

Discrimination has no place here

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Banning international students from participation in democratic processes on campuses would reflect poorly on our liberal democracy.

Anti-Chinese hysteria is at risk of reaching dangerous new levels in Australia. Concerns about the influence of the Communist Party of China in Australian universities and democratic institutions capture media attention daily.

While challenges of foreign influence and espionage must be taken seriously, the intensification of heightened anti-People's Republic of China rhetoric threatens our ability to calmly assess and respond to the complex challenges and opportunities posed by a rising PRC.

While a Lowy Institute poll this year of Australians' views on foreign affairs shows that public sentiment towards the PRC has cooled since last year, any valid criticism of the PRC should not lead to individual PRC citizens being targeted in Australia.

Stigmatisation of a cultural group will greatly undermine Australia's democratic values, tolerance and multiculturalism. Yet that is exactly what is starting to happen.

A case in point is the attempt by the Monash University student union at the Caulfield campus in Melbourne to attempt to alter the eligibility requirements for student representative nominees in a way that discriminates against international students, particularly Chinese students.

The recent tensions surrounding Australia-China research collaboration points to another example of rising tensions in the tertiary education sector.

With more than 360,000 international students enrolled in Australian higher education this year, 38 per cent of whom come from the PRC, Australian universities must effectively manage diverse student cohorts and be proactive in

building trust among diverse student populations to avoid discriminatory outcomes.

With international students making up 62 per cent of all students at Monash University's Caulfield campus, the values of democratic representation and the avoidance of discriminatory bans must be a priority for the university.

Australia must continue to engage the PRC long into the future, but how our university sector responds to the challenges of rising tensions today could have a significant impact on the foundations of our long-term relationship.

Cool heads with thoughtful responses to these issues are vital to Australia's long-term social, political and economic interests.

Australia has faced multicultural tensions in the past, but this current rise in tension, particularly as it relates to our relationship with the PRC, will require careful thought and action.

Our university sector has known for some time the importance of international students fully participating in student life and building relationships with their domestic peers.

Indeed, for much of the past decade universities were struggling to find a way to involve Asian students in campus life; it beggars belief that suddenly we want them to stay in their dorm rooms and study harder because we fear their involvement in campus democracy.

With the benefits of building an internationalised university sector comes obligations for all involved, from the universities to government, to build strong student cohorts across all cultural groups.

History has shown that student unrest is often an early indicator of issues that society more broadly must address.

If we are to avoid unwarranted suspicions across cultural groups and risks to our values (such as the value of democratic representation), we should take the developments at Monash University as a warning that it is time for action.

Positive proactive support for multiculturalism and values of inclusion and tolerance requires firm and active leadership across all levels of Australian society.

Most important, it will send a message to the world about tolerance and inclusion in our liberal democracy. Banning international students from

participation in democratic processes on our campuses, on the other hand, would send the opposite message.
Is that what we want?

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