

Australian government overturns university research grants as part of anti-China campaign

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According to an “exclusive” report in the Murdoch media’s *Australian* newspaper yesterday, the federal Liberal-National government last December secretly blocked a number of university research grants because they allegedly represented a China-linked “national security threat.”

This development, only made known by a leak to the corporate media two months after the grants were overturned, is bound up with the US-instigated confrontation with China, now being intensified by the Biden administration.

It also marks a further step in the government’s political censorship of research at universities, and their integration into preparations for a potentially catastrophic military conflict with China in order to reassert US dominance over the Indo-Pacific region and internationally.

The *Australian* reported: “Top scientists at Australian universities have been denied lucrative taxpayer-funded research grants on national security grounds, as the federal government cracks down on projects that could hand military or economic advantage to foreign adversaries.

“The *Australian* can reveal that, in the first decision of its kind, five applicants for Australian Research Council (ARC) grants were blocked from receiving funding of up to \$500,000 a year on the orders of former education minister Dan Tehan.”

Tehan reportedly refused approval after Australian intelligence agencies, such as the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), subjected 18 ARC grant applications to additional checks.

The move came amid an escalating anti-China scare campaign, spearheaded by the same agencies, the media and the entire political establishment, including the Labor Party and Greens, featuring unsubstantiated allegations of “Chinese interference” and “recruitment” of dozens of academics.

Contrary to the *Australian*’s report, Tehan’s black-banning of five grants was not the first such arbitrary

exercise of the ministerial power to do so.

In November 2018, it was belatedly revealed that the government had surreptitiously vetoed 11 ARC grants, without notifying the public, or even the research teams involved. One of the projects was a study of the social impact of the 2017 closure of the General Motors plant at Elizabeth in northern Adelaide, which destroyed thousands of jobs at the factory and related auto industries.

Like all ARC-recommended grants, the five recently rejected applications went through a rigorous and intensely competitive process to assess their scientific significance. Every year, hundreds of proposals are submitted to the ARC and each is assigned two assessors—relevant experts—then sent to up to six reviewers, who provide ratings.

One of the overturned ARC grants involved advanced wireless communications research, with applications in radar and satellite systems. Another focused on nanotechnology advances for miniaturised optical systems, including autonomous vehicles and robots. The other three involved hi-tech lasers, next-generation electricity networks and cutting-edge fuel cell technology.

The government declined to identify the scientists whose applications had been rejected, but the *Australian* insinuated that they were linked to a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “Thousand Talents Program.”

The *Australian* claimed credit for “revealing” last August that “dozens of leading scientists at major universities across the country had been recruited” to this program, prompting an inquiry by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security into “national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and research sector.”

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton fast-tracked the inquiry, issuing its terms of reference last November, and requesting a report by this July. The terms of reference demand that all universities and other research facilities demonstrate their “capacity to identify and respond to” risks

to “Australia’s national security,” such as “foreign interference” and “undisclosed foreign influence.”

The composition of this committee underscores the bipartisan character of the witch hunt. Currently chaired by Liberal Party Senator James Paterson and deputy chaired by the Labor Party’s Anthony Byrne, the committee consists of six government members of parliament and five from Labor.

ASIO’s submission to the inquiry indicated the importance of the university and research sector for war preparations. “Their work leads to the development of proprietary and other sensitive information critical to the development of new technologies, medicines, techniques and practices that are fundamental to the future of Australia’s economy, military capabilities and security,” ASIO said.

Without providing any evidence, ASIO issued several provocative claims, including that researchers and their families “have been threatened, coerced or intimidated by actors seeking to have their sensitive research provided to a foreign state” and “some universities have been threatened through financial coercion should critical research continue.”

China was not named explicitly, but it was clearly being accused of serious crimes.

One of the instigators of the inquiry is the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Alex Joske, a former ASPI analyst, told the inquiry that his research suggested CCP “talent recruitment activity” could be associated with as much as \$280 million in grant “fraud” over the past two decades.

Joske said he had identified 325 members of CCP talent programs in Australian research institutions, including in all leading universities and the government’s Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

Previous such claims by Joske, published by ASPI, have been based on flawed evidence, such as the number of Chinese academics and their international colleagues who are publishing articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Joske also contributed to *Silent Invasion*, a 2018 book by Greens-associated academic Clive Hamilton that claimed that a war against China was needed to prevent Australia from being taken over by Beijing.

In its submission to the inquiry, Universities Australia, representing the 39 public universities, pledged to keep collaborating with the government and the intelligence apparatus. The university chiefs said they already were working closely with the government and “government agencies” on the Defence Trade Controls Act and a University Foreign Interference Taskforce.

Increasingly starved of funding by successive governments, the university managements promised to

“continue to build on such successes in partnership with government to further strengthen their resilience to foreign interference.”

Under the Defence Trade Controls Act, introduced by the last federal Labor Party government in 2012, people face up to 10 years’ imprisonment for “publishing or otherwise disseminating” information about research covered by the government’s Defence and Strategic Goods List or the Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty between Australia and the US.

University managements have also tied their institutions into joint research with US universities on “priority projects” under the Pentagon’s Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative, which the Australian government joined in 2017.

Universities in Australia, as in the US and internationally, are becoming integral components of military networks preparing for high-tech warfare. This includes the Lockheed Martin research centre at the University of Melbourne.

The National Tertiary Education Union, which covers university workers, is also complicit in the creeping militarisation of universities. For example, in August 2019, in response to a review of the Defence Trade Controls Act, the union issued a media release calling for a “balance” between “Australia’s defence and/or national security concerns” and “academic freedom.”

Such promotion of “national security” is part of a broader anti-China drumbeat. In 2018, the Liberal-National government and the opposition Labor Party jointly pushed through parliament “foreign interference” laws designed to crack down, above all, on anti-war dissent and anyone linked to China.

Last December, unprecedented legislation was passed to give the government sweeping powers to prohibit any agreement with China signed by a state, territory or local government, or a public university, and Chinese investment is now effectively banned across most of the economy.

These moves further demonstrate that the government is placing Australia on the front line of Washington’s plans for war to prevent China from challenging the global hegemony established by US imperialism after World War II.



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