

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Autocracies and UK Foreign Policy, HC 1948

Tuesday 3 September 2019

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Andrew Rosindell; Mr Bob Seely; Royston Smith.

Questions 35-69

Witnesses

I: Dr Christopher Hughes, Professor of International Relations, LSE, University of London, Alexander Bustamante, Senior Vice President and Chief Compliance and Audit Officer at the University of California, and Bill Rammell, Vice Chancellor at the University of Bedfordshire and Chair of MillionPlus.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Christopher Hughes, Alexander Bustamante and Bill Rammell.

Q35 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Thank you all very much for coming. May I ask a very open question? I will start with you, Mr Bustamante. In what way do autocracies pose a threat to academic freedom in universities? Can you give us examples from your own experience and research of the most common types of foreign influence in universities? If you know of examples from UK universities as well as from your own university system, that would be very helpful.

Alexander Bustamante: I can speak primarily about the concerns we have at the University of California and what is happening in the United States generally. The biggest threat we have right now involves our research: the risk of research being misappropriated and diverted, and also some of the systems by which we evaluate grant proposals being compromised. There are also concerns about academic freedom: whether we have the ability to talk, research and discuss things in an open manner with these autocracies, and their ability to influence students and faculty research.

Bill Rammell: If the partnership—the joint venture—is managed appropriately, I do not think it is a threat to academic freedom. Among UK universities—this is certainly the case at my university, the University of Bedfordshire—a detailed risk assessment takes place with any partnership. That looks at risks, including reputational risks; the value fit with the institution; and a whole range of other factors. Any partnership has to go through my executive management group and the academic board, which is a rigorous due diligence process, and there is also sign-off by the board of governors. It is not just the senior management who undertake that level of activity; there is board of governors sign-off. You know my background; I am a former Foreign Office Minister.

Q36 **Chair:** I am aware that you have been before this Committee in the past.

Bill Rammell: Indeed, although I did not get advance notice of the questions. When I was a Foreign Office Minister, we spent public funding on English language training in North Korea, which is probably the most repressive regime anywhere in the world. That was an act of public diplomacy. I cite that example to show that higher education can be a force for liberalism and civilisation. It certainly played that role during the cold war. Therefore, as long as you have the right checks and balances and the right due diligence in place, I do not think international partnerships with autocracies are a threat to academic freedom.

Dr Hughes: I think I am the only academic faculty member here, so I have a slightly different perspective. It may be useful to think of a



spectrum of influence and interference. At one end you have the kind of bullying and pressure that I have seen, whereby someone lost their position as the head of a research centre over clashes about funding from a certain state. I do not want to go into detail now, but if you want me to, I can do so on another occasion. That is the extreme end of what I have seen. At the other end is self-censorship—I think we will look at that later—which is far more insidious. In between, you have a whole range of issues with institutional pressures on academics.

It is useful also to think of universities as containing a range of targets for these states. There is the faculty, such as me; there are the students; and then there are the managers, including a growing army of fundraisers and regional agents. That is getting bigger and bigger, so the academics are becoming a smaller part of this equation. That makes it easy to divide the academic community and undermine the core values of the institution: freedom of speech, inquiry and so on.

A lot of my work is on China, which I think is a special case because of the sheer number of students: about a quarter of the total number of foreign students in this country is now Chinese. We have to be very careful, because—I like Chinese students; they are very good people—but the sheer scale of the numbers creates a different kind of problem, because it changes the nature of the institution you are working in.

Q37 Chair: Is that because of the ethos that they bring with them or because of the leverage, that the financial weight that they bring with them changes the influence of a foreign Government on your research?

Dr Hughes: I don't think it is what they bring with them, so much; it is that it creates more opportunities for foreign Governments to use them particular, at the moment, the issue of Hong Kong, which is very serious. We have seen violence in Australia, for example, and I think some cases in the US, and I am dreading the new academic term, which starts in a few weeks, when all these students come back. At the LSE, we had an issue at the end of last term over a map of Taiwan on a sculpture we commissioned, which hit the media, and that turned students against one another. There is evidence that some parts of the student body are being manipulated and used by the embassy and their agents, and that this is organised. So this poses real problems for the Chinese students themselves, who come here to enjoy freedom—academic freedom; and they are in classes with people, and this also includes other authoritarian states where we know this happens, who—they are being observed and monitored. The bigger the community the more of this goes on.

Q38 Andrew Rosindell: This is all very intriguing, but what policies do we have in place to safeguard students against this kind of thing from happening, and do you have a strategy to counter this intrusion? Do you have any examples of how that has actually happened in practice?

Dr Hughes: I do, and I think this where I am more sceptical about whether our policies, our procedures, are fit for purpose. I think many of our procedures look good on paper. A lot of them are from a different age



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when we were much more powerful, relatively, and we were not serving large numbers of foreign students and also depending on them for funding, for research and so on. That has changed the equation, so we can have—the LSE, for example: you should look at Lord Woolf’s report on the Gaddafi incident in 2011, which goes into this in detail. One of his recommendations, that we should have an ethics code at the LSE, which we didn’t have: we have one, but it has been diluted steadily over the years.

One of the key measures in that ethics code was what I saw as the central purpose governing the way we establish partnerships with, shall we say, unsavoury regimes and organisations. That has been removed from the ethics code now and put in a sort of supplementary document that is almost impossible to find. We have taken this up at the academic board, and so on. So you see a sort of institutional movement in one way, a kind of inertia, in favour of the priorities of, I think, the administrators and the fundraisers who—we know what their job is; but the academic voice is increasingly weak and limited in shaping this agenda. So I think we see a drift in one way, and if you try to raise these issues you end up being marginalised, of course, and you become a troublemaker.

Q39 Andrew Rosindell: Can I ask Bill a direct question on this, as a former Minister in the Foreign Office? What is the Foreign Office doing to work with universities to support you in tackling this problem? Do they feed you information? Do they advise you, or are you just left to float on your own and actually just tackle it yourselves; or do they give you any support?

Bill Rammell: Through the interaction of the Foreign Office with Universities UK there are elements of risk assessment, support for risk assessment, that do take place; but I make this point: it is very easy to make claims about foreign Governments using and manipulating students. I have not heard one piece of evidence to actually back that up. Now I am not going to say that there aren’t instances where that happens, but actually, you know, that practice goes back over decades. I studied at Cardiff University in the early 1980s and in Welsh universities and in other parts of the country there was real evidence of agents of the Ba’ath party studying at British universities and effectively being used as agents. And do you know what? Actually their exposure to open academic debate, to challenge, to scrutiny, was beneficial in flushing that out. I think additionally we have in place, for example, the Prevent duties, which exist for all universities, where part of our responsibility is to promote British values, and the reporting from the Office for Students on the progress that universities are making in that regard is actually positive.

Q40 Royston Smith: I will pick up on a couple of things that have been said, but before I do, on the commercialisation of universities, are market incentives diminishing the value of academic freedom? Is there a fundamental problem with the funding of universities by foreign students, and people potentially turning a blind eye?

Dr Hughes: Yes.



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Royston Smith: I knew you would say yes.

Dr Hughes: I know this from experience. I think you were given my article on the Confucius institutes, which looks at the transition from what we call the classical university—that is a kind of ivory tower; everything is great and we can do what we want—to what is called the enterprise university, which is a very different kind of organisation. I am not quite sure where we are on that spectrum, but I feel that our procedures have not kept up with the movement towards the enterprise university at all.

Again, I can come up with many examples—I have already mentioned at least one case where someone lost their position because of a conflict over funding. Philanthropy is the other big word that our fundraisers use nowadays. Philanthropy—who is it from? We now have philanthropists who sit on the advisory boards of research centres, for example. Why is that? What is their role? It is really not clear, but they have some influence there. There is a whole range of such issues, and underneath those is the general issue of incentives and motivations. Money, research funding, is a very powerful incentive for all of us, and being denied it is equally a very harsh punishment. If you are someone who raises questions or works on something sensitive, you will be denying yourself opportunities, and you will not make yourself very popular with the people whose job it is to get the balance sheets right.

Bill Rammell: I think the fact that we have diversity of funding in UK universities is a positive strength. If we were wholly dependent on public funding, as exists elsewhere in the world, I think there would be a less healthy system. Nevertheless, although we take income from a number of sources, the core values of a public university would certainly come first. We are charitable bodies whose fundamental purpose is to promote education for the public good. Academic freedom and free speech are an absolute red line. That is written into our charters and statutes, and as I say, protections are in place. If you look at research projects, for example, there is a research ethics code that must be gone through, and it is consistent with the values of a UK university. Significant risk assessment takes place before any partnership activity is put in place. I reassert that point: the fact that we are not wholly dependent on public funding is a good thing rather than a weakness.

Alexander Bustamante: I would put this into a bit of perspective. The University of California is fundamentally a research institution and it relies heavily on international collaboration—that is what drives the research, and it is fundamental to our discoveries and inventions, and everything else that drives our economy and our national defence. The issue with autocracies and foreign influence, and the things we are seeing, is very small in comparison with the overall size of those collaborations that occur in meaningful ways and without incidents or issues. At any time at the university, about 16% of our student body are international students working on graduate or post-doctoral research, and tens of thousands of foreign researchers come in and help to drive some of that innovation in the University of California system. I do not want to lose sight of the fact that we have a problem, but that problem needs to be put into a



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perspective that includes risk assessments, training and natural safeguards that can guard against the highest risk events. We should not lose sight of that by making a fix that kills what drives our universities.

- Q41 **Royston Smith:** From your experience, have you witnessed, or are you concerned about, a similar issue to that mentioned by Dr Hughes, which is Chinese students or those from Hong Kong mixing together at the moment, while a demonstrable problem in Hong Kong is causing issues out there? Are you seeing that those students have friction together where you are?

Alexander Bustamante: We do not, or I do not. When dealing with this problem we have been trying to focus on having a country-agnostic solution where we focus on our core values and on conflicts of interest and commitment. We try to educate people on the risk to our academic environment and our research environment.

We raise the bar on what we expect from people, but we do it in a tailored and meaningful way, so as not to lose sight of what really is fundamental to our university's success.

- Q42 **Royston Smith:** I do not know whether you can answer this, Dr Hughes, but there are things we hear. Australia has just decided that it will not have the Confucius Institute teaching Mandarin and will take that back in-house, because it feels there is an issue there. We hear these things. I do not see the particular evidence for them to make their decisions; they do that based on evidence that they have seen—but you felt that there was evidence that some of these things were organised. Would you be able to talk about those now, in a public session, or would that be a step too far? I would be interested to know what you know about whether these issues are actually organised, and by whom, and how you know that.

Dr Hughes: We are talking about a range of activities. If we are talking about the recent conflict on campuses over Hong Kong, it is in the public domain that, in Australia, there were directives and open encouragement directly from the consulate—I cannot remember the city; Melbourne, I think—for students to do this kind of thing, which they classed as patriotic.

I have seen patriotic Chinese students in Trafalgar Square in London, because I went along to look at the Hong Kong demonstration, and I would say it was more like hate crime. The things they were saying—"traitor". I won't go into the details, but it was really intimidating and threatening. I do not think they were students; I do not know who they were. However, it is that kind of activity where there are clear links of direction from the consulate.

If you are talking about the Confucius Institute, we have found the paper trail that traces this back to the office in Beijing, which is a part of the Communist party of China. It took a while to get the paper and the contracts, which were all secret—or were supposed to be, but we got them. It is there, and it is very clear: these organisations are controlled by the Communist party of China. There is no secret about that. I could go



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on. There is plenty of evidence within the public domain. Some of it was not supposed to be in the public domain, but it is now.

Bill Rammell: China is a one-party state, and the influence of the Chinese Communist party sits alongside the state structures. None of that means that you should not engage with Chinese institutions, as long as you have the right protections in place, such as the right due diligence, and you uphold academic freedom.

I do not have personal experience of Confucius institutes, but one member of the MillionPlus group has, and he has been very clear to me that we are talking about Mandarin language teaching and Chinese medicine. Quite how that is promoting the merits of the Chinese Communist party is a bit beyond me.

Dr Hughes: Where do you draw the line? When the head of the office in Beijing turns up at a conference in Portugal and confiscates the brochures and the papers and tears out all the pages that mention Taiwan and will not let the academics see them? That is the head of the Hanban in Beijing. Do we say that is unacceptable influence and interference? Do we start to say that maybe these organisations should not be on our campus? That maybe they have an agenda that does not fit our values? Or do we just say—

Bill Rammell: Have you got an instance of that happening within a UK university?

Dr Hughes: This was at the European Association of Chinese Studies' biannual conference.

Bill Rammell: Have you got an instance of that happening within a UK university?

Chair: Mr Rammell, forgive me, but the questions come from this side this time. I know habits die hard.

Bill Rammell: Sorry.

Dr Hughes: We have. Apart from that are the contracts of the Confucius Institute, which I do not think are compliant with our labour laws.

Q43 **Chair:** There are also accusations of not only Chinese but Islamic texts seeking to influence universities. There are certainly accusations of other countries seeking to influence—Iran, for example, through its educational programmes and by withdrawing or granting access to programmes that it supports or does not support. Do you see similar sorts of things in the United States? Is that an area where you have seen influence trying to be exercised?

Alexander Bustamante: We have had experience with certain topics being sensitive—for example, the Dalai Lama, and inviting the Dalai Lama to a particular campus. That was a particularly sensitive moment, with some concern expressed by the foreign country that we have been



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speaking about. However, most of our concerns revolve around the research space and some of the concerns we have about what is a threat to us. Regarding the Confucius Institute and some of the concerns about individuals coming over or exerting influence, although we are monitoring and looking at that, I have not seen any evidence of that.

- Q44 **Chair:** Have you had any evidence of the Chinese state or any other state seeking to use fund allocations for programmes and the granting and withdrawing of funding as a form of influencing those areas of study that you discussed?

Alexander Bustamante: Have we seen concerns with regard to students attending the university, or perhaps the numbers dropping in a particular year afterwards? I think there has been some anecdotal evidence of that. Have we seen issues wholesale or something that I could draw a causal link to? I am not aware of it.

- Q45 **Chair:** Because your university—or rather your university system; it is rather larger than a single university—has been pretty forward-thinking in how to deal with many of these areas. Could you talk a little about your responses?

Alexander Bustamante: Sure. One of the items we first identified in the beginning was that we did not have an understanding of the scope of the issue. Our first step was to partner with our federal Government, both the regulatory enforcement side, to become aware of the scope of the issue and understand the impact on the university. The other issue that came forward was the need to educate the leadership in the university system, from our board to our senior leadership, to research space, to the chancellors and other stakeholders who drive the university system, and make them aware of some of the concerns and issues that present themselves in our university system relating to foreign influence.

We realised that we needed to perform a risk assessment but also come up with a compliance plan that addressed things in a thoughtful and meaningful way. What we have put together is a series of training for our principal investigators—the researchers—for our leadership, some formal and some informal. We have used a variety of different means to educate.

We have also put together a series of assessments and audits to look at the research space and some of the foreign relationships that we have that are prohibited, that are problematic, and try to make sure that we have an appreciation of who we are entering into relationships with and whether we are abiding by our own rules as a university regarding conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitments. We have tried to make that focus on our core values. As I said, our core values are country-agnostic. It does not matter if we have a conflict that is occurring down the street or across the country, or across the Atlantic or in Asia, it is fundamental for us that we understand when we have a conflict of interest or commitment we come forward and identify and work through those issues.

The last piece of that is having an investigative mechanism where if we believe that there is a credible allegation in this area, it feeds into a pre-

existing system that we have where we will investigate it dispassionately and look at the issues to determine whether we believe a policy violation or the violation of a law has occurred and we then we handle that accordingly.

It is the full suite of that activity that has allowed us to hold this issue of the university in a meaningful way but also to make sure it is right-sized and that we do not extinguish or otherwise deter international collaborations that are absolutely vital, as I said a moment ago. We want to make sure from a university's perspective that we are dealing with the issue, but dealing with it in a way that the 98%, 99% of international collaborations are intact and continue to go and operate.

Bill Rammell: Referring back to Mr Rosindell's question about the relationship with the Foreign Office, there is a cross-departmental international education strategy which highlights engagement in China, Hong Kong, the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and the ASEAN group of nations. The context of this from Government is that there is support for engagement with these countries—indeed, within that strategy, China is mentioned 21 times. I happen to think the Government's strategy is correct: we should be engaging with those nations, as long as we have the appropriate due diligence and the protections in place. I have not seen evidence that in any UK university that does not exist.

3 pm

The Committee became inquorate.

Dr Hughes: Again, there is a false dichotomy of engagement or non-engagement. I have spent most of my life engaging with China and east Asia and the issue is one of due diligence, which is the key issue. That is why I started off by saying "Look at the complexity of the modern university, its size and the number of actors involved." It is all very well to have these procedures—and I am sure that maybe they do work in California. My experience is that you can have all kinds of things on paper, but unless academics are empowered to safeguard the values of the university, despite having these procedures in place, no one actually uses them in the way they should.

There is every incentive to marginalise academics and especially the academics who have the expertise. I refer you again to the Woolf report on the Gaddafi incident and what happened to my colleague Professor Fred Halliday, an expert on the Middle East, and how he was marginalised, treated and discredited by the university for trying to point out what was blindingly obvious about taking money from the Gaddafi Foundation.

Having procedures in place is one thing, but the culture of the university, the ownership of it, which should be in the hands of the academic faculty, is what I am concerned about. Who owns the university? Who owns its agenda? It is not so much about direct interference; it is the growing body of actors and institutions such as the Confucius Institute or whatever,



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which are then taking over the work of academics and shaping the agenda. That is one of the core aims of what these Governments want to do.

Q46 Royston Smith: How does the Confucius Institute shape the agenda?

Dr Hughes: By teaching. Its job is to teach about China. What they say in their contract is that their main job is teaching language, but what tends to happen—included in the contract—is that it goes beyond language to other areas.

Q47 Chair: The teaching of language is inherently political anyway, because depending on what texts and what style you teach, you shape a political argument.

Dr Hughes: Indeed. There is also a strong argument that we should be teaching the language ourselves. By having these institutes, we are taking away jobs from other people who we have trained or from other parts of the Chinese-speaking world—Taiwan, for example; they will not be able to teach Chinese language where there is a Confucius institute. The way the agenda changes and that certain things will be squeezed out is much more subtle. We know the big Ts—Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen. Now, there is Hong Kong. These things will be marginalised and squeezed out as academics have to work with the Confucius Institute and the Confucius Institute itself gets legitimacy. The issue of legitimacy and status is a key thing here. Our universities have brand names that we need to safeguard. Having institutions such as the Confucius Institute using our website or having double degrees with us gives them recognition as something equivalent to us. Now, I do not think they are.

Bill Rammell: Can I give a specific example that cuts to the heart of the debate about the ability of the academic community to challenge and scrutinise? My university has a partnership in Myanmar where, as you will be aware, there are significant concerns about the impact on the Rohingya community and its human rights. I was going for a graduation ceremony with our partner and insisted on delivering a public lecture where I made criticisms of what the Myanmar Government were doing. I did that, I announced bursaries and scholarships for members of the Rohingya community, and I reassured myself about the admissions process. The key to this story is that three members of my academic community questioned, scrutinised and challenged our relationship with the institution in Myanmar and were reassured because of the actions we were taking. Freedom of speech, open academic criticism and challenge is built into the DNA of our universities, and academics have an ability to question and challenge the partnerships that are driven by the university management, albeit overseen by boards of governors.

Q48 Chair: We have heard different reports about some of the partnerships, and I am certainly not referring to your partnership in Myanmar here. We have heard other reports about other partnerships where the partner institution—sometimes the school; not always the university—has become effectively so dependent on the outstation in place X that the



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leverage exercised on the finances of that university or educational establishment can be such that it certainly influences and sometimes actively threatens academic freedoms in the UK. For example, refusing to fund if there is teaching about Uighur communities—that is, not the abuses or the mass incarcerations that we are seeing today, but in general; or refusing to fund any organisation that teaches about Tibetan language, for example. One can go on. We have certainly heard about these things. Are you saying that this has never come up in the universities system?

Bill Rammell: It has certainly not come up in my university. I am not only chair of MillionPlus, but a member of the Universities UK board. I am not aware of any institution that is over-dependent on one relationship in that way. I know that at board of governors level, and council level within pre-1992 institutions, the risk register will highlight it if there is an over-dependence. Any institution worth its salt would seek not to be so over-dependent on one place, because—quite apart from the ethics and politics of it—there is always a risk that the funding will be cut off if the circumstances change and you are over-dependent.

Dr Hughes: Getting back to this issue of the role of the academics in the university, Mr Rammell says he encourages them to speak out and be bold.

Bill Rammell: And they do.

Dr Hughes: Maybe they do at your place, but I am speaking from direct experience of myself and colleagues who have spoken out, who have been marginalised, or taken aside for cups of tea and told, “Stop stirring things up.” That is the reality of what happens, I’m afraid.

Q49 **Royston Smith:** What about our researchers overseas, then? Do you have experience of our researchers overseas being intimidated or found that they are being subjected to the same sort of pressure that we are talking about in this country?

Dr Hughes: In 2013, we had a conference in the United Arab Emirates. An academic who wanted to present a paper on the royal family was refused entry. The organiser from the LSE decided to cancel the conference and he lost his job as a result. In 2013, he was transferred from his post. That is the kind of support you will get from your institution when there are large amounts of money at stake. It was in the newspapers.

3.7 pm

The Committee became quorate

Bill Rammell: There is an absolute responsibility on universities to risk-assess their staff who are working and travelling overseas. All of us take that responsibility very seriously. In addition, Universities UK International is undertaking work on the duty of care for universities for academic staff

travelling overseas. That is focusing on identifying and sharing experience and good practice. That will be a positive development.

Q50 **Royston Smith:** What about researchers based overseas—our researchers, carrying out research overseas?

Bill Rammell: They have to comply with the law of the land, in the same way that overseas nationals comply with our laws within this country. I have certainly not seen examples of that influencing. There has to be a process with any research contract of ethical approval, which is mandatory. It comes to the rub: if you are working on a joint research project and the host country attempts to restrict the publication of that research, it will not pass muster in terms of the ethical approval.

Q51 **Chair:** Can I ask about self-censorship? We have spoken about generalities, but one of the aspects that has come up as well in the past is the influence of state agencies on families at home causing either self-censorship or, indeed, agitation on campuses in the UK. Dr Hughes, you touched on that. Is there a comparator between what is going on in the United States and what is going on the UK? I would be interested in views on each.

Alexander Bustamante: You are speaking particularly about students?

Chair: Yes, so if a student is visiting from another country and their family is still residing in their place of origin—the issue of influence on the family seeing results, whether that be causing agitation or causing them to assist a foreign intelligence agency with lobbying fellow students from the same origin.

Alexander Bustamante: There has always been a concern. We definitely try to raise awareness of the issue and try to educate people on it. We have different mechanisms throughout our system by which individuals raise such concerns, and we would attend to them. The academic senate and the leadership on campuses have brought those issues up and discussed them fully. They are concerned about that. At the University of California, as with many universities, the one thing we are fortunate to have is a strong and healthy academic senate that takes its role seriously, and is passionate about academic freedoms and about safeguarding their openness and their environment. Although I have not seen it, I know that we have taken measures to at least guard against that. To the extent that it presents itself, we will of course be addressing that in a number of ways and through a number of mechanisms.

Q52 **Chair:** You are aware of a recent FBI report that touched on some of the ways in which foreign agents in the US are trying to influence universities, including through individuals. Is there enough cross-Government co-ordination to address each of the threats raised by the FBI? I think I am right in saying that they raised leveraging joint research opportunities, language and cultural training, unsolicited invitations, visiting students and professors.

Alexander Bustamante: They brought up a lot of issues. I come from that family—prior to my position I was a federal prosecutor for quite a bit



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of time. I am familiar with our federal Government, including our enforcement agencies. We have a close working relationship. A lot of our concerns on the campuses have been borne out by some of that collaboration and some of the discussions on what is our risk profile, as well as some of the assessments and information gathered by us on our own. I would say that the FBI's information on that is sound. It probably presents in different ways at different universities and colleges. We have tried to address our issues and concerns around foreign influence in a risk-based way in which we talk and consult heavily with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Commerce Department, the State Department and the Department of Justice and the like. It is through those collaborations that we fully understand the issues, and we fold those into our risk assessments in which we identify where we think we are most vulnerable, and where we have the biggest issues that need to be addressed. We will then tailor a measure to close that gap and be able to deal with them in a meaningful way.

Dr Hughes: The problem with self-censorship is that you cannot really see it. It is insidious. To know that the threat is there is enough to have a negative impact on everything we do. There are stories out there and people are aware of certain possible threats, and that is enough. That brings me onto the third constituency: the students themselves. No student has ever come to me and said, "My family is being threatened," but we really need to empower the students to make sure that that kind of pressure never happens through, for example, our induction processes. When students come in, we need to tell them much more about their rights and where they can go for support if they come under that kind of pressure. I do not think that we empower the students. I do not think that the academics are empowered, and nor are the students in this kind of triangle. Self-censorship is insidious. You only need to go somewhere like Hong Kong and Taiwan a lot now to see how it works. We do see signs of it. We call it the anaconda in the chandelier—you know it is there and if you move too much it might fall down and get you.

Alexander Bustamante: I think there is a concern. If you do not see it and you do not know where it is, there is a tendency to overreact to it. You want to have a system in place in which you act forcefully once you identify it, ensuring that the student is protected, academic freedoms are protected, and the way of life on campus and the culture and the ability to communicate are all preserved. I would rather there be a system in place whereby, when we find somebody is being inappropriately influenced or there is some censorship, we have the mechanisms in place to address that head-on, instead of trying to discern or divine where it might be happening on a campus, which is a much harder proposition and borders on impossible.

Bill Rammell: I also think the Prevent agenda, which—let me share a secret with you—is not universally popular within the academic community, has nevertheless been beneficial in ensuring that, within each institution, there is a mechanism for students who feel that they are being coerced or pressurised to report it and seek support. That has been a



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positive development. I also think the idea that self-censorship is carried out by practising academics is completely at odds with the character of our academic community and the way it works. On the idea that a directive on self-censorship could be given from the top of an institution, it would simply be blown out of the water and would be rightly exposed.

- Q53 **Chair:** You say it would be exposed. We can imagine—in fact, we have heard reports of it happening in certain areas. It might be very minor; I am not suggesting it is an epidemic, but we have heard of it happening. One of the other things that we have heard has been happening is in sensitive research institutions, which are often bidding for Government or sensitive private funding for research—for example, in telecoms or matters that might easily lead to intellectual property theft. There are reports of some of the programmes that are bidding, either under a US title or occasionally under a UK title, where such a large number of the PhD students on the programme are of a particular foreign origin that it really calls into question whether it is a sensitive UK or US programme at all. Have you heard of those in California's system?

Alexander Bustamante: Our system is predominantly funded by research. All the research will ultimately be published and shared with academics around the world, and it will drive some of the other innovations in the applied sciences. We see some concerns—not so much with the country of origin of students, postdocs and doctoral students coming from a particular country. Like I mentioned earlier, we see some of the conflicts of interest or commitment that create the situation whereby we believe some of that research is at threat. We are having people be more aware of when they have a similar research grant from another country on the same topic. If they have relationships with another country at the same time, we ensure that they are involved in federally funded research in the United States. Those are the things that we want to know about and fair out.

On the topic of international students, we welcome them. We do it because that is who we are, and it is also what drives our research. We want to be very mindful that the focus is not so much on the students and on who is coming from which country; it is about having mechanisms in place to identify those conflicts and issues that will present a problem, either now or in the future.

- Q54 **Mr Seely:** Dr Hughes, you said the examples in Hong Kong and Taiwan are well known. I do not know whether you covered this earlier—my apologies for being a bit late—but could you enlighten me a little about those examples?

Dr Hughes: I suppose we could think of one famous case of Professor Robert Chong at the University of Hong Kong, who was a leading opinion poll expert who began to publish opinion polls several years ago, showing that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong was not popular with the public. I think he has lost his job now. He was taken to court and pressurised by the university. It sends out a message to anyone who is working on public opinion polls in Hong Kong: if you want to keep your job, make sure you



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do not look at the popularity of the Chief Executive. I could go on. You only need a few cases like that to send the message, and unless there is proactive institutional support—you know, I like to hear these things about all these codes and how we are supported by our universities, but it has to be much more proactive. This is where the Human Rights Watch code of conduct is very good, laying out how academics need to be protected by their universities: their career paths, for example, and what is expected of them if they are working in these areas.

- Q55 **Mr Seely:** Tell me, Mr Chairman, if I am going off piste or if you want me to go on to other things. With the growth of the Confucius institutes in the UK and their expansion to various universities in the UK, do we think that is a good thing, or do we think it comes with a risk of informal Chinese influence? I understand the Australians are uncomfortable about 13 Confucius institutes setting up at the Australian university campuses.

Chair: We have touched on this, so do you want to answer very briefly, Dr Hughes?

Dr Hughes: I have written my article, which I think sets out my position very clearly on that. I do see them as a big problem, and I think it is something we need to take much more seriously. The US, too, has now largely stopped them, and a lot of other countries are beginning to stop them.

- Q56 **Chair:** Are there other countries that run similar institutes of which you would be cautious?

Dr Hughes: Not that I am aware of. This is an institute run by a political party, in effect.

Bill Rammell: Well, so is the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Germany.

Dr Hughes: They do not have a centre on—

Bill Rammell: They are party political.

Dr Hughes: Yes, but do they have centres on university campuses?

Chair: Forgive me, Dr Hughes; again, the questions will come from this side of the table.

- Q57 **Mr Seely:** But this is a—

Chair: Indeed, Bob, and you are very welcome to pick up on it.

Mr Seely: I am sorry, but this is a bizarre analogy, to compare Confucius institutes that are from a one-party state with the Konrad Adenauer institutes.

Bill Rammell: There are a lot of things being asserted, a lot of claims. I have not seen the evidence of how Confucius institutes are contradicting academic freedom, which is built into the DNA of our institutions. Beforehand, I quoted examples; there is one member of the MillionPlus



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group that has a Confucius institute, and it is about Mandarin teaching and Chinese medicine. I do not think that is a Trojan horse to enable the one-party state in China to promulgate its influence.

- Q58 **Mr Seely:** So all the other states that are concerned about Confucius institutes are wrong to be? The Australians should be more relaxed about it; the Americans should be more relaxed about it? It is just bizarre: these states are making some quite big decisions with Confucius institutes, and you are basically saying there is no problem, because they are just like teaching institutes.

Bill Rammell: As far as I am aware, there are two nations. It is Australia and Canada.

- Q59 **Chair:** Forgive me, Mr Rammell, but that is not quite right. Sweden's Stockholm University, Karlstad University, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Germany's Stuttgart Media University, University of Hohenheim, Denmark's Copenhagen Business School, France's University of Lyon, Université Toulouse Capitole, West Paris Nanterre La Défense University, Canada's McMaster, the US's Pennsylvania State, University of Chicago, Pfeiffer, Tulane, University of North Florida, University of West Florida, University of South Florida, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Texas A&M University System, Prairie View A&M University, University of Iowa, North Carolina State University, the University of Michigan, University of Massachusetts Boston, and the University of Rhode Island have all—

Bill Rammell: I was referring to nations and Governments that have taken that action. My understanding is that the Australian Government have taken that action, and I have to say it is somewhat at odds with a much more open approach to recruiting international students, particularly Chinese students, where the Australian Government are in the vanguard. That is an example, and my understanding is that one of the provinces in Canada has recently undertaken a similar action as well.

Dr Hughes: You missed out Leiden and Copenhagen.

Bill Rammell: I was referring to countries and nations; forgive me for not—

- Q60 **Chair:** I am sure the list is not exhaustive. Can we look very briefly at how universities should track instances of direct or indirect Government harassment? I know, Mr Rammell, you are saying that you have not seen any evidence of this, so maybe I could ask the other two to comment on how they should track harassment, surveillance or threats on campuses in the HRW code of conduct for US universities.

Alexander Bustamante: We have a series of mechanisms by which people can make all sorts of complaints. They can do it either anonymously or through phone lines, computer systems, in person. If someone were to raise an incident of that nature, it would go through the appropriate channels on the campuses and it would likely be elevated to my level, at which we would be working with any number of individuals to

try to address the issue and determine whether we thought there needed to be some kind of intervention.

That said, as I referenced, we also have active lines of communication with our federal partners, so if they believed that there was an incident or issues related to an individual or group on campus and their ability to influence things, we would actively solicit that information and try to figure out how to address it if they came to us with credible information about the goings-on at a particular campus.

That goes back to having the mechanisms to address the issues when they present themselves and then keeping the dialogue open with the federal authorities to ensure that we are not blind to things that we may not have eyes on, and that we are able to talk with them if something that we have to address presents itself.

Dr Hughes: My real concern is getting the state and the Government too involved in this—I do not want to go down that road. Will people say it is McCarthyism or something? Even the Prevent strategy was controversial, as Mr Rammell said. We need to be very careful in categorising what kind of activities we are talking about. Obviously, if it is something like espionage or terrorism, that is something for which we would need that kind of Government co-operation.

On the other issues of self-censorship and all those things, we need to locate in the universities as much as possible. That comes back to having those channels of communication and encouraging students and staff to feel safe speaking up, protected when they do—whistleblowing codes, I suppose—and able to record that and possibly share it at a university level with, I would hope, a minimum amount of security and Government intervention, if that makes sense. We have to be careful about mixing everything up going down the road of treating everyone like a terrorist, in effect.

Bill Rammell: I am not in any sense complacent, but I have been the vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire for seven years, and it is genuinely the case that I have not seen one instance of Government harassment against a student of the university. Nevertheless, you need to take the risk seriously and you need—it is done through the appropriate university committee—ongoing monitoring of complaint and claims of harassment to discern whether there are any patterns and, if there are, to take action as a result.

Alexander Bustamante: I agree. You do not want a situation where you are making everything a large issue, but you do want a mechanism when there is something serious and credible of a certain degree that threatens a student, their family or a professor. You want to have mechanisms in place to be supportive of the student and the family and be able to address the issue.

Q61 **Chair:** One of the things that I am told that you have seen in the United States—forgive me; this is far from my area of expertise—is funding for a



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programme being pulled from one university and given to another when university A falls out with the regime and university B is rewarded. Have you found a way of making sure that universities band together so that they do not allow themselves to be played in such a way?

Alexander Bustamante: This is a little bit out of my lane to be quite honest with you and more within our operations lane, but the demand to come into the UC system is so great that if there were a dip in any number of students, it would be absorbed by several out-of-state students and students within the state of California. Some consideration has been given to that and there has been some talk about it as an issue.

When I think back to the comments that I have made, I think that was anecdotal and I do not know if I saw a causal relationship. It is just one of those things that we monitor, look at and examine. As the gentleman to my left indicated too, you want to look for the red flags and look for the daisies, and be able to identify where you might need to put further gaze on it to see if there are issues so that you are forever vigilant, but you also do not want to be alarmist.

- Q62 **Chair:** Given that some university students are leaving countries in such large numbers—I am thinking particularly of Chinese students—the shift could easily be not only from university to university but from country to country, such as their choosing against the Canadian system in favour of the US one or the Australian one or whatever it might happen to be. Do you think there is scope for cross-country co-operation on this, so that there is a register or record of international companies, state-sponsored companies or state-sponsored investment in universities, so that countries will at least be aware if their university systems are being played off against each other?

Alexander Bustamante: I am not sure that you have—at least, I have not seen it—evidence to suggest that that is occurring. There might be other universities that have that evidence. There may be other systems around the world that can demonstrate that. I know that is something that we have looked at and been concerned with, but I would be the wrong person to analyse that issue further, let alone to discuss whether some kind of collaboration across country lines is warranted, since I really have no information on that point to make that judgment.

Dr Hughes: I am sure that there is scope for intergovernmental co-operation on a range of things, but I am not sure if this is the reason for it, and certainly not for the UK, where we have almost unlimited student demand. I do not think any Government could really stop their students coming, to punish us, and I am not aware of them playing universities off against each other, so I do not see that as the reason. I think there are better reasons for intergovernmental co-operation.

Having said that, we do not quite know where— We need to bear in mind that this is a very fast-changing picture, and to bear in mind what is happening in Hong Kong at the moment and the serious situation we have



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seen on several campuses in other countries, and where this is heading. That kind of thing, where we are seeing real threats—physical threats, violence and intimidation—is a reason for more governmental co-operation, to find out who is doing that and to join together in saying that none of us will accept this, and that if we find out who is doing it, those people will not be allowed to operate on any campuses.

Bill Rammell: It is important that there is some proportion and caution within this debate. International students coming to study at our universities brings a significant financial benefit, which diversifies the income of UK universities. As importantly, it positively promotes international co-operation, with students of all nationalities, faith systems and belief systems living, studying and working alongside each other. Ultimately, it promotes the soft power of the UK once these students go back to their country of origin. That is a good thing for those countries, and it is a good thing for the UK.

We have heard a number of times this afternoon about the risk of this being driven by anecdote. I think it is really important that we look for the evidence before recommendations are taken forward that might come back to haunt us.

Q63 **Mr Seely:** On the Confucius Institute, you were saying, “What is the evidence?” I just brought up a few articles, which were not difficult to find. One says the American Association of University Professors issued a statement accusing the Confucius Institute of advancing “a state agenda in the recruitment and control of academic staff, in the choice of curriculum, and in the restriction of debate.”

There is a lot of stuff out there; it is not just hearsay or anecdotal evidence. That is why people are taking action against Confucius. In the long run, just accepting Chinese state involvement— It may be indirect, although it is actually their education department, so it is actually pretty direct involvement. Having that direct involvement of a one-party state can, in the long term, limit intellectual freedom, especially if Chinese students do not want to come here unless they are very on-side with and supportive of their state. If they want genuine academic freedom, they may actually go elsewhere, because they may not want to be around the Confucius Institute.

Bill Rammell: The numbers and the evidence do not suggest that that is the case, with the volume of Chinese students—

Mr Seely: I am just asking a question. You were talking about anecdotal evidence—

Bill Rammell: And I have not seen that evidence in UK universities. Because of the governance systems that we have in place, any Confucius institute will have a separation of powers and responsibilities from the rest of the overall university enterprise. Earlier, I quoted an example of one member in our sector group. It is about Mandarin teaching and Chinese medicine.



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Q64 **Mr Seely:** I am talking more generally. You are saying that there is more hard evidence out there—I noticed, Dr Hughes, that you were nodding as I said that.

Dr Hughes: There is so much evidence—I am sorry, but there is so much. How much evidence do you need when you see students being beaten up on campuses? The issue becomes one of protection. Of course we want foreign students—I agree with all those things. I have spent my life working with foreign students and doing work on China, but we need to protect those students. When a student comes from China—students from China have said to me, “Why have you got a Confucius institute here? I have come from China. I don’t feel that I am in the UK. I don’t feel secure in this place.”

Q65 **Mr Seely:** Is that because they think they are being monitored?

Dr Hughes: Exactly. Of course.

Q66 **Chair:** I thank all three of you enormously. If there is anything you feel that you would like to add just now, we would be grateful to hear it.

Dr Hughes: May I just say one final thing? The tone that the Government take on this is key. Much of this issue started back in the early 2000s under the Blair Administration, when Tony Blair went to China and said that we needed more Chinese students. There was nothing wrong with that, but it was the way it fed down through the Administration without real consultation—it started something moving. When David Cameron was Prime Minister, the website of the Confucius Institute office in Beijing said that he wanted more Confucius institutes. The Government have taken the tone of saying, “We want more and more of this,” but if someone is concerned and trying to raise questions, that makes it extremely difficult if that tone is coming from the highest levels. It means that the people running the universities are kind of taking their cue from that—I am not blaming them; that is their job, and they are following that agenda. If the tone from Government changes a bit and becomes a bit more supportive and critical, that will help the balance of power within the universities and empower academics and students a bit more.

Bill Rammell: Forgive me, but I was the Higher Education Minister when we promoted the Prime Minister’s initiative and the globalisation of higher education, and I think that was a positive good. The idea that there has not been a negative flow in the other direction over the past few years regarding the recruitment of international students is a million miles away from the reality.

Q67 **Mr Seely:** What do you mean by negative flow?

Bill Rammell: I am talking about significant restrictions that have been put in place.

Q68 **Mr Seely:** What do you mean by that? Are you talking about visa restrictions?



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Bill Rammell: Yes, I am talking about UKVI and the 10% visa refusal threshold that has significantly impeded the ability of UK universities to recruit.

- Q69 **Mr Seely:** Understood, but that is a slightly separate point from the idea that the best way of ensuring academic freedom is not necessarily to work with Confucius institutes, because that is part and parcel of the Chinese one-party state. That is a different argument from the justifiable point that you made about restrictions on visas. I think we all agree that the more foreign students we have the better, because it is enriching, but we want those students to feel that they are brought up in proper academic freedom and have those liberal freedoms here. The question therefore is whether Confucius institutes are part of a solution or part of a problem. There seem to be growing voices to suggest that Confucius institutes, because they are very aligned to the Chinese state, are part of the problem. That is different from attracting Chinese, and indeed other, international students, and that is the issue.

Bill Rammell: Okay, but it is a very, very small subset of international recruitment, and within UK universities I have not heard of or seen the evidence of it impacting and infringing on academic freedom.

Chair: I thank you all very much indeed, particularly Mr Bustamante for the enormous efforts that he made. Again, I apologise that we are somewhat down on numbers—what a week to be talking about freedom of speech when our Parliament has been prorogued.