

Academics under surveillance as anti-China witch hunt escalates in Australia

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With the assistance of university managements, Australia's US-linked intelligence agencies are intensifying their monitoring and screening of university workers as the Liberal-National government moves to block all links with Chinese universities.

The stepped-up surveillance of academics goes hand in hand with increasing involvement of the universities in military projects related to preparations for a US-provoked war against China.

Evidence from Senate Estimates hearings earlier this month revealed that the Australian Research Council (ARC), which allocates government research grants, has been working with the spy agencies for several years to compile "sensitivity files" on researchers.

ARC chief executive Professor Sue Thomas told a hearing that the ARC had been collecting files, based on media reports and information provided by intelligence agencies, to ensure research grants were not issued to academics who may pose a threat to "national security."

The ARC checks for "sensitivities" using a "tracker" developed by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a Canberra-based, government-subsidised and US-linked military policy think tank.

In true blacklisting fashion, ASPI previously publicly named 325 academics linked to the Thousand Talents Plan, allegedly a Chinese government research program. Such claims by ASPI have been based on flawed evidence, such as the number of Chinese academics and their international colleagues who are openly publishing articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The ARC's "sensitivity files" indicate widespread spying on academics, researchers and university workers. The ARC receives upwards of 6,000 grant applications each year, collectively involving more than 10,000 researchers from tertiary institutions across Australia.

In March, a parliamentary committee confirmed that five research grants had been secretly rejected last

December, without clear reasons, from 18 referred for security checking by the intelligence agencies.

Universities themselves are employing corporate consultants and "foreign interference compliance officers" to conduct "security" checks on their staff as part of the federal government's crackdown.

The universities of Sydney, New South Wales, Monash and Queensland have hired corporate advisory firm McGrathNicol to help detect the risk of "foreign influence," including by auditing academics to check for "secondary loyalties."

A "senior risk advisor" at McGrathNicol is John Garnaut, a former corporate media journalist and advisor to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose government introduced far-reaching, anti-democratic foreign interference laws in 2018, supported by the Labor Party opposition.

At the same time, the Liberal-National Coalition government has ordered the universities to supply lists of their agreements with "foreign entities" by this month, to be subject to possible veto under last year's unprecedented Foreign Relations Act.

That legislation gives the foreign minister arbitrary powers to terminate relationships between a university and any "foreign entity" that the minister deems may "adversely affect Australia's foreign relations or are inconsistent with our foreign policy."

In April, the government used this power to tear up two vague agreements by the Victorian state government to participate in China's "Belt and Road Initiative" infrastructure program. The universities are evidently next in the firing line.

A bipartisan parliamentary committee is conducting a scare-mongering investigation into the universities and other research bodies, such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

In their submissions to the inquiry both the Australian

Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Federal Police declared, without providing any details, that Australian universities, researchers and their families are “at risk” from foreign states.

ASIO insisted that, while global collaboration has been the foundation of scientific and technological accomplishments, this had left Australian research institutions vulnerable to international partners with “different political, cultural and moral values”—a clear reference to China.

In his testimony, ASIO boss Mike Burgess revealed ASIO had 60 “engagements” with universities in 2020. He provided no further information.

Appearing before the committee, university chiefs pledged their loyalty. “Our universities and our researchers are not naive to geopolitical imperatives, and we support the Morrison government’s view that national security risks must be dealt with proactively,” Group of Eight (Go8) chief executive Vicki Thomson said, representing the eight most prestigious public universities.

The Go8 submission declared that its “beneficial” working relationship with the security agencies was already regarded as an “exemplar by the Five Eyes Plus group of nations and their leading research-intensive universities.”

The US-led global “Five Eyes” eavesdropping network conducts mass surveillance on millions of people around the world, as exposed by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden.

Australian National University (ANU) vice-chancellor Brian Schmidt said the university’s relationship with the security sector had “ramped up dramatically” since 2018, when it expanded to include the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and the Office of National Intelligence. The ASD is the electronic surveillance agency that forms a direct part of the “Five Eyes” operations.

Universities Australia chief executive Catriona Jackson said the universities were cooperating closely with the government in a University Foreign Interference Taskforce. She cautioned against duplication with this mechanism, only because that would “make it harder for universities to root out foreign interference.”

University of Adelaide vice chancellor and president Peter Hoj boasted that his institution had turned down seven collaborative research projects with overseas institutions due to concerns over foreign interference. This had come at “significant financial cost” and “put the renewal of staff employment contracts in jeopardy.”

In a statement to the committee, the University of

Adelaide said it was “one of the most defence-engaged universities in Australia.” This underscores the connection between the anti-China crusade and the integration of the universities into military preparations. “We were granted just last week a renewal of our Defence Industry Security Program membership at the highest level for personnel and governance,” the statement read.

Through this program and other schemes, university managements have tied their institutions into joint research with US universities under the Pentagon’s Multidisciplinary University Research Initiative, which the Australian government joined in 2017.

All this is happening with the complicity of the main university trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). While expressing concern about the chilling impact of “sensitivity files” on academic freedom, it has not opposed them. Instead, NTEU national president Alison Barnes said the union would write to the ARC to ask for more information and to request procedural fairness for targeted academics to respond to allegations made against them.

Similarly, the NTEU has not opposed, let alone campaigned against, the Foreign Relations Act veto power but only expressed concerns about the lack of an appeal process or right of reply once a banning decision is announced.

Over the past three years, the Australian government has become a frontrunner in measures against China, including the repressive “foreign interference” laws passed in 2018, which Washington regards as a model for similar provisions internationally.

For the past decade, successive Liberal-National and Labor governments have increasingly placed Australia on the front lines of Washington’s plans for war to prevent China from challenging the global hegemony established by US imperialism after World War II.

It is now clear that the universities also have become global “exemplars” for measures to cut off research cooperation with China and prepare for war.



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