

World

China links ‘will become more political’

Research ties with China likely to be rattled by growing geopolitical tensions

Ben Upton

Researchers have warned that links between Chinese academics and those in Western democracies are likely to face further strain in the years to come, with the Covid-19 pandemic worsening tensions.

Ties “will be unusually political or politicised”, said Dominic Sachsenmaier, a China researcher at the University of Göttingen, Germany. Speaking at a May event—titled The New Silk Road in time of global pandemic: changing views on academic cooperation between China and the West?—he said political turbulence would come from both ends of these international collaborations.

Tight government controls and greater suspicion of Western collaboration on Chinese university campuses are already mirrored by a growing climate of distrust and anxiety at the other end, including in Europe, he said.

European and American politicians have recently warned that China could be exploiting

their nations’ research. That was before the Covid-19 pandemic saw the United States and China also trading insults over culpability for thousands of deaths.

US president Donald Trump has vowed to withdraw US contributions to the World Health Organization over its Covid-19 response, claiming it has an “alarming lack of independence” from China. That move followed a months-long rhetorical battle between the two superpowers.

Even before the pandemic, EU member states were asking the European Commission to negotiate a more level playing field for academic cooperation with China, Marijk van der Wende, a China researcher at Utrecht University, said at the same event.

Van der Wende coordinated the Academic Silk Road, a two-year research project exploring higher education and research

cooperation between China and Europe. That found a decline in Chinese students travelling to Western countries to study and an increase in Chinese expatriate researchers returning home.

She warned that post-pandemic hits to university finances—which could land harder in the West than in China, due to a deeper recession and the greater loss of international students—“may challenge Europe’s competitive edge over China”, she said.

Simon Marginson, a China researcher at the University of Oxford, struck a more optimistic tone on collaboration.

He said US and Chinese co-authors on research papers are still “by far the biggest collaboration in the academic literature”, citing a rise from 2,100 in 1996 to 55,400 in 2018.

This growth “is sustained by

a great deal of commonality in terms of commitment to academic values” and a shared understanding of the importance of cooperation, he said.

William Kirby, a China researcher at Harvard University in the US, said there were still strong incentives to collaborate with China, which has “the fastest growing [higher education system] in the world in terms of quality, as well as quantity”.

The Covid-19 pandemic “both limits and gives new prospects for the world of cooperation in higher education”, said Kirby.

While movement may be curtailed, other avenues of interaction are widening.

Kirby cited a recent Harvard College China Forum. These usually garner a few thousand physical attendees, but a livestream in May was watched by 1.2 million people. 📺



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