

News in focus

CHINESE INFILTRATION OF US LABS CAUGHT AGENCIES OFF GUARD, REPORT SAYS

China has diverted US government funds to bolster its military and economic aims, a US Senate panel finds.

By Jeff Tollefson

US science agencies' slow response to the threat posed by China's talent-recruitment programmes has allowed China to divert US government funds and private-sector technology to further its military and economic goals, a US Senate panel has found.

Its report, which lawmakers discussed at a hearing on 19 November, describes new details of what it says are China's efforts to infiltrate US research institutions – including contract provisions requiring participating scientists to work on behalf of China. The analysis focused on China's Thousand Talents Plan, the most prestigious of more than 200 programmes that are designed to recruit leading academics and promote domestic research.

Federal science agencies have been caught off guard by these programmes, lawmakers said, and they must now coordinate efforts to protect the US research enterprise. "We have to be nimble," said Senator Rob Portman (Republican, Ohio).

He pointed to provisions in sample Thousand Talents contracts that require participating scientists to keep the contract secret, recruit postdocs and sign over any intellectual-property rights to the sponsoring Chinese institution. The contracts provide incentives for scientists to set up 'shadow labs' in China that mirror US taxpayer-funded research, the Senate report says.

Michael Lauer, a deputy director at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), told lawmakers that those laboratories allow China to see what is happening in the United States

before the rest of the world. When the NIH informed US research institutions about these shadow labs as part of a broader investigation into foreign influence, confidentiality rules and conflicts of interest, the news often came as a surprise, Lauer said.

The report also includes examples of potential undue foreign influence at the US National Science Foundation and the departments of commerce, energy and state. One post-doctoral researcher at an energy-department lab who was also part of China's Thousand Talents Plan removed 30,000 electronic files from the US lab before returning to China, the report says.

Probes into the issue by the NIH and other government agencies have fuelled fears that researchers of Chinese descent are being targeted unfairly. They have also left some institutes struggling to balance security concerns with academic openness.

By delving into requirements in talent-programme contracts, the Senate report provides a vivid depiction of these issues, says Tobin Smith, vice-president for policy at the Association of American Universities in Washington DC.

"This will help us as we try to make faculty aware of why they ought to be careful in entering into any of these talent programmes," Smith says.



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