

Foreign states targeting sensitive research at UK universities, MI5 warns

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MI5 has warned universities that hostile foreign states are targeting sensitive research, as ministers consider measures to bolster protections. Vice-chancellors from 24 leading institutions, including Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London, were briefed on the threat by the domestic security service's director general, Ken McCallum, and National Cybersecurity Centre (NCSC) chief, Felicity Oswald. In addition, the UK government is looking at increased funding to improve security at sensitive sites. Oliver Dowden, the deputy prime minister, announced plans for a consultation on a package of measures that could include looking at key university personnel being given security clearance and a strengthened process to improve the transparency of funding, particularly with foreign institutions. The measures will be focused on a small proportion of academic work, with a particular focus on research with potential dual uses in civilian and military life. McCallum told the vice-chancellors that hostile states are targeting universities to steal technology that can "deliver their authoritarian, military and commercial priorities", the Times reported. The government ordered a review of protections for higher education in its refreshed foreign and security policy last year amid concerns that hostile states – and particularly China – were gaining undue influence over the sector. Dowden has previously warned that some universities' reliance on overseas funding could leave them open to being "influenced, exploited, or even coerced" by a foreign power. After the security briefing, Dowden said: "For a millennium, our universities have thrived on being open – open to ideas, open to innovation, open to being independent of government. "This is not about erecting fences, this is about balancing evolving threats and protecting the integrity and security of our great institutions." The consultation will explore proposals to protect cutting-edge technology under development in sensitive sectors that are being targeted by states intent on stealing intellectual property to enhance their own economic and military capabilities. The NCSC and the National Protective Security Authority have also launched a tool to help universities assess their research security. Michelle Donelan, the science and technology secretary, said: "I believe that universities are on the frontlines of a battle for information. "Maintaining the UK's world-leading reputation as an academic superpower relies on having strong safeguards to protect research from those who wish to do us harm." Tim Bradshaw, chief executive of the Russell Group of leading research universities, said: "Russell Group universities take their national security responsibilities incredibly seriously and already work closely with government and the intelligence community to help protect UK breakthroughs in fields like AI, which are important to our national interest. "But we also recognise security is a dynamic and evolving challenge which means we need the right expertise and intelligence to keep pace with this." Universities UK chief

executive Vivienne Stern said: "For several years, Universities UK has worked with government to ensure that universities are supported and equipped to recognise and mitigate risks to national security. "This is important and necessary, and we welcome the government's approach to working hand in hand with us to get the mechanisms right."