



Inquiry into national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and research sector

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To the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and research sector.

Science & Technology Australia (STA) is the peak body representing more than 88,000 scientists and technologists in Australia. We do so through our member organisations including specialist scientific societies, research institutes, and research strategy bodies such as councils of deans.

Strong global engagement is crucial to science and research. Without it, the Australian science and technology sector would be left behind. Australia derives a vast benefit from international collaborations and connections, gaining access to new innovations at a greater level than we generate.

Without deep global engagement, we risk becoming a nation of adoption rather than innovation. Such an approach would leave Australia in the hands of foreign nations to make innovations accessible, amplifying both costs and risks (Seebeck, 2020).

The science and technology sector is carefully attentive to the broad risks of foreign interference and the potential for intellectual property theft. To anticipate, respond and mitigate such risks, the science and technology sector regularly engages with a wide array of Government bodies and legislation to protect the sector and its intellectual property.

On behalf of the science and technology sector in Australia, this submission will focus specifically on two of the terms of reference outlined in this inquiry:

- The sector's awareness of foreign interference, undisclosed foreign influence, data theft and espionage, and its capacity to identify and respond to these threats; and
- The adequacy and effectiveness of Australian Government policies and programs in identifying and responding to foreign interference, undisclosed foreign influence, data theft and espionage in the sector;

The sector's awareness of foreign interference, undisclosed foreign influence, data theft and espionage, and its capacity to identify and respond to these threats;

The higher education and research sector is very attentive to the broad risks of foreign interference and the potential for intellectual property theft. This awareness is reflected in detailed engagement and work with the Australian Government over many years.

As the body representing science and technology professionals, STA has provided input to the Australian Government on:

- [protecting critical infrastructure](#),
- [foreign relationships](#), and
- [defence trade controls](#).

Beyond the work that STA has undertaken, including in recent years, the sector's constituent parts regularly engage with both state and federal Government bodies highlighting their engagement on risk mitigation. Requests to universities to strengthen

conflict of interest reporting has been readily accepted (Grundy et al., 2018), funding bodies specifically ask for information from national security agencies on foreign engagement (Australian Research Council, 2020), and researchers continue to report regularly on research covered by the Defence Trade Controls Act 2012 (Thom, 2019).

This engagement builds on Australia's procedures for ethical research approvals. Such approvals processes require that Australian research follows strict ethical guidelines including the protection of human rights.

The adequacy and effectiveness of Australian Government policies and programs in identifying and responding to foreign interference, undisclosed foreign influence, data theft and espionage in the Sector;

The wide array of existing Australian Government policies and programs designed to monitor these risks are extensive and effective.

The breadth of policies and programs that monitor or regulate research and foreign interference is extensive. They include:

- The University Foreign Interference Taskforce
- The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research
- The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research
- The Defence Trade Controls Act
- The critical infrastructure protection legislation
- Visa regulations
- International and Australian sanctions
- Australia's foreign relationships legislation
- Foreign investment legislation
- State corruption bodies and ombudsmen
- Annual state auditors reports on university financial risks
- National interest tests
- Expert peer review processes.

This is a significant level of regulation and oversight at internal, state/federal government levels, and from independent bodies. This oversight of science, technology, and research creates a significant amount of reporting and red tape for researchers and research organisations. Every dollar spent complying with oversight reporting obligations is a dollar not spent on investment in new science and technological breakthroughs. There is always a careful balance to be struck here.

The breadth and number of these frameworks creates multiple layers of protection. The Australian Research Council now requires applicants to disclose international collaborations when applying for grants. At a university level, staff are required to register their interests including international engagements.

The breadth of this oversight covers every aspect of the science, technology and research process in international engagement. Through the University Foreign Interference taskforce and the critical infrastructure legislation, any work undertaken in Australia is also protected.

The current Australian Government policies and programs also enable the research community and Government agencies to work closely to anticipate future threats. Regular engagement through UFIT and the capability for the Government to adapt the rules of the protecting critical infrastructure bill and the Defence Trade Controls List allows for quick adaptation. Through this flexibility, STA considers the current policies and programs are adequate.

STA also highlights the readiness of the science and technology sector to report on research that falls within the scope of the Defence Trade Controls Act. In the most recent review of this legislation, it was stated that researchers actually over-report the work they undertake.

In conclusion, STA recognises the importance of protecting Australian research from foreign interference. It is also important to recognise the benefits that Australia receives from engaging in the global science and technology sector.



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