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Oct 24, 2023 by [Jorge Marinho](#), [Júlio Ventura](#)

Foreign Influence and Academic Espionage: Portugal's University of Lisbon

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Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *An earlier version of this piece was published on Sep 19, 2023, in [Marinho Media Analysis](#) here. In addition to bibliographical research, this piece draws from an exclusive interview with an expert.*

In principle, for governments, foreign interference is more worrisome than foreign influence; although, in practice, it isn't always possible to clearly distinguish the  two. This difficulty in differentiating them is underscored by several experts . This piece considers that the terms foreign influence and foreign interference can be synonymous.

International Academic Cooperation

Historically, since their inception, high education institutes (HEI) have welcomed scholars from

all over the world, for the purpose of engaging in information exchanges and collaboration in producing new knowledge. International contacts have increased over time, both in the field of teaching and in the sphere of research. As part of international relations, education can be regarded as a soft power tool.

Currently, opening HEIs internationally renders them vulnerable to foreign entities that harbor malign purposes. The entry of foreign students and scholars in a given university, under international mobility programs, for instance, makes that institution more vulnerable to espionage. Still, most of the said students and scholars do not constitute a threat to institutions welcoming them.

Academic Espionage and Human Intelligence

HEIs are of interest to foreign powers for several reasons, namely because they contain sensitive information and since they are attended by students that are part of the national elites, in a variety of spheres, such as cultural, social, business and political. Generally speaking, HEIs are vital to nations. According to an article by Saadia Ali of the Global Resilience Institute at Northeastern University, said institutions should be regarded as critical infrastructures, given that they play a significant sociopolitical and economic role on the local and national scene. This is why HEIs' physical and virtual aspects need to be duly safeguarded, for example, by applying anti-phishing IT programs and controlling access to their premises. Though protecting HEIs against foreign powers' possible hostile activities is important, this should be proportional to the risk.



Obviously, to tackle the problem under analysis, the role of the law must not be disregarded, as there is even a certain tendency to create new legislation.

Beyond just students, faculty and researchers, foreign intelligence services have highly diversified targets, such as administrative and research support staff. Within this context, it's also important that those operating covertly (that is, foreign intelligence service officers and their collaborators) be selected and placed in strategic positions at HEIs and research institutes. This entails influencing decisions with regard to selecting staff and promoting their academic career. In this regard, school administrators would be wise to pay attention to those occupying every position, from the lower echelons to the higher-ups at HEIs. All of them may be useful for intelligence services of adversarial powers.

Countermeasures

To combat situations of foreign influence, interference and espionage, it's possible to institute some countermeasures. From the outset, countering these situations should comprise raising the general public's awareness to the importance of this topic. To that end, the media has a notable role to play, given its ability to disseminate the subject matter in question. In this respect, awareness-raising initiatives also need to be conducted, specifically geared to academic circles.

At HEIs and research centers, ideally with a strong governance system, foreign influence, interference and espionage need to be safeguarded against, both at the individual and institutional levels. In this context, the best defense comprises endowing potential targets with information, so that they can identify and report the situations at issue to the appropriate bodies. HEIs' and research institutes' cooperation with counterintelligence services is essential.

Obviously, to tackle the problem under analysis, the role of the law  must not be disregarded, as there is even a certain tendency to create new legislation . HEIs and research centers can also create a Code of Conduct for Foreign Interference as well as a Foreign Interference Committee. All of this needs to be suited to each institution's specific circumstances.

The Example of University of Lisbon, Portugal

In an exclusive interview for this piece, Professor Luís Ferreira, Rector of the University of Lisbon (UL), acknowledges that, in the context involving instances of potential academic espionage, there is a basic contradiction, perhaps even irreconcilable, between the principle of open science and the political constraints of the Nation-State, going by way of restrictions to the entry of persons and the disclosure of ideas from abroad, while justifying that national security and interests should prevail.

Located in Portugal's capital, UL has inherited an academic tradition dating back over seven centuries. Currently, the UL is the largest Portuguese Higher Education Institute (HEI), with 50,000 students.

The UL Rector asserts that the Portuguese Government should not specifically legislate on the issue of interference at universities, since this would seriously counteract the basic principle of autonomy and academic freedom. The UL Rector recognizes that matters related to national security and interests can occasionally be the subject of reflections.

According to Ferreira, the UL's Code of Conduct and Best Practices does not involve students, faculty and staff as the first line of defense, to be called upon to stay vigilant in relation to foreign activities. However, he states that members of the academic community, as citizens, need to remain attentive to the public interest and alert to possible dangers.
