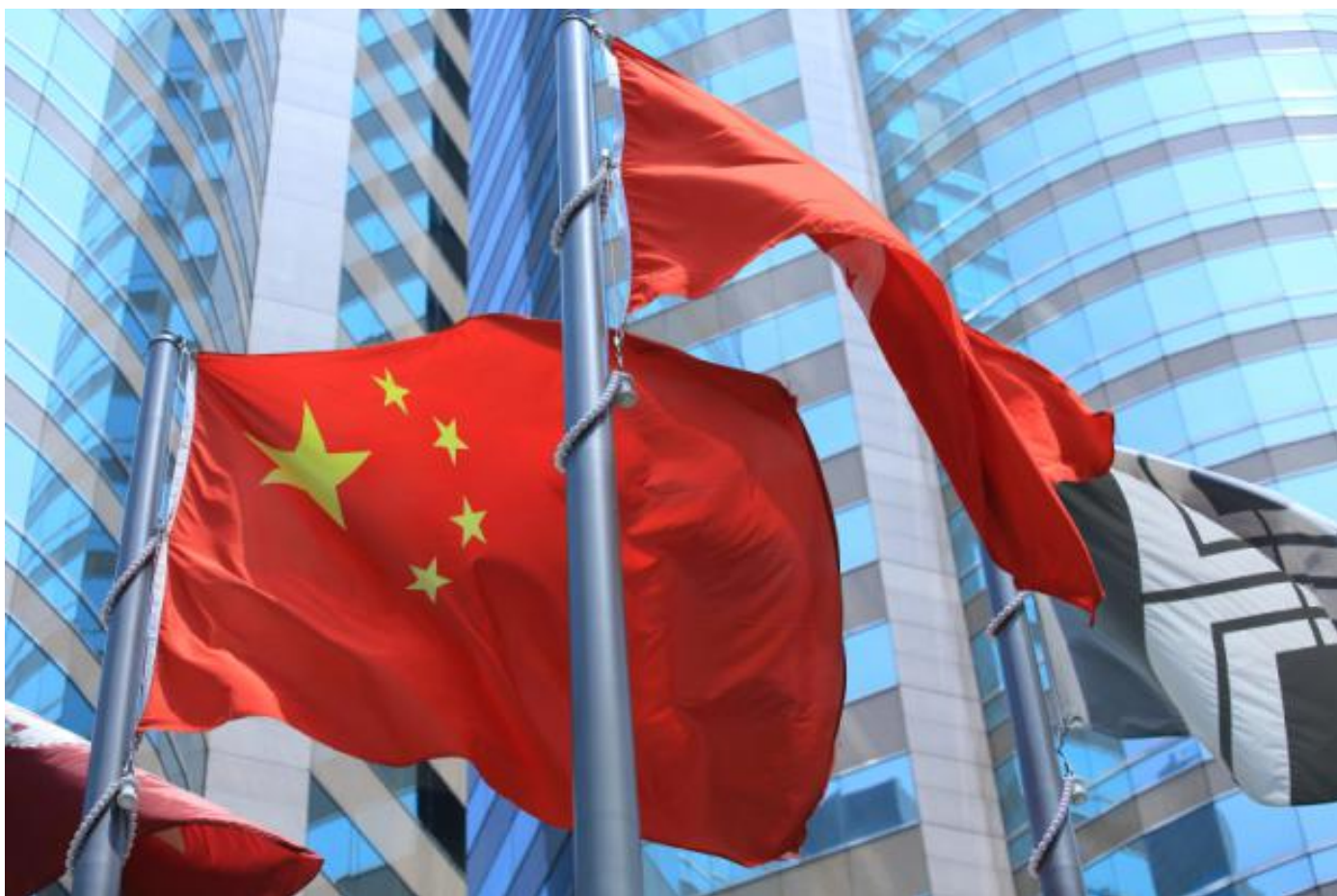


The prestige that attracts Chinese students to the UK is at risk

UK's strong higher education reputation has not been achieved by current policies, says Toby Miller

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With the current state visit of Xi Jinping, Britain's new special relationship is at a high point.

Chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, said nothing about human rights on a recent trip to Beijing, during which he promised that Britain would be China's "best partner in the West", while prime minister David Cameron remains disgracefully silent on Hong Kong's democracy movement. With US\$30 billion (£19.4 billion) of Chinese money invested in Britain over the last decade, it's not hard to see why.

Part of that investment is educational. Depending on whether you speak to the Chinese embassy or the UK government, there are between 90,000 and 150,000 Chinese students in British universities. Whatever the actual number, they certainly form the largest group of foreign nationals.

So what appeals to Chinese students about UK higher education? Is it commodification of knowledge, massive state intervention into the priorities of scholarship and a managerial vocabulary where "spend" is a noun, humans are "resources" and "what's the ask?" is a question? Or is, perhaps, the vastly increased surveillance of faculty by administrators and the state's seemingly unquenchable desire for numbers and words that describe what we do in commercial language? I doubt it. I think they have enough of that sort of thing at home.

It may be that Chinese students come here for utilitarian purposes, in the hope that the UK's scholarly prestige will improve their employment prospects. But let's be clear: that prestige has not been achieved by current policies. It derives from a centuries-long, arms-length approach from governments and university managers that largely left academics alone to study what they believed was worth knowing.

That's all changed, and my 20 years at New York University and the University of California Riverside prepared me poorly for UK scholarly life, to which I returned a couple of years ago. For today, British

universities' watchwords seem to be to mimic business, obey government and base education in customer service to students.

That doesn't describe the approach of any major research university in the US that I know. The American model of a liberal education is not founded in labour-market projections or links to corporations. Such tasks are more relevant to professional graduate-school study in engineering or law.

The businesspeople I know in Manhattan and Los Angeles send their children off to experience a university education that is about citizenship, not consumption. Knowledge, not competition. Just such autonomy from utilitarian calculation is what made English-language universities so powerful and renowned. But UK faculty have lost much of what defined them as professionals: trust, time and autonomy from mammon and master. And I am staggered by the way that they collude in this loss.

I've sat on search committees in various UK universities for senior and junior positions in law, business, and media studies. Even avowedly progressive members decline to discuss in any detail the research or publications of candidates. All they want to know about is grants gained and peer-reviews passed. And forget such issues as racial, gender or linguistic diversity.

In one interview, I asked an applicant why his presentation didn't overtly draw on the work of a noted philosopher whose research was close to his own. The candidate cheerily responded with: "Yes, X is crucial to what I do. I can't cite him, though; that would stop my being published in the right journals." I looked cautiously around the room. Heads nodded — to the extent that they moved at all.

On another panel, I asked about the racial and gender profile of the department and how questions of justice and diversity applied to recruitment. No-one knew anything apart from the need to include women. Somewhere.

Instead of collusion with the loss of professionalism and antiquated views of fairness, we need to hold onto the heritage that brought us here, which prizes scholarly freedom and is au fait with the new inclusiveness of the academy. And we need to send a clear message to the people who run British higher education policy and institutions that any notion that they are simply following what Americans do is pure fantasy.

The fundamental question that even so-called pragmatists must consider is this: if there is to be an Asian Century, can Britain help illuminate it — and, in the process, prevent its own sun from setting?

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