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PHOTO: YAN XIA



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## Our Universities Are a Frontline in China's Ideological Wars

President Xi Jinping is returning politics to the commanding heights of Chinese education.

He's told teachers to "educate and guide their students to love the motherland, love the people, and love the Communist Party of China." He's rallied lecturers to "guard the party's ideology" and "dare to unsheath the sword." And, most challenging for us, Xi has made clear that his primary enemies are the liberal values that undermine his political system but underpin our own. "There is no way that universities can allow teaching materials preaching Western values into our classrooms," Xi's Education Minister explained.

The liberal values of freedom, equality and individual dignity are under greater strain in China than they have been for decades. The room for rational debate and open, evidence-based critical inquiry is shrinking. And the political rewards for blind patriotism – a racialised patriotism that conflates "the motherland" with "the party" – are high and rising.

The challenge for the democratic world is that Xi's deepening struggle against liberal values does not end at China's borders. To the contrary, Xi has been rebuilding and reinvigorating the old revolutionary machinery – core institutions like the United Front Work Department and its myriad platforms – to export his ideological battle to the world. "Overseas Chinese have red-hot patriotic sentiment," as Xi told delegates to the Seventh World Get-Together Meeting of Overseas Chinese Social Groups, early in his tenure.

The Communist Party's war against liberal values and its growing international reach presents Australia with challenges we've not seen before.

Last year the Ministry of Education issued new instructions to its counsellors at diplomatic missions around the world: "Build a multidimensional contact network linking home and abroad – the motherland, embassies and consulates, overseas student groups, and the broad number of students abroad – so that they fully feel that the motherland cares."

And nowhere are the challenges greater than at our universities.

In recent months we've seen denunciations of Australian university lecturers who have offended Beijing's patriotic sensibilities.

A lecturer at the Australian National University was excoriated on Chinese language social media channels for "insensitively" displaying this warning – "I will not tolerate students who cheat" – in both English and Chinese. He was forced to issue a long apology for any implication that the offenders spoke Chinese.

A lecturer at the University of Sydney was castigated for using an online map of the world which, if you looked extremely closely, showed an Indian demarcation of the Himalayan border. The lecturer apologised after being found guilty by a WeChat group called Australian Red Scarf – which focused on the lecturer's Indian-looking name.

And then there was the convoy of Bentleys and Lamborghinis

that wound its way past Sydney University and UTS before revving engines outside the Indian consulate on August 15, India's Independence Day. "Anyone who offends China will be killed," said one of the car door slogans, quoting from China's biggest grossing film, *Wolf Warrior 2*. Racial chauvinism is only one of the challenges that Beijing is exporting to universities. Look at recent controversies involving Cambridge University Press and its experiment with mass censorship. Or the enormous private donations to Harvard. Or the attacks on a Chinese student for praising the "fresh air" at the University of Maryland.

Singapore has just expelled a prominent professor of international relations – a Chinese-born US citizen – because he allegedly "knowingly interacted with intelligence organisations" and "co-operated with them to influence the Singapore government's foreign policy and public opinion in Singapore."

This case has implications for the integrity of academic systems everywhere. The professor's work, for example, features on the cover of the current edition of an influential Australian university magazine.

There can be no doubting the pressure on universities to fill classrooms with full fee-paying foreign students, generate private donations, and rise up the research rankings.

But they will need to find a way to reconcile their scholarly values and principles with the political objectives of their dominant customer.

How should university

leaders respond to the Party's latest instructions to "set up party cells in Sino-foreign joint education projects" – as set out in an edict from the Ministry of Education cited by the Beijing-based advisory China Policy. The edict goes on to ensure that cadres are properly compensated for the time-consuming work of "monitoring the ideological orientation of young faculty [members] and overseas returnees."

The reputational and commercial risks for our universities are potentially enormous. And there will be new legal risks to navigate when the Prime Minister and Attorney-General deliver sweeping counterintelligence reforms later this year. Mr Turnbull has made clear that he does not look kindly upon countries seeking advantage "through corruption, interference or coercion."

To manage these risks our universities will need to reach out to alienated students, fix the failures of integration and improve their products. They'll need full-spectrum resilience strategies to shore up vulnerabilities and uphold the principles of open and critical inquiry which they are built upon. Most of all, they will have to look at what the Chinese Communist Party is doing on their campuses and do a better job of hearing what it says.

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