

# University spies claims rejected

Sydney vice-chancellor slams allegations of foreign infiltration and influence on Australian campuses as baseless

By **KARL WILSON** in Sydney  
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**T**he vice-chancellor of one of Australia's leading universities has spoken out against the federal government's claims that foreign spies have infiltrated the campuses of Australian universities.

In a recent interview with the *Weekend Financial Review*, Michael Spence from the University of Sydney said the government was making "Sinophobic blatherings" in its attempt to take a tougher stand against foreign interference in domestic politics.

He said the claims — which many observers had said were primarily aimed at China — "have no foundation" and were putting at risk a significant sector of the economy.

Tertiary education — fed by foreign students — was Australia's third-largest export industry in 2016-17, pulling in A\$28 billion (\$22.5 billion). Education accounted for more than half of Australia's export trade to China.

In 2017, the Australian government claimed that China was using students as spies on the campuses of Australian universities.

The government is also planning to introduce a foreign interference law to curb what it sees as undue influence now being exerted by foreign governments on Australia's internal affairs.

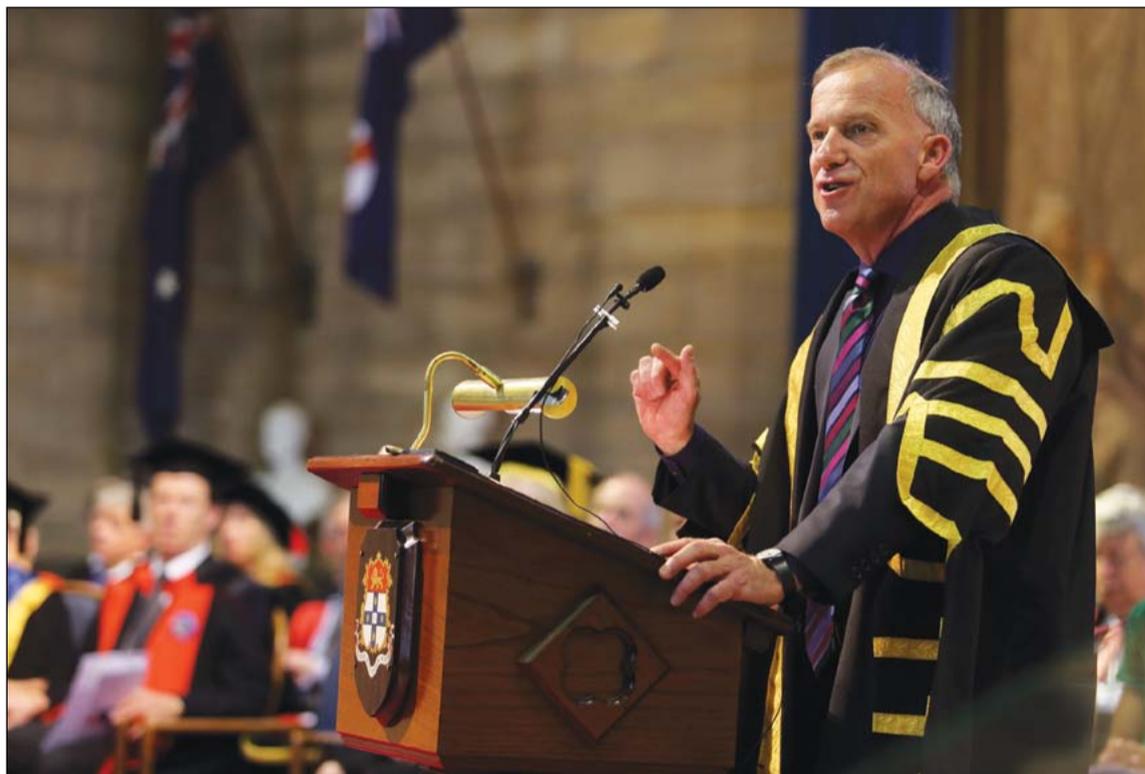
The legislation, if approved, will not only have an impact on foreign think tanks but on media companies, foreign charities, lawyers, church groups and universities.

The proposed new law comes on the back of a major political scandal in 2017, which saw the resignation of high-profile Labor senator Sam Dastyari over claims that he had been "bought" by a Chinese businessman with connections to the Chinese government. The senator denied the claims.

In an interview with *China Daily Asia Weekly*, Spence said he was not prepared to comment on the proposed legislation. "But what concerns me are the allegations made by the Australian government about the influence of China in Australian university life."

As the head of Australia's oldest university, with a 67,000 student body and 15,000 high-fee-paying overseas Chinese students, Spence said: "Frankly, I just don't see any evidence of this."

He said while Chinese student



**Michael Spence**, University of Sydney vice-chancellor, accuses the Australian government of "Sinophobic blatherings". PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

numbers have not changed, "the chatter on Chinese social media is starting to question whether or not Australia is such a friendly place to be".

"That is a worrying development as we have not seen that before. Chinese students have always seen us as an open, welcoming country."

Spence said his concern is not with the geopolitics but with the "freedom" academics and students enjoy at universities in Australia.

"Universities no longer work in isolation; they cooperate in research, student and academic exchanges," he said.

At present, the University of Sydney has over 250 researchers working with Chinese counterparts on issues ranging from healthcare to engineering and economics.

"We are involved in a number of programs with Chinese researchers that will benefit China and the region as a whole."

Spence noted that researchers from the University of Sydney "have been working at this for a long time ... even before Australia formally recognized China."

He cited the case of Professor Wilber Christiansen, Australia's leading radio astronomer, who helped China build its first radio telescope in the 1960s.

More recently, Professor Branka Vucetic received a China friendship

award in 2014 for her work with Chinese tertiary institutions and her contribution to furthering education, science and technology in China, he added.

Professor Robert Park received a China friendship award in 2009 for his work in introducing strains of disease-resistant cereal crops to China.

Spence also pointed to Professor Creswell Eastman, who has worked in China for decades helping to abolish iodine deficiency disorders.

Children born to mothers deficient in iodine can suffer a range of defects, including mental retardation, deafness, and speech and physical impairments. Eastman's transformative work with populations in China's remote areas led him to be dubbed as "the man who saved a million brains".

"These are major achievements by just some of our academics working in China," Spence said.

In 2017, he added, there was an incident at the university in which some Chinese students questioned a lecturer's map of China and India that incorrectly showed a disputed border.

"It wasn't a problem. The lecturer realized the information was wrong and apologized. Isn't that what a university is all about? To encourage students to question."

Noting that the University of Syd-

ney has students from 120 different countries, Spence said: "Not all those countries hold the same political values as we do."

"And it is true some of those countries take an interest in their students abroad. My job is to make sure there is no undue influence on students or academics and to create an environment where they are free to speak."

"Students have different points of view and we provide the space for that diversity of opinion and freedom to express those opinions. You may not agree with them, but that is the whole point of a university."

Stressing the university's commitment to academic freedom, Spence said: "Our experience with Chinese officials and the Chinese Ministry of Education has been excellent and they understand our commitment to academic freedom."

He added that the Chinese government is investing "huge sums of money" into medical and scientific research.

"It is important that we leverage our relationship with Chinese researchers. When you are trying to cure cancer, for example, geopolitics doesn't come into it. These are issues common to our region. If we don't take part, we will be left behind."

Spence said the university has not heard anything official from China

about the current debate on the proposed law. But unofficially, he added: "We are hearing people are baffled by the Australian government."

"They are asking: Why, after such a long and close relationship, is the university sector being treated with such suspicion by the Australian government?"

According to the US National Science Foundation, China has now overtaken the United States in terms of the total number of science publications. In 2016, China published more than 426,000 studies compared to the US' nearly 409,000.

Spence said the University of Sydney has a more active research collaboration with China than any other Australian university.

"We've published more than 3,200 joint research papers in the last three years, compared to the University of NSW with 2,790 and the University of Melbourne with 2,223," he said.

On Jan 31, the federal education minister, Simon Birmingham, said Spence's recent "Sinophobic blathering" comments were "deepening the damage over Chinese students", adding that the vice-chancellor should concentrate his efforts on being an education advocate.

"The government's new foreign interference laws are designed to safeguard all aspects of the Australian economy, including international education," Birmingham said.

"That means ensuring our universities are places where you can challenge ideas or have your own ideas challenged."

On Jan 30, representatives from university, business, legal and religious groups appeared before a Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security hearing, where they argued that the proposed foreign interference legislation was "too broad" and did not involve adequate consultation.

Vicki Thomson, chief executive of the Group of Eight — a coalition of Australia's top universities including the University of Sydney — said exemptions need to be made in the legislation.

"Much of our world-class research is carried out with global partners ... that is the only way research can succeed," she said.

She told the hearing that "given the severe penalties for breaches, and the uncertainty created by the vast gray area established by the broad language of the bill, it is likely that without an academic exemption, universities will act in a precautionary way".