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Background Brief:

**Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao and
Linacre College, Oxford**

June 29, 2022

We are working on a report that relates to the United Kingdom's government investigation of a £155m donation to a University of Oxford college by a Vietnamese company led by Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao, Vietnam's first female billionaire. We request your assessment of the following issues:

Q1. Is the investigation a normal process in Western educational institutions?

ANSWER: First, it should be noted that Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao's offer of a gift of £155 to Oxford University was reviewed by the Governing Body of Linacre College and Oxford University's Committee to Review Donations and Research Funding. The College and University both gave a positive vetting. After Thao made the first tranche of £50 million, Linacre College announced in November 2021 that it would seek permission of the Privy Council to change the name of Linacre College to Thao College.

Second, quite separately, a Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was introduced in the Parliament on 12 May 2021. The purpose of this Bill was to ensure that freedom of speech at universities in the United Kingdom (UK) was not curtailed as a result of gifts or donations from individuals or organisations outside the United Kingdom by requiring UK higher education institutions to report all overseas financial arrangements to ensure that UK values were not compromised.

On 13 June 2022, the House of Commons met to consider amendments to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. Julian Lewis, a Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) and Chairman of the Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee, raised Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao's offer of a gift in a question to Michelle Donelan, Minister for State Universities. Lewis asked, "Does she share my concern at the proposed £155 million gift from the billionaire chairwoman of a Vietnamese company... that is extremely close to the Vietnamese communist government, where there's certainly very little freedom of speech. The Privy Council has to approve this. Is the Government taking a view about this matter?"

Minister Donelan replied that she was only recently alerted to this issue and was "actively investigating this..."

In other words what should have been a straightforward process of Linacre College seeking approval from the Privy Council became entangled in legislation before the Parliament aimed at scrutinizing foreign donations to UK universities, largely motivated by Chinese funding for Confucius institutes.

Q2. A donation was signed during Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's visit to the UK in 2021. An investigation into the donation at this time is not a positive move that helps the relationship between the two countries. Why didn't UK government undertake an investigation prior to receiving Thao's donation?

ANSWER: Linacre College and Oxford University have primary carriage of this issue. They followed their procedures in accordance with UK law.. It is up to the Privy Council, senior advisors to the Queen, to approve the recommendation to rename Linacre College.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill has not yet been passed into law so there is no formal requirement for Oxford University or Linacre College to report Thao's gift to the Government (as distinct from the Privy Council).

This matter is under investigation because Members of Parliament raised the ethical propriety of receiving a gift from a company in Vietnam whose Government, in their view, stifles freedom of speech. The Minister for State Universities had no recourse but to investigate the matter. As of this writing the Minister has not yet met her promise to update Julian Lewis "within the coming days."

It is unlikely this issue will impact negatively on bilateral relations because the gift is from the Servico Group headed by Thao not the Government of Vietnam. Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met with leaders of leading UK universities on 31 October 2021 in Edinburgh, Scotland on the sidelines of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) which he attended.

Q3. Is it true that Western governments have tightening rules and closely monitoring educational donation from foreign countries, especially Communist countries, after the event of global Confucius Institutes, which were called as a part of China's overseas propaganda setup?

ANSWER: Yes, western countries including Australia have either adopted formal legislation or tightened regulations to monitor and restrict foreign interference, inter alia, in the education sector. China's funding of Confucius Institutes has been a primary but not exclusive focus.

During the 13 June debate in Parliament on the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, the Government introduced new amendments that will require universities to report overseas funding of £75,000 or more. Alicia Kearns, a Tory MP, separately tabled an amendment requiring universities to report the funding and activities of Confucius Institutes.

Q4. Or are there any other possible reasons that led to the investigation?

ANSWER: Linacre College has publicly declared that all donations are "in line with government guidance and laws" and that existing review mechanisms (Linacre College Governing Board and Oxford University's Committee to Review Donations and Research Funding) followed a "robust, independent process, taking legal, ethical and reputational issues into consideration." In other words, there were no strings attached to Thao's gift that infringed academic freedom. The decision by the Minister for State Universities to investigate resulted from political pressure by MPs (and possibly domestic human rights advocates).

This particular episode is unlikely to undermine bilateral relations between Vietnam and the United Kingdom. Currently, Vuong Dinh Hue, Chairman of the National Assembly, is making an official visit to the UK to strengthen ties with Parliament (28-30 June).

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