

## Western universities urged to rethink Chinese military ties

Academics debate how to respond to increasing influence of People's Liberation Army

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Universities have been urged to develop a “mature understanding of the Chinese state” and in particular to realise that working with its military scientists means supporting the Chinese Communist Party “to enhance its capacity to stay in power in China indefinitely”.

A [report](#) from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute last week looked at research collaborations and exchanges between universities outside China and “People’s Liberation Army scientists”, suggesting that some Western institutions are unwittingly helping a “rival military” to “develop its expertise and technology”.

The report – which says that the US, UK, Canada, Australia and Germany are the top countries for research collaboration with the PLA and that the number of peer-reviewed articles published as a result of such links has grown sevenfold in a decade – comes in a broader context of rising sensitivity and anxiety around West-China academic links.

Last month, *Nature* reported that China’s programme to attract leading researchers back to Chinese universities from Western institutions, the Thousand Talents Plan, had “gone underground” amid participants’ fears that they are being targeted by FBI scrutiny.

In Australia, a number of high-profile incidents involving teaching about politically sensitive issues have raised concerns about the financial clout wielded by thousands of Chinese students putting academic integrity in Australian institutions at risk.

Donald Trump is reported to have described Chinese students as “spies” and [discussed plans to stop providing student visas](#) for Chinese citizens.

Alex Joske, the ASPI researcher who wrote the report on research collaborations and the Chinese military, told *Times Higher Education*: “Many universities have been greatly increasing their engagement with China without also developing a mature understanding of the Chinese state.

“They don’t understand China’s efforts to blur the lines between civilian and military research through military-civil fusion and aren’t cognisant of the strategic implications of the Chinese military’s modernisation. Additionally, many [universities] appear to have been unaware of collaboration by their researchers and the PLA, as well as of PLA scientists training on their campuses.”

Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at [Soas, University of London](#), described the PLA as “the military wing of the Chinese Communist Party”, with a “primary mission” to “defend and protect the security and integrity of the political system in China, which means the Leninist party-state”.

He added: “Conducting research for the sake of advancing science does not fall within the remit of PLA research scientists.”

British universities “that welcome or accept scientists from PLA institutions should bear [this] in mind”, Professor Tsang continued. “They should continue to do so without restrictions if they feel that it is within their remit and morally right to support the Chinese Communist Party to enhance its capacity to stay in power in China indefinitely.

“As an academic, I do not think it is right and proper for me to be part of any project or arrangement that is intended to sustain a human rights-abusing authoritarian government in power in any part of the world.”

Marijk van der Wende, distinguished professor of higher education at [Utrecht University](#), who is leading a major international project on China’s impact on global higher education, said that wider geopolitical issues have “always affected [academic] cooperation, for better or for worse” so, in that sense, recent developments affecting Western-China academic collaborations are “nothing new”.

She added that higher education and scientific collaborations, like cultural ties, are “very important components of diplomatic relations between countries...probably even more so when there is a political problem”.

Professor van der Wende said that universities could benefit from clearer guidance on sensitive academic areas from national authorities and “cannot be naive”. But she argued that the experience of the United Nations’ “knowledge embargo” against Iran’s nuclear research – successfully challenged by Iranian students in the Netherlands – showed that any restrictive measures should only be applied to specified research facilities or technologies and to specific individuals, not to entire groups on the basis of their nationality.

Universities should never be put in a position of being forced to “look at every Chinese student or [academic] colleague as a spy”, she said.

The universities of Southampton and Manchester were the UK institutions ranked by the ASPI report as being among the world’s top 10 universities for PLA collaborations.

In a [blog](#), Mr Joske says that a Chinese PhD student who worked on graphene at Manchester is “now a researcher at the PLA’s National University of Defence Technology (NUDT), which originally sent him abroad”, citing a Chinese newspaper report that states that “the goal towards which he strives is opening up graphene’s applications in fields like military [artificial] intelligence and electromagnetic shielding”.

A Manchester spokesman said: “The university complies with all legislation and rules set out by the government when processing applications for staff and students from overseas.”