

China–Global Relations: A Higher Education Cold War?

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There are signs that we are at an inflection point in China’s academic and scientific relations with much of the rest of the world. This article presents key aspects of current developments. While international exchanges and collaboration between students, scholars, and researchers have contributed significantly to cross-cultural understanding, global knowledge production, and research and publications, at the time of writing, relations are at a more precarious stage.

Excluding Chinese “Influence” from US Campuses

President Trump’s administration has been imposing restrictions on international education and exchanges, advancing the agenda on anti-immigration and foreign espionage. During the pandemic, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement put forth a new immigration policy that subjected international students to deportation if they did not show up for class on campus, though it was rescinded after higher education institutions and the attorneys general of 20 states sued. The US Department of Homeland Security is planning a four-year limit for international students in the United States, to prevent foreign adversaries from exploiting the country’s education environment.

More actions were targeted at Chinese scholars and researchers on the grounds that some may have acquired sensitive US technology, data, and intellectual property. In May, President Donald Trump signed a proclamation to bar Chinese graduate students and researchers who have ties to the People’s Liberation Army from entering the United States, affecting about 3,000 to 4,000 students. Soon after, the [United States revoked the visas](#) of more than 1,000 Chinese students and researchers who were deemed to be a security risk. Additionally, [students receiving funding from the China Scholarship Council](#) (CSC, a government agency responsible for international exchanges of students and scholars) were increasingly scrutinized at US airports. After the fall semester started, the [University of Northern Texas terminated an exchange program](#) with 15 CSC-funded researchers and asked them to leave the country within 30 days. Furthermore, [federal officials have ended the Fulbright exchange program](#) in Hong Kong and Mainland China and forbidden Chinese diplomats from visiting college campuses without US government permission.

Universities, seen as important battlegrounds by many Trump administration officials, are under inspection because their laboratories develop crucial tools for future internet technology, medicine, warfare, and the economy. The US Department of Education is already investigating over a dozen universities, including Stanford University and Fordham University, on their foreign gifts and contracts, particularly from China. These institutions need to submit documentation of all foreign gifts and contracts from the past decade; contact information for all visiting Chinese researchers and scholars over that time; and information about any links that visitors have had to the Chinese government or military—something that the government, not universities, screens for in the visa process.

Around the World

The [Australian government has reportedly launched a broad-ranging probe](#) into foreign interference in the education sector. Universities’ links with China—which channel billions of dollars to Australia’s higher education sector, mainly through tuition fees from almost 150,000 students—are coming under unprecedented scrutiny. In Canada, [the Canadian Security Intelligence Service warned](#) that China’s Thousand Talents Program used “corrosive tactics, which are done to advance the economic and strategic

Abstract

In 2020, as the discourse and initiatives of “decoupling” or “the new Cold War” deteriorated between the United States and China, higher education has invariably come under fire owing to its international nature. Higher education is premised on the existence of open and free global movements and exchanges to enable institutions and individuals to generate scientific production. How higher education holds its ground during these times of geopolitical turmoil is a question vital to its future.

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objectives of hostile states,” expressing concern about Canadian professors participating in the program.

The Confucius Institute, the most important venue for Chinese language and cultural exchange and export, is experiencing closures worldwide. The US Congress has blocked colleges that host Confucius Institutes from receiving certain Defense Department grants, a bipartisan strategy that led many of the institutes to close. Universities and public schools in Belgium, Germany, and New South Wales in Australia are also ending ties with Confucius Institutes. Sweden has closed all Confucius Institutes and Classrooms.

In Europe, the European Commission’s director-general for research and innovation raised concern on the unbalanced relationship between the European Union and China, including open data, research collaboration, and academic mobility. While stressing the importance of continued collaboration, Brussels is now creating a common framework that will more clearly define how European universities and research organizations should partner with China, considering security and intellectual property rights issues.

Meanwhile, In China

Over the four decades since its opening up, China’s higher education has prospered through international collaboration and communication. China’s top research universities are leading in global rankings. Chinese scientists, particularly in the STEM fields, are producing high-impact research and publications. With nearly 500,000 international students, China has become Asia’s largest study-abroad destination.

At the same time, recent global geopolitical turmoil and domestic political sensitivity have been affecting Chinese universities. The obvious barrier for Chinese researchers and scholars seeking international scientific production and communication is access to information. While everyone joins the virtual world of Zoom meetings, this platform and other popular research, communication, and social media platforms such as Google Scholar and YouTube, are not easily accessible in Mainland China.

Since 2016, seeking to improve its overall soft power and academic quality, China has been constructing “a philosophy and social science system with Chinese characteristics.” China’s Research Evaluation Reform, announced in the spring 2020, is projected to cease the adulation of the Scientific Citation Index and encourage scholars to address China’s concerns within its own context in the Chinese language. Meanwhile, scholars are encouraged to “tell China’s story well” to the outside world, by using academic discourse with Chinese characteristics rather than “addressing Chinese issues wearing American lenses.” This initiative might challenge the English-dominated academic knowledge system and impact international collaboration.

Many Western scholars predict that the heightened role of Party leadership in universities, especially on talent team construction, research, and the curriculum, is likely to negatively impact China’s scientific disciplinary development. Meanwhile, some Chinese scholars believe that this is the most salient and dominating feature of a Chinese university, making it a “Chinese idea or model of university,” if there is one.

Ramifications

This new Cold War has a clear spillover effect on higher education, impacting individuals and institutions worldwide. China has long been the world’s top-sending country. In the United States alone, there were over 360,000 Chinese international students in 2018, with as many as 133,400 in graduate programs. Nine in 10 stay in the country after earning their doctorates, becoming a key source of top scientists, researchers, and professors, specifically in STEM fields. In the midst of an increasingly deteriorating Sino-US relationship, survey data shows that Chinese students have lower willingness and confidence to study in the United States. Many STEM departments are already observing a decline in the number of international applicants to their doctoral programs.

As tensions rise, many students would prefer studying, and later, working in countries with friendlier attitudes and policies, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in Europe. A recent analysis by Georgetown University found a 75 percent increase in successful applications from US residents to Canada’s main skilled-immigration program since 2017. All of the growth was due to noncitizen applicants, many of them US educated.

On the institutions' and scholars' side, cumbersome procedures on submitting documents and reporting foreign influences might prevent them from initiating and inviting international collaboration.

The Obscure Future

The United States and China are the largest and most influential countries in terms of knowledge production. Collaboration between these two countries propels global science and higher education forward. Though cooperation with China is framed as being zero-sum, international scientific collaboration generates a positive-sum outcome. Regardless of the external political and economic environment, higher education institutions should hold on to the fundamental values of free and critical thinking and the pursuit of truth. ▲

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