

Engaging with China: The Higher Education Dilemma

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Academic relations with China have become a fraught and controversial topic globally. Developments in China itself, the COVID-19 crisis and the role attributed to China in it, increasingly problematic trade relations, the rise of nationalism and populism—in China and elsewhere—and other issues have all increased geopolitical tensions, and have challenged academic collaboration in research and education between China and Australia, North America, and Europe. These issues play themselves out in the media around the world with constant, and occasionally with exaggerated or even false narratives. There are real issues involved, and current and future academic relations between China and the rest of the world hang in the balance.

Several examples illustrate the tensions. Faculty and students at Cornell University in the United States are opposing a proposed joint degree program with Peking University, noting academic freedom problems in China, among other issues. The Pew Research Center argued in a [recent report](#), “Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights, Economic Issues,” that while Americans generally welcome international students, there is widespread support for limits on admissions of Chinese students, along with other negative opinions on a wide range of issues concerning China. The Academic Freedom and Internationalization Working Group, an international initiative, has proposed a [“code of conduct”](#) to guide academic relations with China. A solidarity statement on behalf of scholars sanctioned for their work on China is circulating and receiving large numbers of signatures among scholars around the world. Chinese government-funded Confucius Institutes have been closed in a number of Western countries, with claims of espionage, control by the Chinese government, and lack of academic freedom. Hardly a week goes by without coverage in the Western media of some negative aspect of Chinese policy or practice relating to higher education—not to mention trade or politics.

Engagement Needed

Engaging with China, perhaps especially in the current difficult period, is of great importance for global higher education. Of course, “it takes two to tango”—and if insurmountable challenges and negative policies and practices from either the Chinese side or the other side are implemented, then engagement becomes difficult, if not impossible. At the same time, Chinese scholars and students studying abroad, as well as at home, feel challenged by negative policies and practices in our part of the world. They face increasing racism, especially in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, are accused of being spies and stealing intellectual property, and are not treated on equal terms in their collaboration efforts. In particular, we have seen investigations of Chinese researchers in the United States—several of which turned out to be completely unjustified.

The basic responsibility for engagement is with academic institutions and individuals—professors, researchers, and students. Institutions and individuals all have their own “internationalization policies,” and institutional and individual values, strategies, and interests all come into play. Mutual respect and understanding between academic communities is the basis for fruitful collaboration and exchange, as well as for academic freedom. Transparency on all sides is also required. But there is unfortunately evidence that policies and actions by governments prevent academic efforts from functioning independently.

Abstract

Academic relations with China have become a fraught and controversial topic globally. Of course, “it takes two to tango”—and if insurmountable challenges are set up and negative policies and practices are implemented (from either the Chinese side or the other side), then engagement becomes difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, engagement and collaboration is in everyone’s interest, in particular, students and academics, who currently appear to be the main victims.

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China's Importance

China–global relations are crucial. China has emerged as a major force in academia worldwide. It has the largest academic system and is the second largest producer of published research. By investing heavily in its research universities, it has dramatically improved in the rankings. In terms of international student mobility, China is the largest sending country, with 662,000 studying abroad. China is also a major receiving country, with 500,000 overseas students, mainly from the developing world. China has also invested heavily in “educational diplomacy” through the Confucius Institute program, with more than 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide, “Belt and Road” initiatives, and other programs.

The world has become increasingly dependent on Chinese higher education. A few countries, notably Australia, depend on international students, the largest number being from China, for significant income. Some academic institutions in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere rely on Chinese student enrollments. In several countries, some graduate programs in STEM fields have become dependent on Chinese graduate students and postdocs.

Universities in Europe and North America have invested significantly in China for many reasons for close to a half-century. Branch campuses, joint degree programs, collaborative research centers of many kinds, and China studies programs are but a few examples. These initiatives have permitted Western institutions to learn about the world's number two economy and one of its great civilizations, and in many cases to earn income—the main motivating force for many programs.

In all this, the West seems to have forgotten that academic collaboration in general, and with Chinese academics and universities in particular, is essential for mutual understanding and addressing global social needs, for example as defined in the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The various conflicts concerning the origins of COVID-19 and the development of vaccines are examples of how politics and misunderstandings may have negatively impacted and delayed dealing with the crisis.

Problems

At least two key “hot button” issues at present are the repression of the Uyghurs and the impact of the security laws in Hong Kong (see for example the [valuable contribution of Carsten Holz](#) in *International Higher Education*, issue 106). Broader geopolitical tensions relating to Taiwan and East Asia in general are of concern to many—and are points of significant international tension. Of course, China is not the only country repressing human rights, but given its importance, it understandably receives more attention.

There are also a range of [higher education issues](#) that greatly worry the international community. Theft of intellectual property, of great concern to companies and governments, affects universities, as do the “narrowing” of intellectual space in China and the limits of access to information due to the “Great Firewall of China,” severe limits on academic freedom, and “weaponizing” student use of social media so that professors or even students expressing “anti-regime” views are subject to harassment or worse. The list goes on. It is clear that, in general, the Chinese intellectual space has steadily been squeezed. These policies by the Chinese government negatively impact academic collaboration and need to be addressed, similar to the negative impact of other government actions such as the policies and rhetoric of the Trump Administration in the United States during 2016–2020.

What Is to Be Done?

While specific policies and practices will vary according to circumstances and local conditions and interests, the following broad guidelines seem generally appropriate globally.

- ▶ “Trust but Verify,” as Ronald Reagan once said referring to negotiating with the Soviet Union. Engagement with Chinese counterparts should be on the basis of clearly stated goals and practices (see [“Future-Proofing German-Chinese Partnerships in Higher Education”](#) by Marijke Wahlers in *International Higher Education*, issue 105).
- ▶ Related is the importance of transparency—everyone and everything should be openly discussed and agreed to, so that all partners understand arrangements and goals.

- International student enrollments and exchanges of all kinds should be encouraged and facilitated. There is a continuing interest among the expanding Chinese middle class to study abroad, as there is interest in studying in China. International study is a significant advantage to all sides and should not be driven primarily by soft power or the market, but by academic and social relevance.
- Research collaboration with China, between both individual scholars and institutions, already an important driver of global science, should be encouraged, but with appropriate safeguards to prevent exploitation of people or intellectual property.
- Under these parameters, academic collaboration should be left to institutions, academics, and students and not be controlled by governments.

Conclusion

Without question, the world is at an inflection point with regard to academic relations of all kinds with China. There are, and will be, significant pressures from all sides to limit or even end aspects of engagement. Despite problems and challenges, every effort should be made to resist these pressures. One needs to remain realistic.

It will be noted that this article has not said much about academic freedom. Our view is that engagement with China should ensure that a modicum of academic freedom is guaranteed in each project or collaboration. It is unrealistic, however, to expect that Chinese higher education will be allowed to reflect established international norms of academic freedom or autonomy, as it is unrealistic to expect that anti-Asian ideology, suspicion of espionage and theft of intellectual property, and fears surrounding Confucius Institutes as an export of Chinese ideology will go away soon. (Note that similar programs sponsored by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom also disseminate culture and language for foreign policy purposes.) Indeed, trends in China and elsewhere are moving in opposite directions. Nonetheless, engagement and collaboration in the academic and scientific research spheres, to as great an extent as possible, is in everyone's interest, in particular in the interest of students and academics, who on both sides currently appear to be the main victims of these geopolitical tensions. ▲

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