



# Foreign Affairs Committee

Committee Office House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

Website [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

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President, Universities UK  
Woburn House  
20 Tavistock Square  
London, WC1H 9HQ

12 February 2019

I am writing to you on the subject of potential foreign interference in the UK higher education sector.

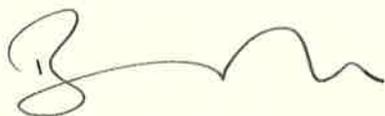
As I am sure you will agree, academic freedom is foundational to an open, thriving democracy. International collaboration is, of course, a vitally important aspect of the UK higher education sector: a source of ideas, human capital and financial resources. You will be aware, however, that in recent months concerns have been raised about the possibility that foreign countries might seek to exploit the openness of our world-leading universities to exert improper influence for political ends. This subject has been raised in a number of current and former inquiries the Foreign Affairs Committee has been pursuing in this Parliament.

With that in mind, I would be very grateful if you could tell me whether Universities UK is aware of any evidence that any foreign countries have:

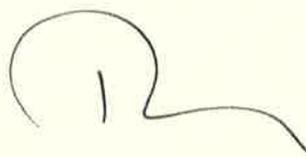
- Used, or attempted to use, financial leverage, political or diplomatic pressure, or other means to shape the research agenda or curricula of UK universities, whether at the macro level (for example, providing direct or indirect financial support for research or educational activities with explicit or implicit limits on the scope of the subjects that can be discussed) or at the micro level (for example, exerting pressure on event organisers not to invite certain speakers);
- Applied, or attempted to apply, limits to the activities of UK foreign campuses or joint-venture universities abroad which constrain freedoms that would normally be protected in the UK;
- Applied, or attempted to apply, their own domestic practices of censorship in UK universities;
- Pressured, or attempted to pressure, UK-based researchers who focus on subjects the countries concerned find unpalatable, including through visa refusals, pressure on university leadership, pressure on relatives of UK-based researchers still living in the country concerned, or other means; or
- Pressured, or attempted to pressure, UK-based students born in the countries concerned, or with ancestry in the countries concerned, to inform on the speech or activities of other students, or to engage in political protest in the UK in support of the countries' objectives.

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, I would be grateful if you could supply as much detail as possible. I would also be grateful if you could explain what policies and practices Universities UK offers to guard against these concerns, and what future plans, if any, you have to assist the UK universities you represent in mitigating the risk of improper foreign influence. Lastly, I would be grateful if you could tell me whether you have raised these issues with Ministers or officials in the last 12 months; if so, whether those discussions included the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; what outcomes came from those discussions; and what additional advice and support you believe the UK Government, and particularly the FCO, should be offering the higher education sector in mitigating these risks.

I would be very glad to receive a reply by 19 March. We plan to put this letter, and your reply, in the public domain. However, should there be details which you would prefer to discuss in confidence, I would be very happy to do so. For your information, I am sending a similar letter to the Chair of the Russell Group. Thank you in advance for your support.



**TOM TUGENDHAT MP**  
Chair



Tom Tugendhat MP  
Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee  
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6 March 2019

Dear Tom,

Thank you for your letter dated 12 February 2019 regarding potential interference by other countries in the UK higher education sector.

Like you, we recognise that academic freedom is a vital cornerstone of our society and democracy. Our world-class university sector has a long history of championing this principle, leading the world when it comes to freedom of inquiry and expression. In an increasingly globalised world, it is vital that academics from British universities can collaborate with their counterparts in other countries, both for the furtherance of knowledge and to support the UK's soft power abroad.

Anyone employed by a UK organisation but working overseas must abide by local laws and regulations, and staff based at foreign campuses are no exception. In countries without our own long history of liberal democracy, we acknowledge that this can sometimes pose certain challenges for UK universities and academics. When such challenges do occur, universities must sensitively balance the need to uphold academic freedom with the importance of international academic collaboration.

While we do not know of any robust evidence of systematic attempts by a country to undermine academic freedom at UK universities, we are aware of individual cases where attempts at foreign influence have been reported. As the representative body for UK universities, our role in this sensitive area is to work in partnership with government to examine issues like those raised in your letter and then to provide informed guidance to ensure effective and consistent practice among universities and academics.

I can assure you that the UK university sector is being proactive in scrutinising this important matter and responding appropriately. In recent months, Universities UK has been involved in regular discussions with departments including the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Cabinet Office, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about many of the issues raised in your letter.

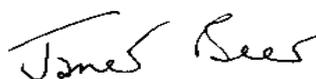
Following on from these discussions, we are currently undertaking a programme of work in partnership with government which includes:

- Examining due diligence processes which universities undertake when accepting income from overseas governments, organisations or individuals.
- Analysing to a greater extent the specific risks and challenges in university interactions with certain countries to inform advice on academic collaboration with them.
- Reviewing our guidance published in 2012 on oversight of security-sensitive research material possessed by UK universities.
- Publishing updated cybersecurity guidance to better reflect the current risks which UK universities face in this area.
- Examining the risks arising from the use of personal data by academics in a university research capacity.

Universities UK would welcome the opportunity for an in-confidence discussion in the coming weeks to provide more detail about this work. Professor Sir Peter Gregson, Vice-Chancellor of Cranfield University and who leads our work in this area, would most likely be best placed to speak with you about this matter.

I hope this response is helpful to the work of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Please let me know if I could be of further assistance in any way.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dame Janet Beer  
President, Universities UK

## The voice of universities

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