

China Monitoring Claims Raise Concerns at UK Universities

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Chinese students at British universities are reportedly being instructed to monitor their classmates and report discussions critical of the Chinese government, according to a recent study published by UK-China Transparency (UKCT), a UK-based think tank. The findings, drawn from surveys of academics specialising in Chinese studies, have prompted concerns over foreign interference in the UK's higher education sector.

The report claims that certain students from China were encouraged by officials to observe lectures and notify authorities if controversial topics such as Beijing's stance on Xinjiang, Covid-19 origins, or its technological expansion were raised. In some cases, students reportedly felt uneasy about engaging in these discussions, with some discouraged from pursuing further research in politically sensitive fields.

UKCT also noted that some academics had been warned by Chinese representatives to avoid particular subjects in class. A number of researchers said they had experienced difficulties such as being denied visas to China, or had seen family members back home pressured as a result of their academic work in the UK. There were also claims of intimidation from visiting Chinese scholars and Confucius Institute staff.

The Chinese embassy in London rejected the report's conclusions, labelling them "groundless and absurd". A spokesperson stated that China respects free speech in the UK and does not interfere in other nations' internal affairs.

However, the report arrives shortly after new legislation was enacted in the UK, placing greater responsibility on universities to promote and protect academic freedom, regardless of overseas partnerships. The Office for Students (OfS), the sector's regulator, has described academic freedom as "fundamental" and warned institutions against overlooking foreign influence for financial reasons.

Susan Lapworth, chief executive of the OfS, has specifically raised concerns about Confucius Institutes Chinese state-funded cultural bodies operating within many UK universities, saying they should be assessed under the new law. These institutes have faced scrutiny over their potential role in influencing academic agendas.

Universities in the UK may be hesitant to raise concerns about Chinese interference due to the high number of international students from China, who contribute significantly through tuition fees. Despite this, universities are legally required to prioritise the protection of free expression on campus.

To bolster enforcement, the OfS has confirmed that its regulatory powers will expand to include a new complaints process, allowing staff and guest speakers to report issues directly. Universities that fail to comply could face financial penalties. One institution was fined £585,000 earlier this year for breaching free speech requirements.

Universities UK, which represents 141 institutions nationwide, responded to the report by stating: “Any threats to the freedom of our staff or students are taken very seriously. We work closely with the government to prevent this.”

A spokesperson for the UK government added, “Anyone working or studying at our universities should know their rights to personal and academic freedom are protected when they are on British soil.”

Skills Minister Jacqui Smith echoed this position, stating: “Academic freedom is non-negotiable in our universities. Any attempt by a foreign state to intimidate or harass people in the UK will not be tolerated.”