



A Degree of Influence: The funding of strategically important subjects in UK universities

By Robin Simcox

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Degree of Influence examines the level of foreign funding in British higher education. The report catalogues the financial donations from foreign governments to university subjects that are currently designated by the British government as 'strategically important'. Focusing on financial contributions that are available on the public record to strategically important area and language studies that pertain to the study of the Middle East (including Islamic Studies), East Asia (including China and Japan), and the former Soviet Union, the report examines whether these donations have had a significant effect on higher education in the UK.

The report finds that, in all the strategic subjects studied, the bulk of the cash that is on public record as being injected into UK higher education comes from Arabic and Islamic sources. In addition, donations from the Chinese government, while not significant financially, have ensured a level of influence that is disproportionate to the money injected. Donations from Japanese and Russian governments and businesses are largely inconsequential, in terms of both money donated and influence acquired.

A Degree of Influence has found evidence of the following:

❖ **Censorship of discussion of certain aspects of Islam in UK universities**

UK university staff members have sometimes appeared reluctant to criticise primary donors publicly. For example, an academic chairing a public event on terrorist networks in Europe at St Antony's College, Oxford, stifled discussion on the sources of funding for these networks after a fellow academic raised the subject. The Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) was also forced to take down a photograph taken by a Saudi artist at their gallery after it was deemed to be insulting to Muslims and Islam.

❖ **The running of universities has been altered**

The way in which universities are being run has been altered to match the wishes of donors. For example, the management committee at Islamic Studies centres at the universities of Cambridge and Edinburgh contain appointees picked by Prince Alwaleed, their principal donors. Furthermore, a variety of universities have altered their fields of study in line with the interests and wishes of donors.

❖ **A lack of academic objectivity**

Specialist teaching and research centres have been set up with a specific political agenda. For example, the Al-Maktoum Institute, an independent institution which has its degrees validated by the University of Aberdeen, was established in order to disseminate the 'vision' of its primary donor and namesake. Furthermore, when British universities establish Confucius Institutes, an arm of the Chinese government, the curriculum and teaching standard is decided by the regime, with the university required to accept 'operational guidance' from this regime.

❖ **Universities are being used as diplomatic arms of governments abroad**

Confucius Institutes are openly political organisations which serve as diplomatic arms of the Chinese government abroad. Donations to the LSE from the Turkish government were also openly admitted to be in part political – in order to help their accession to the EU.

❖ **Financial reliance on donors from undemocratic governments**

The way funding has been structured means that often universities cannot run courses or even departments unless they continue to receive donations from abroad. This is especially true of the

Confucius Institutes, and means that some universities are almost entirely reliant on the Chinese government to sustain funding for these institutes.

❖ **A subjective platform for donors**

Undemocratic governments with poor human rights records are given a platform at UK universities to highlight the advantages of their system of government. This often coincides with substantial donations. For example, following a donation from Saudi Arabia, the King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud Lectures, 'named in honour of the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', were established at Oxford. Members of the Saudi government regularly speak at and attend these lectures.

❖ **A lack of transparency in the donations**

Foreign donors are allowed to give large amounts of money anonymously, and universities are not obliged to publish their agreements. This practice is prevalent throughout UK universities.

❖ **A lack of accountability**

Academics have consistently raised concerns about the impact that donations from abroad could have on the running of universities. They have often cited the undemocratic nature of some of the donor regimes, as well as the impact that the scale of the donations could have on the independence of the university. However these protests appear to have had minimal impact.

❖ **The UK's finest universities are taking money from some of the world's worst dictatorships**

Iran, Saudi Arabia and China, all nations with appalling human rights records, are significant contributors to venerable UK institutions.

The report discovers that universities have insufficient safeguards in place to prevent donations affecting the way universities are run. There is clear evidence that, at some universities, the choice of teaching materials, the subject areas, the degrees offered, the recruitment of staff, the composition of advisory boards and even the selection of students are now subject to influence from donors. These problems are heightened by the undemocratic nature of certain donor governments.

It is of great significance that the figures cited in this report are only those that have been made publicly available. These figures, large though they may be, are only indicative of a wider phenomenon.

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