

## **University of Aberdeen**

### **Briefing for Court Members regarding protection against any undue influence by the Chinese Government in University Affairs**

#### **Background**

As was raised at the meeting of Court on 10 December 2019, a member has requested that Court be briefed on how the University ensures that Chinese students on campus are not subject to undue influence by the Chinese Government. The member's question follows a House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (HCFA) Inquiry "Defending Democracy in an age of autocracies" <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmfa/109/10902.htm> published in November. Alongside other areas - principally the present situation in Hong Kong and the use of sanctions against autocracies - the Report comments in most detail on the influence of autocratic regimes in UK academia which it broadly defines as encompassing financial support for educational activity which puts limits on the scope of subjects that can be discussed, limiting academic freedom in joint overseas ventures (for example seeking to prevent criticism of foreign governments), pressuring event organisers not to invite certain speakers, and applying pressure on overseas students in the UK to inform on the activities of other students from that country in the UK.

The Report concludes that there is a 'weight of evidence' that universities' activities are being influenced by autocracies, in particular by China. It expresses surprise that this does not appear to have been acknowledged as a major area of risk by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which it criticises for not providing advice regarding such influence to UK universities.

#### **Query from Member of Court**

A member of court highlighted the report to senior management prior to the last meeting of Court and asked that Court be briefed "on how our University ensures that such malign influence of the Chinese government is not present on campus and will not be in the future." The University is grateful for the interest of Court in this matter and happy to respond.

#### **Situation at Aberdeen**

There are currently 888 Chinese students studying at Aberdeen: 594 at taught postgraduate level, 159 at undergraduate, 78 at the Language Centre and 57 undertaking postgraduate research. Of these, less than 2% are currently funded by non-personal resources. At PGT level, at which the vast majority of Chinese students are studying, this has historically varied between 0 and 1.5%.

Whilst recognising such negative external influence from any state, is to be guarded against, the University is pleased that at the present time there is no evidence of its existence at Aberdeen. The University noted in the HCFA report that UUK representatives giving evidence to the Committee did not consider there to be significant evidence of improper foreign influence across the sector. Indeed, in publicly responding to the publication of the HCFA report, UUK further rejected the idea of there being widespread attempts at interference, saying: "As autonomous institutions, universities are responsible for developing their own policies and practices for preventing foreign interference ... Although there is some limited anecdotal evidence of attempted influence over institutions, any instance that Universities UK is aware of has been firmly rejected. We are unaware of any systematic attempt to interfere with the sector."

The individuals who gave evidence of there being such improper influence to the HCFA appear to have been individual members of staff at a number of universities, predominately in London. In order to ensure that such individuals at Aberdeen are able to report such concerns should they arise in the future, the University will make the HCFA report available to all Heads of School, the Language Centre, Student Recruitment, Research & Innovation and the Students' Association and will draw the attention of each to the comments made by the Committee asking managers to engage with their staff both to raise awareness of the potential of such improper occurrences and to ensure that any doubts are reported for further investigation. Whilst we do not feel there is any cause for concern at the moment,

the University recognises that continued vigilance is key and that we must never be blasé about the potential for such improper influence being attempted in future. We will make regular contact going forward with such areas and in particular with those where the heaviest concentrations of Chinese students are based, for example the Business School.

The University has hosted one of the five Scottish based Confucius Institutes since 2013, the funding for which originates from the Hanban, a public institution affiliated to the Chinese Ministry of Education with a mission to provide Chinese language teaching and cultural resources and services worldwide. Its financial commitment to the University for the running of the Aberdeen Institute during the academic year 2018/19 was £97,759, although this does not include its staffing costs, which include a full time Co-Director and 4 professional Mandarin teachers. There are a further 11 volunteer teaching assistants currently visiting from China. The Hanban also provides occasional direct grant income which has in the past included £150k to refurbish part of the Institute's accommodation on the High Street for additional classroom space. Both the Co-Directors of the Institute who have worked in Aberdeen to date have been senior members of the School of Language and Literature at the University of Wuhan, the Chinese partner University sponsor. Whilst it is acknowledged that there have been issues around Confucius Institutes elsewhere ( <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-49511231>), particularly in the US, to date relations between the University and the Institute have been exceptional and in 2019 ca. 8000 people, from within the University community but predominantly from the wider Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire region, have attended one or more of its events.

We have also taken advice [REDACTED] [REDACTED] has advised that the vast majority of Chinese students, as with any Chinese person travelling overseas, will have been 'cleared' by the Chinese authorities for travel. Given the numbers of such students we [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at the present time we do not have any immediate cause for concern.

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