

**Abstract**

This article recognizes growing concern worldwide about the exploitation of higher education actors and institutions by foreign entities for malign purposes. It examines how higher education has become increasingly vulnerable to interference from geopolitical adversaries. The authors highlight recent allegations of espionage, propaganda, and strategic meddling in higher education in various countries before analyzing the validity and implications of these claims. They conclude by proposing solutions to counter undue foreign influence.

## Rising Global Fears of Foreign Interference in Higher Education

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**T**he internationalization of higher education, long heralded for fostering friendly cross-border relations, must face a hard truth. Unfettered mobility and openness leave higher education vulnerable to exploitation by malign actors. In recent years, stories about faculty spies and student propagandists have become commonplace, contributing to rising concerns about higher education undermining national security. This worry is consistent with growing public fears regarding foreign interference in national life more broadly. The fraction of Americans who thought it very or somewhat likely

that a foreign government would attempt to influence the national election increased from two-thirds in 2018 to three-quarters in 2020.

Yet, pinpointing abusers is difficult and makes foreign interference—especially the malign variant—all the more harrowing and destructive. In the context of higher education, the phenomenon of foreign interference has heightened fears associated with ostensibly harmless international education activities. We perceive growing misgivings about government-sponsored exchanges of students and faculty, transnational research collaborations, and cross-border programming.

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### **A Treacherous Trio**

A spate of recent news stories and op-eds, government press releases, and policy documents from around the world demonstrate a level of alarm over foreign interference in higher education unseen since the height of the Cold War. When considered together, these sources point—with and without evidence—to three overarching concerns: theft of proprietary research, promotion of propaganda and disinformation on campuses, and imposition of political or cultural values through curricular and extracurricular programming.

### **Research Theft**

In the United States, the government’s “China Initiative” has accelerated federal investigations of Chinese scholars suspected of exploiting international research collaborations for criminal purposes. In September 2020, the State Department suspended the visas of more than a thousand Chinese students and professors deemed high risk due to alleged ties to the Chinese military. The Justice Department claims that another thousand visiting researchers affiliated with the Chinese military fled the country after a series of indictments earlier in the year. Since 2019, the National Institute of Health alone has investigated more than 50 institutions for a range of questionable behaviors by visiting Chinese researchers.

Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom have also implemented stricter visa policies for Chinese researchers or established national commissions on foreign interference in universities. The European Union has adopted a policy preventing scholars from China and other countries that do not share EU values from participating in sensitive research projects. Some of the global backlash against China amounts to little more than xenophobic spectacle. But mounting evidence of criminal behavior shows that research theft is a clear and present danger.

Still, the benefits of international research collaboration ought to outweigh those concerns, especially in an era of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions must balance the need to safeguard their work with the need to maintain productive international relationships and the ethical imperative not to discriminate against researchers by nationality.

### **Propaganda, Censorship, and Disinformation**

The global rise of disinformation has made headlines for threatening the integrity of national elections, but the probity of higher education is also at risk. Recent concerns about propaganda in American higher education revolve primarily around Confucius Institutes. In August 2020, the State Department officially designated the Confucius Institute US Center as a foreign mission of China. The classification implies that the campus cultural centers are deemed a key instrument in a global influence campaign. National political discourse and recently introduced legislation accord with this interpretation. Other countries are bringing their policies in line with the United States. In India, the ministry of education now requires universities to report their relationships with Confucius Institutes. In Australia, the government seeks to do the same, although universities have thus far resisted. While some cases of censorship, self-censorship, and visa fraud have been connected to the institutes, no evidence has been made public that clearly paints them as dangers to national security.

Confucius Institutes are not the only source of concern. The US Department of Education has started investigating institutions for failure to report foreign donations, a heretofore relatively unenforced provision of the 1965 Higher Education Act. Of particular

concern to investigators are contributions from geopolitical adversaries such as China and Russia, but also allies like Saudi Arabia. A prominent case alleged that Texas A&M University misreported financial support from the Qatar Foundation. The underlying concern is that international funding sources may lead institutions to promote—wittingly or unwittingly—propaganda and disinformation from these countries. Another worry is that recipients would refrain from taking actions or spreading information that might anger foreign donors, thereby stifling academic speech. An examination of news stories and documents relating to these investigations do not cite evidence of *quid pro quo*. Yet, investigators' fears appear to be grounded in the logic that foreign financial contributions must yield undue influence. Continued investigations may have a chilling effect on cross-border philanthropy, cutting off valuable revenue streams for cash-strapped institutions, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

### Values Imposition

While the first two categories of foreign interference have begun to pervade open societies, the third has a stronger association with closed societies. Stoking fears about foreigners is in the authoritarian playbook. Illiberal leaders routinely leverage xenophobia and outside interference to tighten their grip on power. The globalization of higher education—with people and providers crossing borders more than ever—during the past three decades has provided autocrats and their sycophants with new targets. While many antidemocratic regimes have welcomed international higher education partnerships with democratic countries and the global prestige that accompanies them, they will cut ties as soon as they are deemed a threat to sovereignty. Such was the case in 2019, when the Hungarian government revoked the license of the prodemocratic Central European University, forcing it to relocate to Austria. Officials in Budapest are still subsidizing a branch of a Chinese institution, Fudan University. Russian prosecutors investigated a university in Moscow last fall under the suspicion that pro-American influencers and international NGOs fomented student protests by spreading liberal ideas. Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, a viral video circulated during the country's parliamentary election asserted that the American University of Central Asia is propagating Western values such as LGBTQ acceptance. Political rivals used accusations of promulgating these beliefs in attempts to discredit their opponents.

### Collaboration and Commitment

These instances of foreign interference in higher education—or fear of it—demonstrate both how valuable higher education has become to national life and just how vulnerable higher education has become to nefarious actors. To combat further interference in open societies, current government and institutional policies related to counterintelligence, diplomacy, and law enforcement must change. Developing or leveraging policies that allow for nongovernmental oversight of investigations into alleged acts of malign foreign influence could provide a solution to avoid overly politicized reactions, while still maintaining a sufficient level of scrutiny into suspicious action. Nongovernmental and international organizations, think tanks, and membership associations can play an important role in monitoring and evaluating instances of malign foreign influence. They should provide guidance on how to properly identify perpetrators and rectify wrongs. Meanwhile, open societies must continue to advocate for, and provide resources to, faculty, students, and administrators in closed societies. ▲

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