



UNITED STATES

Universities, neo-nationalism and the ‘China threat’

Jenny J Lee 09 November 2019

The rise of nationalism, and its influence on internationalisation efforts, is unprecedented. In the past year especially, **numerous federal proposals and governmental or organisational policies** in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia have made clear that internationalisation as a goal in itself is to be secondary to the country’s global advancement and security interests.

Higher education institutions’ responses have varied, demonstrating the complex relationship between universities and the nation-state. At the same time, universities, as global knowledge producers and disseminators, are being bordered in the changing political climate by a perceived threat: the rise of China.

The ‘China threat’

US President Donald Trump’s campaign slogan ‘America First’ has taken on particular intensity and some bipartisan appeal with the escalating US trade war with China. Beyond ongoing trade disputes, the two countries are also locked **in a fierce geopolitical rivalry**, which includes global positioning in the current knowledge economy.

In the midst of this scientific knowledge production race, there have been challenges to US intellectual property claims, leading universities to become the hotbeds of this geopolitical tension.

The political rhetoric used to justify limits on China’s place in US higher education is primarily based on **suspensions that Chinese citizens are ‘spies’** and ‘stealing’ intellectual property.

Such assumptions are often in stark contrast to the ‘open’ depiction of US universities as possessing all knowledge and ignore the considerable benefits yielded from international collaboration.

The so-called ‘China threat’ has taken on ‘a whole-of-society response’, **including the US academic sector**. Or as more bluntly stated by an FBI official: “US academic

environments offer **valuable, vulnerable and viable targets** for foreign espionage”.

Scholars, students and university programmes associated with China have especially been affected. In the US, developments affecting higher education include visa limits for Chinese graduate students in high-tech fields **to one year from five years**, investigations and **calls to close Confucius Institutes**, bans against **research funding from Chinese telecom companies** (for example, Huawei and ZTE), **FBI surveillance on Chinese researchers**, and **more**.

In the past year, at least 280 **Chinese scholars were denied US visas**, and in some cases, US scholars also had their China visas rejected or significantly delayed, **suggesting possible ‘visa wars’** between the two countries.

In response, China’s Ministry of Education warned Chinese students and scholars of the **risks of studying in the United States**.

Chinese profiling and neo-nationalism

Protectionist sentiments and fears have directly impacted the US scientific research community. University academic and medical leaders were warned about ‘classified security threats’ coming from ‘inside’ and appealed to partner with the FBI **to identify possible espionage**.

Under pressure from Congress and in cooperation with the FBI, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the United States’ largest research funder, urged more than 10,000 research institutions to report any international funding and not to share NIH grant application information to those outside the United States.

While violations to these NIH policies are not considered criminal offences, the policies imply heightened sensitivity and distrust of international ties, justifying the call for disclosures.

In response to these and related allegations, there are mounting criticisms that Chinese scholars and students are being **exclusively and unfairly treated based on their ethnicity**. US citizens of Chinese ethnicity have also been affected.

Three Chinese American scientific societies published an open letter in *Science*, expressing that the targeting of ethnically Chinese researchers and students by the NIH and the FBI is unjust racial profiling.

Such prejudice can be interpreted through the lens of a new nationalism in the global society, stemming from the broad concept of neo-racism, which suggests racism that is justified based on a superiority of cultures. Neo-racism in university settings has been documented for over a decade in the United States and more recently, neo-nationalism, which emphasises neo-racism based on statehood, has been observed abroad.

In relation to current events, neo-racism, and particularly neo-nationalism, are evident in the sweepingly discriminatory views and mistreatment of ethnic Chinese individuals in US higher education as comprising a ‘China threat’.

Geopolitical competition between the two countries serves as the backdrop in amplifying and justifying much of the neo-nationalist rhetoric.

The danger of neo-nationalism is that while investigations and inquiries regarding possible espionage are ongoing, targeting a single group of people based solely on their ethnicity will result in more dire consequences for many innocent people. The overwhelming majority of Chinese internationals are simply seeking to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Higher education quandary

Such geopolitical tensions over the past year call into question the extent to which universities should engage in internationalisation.

As Elizabeth Redden outlined in her article “**Science vs Security**”, scientific openness and national security, combined with economic competitiveness, has not been an easy balance.

On the one hand, knowledge societies and the universities that support them are fundamentally borderless and transparent. International affairs offices play an especially important role in facilitating university activities across countries, such as the exchange of international students and scholars, promoting cross-border partnerships and facilitating internationalisation programmes.

On the other hand, federal funding guidelines, immigration policies and political pressures channel the scope of and where internationalisation is to take place. Ongoing legislative limits affecting these areas, combined with escalating resource dependencies, are directing US higher education’s roles and priorities to favour the interests of the nation-state. In short, US universities are being simultaneously starved and shaped by governmental interests.

The challenges are magnified by US universities’ heavy reliance on China. As reported by Karin Fischer **commenting on the “China effect”**, “the connections [between Chinese and US higher education] – student enrolments, joint degree programmes and research partnerships, among others – are deep, numerous and, often, lucrative”.

Besides China serving as the largest supplier of international students, **comprising about 30% of the total**, the country is also the top geographic objective for future international student recruitment, partnerships and programmes, according to an **American Council on Education national survey**.

Potential costs

Already, the United States is experiencing a decline of international students coming to the country. In 2018, the Institute of International Education reported a downward trend in new international student enrolment in the United States over the past three years. The Department of Homeland Security correspondingly indicated a 3% drop in student visas, **which includes students from China**.

Considering ongoing cuts to public higher education and universities' increasing dependence on international student revenue, continual decreases in Chinese student enrolment would have very costly effects.

US universities that are globally ranked or aspire to be 'world-class' are especially vulnerable, with rising political protectionism being at the potential expense of national isolationism.

Scholarly **collaboration across borders is highly linked with publication citations**, which is a key metric in each of the three major global ranking systems – Shanghai Jiao Tong, *Times Higher Education* and QS. For the latter two, international faculty and students are also factored in.

Given the rise of higher education systems and research collaboration opportunities elsewhere, the United States' spot as the leading host of the world's top universities becomes less secure.

Beyond national and institutional detriments, the greater price is global scientific advancement. **According to the 2019 Nature Index**, the United States is the top international collaborator for scientific research, collaborating with China more than any other country during 2018. China ranks third in international collaborations (Germany is second) and its lead country collaborator is the United States.

Prior to these recent geopolitical tensions, the United States enjoyed a long-standing partnership with China, as reflected in the US-China Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology enacted in 1979. With China being now positioned as an adversary rather than an ally, the potential for future innovation in addressing the world's leading health and environmental problems may be hampered.

University responses in the US and abroad

US universities are at a crucial juncture, intersecting national and international interests in the current knowledge economy. International programmes and services that would normally promote a worldwide reach are now having to respond to a global hierarchy of country preferences.

University senior international officers must be prepared to respond in a political climate that might not only disfavour Chinese students and scholars, but also questions the value or purchase of internationalisation itself amidst protectionist ideologies.

In so doing, more research and university assessment, in the US and likely elsewhere, is needed to combat prevailing and unsupported fears about the threats of internationalisation.

There is particularly limited institutional assessment on university exchange and partnerships, **despite their growing prevalence**. Empirical data on the outcomes associated with these international arrangements not only provide evidence for better decision-making but can also combat unsupported suspicions about malicious intents and espionage activities.

Educating policy-makers and society members on why such programmes are important helps to not just defend the existence of international activities, but also helps garner more public support for them.

University leaders are also encouraged to identify and make public the contributions of Chinese and other international researchers and students in their respective institutions as a way to combat the neo-nationalist rhetoric.

International researchers and students provide immense cultural knowledge, research skills and field knowledge that advance their host countries and the universities where they work.

As for their underlying motivations, Chinese students, for example, speak of the desire for a broader worldview beyond the Chinese perspective as a leading reason for US study, meaning that Chinese students are rarely covert arms of the Chinese government, but individuals seeking a better education for themselves, much like international students from other countries.

Contrary to **stereotypes about Chinese students as potential spies**, there is ample evidence of Chinese students demonstrating their own agency in voicing their criticism of the Chinese government, such as the 'Xi's Not My President' campaign.

Presidents of leading research universities have already begun to openly denounce such discrimination based on one's nation of origin and affirmed their commitment to their institution's international community (see, for instance, **MIT News Office's statement** and **the University of California, Berkeley's** and **Stanford's**).

Finally, internationalisation is certainly not limited to scientifically funded research or traditional international student enrolment; these types of research are emphasised here to reflect the most serious vulnerabilities to internationalisation today. Meanwhile, internationalisation takes many other forms. Cross-border discoveries should continue to be openly promoted.

Furthermore, education is occurring transnationally, such as through branch campuses, online degree programmes and more recently, **micro-campuses**, including in China. Overseas travel is no longer a requisite to engage in international education and more non-

traditional approaches to engage globally may be needed.

The return of McCarthyism?

In conclusion, mounting fears about Chinese scholars and students exploiting US knowledge, stealing intellectual property, acting as spies and conducting espionage, reflect a geostrategic positioning of an oversimplified zero-sum game – a political means to illicit fear and gain public support.

Some cases do warrant serious consideration, such as evidence of US universities being hacked for their intellectual property, but are not limited to universities or from a single country.

It is also important to keep in mind that security protocols already exist; classified research occurs off campus and export-controlled research already requires government approval for international participation.

Meanwhile, as negative stereotypes pervade, university leaders do not have to succumb to hyped political pressures that would undermine institutions' missions in research and teaching as well as the mutual benefits to be reaped from international collaboration and partnerships.

The majority of internationalisation activities is of little to no interest when it comes to US or China intelligence security matters, but neo-nationalist fears can nevertheless raise harmful suspicions and jeopardise programmes. Rather, as institutions of higher learning, universities play a critical role in educating the public with hard evidence and effectively responding to current fear-mongering, **reminiscent of the McCarthy era.**

A key benefit of an international education is the ability to make what is 'foreign' more understandable and appreciated, including a country's complexities and the many cultural contradictions within them. These realities are as true for China as they are for the United States or any other country. As global competition intensifies, limiting international ties and curbing knowledge production within a bordered bubble will not benefit any nation-state or global society.

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COMMENT

This is an equally abstract argument. The points raised are valid only to the extent that the China threat is decontextualised and turned into a 'hawks vs doves' scenario under the broader concept of academic freedom and open collaborations for the greater good.

Consider the purposes of the PRC's cross-disciplinary Military-Civil Fusion programmes, the legal framework compelling any PRC citizens (including staff and students at universities abroad) to report to the PRC government any knowledge/technology that is 'of interest', the number of undisclosed dual-appointments under the many 'talents' programs devised and implemented in the past 10 years by the Chinese government to further the tech transfer as above.

The notion of 'brainwashed individuals' when dealing with Chinese staff/students is fundamentally wrong and opens the door to the undertone of eugenics, yet it is equally dangerous not to take into account all the above under the nationalistic banner promoted by Xi Jinping and the aims of his China Dream: "Chinese students and people of Chinese heritage throughout the world must contribute to our China Dream".

Failure to acknowledge this in the correct context is an abdication of responsibility.

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