanotechnologies.

Similar media campaigns have targeted other research initiatives, claiming, without any evidence, that they are of use to the Chinese military. The military and intelligence apparatus has invoked these assertions to push for unprecedented control over research, directly attacking academic freedom.

In a submission to the government in July 2018, the Australian Department of Defence requested powers to prohibit the publication of research, even for scientific purposes, and for warrantless entry, search, questioning and seizure powers to monitor compliance.

The department demanded authority to prohibit research on the virtually limitless ground that it has

“reason to believe the technology is significant to developing or maintaining national defence capability or international relations of Australia.”

The request was inextricably tied to the Australia’s deepening integration into the US-led war drive against China, overseen by successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike.

The latest crackdown is also doubtless being conducted in close collaboration with the Trump administration. The AFR reported after last week’s meeting: “The university sector fears the government could be pressured by the United States to crack down even harder on its collaboration with China, following a series of measures being proposed by US Republicans, one of which directly implicates Australia.”

The Trump administration is currently pushing a series of bills targeting Chinese academics, researchers and students.

One bill would ban visas for “individuals who are employed, funded, or otherwise sponsored by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.” Given that China’s university sector is state-controlled, this provision could be used to target any Chinese researcher. Other measures would force Chinese, Russian and Iranian students to undergo intrusive background checks before engaging in any “sensitive research projects” in the US.

The US legislation demands that Washington’s allies impose the same authoritarian regulations, declaring: “Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom should take measures similar to the measures outlined in [the bill] to address security concerns posed by researchers and scientists affiliated with, or funded by, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.”

The AFR noted that “the university sector is aware it needs to work with the government if only to avoid an even more onerous crackdown on its liaison with Chinese institutions.”

The US measures are one aspect of a military, economic and diplomatic confrontation with the Beijing regime, aimed at shoring-up Washington’s dominance in the Asia-Pacific and internationally. The attack on Chinese researchers is connected to the Trump administration’s trade war measures, which seek to stymie Beijing’s development of the high-tech sector.

The crackdown on Australian universities comes

amid warnings from Washington’s mouthpieces within the political and media establishment over the sector’s reliance on Chinese student enrolments after decades of government funding cuts. At the same time, estimates indicate that partnerships with Chinese research institutions will eclipse those involving any other nation by the end of next year.

The growing ties underscore the dilemma facing the Australian corporate and political establishment, between its strategic alignment with US imperialism and its economic and trade ties to China. The Coalition government’s measures, which have Labor’s full support, are another indication that the dominant sections of the ruling elite are fully committed to the US confrontation with China.

The renewed focus on universities follows the visit to Australia last month by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Labor and the Coalition welcomed Pompeo as he called for stepped-up involvement in US provocations targeting China, and in preparations for war with Iran.

Following Pompeo’s trip, Chinese international students have again been vilified as agents of the Chinese Communist Party, and there have been calls for their prosecution under draconian “foreign interference” legislation.

This week, the New South Wales Coalition government cancelled Mandarin and Chinese cultural classes in 13 public schools on the absurd grounds they “could be facilitating inappropriate foreign influence.” The sole ground for the decision was that the program involved Chinese government agencies, Hanban and the Confucius Institute.

These measures are aimed at vilifying China to legitimise the escalating war drive. They are also establishing a precedent for further attacks on democratic rights, to suppress the opposition to militarism and war that exists in the working class.



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