Foreign autocratic interference in western academia: a closer look into the British case

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Resumo: O debate sobre a exposição das economias ocidentais à interferência externa tem vindo a adquirir um maior destaque nos últimos anos. Contudo, não existem ainda análises sistémicas e aprofundadas sobre os efeitos da interferência externa no mundo académico. O objetivo deste artigo é alertar para os riscos que a crescente exposição das universidades ocidentais à influência autocrática externa acarreta ao nível da liberdade académica. O texto destaca que a excessiva dependência em relação a estudantes internacionais, bem como de doações e outros tipos de investimentos estrangeiros, pode representar um risco financeiro e académico para as universidades a longo prazo. Isto tem sido especialmente visível no caso britânico, em que se verificou um aumento significativo no número de estudantes internacionais, sobretudo de estudantes chineses, ao longo da última década. No entanto, a crescente visibilidade destes casos surge como uma oportunidade para os governos ocidentais avaliarem as vulnerabilidades das suas instituições académicas e analisarem os seus vínculos a entidades e regimes não democráticos. Em última análise, os governos e as instituições académicas ocidentais devem cooperar no desenvolvimento e na aceitação de um conjunto de diretrizes universais, a fim de garantir a preservação da liberdade académica.

Abstract: Albeit rising concerns regarding foreign interference in a set of strategic areas of western society, its effects on academia in particular have been both understudied and underestimated. Hence, the aim of this academic paper is to shine a light on the widespread impacts and risks associated with western universities' increasing exposure to foreign autocratic influence and how that may ultimately affect academic freedom. This paper argues that the tendency towards western universities' growing dependency on international students, as well as on the donations and investments of external actors poses a financial and academic risk in the long-term. This is especially true in the British case, which has experienced a surge in the number of international students, particularly Chinese students, in the last decade. However, the increasing visibility of cases that constitute either direct or indirect foreign interference in academia is an opportunity for western governments to assess their academic institutions' vulnerabilities, especially their links to autocratic regimes. Ultimately, western governments and academic institutions must jointly strive to cooperate in developing and accepting a set of universal guidelines in order to ensure that academic freedom is not compromised.

Constança de Matos é bolseira de investigação do Centro de Investigação do Instituto de Estudos Políticos (CIEP), onde integra o projeto RAP. As suas principais áreas de atuação enquadram-se no campo dos estudos da democracia e debruçam-se sobre temas como a liberdade académica e a liberdade de imprensa no mundo Ocidental. Atualmente, encontra-se a estudar o futuro da democracia liberal no século XXI. Para além de ser licenciada em Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais, é mestre em Governance, Leadership and Democracy Studies pelo Instituto de Estudos Políticos da Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

The aim of this paper is to shine a light on the widespread impacts and risks associated with the growing exposure of western academic institutions – particularly universities – to foreign autocratic influence and how that may ultimately affect academic freedom. Although I intend on providing examples on how the relation of dependence between western academic institutions and foreign autocratic regimes is affecting academia around the world, I will devote a special emphasis on the British case.

The selection of the British case was a natural choice as not only is it the European country where most cases of foreign autocratic interference in the academic context have come to light, but also due to the attentiveness of the country's political institutions to the phenomenon in question. This is not totally surprising given the fact that its academic sector is intricately dependent on both the revenue from international students – particularly Chinese students, whose presence in English universities has increased 34 per cent in the last four years –, as well as on other financial contributions and on the extensive partnerships that have been established with foreign actors, especially those which operate in non-democratic settings. The British case is also illustrative of how even the most reputable academic institutions can easily become vulnerable to foreign autocratic interference.

Before delving into the subject at hand, I feel that it is necessary to define what is meant by foreign interference in western academia. On this matter, the 2019 Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons report entitled 'A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies' has a clear, informative and rigorous definition of what the Committee considered to be 'autocracies' influence in UK universities' (Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 5). Albeit the fact that it alludes to the UK's context specifically, I believe that it impressively sums up the phenomenon in question and, thus, I intend on using it as a reference throughout this work. The definition includes:

Financial, political or diplomatic pressure, to shape the research agenda or curricula of [UK] universities, whether at the macro level (for example, providing direct or indirect financial support for research or educational activities with explicit or implicit limits on the scope of the subjects that can be discussed) or at the micro level (for example, pressuring event organisers not to invite certain speakers);

Attempts to limit the activities of [UK] university campuses or joint venture universities abroad which constrain freedoms that would normally be protected [in the UK], such as criticisms of foreign governments;

Pressure on [UK-based] researchers who focus on subjects related to the countries concerned, including through visa refusals, pressure on university leadership, pressure on relatives still living in that country;

Pressure on [UK-based] students born in the country concerned, or on their families, to inform on the speech or activities of other students, or to engage in political protest [in the UK] in support of the country's objectives (Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 5).

Indeed, the frequency with which the media has reported on several examples of external autocratic interference in the academic world seems to indicate that the phenomenon is on the rise, especially in Europe, the United States and Australia. These cases differ in nature and include, as the previous definition suggests, direct (i.e. pressure to cancel an event) and/or indirect (i.e. self-censoring the curriculum of a particular course) practices that may jeopardize academic freedom, as well as limit freedom of expression for students, researchers and other employees of the academic institutions in question.

Moreover, the number of foreign students and researchers enrolled at western universities has generally witnessed a significant growth in the past years. This was mostly due to universities' internationalization efforts, which derived from the latter's need to diversify their sources of revenue as state funding across several countries, especially in Europe, decreased. Hence, western universities have become increasingly dependent on foreign revenue in order to both survive and thrive in the present time. In fact, many universities are particularly dependent on revenue from Chinese students, as their presence in such institutions has grown exponentially over the last decade, to such an extent that, for instance, they presently constitute the largest group of international students in the United Kingdom, as well as the United States and Australia.

Whilst the exponential growth of Chinese students enrolled at western universities does not seem problematic *per se*, and can even be desirable, there may be some reasons for concern. As a French government report on information manipulation clearly stated, the Chinese

regime is notorious for engaging in the 'manipulation of diasporas and Chinese communities living abroad' ('Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies' 2018: 61). This is in line with China's National Intelligence law that has been in effect since 2017 and according to which every Chinese citizen is required to provide information to its government authorities whenever it may be requested. Naturally, this has intensified suspicion in western university campuses as Chinese students and other activists fear that they may be punished for organizing protests or simply voicing their opinions on what the Communist Party of China (CPC) considers to be sensitive matters.

Furthermore, not only can the relation of dependence between the academic institutions of the western world and those which operate in autocratic regimes prove to be financially and academically damaging in the long run, but they may also ultimately undermine their traditional role within democratic societies. The overreliance of western universities on international students from a single country can affect the institutions' financial viability if, regardless of the circumstances, those students are prevented from attending or enrolling in courses abroad – which has, to some extent, recently occurred due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Even more risks are added to this scenario when dealing with an autocratic regime that, albeit unlikely, may decide to retain its citizens without any previous justification or legitimate criteria.

However, it seems to be even more important to address how this phenomenon can affect the role of academic institutions within democratic societies. Indeed, the stability of a democratic regime is dependent on the strength and independence of its institutions, as well as the respect for the fundamental values that define its socio-political system. If universities fail to prioritize knowledge, freedom of expression and free debate over all – that along with the respect for human rights, freedom of the press and other fundamental principles constitute pillars of our democratic system –, the stability of our regime as we know it will be at risk.

Before delving into the subject at hand, I must address the fact that, although the main focus of this paper concerns foreign autocratic influence, it does not intend to diminish the jeopardizing role that other factors, such as legal protection or academic tenure, play on academic freedom. On this matter, I must point out the damaging effects produced by government interference in academia that, even within a democratic context such as the European Union, have proved to be particularly harmful to academic freedom.

The Hungarian case is a blatant example of the latter. The feud between the illiberal democrat Hungarian Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán and the Hungarian-born American billionaire George Soros has famously culminated in the expulsion of the Central European University's main activities from Budapest to Vienna, after years of government harassment towards academia and citizens' rights to free-speech.

A similar example may be found in the NATO alliance member Turkey, where Erdoğan's autocratic rule has also frequently targeted the country's academic institutions and scholars. More recently, a Turkish Professor has been sentenced to prison for revealing the disturbing findings of a study on industrial pollution which was launched on behalf of the Ministry of Health and in which he participated that, albeit clearly indicating that such levels of pollution posed an urgent risk to public health, were never revealed to the public. This is an action that was condemned by the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom, who in a letter addressed to President Erdoğan wrote that:

> The case of Professor Şık confirms the broader pattern of persecuting academics perceived to be critics of your government whether based on their advocacy of Kurdish rights or criticisms of industrial policies that advance the interests of corporate sectors supportive of your government (Committee on Academic Freedom 2020).

The sometimes not-so transparent relations between private businesses and universities can also pose potential risks to academic freedom. However, it is often difficult to unveil the details of such cases and, thus, to uncover whether they truly constitute a threat to academic freedom or not. For instance, according to a New York Times article that dates back to 2014, in light of the trend in German higher education institutions to form strategic partnerships with the private sector, companies have been funding entire departments of public universities in order to outsource their research. The article further mentions that E.ON, Germany's largest supplier of fossil fuel and nuclear energy, was paying the annual costs of the E.ON Energy Research Centre at the RWTH Aachen University, which at the time, amounted to 52 million dollars (Hockenos 2014). Whilst this sort of arrangement is not necessarily detrimental to academic freedom and may even be a desirable model, as the

managing director of Transparency International Germany Christian Humborg rightly noted, the details of these collaborations must be made public.

Moreover, I should also address the obvious limitations that arise when studying this phenomenon. Firstly, albeit the existence of a set of tools that measure academic freedom at a global scale, not only are they limited to an either events-based or expert-based analysis, but also, particularly in the case of the Academic Freedom Index, their highly aggregate design does not make it possible to break-down the role of a single element, such as foreign autocratic interference, in a country's score. Secondly, there is an obvious lack of literature on this subject. Although there are numerous articles on academic freedom, they fail to analyse this component separately from what I consider to be all-encompassing indicators, such as 'freedom for teaching' or 'freedom for research.' Thirdly, the dubious nature and the lack of detail of some cases that have been made public makes it particularly hard for those who are analysing them to assess whether they do, in fact, constitute a case of foreign autocratic interference or not.

Nevertheless, I am confident that I can overcome these limitations and cautiously proceed to presenting a well-founded paper mainly based on qualitative research, where both theoretical and empirical evidence are combined in order to shine a light on the risks associated with western academic institutions' increasing exposure to foreign autocratic influence and how that may ultimately affect academic freedom.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN THE UNITED STATES, AUSTRALIA AND EUROPE

The United States

In the United States, a set of examples that may amount to either direct or indirect foreign autocratic interference in academia have become public in the past years. In particular, academic partnerships with institutions in either autocratic or so-called mixed regimes have recently been the object of public scrutiny. For instance, Yale's partnership with the National University of Singapore has been heavily criticized from the very beginning. More recently, and as The Diplomat reported, the cancellation of a week-long academic program on 'Dialogue and Dissent in Singapore' reignited the 'old fronts in the battle about the

legitimacy of liberal arts colleges in quasi-authoritarian contexts' (Polakiewicz 2019). However, whilst critics of these partnerships hastily labelled the cancellation of the event as an attack to academic freedom, it is still unclear whether this was indeed the case.

Furthermore, it seems important to note that US universities' links to China in particular are varied. The United States is the number one destination for Chinese students who wish to study abroad. Indeed, as of 2019, there were over 300 thousand Chinese students enrolled at US universities, which represents approximately one third of the whole international student body in the United States. Consequently, several US higher education institutions have become heavily reliant on the revenue from the latter's' tuition fees, as well as on the money raised from other gifts and donations that have been contributed by foreign actors.

In fact, in 2020, Bloomberg reported that a set of US universities had received nearly $1 billion in gifts and contracts from China over a six-year period (Lorin and Kochkodin, 2020). Harvard University was the institution that benefitted the most. It obtained $93.7 million in total, the majority as gifts. The latter was followed by the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively. Such monetary gifts are not illegal, nor do they constitute evidence of attempted foreign autocratic interference. They must, however, be scrutinized and processed in a transparent manner that is in accordance with the national law of the country where those gifts are received. Most importantly, this example shines a light on the intricacy of the relations between the academic institutions of the west and those which operate in non-democratic settings.

Additionally, academia has traditionally been a sector where there is major technological and political competition between both democratic and autocratic nations, often involving the recruitment of key players from either side of 'the barricade' for the completion of consequential projects. For instance, in January 2020, the American media shockingly reported that a renowned Harvard chemistry professor had been arrested, and later released on a $1 million bond, for allegedly failing to disclose his role as a 'strategic scientist' at Wuhan University of Technology (WUT) in China, as well as his contractual involvement in the China's Thousand Talents Plan, that had been set up without the American university's knowledge (Subbaraman 2020).

American authorities are not oblivious to this complex phenomenon. They seem to be especially concerned with the Chinese regime's subversive influence in the academic context and, more specifically, with the CPC's ability to project soft power and disseminate propaganda via their global network of Confucius Institutes. In 2019, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the US Senate has recently produced an extensive report entitled *China's impact on the US education system*, which examined the operations of Confucius Institutes throughout the country. Its findings were very clear: not only do Confucius Institutes 'attempt to export China's censorship of political debate and prevent discussion of potentially politically sensitive topics', but their ultimate aim is also worrisome, as they 'attempt to change the impression in the United States and around the world that China is an economic and security threat' (Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs 2019: 1).

Additionally, it seems that some US universities have actively begun to question the moulds in which their own academic partnerships with authoritarian counterparts have been established. For instance, in 2018, amid concerns that Renmin University had punished students for voicing their opinions on labour rights and for supporting attempts to unionize workers in the Shenzhen region, Cornell University suspended two academic exchanges and a research program with the latter. According to a Financial Times article, this was 'the first case in years of a foreign university halting a partnership with a Chinese counterpart for such reasons' (Yang 2018). The American university considered these actions to be a grave infringement on academic freedom, one that could not be tolerated.

Australia

In Australia, authorities are also increasingly attentive to how foreign actors are interfering in the country's democratic processes. In December 2018, two new major laws were added to ultimately safeguard the country's national security, one of which – the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme in Australia (FITSA) – was specifically directed at providing 'visibility of the nature, level and extent of foreign influence on Australia's Government and political process to the public' ('Australia's national security greatly enhanced with new laws' 2018). According to the Australian Attorney-General, Christian Porter, the implementation of this new scheme requires that 'any person who undertakes certain activities on behalf of a foreign principal for the purpose of influencing the national political

or government processes will be required to register under the scheme' ('Australia's national security greatly enhanced with new laws' 2018).

Furthermore, in August 2019, rising concerns regarding foreign interference in the academic context have also led to the creation of the University Foreign Interference Taskforce, in which both universities and government agencies are represented and whose main intention is to jointly develop recommendations on how to deal with the pressing phenomenon. In light of the recent confrontations between mainland Chinese and pro-democracy students from Hong Kong across Australian universities, the University Foreign Interference Taskforce has produced a set of guidelines that endeavour to protect the sector against foreign interference and ultimately ensure that a propitious environment for academic freedom is maintained.

These recent measures are a reflection of how Australian authorities are not only perceiving a shift in the global panorama, in which Beijing has overtly assumed a more aggressive foreign policy stance, but also how they are reacting to the undesirable incidents that have occurred due to their institutions' overexposure to foreign actors. For instance, it is no secret that Australian universities heavily depend on the revenue from Chinese students, who constitute a significant part of the total student population, and that these facts alone are at the origin of several controversial events.

For instance, University of New South Wales has been recently accused of censorship after deleting social media posts that alluded to an article that criticized the CPC's handling of the events in Hong Kong, as well as removing an article entitled 'China Needs International Pressure To End Hong Kong Wrongs' from its website due to unduly pressure from Chinese students and state media, as the Financial Times reported (Smyth 2020). The university eventually reversed its decision following the general contestation that arose from it, but the nature of these incidents was sufficient to re-ignite the debate about the state of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the country.

Europe

In Europe, most of the news on foreign autocratic interference in academia concern UK universities. This is not entirely surprising. The deepening dependency on foreign students enrolled at UK universities has seemingly pressured universities and other academic institutions into adopting practices that may ultimately compromise academic freedom, a

phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed by the British media nor the intellectual elite who appear be more attentive to this matter ever since the London School of Economics (LSE) was heavily criticized for its links to Muammar Gaddafi's regime back in 2011.

Indeed, the LSE has been involved in several controversies related to both indirect or direct foreign autocratic interference. For instance, in 2011, the university was accused of fostering a non-transparent link with the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi, which resulted in the removal of the university's dean, Sir Howard Davies. Some of the incidents that were subject to investigation included the celebration of a £2.2 million contract – of which the university had already received £1.5 million from Seif al-Islam Gaddafi's foundation, a former student of the university and Muammar Gaddafi's son, that had been obtained through bribes paid by Libyan companies to the dictator's family in order to obtain political favours within the regime –, as well as the payment of £50,000 to the university after the former rector Sir Howard Davies provided consultancy services to the Libyan sovereign wealth fund in 2007, among other cases (Vasagar & Syal 2011). More recently, in 2019, the LSE was, once again, at the centre of the news when it was forced to put on hold a program on China that was funded by a pro-Beijing supporter, after several scholars publicly voiced their concerns on the matter (Riordan 2019).

Furthermore, Cambridge University Press (CPU) has also been repeatedly criticized for seemingly compromising its long-standing values. In 2014, Karen Dawisha, the former Walter E. Havighurst Professor of Political Science in the Department of Political Science and the founding Director of the Havighurst Centre for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies at Miami University was impeded of publishing a book on Putin's gangster connections. In a letter that was sent to the author and that was subsequently made available in a The Economist article, Cambridge University Press claimed that the accusations which were made in the book that was provisionally sub-titled *How, why and when did Putin decide to build a Kleptocratic and Authoritarian Regime in Russia and what is its Future?* would be libel under English law and that, hence, 'the legal risk of publishing the book was too great' ('A book too far' 2014).

The letter, signed by John Haslam of CPU, stated that:

> After discussion with legal colleagues who have reviewed the typescript from both a US and UK legal perspective, I'm afraid that our view is that we are not in a position to proceed with your book. The decision has nothing to do with the quality of your research or your scholarly credibility. It is simply a question of risk tolerance in light of our limited resources (…) We have no reason to doubt the veracity of what you say, but we believe the risk is high that those implicated in the premise of the book—that Putin has a close circle of criminal oligarchs at his disposal and has spent his career cultivating this circle—would be motivated to sue and could afford to do so. Even if the Press was ultimately successful in defending such a lawsuit, the disruption and expense would be more than we could afford, given our charitable and academic mission ('A book too far' 2014).

Although this may not seem like an example of foreign autocratic interference, the fact that such a reputable publishing house would turn down an esteemed academic, not due to the quality of her research but for fear of being the object of a troublesome and expensive lawsuit deserves our reflection.

More recently, in 2017, the publishing house was forced to remove sensitive content from one of its journals that is dedicated to Chinese affairs: The China Quarterly. According to a New York Times article, the editor of the journal in question, Tim Pringle, shared a letter on social media where he stated that 'Cambridge University Press had informed him that the authorities had ordered it to censor more than 300 articles related to issues like the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the Cultural Revolution' (Johnson 2017). The letter also mentioned that if Cambridge University Press did not agree to such demands, 'the publishing house's site risked being shut down' (Johnson 2017).

Ever since such reports have become known to the public, all types of academic institutions that operate in the UK have been under pressure to reveal their autocratic ties. In 2016, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a London-based think tank, was under fire after leaked documents exposed that the institute had received 25 million pounds from the Bahraini royal family over the course of five years. The money was used to fund an office in Bahrain as well as to pay for the "Manama Dialogue", an annual conference on Middle East politics which was attended by important international dignitaries. According to the documents that were revealed by Bahrain Watch, the details of the deal were intended to be

kept hidden from the public, in order to avoid scrutiny (Evans 2016). This is, yet again, an example of how the systemic lack of transparency in the operation of certain western academic institutions, specifically in relation to the donations and gifts that they receive from foreign actors, may ultimately jeopardize their credibility and compromise their independence.

It is safe to say that this phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by the political institutions of the UK As was previously mentioned, in 2019, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons produced a report where they revealed how foreign autocratic interference had caused a number of incidents across UK universities – which ranged from the taping of sensitive conversations on campus to the exertion of pressure to cancel academic events –, as well as exposed the latter's risks and actively criticized the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for failing to recognize how autocracies pose a threat to academia, for not developing a strategy so that UK universities could be better prepared to respond to such threats and for failing to 'engage directly with counterparts in the US, Australia or elsewhere to share best practice' (Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 9).

These are not the only examples of such a phenomenon in the European context. For instance, Sweden's tensions with China have culminated in the decision to shut down all Confucius Institutes and teaching programs in the former's territory. In fact, according to a Radio Free Asia news article, Stockholm University had already chosen to close its Confucius Institute back in 2015 citing 'Chinese insistence on greater control over the running of the institute' (Feng 2020).

Moreover, other sources have also direct or indirectly accused Confucius Institutes of engaging in suspicious activities throughout Europe. In 2019, Belgian authorities banned Renmin University professor Song Xinning, the head of a Confucius Institute in Brussels, from entering the Schengen area due to espionage claims. According to a South China Morning Post article, Xinning 'was accused of acting as a recruiter for Chinese intelligence services and hiring informants from the Chinese student and business communities in Belgium' (Lo 2020). Although the ban was recently overturned due to a procedural technicality, the courts did not alter their ruling on the espionage claims.

THE BRITISH CASE

As was previously mentioned, it is no secret that a significant number of foreign students choose to pursue their studies at UK higher education institutions. In fact, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there are just over 485,000 foreign students presently enrolled in courses at UK universities. Chinese students alone represent approximately 25 per cent and 35 per cent of all foreign students and non-EU students who attend courses at UK universities, respectively. As shown in figure 1 below, this segment has witnessed a sharp rise in the last five years, especially when compared to the numbers of foreign students that were registered for other non-EU countries during the same time period.

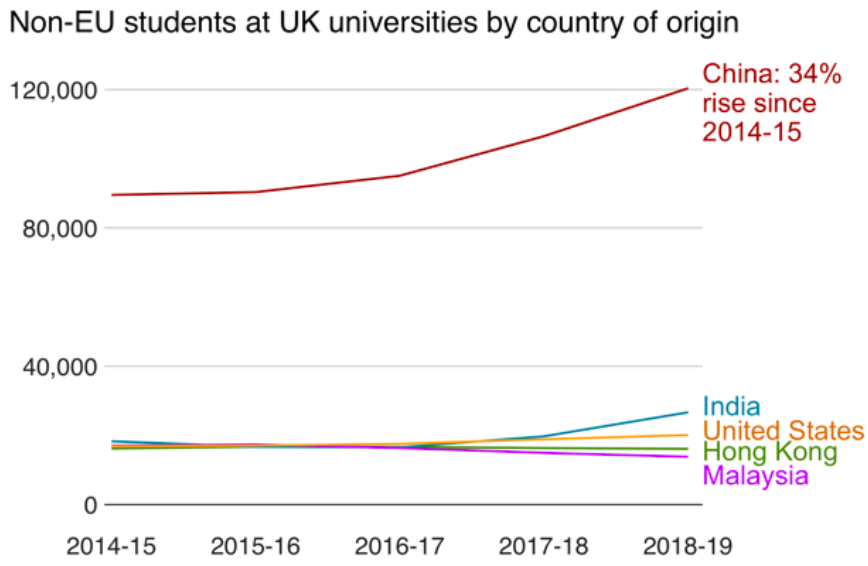

Figure 1: Evolution of non-EU students at UK universities by country of origin
Source: BBC News & Higher Education Statistics Agency

English universities in particular concentrate a higher number of foreign students than the higher education institutions of the other nations that compose the UK. As a recent Office for Students (OfS) note stated, as of the 2017-2018 academic year, there were over 370,000 international students enrolled at English higher education institutions, which roughly represents 20 per cent of the total student population in England. In fact, according to the OfS note, the more than 100,000 Chinese students enrolled in courses at English higher education providers represent 22.3 per cent of all international students, making up 'by far the largest group of international students in England' ('Coronavirus Briefing note' 2020), to such an extent that it is 'even larger than students from all EU countries put together' ('Coronavirus

Briefing note' 2020). It is also relevant to emphasize that, since the 2014-2015 academic year, and over a five-year time-period, there has been a 46 per cent increase in Chinese students who have chosen to pursue their higher education studies in England.

This data alone may help explain why UK universities – and English universities in particular – seem to have been more affected by either direct and indirect foreign autocratic interference than other higher education institutions in Europe. Indeed, universities' growing dependency on foreign students, as well as from foreign philanthropic donations and other investments, creates a context that makes it more likely for those who are professionally tied to these institutions to engage in a behaviour that may compromise academic freedom whenever they might find themselves dealing with sensitive matters. In most cases, these actions are perpetuated in order to safeguard the institution's links with the foreign actors that they are dependent on, which may ultimately guarantee their overall financial stability.

In general, this relation of dependency has become more accentuated due to the rising trend of managerialism in the world of academia, as the functioning of universities has gradually shifted from a collegial to a more corporate model. In fact, this shift was not only generally desired by the heads of the institutions of higher education themselves – who, amid a period of state funding restraints, wished to diversify the provenance of their revenue and, hence, rely more heavily on private funding –, but it was also, as Karran (2007: 3) put it, 'endorsed by national governments, often acting on and prompted by the findings of national committees of inquiry.'

In the UK, the so-called Dearing report of 1997, formally entitled *Higher Education in a Learning Society*, helped promote the shift towards a more corporate model in academia. The extensive report, which was published in the beginning of Tony Blair's New Labour government, recommended, although not exclusively, implementing a different funding scheme that would famously involve the introduction of tuition fees on the basis that higher education should not be solely funded by the taxpayer.

As a result of this newfound liberty to procure other sources of funding, universities hastily developed strategies aimed at increasing student numbers. In fact, universities were especially keen on expanding their internationalization strategies in order to allure more foreign students and ultimately protect the reputation of the British diploma in the global marketplace, which was also a central concern of the Dearing report. As is shown in figure 2, despite the fact that the UK already had a large number of foreign students in the beginning of the Twenty-first century, these internationalization efforts seemed to have been successful, given that the number of international students in the UK more than doubled in less than two decades.

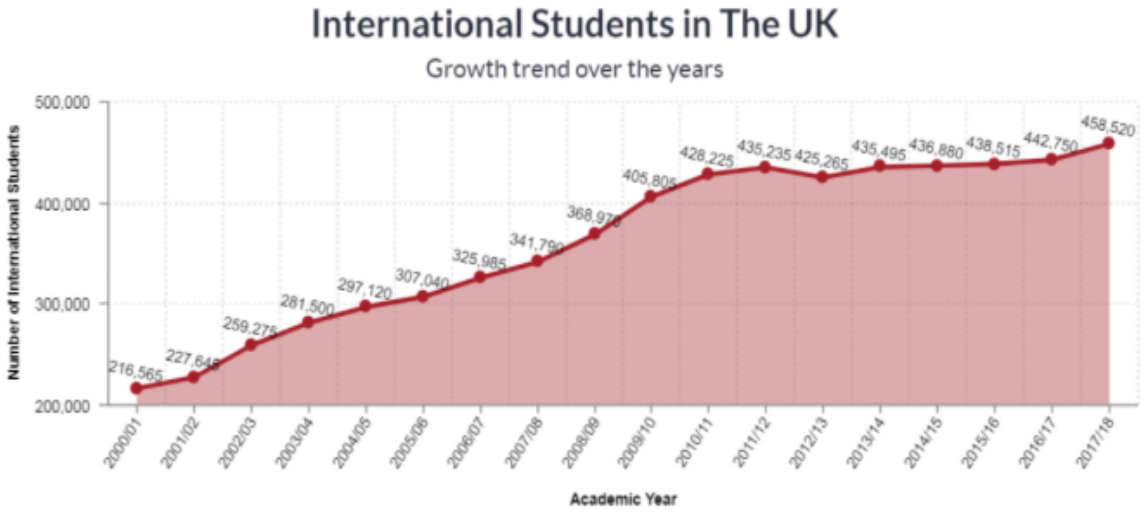

Figure 2: Number of international students in the UK over the last two decades
Source: Studying-in-uk.org

According to some authors, this rising trend of managerialism in academia was bound to come into conflict with academic freedom. On this matter, Tierney (2001: 13) writes that these trends can pose a set of risks, and notes that 'if deans and departmental heads, for example, are seen exclusively as managers, a culture will be developed where academic freedom is irrelevant and may not even be discussed.'

Whilst it is difficult to assess, without a trace of doubt, whether the higher education policies that were enacted in the beginning of the Twenty-first Century are effectively responsible for undermining the protection of academic freedom, it seems plausible that such policies created a context which made universities more vulnerable to succumbing to a number of internal and/or external pressures that may compromise academic freedom in the long run. Karran's earlier findings (2007) may help prove the validity of this thesis.

Nation	Constitutional Protection	Specific Legislative Protection	Self Governance	Appointment of Rector	Academic Tenure
Finland	High	High	High	High	High
Slovenia	High	High	High	High	High
Czech Republic	High	High	High	High	High
Hungary	High	High	High	High	High
Spain	High	High	High	High	High
Latvia	High	High	High	High	Medium
Lithuania	High	High	High	High	Medium
Slovakia	High	High	High	High	Medium
Poland	High	Medium	High	High	High
Austria	High	Medium	High	High	Medium
France	Medium	High	Medium	High	High
Portugal	High	Medium	Medium	High	High
Italy	High	Low	High	High	Medium
Greece	Medium	Low	Medium	High	High
Estonia	High	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
Germany	Medium	High	High	Medium	Medium
Ireland	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Luxembourg	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Malta	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Low
Sweden	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	High
Denmark	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Netherlands	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
U.K.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Figure 2: Summary of results in the five categories that Karran assessed for the 28 EU member-states at the time of his work
Source: (Karran 2007: 19)

In his comparative research, where he set out to assess the level of protection of academic freedom in the 28 member-states that composed the EU at the time, Karran came to the conclusion that the UK actually held low scores in all of the five categories that were analysed – namely constitutional protection, specific legislative protection, self-governance, the appointment of the rector and academic tenure –, which can be verified in figure 3. On this matter, Karran wrote that:

> By contrast, in the UK, there is no constitutional protection for either freedom of speech or academic freedom, the law on academic freedom is designed to ensure 'just cause' for employment termination, the academic staff have only a minor input in the decision-making process, the Rector is an external appointment over which they have no rights, and academic tenure exists for only a few staff, who are dwindling in number as retirement beckons (Karran 2007: 19).

Nonetheless, according to the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), an expert-based index that sets out to measure academic freedom on a global scale, the UK has a very positive overall score – 0.93 out of 1 –, with good performances in indicators that include freedom to research and teach, institutional autonomy, freedom of discussion and campus integrity, as is shown in figure 4. It is especially interesting to note that, according to the AFI, not only did the UK's campus integrity and institutional autonomy scores remain stable in the last four decades, but its overall academic freedom score actually increased since the beginning of the Twenty-first century, which essentially contradicts the thesis that was previously put forward.

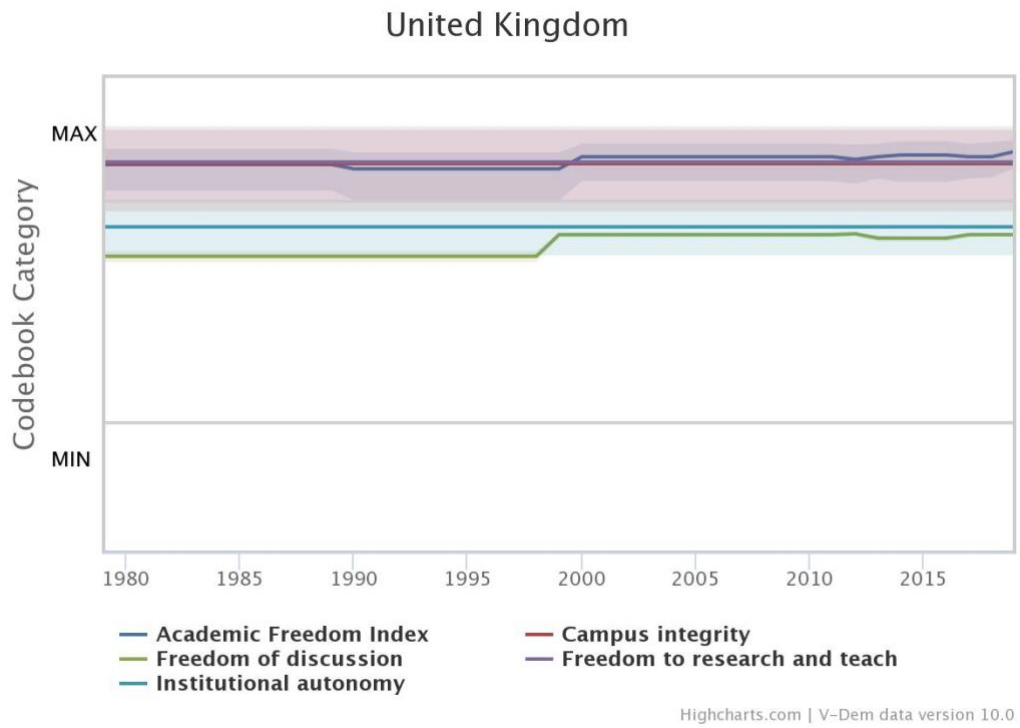

Figure 3: UK's country graph in regard to five categories within the Academic Freedom Index
Source: V-Dem Institute

This contradiction is, to a certain extent, emulated in the present discussion concerning the strategies that must be applied when dealing with foreign actors and, most importantly, on how to tackle foreign interference in the academic context and ultimately safeguard academic freedom. Whilst the 2019 House of Commons report on this matter is clear on the dangers of this phenomenon and reminds that 'the need for universities to attract more funding and grow internationally can come into conflict with the principle of academic freedom' (Foreign Affairs Committee 2019: 5), a British government policy paper of the same year entitled *International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth* not only did not address

this issue, but also set out even more ambitious objectives for the education sector, which included ‘increasing the value of [our] education exports to £35 billion per year, and increasing the number of international higher education students hosted in the UK to 600,000 per year, both by 2030’ (‘International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth’ 2019), without weighing in on the implications that such a policy may potentially have on the protection of academic freedom – especially if no strategy aimed at counteracting foreign interference in academia is parallelly outlined.

CONCLUSION

The surge in the number of international students at western universities, particularly Chinese students, as well as the increased attention that the media and the political institutions in several democratic nations have been recently paying to the phenomenon in question suggest that the relation of dependency between western academic institutions and certain autocratic regimes has deepened in the past decade.

This intricate relation of dependency is not one-sided nor is it inherently problematic. In fact, albeit in dissimilar ways, it provides substantial benefits to all parts involved. Whilst autocratic regimes rely on western academic institutions for educating a growing part of their own population and for establishing further bilateral or multilateral academic and research partnerships, western academic institutions also benefit from the latter, as well as from the increasing revenue that is generated by international students’ fees and from the overall reinforcement of the reputation of these western institutions and their academic standards in the global marketplace.

In fact, global academic cooperation is essential for the financial success of numerous academic projects, as well as the viability of countless institutions. Hence, such broad cooperation is crucial for the continued evolution of scientific progress and economic development all around the world. This fact alone explains why political actors often avoid taking definite stances when dealing with autocratic interference in western academia. The political institutions of the western world seem to be aware of the gravity of this phenomenon, but understandably do not wish to jeopardize important academic partnerships with foreign academic institutions that are vital for their own nation’s long-term scientific progress and economic stability.

However, despite the obvious importance of international academic cooperation between all nations and regardless of their political system, one must recognize that partnering with autocratic regimes inevitably carries risks for academic institutions in democratic settings. For one, its effects on academic freedom in the west are clear. The financial dependency on autocratic actors creates a context that makes it more likely for the associates of western academic institutions to behave in a way that may ultimately compromise academic freedom in the name of economic viability. Even the most reputable academic institutions, such as the Cambridge University Press, have succumb to the effects of foreign autocratic interference in order to preserve their activities in a foreign country, as well as maintain their relations with a foreign actor.

Additionally, one must consider that the financial implications of this relation may well surpass its effects on universities and academic freedom, especially if there is an excessive reliance on the revenue of students from one country in particular. For instance, according to a recent survey that was carried out by the China-Britain Business Council, 'links with China in trade, tourism and higher education support up to 150,000 UK jobs' (Fairbairn 2020). In addition, according to the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the world's largest non-profit association dedicated to international education and exchange, Chinese students presently contribute approximately $13 billion to the US economy ('Trade war: How reliant are US colleges on Chinese students?' 2019).

Indeed, this exposure may not only compromise universities' long-term viability, but it may also negatively affect other sectors of the economy which also partly rely on the revenue from international students' and their consumption habits abroad if, for whatever reason, they are impeded from enrolling or frequenting their courses overseas – which has, to some extent, recently been the case with the restrictions imposed as a result of the worldwide covid-19 pandemic. The risk increases when academic institutions heavily rely on one or more autocratic countries that, albeit unlikely, can more easily choose to prevent their citizens from travelling abroad at any time and without a legitimate justification.

Thus, and taking into consideration the imperative role that academic institutions play within democratic regimes, it is not unreasonable to be cautious about this relation of dependency towards autocratic partners, nor to consider the phenomenon of foreign autocratic

interference in western academia as an indirect form of economic statecraft and a projection of sharp power on behalf of certain autocratic regimes.

Although it is impossible to attribute a single cause to the phenomenon in question, it seems reasonable to conclude that the adoption of a more corporate model in the management of western universities indirectly placed academic institutions that wished to diversify their revenue and open up to the global market in a more vulnerable position to interference from external actors, especially those from autocratic regimes.

Additionally, it seems interesting to note that the debate on how to tackle foreign interference in academia is simultaneously occurring at a time when western contemporary society is now more openly debating whether certain strategic sectors of the economy should be open to receiving investment from autocratic regimes and, if so, on what terms such investments must occur.

Most importantly, it is clear that there must be a greater balance between the imperative need for global academic cooperation, as well as the necessity for western universities to expand internationally and seek greater recognition in the global marketplace, with the creation of political strategies that protect western academic institutions from external interference that can jeopardize academic freedom and may ultimately threaten their role within democratic societies. The solution does not reside in limiting academic partnerships with foreign actors but in re-evaluating the consequences that overexposure to authoritarian regimes produce in both the western academic sector and in society as a whole and to consequently establish a set of more rigid guidelines for the interactions that occur between western academic institutions and those which operate in non-democratic political regimes.

Australia is perhaps the best example of a nation that, albeit intricately dependent on a major authoritarian power, has not shied away from taking a stance on this issue and proceeding with real political efforts into evaluating the extent to which the democratic processes are subject to foreign meddling. Its political institutions have aimed to achieve greater transparency through the implementation of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITSA) in 2018, as well as to ensure the protection of academic freedom with the creation of the University Foreign Interference Taskforce in 2019 – in a collaborative process where universities and security agencies were included. Only time will tell if these instruments can

successfully tackle the phenomenon of foreign autocratic interference in the Australian academic context. Nevertheless, it is evident that Australia has set a good example for other countries to follow.

Recommendations

1. The political leaders of democratic countries should reflect on the risks that excessive external dependence entail at the academic level and how the weakening of academic freedom calls into question our entire democratic system, namely by elaborating reports that outline the country's situation similar to the document that was produced by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons in 2019;

2. The political leaders of democratic countries should outline a joint strategy on how to prevent the occurrence of cases that may jeopardize academic freedom in the future, not without taking into account the benefits that derive from international academic cooperation, nor without failing to observe that economic growth, technological advancement and scientific knowledge would be seriously damaged if transnational partnerships were to be interrupted;

3. All universities should strive to make their academic and financial partnerships more transparent, especially those which involve foreign actors, as is often suggested by Transparency International;

4. All universities should adopt a universal code of conduct similar to that which has been produced by Human Rights Watch;

5. The political leaders of democratic countries should look up to countries like Australia, which have adopted concrete measures aimed at tackling foreign autocratic interference in their academic institutions through instruments such as the University Foreign Interference Taskforce and the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme.

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