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1. We face hostile states alone, says academic charged with spying

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Byline: Charlie Parker

Body

An academic detained in Dubai after being falsely accused of spying for Britain has criticised the higher education sector for failing to support scholars oppressed by authoritarian regimes.

Matthew Hedges, a Durham university PhD candidate, raised concerns that professors and students lacked the training and institutional backing to conduct fieldwork in hostile states. He was speaking in support of an initiative by scholars to address the risks posed by the "internationalisation" of British universities.

The new Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group has released a code demanding that universities protect the sector against interference.

Mr Hedges, 33, praised the code for its commitments to safeguard and reassure young scholars and academics on fieldwork abroad. He was held for almost six months in solitary confinement after being arrested at Dubai airport in May 2018. He claims that he was made to sign a false confession and given cocktails of drugs amid psychological torture from which he is still recovering.

Mr Hedges was sentenced to life in prison but pardoned in November that year after interventions from Britain and international pressure. At the time Durham University defended him, describing the spying claims as baseless and a threat to academic inquiry.

However, he says that despite his experience, since returning to Britain he has seen no institutional changes that will give academics peace of mind.

He said: "There's just absolutely no support. You feel completely isolated in a world where things are changing in such a mad way. The state capabilities of power, they have grown in such a vast way in such a short amount of time. Anyone can be deemed a threat, both in the UK and abroad. And they're left isolated and alone. It's very dangerous.

"Students at Durham have spoken to me about their security issues with Russia and former Soviet Union states.

They are scared because there's a lack of training. I have raised this many times with Durham ... I've had no response."

Universities UK, which represents vice-chancellors, is introducing guidelines this week that will address cyber and

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physical security on campuses and cover concerns over university partnerships and tie-ups. The government expects the number of international students to increase from 485,000 to 600,000 by 2030.

Last week The Times revealed that hundreds of Kazakh students were made by their government to reveal college passwords and emails, prompting them to censor their work.

Professors at Oxford University and SOAS University of London lecturing on sensitive topics about China have been forced to introduce anonymity rules to protect their students from retribution at home because of the new Hong Kong security law.

Universities UK said: "Universities can and do have to engage internationally, robustly protecting academic freedom, institutional autonomy and our own values. The development of a code is welcome." Durham University did not respond to a request for comment.

Graphic

Matthew Hedges says he was given drugs and suffered mental abuse

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