

Academic freedom needs protection from all stripes – not just China

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In *China Panic*, David Brophy, Sydney University historian and expert on the Uyghurs and Xinjiang, says that critical discussion of China is mostly ‘alive and well’ in Australian universities. He cites the successful events held on his own campus featuring Uyghur dissidents and Chinese democracy activists.

But he observes:

Successful events, of course, are not as newsworthy as those that get disrupted or administratively nixed, so they tend not to make the press. The only time the public hears about China-related events at universities is when something goes wrong, and a one-sided narrative grows.

The latest example of such journalism is a [recent story](#) in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It cites emails sent to students and staff at the University of New South Wales in June and July of this year, asking them to come forward with any complaints about ‘foreign government interference’, citing Human Rights Watch reports of pro-Beijing groups intimidating individuals critical of the Chinese Communist Party.

In other words, the story is framed as a Chinese interference problem rather than as a general foreign interference problem.

Nowadays, Australian universities tell commencing students they cannot intimidate their peers or report to foreign embassies, and that anyone targeted with such intimidation should report it. This has been standard practice for at least a couple of years. Shy of media exposure and keen to avert negative press, university administrators require staff to undertake mandatory training in order to familiarise themselves with the dos and don’ts, so as to safeguard the university against foreign interference.

So, what’s new? You could be forgiven for having a sense of déjà vu.

Like many other China interference stories regularly printed in our media, this one is predictably light on detail and big on free association. The story cites UNSW as saying there had been new complaints around foreign interference, but did not mention any cases, which makes it hard for readers to form their own judgment or experts to provide any further assessments. Has the accusation been proven? Just how threatening was the intimidation? Did it involve the Chinese government or some other state actor?

Intriguingly, the article does present some seemingly balancing facts: the University of Technology Sydney received *zero* complaints around freedom of speech in 2021 and 2022. And while Sydney University documented 25 complaints around academic freedom in 2022, *none* related directly to foreign interference.

In any case, the exact number of complaints the university receives is largely a red herring. Universities receive complaints all the time, and the causes of complaints can range from ‘the use of pronouns to the issue of Palestine’, to quote a Sydney University staff member.

Colleagues teaching China Studies regularly share stories about receiving complaints from students, some protesting that lectures were too pro-CCP, others claiming they were unfair towards China and its government.

Complaints also go both ways. Students allege that lecturers are biased, and lecturers can report on students whose behaviour strikes them as aggressive or abusive.

What the *SMH* story fails to mention is that not all complaints around freedom of speech are necessarily China-related. Brophy’s book narrates his experience of having been the subject of a complaint from ‘a representative of one of New South Wales’s pro-Israel organisations’, who turned up in his department chair’s office after Brophy had given an interview to a newspaper on Palestine.

One academic, who stressed the need not to be identified so as to evade further pressure, remarked that ‘So much concern about ‘foreign interference’ in Australia has been focused on China, that India, whose backslide from liberal democracy should be a topic of concern, has gone unnoticed’ — a concern shared by India Studies [colleagues](#) in another university.

We often learn from the media of [cases](#) in which individuals speaking out against the Chinese government are harassed on our campuses, and the media are right to report such incidents. At the same time, largely overlooked is research that [finds](#) some Chinese students feel frustrated and alienated by criticisms of their loyalty to the Chinese state simply because their views are different from those dominating the classroom. They [want](#) to put forward their views eloquently and effectively, but they often do not have the language fluency or confidence to do so. Hence, while some resign themselves to remaining quiet, a small handful of them get agitated, angry and aggressive.

The reality is that academic freedom, Chinese influence and foreign interference on our campuses are all serious and complex issues, and our media is right to pay close attention. But to avoid reproducing what Brophy calls a ‘one-sided narrative’, a few fundamental principles merit iteration.

First, nobody — neither academics nor students — should feel too intimidated to speak out and criticise human rights violations in *any* country, including our own. Universities need to ensure that academic freedom is guaranteed on campus, as long as the manner of communication is respectful. Staff and students have a duty to report incidents of intimidation, harassment or abuse, regardless of whether foreign interference is involved or not.

Second, no foreign government — China or any other country — should be allowed to interfere with academic exchanges in Australia’s classrooms or elsewhere on campus, whether it is overt harassment or intimidation, or covert lobbying or influence. The media needs to ensure that such attempts by *any* government — not just the Chinese government — are exposed.

Third, when it comes to PRC-related topics, journalists need to give voice to students or staff who feel too intimidated to advance a point of view differing from China’s official position, *and* to those who feel too intimidated to express their support for China.

After all, as managing editor of the China Story blog at the Australian National University [Yun Jiang](#) points out:

Chinese students come to Australian universities in a big part to experience the culture and society. Part of this experience is democratic, healthy debate. Students should be encouraged to express their views, whether they support or oppose the Chinese government.

Finally, just as individuals speaking out against the Chinese government should be safe from harassment and abuse, those who wish to speak in support of the Chinese government should not automatically be seen as brainwashed by China’s propaganda, or — even worse — suspected or accused of operating as agents and spies of the Chinese state. It is crucial for the media to remember that nationalist individuals are not necessarily state actors.

Journalists who aspire to break free from the ‘one-sided narrative’ may do well to apply all these principles, so as not to risk endangering the very democratic values they purport to uphold.

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