



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

United Kingdom: Opaque research ties, hidden CCP influence at the expense of a large Chinese student diaspora

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The UK hosts one of the world's most reputable higher education sectors. With a strong emphasis on world-class research and international partnerships, the academic rigor and global prestige of British universities have attracted students and collaborations from around the world.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is one of the UK's most important academic partners, second only to the United States in the number of co-authored publications with British universities. This relationship is supported by a complex network of institutional and individual research collaborations, which notably accelerated during the "golden era" of UK-China relations in the 2010s. Government-funded programs such as the £200 million UK-China Research and Innovation Partnership Fund have further cemented this collaboration.

Concerns about UK-China academic partnerships primarily focus on potential links between Chinese university partners, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Chinese state. A key risk lies in the possibility that research partnerships may contribute

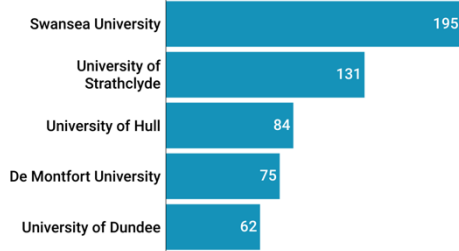
United Kingdom's academic engagement with China

Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

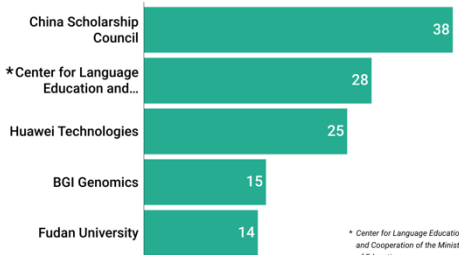


1 518 Number of identified ties between British universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

The most active British academic institutions



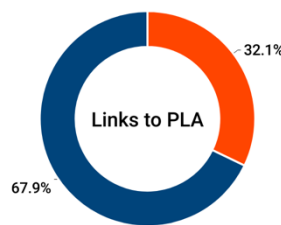
The most active Chinese entities



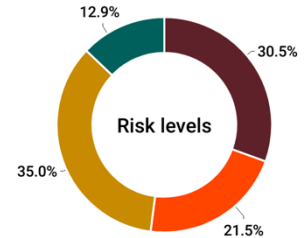
* Center for Language Education and Cooperation of the Ministry of Education

Data: China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker | www.academytracker.ceias.eu

Cooperation with entities linked to the Chinese military



With links to PLA Without links to PLA



Very High High Medium Low

Engagements focused on China's priority cooperation areas



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to China's rapid military development, facilitate human rights abuses, or result in academic censorship both within and beyond China.

Moreover, despite being publicly funded institutions, British universities have faced challenges regarding transparency and accountability in these partnerships. The large-scale, commodified recruitment of Chinese international students has also exposed universities to financial dependency, while institutional support for these students remains limited.

This study was informed by Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted to the 80 top-ranking British universities. The requests covered a range of inquiries concerning the scale and nature of collaborations with Chinese entities. In total, 45 universities disclosed information in response, but only 14 responded in full. Additionally, 40 universities were included based on links identified through secondary research. Altogether, we collected 1,518 records from 85 British universities, with 88.6% (1,345 records) obtained via FOI responses and 11.4% (173 records) sourced through secondary research.

The CCP's hidden influence and the risks of transnational repression

In response to the FOI requests, no British university reported that any PRC entity had influenced its decision-making processes regarding course curricula, research, or grants. However, concerns about hidden influence and the associated risks of transnational repression remain significant within the UK higher education sector, raising serious implications for academic freedom and the well-being of both students and staff.

One example of hidden influence involves visiting scholars and PhD programs funded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), which operates directly under the Chinese Ministry of Education. Recipients of CSC scholarships are subject to a “rigorous review” of their “political ideology” and are required to implement “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” CSC-funded fellowships and PhD programs are widely available at British universities. This arrangement not only allows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exert political influence over British university programs but may also constitute discrimination under the UK’s Equality Act 2010, which protects individuals with genuinely held beliefs. At least 38 British universities have entered into agreements with the CSC to host visiting scholars and PhD students across a broad range of academic disciplines.

Another example of CCP influence can be found in UK-China Joint Educational Institutes (JEIs). At least 45 British universities have established JEIs in China, making the UK the most engaged country globally in this scheme. JEIs typically offer joint or dual degrees governed by UK higher education standards, with students having the opportunity to study in both countries. However, according to a report by the China Strategic Risks Institute, the CCP exercises shadow managerial control over JEIs, and the presence of CCP branches within these institutes is mandatory. British universities appear either unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge this involvement, raising serious concerns about potential contradictions with their commitments to academic freedom and equality, as well as possible evasion of UK regulatory frameworks.

The extent of CCP influence in both the CSC and JEI schemes could come under scrutiny with the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which takes effect on 1 August 2025. Regulatory Advice issued by the Office for Students (OfS) in June 2025 suggests that certain practices underpinning CSC scholarships and JEI arrangements may be prohibited under the Act (see Examples 25 and 26).

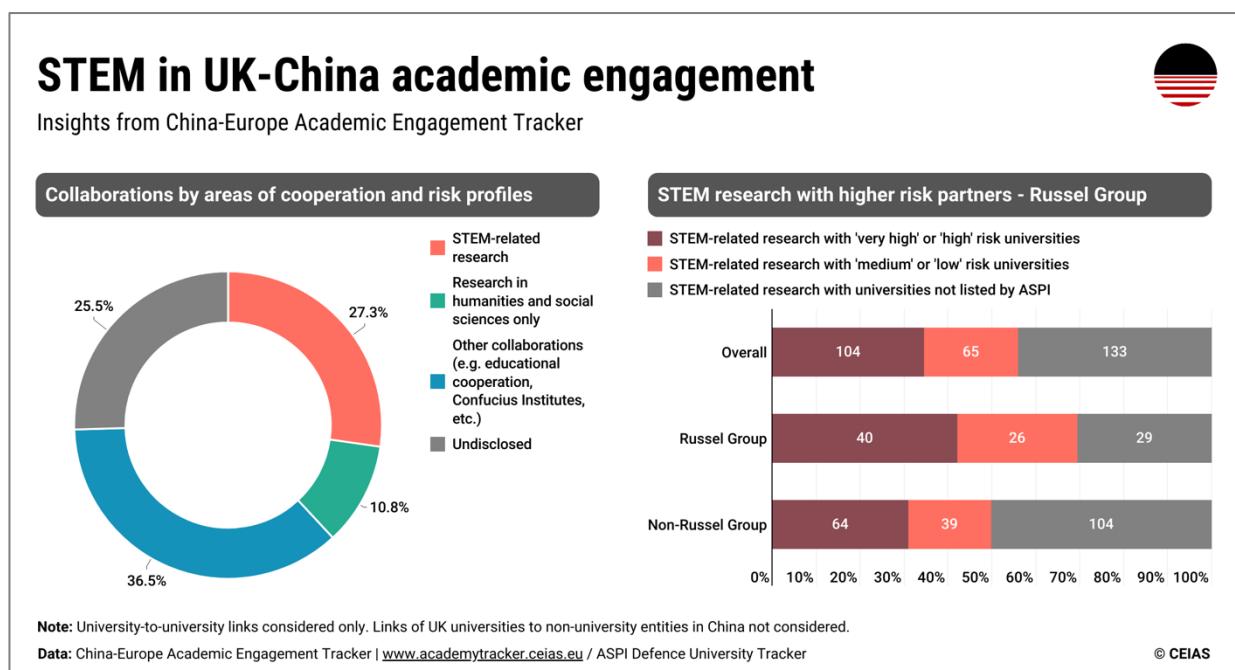
Collaboration with defense-linked Chinese universities in STEM research

During this investigation, a total of 1,108 records were collected pertaining to collaborations between British and Chinese universities, with the remaining 410 records involving partnerships with research institutes, companies, and other entities. Of these, 27.3% related to STEM-focused joint research projects, and 9.4% involved Chinese universities classified as “high” or “very high” risk, according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) *China Defence Universities Tracker*. It is important to note that

this figure may represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of links between British universities and military-linked Chinese entities, as the ASPI tracker covers only 32.2% of the collaborations examined.

This trend of collaboration with defense-linked Chinese universities, as identified by the ASPI tracker, is even more pronounced among the UK's research-intensive Russell Group universities. Among their STEM research partnerships with Chinese universities, 42.1% involve institutions classified as "high" or "very high" risk, compared to 30.9% for their non-Russell Group counterparts.

Furthermore, at least 80 STEM-related partnerships have been established with Chinese universities that appear on export restriction end-user lists—maintained by countries such as the United States, Canada, and Japan—or have been linked to espionage or cyberattacks, according to analysis conducted by ASPI (hereafter referred to as entities on end-user lists or engaged in espionage). For example, between 2020 and 2023, University College London hosted at least 10 joint research partnerships with such Chinese universities in areas including quantum technologies, materials science, biosciences, and sustainable energy.



Working with companies linked to rights abuses and Chinese defense industry conglomerates

A total of 185 instances were recorded involving joint research projects between UK universities and Chinese research institutes, private enterprises, or state-owned enterprises. However, British universities have typically been unwilling to clarify the nature of these collaborations. Under Section 43 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which allows exemptions for "prejudice to commercial interests," many universities cited this clause to withhold details of their partnerships.

Huawei and BGI Genomics are two of the most prolific private-sector partners, having collaborated with at least 25 and 15 British universities, respectively. Yet, of the 40 partnerships identified in this investigation, only six were voluntarily disclosed through FOI requests. The remaining 34 were sourced from existing media and think tank reports, during which UK universities frequently appeared unwilling to engage or provide further information.

Both Huawei and BGI Genomics are deeply controversial. Huawei has previously been found supplying technology used in ethnically targeted surveillance against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and its 5G equipment has been banned from critical infrastructure in several countries, including the UK. BGI Genomics has reportedly shared globally collected prenatal genomic data with entities linked to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), raising concerns among regulators in Germany, Australia, Estonia, and Canada.

The investigation also reveals a concerning level of collaboration between UK universities and Chinese state-owned defense conglomerates. British universities have partnered with seven of the 12 largest Chinese defense conglomerates, as identified by the ASPI tracker, across at least 22 partnerships. These state-owned entities are central to China's Civil-Military Fusion strategy and maintain close ties with the PLA in the development of advanced weaponry and military technologies.

Identifying collaborations with defense conglomerates has been particularly challenging due to the often opaque structures of their research subsidiaries and the

Research cooperation with Chinese defense conglomerates



Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

ASPI-listed defence industry conglomerates	# of identified links with UK universities	End-user lists	Espionage
CASC (China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation)	8	•	•
AECC (Aero Engine Corporation of China)	4		
AVIC (Aviation Industry Corporation of China)	3	•	•
CETC (China Electronics Technology Group Corporation)	3	•	•
COMAC (Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China)	2		•
CASIC (China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation)	1	•	•
CSSC (China State Shipbuilding Corporation)	1	•	
Total	22		

Data: China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker | www.academytracker.ceias.eu / ASPI Defence University Tracker

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use of commercial aliases. For example, the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC)—a central player in the PLA’s research, development, and production of missiles, rockets, and other aerospace systems—has at least eight documented collaborations with British universities. Five of these partnerships were initially identified under alternative names or through affiliated research entities, including ChinaRocket Co., Ltd., the Beijing Institute of Aerospace Control Devices, the State Key Laboratory of Space-Ground Integrated Information Technology, and the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology.

In addition, at least three joint research laboratories have been established in the UK by CASC-affiliated entities, all focused on advanced engineering and aerospace technologies. These joint laboratories include: the UK-China Advanced Structure Manufacturing Technology Laboratory (hosted by Imperial College London); the Sino-British Joint Advanced Laboratory on Control System Technology (hosted by the University of Manchester); and the Space Mechatronic Systems Technology Laboratory (hosted by the University of Strathclyde).

Opaque financial relationships

Of the 80 universities that received FOI requests, only 15 (18.8%) disclosed the amount of financial income received from Chinese entities, totaling £49.4 million. This figure is likely just the tip of the iceberg. For example, the University of Cambridge declined to respond to this investigation’s FOI request in full. However, self-disclosed aggregate data on its [website](#) indicates it received £75.6 million from Chinese sources between 2017 and 2021, with all funders except Huawei listed anonymously.

By contrast, Imperial College London was among the most financially transparent institutions in this investigation, disclosing £35.6 million in funding from Chinese entities between 2010 and 2023. Notably, all of this funding was allocated to STEM-related research, with eight funders identified as “high” or “very high” risk by the ASPI tracker, including several listed on export control end-user lists or linked to espionage activities.

British universities are now required to increase transparency around foreign funding, as stipulated in the UK’s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which came into force on 1 August 2025. However, at the time of writing, implementation details of such schemes have not yet been announced.

The commodification of Chinese student recruitment

One distinctive feature of UK–China academic relations is the heavily commodified recruitment and admissions infrastructure targeting Chinese international students. Currently, the UK is the second most popular destination for Chinese students studying abroad, following only the United States.

Our records indicate that British universities have disclosed at least 66 commercial partners based in China that are specifically tasked with recruiting Chinese international students. Additionally, at least 203 Chinese universities have entered into progression, articulation, double, or joint degree agreements with UK counterparts. At least 45 British

universities have also participated in establishing Joint Educational Institutes (JEIs) to deliver British degree programs to Chinese students within the PRC.

This strong emphasis on Chinese student recruitment raises concerns about structural vulnerabilities in the financial models of UK universities. In the 2021/22 academic year, Chinese international students accounted for 26% of total tuition fee income for Russell Group universities. Amidst declining domestic enrolment and rising financial pressures, many institutions have become increasingly dependent on international student recruitment.

At the same time, this large-scale recruitment stands in stark contrast to the often poor quality of experience Chinese students report. Numerous studies and investigations have found that British universities frequently fail to address the intersecting challenges faced by Chinese students, including a lack of integration, stereotyping, racism, and transnational repression. Many Chinese students experience significant ostracization in British university settings today.

Confucius Institutes

The UK currently hosts 30 Confucius Institutes (CIs)—the highest number of any country. While these centers are nominally dedicated to Mandarin language instruction and cultural exchange, a previous report by the Henry Jackson Society found that only four UK-based CIs strictly limit their activities to those functions. All other 22 CIs investigated by the HJS report have engaged in a range of influence operations targeting businesspeople, political networks, academics, and the general public. The report also identified at least £33.4 million in funding for British CIs from Chinese partners. By contrast, only seven British universities disclosed Chinese funding of CIs in response to this investigation, with the total amount reaching just £4.8 million, excluding figures obtained through secondary research.

Several examples in the Henry Jackson Society report illustrate CI influence within the UK political sector. Between 2019 and 2021, Welsh officials met five times with staff from Welsh-based CIs to discuss the Welsh Government’s “draft international strategy.” Additionally, eight events have been co-organized by Welsh authorities and CIs since 2016. On one occasion (date undisclosed), the CI at the University of Southampton donated £13,000 to the local city council.

Recommendations

- **Improve transparency on overseas partnerships, especially financial ties.** Building on the Government’s implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and its overseas funding disclosure requirements, British universities must enhance transparency across all aspects of their collaborations with Chinese entities. This includes disclosing financial income, the results of any risk assessments, and the nature of collaborations, particularly those with implications for national security, academic freedom, or significant public interest.

- **Design strict internal safeguards for research collaborations with Chinese entities and raise awareness among key stakeholders.** The high number and proportion of research partnerships with Chinese institutions subject to sanctions or implicated in espionage is a cause for concern. In today's landscape, the boundary between basic scientific collaboration and sensitive technology transfer is increasingly blurred. Rather than relying solely on broad regulatory restrictions, which may be overly burdensome and ineffective, universities should develop robust internal safeguards led by academic experts with deep subject knowledge. Key decision-makers must be trained on the PRC's military ambitions and record of human rights violations. Partnerships with Chinese entities linked to military development or rights abuses should be subject to rigorous scrutiny and enhanced due diligence.
- **Invest in independent, culturally informed support services for Chinese students.** Current recruitment practices targeting Chinese students have created challenges that compromise both the financial sustainability of British universities and the well-being of the students themselves. Universities must move beyond viewing Chinese international students primarily as revenue sources and instead invest in robust, culturally informed support services that reflect these students' substantial financial contributions and the complex difficulties they may encounter while studying in the UK. These services should leverage partnerships with trusted UK-based third-party organizations experienced in supporting Chinese students, while deliberately avoiding collaboration with entities linked to or influenced by the CCP.

**[Visit the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker](#)
and explore the data on [UK-China academic engagements](#).**

China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker serves as a database of interactions between European academic institutions and Chinese entities. It was created by CEIAS and partners from investigated countries.

Along with the Tracker, country-level analyses were created to help better understand the specific circumstances of academic relations with Chinese entities in individual countries. They provide information on the significant points in regards to individual academic interactions, look at their current state, and identify what may improve them. They also map the current guidelines used by institutions involved in such interactions.

The goal of the Tracker is to provide a record of how European academic institutions engage with China so as to help understand the nature and volume of these interactions, as well as to improve their transparency. The Tracker can help with further research by individual scholars, provide the initial information for policy-making as well and help guide the universities themselves in establishing and improving their academic interactions.

Project scope

The Tracker was launched in June 2022; however, due to its nature, it is subject to ongoing updates. At the point of the launch, the Tracker mapped the engagement of academic institutions from 11 European countries with their Chinese partners.

In some cases, especially the larger countries (like France, the UK, or Germany), investigated universities were sampled, with investigation priority put on researching China links of those academic institutions that would be considered the most significant - due to their overall internationalization, academic ranking, or dominant focus on research (especially in STEM fields).

The 11 European countries initially covered (data published in June 2022) by the project are Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. As of April 2025, data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Greece, France, Luxembourg, Italy, and Slovenia were published on the Tracker.

Methodology

To map the interaction of European academic institutions and Chinese entities, we have relied on data collected from various open sources. The methodology of this research has been built on previous research into the ties of Slovak academic institutions with Chinese entities published by CEIAS in December 2020.

The methodology consisted firstly of gathering data through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests (where applicable; otherwise similar approaches were used if possible) to the public universities and research institutes. We have used this method to gather data on the scope and outcomes of cooperation with Chinese entities, as well as to evaluate the financial flows between them. Filing the FOIA requests has also helped us to evaluate the overall openness of public academic institutions when it comes to their dealings with China.

Second, we juxtaposed the collected data with media coverage of various academic interactions and other public sources so as to broaden the scope of the information where possible. In cases where it is allowed (such as Slovakia or Czechia), we also relied on publicly disclosed contracts to help supplement and check the transparency of contracts signed as a part of various interactions.

Where available, we have also cross-referenced the collected data with the [China Defense University Tracker](#) by ASPI, which has allowed us to note instances of cooperation with entities linked to the People's Liberation Army and assign approximate risk levels. However, as ASPI itself notes, the fact that such a link is not recorded does not automatically indicate no risks are associated with cooperating with an institution.

Caveats

Despite the large-scale data collection that took place, please take note that the data contained herein are not comprehensive. The reasons for this are twofold. First, given the nature of the data collection process, which relied on Freedom of Information Act requests and open source data collection, there is a risk that certain data were not included as they were not disclosed by the universities so far. Second, even though we strived to be as comprehensive as possible, in certain cases (e.g. France, Germany, Poland, UK), local limitations forced us to rely on a sampling method in the data collection process, thus deviating from the general approach of collecting data on all the publicly financed academic institutions.

Despite these limitations, it is our view that shedding light on a large number of existing links, though not all of them, still contributes to the overall goal of this project, i.e. improving the transparency of the engagements between European and Chinese academia.

Nevertheless, we strive to overcome these limitations and plan to update the database. To this end, please do not hesitate to submit to us information about any links between European academic institutions and their Chinese partners.

About CEIAS

Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank focusing on Europe-Asia relations and developments in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally founded in 2007 in Slovakia, CEIAS is today a **transnational think tank with main branches in Bratislava (Slovakia), Prague (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria)**, and further regional presence in Poland, Hungary, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and beyond.

We strive to combine **academic and policy advisory role**, producing **data-driven, methodologically rigorous, reliable, and practically relevant research** that is highly valued by experts and policymakers.

Our activities focus are **focused into several research programs and centers**:

- **Geopolitics • Security**
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- **EU-China Relations**
- **Taiwan • Cross-Strait Affairs**
- **Southeast Asia • ASEAN**

Since its establishment in 2007, CEIAS has consistently worked towards becoming a **go-to think-tank in the CEE for matters related to East Asia and the Indo-Pacific**

region. We have a track record of successful project implementation **supported by regional and international donors**, including the European Commission; Government of Taiwan; US State Department; UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; the Government of Japan; the Government of Slovakia; National Endowment for Democracy (NED); the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE); Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Fridrich Naumann Stiftung; International Visegrad Fund; International Republican Institute (IRI); Korea Foundation, and many others.

CEIAS is **embedded into the key European networks of premier East Asia scholars**. Examples include the European Think-Tank Network on China (ETNC), European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS), or China in Europe Research Network (CHERN).

CEIAS researchers regularly comment for and publish op-eds in leading CEE and international media. Our work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, South China Morning Post, NHK, Deutsche Welle, Euractiv, CNA, The Diplomat, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Euractiv, and other media.

Our outputs are referred to in the work of other thinktanks, e.g. Brookings (USA), Clingendael (Netherlands), MERICS (Germany), Institute for Security & Development Policy (Sweden), IFRI (France), ISPI (Italy), Global Taiwan Institute (USA), Prospect Foundation (Taiwan), ISEAS (Singapore), Elcano Royal Institute (Spain) and many others.

CEIAS analysis was also highlighted in the outputs of the **European Parliament** and the **U.S. Congress**.

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Editors: Matej Šimalčík, Adam Kalivoda

Copyediting: David Hutt

Cite as: Yang, Tau (2025): *United Kingdom: Opaque research ties, hidden CCP influence at the expense of a large Chinese student diaspora*. China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker – Country Briefing. Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS).

Published by:

Central European Institute of Asian Studies
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