

Academic urges universities to get out from under the 'shadow of Beijing'.

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Australian universities will live “under the ever-darkening shadow of Beijing” unless they act more decisively against Chinese influence, the Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University, Clive Hamilton, has warned.

Hamilton, who has made a study of Chinese influence in higher education, accused “many” Australian vice-chancellors of losing sight of academic freedom, under the pressure of revenue and influence from China.

He also claimed the University of Queensland (UQ), which recently saw violent clashes between rival groups of Chinese protesters, had brought the trouble on itself by its pro-Beijing attitude.

Hamilton was delivering a lecture titled “Chinese Communist Party Influence in Australian Universities” at UQ on Wednesday night.

Earlier Wednesday federal Education Minister Dan Tehan announced a University Foreign Interference Taskforce that will have members from universities, national security agencies and the federal education department.

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Hamilton said vice-chancellors “are quick to say they support free speech and academic freedom.

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In truth, the corporatisation of the tertiary sector and the extraordinary dependence on revenue flows from China, coupled with a sustained and highly effective influence campaign directed at senior university executives, has meant that many have lost sight of the meaning of academic freedom.

We have yet to see one Australian university draw a line in the sand and make it clear that it is willing to take pain in defence of academic freedom and free speech on campus.

Instead, all we hear are words without commitment. A principle is worthless unless we are willing to sacrifice something to defend it. Unless we are willing to make that sacrifice, Australia's universities will live under the ever-darkening shadow of Beijing.

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He accused UQ of an "anodyne" response to the violence on July 24 in its calling for free speech to be respected. This had indicated "that it would not be taking sides, thereby imposing a moral equivalence on the pro-democracy and the pro-Beijing protesters who planned and initiated the violence - a bit like President Trump's response to the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville," Hamilton said.

"Moreover, experienced observers believe that the pro-Beijing protesters were led not by students but by heavies sent by the Consulate, probably MSS [Chinese Ministry of State Security] agents. If so then the attempt to intimidate and silence pro-Hong Kong protesters was on the face it a violation of Australia's new foreign interference law," he said.

"The UQ nationalist protest and streets protests in Sydney and Melbourne are part of a worldwide campaign being orchestrated by Beijing," he said.

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“UQ has been an easy target because the university has for some years been signalling that whatever Beijing wants it can have. This created an enabling environment for the protests to turn aggressive. Patriotic Chinese students, and the Brisbane consulate, feel that they own the campus and so they were particularly affronted when pro-Hong Kong protesters decided to express their view.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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