

Minister for Education

Defence researcher in security fight at uni

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

The Australian Government is aware of reporting regarding alleged foreign interference attempts at the Australian National University (ANU).

The Australian Government expects universities to make decisions which protect them from foreign interference and support Australia's national interests.

The Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector (the Guidelines) support universities in managing foreign interference risk.

Universities, including the ANU, should carefully consider international engagement and due diligence processes in accordance with the Guidelines.

The vast majority of international engagement and collaboration furthers Australia's growth in research and innovation.

The Government will continue to work collaboratively with universities and relevant agencies to strengthen research security and resilience to foreign interference.

This includes engaging meaningfully on the implementation of the Guidelines, and through the University Foreign Interference Taskforce.

The Department of Education is closely monitoring the matter and engaging with relevant government agencies to ensure the ANU is taking appropriate steps in compliance with the Guidelines.

The ANU is aware of the significant risks from foreign interference and seeks to uphold the highest standards so as to not jeopardise the reputation and work of the university.

Media

Probe into uni foreign intrusion allegations

The Australian – Natasha Bitá

Date: Friday, 27 September 2024

The federal Education Department has intervened in a foreign interference scandal at the Australian National University, after a defence scientist accused an academic with Russian ties of seeking help to procure a government security clearance.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare said “protecting against foreign interference at our universities is critical”.

“Australia’s law enforcement and intelligence agencies will assess, investigate, disrupt and, where possible, prosecute acts of foreign interference,” he told The Australian on Thursday.

“Universities are attractive targets for foreign interference, given their world-leading research and role in shaping public debate in Australia.” Mr Clare said the government’s University Foreign Interference Taskforce set guidelines for universities to manage foreign interference.

“Universities should comply with those guidelines,” he said. A spokesman for Mr Clare said “the Department of Education has contacted the ANU to ensure they have adhered to the foreign interference guidelines regarding this matter”.

The ANU, based in Canberra, is the top academic recruiting ground for Australian spies and military personnel. Mr Clare’s remarks follow The Australian’s revelation on Thursday that a defence scientist working on sensitive national security research had accused an ANU academic with Russian ties of seeking help to procure a government security clearance.

The researcher had warned of the potential for foreign interference at the ANU, which collaborates with Australia’s defence and intelligence agencies as well as Chinese institutions. The academic who has ties to Russia has denied the allegation. The researcher had cut ties with the academic and insisted his work be supervised by someone with an Australian security clearance. ANU, however, transferred the work to another academic who trained at a Chinese university flagged by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute as having links to the Communist Party and Chinese defence industries. The opposition’s spokesman on home affairs and cyber security, senator James Paterson, said as a major defence research university, the ANU must “demonstrate it is taking action to address these serious allegations”.

“It’s no longer tenable to plead ignorance,” he said on Thursday. “By now, universities should have incredibly robust policies in place to manage the increasingly fraught national security environment. Allegedly allocating the supervision of sensitive research to a supervisor from a PRC-linked university is inexplicable in this day and age, and suggests a major failure of process.”

Senator Paterson chaired the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security inquiry into national security risks affecting Australia’s higher education and research sector in 2022. The committee recommended the government’s UFIT help universities to “introduce, maintain and develop relevant training on national security issues for staff and students”. ASIO told the inquiry that the higher education sector was at risk of espionage and foreign interference, warning that “hostile foreign state actors” were attempting to gain insights into international alliances and defence relationships. “Foreign intelligence services and their proxies are all too willing to take advantage of the openness that is integral to our universities and research institutions to steal intellectual property and cutting-edge technologies,” ASIO director-general Mike Burgess told the inquiry.

In October last year, he revealed that ASIO had disrupted a plot for an unnamed “visiting professor” from China, recruited by Chinese intelligence, to infiltrate an unnamed university. “The Chinese government are engaged in the most sustained, sophisticated and scaled theft of intellectual property and expertise in human history,” he told a meeting of Five Eyes intelligence agencies in the US. A spokesperson for ASIO said it “does not comment on individuals or specific cases ... however, ASIO has routinely warned of threats to academic research.”

The ANU has denied whistleblower protections to its researcher and is refusing to say whether the allegations have been referred to UFIT. An university spokeswoman on Thursday said “foreign interference is something we take seriously in all that we do ...We have robust mechanisms and practices in place, including a group of senior staff reviewing all potential partnerships. International partnerships cannot be entered into without this group’s approval. “We have also partnered with the Australian government to help develop foreign interference guidelines for the entire university sector.

ANU is an active member of the University Foreign Interference Taskforce. For privacy reasons, we do not comment on individual allegations.” ANU chancellor Julie Bishop – the former Coalition foreign minister – did not respond to a request for comment. Academic collaborations at ANU are sensitive due to the university’s many links with defence and intelligence agencies, including a “Co-Lab” with electronic eavesdropping agency the Australian Signals Directorate.

ANU also conducts joint research with the Australian Army Research Centre. “We have an agreement with ANU for the conduct of research, a part of which requires citizenship and a security clearance where required,” the centre’s director, Colonel Anthony Duus, said on Thursday.

Media

Defence researcher in security fight at uni

The Australian – Natasha Bitá

Date: Thursday, 26 September 2024

A defence scientist working on sensitive national security research has accused an Australian National University academic with Russian ties of seeking help to procure a government security clearance.

The researcher has warned of the potential for foreign interference at the ANU, which collaborates with Australia’s defence and intelligence agencies and Chinese institutions.

The academic with ties to Russia has denied the allegation. The ANU has refused to grant official whistleblower protection to the doctoral researcher during a three-month standoff that has escalated to legal threats.

The researcher cut ties with the academic after alleging he had sought help to procure a security clearance for his wife, and then tried to connect with the researcher’s high-level defence industry contacts.

Through a lawyer, the researcher wrote to ANU vicechancellor Genevieve Bell last week, seeking whistleblower protection to report alleged foreign interference.

He told Professor Bell he had made multiple requests to perform his defence science research “safely and free from foreign interference”.

Professor Bell’s senior adviser replied on Friday that the researcher did not qualify for whistleblower protection under the Public Interest Disclosures Act, as a current or former public official.

The adviser stated that ANU had “done all it can” to help the researcher. The researcher’s solicitor, Paul James – the principal of veteran-owned law firm Operational Legal Australia – told The Australian that stronger laws were needed to protect whistleblowers.

“The risks of foreign interference in our universities are not just academic,” he said. “They threaten Australia’s national security, innovation and intellectual property.

“Those who expose these threats play a crucial role in defending our national security and the integrity of our universities.” When contacted by The Australian, the academic denied the allegations, and counterclaimed that the researcher had “offered to get my wife a clearance for some reason”.

He said his wife did not need security clearance, but needed help only to find a job as she was not an Australian citizen. Asked if he had an Australian security clearance, the academic replied: “I don’t need it and I don’t have it.” He said when he asked the researcher to produce data, “he started making these weird accusations and went a bit berserk, to be honest”.

The academic also denied that he had asked the researcher for a list of attendees at a high-level security conference. “I didn’t ask for names or anything like that, I just introduced myself to people I saw at the conference,” the academic said. “When I did that, (the researcher) got very upset and said, ‘Why are you using my name?’ “As far as I know, I personally never asked for a list of people.”

Professor Bell was alerted to the dispute in June, when the researcher first complained about an alleged “abuse of power”. She delegated the matter to a senior academic, who responded that he lacked the necessary security clearance or expertise to interview the researcher. The ANU then transferred the researcher’s project to an academic who trained at a Chinese university flagged by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute as having links to the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese defence industries.

Now the sensitive defence- related research has been put on hold because of the complainant’s insistence that it be overseen by an academic with security clearance. An ANU spokeswoman refused to comment on the dispute or to identify the academic or the researcher on privacy grounds. “We take all allegations seriously,” the spokeswoman told The Australian. “We have robust policies and procedures in place to support students making complaints and to investigate allegations, and appropriate action is taken when required.” The drawn-out dispute raises questions about ANU’s processes for handling allegations of foreign interference, and its safeguards for academic collaborations with defence and intelligence agencies.

The ANU, based in Canberra, is the top academic recruiting ground for Australian spies and military personnel. It hosts a “Co-Lab” with electronic eavesdropping agency the Australian Signals Directorate, in a formal 15-year partnership that brings together leading ANU academics with ASD analysts and technicians. ANU was in July given Defence Department funding to establish a new Defence Institute as a “hub for fostering collaboration and partnerships between the ANU, the Defence sector and industry leaders”. The university also hosts the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre to “prepare and educate the next generation of strategic leaders – military, civilian and academic”.

ANU's National Security College is a joint initiative, with 19 federal government departments and agencies. Its advisory board includes vice-chancellor Professor Bell, Defence Department secretary Greg Moriarty, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade secretary Jan Adams, Office of National Intelligence director general Andrew Shearer and Graham Fletcher, who is deputy secretary in charge of inter-national and security for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

However, the ANU's Australian Army Research Centre appears to be the only division that requires academic staff and PhD students to be Australian citizens, or to hold a - recognised security clearance. ANU also hosts a China Liaison Office to "secure strong relationships in China into the future across multiple research partnerships, student and alumni relations and industry engagement". An ANU spokeswoman refused to say whether the dispute had been referred to the university's Foreign Interference Taskforce. "All research at ANU is covered by the university's policy on academic freedom," the spokeswoman said. "Under this policy, ANU researchers are able to undertake research with partners as they see fit, subject to relevant checks and balances. "These include ethics approval, national security and foreign interference assessments, and modern slavery considerations, among others. "We are proud to be the university of choice for so many talented staff and students from around the world."

The federal parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security warned of the national security risks involving academic research in 2022.

Minister for Education

Chinese academic visits banned at ADFA

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

The Australian Government is aware of reporting regarding the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) decision to ban Chinese Academic visits to its campus in Canberra.

We understand this decision relates to the ADFA campus and is not University of New South Wales policy.

The Australian Government encourages universities to make decisions which protect universities and Australia's national interests in critical technologies.

The Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector provides universities with a guide to assist them in managing foreign interference.

Universities should carefully consider their international engagement in accordance with the Guidelines.

The vast majority of international engagement furthers Australia's growth in research and innovation.

To that end, there was widespread support from the sector for recent amendments to The Defence Trade Controls Amendments Act.

This Act seeks to strengthen Australia's export control framework to benefit Australian universities engaged in collaboration and research with both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Minister for Education

Media

Chinese academic visits banned at Canberra's Australian Defence Force Academy.

ABC News – [Andrew Greene](#)

Date: 21 August 2024

Chinese academic visits to ADFA, where many future military leaders are trained, will be ended. (Department of Defence)

In short:

The Australian Defence Force Academy has moved to ban Chinese academic visits to its campus.

In an internal message seen by the ABC, academics are advised UNSW Canberra will not "support" Chinese linked research.

The shadow home affairs minister has called for the institution to go further in cutting ties to China.

The university where future leaders of the Australian Defence Force are sent to study has moved to limit research collaboration with China, including ending visits from academics to its Canberra campus, amid growing military tensions with Beijing.

Since the 1980s, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has provided academic education to officer and midshipman cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in Canberra, and postgraduate programs for Defence civilians and other students.

Until recently, a large proportion of international students at UNSW Canberra were from China, and the university, which is one of the ADF's tertiary education providers, still offers lucrative PhD scholarships to Dongguan University in Guangdong province.

Now, the ABC can reveal that in recent weeks UNSW Canberra has informed its staff that "collaborative research projects involving academics affiliated with Chinese universities will not be supported", although UNSW Sydney is not affected.

An internal message sent to UNSW Canberra's academic schools advises that the university will no longer take the lead for projects involving Chinese universities, but the ABC understands research with China is still permitted if approved.

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Several postgraduate courses offered at UNSW Canberra are linked to the ADF, including the Master of Explosive Ordnance, which is taught to defence staff working at Australia's new Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance (GWEO) Enterprise.

In a statement, UNSW Canberra told the ABC, "Any university-level collaborations which UNSW seeks with countries or institutions considered high-risk are thoroughly risk-managed" through various government agencies.

"UNSW researchers engage in collaborative research with many international partners as part of the university's work as a globally connected institution. UNSW Canberra is in a unique position given that the faculty is located at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

"UNSW takes its security and compliance obligations very seriously and requires its academics to regularly disclose their individual foreign affiliations and helps academics risk manage collaborations with partners considered high-risk or involving critical technologies."

Go further to cut China ties, says shadow minister

Shadow Home Affairs Minister James Paterson has welcomed UNSW Canberra's recent decision but has called for the institution to now remove any academics on staff with ties to the Chinese government.

"Three years on from the intelligence committee's inquiry into national security risks in higher education, we still have much more work to do," Senator Paterson said.

"Of all our universities, UNSW's campus at ADFA should be the most secure — it's where our future defence force leaders are trained," the former chair of parliament's intelligence committee added.

"No academic with ties to the Chinese government should be employed there with access to the next generation of ADF officers. Defence must issue an urgent 'please explain' to UNSW about these apparent connections and any security risk they present."

Last year, Australian universities expressed concerns about a [relaxation of defence export rules for AUKUS partner nations](#), warning it would also create strict new penalties for unauthorised collaborations with researchers outside the US or UK.