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The focus of this report is on the situation of freedom of expression in China. I shall provide evidence of violations of academic freedom in higher education institutions from 2016 to the present. The report will end with a short policy recommendation for action in the UK.

Few doubt that China wants to become a major economic, political and military power on the world stage. To achieve this ambition, the Chinese government recognizes the vital importance of information technologies. In the past decade, China has emerged as a world leader in AI, 5G and other digital media technologies. Instead of adopting liberal democratic values and practices, China's one-party state has continued in its old authoritarian ways of governing its people. Moreover, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the government has intensified ideological control and indiscriminate mass surveillance, utilizing digital technologies, such as facial recognition, real-name registration systems and big data to achieve this end. China's technological leap into the digital surveillance of its own citizens has been widely reported by international media and recognized by China watchers across the world. In June, 2017, the [Wall Street Journal](#) reported that, 'once the stuff of science fiction, facial-scanning cameras are becoming a part of daily life in China, where they're used for marketing, surveillance and social control'. In December, 2017, [the BBC](#) reported that China has been building what it calls, "the world's biggest camera surveillance network". Prof. Qiang Xiao of the School of Information, University of California at Berkeley, wrote in the [Washington Post](#) 21 Feb, 2018, warning that China was becoming 'a digital totalitarian state'. It is not surprising then that freedom of expression in China has radically deteriorated since 2016. This is evidenced by reports published by major press freedom and international human rights organizations in the past four years.

In a report published this year, [RSF](#) (Reporters Without Borders) rated China in 2019, 177 out of 180 in its world press freedom index, the fourth lowest in the world – a decline from 176 in the period 2016-2018. It concludes that, ‘By relying on the extensive use of new technology, President Xi Jinping has succeeded in imposing a social model in China based on control of news and information and online surveillance of its citizens’.

The situation in terms of political rights and civil liberties in China in 2019 was assessed by [Freedom House](#) as ‘Not Free’. Under the category of ‘Freedom of expression and belief’, China nearly fell to the lowest possible score in all the sub-categories on a four point scale, showing a noticeable drop compared to the data of the last few years:

1. Are there free and independent media? (0/4)
2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or non-belief in public and private? (0/4)
3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? (0/4)
4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? (1/4)

In its 2019 annual report, [Amnesty International](#) declared, ‘the [Chinese] government strengthened its restrictions to the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The authorities rigorously censored all media, from print media to online games.’

In the same year, [Human Rights Watch](#) published a report condemning the Chinese government for its tightening of ideological control over information flow and expression.

In such a context, the sector of higher education in China has suffered particularly badly in terms of freedom of expression. As the report from Freedom House indicates, the change of

score in the area of academic freedom in 2019 from 1 to 0 compared to the previous year was, 'due to a multiyear pattern of growing restrictions on academic freedom, including greater indoctrination in schools and universities, mass detention of Uighur scholars, punishments for outspoken professors and student activists, and surveillance in classrooms'.

It is alarming to see the scale of the CCP's adoption of new media technologies in classrooms for political surveillance. But even more sinister is the renewal of a system of developing informants among students in order to prosecute outspoken academics – something reminiscent of both Mao's Cultural Revolution and the Nazi state in Germany:

Efforts to police classroom discussions have increased at all levels of education, including via installation of surveillance cameras in some classrooms, large-scale recruitment of student informants, and the creation of special departments to supervise the political thinking of teaching staff. The CCP controls the appointment of top university officials, and many scholars practice self-censorship to protect their careers and personal safety (Freedom House).

It is also worrying to see the return of Mao's style of political indoctrination and the cult of personality in universities. The study of "Xi Jinping Thought" has now become a required component of the curriculum at all levels of education:

Professors and students from a range of academic disciplines faced reprisals during the year—ranging from censored writings, travel restrictions, and demotions to arrest and imprisonment—for expressing views that were deemed critical of the CCP's governance and of Xi Jinping's slogans, whether in class, in academic writings, online, or in interviews with overseas media. (ibid.).

Below are listed some cases of the repression of academic freedom in 2019 as recorded by [Freedom House](#):

In March, 2019, law professor Xu Zhangrun of Tsinghua University in Beijing was stripped of his teaching duties, placed under investigation, and had his wages reduced in apparent retribution for an article criticizing Xi's authoritarian policies.

In April, retired economics professor Zi Su was sentenced to four years in prison after he published a letter online that referred to Xi's rule as a "dictatorship."

Mongolian historian Lhamjab A. Borjgin was sentenced in July to one year in prison with a two-year reprieve in connection with his book on the Cultural Revolution.

Two foreign scholars—Yang Hengjun from Australia and an unnamed professor from Japan—were arrested while visiting China in 2019 on dubious charges of spying.

Cases of student detentions also emerged during the year, including ethnic Kyrgyz in Xinjiang and labour rights supporters from Beijing universities.

In a separate [report](#) published in May 2019 by US-based Uyghur Human Rights Project, the persecution of Uyghur intellectuals is seen to be even more alarming: "Since April 2017, the Chinese government has interned, imprisoned, or forcibly disappeared at least 435 intellectuals as part of its intensified assault on Uyghurs and erasure of their culture."

[Human Rights Watch](#)'s report also recorded cases of the CCP regime's assault on academic freedom in Chinese universities in 2018:

The government tightened its ideological grip over universities. A number of professors, including foreigners, were punished for making comments critical of

the government. In July, the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China removed Stephen Morgan from its management board after he wrote an online essay critical of the Chinese Communist Party. In August, Guizhou University dismissed economics professor Yang Shaozheng, alleging him [sic] of “disseminating politically incorrect views.” Peking University did not renew the contract of American professor Christopher Balding, who had previously launched a campaign calling on Cambridge University Press to resist the Chinese government’s pressure to censor academic articles.

Incidents of violating academic freedom in Chinese universities have also been widely reported by the international media. For example, in 2019, the [New York Times](#) reported that You Shengdong, a professor of economics, was dismissed by Xiamen University in 2018 after students reported him for questioning a political slogan favoured by Xi Jinping, the country’s leader.

There is, then overwhelming evidence of abuses of fundamental freedoms within the academy in China today. How should the British government and British universities respond to the this? Firstly, the importance of the issue needs to be recognised. It has become increasingly clear that, as China emerges as a global superpower, its human rights record cannot remain a domestic issue but one that has international implications. The current Covid-19 pandemic should serve as a wake-up call that information suppression in China endangers not only the Chinese people but also the world. According to [a study](#) by Southampton University, ‘if interventions in the country [China] could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier, cases could have been reduced by 66 percent, 86 percent and 95 percent respectively – significantly limiting the geographical spread of the disease’. However, without freedom of speech and an independent media, the Chinese

government has been widely reported as covering up the outbreak and punishing whistle blowers like Dr. Li Wenliang for being ‘rumour spreaders’.

The incompatibility between China’s authoritarian governance and liberal democracy needs to be more widely and fully recognized as a threat to liberal democratic regimes, rather than simply a cultural-political divergence that needs to be negotiated in the interests of ‘business as normal’ on the economic front. China watcher Larry Diamond’s new book ‘Ill Winds: saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition and American complacency’ (2020:131-2) puts this starkly, ‘Beijing’s goal is nothing less than ‘Globalization 2.0’, based on the ‘China model’ of authoritarian, state-directed capitalism, which produces impressive growth rates while dispensing with tedious Western standards of accountability or moralistic Western lectures on freedom and rights’. This is endorsed by [Kenneth Roth](#), executive director of Human Rights Watch, who wrote in the [report](#) ‘China’s Global Threat to Human Rights’ published this year, ‘China’s government sees human rights as an existential threat. Its reaction could pose an existential threat to the rights of people worldwide’.

Recognising these threats, the British government should work with other western countries and develop a coordinated strategy to deal with the challenges posed by China’s rise.

Universities also need to reflect deeply on their relationship with China. The sustainability of an income model based on attracting Chinese students while avoiding sensitive subjects needs be questioned not only on the basis of principles of academic freedom , but in terms of national and international interest. Stein Ringen, visiting professor of political science at King’s College, University of London, puts the matter clearly when he calls on academics to, ‘speak in clear language on the value of academic freedom’ and act collectively. He warns that, ‘The Chinese policy is divide and rule and they will prevail as long as our side remains fragmented. There is a real challenge here and our universities need to coordinate in

response'. The British government and in particular the Department of Education needs to play a role in supporting universities in this. Without a coordinated strategy and government support, under the financial pressure to recruit, the temptations for individual higher education institutions to enter into even closer relations with China are apparent. If the price of this is compromise over the founding values of academic freedom, British institutions may find they have much more to lose collectively in terms of global reputation than to gain individually in terms of income.

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