STUDENTS' UNION UCL

Policy Briefing – UCL to end ties with companies/brands complicit in Uyghur forced labour

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What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

While UCL has not released an official statement or policy regarding the treatment of Uyghurs in China, it is being discussed among the university community. A UCL Laws professor published an opinion piece on the university's website calling for international support for Uyghurs.[1] The UCL Islamic Society[2] and UCL's *The Cheese Grater* magazine[3] have also written about the persecution of and violence committed against Uyghurs in China. In February 2022, Students for Uyghurs[4] criticized a 'Xinjiang' dance performed by the UCL Chinese Students and Scholars Association for appropriating Uyghur cultural and "present[ing] a version of the Uyghur region in which genocide is not taking place."[5]

In terms of business relationships, there is no comprehensive list of companies with which UCL works. However, use of forced Uyghur labour has been documented in many prominent global brands' supply chains (see below). This includes services and products ubiquitously used by UCL and other entities, including from Amazon, Cisco, and Microsoft.

In terms of funding, according to UCL, 30% of its income comes from research grants and contracts, while 11% comes from 'other' sources, not including tuition fees (37%), government funding (17%), residences (3%), and donations (2%).[6] A further breakdown of the sources that provide research grants and contracts and 'other' incomes does not appear immediately available.

What is the relevant national/ international context to this situation?

There are approximately 12 million Uyghurs, a predominately Muslim ethic group with their own language and culture, living in the north-western Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China.[7] The majority

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[1] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jul/opinion-genocide-or-not-uighurs-need-urgent-international-support

[2] https://uclisoc.co.uk/horrors-in-xinjiang-whats-happening/ ; https://uclisoc.co.uk/horrors-in-xinjiang-the-response/

[3] https://cheesegratermagazine.org/2021/02/12/we-cannot-let-the-persecution-of-uighurs-escalate/

[4] According to their Twitter account, Students for Uyghurs is the student wing of Uyghur Stop, a UK-based campaign to defend Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in China.

[5] https://mobile.twitter.com/StudentsUyghurs/status/1491806363923595270

[6] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/fees-and-funding/how-ucl-uses-tuition-fees#:~:text=Tuition%20fees%20makes%20up%20around%2037%25%20of%20total%20income&text=The%20rest%20of%20the%20income,donations%20and%20income%20from%20investments.

[7] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

of China's population belongs to the Han ethic group, and the government views the Uyghurs as a threat to Chinese unity.[8]

China has targeted the ethnic-minority Uyghurs, interning many in "re-education" or "anti-extremism" camps, carrying out forced sterilization of women, and separating children from families.[9] An estimated 1.2 million Uyghurs (12% of the population) were in a camp or in prison between 2017-2018.[10] Brutal conditions have been reported in the camps, including pervasive and systematic physical, mental, and sexual abuse and torture.[11]

China has also forced approximately 100,000[12] of those interned to work in factories or other jobs, producing goods for China's export market.[13] Overall, forced Uyghur labour has been documented in the supply chains for a multitude of goods including textiles and clothing, food items, electronics and technology, pharmaceuticals, and health and beauty products.[14] In 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute released a report identifying forced Uyghur labour in the supply chains of at least 82 globally recognized brands, including Amazon, Apple, Cisco, Google, and Microsoft, among others.[15]

While Disney does not appear in this list, the company has been criticized for filming its live-action version of *Mulan*, released in 2020, in parts of China where violations against Uyghur people are taking place, and for including a credit at the end of the film thanking government agencies in Xinjiang.[16]

Given these events, several countries, including the US, UK, and Canada, have accused China of gross human rights violations and of committing genocide against the Uyghur population.[17] In 2021, the U.S. passed a law banning goods made in Xinjiang from entering the country, specifically to address concerns about forced labour.[18] Also in 2021, the U.K. announced a series of measures to curb British business involvements with Uyghur forced labour, but fell short of a complete ban on imported goods from Xinjiang.[19]

China denies that it is committing any rights violations or genocide, claiming its actions are in line with anti-terrorism and anti-poverty policies.[20] However, China has also heavily restricted access to

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[8] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100391863/uyghurs-xinjiang-muslim-minority-forced-labor-china?t=1653557857679

[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

[10] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

[11] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

[12] https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/against-their-will-the-situation-in-xinjiang

[13] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100391863/uyghurs-xinjiang-muslim-minority-forced-labor-china?t=1653557857679

[14] https://www.state.gov/forced-labor-in-chinas-xinjiang-region/

[15] https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale

[16] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-54064654

[17] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

[18] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100391863/uyghurs-xinjiang-muslim-minority-forced-labor-china?t=1653557857679

[19] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-announces-business-measures-over-xinjiang-human-rights-abuses

[20] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037

the Xinjiang region, making it difficult for human rights groups and the international community to monitor the situation.[21]

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

The second point of this proposal in the section 'what would you like the Union to do?' ('SU to openly condemn companies and partnerships alleged to be complicit in human rights abuse in Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region') may contravene the Union's charitable objectives, as it may be considered ultra-vires and outside of its charitable purpose in representing students as students.[22]

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

In 2019, the SU passed the policy: *In support of a SUUCL stance on the Uyghur people* (lapsed in May 2021).[23] This policy included a resolution to "mobilise an investigation into any potential academic, corporate and economic links between the university and companies and/or institutions that participate or are complicit in the international human rights violations of the Uyghur people."[24]

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder/ public relations issues with this policy proposal?

Yes, there are significant financial, resource, and stakeholder/public relations considerations with this policy proposal, which would directly affect UCL rather than the Union. Financial and resources considerations include the products, services, and funding which UCL has already paid for or received, as well as the cost to identify and procure alternative products, services, and funding from different sources. For example, much of UCL's IT system both in terms of hardware and software is centred around Microsoft products and divesting away from these products would require a huge upheaval in UCL systems which could take years and incur a significant cost.

Stakeholder/public relations issues may result both from continued association with the companies and brands complicit in Uyghur forced labour and ending ties with these entities.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The SU would need to lobby UCL to end ties with companies/brands complicit in Uyghur forced labour, including determining which companies this applies to and the associated products, services, or funding which UCL uses.

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[21] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100391863/uyghurs-xinjiang-muslim-minority-forced-labor-china?t=1653557857679

[22] https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/43046/d18365fc5166c6ed6035bc98933baebe/NUS_Ultra_Vires_Briefing.pdf

[23] https://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up1809/in-support-of-suucl-stance-on-uyghur-people

[24] https://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up1809/in-support-of-suucl-stance-on-uyghur-people