

# Warwick Think Tank Report

Education

March 16, 2022

Chinese State Interference  
in the British  
Higher Education System

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## Briefing Note

The aim of this report is to lift the lid on the extent of Chinese interference in the UK higher education system and to suggest ways of resolving the problem.

The UK is famed around the world for its leading universities, and for its role in research and education. A key principle underpinning higher education is academic freedom. The ability to express and share ideas freely in an open and safe environment is not only a human right but the key to achieving meaningful progress in academia. However, mounting evidence is revealing that this fundamental principle is being eroded by a state whose ambitions and motives run counter to the interests of British universities and Britain as a whole. We live in a world of increasing educational interdependence and cooperation, which manifests in a variety of ways, such as exchange programmes, international research agreements, and common access to intellectual material. However, reports of espionage and illicit interference in academia have become more prevalent, particularly in nations such as Australia, the US, and the UK.

Our report focuses on the growing trend of interference and malpractice by authoritarian regimes in the UK. This report is most levelled at the acts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in particular, its growing involvement in the censorship and theft of academic content, but also its use of violence and exploitation of legal powers to limit the activities of students and academics who attempt to uncover and release the truth. We should be clear that in our report we do not seek to blame Chinese students or staff for this. We actively embrace the benefits of a truly international academic community, which includes everything China has to offer.

### Overview

In the first part of our report, we will examine 4 issues:

- Chinese interference in the social sciences
- Chinese interference in science and technology
- Chinese censorship in UK universities
- UK government responses to the threat

What we seek to raise awareness of is the actions of the Chinese state and other authoritarian states who seek to undermine and threaten the culture of academic and personal freedom that we all enjoy and thrive from.

**Interference**

**Interference in the social sciences**

## **Incidents of Diplomatic, Structural and Financial Interference in the Social Sciences**

### **Numerous Chinese groups and programmes collaborate with UK universities**

- The University of Cambridge hosts the China Executive Leadership Programme, which is co-sponsored by the CCP's powerful Organization Department and the State Council's China Development Research foundation. The programme trains senior executives from large state-owned corporations selected by the party to spend 3 weeks at Cambridge<sup>1</sup>
- The 48 Group Club is a powerful lobbying group consisting of many high profile members. The members include masters of colleges at Cambridge and Oxford. The chairman, Stephen Perry, has strong personal links with CCP government officials. The group promotes the Belt and Road initiative<sup>2</sup>
- The University of Westminster runs the China Media Centre (established in 2005). It hosts 3 week training courses for Chinese propaganda officials, such as Central Party School cadres and defence officials, employees of state owned enterprises and official media. The courses are partly funded by the British taxpayer through the UK foreign office<sup>3</sup>
- Jesus College, Cambridge has accepted a £200,000 donation from a Chinese state-funded agency for its UK-China Global Issues Dialogue Centre<sup>4</sup>

### **Social Sciences are becoming financially dependent on Chinese investment**

- According to the right of centre think tank Onward, in 2018-19, 120,385 students came from China, a 34% increase in 5 years and triple the figure of 2006-7<sup>5</sup>
- Fee Income from China was more than £2.1 billion in 2018-19, 10% of the total. However at some Universities (Liverpool, Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester, UCL and Imperial College), Chinese student fees account for over 25% of their fee income<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.237.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.60,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.170.

<sup>4</sup> Wilby, Peter, 'Academic freedom is so precious - so why have universities sold out to China?', The Guardian, 11 August 2020, [Academic freedom is precious – so why have UK universities sold out to China? | Peter Wilby | The Guardian](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- According to Christopher Hughes of the LSE, the 'enterprise university' model creates structural incentives for universities, dependent on investment from China, to stay on the CCP's good side <sup>7</sup>
- Oxford University recently renamed the 120-year-old Wykeham professorship in return for a £700,000 donation from Tencent, the Chinese software company. It became the Tencent-Wykeham professorship <sup>8</sup>

### **Several senior UK academics have considerable links with the CCP**

- In 2011 Wen Ruchun, daughter of former Chinese premier Wen Jiabo, donated £3.7 million to endow a professorship at the University of Cambridge through her mysterious Chong Hau foundation. The first Chong Hua professor, Peter Nolan, had previously taught Wen Ruchun and co-authored a book with her husband. The university apparently didn't go through the formal process of appointment to fill the chair. Nolan has 'very close links to the Chinese government'. Nolan is the Director of Cambridge's Centre for Development studies, and the director of China's Executive Leadership programme <sup>9</sup>
- Peter Frankopan, professor of global history at Oxford, joined in the celebration of the launch of the international edition of China Daily, the CCP's primary English-language newspaper, whose journalism is 'infused with the spirit of the party' <sup>10</sup>
- Hugo de Burgh, journalism professor at the University of Westminster, is director of the China Media Centre, and is a strong advocate of closer ties between Britain and China <sup>11</sup>
- In 2017, Max Lu became vice chancellor of the University of Surrey. He has long maintained close connections with the Chinese state, including membership of an Expert Consultative Committee of the Chinese State Council <sup>12</sup>

### **The Chinese embassy is putting pressure on UK universities to keep in line.**

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<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.236.

<sup>8</sup> Hayward, Freddi, 'How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities', The New Statesman, 13 July 2021, [How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities - New Statesman](#)

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.238.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.170.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.154.

- Pressures from the Chinese embassy led to a pro-vice chancellor of a Russell Group university deciding to withdraw an invitation to a guest speaker <sup>13</sup>
- Another vice-chancellor came under pressure from the embassy to ensure that one of their academics did not make political comments on China for a certain period of time <sup>14</sup>
- There have been threats of “travel bans and detention” for several days utilised through the Chinese Consular in London against students appearing to take part in criticism and sensitive research against the CCP. In another instance there was even an incident of assault against a student organising an anti-autocratic movement in London <sup>15</sup>

## Incidents of Diplomatic, Structural and Financial Interference in the Science and Technologies

### UK universities collaborate extensively with Chinese academics and universities

- Scientists from the Zhengzhou Information Science and Technology Institute publish articles in the university of Oxford’s The Computer journal. The Institute doesn’t actually exist. It is a cover of the People’s Liberation Army Information Engineering University, which train’s China’s military hackers <sup>16</sup>
- In 2019, UK researchers published 16,267 research papers co-authored with Chinese researchers, 11% of UK output <sup>17</sup>
- China is the UK’s 3rd most important research partner. However, universities aren’t always transparent about funding sources. For example, Bristol University refused to reveal details of funding for a 5-year internet research programme, as disclosure could

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<sup>13</sup> Busely, Eleanor and Sengupta, Kim, ‘Chinese government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British Universities, MP’s report warns’, The Independent, 5 November 2019, [Chinese government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British universities, MPs’ report warns | The Independent | The Independent](#)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.156.

<sup>17</sup> Hayward, Freddi, ‘How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities’, The New Statesman, 13 July 2021, [How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities - New Statesman](#)

“lead to the sponsor’s withdrawal and could hamper the ability to win future research funds”<sup>18</sup>

- A report published by think tank Civitas revealed that UK universities have been “unintentionally generating research” that is available to Chinese military institutions. For example, in 2017, the UK produced 156 peer-reviewed pieces of research co-authored with Chinese military scientists<sup>19</sup>

### **People’s Liberation Army (PLA) scientists operate in UK universities**

- Western Universities have invited Chinese scientists and engineers into their labs, to work on military-related projects. Alex Joske has uncovered an extensive network of collaboration between western researchers and scientists linked to the Chinese military. Since 2007, the PLA has sent 2500 military scientists and engineers abroad, to mostly the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand<sup>20</sup>
- At least 10 UK universities laboratories depend on significant investment from Chinese defence firms<sup>21</sup>
- About 500 Chinese military scientists have spent time at UK universities in the past decade, working on technologies linked to missiles, supercomputers and jet aircraft<sup>22</sup>
- The Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in the UK has warned universities about “hostile state actors” trying “to steal personal data, research data and intellectual property”<sup>23</sup>

### **Cutting edge research is being stolen for Chinese weapons development**

- Between 2015 and 2021, a Chinese Physics student, named Dongyang Xu, studied at an Oxford University laboratory researching quantum technology. Quantum technology has the potential to transform warfare, giving a country that possesses it a significant

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<sup>18</sup> Wilby, Peter, ‘Academic freedom is so precious - so why have universities sold out to China?’, The Guardian, 11 August 2020, [Academic freedom is precious – so why have UK universities sold out to China? | Peter Wilby | The Guardian](#)

<sup>19</sup> Hayward, Freddi, ‘How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities’, The New Statesman, 13 July 2021, [How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities - New Statesman](#)

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.155.

<sup>21</sup> Wilby, Peter, ‘Academic freedom is so precious - so why have universities sold out to China?’, The Guardian, 11 August 2020, [Academic freedom is precious – so why have UK universities sold out to China? | Peter Wilby | The Guardian](#)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

advantage. For example, it could enable unhackable communications, precision weapons guidance systems, and radar so sensitive it can detect enemy stealth bombers and distant submarines. The laboratory is part-funded by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The National University of Defence Technology (NUDT) in China, with whom Xu has extensive links, sponsored Xu's studies. Xu also hosted Oxford workshops for the (NUDT) in 2016 and 2018, giving colleagues tours of the lab. The lab is part-financed by the MoD, and the UK government has spent over £1 billion on quantum research since 2013 <sup>24</sup>

- Direct intervention from the security services led to all collaboration between the laboratory and the NUDT being terminated swiftly. The UK government has subsequently tightened up the rules regarding enrollment on sensitive subjects, however, hundreds of Chinese students who have already enrolled remain <sup>25</sup>
- In April 2020, Xu returned to the NUDT, and soon his name began appearing on patents files by the NUDT on quantum research <sup>26</sup>

## Censorship is becoming a significant theme at higher education institutions

### Confucius Institutes play an important role in censorship

- The UK has 30 Confucius centres, with the majority located within universities <sup>27</sup>
- They are believed to be a hub for United Front activities, where they undertake interference in academic freedoms and censorship of sensitive topics <sup>28</sup>
- A professor at the London School of Economics reported an incident where papers at an academic conference which mentioned Taiwan were confiscated by Chinese Confucius Institute officials <sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rose, David, 'Why has the UK handed the world's new most powerful weapon to China? Ultracold quantum matter research at Oxford that could create unhackable communications and radar to find submarines shared with Chinese military university', The Daily Mail, 11 December 2020.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9044843/Why-UK-handed-worlds-new-powerful-weapon-China.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> China's magic weapon, BBC, 23 August 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000z2yt/chinas-magic-weapon>.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.229.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p.229

<sup>29</sup> Busely, Eleanor and Sengupta, Kim, 'Chinese government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British Universities, MP's report warns', The Independent, 5 November 2019, [Chinese](#)



## Chinese state interference in the UK Higher Education System

- Some Confucius Institute contracts have been found to contain clauses that are illegal in their host countries or clash with the values of the host universities. The University of Edinburgh refused a request for information on potentially discriminatory clauses in its contract, citing confidentiality <sup>30</sup>

## China is exerting increasing influence over academic publishing companies

- Most western publishers print a large share of their titles, particularly illustrated books and those with high print runs, in China, which has the most advanced and cheapest printing process. These publishers must censor their books or pay more for having them printed elsewhere <sup>31</sup>
- Western journals have been published which incorporate China's 9-dash-line territorial claim to the South China Sea, ruled unlawful by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea <sup>32</sup>

## UK academics are being threatened by chinese authorities

- Western China scholars are adjusting what they write and say, in order to protect their access to China to do research, as well as protect contacts and sources. The Chinese State keeps academics in line with the threat of withdrawing their visa <sup>33</sup>
- Managers at the University of Nottingham, which has a branch in China, put pressure on academics to cancel events relating to Tibet and Taiwan on campus <sup>34</sup>

## Freedom of speech is being undermined by censorship

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[government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British universities, MPs' report warns | The Independent | The Independent](#)

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.231.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.244.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.247.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.245.

<sup>34</sup> .Busely, Eleanor and Sengupta, Kim, 'Chinese government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British Universities, MP's report warns', The Independent, 5 November 2019, [Chinese government confiscating papers and getting events cancelled at British universities, MPs' report warns | The Independent | The Independent](#)

- A document approved by the Chinese communist party council in 2013 stated that “we must [...] allow absolutely no opportunity or outlets for incorrect thinking or viewpoints”. It explicitly rejects universal values of plurality and free expression <sup>35</sup>
- Patricia Thornton, associate professor of Chinese politics at Oxford, asked “How does one protect academic freedom when China claims the right to intervene anywhere?”<sup>36</sup>
- Peter Nolan has warned colleagues against discussing the Uyghur genocide or the suppression of democracy in Hong Kong <sup>37</sup>

## Government responses to Chinese interference

### The Foreign Affairs Select Committee produced a report on this topic

- The Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC) concluded that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had considered the threat that autocratic regimes pose on UK higher education institutions. “There is NO evidence that it has considered the threat from autocracies to academic freedom, [...] nor engaged sufficiently with other departments to develop a coordinated response” <sup>38</sup>
- The FASC also found that University officials were also unaware or refused to acknowledge the extent of the problem. Furthermore, officials refused to conduct talks with ministers or other officials about “improper foreign influence” after deliberation and interview with the FASC <sup>39</sup>
- The FASC recommended that a Senior Responsible Person be appointed to help coordinate strategy in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and as the senior official charged with responding to threats of academic freedom. The FASC recommended that this official have oversight on issues such as legal implications of accepting funding and for a inter-departmental coordinated response to foreign influence <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Wilby, Peter, ‘Academic freedom is so precious - so why have universities sold out to China?’, The Guardian, 11 August 2020, [Academic freedom is precious – so why have UK universities sold out to China? | Peter Wilby | The Guardian](#)

<sup>36</sup> Hamidi, Hilla, ‘Academics demanding more say over foreign deals to avoid interference in UK universities’, *The Boar*, 20 October 2020. [“Alarming” evidence of Chinese interference at UK universities, report shows - The Boar](#)

<sup>37</sup> Hayward, Freddi, ‘How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities’, The New Statesman, 13 July 2021, [How the Chinese government is buying its way into UK universities - New Statesman](#)

<sup>38</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, (2019), [“A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies”](#), pp. 1-27

<sup>39</sup> Ibid pp. 5-10

<sup>40</sup> Ibid pp. 5-10

- The FASC also recommended that the Government engage with its allies and partners in “Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US” to explore ways to protect UK universities from improper autocratic interference, as well as to use their combined financial muscle to influence improper or suspicious funding structures <sup>41</sup>

### **The UK government’s stance on China is becoming firmer**

- The UK government took the bold step of announcing sanctions against Chinese government officials for human rights violations in Xinjiang. This incorporates a harsher strategy taken by the UK government in order to combat and highlight growing Chinese violations of Human Rights and basic fundamental freedoms <sup>42</sup>
- In the Integrated Review 2021, China is referred to as a “systemic competitor” of the UK. In particular the Foreign Secretary was quick to highlight the growing and concerning degree to which the CCP were willing to break rules and skirt international standards in trade, such as through illegal activities in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road initiative <sup>43</sup>
- China is seen to present the “biggest state-based threat to the UK’s economic security” - The Government has not been clear as to exactly what this meant, but they have frequently referred to the use of indirect threats in order to enhance its own influence in the Pacific and surrounding regions <sup>44</sup>
- The UK, US and Australia recently announced a new security and defensive pact. “AUKUS” has been created in order to counter growing Chinese aggression against its surrounding neighbours such as Australia. This deal will grant Australia the ability to construct Nuclear Submarines in order to ward off any Chinese aggravation <sup>45</sup>

### **The relationships other countries have with China could influence the UK’s willingness to respond**

- The US Treasury designated China a “currency manipulator”, which resulted in China being excluded from any US government procurement contracts. This was later overturned after the Chinese agreed to stop devaluing their currency <sup>46</sup>
- The EU added further sanctions onto Chinese officials and companies in 2021 after allegations of the Xinjiang genocide emerged. This also later jeopardised the EU-China investment agreement signed in 2020. This indicates a growing willingness to fight Chinese aggression despite the economic consequences <sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid pp. 5-10

<sup>42</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2021, [“UK sanctions perpetrators of gross human rights violations in Xinjiang, alongside EU, Canada and US”](#).

<sup>43</sup> HM Government, 2021, [“Global Britain in a competitive age”](#), pp. 22

<sup>44</sup> Ibid pp.62

<sup>45</sup> BBC, 2021, [“Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China”](#)

<sup>46</sup> US Department of the Treasury, 2019, [“Treasury Designates China as a Currency Manipulator”](#)

<sup>47</sup> Reuters, 2021, [“EU extends human rights sanctions, including on Chinese officials”](#)

## Chinese state interference in the UK Higher Education System

- Russia has indicated its willingness to work with China in response to the Nato Expansion and tensions surrounding Ukraine. This is likely to involve agreements in academia and funding required in order to expand their overseas influence <sup>48</sup>
- The UN security council rejected proposals to impose humanitarian exceptions to economic sanctions imposed on Afghanistan, after both China and Russia blocked sanctions proposed by the US. It is thought that this signals a further growing willingness to work together to limit the US sphere of influence, and signals a partnership between Russia and China <sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> AlJazeera, 2022, "[Russia wins China's backing in NATO showdown over Ukraine](#)"

<sup>49</sup> UN News, 2022, "[Security Council sanctions: from blunt instrument to vital tool](#)"

# Insight

## Overview

In our insight, we wanted to think critically about the issues at hand. We focus on 4 issues in this section

- The reasons for Chinese interference and why it is a bad thing
- The negative consequences of censorship on education
- Criticisms of the current government response
- A case study of the University of Warwick's relationship with China

We hope that this section will make clear the difference between collaboration and interference in education. This issue is heavily context laden, and the facts only have meaning and consequence when the politics behind it is understood. Obviously, this report is focused specifically on Chinese state interference in UK higher education, not about Chinese politics. Therefore, we only seek to touch on issues that are relevant to our report.

## **Chinese interference in UK Higher Education is a tactic for achieving geopolitical aims**

It is difficult to argue that Chinese interference in the UK higher education system is a bad thing without first having an understanding of China's geopolitical aims. Hamilton and Ohlberg provide an ominous overview of the CCP's ambitions. They argue that the CCP is determined to transform the international order, and to shape the world in its own image.<sup>50</sup> Manipulating the way the world perceives China is essential to the party securing continued rule at home and making China "the number one global power".<sup>51</sup> As China is the second largest economy in the world and the largest manufacturing nation, many industries and businesses are dependent on or embroiled in China's gargantuan market.<sup>52</sup> Beijing is willing to use their economic might as a political weapon - they have become the "world's master practitioner of the dark arts of economic statecraft".<sup>53</sup> Beijing's vast programme of infrastructure abroad, the Belt and Road Initiative, is their prime instrument for reordering the global geopolitical order.

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<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.1

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.1

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.2

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p.3

However, the question of why China wanted to become global hegemon still needs to be addressed. The CCP's goal of strategic rebalancing is also to be achieved by a subtle and multi-pronged programme of global thought management.<sup>54</sup> The CCP continues to remain deeply anxious about 'ideological infiltration' into China.<sup>55</sup> China cannot take on the west without coming into contact with it, which runs the risk of Chinese citizens being exposed to western values of freedom, justice, human rights and democracy, which could undermine the CCP's style of government. The Great Firewall (a filtering and censoring algorithm on the internet in China) is the CCP's ultimate line of defence against western ideas, aiming to keep Chinese citizens cocooned in CCP propaganda. The aims of the CCP have been revealed in a *Global Times* (a party run tabloid) article, describing the Great Firewall as 'temporary'.<sup>56</sup> This implies that once the CCP has reshaped global opinions, and their values, political system and policies are accepted, the great firewall will be made redundant.<sup>57</sup> According to Melaine Hart and Blaine Johnson (2017), the CCP wishes to make authoritarian systems and values equal to liberal ones.<sup>58</sup>

Commentators argue that having China as a major power on the international stage is inappropriate, especially considering the country's human rights record. The ongoing Uyghur genocide is a prime example. The Uyghurs are a muslim ethnic-minority group living in the north-western region of Xinjiang. Human rights groups believe that China has detained more than one million Uyghurs against their will over the past few years in a large network of what the state calls re-education camps, and sentenced hundreds of thousands to prison terms. There is evidence that the Uyghurs are being used as forced labour and of women being forcibly sterilised.<sup>59</sup> This attempt to destroy a cultural group and prevent its ability to reproduce is by definition genocide. Some former camp detainees report that they were tortured and sexually abused. China denies all allegations, claiming that its system of reeducation camps exists to combat separatism and Islamist militancy. Campaigners say that China is trying to eradicate Uyghur culture. In April 2021, the UK Parliament declared that China was committing genocide in Xinjiang. However, Universities are continuing to pursue close relationships with China.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.5

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.5

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.5

<sup>59</sup> BBC, 'Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?', *BBC News*, 21 June 2021.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037>

**Censorship can  
have a significant  
impact on  
students'  
perception of the  
world**

## **Censorship can have a significant impact on students' perception of the world**

Censorship can have a profound impact upon the life and educational outcomes of an individual and a community. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is well known for operating a strict policy of censorship in many areas of life within China, such as social media, news and media, and indeed education.<sup>60</sup> This can take many forms including forbidding certain news outlets, and censoring the use of particular language, data and information that could present a particular event or official in a negative light. Wider forms of censorship can also include banning certain social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram which are commonly used to share opinions and information regarding current affairs, such as the CCP does. This presents a logistical challenge to residents and tourists within China to attempt to engage with the outside world through traditional platforms. This further presents a two pronged attack on citizens as the CCP can use alternative means to spread their own forms of information, often false and misleading. This is deliberate, and an attempt to control their population in terms of their perception and understanding of the facts, particularly through news channels.<sup>61</sup>

It is important to grasp the impact of this policy upon Chinese students who may choose to study and live within other countries that do not have this level of censorship. Firstly, it is possible that Chinese students may be surprised at the type of reporting among Western News outlets surrounding the activities of the CCP. This may be surprising as although they will no doubt be familiar with intense amounts of propaganda and information by the CCP being dispersed, they will be no doubt surprised by the level of criticism levelled at CCP activities and the Chinese state. This level of criticism may be a rarity for some students and so adapting to this different lifestyle surrounding perceptions of the CCP could be difficult and in some sense disturbing.

However, most importantly, the effects of censorship of certain subjects and information within the education system and social media, could impact upon their worldviews. For instance, being restricted in your beliefs and access to information could lead to you holding a very twisted or simplistic view of the world, different cultures and countries, and indeed other religions. This is exacerbated if a state holds a particularly negative view of a community or country, as we have seen countless times in history, such as with the Jewish community and rivalries between different nations, such as Korea. This may seem like a remote possibility at first, but China, standing as the most heavily populated country in the world, has a huge role to play here. Students may have a lack of knowledge or understanding of cultures or certain values held by their country of destination. This is not an outcome levelled at just Chinese students though, and can affect any student brought up in an environment which censors

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<sup>60</sup> Xu, Beina, and Eleanor Albert. "[Media censorship in China.](#)" *Council on Foreign Relations* 25 (2014): 243.

<sup>61</sup> Wong, M. Y. H. and Kwong, Y.-ho (2019) "[Academic Censorship in China: The Case of The China Quarterly.](#)" *PS: Political Science & Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 52(2), pp. 287–292.



particular information regarding different nations, political opinions and key facts, whether that be on a state-level or even a family level, too.

## **The government has been slow to respond to the concerns raised**

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee released a paper in 2019<sup>62</sup> looking at the threat posed by authoritarian regimes to the UK, in terms of security, finance and academia. They outline a number of threats posed by authoritarian states, especially China. This includes a number of threats such as the growing involvement in UK universities by Chinese parties, such as wealthy business people, Chinese Universities and the CCP themselves. One particular reason for this is the growing need for universities to attract greater funding and grow internationally in order to remain competitive. This therefore comes into conflict with the principle of academic freedom if they agree to finance and international cooperation with CCP affiliated parties. Charles Parton of RUSI said that the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) was an instrument of this interference.<sup>63</sup> It was alleged to report to Chinese authorities on the activities of Chinese students of interest and attempted to stop discussion of certain topics sensitive to China, such as China and Tibet. This normally translates into more direct guidance from the embassy in more serious cases.

The report by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee makes clear its criticism of the government's position of inaction and failure to recognise the clear threat posed by Chinese activities. It alleges that the government has not considered the threat posed by autocratic regimes.<sup>64</sup> The report finds that this undermines academic freedom and the quality of the UK higher education system. It also found that other whitehall departments, apart from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), which is the main department charged with responsibility, have not developed a coordinated response. The main risk posed by this failure is the possibility of government failure when attempting to deal with potential incidents of espionage in the future. The report later goes on to recommend that the government develop a coordinated response through a senior responsible person.

What is perhaps more distressing to us as investigators, is the lack of information from any official government sources in the UK. Other nations such as Australia, regularly hold committee meetings to consider the influence of autocratic regimes. In the US several senate hearings have been held at committee level to consider and deliberate potential moves to control Chinese influence in academic circles. It is alarming that the UK does not have sufficient detail surrounding the true extent of the Chinese interference. The UK government should firstly launch a full enquiry to consider the true extent of Chinese interference in UK academia. Our report is admittedly based upon a small and possibly unreliable collection of

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<sup>62</sup>Foreign Affairs Committee, (2019), [“A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies”](#), pp. 1-27

<sup>63</sup> ibid . p.6

<sup>64</sup> Ibid p. 9

sources, although many have been peer-reviewed. Therefore, a truly objective and verified report is needed by an official government source in order to uncover verified information, which can then be analysed to consider how best to counter Chinese interference.

## **The University of Warwick has an extensive and growing relationship with China**

In order to make this issue feel more real, we decided to do a case study looking at the University of Warwick, with the aim of trying to understand its relationship with China. Research on Warwick's links with China has revealed a very strong and established relationship; Warwick is in a similar position to other prestigious universities in the UK. There are clear examples where this involves the university helping China at the UK's expense, but also where the significant Chinese presence on campus has directly suppressed freedom of speech.

In August 2016, the University of Warwick signed an agreement with China's South University of Science and Technology, enabling some of China's top students attending Warwick to study for a PhD.<sup>65</sup> In response to the agreement he had just signed, Warwick's Vice-Chancellor Professor Stuart Croft said that "our agreement further strengthens the proud, existing bond enjoyed by the University of Warwick and China - one which will surely continue to grow".<sup>66</sup> Before the 2016 agreement, Warwick already had links with SUSTech, with Professor Jiangfeng Feng of Warwick's Department of Computer science and Martin Wills of the Department of Chemistry having professional relationships with their SUSTech counterparts.<sup>67</sup> When the agreement was signed in 2016, 1,750 Chinese students studied here<sup>68</sup>; today the figure is 3,228.<sup>69</sup> Although our issue certainly is not with Chinese students personally, we recognise that their presence does have consequences on freedom of speech on campus. This problem will be addressed later on, but the previous section on censorship provides an explanation.

WMG is one of the largest academic departments at the University of Warwick, with over 350 staff, and is based in seven buildings on campus.<sup>70</sup> It is involved in collaborative research and education programmes in engineering and technology.<sup>71</sup> However, the organisation has been

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<sup>65</sup> Hattie, Rowan, 'Relationship being built between University of Warwick and China', *The Boar*, 24 August 2016. [Relationships being built between the University of Warwick and China - The Boar](#)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> 'China', *University of Warwick*. [China \(warwick.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>70</sup> WMG, 'WMG in China', p.2. [p2477\\_wmg\\_in\\_china\\_8pp\\_final\\_web.pdf \(warwick.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>71</sup> [WMG - The University of Warwick](#)

very open about the significant links it has with China. WMG's founder and former Chairman, the late Professor Lord Bhattacharyya, had maintained a close 'personal' relationship with China for over 35 years, and in 2015 was awarded the National Rainbow Bridge Award in recognition of his role in promoting friendly cooperation between China and the rest of the world.<sup>72</sup> During his regular visits to China, Bhattacharyya had many discussions with state and city leaders, including Vice-Premiers, the Minister for Education, and the Mayor of Beijing. WMG has worked with the Chinese State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs, delivering education programmes to managers from most of the major industries and institutions across China.<sup>73</sup> This includes companies in the defence sector<sup>74</sup>; assisting a country who threatens its neighbours with military might with defence matters is utterly immoral and reckless. WMG seeks to help China achieve its 'Made in China 2025' national plan, aimed at transforming China into a manufacturing world power by 2049.<sup>75</sup> WMG announced that they are keen to work with the Chinese to improve manufacturing innovation, integrate information technology and industry, promote breakthroughs in key sectors and provide intensive training to improve the competitiveness of Chinese companies.<sup>76</sup> It seems that many of these skills and expertise developed at Warwick in key STEM subjects are being enthusiastically shared with China.

There is also evidence of the Chinese presence on campus affecting the work of the Student's Union. A motion in the Spring 2020 All Student Vote titled 'Support Hong Kong's movement and protect freedom of expression on Campus failed to pass, receiving 971 votes for and 2041 votes against.<sup>77</sup> The motion condemned the "abhorrent human rights" abuses committed by the Chinese police. That particular All Student Vote (ASV) had a record turnout over 2.5 times higher than any over the other ASV.<sup>78</sup> The outcome was so unusual that even The Times wrote an article about it.<sup>79</sup> A Hong Kong student proposed the motion. During an SU debate on the motion, members of the Warwick Chinese Society voiced their criticism, with one student saying that "Warwick is supposed to be a place for students to explore future things in life, not a place to do political things [...] we want the University to go back to a stable environment, a place to study in peace, enjoy our life, without criticism about our country".<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> WMG, 'WMG in China', p.2. [p2477\\_wmg\\_in\\_china\\_8pp\\_final\\_web.pdf \(warwick.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.p.3

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> The Boar, 'BREAKING: Landslide votes overturn SU support for Hong Kong protests at Warwick', The Boar, 7 February 2020. [BREAKING: Landslide votes overturn SU support for Hong Kong protests at Warwick - The Boar](#)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Parker, 'ChaMotion backing Hong blocked after campaign by Chinese students at Warwick', The Times, 28 May 2020, [Motion backing Hong Kong blocked after campaign by Chinese students at Warwick | News | The Times](#)lie, '

<sup>80</sup> The Boar, 'BREAKING: Landslide votes overturn SU support for Hong Kong protests at Warwick', The Boar, 7 February 2020. [BREAKING: Landslide votes overturn SU support for Hong Kong protests at Warwick - The Boar](#)

The Warwick Chinese Society posted a tutorial for its members on how to vote against the motion.<sup>81</sup> After the vote, the society responded by saying that it “advised” its members to vote against the motion<sup>82</sup>. A student body voting down a motion championing free speech and democracy is not what one would expect.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have tried to reiterate the significance of this issue. The benefits of such a relationship appear lopsided in China’s favour. The aims of the CCP and its current practice make any relationship inappropriate. The extensive amount of censorship that the CCP practices in China raises concerns about universities relying heavily on Chinese students for their income. Because the CCP penetrates the lives of all its citizens, controlling their thoughts and actions, unfortunately, anyone with substantial links to China could be doing the CCP’s bidding. This is why caution is always required. The problem is further inflamed by the fact that, although the government has started to wake up to the problem, little action has followed. The UK is much further behind than other countries. The fact that our academic freedom and national security is at risk, no time can be wasted in closing the watertight doors. Uncovering Warwick’s relationship does make this phenomenon feel very real and makes one realise the scale of the problem. Based on this analysis, we shall move on to the next section, which seeks to answer what should be done.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

# Policy Recommendations

## Overview

The aim of this section is to outline policies that we believe will tackle the issue, and which we hope the government will adopt. The two main setbacks which exist are that it isn't widely known about, and if it is, not much can be done about it. Hamilton and Ohlberg argue that a key way of tackling this is to increase funding for universities since underfunded universities will become financially dependent on China.<sup>83</sup> Although this is something we would definitely support, it is unrealistic to expect 25% of some university funding needs to be met by the government overnight and it won't do anything to stop China from trying to gain influence. What is needed are policies with teeth that can bring about significant change quickly. The longer that Universities remain attached to China, the harder it will become to disentangle them.

Here we propose two policies which should solve these problems

- Action 1 - set up a UK Education Security Commission
- Action 2 - set up a National Education Security Agency

We believe that the first step to solving an issue is understanding that there is an issue. Our two-pronged strategy is a way of persuading universities to make the right decisions themselves, but also preventing inappropriate relationships through the law. In other words, we have a soft and a hard approach; either one alone would be insufficient. If we force universities to make the changes against their will, the process won't be very efficient. Universities need to want to change their relationship.

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<sup>83</sup> Hamilton, Clive and Ohlberg, Mareike (2020) Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World. London: One World Publications, p.269

# The UK Education Security Commission

## The UK Education Security Commission

It is clear from our report that there is a need for a responsible body charged with the specific task of researching the nature of these relationships, and also advising the government on how to respond. Therefore, we propose a United Kingdom Education Security Commission to take up this role. Their main task would be to review the nature and severity of the threat faced by the possibility of espionage and interference by any state or organisation (including Terrorist and illicit groups) in the realm of academia. They would also work to coordinate government strategy across departments and act as the first point of call for any academic-security-related matters. This would involve an annual report assessing the current threat level, risk mitigation actions, and any other related concerns. Ultimately this Commission upholds the principle of academic integrity. Education policy is a devolved matter in the UK, therefore this commission would only operate in England.

We want an advisory body that is independent enough to be credible, but close enough to the government to be able to make progress. After examining the different types of advisory bodies, we believe that the establishment of an Education Security Commission in the form of a Non-departmental Public Body (NDPB). According to the government, a non-departmental public body (NDPB) is a “body which has a role in the process of national government, but is not a government department or part of one, and which accordingly operates to a greater or lesser extent at arm’s length from ministers”.<sup>84</sup> The Cabinet Office outlines the functions and structures of NDPBs:

- They comprise external (non-civil servants) experts who operate in a personal capacity to advise ministers on particular policy areas. These independent specialists are free from political control. They are supported by a department civil servant as secretariat.
- The corresponding department provides all the funding and sets a strategic framework. The secretary of state appoints the members of the commission and is responsible for the commission's actions to Parliament.
- All advice is impartial and apolitical, and the secretary of state has the power to refuse to act on the advice.
- The terms of those in the committee lasts for 3 years.
- All NDPBs should be reviewed regularly to ensure that the functions of the body are still required, and bodies that have completed their tasks or are no longer completed should be wound up.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cabinet Office, *UK Government. Guidance: Public Bodies* (Published 19th February 2013, updated 10 December 2018) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/public-bodies-reform>

<sup>85</sup> Cabinet Office (2016) *Classification of Public Bodies: Guidance For Departments*, pp,13-14. [Classification of public bodies: information and guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/classification-of-public-bodies-information-and-guidance)

The Department for Education currently has 10 NDPBs, and provided a total of £1.72m of funding.<sup>86</sup> The Education Security Commission is inspired by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC). The SMC is also an advisory non-governmental public body, therefore the two commissions should operate similarly. According to the government, the responsibilities of the SMC include publishing an annual report assessing the progress made, promoting social mobility by challenging employers, the professions, universities and schools to play their part in promoting social mobility; carrying out and publishing research in relation to social mobility; providing advice to ministers (at their request) on how to improve social mobility in England, and this advice must then be published.<sup>87</sup> The SMC is currently made up of 12 commissions, each experts in their fields. We see the ESC being of a similar size. We would also want the overseeing department to be the Department for Education, since universities come under its responsibilities.

We also propose two further functions of this commission

- 1) The commission will be charged with holding the actions of the The National Education Security Agency (NESA) to account, deciding upon its existence, fiscal capabilities, and powers.
- 2) To act as the primary educator for UK education institutions in order to help them counter potential threats to academic integrity. This could involve liaison with University representatives to help institutions better prepare for threats.

The main purpose of this body is to uphold the principle of academic freedom and integrity and should act as a figurehead and defender of these principles. We are aware that the work of this commission could have major foreign policy implications, but due to the independent nature of the commission, we believe that such consequences can be minimised and managed. We also realise that the government relying solely on the research of one advisory body could result in a more limited response. Our hope is that the great awareness of the issue this commission would raise will encourage other think tanks and academics to carry out their own research on this topic, and give their advice to the government as well.

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<sup>86</sup> Cabinet Office (2017) *Public Bodies 2017*, p.47.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/663615/PublicBodies2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/663615/PublicBodies2017.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> Social Mobility Commission. "Responsibilities". HM Government. Retrieved 11th March 2022. [About us - Social Mobility Commission - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/about-us-social-mobility-commission)



# The National Education Security Agency

## **The National Education Security Agency (NESA)**

Although we have proposed a national commission to act as the heart to countering academic espionage, we need a body to actually enforce this. This agency needs to be able to actively enforce the principles of academic freedom and also counter the threats seen in areas such as the one's discussed. For instance, the power to sanction those who deliberately record and infiltrate academic conversations and conferences to commit crimes. Furthermore, this agency must have the ability to act as an international agency to coordinate policy and response with other agencies internationally.

Therefore, propose the creation of a National Education Security Agency (NESA) that holds policing powers to counter threats to academic freedom and punish those proven to compromise UK academia. This would operate in a similar fashion to the National Crime Agency (NCA) but within the realm of education. We want to avoid mentioning specific powers this agency could hold, as we are not security law experts, nor government ministers. But we will list a basic framework below which could be used as a point of reference.

We suggest that this body hold policing powers, such as the right to arrest and enact criminal charges against individuals in extreme cases. We also suggest this agency hold financial powers such as freezing of assets of individuals of interest. Primarily, this agency is charged with the investigation of matters, as opposed to prosecution, which can be done through normal legal mechanisms. Therefore, all of these powers should be subject to regular review and scrutiny. They should also be consistent with existing criminal legislation and human rights statutes. The investiture of these powers should always be reliant upon the consent of a judge and a government minister, with sufficient prerogative.

We would also recommend NESA work with our friends and allies abroad, in other countries to try and coordinate a global response to this growing crisis. This could entail the sharing of intelligence and information, joint investigations. We envisage a global community powerful enough to impose the strongest of responses (inc sanctions) against would-be perpetrators and criminals.

We believe this is a highly tangible and achievable aim. The creation of similar bodies such as the National Crime Agency (NCA) have established a precedent of government action to counter specialised threats, such as cybercrime and financial crime. We believe that education should be treated with the same remit. Of course, the government should consider the size and scale of such an agency. This is afterall, still a fairly niche area of crime and education policy, as such, it may be better to think of this agency as a specialised team as part of a bigger crime unit (such as the NCA). We also stress that the government considers the constraints placed on such an agency. Any powers granted should always be subject to rigorous scrutiny and the rule of law. We want this agency to act with the full discretion of a regular police officer or investigatory body, but with the accountability to match such powers granted to them.

Both of the policies we have outlined above take inspiration from Australia's response to the very same issue. In August 2019, the Australian government established the University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT). The task asks as the bridge between government and universities, and provides guidelines to universities on how to manage risk.<sup>88</sup> It is made up of intelligence agencies, education bureaucrats and university leaders.<sup>89</sup> The support provided by the taskforce includes:

- Briefing the heads of universities on threats and national security
- Raising awareness with university staff of foreign interference
- Engaging universities through national security bodies to help universities respond to the threat
- Provide updates on critical technologies of national interest
- Strengthen university cyber security capability and providing guidance on strategies to address cybersecurity incidents through the Australian Cyber Security Centre<sup>90</sup>

The UFIT has produced a detailed document outlining 16 guidelines under the categories of governance, communication, risk assessment and cyber-security. We have taken the aims of this taskforce and tailored them to the way the British political system works. By having two bodies, we hope this will enable the government to go further than Australia in tackling foreign interference. Australia has proved that it is possible to take action, and many of the sentiments present in this report echo the UFIT's guidelines. We recommend that the government works collaboratively with the UFIT whilst setting up the ESC and the NESAs.

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<sup>88</sup> Australian Government - The Department for Education, Skills and Employment (Last modified December 2021) *University Foreign Interference Taskforce*. [University Foreign Interference Taskforce - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government \(dese.gov.au\)](https://www.dese.gov.au/university-foreign-interference-taskforce)

<sup>89</sup> BBC, 'Australia to tackle foreign interference at universities', *BBC News*, 28th August 2019. [Australia to tackle foreign interference at universities - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/australia-50811111)

<sup>90</sup> The University Foreign Interference Taskforce (2019) *Guidelines to counter Foreign University Interference in the Australian University Sector*. [Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government \(dese.gov.au\)](https://www.dese.gov.au/university-foreign-interference-taskforce-guidelines-to-counter-foreign-university-interference-in-the-australian-university-sector)

# Conclusion

Throughout this report, we have aimed to uncover the nature and extent of Chinese interference in the UK higher education system. For too long we feel that this issue has been brushed under the carpet.

As Hamilton and Ohlberg point out, “China prefers to operate in the shadows, and sunlight is often the best disinfectant ... Free speech is the enemy of the CCP, and must be protected at all costs”. Therefore, academics have a duty to call out attacks on academic freedom, such as “insidious self-censorship or institutions leaning on employees to temper their work”. University elites, such as the ones identified in our briefing, who have links to or actively support Beijing deserve public scrutiny and robust criticism. It is clear that the international academic community face a significant and systematic threat to its principles of academic freedom and integrity, and call on governments across the world to take immediate action, to recognise and counter these threats.

We want to be clear that these findings are levelled at the Chinese Communist Party and the actions of the state, and not the nation and people of China. It is clear that the CCP through their criminal actions both in the realm of academia, and other aspects, including accusations of crimes against humanity, as found by an unofficial independent UK-based tribunal<sup>91</sup>. We condemn the actions of the CCP in the strongest manner and support immediate action through the ICJ to hold those responsible for acts of espionage, theft, and crimes against humanity to be held to account. Although this report has painted a gloomy picture, we are confident that efforts can be undertaken to prevent the problem from becoming insurmountable. The world’s opinion of China is starting to change; we are beginning to see China in a different light. However, the best thing we can do now is to equip ourselves with caution.

Nelson Mandela said that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Uyghur Tribunal, [“Uighur Tribunal Judgement”](#), 2022

<sup>92</sup> McKenna, Amy. "15 Nelson Mandela Quotes". Encyclopedia Britannica, Invalid Date, <https://www.britannica.com/list/nelson-mandela-quotes>. Accessed 4 March 2022