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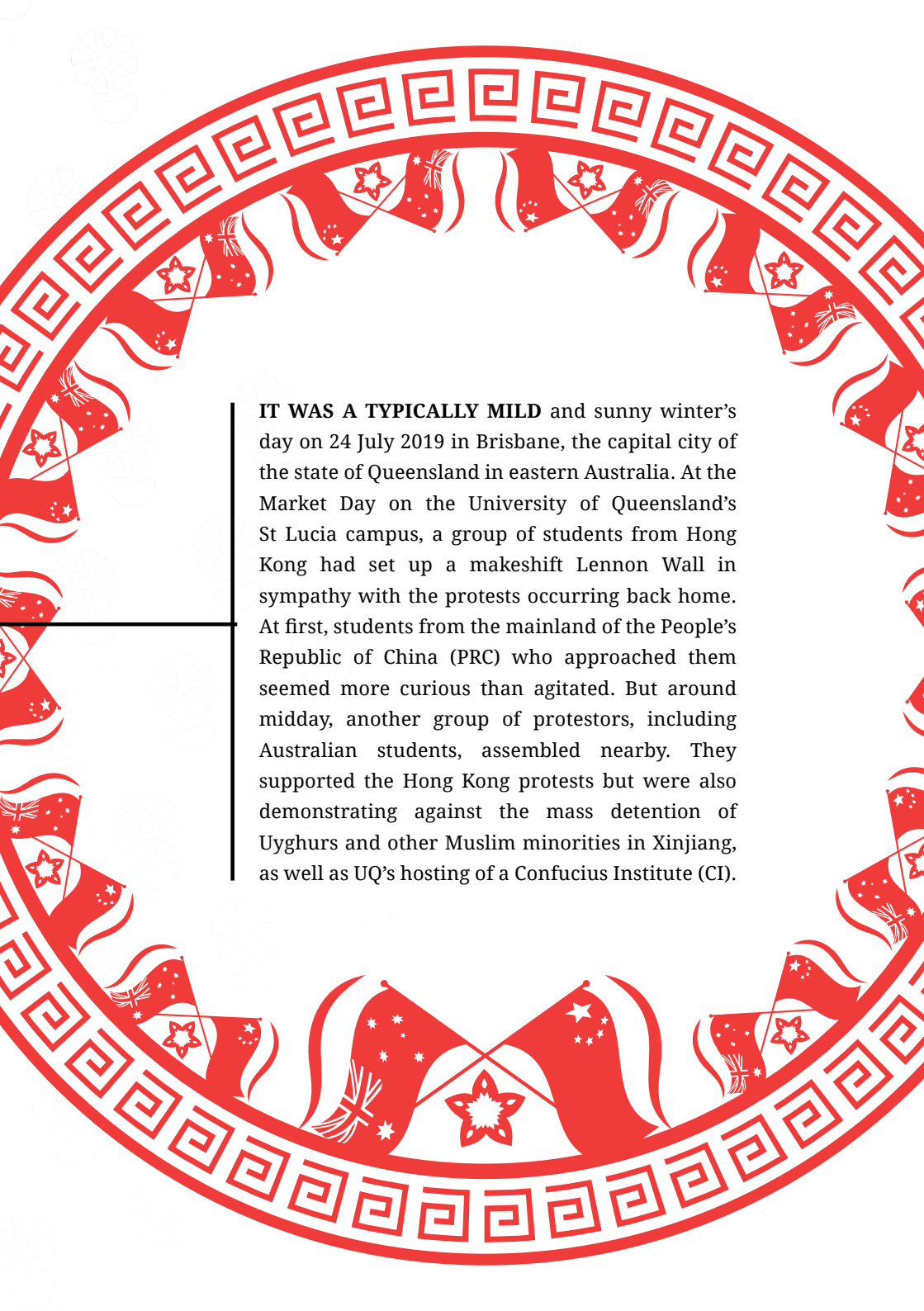
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## **CAMPUS CONUNDRUMS: CLASHES**

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**AND COLLABORATIONS**  
Jane Golley, Paul Harris,  
and James Laurenceson





**IT WAS A TYPICALLY MILD** and sunny winter's day on 24 July 2019 in Brisbane, the capital city of the state of Queensland in eastern Australia. At the Market Day on the University of Queensland's St Lucia campus, a group of students from Hong Kong had set up a makeshift Lennon Wall in sympathy with the protests occurring back home. At first, students from the mainland of the People's Republic of China (PRC) who approached them seemed more curious than agitated. But around midday, another group of protestors, including Australian students, assembled nearby. They supported the Hong Kong protests but were also demonstrating against the mass detention of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, as well as UQ's hosting of a Confucius Institute (CI).

After the leaders of this second group began chanting into megaphones, the situation quickly deteriorated, with abuse being hurled in all directions. A large group of mainland Chinese students began drowning out the protesters' chants with a boisterous rendition of their national anthem blasting out from a speaker of their own. UQ security officers called the police and order was eventually restored.<sup>1</sup> But UQ's China conundrums were only just getting started.

The next day, China's Consul-General in Brisbane, Dr Xu Jie 徐杰, issued a statement praising 'the spontaneous patriotic behaviour of Chinese students'.<sup>2</sup> Earlier that month, UQ had appointed Dr Xu as an adjunct professor in the School of Languages and Cultures, albeit in an honorary capacity. In the media, questions were raised about whether the appointment of a serving diplomat was consistent with the university's commitment to freedom of speech and academic inquiry, particularly in light of Dr Xu's statement a day earlier. On 26 July, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne made it clear that the government expected foreign diplomatic representatives to respect the right to free speech and lawful and peaceful protest, saying she 'would be particularly concerned if any foreign diplomatic mission were to act in ways that could undermine such rights, including by encouraging disruptive or potentially violent behaviour'.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Embassy in Canberra replied that Dr Xu's remarks were 'appropriate and measured' and that any 'misinterpretation' and 'overreaction' were 'regrettable and unacceptable'.<sup>4</sup>

The day after the protests, the Nine Network reported on UQ's agreement with Hanban, the Chinese government organisation that manages all CIs and is guided by the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). According to the Nine Network, the agreement required UQ to accept Beijing's authority on teaching matters in courses run by the CI that it hosts.<sup>5</sup> Between 2013 and 2018, UQ Vice-Chancellor Peter Høj had also acted as an unpaid consultant to Hanban, receiving a formal commendation for his service in 2015. UQ claimed that its CI had no input into award courses.



China conundrums at the University of Queensland  
Photo: Kgbo, Wikipedia

Controversy also spread to UQ's research programs. In August, Alex Joske, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), briefed a journalist at *The Australian* about a new ASPI report alleging a UQ professor of Chinese origin had set up a company supplying surveillance technologies to a local government in Xinjiang, as well as operating a joint laboratory with the Ministry of Public Security.<sup>6</sup> The university responded that the academic had left in 2017, although he retained an honorary position. Nonetheless, Joske drew a connection with the researcher's earlier work at UQ. He also cited evidence that the researcher had held multiple positions in China, including as head of a school of computer science and engineering at a university, while still employed at UQ and receiving Australian government research grants — possibly in contravention of funding body rules.<sup>7</sup>

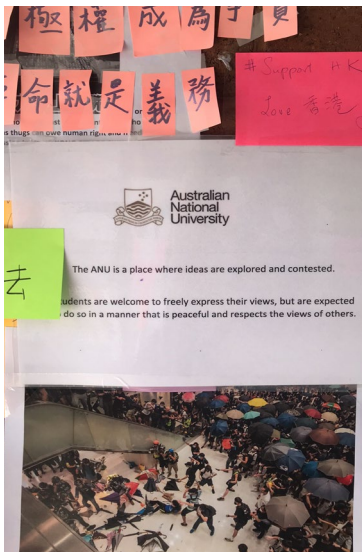
Such were the ferocity and breadth of criticism around UQ's engagement with China that the university felt compelled to set up a dedicated webpage to 'provide clarity'.<sup>8</sup> UQ Chancellor Peter Varghese, a former Director-General of the Office of National Assessments (now the Office of National Intelligence) and Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, also came to UQ's defence. Varghese noted that UQ was managing its financial exposure to China by means including the establishment of a contingency fund that could be drawn on in the event of a sudden sharp fall in the number of Chinese students.

He described allegations that Høj was a CCP stooge as belonging ‘more to the anti-communist witch hunts of the McCarthy era in the US than to the rational debate we need to have in Australia’.<sup>9</sup> While welcoming a dialogue with the Australian government to ensure that the university’s international research collaborations did not endanger national security, he also cautioned against ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

UQ is not a unique case in Australia — a country with one of the most internationalised higher education systems in the world. In 2013, international student fees earned Australia AU\$17 billion; by 2018, it was AU\$35 billion. Chinese students are by far the largest group of international students in the country, and are especially concentrated in the leading research-intensive universities, which are known as the Group of Eight. In addition to ensuring free speech on campus and mitigating against an overreliance on fee-paying Chinese students, these universities face an even more complex challenge — hinted at

above in the ASPI warning about breaches of funding body rules and Varghese’s defence of UQ’s research practices. This involves collaborative research, which is also increasingly international.

In April 2018, Senator Payne, then Minister for Defence, announced a review of Australia’s Defence Trade Controls (DTCs), which apply to university-based research projects, to ensure the legislative and regulatory framework ‘appropriately balances’ defence requirements ‘while not unnecessarily restricting trade, innovation or research collaboration’.<sup>10</sup> In November 2018,



**The Lennon Wall at The Australian National University**

Photo: Melodie Liu

Minister for Education Dan Tehan instigated a review into the state of freedom of speech on university campuses. In August 2019, he announced the establishment of a taskforce charged with ‘the development of best practice guidelines to counter foreign interference in the Australian university sector’.<sup>11</sup> The guidelines were released in November.<sup>12</sup>

## Five Eyes on China

The Australian government is not alone in its concerns. In September 2019, Dr Kelvin Droegemeier, Director of the White House’s Office of Science and Technology Policy, using language strikingly similar to that of minister Tehan, called for the development of ‘best practices for academic research institutions’ in response to countries that had sought to ‘exploit, influence and undermine our research activities and environments’.<sup>13</sup> Just a few days earlier, on 13 September, Assistant US Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation, Christopher Ford, said his department had been hard at work building international ‘coalitions of caution’ among friends and allies to protect against ‘Chinese technology-transfer threats’.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of 2019, six bills had been introduced to the US Congress proposing tighter screening of Chinese applicants for student visas and stronger measures to address intellectual property (IP) theft and espionage in universities. One draft bill stated that the US government should publish annual lists of research institutions in China ‘affiliated with, or funded by, the People’s Liberation Army’ and deny visas to their associates. The same draft bill also states that Australia and other Five Eyes countries should implement similar measures. Along with discussions of the feasibility and implications of ‘decoupling’ from China in key technology sectors, there is increasing interest in creating an ‘allied innovation zone’ with greater research cooperation between the United States and its closest allies.

These views have been gaining strength in Washington since the release of the US National Security Strategy in 2017, which focused on ‘strategic competition’ with China. In February 2018, Director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Christopher Wray testified to Congress about the university sector’s ‘naïvety’ with regard to China’s exploitation of the open research and innovation system that the United States has led since the Second World War. In June 2018, the State Department followed up by announcing that Chinese graduate students studying in the United States in key sectors such as advanced manufacturing, aviation, and robotics would henceforth be entitled to only one-year visas instead of five-year visas. The Department of Defense (DoD) told universities they would have to apply for a special waiver if they wanted to maintain a CI as well as having access to DoD funds for foreign language education. After a number of US universities applied for waivers, the DoD announced that it would not be granting waivers after all, making the choice stark. By November, fifteen universities had announced the closure of their campus CIs. In mid-2019, the Department of Energy forbade its staff and grant recipients from participating in foreign ‘talent recruitment programs’, such as China’s Thousand Talents, which Beijing established in 2008 to draw top international science and technology researchers to China. The US Department of Education and major research funding agencies such as the National Institutes of Health have also introduced new rules on foreign funding and conflicts of interest.

The US Department of Commerce, meanwhile, is reviewing whether its export control regime should be broadened to cover a wider range of ‘emerging technologies’ such as artificial intelligence (AI). Throughout 2019, more than 170 Chinese individuals and organisations — including Sichuan University and leading Chinese technology companies Huawei, Hikvision, IFLYTEK, Megvii Technology, and Sense Time — were placed on the US ‘entity list’, barring them from dealing with American universities and companies unless they successfully apply for a licence to do so.<sup>15</sup>

On 28 September, David R. Stilwell, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said that US intelligence and law enforcement communities had identified ‘an increasing number of instances in which foreign intelligence services had “co-opted” individual academics, researchers and others to conduct intelligence-related activities while in the US’. In the following breath, he cited the FBI’s Wray in saying that investigations around IP theft saw ‘almost all [of them] leading back to China’. Stilwell also accused China of undermining and exploiting fundamental scientific values such as free inquiry, openness, and ethics for ‘unfair gains’ such as the theft of IP and ‘illiberal and repressive uses’,<sup>16</sup>

In response to the rapidly changing landscape, throughout 2019 US universities reviewed and tightened their internal processes to protect IP and ensure compliance with federal legislation while also making a case for the benefits of continued cooperation, and the importance of foreign talent for their ability to do high-quality research. In June 2019, Rafael Reif, the President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), wrote an email to staff that conceded that, across the United States, ‘small numbers of researchers of Chinese background may indeed have acted in bad faith’. But, he asserted, bad actors were ‘the exception and very far from the rule’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, since 2014, charges against at least five China-born scientists have been dropped.<sup>18</sup> In the second half of 2019, senior MIT leaders spoke out publicly to Washington think tanks about the value to the United States of research collaboration with China, and the MIT campus in Boston was the site of protests by academic staff over what they argued was the unfair targeting of Chinese–American academics.

Meanwhile, bilateral education and research links between the United States and China continued to grow, according to the latest available data. In 2007–08, there were just over 80,000 Chinese students studying at American colleges and universities. By 2017–18, this had grown to 363,000. Despite a downturn in total international student numbers to the United States in each of the past two years, growth in



Chinese student numbers has been consistent. By 2018, according to the InCites database, 10.7 percent of scientific papers published in the United States in that year included a co-author affiliated with a Chinese institution. This was up from 8.6 percent in 2016 and just 2.7 percent in 2008. While policymakers in Washington may consider some amount of ‘decoupling’ as desirable, this can only come at a significant cost — financially and intellectually for universities, and also for the Chinese (and potentially Chinese–American) students and researchers who find themselves in the firing line.

## Facts and Folly

For Australia, the costs of decoupling from China would be significant. A report by the Australia–China Relations Institute released in July 2019 showed the dramatic expansion of research collaboration between Australian and Chinese institutions over the past two decades.<sup>19</sup> In 1998, only one percent of all Australian peer-reviewed articles included a co-author affiliated with a Chinese institution; by 2018, it was fifteen percent. By this measure, China overtook the United States to become Australia’s leading international collaborator in 2019. Most Chinese–Australian collaborations are in the physical and computer sciences, whereas American–Australian collaborations tend to be in the life sciences.

The Australian government has long seen the benefit of such collaborations, some of which it funds through the Australia–China Science and Research Fund.<sup>20</sup> In August 2018, then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull addressed the University of New South Wales (UNSW), praising its ‘international partnerships and collaboration, particularly with China’.<sup>21</sup> Yet not everyone is convinced. In a submission to the recent independent review of DTCs commissioned by the Australian government, Michael Shoebridge, from ASPI, wrote that ‘it is a growing certainty that Australian research partnerships with Chinese



**On ABC's *Four Corners* program, ANU Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt was grilled about student activism on campus, cybersecurity, research collaboration, and links to the Chinese government**  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

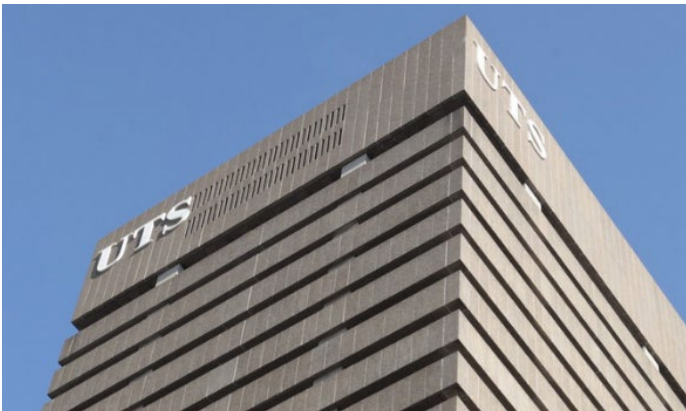
counterparts will be directly advancing Chinese military capability'. Therefore, he said, it is likely that if decisions are made on the basis of national security, there could be many more refusals in future.<sup>22</sup> John Fitzgerald of the Swinburne University of Technology echoes the concerns of Stilwell when he asserts:

Australian universities are sailing into uncharted waters when they venture into major research collaborations with institutions and systems that do not share their commitment to liberal values and free and open critical inquiry. It is not clear that they are equipped to manage the risks.<sup>23</sup>

In May 2019, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report documented how a subsidiary of China Electronics Technology Corporation (CETC), a massive Chinese state-owned conglomerate with military connections, had designed surveillance equipment being used in Xinjiang.<sup>24</sup> Back in the first half of 2017, when the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) announced a research partnership with CETC,<sup>25</sup> a PhD student at The Australian National University and a researcher at the US Studies Centre raised questions about the national security implications of the

collaboration.<sup>26</sup> UTS responded by noting that all the research it undertook was subject to DTCs. In July, the ABC's *Four Corners* program followed up, revealing that UTS had launched an internal review of the CETC collaboration in April after being made aware of the soon-to-be released HRW report.<sup>27</sup> In October, the *South China Morning Post* obtained a copy of the agreement between UTS and CETC. According to James Leibold, a specialist on Xinjiang at La Trobe University, it showed that: 'UTS is essentially providing CETC with an overseas laboratory for its research in dual-use technologies that are contributing to the advancement of the Communist Party's "security-surveillance complex".'<sup>28</sup>

What the UTS review actually found — a summary of which was made publicly available in August — received little media attention. Its academics had engaged in five projects in collaboration with CETC. Only one was potentially relevant to the surveillance technologies being deployed in Xinjiang, yet it was initiated only after HRW had already obtained the problematic surveillance application. Further, all projects had been submitted for approval to the Department of Defence where required under DTCs.



Questions were raised about the national security implications of the partnership between the University of Technology Sydney and China Electronics Technology Corporation

Photo: Charlie Brewer, Flickr

To date, there is no evidence that any Australian university has violated the laws and regulations put in place by the Australian government. Questioned about compliance in Senate estimates in late 2017, then secretary of defence, Greg Moriarty, replied that in his experience Australian universities ‘are very conscious of the dangers and risks around these leakages of technology’.<sup>29</sup>

While universities may follow the rules, the existing DTCs are arguably inadequate for managing the risks in a changed national security environment. This view is reflected in the DTC review released in February 2019. It concludes that some gaps exist that need closing, such as ‘inadequate control of emerging and sensitive military and dual-use technology’. However, the sweeping changes advocated by some in the defence and security community were deemed unnecessary.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to deny the existence of security and other risks for Australia in international scholarly collaboration and exchange, including with China. But there are also economic and even security benefits stemming from Australia’s capacity to create knowledge and access cutting-edge technologies in a growing number of fields in which China now leads the world. Australia spends about US\$25 billion (AU\$36.4 billion) on research and development (R&D) each year.<sup>31</sup> Both the United States and China spend about US\$500 billion. Last year, the R&D budget of a single Chinese technology company, Huawei, was US\$15.3 billion,<sup>32</sup> which is more than the total spent by all businesses in Australia. If Australia punches above its weight in research in science and engineering — fields that help drive long-term prosperity — this is in no small part due to international research collaboration, including with Chinese partners. As just one example, in 2017, of Australian articles in the top one percent of the AI articles most cited globally, 64.6 percent involved a collaborator in China. That is, only one-third of Australia’s AI knowledge creation with the highest impact was produced without Chinese help.

In June 2019, former secretary of the Australian Department of Defence Dennis Richardson observed that if the United States were to pursue a technological decoupling from China, and Australia followed suit, Australia would risk ‘for the first time, us not having access to the best technology’.<sup>33</sup> In August, UQ’s Varghese told an audience assembled by the US Studies Centre at Sydney University that, realistically:

For Australia, there is no sensible alternative to engaging China ... the notion that global technology supply chains can be divided into a China-led system and a US-led system is both economic and geopolitical folly.<sup>34</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

In October 2019, the ABC’s *Four Corners* program again turned its attention to Australian universities and their relationship with China, with a program titled ‘Red Flags: The infiltration of Australia’s universities by the Chinese Communist Party’. The reporter grilled UQ’s Høj (as well as ANU Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt) about student activism on campus, cybersecurity, research collaboration, and links to the Chinese government. These issues, as we have seen, are complex and intertwined. But many of them are not nearly as sensational as portrayed in the media, nor does the commentary around them always do justice to the deeper structural changes in international education, research, and innovation. One thing is clear, however: as US–China competition intensifies, the Australian government and universities find themselves in increasingly difficult policy terrain. Navigating our way will require lucidity and focus on Australia’s national interests and values — drawing clear red lines with respect to China on matters of academic freedom, for example, but also with the United States, which could pressure Australia into making decisions that threaten the university sector’s ability for knowledge creation and collaboration with leading international partners.

Australians are not the only ones learning to navigate their way. Just as the more contentious areas of joint research attract the most attention, so do the loudest and most aggressive students. Yet the majority of Chinese students (and scholars) studying and researching in Australian universities are simply pursuing their academic dreams and contributing positively to the intellectual and cultural vibrancy of campus life in the process. The right to (respectful) protest is one of several unfamiliar freedoms they must learn to navigate, with pressure coming from all directions, including from Chinese officials who expect them to toe the party line and vocal Australians who expect them not to. It is important to remember that their dreams are on the line as well.

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