



ASIO response to Questions on Notice from PJCIS inquiry into National Security Risks affecting the Australian Higher Education and Research Sector

9 April 2021

Question 1

What are the most significant national security risks affecting the sector?

- Cyber espionage represents the most significant threat to the sector. However, traditional espionage and foreign interference activities are also occurring.

(a) Is 'undisclosed foreign influence' per the terms of reference a national security risk?
Why/why not?

- Foreign influence (when it is transparent) is a normal part of statecraft.
- Any activity that involves a threat to any person, or that is covert, deceptive and detrimental to Australia's interests is of concern.

Question 2

Compared to other sectors in Australia, what is the relative exposure of the higher education and research sector to the national security risks identified in the terms of reference?

- The higher education and research sector is just one of several sectors that is vulnerable to threats from espionage and foreign interference.
- This is because foreign powers are seeking to obtain information about Australia's capabilities, including Australian research and technology. Alternatively, particularly where Australia is world leading, our research and technology can be used in a manner to the detriment of our national interests.

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- Ultimately, ASIO's role is to protect Australia and Australians from threats to their security, regardless of the sector. Our focus is high-harm activity.

Question 3

Do you see foreign interference against academics or students to be the more significant threat? Why?

- ASIO's role is to protect Australia and Australians from threats to their security. When ASIO identifies high-harm foreign interference or espionage activity, it will take action, regardless of who or what the target of that threat is.

Question 4

Can universities come to ASIO directly with queries? Over the last two years, say, how many universities have actually reached out? Do you know or would you have to take that on notice?

- Universities are able to approach ASIO directly through the ASIO Outreach service, which is listed on ASIO's website.
- ASIO Outreach also manages a secure website for security professionals with reports on domestic and international security and protective security advice in relation to espionage, foreign interference and terrorism. The website currently has around 200 subscribers from Australian universities.
- In terms of the volume of engagement between ASIO and universities, ASIO briefed individual universities or university affiliated forums, predominantly in relation to foreign interference issues on more than 60 occasions in 2020-21.

Question 5 (transferred from Home Affairs)

From most to least significant, how would you rank the national security risks in the terms of reference for this inquiry?

- Cyber espionage represents the most significant threat to the sector. However, traditional espionage and foreign interference activities are also occurring.
- We take many factors into account when assessing national security risks. Each risk is assessed on the basis of these factors at a point in time. As such, ASIO considers it unhelpful to provide a detailed ranking of national security risks.

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Question 6 (transferred from Home Affairs)

Do you see foreign interference against academics or students to be the more significant threat? Why?

Response as per Question 3 above.

Question 7 (transferred from Home Affairs)

Noting the national security issues identified in the talent-recruitment program examples provided by Mr Alex Joske in his submission to the inquiry, do these represent actual national security risks to Australia?

- ASIO's focus is on high-harm foreign interference and espionage activity.
- Talent recruitment programs are not in and of themselves concerning.
- ASIO would, however, be concerned if a foreign power used means that are threatening, or that are covert, deceptive and detrimental to Australia's interests, to try to obtain Australian research.
- ASIO does not comment on specific cases.

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