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Australian Universities Risk Giving The Game Away To China In The Uphill Battle To Defend Our National Security

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We face an ongoing struggle to defend our national security against malicious foreign actors, but there is little point if Australian universities are leaving themselves open to the theft of our knowledge.

Information security has come into sharp focus for the millions of Telstra, Optus and Medibank customers who have had their personal data stolen and, in a number of instances, leaked by hackers.

Last year, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation director-general Mike Burgess said the relentless and daily cyber-attacks on the nation were “sophisticated and wide-ranging” and taking place “in every state and territory, targeting all levels of government, as well as industry and academia”.

Australia faces an ongoing and uphill battle to defend national security with data-hacking and information security an ever-burgeoning front of conflict, but we must ask ourselves if our universities are already giving the game away?

Over the last decade, China’s communist regime has spent hundreds of millions of dollars setting up “Confucius Institutes” in Western universities, with the total number worldwide peaking at 550 in 2018.

According to China, Confucius Institutes are “a bridge reinforcing friendship” to its neighbours by offering language and cultural programs to overseas students.

Since their peak in 2018, many Confucius Institutes have shut their doors due to a successful international campaign to expose what they really are – propaganda machines which, under the guise of teaching, interfere with free speech on campus, spy on students and steal sensitive research.

However, a recent report released by the US National Association of Scholars found that: “many once-defunct Confucius Institutes (CI) have since reappeared in other forms”.

Worse still, it found “the single most popular reason institutions give when they close a CI is to replace it with a new Chinese partnership programme.”



The report concluded there was not a single case out of the 104 US tertiary institutions reviewed where they could “classify any university as having fully closed its Confucius Institute”.

Such a finding is very likely apt for the many Australian tertiary institutions who have struck “alliances”, “collaborations” and “partnerships” with Chinese universities to replace the ruined Confucius brand.

These deals bear a striking similarity to defunct Confucius Institutes.

University of Queensland students protest against the univer

University of Queensland students protest against the university’s China-aligned Confucius Institute, St Lucia. Picture: Liam Kidston

For example, RMIT’s Confucius Institute closed in 2020, yet it appears to have been reborn as the China-Australia International Research Centre for Chinese Medicine in collaboration with the Guangdong Provincial Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences.

Charles Sturt University collaborates with Chinese universities through the Office of Global Engagement and Partnerships to deliver programs with Chinese universities.

Federation University is one of six Australian universities to have a major information technology centre approved at Hebei University in China.

Six of Australia’s Group of Eight universities, the University of Western Australia, the University of Sydney, University of Queensland, the University of New South Wales, Adelaide University and the University of Melbourne continue to host Confucius Institutes on campus.

At its peak, Australia had 14 Confucius Institutes and 67 Confucius Classrooms that operated in primary and secondary schools.

This ranked Australia third globally after the US and the UK.

China’s subversive campaign against tertiary institutions faced a setback when many Confucius Institutes were forced to close between 2019 and 2022, as people woke up to the threat they presented.

In Australia, following the Federal Government’s introduction of new foreign veto powers in 2021, the number has fallen but their potential for foreign interference remains high.

Today, there remains 11 Confucius Institutes on our campuses, and almost every Australian university has a close research partnership or research centre focused on collaborative scholarship with China.



The international campaign against Confucius Institutes has had great success, yet it would seem the attempts by the CCP to exert influence and conduct intelligence gathering at our universities remains as strong as ever.

Many Australians would believe the Committee's recommendations do not go far enough or properly address the threat faced.

China is by no means the only threat to our information security, but as it becomes increasingly aggressive in our region, we cannot underestimate its subversive operations taking place on our shores, in our networks.

Our universities house our wealth of knowledge and research, which is hard won and world leading.

We need our university leaders to ensure they are not giving the game away and weakening our national security by leaving themselves open to the theft of our knowledge.

Clarification – RMIT requested clarification that its research partnership with Guangdong Provincial Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences commenced in 2008. The China-Australia International Research Centre for Chinese Medicine was established with that institution in 2013. The Confucius Institute at RMIT was established in 2010 with Nanjing University of Chinese Medicine and ceased operation in 2020 due to COVID. RMIT have stated that the two projects are not connected.

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