

## **Response to 'The Australia-China Relations Institute doesn't belong at UTS', *The Conversation*, June 5 2017**

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*Prior to publication of the piece 'The Australia-China Relations Institute doesn't belong at UTS' (June 5 2017), The Conversation invited the Australia-China Relations Institute to respond to several questions as a right of reply. These are posted [here](#). Following publication, however, it became clear that a more detailed response was needed.*

The author of the article is an expert on the politics of ethnicity, race and national identity in modern Chinese history and society based at La Trobe University. Perhaps he is in a rush to capitalise on the Four Corners-Fairfax investigation into Chinese Communist Party influence in Australia. The critique of ACRI he has produced is rife with erroneous claims.

The mission of ACRI is to illuminate the Australia-China relationship. It is the only think tank in the country with this mission. It was launched by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, it has been addressed by Special Envoy for Trade Andrew Robb, NSW Premier Mike Baird, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, former Ambassadors David Irvine, Ric Smith, Stephen FitzGerald, Ross Garnaut and former Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

Typical of the brazen inaccuracies in the author's attack on ACRI is the claim that "When the [Communist] Party's Minister for Propaganda Liu Qibao visited Australia in 2016, Carr chaired a "dialogue with Sinologists in Australia". Professor Carr did not chair the event, and was one of a dozen Australian Sinologists participating in a roundtable.

In attacking ACRI's research output, the author notably fails to mention that ACRI research is published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, all available on ACRI's [website](#). His criticism of one ACRI poll on Australian public opinion on the East China Sea stating a lack of 'raw data or details on the methodology employed' ignores the unmissable opening line on the [poll page](#): "A representative sample of 1000 people over the age of eighteen were surveyed online by UMR Strategic."

In three years, ACRI has published seven long-form research reports from external academics who are all highly regarded in their fields. Again, these are all available on ACRI's [website](#).

In February 2017, ACRI co-hosted a conference on the South China Sea with the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. The conference was attended by about 20 scholars from the US, China, Russia and Europe, as well as from Australia and Asian nations. The conference report is available [here](#).

The author may wish to contact these academics to test his claim that ACRI's research agenda is biased.

The author insinuates that ACRI does not host properly trained experts who have an independent outlook. Yet among its staff members ACRI counts the current and former presidents of the Chinese Economics Society of Australia, both with PhDs and long academic track records of publishing in the best scholarly journals in their fields.

ACRI academics are also regularly invited to participate in conferences hosted by external academic and industry organisations such as the Australian National University, the University of

New South Wales, the Reserve Bank of Australia, Griffith University's Griffith Asia Institute, the Australia-China Business Council, the University of Western Australia, Renmin University, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in the Nanyang Technological University and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

And as for an Australian university "being used as a conduit to promote China's national interest", ACRI has supported the policy taken by the Abbott and Turnbull governments: vigorous diplomacy on the South China Sea, support for the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement and support for Australian membership of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. In opinion pieces [it has warned](#) China would lose if it were locked into an authoritarian mode and [referred](#) to the disasters of the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist legacy and the damage it had done China. It also recently [advocated](#) that Prime Minister Turnbull call China out on a lack of reciprocity in investment market access and for using economic retaliation when countries make sovereign decisions that Beijing does not approve.

The author's claim that "[m]ost of ACRI's activities happen behind closed-doors and large outside the purview of the Australian public" will come as quite a surprise to the thousands who have attended ACRI's many and regular public forums, which are showcased on ACRI's [website](#).

On ACRI's lack of an annual report, ACRI is one of more than 100 research centres within UTS. Across Australia, university research centres that operate wholly within their university are not required to complete separate annual reports or disclose separate financials. (The author may wish to look to his place of employ's own Asia research centre to verify that this is indeed [established practice](#)). Rather, their financial affairs and governance are managed as part of the university through a robust framework of policy and State Government legislation, and included in all formal university-wide reporting.

The author states that “[UTS] now claims to “fully fund” the institute; yet the Bank of China, the China Construction Bank, Yuhu Group, and other Chinese companies are listed as “Chairman’s Council Members” under a description of how ACRI is funded.” The author fails to mention any of the 17 Australian companies – more than four times as many Australian companies than Chinese companies – that are members of ACRI's Chairman's Council. That the Australia-China Relations Institute would have some Chinese companies amongst its supporters is entirely unsurprising.

The article also contains a claim that a visit to China hosted by ACRI for senior Australian journalists prompted some to return to Australia ‘singing the praises of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s showcase “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative’. The insinuation, of course, being that some of Australia's most seasoned journalists are unable to undertake autonomous, critical analysis and unable to adequately weigh the evidence. He has implied they are intellectually incapable, or worse, ethically compromised. Moreover, the author inflated the delegation of journalists from six to eight – a minor point, yes, but one that might also attest to a lack of basic fact-checking. The author may wish to contact the participants to enquire whether they had been pressured to write in a certain way, or indeed, whether they have been pressured to write anything at all.

UTS supports academic freedom in studying the Australia-China relationship. That makes it an ideal place for ACRI to be based.