



Foreign Affairs Committee

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12 February 2019

I am writing to you in your capacity as Chair of the Russell Group 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.

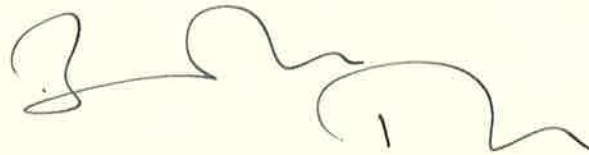
With that in mind, I would be very grateful if you could tell me whether the Russell Group is aware of any evidence that any foreign countries have:

- Used, or attempted to use, financial leverage, political or diplomatic pressure, or other means to shape the research agenda or curricula of Russell Group 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 Russell Group 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 Russell Group universities;
- Pressured, or attempted to pressure, UK-based researchers at Russell Group universities 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 of Russell Group universities 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 the Russell Group offers to guard against these concerns, and what future plans, if any, you have to assist the 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 President of Universities UK. Thank you in advance for your support.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Tugendhat', with a stylized flourish at the end.

TOM TUGENDHAT MP
Chair

RUSSELL GROUP

Tom Tugendhat MP
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18 March 2019

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Dear Mr Tugendhat,


Thank you for your letter dated 12 February 2019 on the subject of potential foreign interference in the UK higher education sector. We circulated a copy of your letter to Russell Group Vice-Chancellors in attendance at our latest board meeting on 14 February, for information.

After discussing this with colleagues, we are not aware of any significant or systematic attempts to influence university activity by foreign actors in any of the ways outlined in your letter. Nor have we held any discussions with Ministers or officials about improper foreign influence.

As you would expect, the Russell Group and its member universities are strong advocates of academic freedom and recognise the sensitivities involved in any international activity – be that research, teaching overseas, engaging with multinational enterprises or any other form of international collaboration. Our universities have processes in place to consider ethics, security and other matters and take on board advice as and when it is issued by the Government. Specific procedures may differ from university to university, but all keep these under review and are able to respond quickly if new advice or guidance is issued.

Universities UK is leading a Global Partnerships strand of work which will consider issues such as cyber security and due diligence in more detail and we will engage with them on this as their programme develops.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, Russell Group



Prof Sir Anton Muscatelli
Principal and Vice Chancellor,
University of Glasgow
Chair, Russell Group

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