

China Politics & Policy

Beijing vies for greater control of foreign universities in China

Communist party wants more influence despite academic freedom guarantees



China's Communist party wants more control of the foreign funded universities in the country © Reuters

NOVEMBER 19, 2017 Emily Feng in Beijing

The Chinese Communist party has ordered foreign-funded universities to install party units and grant decision-making powers to a party official, reversing an earlier promise to guarantee academic freedom as President Xi Jinping strengthens political control over all levels of education.

More than 2,000 education [joint ventures between Chinese and overseas universities](#) have been established since 2003, when they were first allowed. Some, such as New York University Shanghai or University of Nottingham Ningbo have their own campuses. Others, such as the University of Pittsburgh's collaboration with Shanghai Jiao Tong University, operate institutes within a Chinese campus.

According to the directive from the education ministry, party secretaries at each education joint venture will be given vice-chancellor status and a seat on the board of trustees, two people briefed on the new regulations told the Financial Times. The directive was drafted by the party's Organisation Department, which oversees appointments to top party and government posts.

"This changes the nature of the game and has ominous potential [consequences] for academic freedom," one of the people said. "The first line of control is self censorship. The next line is [more] overt."

For recently established universities and institutes, the board of trustees plays an important role in shaping their development.

Many trustee boards require unanimous consent for management decisions such as senior hires and budget allocations, in effect giving their newly appointed party representatives veto power.

Jeffrey Lehman, vice-chancellor of New York University Shanghai said that Yu Lizhong, the university's chancellor, already served as party secretary. Mr Yu has served as chairman of the board since its inception and had never interfered in matters of academic freedom, Mr Lehman said.

"From the beginning, we were assured that NYUSH would operate with academic freedom. That promise has been kept for the last four years," Mr Lehman said, adding: "Academic freedom is fundamental to our identity. We have not received any directives that would change things, and I don't expect to receive any in the future."

The Ministry of Education was not immediately available to comment for this article.

Under Chinese law, joint venture universities are considered independent legal entities that are 51 per cent held by a local partner and 49 per cent by a foreign university. Many of them grant their own degrees or operate degree-granting exchange programmes with partner universities in the UK and US.

Such entities must now establish a party-run unit that would monitor operations and have a say over big administrative tasks. Foreign-invested universities and institutes will need to show co-operation over the next few months, the two people said.

Discussions over the new directive began in August among party and education officials. The formal decision to implement it was made after the party's recently concluded 19th congress, at which Mr Xi said: "Government, military, society and schools — north, south, east and west — the party is leader of all."

The issue of academic freedom has always been a sensitive one for foreign-invested universities and institutes in China, which have been criticised for agreeing to operate in a country with a poor human rights record.

Since Mr Xi assumed office in 2012, he has overseen a drastic political tightening over Chinese education institutions and reintroduced [ideologically informed curriculums](#) within universities. Academic administrators have watched these developments with concern but hoped that their institutions would be sheltered from party interference.

Some high profile academic joint ventures, such as Duke University's partnership with Wuhan University in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, signed legally binding agreements with China's education ministry that guaranteed academic freedom on campus. Many academics questioned whether the agreements would be honoured.

"DKU is still in an evolving state and thus it would be premature to indicate what the final impact might be," said Denis Simon, executive vice-chancellor for Duke Kunshan University.

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