

UK academics face investigation, prison for China-linked “military” research

Julie Hyland
19 February 2021

Almost 200 leading academics in the UK are being investigated for their “connections” to Chinese universities and “military-linked” firms, with the threat of up to 10 years imprisonment if they are deemed to be breaching “national security.”

The announcement by oligarch Rupert Murdoch's *Times* newspaper is part of an escalating assault on academic freedom and is integral to the US-led drive towards a potentially catastrophic military conflict with China.

It comes as Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper disclosed that Australia's federal Liberal-National government secretly blocked a number of university research grants last December on the grounds that they allegedly represented a China-linked “national security threat”.

On Friday, Australia formed one of three “guests” participating in a virtual meeting of the Group of Seven (G7) leaders, hosted by the UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The so-called D-10 coalition (whose other invitees are South Korea and India) is strategising on an “anti-China front”.

The allegations that UK university research is being used to assist the Chinese military are made in a report by the right-wing Civitas think-tank, which began life as part of the Thatcherite Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). Radomir Tylecote and Robert Clark, authors of the report titled “Inadvertently Arming China?”, are attached to the extreme-right of the ruling Conservative Party and the pro-Brexit campaign, heading up the IEAs and the neo-con Henry Jackson Society respectively.

The report claims to have “found” that 15 of the 24 top UK Russell Group universities have links with 29 Chinese “military-linked” universities and corporations. It accuses the UK universities of “unintentionally generating research” that “may be of use” to China's military conglomerates, “including those with activities in the production of Weapons of Mass Destruction...”

The spurious and menacing investigation concludes

with an extended note that “None of the academics, researchers, or other staff... discussed in this report are accused of knowingly assisting the development of the Chinese military, of knowingly transferring information to that end, or of committing any breach of their university regulations. Nor are they accused of any other wrongdoing, or breach of national security, or any criminal offence.” It also states that the research queried “may be used solely for non-military ends”, and even that “this report is not necessarily to demonstrate that they risk being used for military purposes...”

Although the report does not specifically name the academics involved, their identities can be easily established. For example, it cites “Three academics from the Bristol Composites Institute [that] have lectured at Zhejiang University” and who “are experts in composite materials that can be made stronger, lighter and resistant to electricity or fire...”

It also lists universities—including Cambridge, Imperial, Queen Mary, Bristol and Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt—it says are involved in research with potential links to the Chinese Communist Party and the Peoples Liberation Army, while asserting that there is “no evidence that any of these universities has done anything wrong.”

Nonetheless, it argues that much of the research identified is “being sponsored by the UK taxpayer” and calls for “a strategic reassessment for new rules for scientific research”, as part of an “urgent reassessment of the security implications of the so-called ‘Golden Era’ policies towards China...”

On this basis, the *Times* disclosed that the Foreign Office is preparing “enforcement notices” warning up to 200 UK academics that they could be breaching export laws preventing highly sensitive intellectual property “from being handed to hostile states.”

“We could be seeing dozens of academics in courts before long,” an unnamed source told the *Times*. “If even

10 percent lead to successful prosecutions, we'd be looking at about 20 academics going to jail for helping the Chinese build super-weapons."

The University of Manchester was forced earlier this month to end its research project with China Electronics Technology Group (CETC) following claims by Tory MP Tom Tugendhat, chairman of the Commons foreign affairs committee, that the state-owned firm's technology was being used against Muslim Uighurs.

Tugendhat is part of the newly formed China Research Group that is working with right-wing lobby groups and think-tanks to demand the UK's "economic decoupling" from China, using allegations of its human rights abuses. The *Times* editorial on the Civitas report was titled "Academic Decoupling."

The right-wing forces mobilised globally behind this latest incarnation of human rights imperialism have no genuine concern as to the repressive apparatus of the Chinese police state, which is directed above all against the working class. They are the representatives of a financial oligarchy that has massively enriched itself on the backs of the super-exploited Chinese masses, following the restoration of capitalism by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Their "investigations" and "research" are politically-motivated propaganda aimed at justifying economic and military aggression—including nuclear war—against what they regard as a strategic competitor to the interests of western imperialism.

Though they are reluctant—at this point—to propose measures that might infringe on the City of London's role as the largest renminbi-denominated foreign exchange hub and payments centre outside of China, this campaign is becoming ever more strident. The UK is attempting to march in lockstep with the US, where President Joe Biden has made clear the Democrats will continue and intensify the economic and military encirclement of China, begun under Obama and continued by Trump.

Earlier this month, the Ofcom media regulator withdrew the license of China Global Television Network (CGTN) to broadcast in the UK, claiming that it was controlled by the CCP. This had been preceded by a campaign against academics and freelance researchers that had appeared on CGTN to criticise US and UK policy against China. The ban also follows the introduction of the UK's new National Security Investment Bill, giving sweeping powers to scrutinise and block deals with Chinese corporations, and Johnson's provocative assertion that COVID-19 is the outcome of Chinese "demented

medicine."

Anti-China propaganda is also the stalking horse for broader political censorship, the primary target of which is left-wing opposition to capitalism, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Civitas report author Tylecote is the co-founder of the Free Speech Union (FSU), which purports to champion "national academic freedom." The FSU played a key role in the announcement by Education Secretary Gavin Williamson that he will place "a free speech condition" on universities wishing to access public funding and enable the government's recently created Office for Students (OfS) to appoint a "free speech champion" to investigate alleged breaches.

Journalist Toby Young is another founder of the FSU and was initially the government's first choice to lead the OfS before his attendance at a secret eugenics conference was exposed in the *London Student*.

The FSU is part of a network sponsored by the Charles Koch Foundation, a prominent funder of neo-fascist libertarian and Republican causes, including the Great Barrington Declaration in favour of letting COVID-19 rip through the working class.

Propagandising in favour of the state clampdown on academic freedoms, Edward Lucas in the *Daily Mail* drew a direct parallel between the anti-China measures and state surveillance of campuses pioneered through the Islamophobic Prevent strategy. These were pioneered on campuses by the Blair government in 2003, following the illegal invasion of Iraq.

"So how might we counter the threat?" he wrote. "Declining sponsorship for chairs in physics is certainly one way. But there are lessons to be learned from the close co-operation between counter-terrorism authorities and universities which has brought considerable success in beating back the radical extremists infesting our campuses."



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact