



VERSPRITE

China and Higher Education

Executive Summary

— Summary

Western universities with extensive study abroad programs to China, or satellite campuses within China, should be wary of increasingly violent crackdowns on students' engagement in political activities and involvement with groups that China's government deems unacceptable or illegal.

Several recent cases, in which students were apprehended on campus, beaten by authorities and detained for weeks, suggest that the current wave of crackdowns is likely to continue as Xi Jinping solidifies control.

The current environment represents an escalation of existing issues about extensive surveillance or student and faculty movements; IP/research theft and surveilled communications; limitations on academic freedom and research topics deemed illegal; and demands that those accepting research funding parrot state propaganda.

As universities consider whether to approve, reapprove, or launch future programs in China, they should take concrete steps to extensively prepare students and faculty, train them in steps to secure their devices and accounts, and to ensure they know what measures to take to avoid being targeted.

Furthermore, it is imperative that institutions of higher education understand the limited leverage they have to oppose Chinese authorities' demands, and to ensure that any university representatives are well versed in the limited options available to them if they are arrested, detained, or attacked by authorities.

Of the limited options available to Western institutions, the one with the greatest chances of success is working together, to assert unified pressure against demands that run counter to university values of intellectual honesty and academic freedom.

Though each university alone has limited leverage, together they can deny the Chinese government the prestige they clearly seek from being able to boast of the many high-ranked Western institutions' satellite campuses that China hosts.

— Background

Amid excitement about the opportunity to become global institutions, and extend their reach around the world, many Western universities eagerly sought out opportunities to open satellite campuses in China, which offered incentives and investment to gain prestige from hosting highly ranked Western universities.

The chance to build campuses in China at low cost, and often no cost, as cities offered to fund construction and infrastructure, seemed like great opportunities initially. However, the no-cost illusion was quickly shattered by the realization that China did not intend to allow academic freedom and had no intention of opening up to Western ideas. As some universities have found, faculty and student researchers do not have the freedom to pursue many research topics deemed unsuitable, their access to seemingly innocuous information is blocked, publication of completed research is suspended, and research is frequently stolen.

Particularly important to remember is the fact that even supposedly apolitical topics- like agriculture or medical research, become political in China. A major Dutch institution, Groningen University, which had planned to establish the first Dutch university satellite campus in Yantai, eastern Shandong Province, in partnership with China Agricultural University, abandoned their plan in early 2018. Details of the plans generated outcry from Groningen's board, as well as student union representatives, following announcements that academic freedom could not be guaranteed, and that the head of the Groningen China campus would be an official of the Chinese Communist Party. Several other universities have also suspended extensive partnership programs, including Cornell and Stanford.

In recent months, there has been a marked escalation in students being forcibly detained by authorities, or beaten and arrested on campus, for participating in Marxist groups or being involving in labor actions, such as protests and attempts to unionize workers in companies where laborers are routinely abused. In several cases, reports suggest that the Chinese universities where many Westerners study abroad (and which are partners with Western institutions) were either forced to abide by what amounts to the kidnapping of several students, and reports suggest some institutions may have even helped authorities find students marked for detention. The recent targets of such detentions including students involved with Marxist groups, as well as those supporting workers' rights or unionization attempts, both of which are illegal in China. There is little information provided on the status of detained students; some are held indefinitely.

Activities that would be seen as grounds for arrest but quick release on misdemeanor charges, such as petty theft, can lead to long term detention for students, and even foreigners. Three UCLA basketball players were arrested for shoplifting in Hangzhou while in the country to play a game against Georgia Tech. They were detained at the airport, and it was reported that UCLA agreed that they be taken back to their hotel and placed under house arrest. Their passports were seized by Chinese authorities. The situation was resolved a week later, and the students ultimately returned home unharmed, but the diplomatic incident even led to involvement by the White House.

Schools have also seen increasing outcry from alumni and board members concerned about the risk of reputational damage to schools that benefited from what amounts to leasing their prestigious names to satellite campuses in China. Although they benefited financially, the litany of human rights abuses being committed by China, like the imprisonment of over a million Uighurs in Xinjian province who are confined to concentration camps. And many are likely to be troubled by details of China's work with the oppressive Venezuelan government through a ZTE Corp effort to issue national ID cards to Venezuelan citizens, controlling access to scarce resources. The card, which tracks everything from personal data to whether someone voted and how active they are on social media, are creating a two-tier system in the failing state. Anyone who disagrees with the government of Nicolas Maduro or is otherwise wary of signing up for the so-called "fatherland card" is unable to access the already limited services available in Venezuela, allowing Maduro to reward his loyalists and punish anyone who opposes him. **As alumni become more vocal and withhold donations from universities, the costs of being seen as cooperating with Beijing will rise.**

Finally, given the current trade war between the US and China, international students are likely to become political pawns. Many Western universities rely on Chinese students, who pay full tuition, and grants to programs from groups aligned with the Chinese government, to stay financially stable. If China decides to disallow citizens from coming to Western universities, many institutions in already dire financial straits may find themselves unable to stay afloat.

— Guidance

Students and faculty currently set to travel to China should be trained to use specially designated devices while in China, avoid logging into sites blocked on the mainland, refrain from posting political statements on social media, and understand that all communications, such as university email, is read and monitored by authorities. **All individuals traveling under university auspices should understand the potential repercussions of engaging in activities that draw the attention of authorities, no matter how seemingly innocuous such activities might seem while in the West.**

Students should refrain from participating in any political activities, such as protests or marches, and even religious events. Universities should consider suspending future programs and reevaluate plans to maintain or further expand their satellite presence.

Students and faculty working at their home institutions should understand the strings attached to accepting grants and scholarships that originate with the Chinese government, and research the sources of any current and expected funding closely. Any funding from the Chinese government, even threaded through allegedly private research institutions or seemingly apolitical organizations, is likely to come with substantial strings attached, that may render them unable to ultimately pursue the subject they want to study or keep them from publishing results that run counter to what Chinese authorities deem acceptable. Universities should direct students and faculty to avoid taking any funding that would require them to parrot Chinese propaganda.

Universities should not underestimate the tools that students, alumni, and faculty have at their disposal to protest against university decisions, or the reputational and financial risks associated with being seen as cooperating with an oppressive Chinese regime. As colleges get pushback to take actions like divest from fossil fuels and stop working with the US government on military programs or immigration policies, university officials should understand that the same pressure may be applied regarding human rights violations.



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