

# Unis take foreign interference risks seriously

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The security risks that Australian universities face through their many and varied international connections need to be taken seriously.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has disclosed it is 'aware' of various attempts at espionage and interference by foreign powers targeting Australia's research sector.

But Australia's national interest is not served by ill-informed commentary around 'research security' that displays little understanding of what universities do and the risk mitigations already in place.

For its part, [ASIO is clear](#) that while espionage and foreign interference cannot be left unchecked, this 'does not need to come at the expense of the openness and international collaboration that is a hallmark of the higher education and research sector'.

Earlier this month, the [Australian Strategic Policy Institute \(ASPI\)](#) claimed that while AUKUS – the defence technology-sharing partnership between Australia, the US and the UK – 'heralds a transformative era in Australia's strategic posture and scientific landscape', it also 'exposes a critical vulnerability: the susceptibility of our academic institutions to foreign espionage and intellectual property theft'.

The Chinese Communist Party was named as the 'principal antagonist' and 'willing to use any means necessary' to achieve its science and technology ambitions. Talent recruitment initiatives sponsored by Beijing, like the 'Thousand Talents Program', were cited as 'a stark example'.

Yet Mike Burgess, the director-general of ASIO, has [put on the public record](#) that 'being a member of the Thousand Talents Program of itself is no problem ...[it] is not in itself a problem for me or Australia in general'. What matters for Burgess is that any participation by Australian researchers is transparent.

More fundamentally, what ASPI misses is that the assumption China lags Australia in scientific prowess, and the AUKUS grouping more broadly, is hopelessly outdated.

A [report last month by the Group of Eight \(Go8\)](#) research-intensive Australian universities quantified the volume of knowledge being created in 12 AUKUS-related research fields, ranging from 'computer science – artificial intelligence' to 'oceanography'. Over the period 2018–2022, China produced more high-impact scientific publications than Australia in all 12 fields, and more than the combined output of the AUKUS grouping in eight.

Of course, Australia may still have specific areas of expertise within each field that could be of interest to Chinese intelligence agencies.

But that links to another key point of context that ASPI misses.

Universities overwhelmingly do not undertake research covered by Defence Trade Controls (DTCs), let alone research that is 'classified'.

According to data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in May, in 2022 spending by the higher education sector on research and development (R&D) related to 'defence' stood at \$305 million. This was just 2 percent of their total R&D spending, worth \$14 billion.

When the [Defence Trade Controls Amendment Bill 2024](#) passed the Australian parliament in March to facilitate technology sharing among AUKUS partners, it included a commonsense carve-out for 'fundamental research'.

This is the bread and butter of Australian universities and is defined as 'basic or applied research' that is 'intended for public disclosure, or [that] would ordinarily be published or shared broadly'.

Last week, Emily Hall, assistant secretary of defence export controls at the Department of Defence, said that by modifying an existing exemption that referred to 'basic research', 'the threshold is now lower for what equates to fundamental research, meaning a greater range of research activities will qualify, and thereby not require a permit'.

The key point is this: Chinese spies do not need to 'steal' the findings of Australian university researchers because they can just read about it in open-access, academic journals.

And American and Chinese university researchers clamour to publish their findings in those same journals, often times collaborating with each other to do so.

According to the InCites database of high-impact scientific publications, over the period 2018-2022, China was a more important research partner to the US than the combined weight of Australia and the UK in 11 of the 12 AUKUS-related fields that were catalogued by the Go8.

When Australian researchers do undertake projects covered by DTCs, they must apply for a permit issued by the Department of Defence. ASIO's Burgess was asked in Senate Estimates in 2021 whether he was aware of any breaches of DTCs by university researchers and replied that he was not.

[The same year Burgess](#) said that universities were 'very much' listening to his agency's warnings around foreign interference. He [added that he was 'comfortable'](#) the responses produced by the Universities Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT), established in 2019 as a joint initiative between universities and the Australian Government, were proving effective and that he was 'not predisposed to create some new agency or body'.

The following year, [Burgess continued to assess](#) that the challenges were being 'well managed' and commended universities for their 'excellent work'.

On the relatively rare occasions when universities do undertake research that is sensitive and classified, it is subject to an entirely different set of risk mitigations than those applying to 'fundamental research'.

An example is the [Defence Security Principles Framework](#) that applies to research partners of the Department of Defence. This goes to security governance (assigned senior-level responsibility holders, etc), personnel security (counterespionage training, security clearances, etc), physical security (cameras, restricted entry doors, etc) and ICT and cyber security (separated networks, etc).

[The Vault](#) at The University of Technology Sydney is an example of a facility that was purpose-built with satisfying these mitigations in mind.

Far from possessing a 'a critical vulnerability', by working with the Australian government, including its security agencies, universities have proven adept at recognising and responding to espionage and foreign interference risks.

As the director of the Australian National University's Research School of Physics, Tim Senden, has assessed, these days an arguably greater risk is universities failing to take a 'common sense approach' to their international engagement on the basis of the laws, regulations and guidelines put in place. Instead, university managers may send mixed messages to researchers, causing them to 'self-censor' and avoid some potentially fruitful collaborations.

This is unfortunate because, with appropriate mitigations in place, much mutually beneficial collaboration between Australian and Chinese researchers remains not only remains possible, but desirable for the national interest.

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