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The risk we take when we panic about China's rise

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Sometimes Australia can slip into panic mode when confronted by China's rapid rise. Australian universities are now the centre of attention. They increasingly employ Chinese citizens and Chinese-Australians as researchers, and nearly 40 percent of the fee-paying, [international students](#) they host are also from China.

The most recent claim is that Australian universities are collaborating with top military technology universities in China to the benefit of the People's Liberation Army, and to the detriment of our security ally, the United States.

These are serious allegations that deserve an airing and further investigation. At the same time, what is the evidence being offered? A swath of scientific papers co-authored by researchers who had worked or studied at Australian and Chinese institutions, many published in leading peer-reviewed, English-language academic journals.

Just think about that for a moment: after acquiring the most advanced knowledge that Australia had to offer, PLA-linked researchers apparently decided to make their cutting-edge research findings publicly available and, conveniently for us, in their second language.

There is another possible explanation – highly skilled Australian and Chinese researchers have forged productive and mutually beneficial partnerships, and then done what all academics do, which is publish or perish.

Such commentaries are also keen on stressing that collaboration is occurring in 'high-tech fields like materials science, artificial intelligence and computer science', which are areas that have 'many military applications'. But no university is engaged in low-tech research. And what high-tech fields don't have potential for military applications? Does this mean we stop collaborating with the world's best on the technologies of the future? And that's where we need to be really careful. In many areas China is well

ahead of us. It has the world's most extensive high-speed rail network. Mobile payments technologies mean that in China you can go for months without ever needing to reach into your wallet. In 2016, China had 10 universities (12 if you include Hong Kong) in the [world's top 50](#) for engineering/technology and computer science. Australia meanwhile? Just one – take a bow, University of NSW. Is it just a coincidence that the highest-ranked Australian university is also the one that has arguably been the most successful in forging China links?

China has had the [world's fastest supercomputer](#) since 2010. The latest Chinese [machine](#) to hold the title is built entirely with locally produced microprocessors. Over the past five years artificial intelligence patents lodged by China [jumped](#) by 186 percent. On this measure China is now second only to the US, and well ahead of the EU and Japan. China has just launched the world's first [quantum satellite](#). This is connected to the world's longest [quantum communications link](#) between the political capital of Beijing and the commercial capital of Shanghai.

Faced with such data, any general notion that China might be seeking to infiltrate our universities in a bid to steal technology is laughable and stems from either ignorance or cultural arrogance.

It's also a mentality that puts Australia's prosperity at risk. As Brian Boyle, the deputy vice-chancellor (enterprise) of UNSW [has said](#), our universities need to work with the best to maximise the benefits they can offer. And that means: 'Failing to engage with China in endeavours of innovation and research is not an option.'

Australian universities have sought to rebut the criticism by noting that any potentially sensitive research they engage in must satisfy Commonwealth Defence Controls. There's been no evidence produced that any Australian university has flouted such requirements.

Of course, in suggesting that Australian universities are supporting the PLA it's certainly been insinuated that these controls are insufficient. Yet no concrete examples have been provided of when and how the existing rules have let us down.

The recent panic about research collaboration follows hot on the heels of [other claims](#) that the Chinese government is inciting its nationals studying at Australian universities to stifle classroom debate on topics that are sensitive to Beijing.

But again, what is the quality of evidence being produced? This year just four incidents have been cited and none actually involved freedom of expression being shut down. Meanwhile, there are [131,082 Chinese students](#) with their heads in the books at more than 30 Australian universities.

The university sector is at the forefront of Australia's engagement with China and has benefited enormously as a result. That's to be celebrated, and it's time for other sectors to catch up.

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