



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: UK Universities' Engagement with Autocracies, HC 1157

Tuesday 28 February 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Liam Byrne; Drew Hendry; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Also attended: Mr Robin Walker (Chair) and Andrew Lewer, on behalf of the Education Committee.

Questions 1 - 54

Witnesses

I: Fiona Quimbire, Analyst, RAND Europe; Vivienne Stern, CEO, Universities UK; and Professor John Heathershaw, Professor of International Relations, Department of Politics, College of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of Exeter.

II: Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, President, City, University of London; Dr Tim Bradshaw, CEO, Russell Group; and Alan Mackay, Deputy Vice-Principal International and Director of Edinburgh Global, University of Edinburgh.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fiona Quimbre, Vivienne Stern and Professor John Heathershaw.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Today we have a one-off session on UK universities' engagement with autocracies. We are grateful to be joined by the Chair of the Education Select Committee and one of its Members. Will the witnesses please introduce themselves briefly before we go into questions, starting with Professor Heathershaw?

Professor John Heathershaw: My name is Professor John Heathershaw, Professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter and a member of the Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group, which was set up with the support of the parliamentary human rights group to improve universities' practices with regard to internationalisation, including relations with authoritarian states.

Fiona Quimbre: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Fiona Quimbre. I am an analyst at RAND Europe, where I lead the portfolio work on China. I led a study last year for the Foreign Office on research engagement with China. Before that I lived and studied in Beijing.

Vivienne Stern: Hello. I am Vivienne Stern, Chief Executive of Universities UK. Prior to that I was the director of Universities UK International.

Q2 Chair: Thank you all so much for joining us. Vivienne, what do you see as the main challenges for UK universities when they engage with autocracies?

Vivienne Stern: The challenge is operationalising all the measures that universities need to take to protect themselves against the risks, which are various in nature. I think over the course of the last few years there has been a great step forwards in the capacity of senior leadership, governing bodies and the people in universities who are responsible for various aspects of universities' practice in relation to internationalisation to understand and put in place processes to mitigate risk.

It is a fast-moving, dynamic environment. The legislative landscape is also changing and growing, and probably at this point the real challenge is making it possible for institutions to absorb that from the top right to the tips of their toes. That is the challenge we face at this point.

Q3 Chair: John, do you agree with that assessment? What more do you think UK universities could be doing, particularly with respect to guidelines?

Professor John Heathershaw: I do agree that there has been greater awareness. We have seen examples of universities responding constructively to our model code of conduct, engaging with it and improving their internal processes. It is piecemeal at the moment.



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The watchwords are, first, transparency to the general public and society; universities should be open and robust about academic freedom, including with respect to international partnerships and agreements with authoritarian states. That is global, whether it is China, Gulf money or other countries.

The other watchword is accountability, which means accountability to staff and students. Unfortunately, I think over a few decades, as universities have grown larger, their mechanisms for internal democracy have weakened. Academic senates have weakened, and therefore those accountability mechanisms that were once there have been weakened and need to be strengthened. In this specific area, that means involving academics who are on the frontline in area studies and other fields relating to colleagues in authoritarian states throughout the processes of achieving international partnerships, as advisers on relations with those countries.

Q4 Chair: Fiona, how effective do you think the universities' UK guidelines are? Are they being properly put in place? Secondly, you touched on a programme you did for the Foreign Office looking at this. It would be helpful to understand more about what the Government parameters were for that project, and why they saw this as an area of concern.

Fiona Quimbre: On the second point, we did a study on the challenges and opportunities of collaborating with China. That was very much focused on trying to understand how we balance that imperative of collaborating—understanding that there are tremendous benefits of collaborating with China—as well as balancing the potential risks that come with collaboration with certain actors.

The current guidelines I think are quite narrow. The reason for that is because I think the risk awareness itself is quite narrow. The best way to compare it would be to compare it to cyber-security. We tend to think of hackers in cyber-security as men in the basement with hoodies. Currently, the way we think about the problem in terms of technology transfer with China is very similar. We think of a student who comes into the lab, steals information and transfers it. It is much broader than that; the problem is much larger, and the guidance needs to reflect that concretely. For instance, it does not speak about the talent recruitment programme that China organises—that is not mentioned.

China's approach to technology transfers for our universities is not just about IP theft and cyber-hacks; it is about creating those links and contacts, restating them throughout the years and being able to direct research towards areas of interest.

Q5 Chair: I think that point is really valid. We have all seen the footage of students going round with a USB stick on the last day of their PhD and taking things out of computers at Cambridge University.

On that point about the reality, there is a programme I have been made aware of: Imperial College receives £6 million from China's aerospace corporation, AVIC, for structural design and manufacturing to research cutting-edge aerospace materials. Surely Imperial must have known that



AVIC manufactures the fighting planes and military helicopters of China? Is that the sort of programme we should be concerned about? How could Imperial not have looked into the basics of who they were partnering with?

Fiona Quimbre: I cannot speak about what Imperial is doing on this topic, but this is the tip of the iceberg. Those kinds of links can be traced; they have information on this. What we currently do not have information on is talent programmes, start-up competitions and new forms of donations and funds. Those are vectors and enablers of influence in our universities that we do not speak about. It is very important to understand that the current enablers of future research collaboration with countries such as China are also the enablers of potential technology transfer. That is what makes this challenge so difficult and complex. Our enablers mirror their enablers in their approach and tactics.

Q6 Chair: Vivienne, that specific programme that I mentioned at Imperial was not closed until September 2022—not because the university saw sense and questioned the dual use of the programme, but because the Export Control Joint Unit in Government refused to grant it export licences. Is it not a sign of failure at one of our top universities that it requires the Government to step in and say that that programme should not be taking place?

Vivienne Stern: Now we have an architecture of legislation that does two things. First, it creates a structure that helps institutions to think through the types of collaboration that they need to scrutinise, and informs the approach to due diligence in a way that I think has changed as the landscape has evolved. Secondly, it is underpinned by a supportive structure that is partly developed by Government in partnership with the sector, and partly by the sector itself. There is an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the kinds of things that ought to be referred to structures such as the Research Collaboration Advice Team. Sitting alongside that are things such as the Higher Education Export Controls Association—HEECA—which provides much more hands-on support to institutions to help them to understand how export control legislation specifically might apply in a particular case. Those two things together are making a real contribution to universities' ability to identify things that could be a risk, and in this case a risk to national security.

Q7 Chair: That seems to be the problem. There seems to be a question about universities' taking responsibility. We look to Russell Group universities to be a flagship for Britain around the world. We are incredibly proud of our university sector, but Imperial and Edinburgh partner with a Chinese missile manufacturer—the Chinese Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, whose drones have been used in Xinjiang. Again, it seems odd that they partner with, first, a military organisation of a country that we cannot say is always in line with our thinking, and secondly, a country that without question has committed human rights violations—specifically with a company that is committing those. Where in the university does the fault sit for having allowed that programme to go ahead? Who is the person who should be explaining to us why that decision was made?



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Vivienne Stern: I am not going to speak for Edinburgh or Imperial, but if you go back to the guidance, what we have tried to do is to help institutions to think about how they put in place a structure that allows for anybody in the institution who has a concern about a partnership or a type of collaboration. In response to Fiona's point, I agree. The dimensions of risk are quite complex; they shift over time. What you need at an institutional level is an architecture that goes right from the governing body, with a structure whereby you can scrutinise risk at the governing body level right through to the individual PI who is aware that a particular partnership has been formed, and they are able to ask questions, raise concerns and flag the need for additional scrutiny.

We have published a series of case studies that illustrate how universities have implemented that kind of structure. One of the case studies that we published related to the way that Imperial has put in place that set of mechanisms. They include not only those reporting mechanisms to governing bodies, but things such as enhanced due diligence processes. In many cases, there will be a specialist committee to which the activities or partnerships that are flagged as high risk will go for scrutiny. Sitting underneath that is training not only for people in leadership roles, but for academic and professional staff across the institutions, so that they are informed about the nature of risk and what they do if they are concerned. Sitting underneath that you get institutions that will look for gaps in their own apparatus—for example, stress testing those sorts of approach. We have developed guidance to help institutions to develop that kind of systematic approach; we have then supported that guidance with a suite of case studies, which describe in practice how this looks in individual institutions. All of those things are available on our website.

Professor John Heathershaw: I wanted to say that universities potentially had the infrastructure in place; they have research ethics committees, but they are focused on human subjects research, on issues such as anonymity and confidentiality. When it comes to a great deal of the science research that you are talking about, a lot of it would not go through a research ethics committee. There aren't processes in place around checking end use or appropriate partners from a research ethics committee perspective, and that is the primary body within the institution for doing that ethics check, which is where you should see inappropriate partnerships stopped, I would say. We do not have that at present.

The other body is an independent gifts committee. A particular gift or contract should be assessed by an independent gifts committee. Unfortunately, our research in 2020 found that, of the 24 Russell Group institutions, only seven out of the 17 that responded would say that they had independent gifts committees and published criteria for assessing gifts and donations. That might have changed and improved; some universities certainly said that they are currently working on that, but at that time it was a very poor uptake. That meant that 10 years after the Woolf report into the Saif Gaddafi-LSE case, only seven of the Russell Group universities were reporting to us that they were keeping to those recommendations.



So there are weaknesses. Things may be improving. The institutions are there, but they are just not functioning as they should, or having the remit that they should in some cases.

Q8 Graham Stringer: This Committee brought to the attention of Manchester University the fact that one of the organisations that they were working with—CETC—were involved in the repression of Uyghurs in west China. Professor Schröder said that he knew nothing about this. To be fair to Manchester University, they then withdrew their co-operation.

What should Manchester University have done to find out about CETC? Was that a credible response? Should the Government have a responsibility for telling universities that they are dealing with companies who are involved in that kind of repression?

Professor John Heathershaw: That is a great example of where the recommendations that we have as the Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group could really help.

There will be times when academics in a specialist field, who are not specialists on the place where that company or organisation comes from, enter into partnerships with a company or organisation. They may not know the particular political and economic background of those organisations and what they are doing with regard to human rights, or how they are supporting an authoritarian regime, but in almost all Russell Group universities there will be specialists within the university who do know. If you are bringing in your China specialists at an early stage in discussion of a partnership, even if that means that there is a little bit of tension with, maybe, a natural physical scientist who wants to enter into a partnership, nevertheless it is important, because that is how the university gets the information internally.

It is really important to say that, because many of these issues are quite technical and specific, there is expertise within institutions where academics can talk to academics, academics have different views, and accountability can be generated through better processes within the community.

I don't know whether in cases such as that there is a role for Government. I think we have seen that there are some extreme cases where matters reach an egregious level, where there needs to be a party outside the university, perhaps the state itself, stepping in, but I would think those circumstances are rare. The focus should be on effective accountability mechanisms within institutions.

Q9 Graham Stringer: You mentioned the Libya-LSE case that led to the resignation of a senior person there. As far as I am aware, that is the only such case. Are you aware of any other cases where people have fallen on their sword because they have been behaving in an improper way?

Professor John Heathershaw: I do not know of such cases. It may be at the junior or middle ranks—that tends to be where accountability is very often pushed down to when a public furore breaks out. Others who



know the university sector better, such as Vivienne, could speak to some other cases. When we spoke to gifts committees, we definitely heard of cases of conflicts of interest and an attempt to use relatively imperfect processes to prevent at an early stage donations that were going to be problematic from getting to the stage of being accepted. But the concern was primarily about managing the reputation of the institution, less about adhering to a set of objective standards on not supporting human rights violations indirectly, or not supporting authoritarian regimes indirectly. That was our concern as we looked at the data.

Q10 Graham Stringer: Fiona, from answers to the previous questions, we can assume that the main security risks posed by research co-operation with autocracies like China cover intellectual property violations, data theft and transfer of information, and research that can help in developing defence or war technology, or threaten human rights. Do you have any sense of the order of magnitude of those problems?

Fiona Quimbre: I think we have not completely grasped the scale. The current research focuses narrowly on some aspects—for instance, looking at how many universities collaborate with PLA-affiliated scientists in the UK—but we do not know, for example, how many scientists or researchers in the UK have subscribed to a Chinese talent programme. We know that more than 200 of them exist, but that is not something that we have looked at.

I think we are currently only seeing the tip of the iceberg and further research could be done. A number of tools can be used, such as bibliometrics analysis, which tracks co-written papers between academics and can tell you which academic has lived in a certain country or studied there or conducted conferences; it can track their journeys through time. That is a tool for that.

Going back to your earlier question, I think it is a layered approach to partnership risk management. We talked about the role of PIs and individual researchers. We talked about the role of universities. The Government also have a role to play in terms of the guidelines and guidance that they provide. For our research, we interviewed more than 50 academics across the UK and most of them felt like they had to fend for themselves. They didn't feel like the current framework of guidance provided them a strong architecture to operate in. In particular, they asked for clearer guidance on: first, improving the transparency and comprehensibility of the UK's national China strategy; secondly, enhancing the ease of finding that information; and thirdly, creating country-specific guidance on actors such as China that they can or cannot collaborate with, and research topics that they can or cannot collaborate on, and what the UK Government's risk appetite is.

There is definitely a role for the UK Government to play in this environment to help universities and individual researchers in this layered approach that John and Vivienne have already talked about.

Q11 Graham Stringer: At the start of your answer, you said that we should

know more in quantitative terms about which academics are involved in these partnerships. Who should find that out? Who should do that research?

Fiona Quimbre: I don't think it is necessarily about naming and shaming people and finding exactly who is doing what. It is also about understanding the enablers and the approach that autocracies are taking, to better raise risk awareness. Who should be doing this? I think this is a whole-of-society, whole-of-Government approach to the problem. Universities and individual academics can help.

John mentioned an example of cross-collaboration between the Government and universities. MIT, for instance, created a China working group that developed a China strategy for the university, and which set the guidelines within which its academics can operate. It probably consulted the federal Government on the topic. That is perhaps an avenue that we could look to take in the UK.

Q12 **Andrew Lewer:** John, what priority should be given to protecting academic freedom in universities' internationalisation efforts?

Professor John Heathershaw: Absolutely top priority. Academic freedom is a bedrock condition of our universities. If we lose it, or if it is degraded, our universities cease to be world-class institutions. It is what distinguishes our universities from those in many parts of the world where academic freedom does not exist. Some of the partners with which our universities may be collaborating, with a sort of wilful naivety, do not have that freedom, and they are working for the interests of sometimes quite nasty Governments in their home countries. Academic freedom absolutely has to be a bedrock condition.

All universities worth their salt in Britain have academic freedom agreements with their staff; that is part of their founding charters. Any serious violation of that, or any failure to support it through internal processes, would be a dereliction of duty.

Q13 **Andrew Lewer:** Should universities make more effort to reflect that in risk registers? I spent nine years as a university governor, and much of our discussion of risk was not about the risk to academic freedom, or more esoteric risks, ironically enough; it was all about financial risk. Would you say that that sort of risk is adequately dealt with by university governing bodies, or does that need to be improved?

Professor John Heathershaw: I am sure that there are examples of universities that do it better and have sought to address the issue, but there are precious few of them, and I have not seen any of them myself. You are absolutely right, and you speak to the financialisation of universities and their exposure to the global market. They are worried about losing their share of grants, or of students from overseas. Those are major, serious risk factors to which universities need to pay attention, but there is a risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. By chasing after student populations and becoming dependent on them, and by



chasing after certain funders, you put academic freedom at risk. We have heard examples of that happening.

Q14 **Andrew Lewer:** Also on independent education, but with another hat on, let me ask this. Elsewhere in the world, where there is not a direct assault on academic freedom, have you encountered any examples of soft censorship or self-censorship—of people not necessarily saying, “No, you are not allowed to do that, because we will lose the cash from the Chinese,” but more saying, “Let’s have this module deal with something different,” or “Let’s not do that this year”?

Professor John Heathershaw: Absolutely. I had heard examples anecdotally, but as researchers we want to get beyond anecdote, so two or three years ago, along with colleagues including Tena Prelec, who is with me here, I did a survey of all social scientists in the UK, and 20% of them admitted to self-censorship when teaching about authoritarian states. Most interestingly, when you look at people who declare themselves a specialist in regions where there are autocracies, that figure doubles; 41% of those specialising in China said that they self-censor in the classroom. That for me is fairly solid evidence that that kind of behaviour is going on in the classroom.

Q15 **Andrew Lewer:** Fiona and Vivienne, any reflections on this topic?

Vivienne Stern: First of all, I want to refute the suggestion that universities prioritise financial considerations over considerations of academic freedom. I think that is incorrect. Universities have not only a moral but a legal responsibility to protect academic freedom. Consideration of academic freedom, ethics and freedom of speech is woven through the guidance that we produced, and through every case study that we have gathered on how the guidance is being enacted by institutions.

Fiona mentioned the MIT framework, which describes in great detail how MIT went about putting in place a set of recommendations, guidance and assistance for people at all levels in the institution on managing these complex topics. That is replicated right across the UK university sector. I was reading this morning the version of that approach that the University of Cambridge has produced, and there is no question but that academic freedom is the starting point for the approach.

I also refute the suggestion that universities somehow look the other way when entering into partnerships that would involve compromises on what would otherwise be taught in a particular subject. In my previous role, I spent a lot of time talking to institutions about how they went about establishing teaching partnerships in autocratic states, where it is clear that academic freedom and freedom of speech are not protected.

The most common approach and the approach that we have set out in our guidance is that universities must, first, be clear-eyed. There is no point in starting discussions about a teaching partnership without understanding the limitations of your capability to operate in the way that you expect and have to operate in terms of academic freedom and freedom of speech.



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There is no point in starting a discussion about a partnership without being very clear right at the outset what the parameters will be.

Our advice, and what I have seen play out when such partnerships are formed, is to be prepared to walk away. Indeed, the Cambridge document, the King's version and every version of this that I have seen, has in it somewhere the expectation that you know what you are prepared to do, that that is bound up with your commitments as an institution to academic freedom, and that, if there is a red line, you walk away.

We have also advised—this is common practice—that institutions should not think of due diligence as a one-off. In many of those settings, circumstances change, so what might have been possible in one period becomes impossible or more difficult as control at the political level tightens. That process of evaluating the viability of a partnership against your own values as an institution, and your legal obligations, also has to be dynamic. It has to be an ongoing process and not a one-off.

I refer to case studies—I will send them to the Committee if you are interested—in which, again and again, you can see institutions getting halfway down the line towards negotiating a partnership, deciding that it is not possible to conclude the partnership, and walking away. That is evidence of universities enacting this approach that balances the considerations around values, academic freedom, freedom of speech and the ethical considerations that arise when you are working, for example, in a state that has a poor record on human rights. That is evidence of it in practice.

I want to give you just one example. I will not name the institution—all the case studies that we have published are anonymised. Approached by a partner in a country with a poor record on human rights to deliver a joint programme in law, the institution undertook a due diligence process, as we might expect, not only drawing on the knowledge inside the institution, but commissioning external advice and drawing on the advice available through what I would call "Team UK Overseas". The institution concluded that the individual behind the institution requesting the partnership was closely associated with the Ministry of Justice in that country, and in view of the poor record on human rights of that Government, further concluded that it could not enter into that partnership.

That is just one example of what John is describing happening in practice. Where John and I would perhaps part company in our views is that John is saying, "This isn't happening. It should be happening, and it is not," whereas we would say, "It is happening, but we have a way to go."

Q16 Andrew Lewer: That is what I am interested in. Given the robust framework that you elucidate there, where do the perceptions of and percentages about self-censorship that John speaks about come from?

Vivienne Stern: We have to get to a point where anyone in an institution is confident to speak up when they think that something is going awry. John is right that you need to get to the people who know what is going



on—you need to draw on the expertise in the institution and in the wider higher education community—but the other thing you have to do is to give people the confidence to back their own values. In part, what the institutional statements of the kind that MIT or Cambridge put out are doing is say that it is all right to want to preserve academic freedom and freedom of speech; that is fine, that is good, that is what we are here to do, and we are legally bound to do it.

Self-censorship is hard to prove—it is hard to prove that someone did not say something that they would otherwise have said. Our job, I think, and the job of the leadership of institutions is to give academics the confidence not to omit something that they think might be politically sensitive, but rather have the confidence that the institution will stand up for those values, which—I will reiterate this—they are legally bound to uphold.

Andrew Lewer: John?

Professor John Heathershaw: I totally agree that they are legally bound to uphold them. That is why I mentioned that they are in the university charters. We do need to see cases of best practice. We are certainly not saying that there has been no improvement. It is very good that—partly due to the work of this Committee, I must say—the conversation in universities has changed. When you held your inquiry in 2019, I think we had a number of figures from the university sector really denying the extent of the problem. That has changed, and a number of measures have been taken to bring that change about, which University UK has been involved in.

We now need best practice to be shared across the sector, and a level of transparency and accountability within institutions, and to a certain extent beyond, so that we can be assured of that. That is the objective, so transparency and accountability are key.

Vivienne Stern: At the risk of sounding sycophantic, I would sort of agree with that. Five or six years ago, if we had this conversation, our side all tended to get a bit nervous and worried about it. Frankly, we probably didn't really know that much about how, in practice, individual academics were navigating these sorts of complex judgments. We know a lot more now, and we are much more confident in having an open discussion. I think that is a product of the scrutiny of this Committee, and actually of our partnership with the Government. It was a product of all of that work, so I do not think that it is a bad thing.

Andrew Lewer: No, I don't either. It is helpful to hear that, because I had the impression that someone sitting here five or six years ago would have said, "Oh, no, we've got very robust frameworks. Nothing to see here," and there obviously was.

Q17 **Saqib Bhatti:** Vivienne, I will come to you first. You mentioned a due diligence process. How can departments differentiate beneficial research and harmful or potentially harmful research? What would the criteria be, from your perspective?



Vivienne Stern: Due diligence is one of those topics that I think we will be talking a lot more about over the next couple of years. There are things in place that will help institutions to go through the due diligence process, but you have a lot of institutions individually trying to put together an evidence base that will help them to make an informed decision. I think we need more centralised, shared service-type resources in the sector to help with this. The development of things such as the Research Collaboration Advice Team really helps. Also, the clarity emerging from Government Departments on new pieces of legislation, including the export control legislation and the National Security and Investment Act, is helping institutions to think, "Okay, what should I be looking for?" Sitting underneath that, there is institutional expertise and the shared services-type stuff—I mentioned Higher Education Export Controls Association. Our guidance has given indications of some of the features of a robust due diligence process.

Despite that, one of the problems is that the public domain information might not be enough to help institutions to make an informed decision about whether there really is risk, particularly when thinking about the forms of modern warfare, where it is quite hard to work out whether the end use of something could have a military application. Lots of institutions have expanded their approaches to due diligence, but it is hard and expensive, and I am not sure that we have the kind of shared infrastructure in place to help them do that effectively.

Q18 **Saqib Bhatti:** I will come on to you in a minute, both, but given the examples that we used earlier—I will not push you to talk about specific universities, so we will call it "Unnamed University", and say that it gets approached by an arms company, or to do research. Surely there is some sort of process there to look at that and say, "Actually, there is a potential risk here"? How do they then assess that risk?

Vivienne Stern: At the risk of sounding boring, I will send you the case studies, because we have lots of examples of exactly that. However, I will give you one. A UK university—I am not going to name it—was approached by another UK university to get involved in a consortium with a foreign entity around robotics, computer vision, and AI. The other thing that was strange about this was that the overseas partner asked for quite a lot of information up front, in the form of an expression of interest, so quite a lot of information was requested very early on.

Despite the opportunity having been referred to it by another UK institution, the institution did its own due diligence, traced the ownership of the foreign entity to an individual who had a link to something with a military application, and concluded therefore that it should not get involved in this consortium.

It then used that experience to publish its own institutional case study to highlight the issue to other people in the institution and say, "Look, even if it is your mate in the university down the road who has said, 'I have this great opportunity', don't take their word for it. You have to do your own due diligence." The second thing they pulled out of the experience was



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that not only would you do the normal, standard, obvious stuff, by trying to understand who is involved, what connections they have and if they have any military links, you also have to be aware that if you have been asked to offer up a lot of information early on in the process, you are already potentially giving something away before you have got through that due diligence process. That is one example of this in practice.

We probably have 20 or 25 case studies, which I will send you. Because this area is difficult, as an organisation we are doing lots of things that bring people together in a room to talk frankly about this. We are doing peer-to-peer sessions, where we will get five or six institutions together in a room just to talk about their experience of going through this process and we learn from each other.

There are other moves afoot. I mentioned due diligence being a major focus of activity. The Association of Research Managers and Administrators—ARMA—is currently being funded by UKRI to explore what this sector needs in order to do a better job tomorrow of safeguarding our institutions against these sorts of risks than they are doing today. It is publishing its report in March, but one of the conclusions will be that we need more capacity—shared capacity—around due diligence because it is tough. We don't necessarily know, as it is not easy to find the stuff that really matters, so that is difficult.

Q19 **Saqib Bhatti:** Thank you. Fiona?

Fiona Quimbre: I agree with Vivienne that universities have expanded their due diligence processes and efforts in this matter. Where I diverge is I think that a lot of information is available online, but it is not grouped, produced or packaged as a nice tool that can be used, and gradually used, by universities to conduct due diligence assessments.

Some of the universities I have spoken with mentioned using a tool called the China Defence Universities Tracker that looks at the level of risk a university in China has, based on its ties with the Chinese military and security apparatus. That is just one tool and it doesn't cover the whole spectrum of questions that universities may ask. For example, it does not cover all natures of engagement or start-up competitions or Sino-foreign student associations that may be vectors of influence in universities. This tool is fallible in terms of looking at the nature of Chinese partners. For instance, some Chinese scientists affiliated with the military sometimes cover their affiliation. They will use a mistranslation of their institution from Chinese to English, or they will use fictitious cover institutions or misleading historical names. Those are examples that show that the tools that we have presently are not sufficient.

Information is available out there. More open-source investigation techniques can be used to create new data sets and tools that universities could use. Equally, more training and shared practices could be used. I found that the knowledge is concentrated in the hands of a few universities. They can better spread and share knowledge with others



through forums such as buddy system programmes or UUKi, which is a good example of where that could take place.

Q20 **Saqib Bhatti:** John?

Professor John Heathershaw: It is important to say that this is essentially a decentralised phenomenon, as due diligence always is. Therefore, sharing best practice across institutions is really important and the UK has done good work in that area.

When it comes to humanities and social sciences, due diligence primarily takes the form of research ethics committees that have an assessment of possible harm indicator and box to fill out when you are submitting, so that is there. The problem in the past has been that that is often about direct harms to individuals, where there are a variety of harms when you undertake a research project in, let's say, an authoritarian state overseas. So the fieldwork issues are a challenge; that is a matter of professional practice. Within the humanities and social sciences, there is quite a big debate on how to do that better—lots of journal articles, conference panels, the ways we talk to one another. We in the group have been trying to promote that best practice with things like our policy primer on "Enabling Fieldwork in Difficult Environments". We have five of them in different areas of this problem. I would be happy to share copies with the Committee. Sharing professional best practice among academic and research groups is key.

Q21 **Mr Walker:** I thank the Committee for allowing me to join. Vivienne, I want to talk about numbers of Chinese students at British universities. According to HESA figures, that has risen from about 90,000 in 2014-15 to—nearly double that number—150,000 in the last academic year. What are the key factors driving that increase?

Vivienne Stern: The first thing to say is we have actually seen a slowing down of growth in new enrolments from China and a big improvement in the diversification of the international student population, which I might come back to, if I may, because I think it is important that Government help us maintain that diversity of recruitment. You are right on the figures: there are 152,000 Chinese students. The next biggest country grouping is India with about 127,000. The range varies across the institutional landscape, so you get anything from—I have written all these figures down—0% to 44% as a proportion of the student population. At the UK-wide level, it is 4.1% of the total student population and it is about 13% of the international student population.

There has long been a bit of anxiety over the degree of reliance on Chinese students, and often this is connected with the income associated with that. Universities have been working really hard to diversify intakes, but it is important not to lose the fact that our ability to welcome Chinese students is a massive advantage to the UK. You will hear people from MI5 down arguing that it is good for both the UK and for China. If your long-term ambition is a world in which we can peacefully co-exist, the exchange



of students in both directions is extremely important, and we should preserve that. We should keep that channel open.

It is important for us, and I would like to make this point clearly, to not stray from anxiety over China's position into the world into Sinophobia. You think about the individuals—the human beings—who are studying in our universities—young people, early career researchers. It is important that we do not treat those individuals with blanket suspicion. Having said all that, the sector diversifying is a good thing. We need help with that. The introduction of the graduate route is the biggest single thing the Government could have done to help us diversify intakes. We need MPs and peers to help us preserve that route.

Q22 Mr Walker: I totally accept that we do not want to encourage Sinophobia or the different treatment of students. Should we not be working hard to make sure that when Chinese students come to UK universities, they are integrated and are sharing a common experience with other students? I have heard concerns about some cases where there has been a degree of segregation of those Chinese students, and they have been operating in some degree of isolation from other students. What advice would UUK give universities to avoid that?

Vivienne Stern: It is important, and it is also a hard problem. One of the saddest things I saw when I was director of the international function in UUK was a survey of international students in which one of the questions they were asked was about whether they had any friends from the UK. Quite often you find that international students report that their friends are other international students. That is actually a loss to UK-domiciled students—there are opportunities that they are missing—but it is also an indication of the problem you described that actually getting students to integrate is tricky. Lots of universities will do things to try to get around that, such as events that are deliberately designed to draw in students from lots of different nationalities to mix. There is a very important thing about the concentrations in certain subject groups, so it is a question of trying to make sure that you don't end up with particular subjects having very high concentrations of students from one nationality, because that tends to reinforce this issue.

Then I go back to the point that these are human beings. Young people who are away from home and taking the opportunity to relax with people from their own country and to share things that are common to them all is not wrong. It is just that we need to try to help make sure that that is by choice and not by necessity. Then there is the point, which perhaps underlies your question, that to have a healthy campus environment, it is good to make sure that you have an integrated student population.

Q23 Mr Walker: It is. Just as you say, UK students benefit from engaging with international students and, vice versa, international students need to be given an opportunity to look at the UK way of life and, indeed, our values. Making sure that that can be done without self-censorship is very important. John, do you want to come in?



Professor John Heathershaw: I would affirm what Vivienne said on the problem that students tend to go into cohorts in more technical modes of education—maybe the natural and physical sciences and maybe business studies too—where challenging questions about China’s place in the world or what is going on in Xinjiang are not necessarily raised.

I will give you a counterexample of that from a UK university classroom, which I am going to entirely anonymise for the sake of the students. It involves a Han Chinese student from Xinjiang presenting on the position of the Uyghurs and using standard Beijing, pro-China sources on that, and then being challenged in the classroom not just by the very international cohort of students, from all over the world, including UK students, but—I think most importantly—by another Chinese student, who said, “Here you are. You have the opportunity. You have come here to study China, and you get a variety of sources. You can learn views different from that of Beijing. And you know what you said there wasn’t correct.” To me, as a teacher, that is the kind of experience we want in the classroom. You need to put certain things in place structurally, in terms of diversifying what students do and encouraging that as much as is possible and also guaranteeing the security of those students who do speak up to challenge other students when they are parroting state lines.

Q24 Mr Walker: In terms of the overall performance of Chinese students, why are most Chinese students not obtaining good degrees at UK universities? There is a concern about the level of performance there. It is striking, particularly if you look at the performance of ethnically Chinese students in the UK, which is generally very high and very strong.

Professor John Heathershaw: I can again give a teacher’s perspective, which is about English language standards. If you drop the IELTS or TOEFL standard because you need market share, and that leads you to go just a little bit lower, you have people coming in with, say, a 5 or 5.5 IELTS in oral English. That means in the classroom they are able to learn so much less. There was a particular problem around covid, where things like Duolingo tests were being accepted by some institutions as sufficient English language entry. That has changed now because the IELTS centres have opened up again. But I think that would be a major issue that we see. I am an academic conduct officer at my institution, and one of the types of students who tend to plagiarise are those with weaker English language skills. There is definitely a correlation there.

Vivienne Stern: If I may, I will write to the Committee on this point, because I do not recognise what you have just described about the general performance of Chinese students. Certainly, thinking about just the international student population, I think that—I would like to go away and come back on that, but I do not recognise that. Perhaps you can ask the next panel about their reflections. My general sense is that we recruit great students from China, who do very well and have high continuation and completion rates and also report high levels of satisfaction.

There are differences—



Q25 Mr Walker: Do you think they are all getting good value for money overall out of the experience that they are having?

Vivienne Stern: I would say so. It is a big system, and I cannot say that every single student has a perfect experience, but overall we have a system we can be really proud of in the UK—by a number of international measures, including just things like continuation and completion rates and satisfaction rates.

Q26 Mr Walker: You say “in the UK”. Obviously, we have different systems of student finance in different parts of the UK and, as a result, different universities in different parts of the UK are differently dependent on international students. But would you say that that is across the UK—the picture that you are comfortable with?

Vivienne Stern: Yes. The point I think you are inviting me to make is that we have a problem in all four nations of the UK of relative underinvestment in teaching, higher education teaching and research. You can track how much it costs to conduct research, and universities get about 60p in the pound for the research they conduct. That means they are losing a lot of money on every research project they undertake. That is now increasingly also the case in domestic teaching. The fact that both domestic teaching and domestic research in all four nations of the UK are now, on average, loss-making activities, and increasingly so, is leading to a situation where the income from international students is no longer providing an additionality that allows us to invest over and above what we would be able to do with just domestic sources of income. Instead of being the cherry on the cake, it is becoming the flour. I think the UK has a strategic issue. We need to ask ourselves the question of whether that is smart in the long term. I think that needs attention.

Professor John Heathershaw: Very briefly, I would clarify that my perspective is the humanities and social sciences, where verbal and oral acuity is absolutely crucial to learning. I think it is fair to say that that is a relatively small minority of Chinese students in UK universities. We need to differentiate across subjects as well as institutions and parts of the sector. That is very important. I would agree broadly with Vivienne’s statement that Chinese students are of great value to our institutions.

Q27 Mr Walker: Finally from me, is there any contingency planning for a situation in which the relationship with China deteriorates? Given the scale of the number of Chinese students and the point you just made about the fact that the system does require a degree of cross-subsidy from international students, of which they are the single largest group, is there any contingency planning going on among universities as to what would happen if there were to be a significant change in relations between the UK and China and the supply of students were to significantly decrease?

Vivienne Stern: The short answer to that question is yes, at least in some institutions. It is certainly a question that we discuss a lot within Universities UK. I think it is important that universities do that sort of contingency planning, not because we expect there to be a break in the relationship between the UK and China in the foreseeable future, but

because if it happened it would be very disturbing. It would be disturbing for lots of elements of national life, not just in universities. I think that given that it would be outside our control, it is important to do that contingency planning.

Q28 Liam Byrne: Just to draw you out on this, UK universities are under gigantic financial pressure now. A number of them have only got a month or two of cash on hand. Science spending is under acute pressure. There is the EU Horizon programme. There is no relationship really with American defence budgets. Yet Chinese science spending is now at half a trillion dollars. That must be a temptation for British universities to try to access, not least because there are presumably now plenty of fields of study where Chinese R&D is way ahead of ours.

Vivienne Stern: We have not talked about the economic argument for collaborating with China, but one of the consequences of the extraordinary level of investment in research in China has been a really rapid growth in the quality and volume of Chinese research outputs. I don't have the figures at the front of my mind, but when you look at the proportion of research outputs that are in the top 10% of highly cited articles in the world, the rapid rise of China in that grouping is part of the explanation for why research collaboration with China is now so important.

Is it driven by the underfunding of the UK system? I think what we have been trying to argue throughout this period and the point of the guidance is that universities have to protect their national interests and values. They have to be clear-eyed about the risks involved in certain sorts of collaboration. Financial motives should not outweigh any of those considerations. That is the point of trying to get a robust system in place.

Q29 Liam Byrne: If you are trying to build, create and sustain a world-class institution and the world-leading research is in China, presumably you will have to do research deals with China.

Vivienne Stern: Not for financial reasons, but because you will do better research if you collaborate with the best in the world in your field. That is the reason. It would not be in the national interest for us to cut ourselves off from a great research system. We obviously have to be clear-eyed about where that is in our interests and where it is not, but it would be nonsensical for us to divorce ourselves from one of the— We have an aspiration to be a science superpower, but so does China. In a number of fields, China has the lead in cutting-edge research, and we ought to make sure that we do not isolate ourselves from that. Great research is driven by international collaboration—more and more.

Q30 Liam Byrne: Your guidance is voluntary, and universities will jealously guard their independence and autonomy. Is there a case for attaching strings to public money going into R&D in a way that in effect would render your code compulsory?

Vivienne Stern: There already is. UKRI has published its own guidance, and expectations are associated with domestic grant funding. There is this now quite complicated legal landscape around a variety of research



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activities. We have not mentioned ATAS, which relates to both students and researchers coming to the UK to engage in study or research in certain disciplines. There is the National Security and Investment Act 2021, there is the Export Control Act 2002, and the new provisions in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. It is becoming a bit byzantine.

The one thing I would like to say is that if you ask a lot of people who discharge these responsibilities in universities, they will tell you that they are overwhelmed. The Government need to help us to streamline this, make it easier for universities to understand what they should and should not be doing under the law, and try to eliminate duplication and overlap between the legislative frameworks.

Liam Byrne: To summarise then, it is in our national interest to sustain some kind of research link, there is not enough support on due diligence, and the regulatory landscape is now a nightmare.

Vivienne Stern: Legislative as well as regulatory, yes.

Q31 **Chair:** A quick follow-up on that. Look, we are not in a cold war with China. You said that we should be partnering with the best. But in the 1970s and 1980s, the best was the Russians, and we were not suggesting that we should be sharing science and research with them. So why should we risk dual use research analysis now when we recognise that China is a hostile state when it comes, unfortunately, to many of the arenas we are working in together?

Vivienne Stern: We absolutely were working with the Russians during the 1970s and 1980s—

Chair: Not on sensitive technologies and science. Absolutely not.

Vivienne Stern: There are always areas where you have to protect your national interest.

Chair: We are not, and that is the challenge.

Vivienne Stern: Even now, in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we worked very closely over an intense period of a week and a half with Government to try to work out where all these links were—the research collaboration, the funded partnerships, the teaching partnerships, all that kind of stuff. Most things were ceased.

Just two weeks before, as part of a diplomatic effort led by the British embassy in Moscow, I was part of a delegation that went to Moscow with a group of climate scientists who had spent a lot of their working lives in the Russian Arctic. They go there because there is a whole bunch of environments there that are critical to the future of our planet, including things like the peat bogs. I was deeply uncomfortable about being taken on that visit because I thought, “There are 100,000 troops on the border of Ukraine, and I can’t see that ending well.” But we were asked to participate in that delegation because it was seen to be important; even when the geopolitical relationships could not possibly have been worse,



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scientific collaboration was one of the last things that you sever and one of the first things that you build back.

Chair: Yes, scientific collaboration potentially, but not on sensitive subjects. I am afraid that we will have to leave that panel here, because we have overrun significantly. I am not going to suspend the session. If we could kindly change who is giving evidence to us, we will try to kick off as quickly as we can thereafter. Thank you all ever so much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, Dr Tim Bradshaw and Alan Mackay.

Q32 **Chair:** Good afternoon. If you could introduce yourselves for 15 or 20 seconds, we will then go straight into questions. Sir Anthony, would you like to kick us off?

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: Good afternoon. My name is Anthony Finkelstein. I am the president of City, University of London. I was formerly the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser for National Security. I am on the board of UK Research and Innovation. I sit on UUK's security working group.

Dr Tim Bradshaw: Good afternoon; I am Tim Bradshaw. I am the Chief Executive of the Russell Group.

Alan Mackay: Good afternoon; I am Alan Mackay. I am Deputy Vice-Principal International at the University of Edinburgh.

Chair: Fantastic. Graham, do you want to kick us off?

Q33 **Graham Stringer:** Sir Anthony, you heard the previous session, and the different questions and answers on whether the Government should support universities in dealing with the risks of internationalisation. Are universities getting the support they deserve from Government?

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: In significant part, yes, but there are some areas where improvements could well be made. Clearly, one area of importance is clarity on China policy. We need a UK China policy. The rewrite of the Integrated Review seems to me to provide an important opportunity for some clarity in that area.

I think Vivienne rightly drew attention to the complexity of the policy, regulatory and legal environment. Simplicity might well be sought in that regard. She also drew attention, as did the other speakers, to the matter of due diligence. I believe that better support for open source due diligence—of the kind that Fiona properly referenced—would be a valuable complement to what universities currently have.

I would like to call out the significant work undertaken by both RCAT, the Research Collaboration Advice Team, and CPNI, the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure, as examples of positive work. Similarly, very positive steps forward have been taken by BEIS. Vivienne



picked up the underlying and structural challenges that relate to funding. I anticipate that we might deal with those later in this session.

Q34 Graham Stringer: To summarise, you think that the Government should prioritise and focus on China.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: Actually, I think we need to have a broad lens, particularly on research security and on influence in our universities, which covers much more than China and includes states across the full range. One area that I think is unhelpful is what is often termed the actor-agnostic approach, which has often characterised some of the communication. It is better to call a spade a spade—it is better for diplomacy and certainly better for those of us who have to operationalise the advice of Government.

Q35 Graham Stringer: Do universities look to anywhere else apart from Government for help and support in such issues?

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: UUK has been excellent in this regard. We have formed a very effective collaborative network within and across the universities. John rightly referred to the expertise that exists within the university system to support our judgments. We can also call on international support, and certain UK universities have had very positive interactions with our Five Eyes nations partners—Australia is a good example.

Q36 Liam Byrne: I just want to build on some of the evidence we heard in the earlier panel. Research funding is under strain in the UK and we are struggling to retain the best scientists in the world, yet more and more grey areas in research are emerging. How useful is the guidance that you have available today? Does the Government just need to sketch some brighter red lines about what is off limits and what is okay? I will start with you, Anthony, but I will put the question to each of you.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: The first thing, which I believe very strongly, is that universities cannot be international until they truly understand what it means to be national. We need to have a fuller debate in universities about what we understand the national interest to be. Yes, clarity of guidance and of policy is important. We should freely acknowledge that the geopolitical system and our understanding of it have changed significantly over the last few years.

Q37 Liam Byrne: It is very hard to tell universities to do anything, in my experience. Will we not always run into difficulties? Ministers of the day wandering along with definitions of national security will bump into the quite legitimate academic autonomy that is so jealously guarded in universities.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: Actually, I beg to differ. I think the universities are astonishingly open and responsive to dialogue with Government, and to the broader political discourse.

Q38 Liam Byrne: Do you mean dialogue or an argument?



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Sir Anthony Finkelstein: In this place, I think these are quite closely aligned, are they not? I think there is openness for that discussion and for engagement. Managing risks associated with an active, adaptive adversary is a complex business. These are not like the kind of risks that universities have traditionally managed. There was a very interesting question about risk in the earlier session. Equipping ourselves to deal with that is something that universities are learning with some rapidity.

Dr Tim Bradshaw: I definitely agree with that. The challenge is the dynamic situation that universities face. That is one of the reasons why we say that sometimes legislation is not necessarily the best route to try to get things embedded, in terms of change. It is about updating the guidance and advice so that universities can act on that and review their partnerships and collaborations as things have changed.

Things have substantially moved on over the last few years. I would like to recommend RCAT as one of the best things that has happened in the UK recently. Prior to that, we had situations where universities were told by one part of Government not to do something with a particular actor, only to be phoned up a week later to be told, "Oh, could you show these other people around this institution?", and they are from that same actor, because there has not been join-up within the Government.

I think things have got a lot better. RCAT is one of those groups that is evolving as well and is helping universities to understand what the dynamics are. It can be one of our first ports of call if we are uncertain. I think we should make sure that that is properly resourced for the future, because there are only going to be more questions that universities want to put to them, to get an intelligent answer to whether we should be proceeding with collaborations or not.

Q39 **Liam Byrne:** Dynamic, coherent, brighter red lines.

Alan Mackay: I would agree with that. What we need here is a long-term approach that is a carefully calibrated mix of not just guidance—I think we have got enough guidance—but also legislation and regulation, that forms part of a better plan. There are lots of moving parts here, and at the moment it is quite messy, given all the different things that are going on.

We have got a challenge there. I think the challenge now is to ensure that we educate research ecosystems so that we can ensure that, at an individual level, principal investigators can make informed decisions about what they are doing with different countries across the world as collaboration intensifies.

We are on a journey. I think the work of this Committee has been helpful over recent years, with reports. As we know, a lot has happened in this space geopolitically as well in the last three years. We are on a journey. Are we there yet? No, but we need to continue to work in strong partnership together, with a long-term approach to this, on how we approach international collaboration, in particular with certain countries.



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We need to leverage, along with Government, the sector expertise on certain countries, to be able to give those researchers and other colleagues the support they need to make well-thought-through, informed decisions that are in the best interests of themselves and their universities, but also, importantly, of the United Kingdom.

Q40 Liam Byrne: As legislators, we can see how we might argue for particular precautions to be attached to public money, but obviously a good half or more of the research funding for many universities is private money. Sometimes those companies will have opaque structures, but they will also have quite long-term relationships with universities. Can the same guidelines guard against malpractice in private research funding as they can in public research funding?

Alan Mackay: We are one institution in a group that has been in existence for a long time, but which we have strengthened and where we have upgraded our capability, which is the income due diligence group. It is not just looking at research funding; it looks at commercial income, it looks at donations, it looks at student tuition fee income—the whole broad area.

As was mentioned, the Research Collaboration Advice Team, which sits in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, has been a really welcome development, because in such situations, we have a single point of contact. There now are single points of contact for DSIT at every single British university. The dialogue here with Government has stepped up very significantly across the last three years with the creation of that unit.

That is very important to how we connect with Government—we talked about this earlier. We are dealing with some of the most complex decisions to be made here in the regulatory, legislative and policy landscape. These issues are considered, but we now have very helpful colleagues that can work across Government Departments to be able to give us that support. So, yes.

Q41 Royston Smith: Tim, can I ask you about the 2021 Civitas report that said that half of Russell Group universities had or had had a productive research relationship with a Chinese military-linked manufacturer or university? At the time, you wrote to our then Chairman, Tom Tugendhat, outlining measures you had taken to deal with that situation. What have been the results since then?

Dr Tim Bradshaw: Times have obviously changed. Some of the decisions that were made around the partnerships that universities took out were made in a very different environment. I think universities have now looked at many of those partnerships and are looking to change those and look to the future as to whether they should be renewed or not.

In the previous session, the example of Imperial was given. From my perspective, that was a situation where the structures and processes in place around export control were shown to actually work. There was a situation where the export control unit said, “No, that’s not a thing that you should continue with,” and so universities have reacted and responded



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positively to that. That is one case where it is very helpful to get clear Government guidance and clear guidance from the security agencies in terms of the relationships that universities should have with other organisations overseas.

Q42 **Royston Smith:** You said, “universities looking to renew”. Looking to renew relationships with Chinese military-backed manufacturers; looking to renew those sorts of relationships.

Dr Tim Bradshaw: I do not think very many will be looking to renew those sorts of relationships. Things have moved on very substantially.

Chair: They still exist though.

Dr Tim Bradshaw: We have much better advice from the security service and much better relationships with them. I, for example, chaired a roundtable with the investment security unit a couple of weeks ago with all our universities to hear their perspective on the things we should be watching out for in the future and taking better advice on. That gives you an idea of the changed attitude in terms of universities looking at what they are going to get out of all the relationships they have. As previous panellists suggested, it is very much focused on the excellence and engagement that we have. That is the primary reason we engage with any other partner overseas and it is very much a two-way thing. There is perhaps a misconception that we enter into these partnerships and we are giving things away. Actually, we are not. We would never enter into a partnership where we do not get back something for the UK—for the research for the UK.

You mentioned China. At the moment, China is the world’s second largest investor in research. They have probably one of the largest pools of research talent. The UK needs to be clear-eyed and confident in our engagements with countries like China and many other countries to ensure that the UK is getting good value back out of those relationships. We will be judging those new relationships on excellence and value, and on the returns that the UK gets.

Frankly, we cannot do everything in the UK; the UK research budget is just not big enough. It could never be big enough for us to be the leader on every single aspect of research that we would want to be, so we have to form partnerships around the world. Actually, that is why I am very pleased about the Windsor framework that has been signed off this week. Hopefully, that will finally allow us to associate fully to Horizon Europe and we can do much more collaborative engagement with our partners in Europe: in Denmark, France, Germany and so on.

Q43 **Royston Smith:** I acknowledge that, of course, we cannot do everything ourselves, but I would question whether it is a sensible thing to be building relationships with military-based manufacturers, and Chinese ones particularly in this instance.

Do you have any knowledge of universities that have now ended relationships because they have concerns? It is a different time now, as



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you said, and that is understandable. However, do you have any examples of where universities have ended those themselves, or decided not to renew?

Dr Tim Bradshaw: Yes, and there are examples of where they have ended them themselves or have not renewed them; have reviewed their partnerships and thought they were not for them anymore and would pull out of that; or, more importantly, not started collaborations that they probably would have started in the past. That goes down to the new structures that Alan and others have talked about in terms of what the university will now look for as regards due diligence and the new committees that have been set up. One of my universities, for example, has a security unit that all new partnerships have to be judged through. It meets on a daily basis to decide whether these things should go ahead or not. If it has concerns, it escalates them to the senior management team. That is the sort of thing I am seeing replicated across a wide number of my universities now. We are not perfect, but we are learning and sharing best practice.

There is an awful lot more engagement between different universities, sharing best practice and learning from experience of engaging with the export control system. Vivienne, I think, mentioned the Higher Education Export Controls Association, which is a unit that has come together spontaneously. University practitioners have come together to share best practice in export control, so that when there are those that have run through that system and found challenges or pushback from the Government, that learning is fed back through to the system. That way, those who are involved in it at other universities can benefit from that as well. That is something that universities themselves have actively put together to make sure they are sharing best practice.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: I think one of the challenges here is the language of partnership. I personally take the view that you cannot partner with parties who do not share your values. That is not a partnership. That does not mean that you cannot engage transactionally. What universities are doing, and need to do, is in essence to develop the capacity actively to manage those transactions and the associated risks. Disassociation presents obvious challenges, which have been alluded to in some of the prior discussion. The challenge of transactional arrangements is that we are faced with people who exploit the grey zones and the weak seams in our universities and in our innovation system. We need to get better and more agile at identifying those, and at closing the gaps.

Q44 **Chair:** It is important to add that we should not treat science and technology as some kind of pure form that is unique and free of geopolitics. The reality, as Xi Jinping has made very clear, is that becoming a superpower in technology and science is his priority. The Committee has a great number of concerns that academia seems to behave as if it is free of geopolitics; it is not in any way, sense or form.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: Indeed. The Integrated Review rightly put strategic advantage in science and technology at its front and centre, and



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I think that universities are beginning to absorb that and to have a dialogue about what that means exactly.

This is perhaps a slight riposte to John in the earlier session, but I would like to say—I am an engineer—that in science and technology we have open, active, critical and ethical debate. That is a hallmark of good research.

Q45 Mr Walker: May I come to you, Alan? Peter Mathieson, the principal of Edinburgh University, has said that the university's reliance on Chinese students to sustain its finance is a great risk. Clearly, we have heard that that is not unique to the Edinburgh circumstances. What steps are being taken to diversify international student recruitment?

Alan Mackay: We, like other universities, are keen to diversify our international student populations for a range of reasons. Partly, some of that is long-term thinking, because it will not always be this way: if you look at the upgrading of China's domestic education system and the number of new universities, or at China's demographics—this year is the lowest birth rate in China since 1960—things are happening. There is also the student experience overall for students joining us to think about. What does that look like, as a mix of students?

There are things that have been touched on already that are very important. For the first time in two decades, the Government have started a discussion about the funding of higher education in the United Kingdom. There is a structural vulnerability, because of—as has been mentioned—the loss in research and domestic teaching, and things remaining static when overall costs have actually risen. That is not the only push factor, but as a country—in terms of not only a whole of Government approach but a whole of sector approach, and partnership—we need to look to those very issues and to support greater diversification, not only of international student recruitment but of international partnerships and collaboration.

Q46 Mr Walker: On that greater diversification, if we accept the statement that there is a great risk in dependence on any one country, regardless of status, is there a safe level of dependence on any country that we should be aiming for? If we say that where we are now is clearly not right and that we need greater diversification, what would be the ideal place to be with that balance of international students from any one territory?

Alan Mackay: It is a very complex question, because obviously—because of the Equality Act—you cannot discriminate on nationality or race, nor would we want to do that. It is also about domestic students. We have a real challenge as a sector with regard to domestic students across the United Kingdom entering postgraduate taught education in particular, and the loans system. We need to think about that as well, as opposed to just looking through the international lens.

As a country, we want to continue to have, as Sir Anthony said, that talent coming from overseas, from every country—from Argentina right the way through to Zimbabwe—and hopefully in greater diversity, because of what it brings to our campuses. It is our greatest compliment; people think they



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can come here because of what the UK higher education and research ecosystem has to offer, because it is one of the world's best. That is a huge compliment to us.

But these are complex discussions. We also have to serve our domestic student populations and communities as part of that overall mix. I do not have a figure that would naturally pop out of my head regarding what is an exact percentage or number, but all of us in the UK want to keep a good, balanced mix of the pools of applicants we can select from. We are engaged in lots of activity at the moment, including things such as gateway reviews at different points in the academic cycle, to ensure we can have a more diverse mix of students and that we are not unfair to any applicant who may apply later in the cycle compared to some countries that apply and have all the conditions met much earlier in the cycle. As much as it is about international, it is also about the domestic situation.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: The rise in students from India and Nigeria adds significantly to the robustness of our higher education funding system and our international income, and I think the measure of what the right levels are really relates to that business of robustness. Straightforwardly, we need to make quite sure that our immigration and visa system remains supportive of that increasing diversification. That means the graduate route, and to some extent it means the business of dependants, which is strongly associated with those streams of visas. I believe that is a pressing political issue.

Q47 **Mr Walker:** From the education perspective, we would always celebrate the benefits that are brought by international students and make the case for being able to welcome international students. Obviously, there are specific issues that the Home Office may look to. On the issue of dependants, I have heard from the sector generally that there is a recognition some cases may be looked into, but it would need to be done on a fair basis and one that does not go against the interests of any one particular market, which could be important to that diversification.

Dr Tim Bradshaw: We would always say that if there are genuine cases of fraud, they absolutely need to be investigated, but I echo what Anthony said: the graduate visa, with the post-study work offer it provides, is one of the key tools we have to make sure the UK can more easily diversify its international student market. That is where we need to maintain a competitive advantage with the likes of Australia, Canada and others that are looking to increase the availability for students to come and work. For some countries, it is expensive to come and learn in the UK, and they do need to be able to try to recoup some of those costs. If we want to be able to diversify, one of the key things the Government needs to be able to do is be consistent over a good period of time regarding the visa that is on offer.

We have worked substantially to get ourselves into a really good place. Let's try to maintain that, and let's recognise that with diversity will obviously come some different challenges. At the moment we are seeing a few more dependants wanting to come to the UK. We will deal with that,



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and find ways to support those students and make sure that that works. The challenge is when we have chopping and changing of Government policy from one week to the next, so we do not know where we are; and, more importantly, the students we are trying to engage with in Argentina, Indonesia or India do not know whether they will be welcome to the UK and whether this should be their choice, or whether they should just do the easy option for them and go to Australia.

Q48 Mr Walker: I am going to need to move on, because the Chair will want me to touch on other issues. I want to turn to Confucius Institutes. One of the things that has changed since this Committee first looked into the approach is the Government's approach to them, at least in universities. In the view of the panel, are Confucius Institutes beneficial or harmful to the UK education system?

Dr Tim Bradshaw: I would say generally beneficial. Confucius Institutes help to provide language, culture and calligraphy on a voluntary, optional basis for individuals to tap into, not just at universities—I know some are linked more closely with business. At least one Confucius Institute is supported by the DfE to provide Chinese language skills to primary school students.

Frankly, China is such a big, important global player that the UK needs to have a wider pool of expertise and capacity in Mandarin and an understanding of China if we want to do business with it, and if we want to be able to challenge it on some of the things about which we need to challenge it. If it is not going to come through routes like the Confucius Institutes and more directly through universities, there is a specific role that the Government should be playing by providing additional funding through other, alternative routes, to make sure we can train people in a language that is going to be vital for business and society as we go forward.

We have a structure at the moment. Certainly, the Confucius Institutes that my university is involved with are kept under constant review. I believe that Edinburgh is one of the universities that did a strong review of its Confucius Institute recently. On balance, they are positive, but obviously things change, and we have to keep them under review.

Q49 Mr Walker: Alan, do you want to touch on that review and what has gone on in that space?

Alan Mackay: It was a forensic-level review, and it found no evidence of interference, issues with academic freedom or nefarious activity. This is going back to what we touched on earlier. If there is evidence—maybe some of it is classified or needs to be divulged carefully—we would need to see it. I am talking about my university's situation, and I am just giving you a presentation of that.

The bigger risk is the lack of a coherent policy on China. This goes back to what Sir Anthony was saying earlier about our China-facing capability. This year, after 20 years within the UK higher education sector, I think we have just over 200 graduates in Chinese studies. That is incredible, when you



think of what has happened in terms of China's rise over the last two decades. We need to work together to increase that capability. The higher education sector has a lot of expertise that could be leveraged to do that. We have got to step our game up on that.

Going back to what I said earlier, it is about not just Confucius Institutes but awareness and knowledge of contemporary China if we are making these decisions, but also trading and co-operating—no one is suggesting that you cut ties with China. Confucius Institutes, as we know, are very complex. Charles Parton has talked through RUSI and many other reports about banning Confucius Institutes, but there is a very high likelihood that the return on that will be a ban on the British Council in China.

Are Confucius Institutes breaching any legislation, in terms of what we or the other 29 universities in the UK are currently doing? The answer to that is no. As I said, that is the evidence from our internal review of our partnership working with the Confucius Institute. It ties back into the longer-term strategic need to think about what that looks like, across language learning and business co-operation. I think we need a more in-depth conversation about who is doing this and funding it.

Q50 Mr Walker: To push back on that slightly, there are clearly worthy aims, in terms of cultural understanding, language and so on. There are clearly a lot of people with a financial interest in being able to pursue that. A lot of industry and business want to see a better development of Chinese language understanding. Surely over time it should be a reasonable aspiration for these institutes to be funded by institutions other than the Chinese Government if they are going to operate in the UK. Is there not a case to be made for replacing direct funding from the Chinese Government with a broader range of funding sources or with funding from the industries that will benefit from people having those improved language skills?

Alan Mackay: Yes, in the way that that fits with a longer-term, more coherent and co-ordinated plan of work across a range of sectors, including higher education, to leverage the expertise we have and increase the China-facing capability, which is nowhere near where it needs to be as a country. This also connects with wider issues about academic freedom. I think the well-quoted phrase "I may not like what you have got to say, but I will defend to my death your right to say it" is quite important. We also need to recognise that we have critical minds within our universities, including our students and staff, as was mentioned earlier, that do not just lap up everything they might be told by any source. Looking at where our students are from, they have critical discourse and inquiry as part of that. But you are absolutely right. Do we need to look at a much broader approach in the long term to upgrade that capability? Yes.

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: Reflecting the diversity of opinions in universities, I beg to differ from my fellow panellists. I personally believe that the Confucius Institutes are ill advised and an explicit tool of Chinese Government influence. I think they play not simply a practical role in that regard, but an important symbolic role, and that the sooner we step away



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from it in an orderly way, while preserving and perhaps growing the ecology of Chinese language studies, the better. The opportunity to do that in partnership perhaps with Taiwan is an attractive one. I think if we could see rapid movement on that, it would be positive.

Q51 Mr Walker: Very interesting. What are other countries doing in this regard? Are there other countries we can look to as examples who have managed to protect their Chinese language infrastructure while stepping back from a direct relationship with Chinese funding?

Sir Anthony Finkelstein: I regret to say that I am unaware of other countries' provisions and perhaps would look to Universities UK International to get a better sense of it.

Mr Walker: Fair enough.

Q52 Andrew Lewer: Building on that discussion about the University of Edinburgh, we have touched already on the fact that the aims and objectives of the Confucius Institute for Scotland include aiding, understanding and developing a greater awareness of China in Scotland, but are there limitations on that understanding and awareness? I am not talking here about the university more broadly and the fact that some robust discussions may have happened here and there; I am wondering whether within the Confucius Institute itself there are discussions about Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and so on that you are aware of.

Alan Mackay: You have to look at what the Confucius Institute is there to do in terms of language learning for the wider community and cultural understanding. That is everything from calligraphy classes—Tim mentioned some of this earlier—through to teaching or outreach into schools about Chinese language and culture and celebrating the different festivals. In terms of places for wider discourse on some of the three Ts, if you like, that would not necessarily always happen within a Confucius Institute because of its focus, anyway, but that may take place within other schools and subjects across the university, when you look at what they are there to do in terms of that cultural engagement and outreach for the wider community. Again, it links back to what I have said: what should we be doing here as a country—not as individual constituent parts, but taking a whole-of-Government, whole-of-sector approach—in this space to upgrade our strategic China-facing capability? This is one part of that. These discussions take place across the university. There are lots of debates about not just academic freedom, but freedom of expression for anyone that works with or connects with the university. It is not just the preserve of academic colleagues, I should point out.

Chair: Andrew, due to the business of the House, some of our colleagues have to go, so do you want to ask one final question? Then I am afraid we will have to wrap up.

Q53 Andrew Lewer: Yes. So are you happy for Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes to continue to operate in the University of Edinburgh?



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Alan Mackay: To give you a percentage of how much this is in terms of our overall income, it is 0.001% of the university's income annually. If we did not have that income, could we live without it? The answer to that is yes.

Andrew Lewer: Given the reputational questions, at least, it raises, perhaps that small percentage may not be worth the return.

Q54 **Chair:** Sorry, is £6 million 0.001% of your budget?

Alan Mackay: I should clarify that the 0.001% of the income is per annum; so that £6 million figure would be aggregated over a number of years, in terms of income received from Hanban, then the Chinese Ministry of Education and subsequently the NGO that has been set up.

Chair: I am really sorry; we are going to have to leave it there. I am sorry to finish there, but thank you all ever so much for giving evidence to us. We may well write to you with follow-up questions and, obviously, feel free to write to us as well, but thank you.