



# Decoding Discord: Paradoxes, Misperceptions and Risks in EU–China Higher Education Cooperation

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Geopolitical tensions between China and the West have significantly reshaped global power dynamics, influencing international academic collaboration—an indispensable factor in advancing global scientific knowledge. Initially, these changes manifested in US–China cooperation, but the ripple effects have extended to EU–China relationships. For example, several European countries have published policy guidelines for academic cooperation with China. A growing sense of caution regarding the influence of Confucius Institutes is becoming apparent across Europe. In certain countries, universities are displaying increased hesitancy to accept PhD students funded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC). Moreover, numerous academic cooperation agreements between European and Chinese institutions have not been extended. Concerns have also arisen about European institutions hosting Chinese scholars and doctoral students in the fields of science and technology.

These sudden shifts have thrust the responsibility onto policy makers and practitioners on both sides to tackle complexities in EU–China higher education cooperation. This article delves into the paradoxes, misperception, and risks influencing these dynamics. By identifying the core contributing factors to these challenges, relevant stakeholders can formulate relevant strategies and approaches to navigate the intricate landscape of ongoing EU–China higher education collaboration.

## Paradoxes in the European Union's Objectives in Academic Cooperation with China

In addressing the shifting geopolitics of academic collaboration, the European Union employs a more defined strategy compared to China. Both the European Union and its member states broadly agree that while sustaining partnerships with China is crucial, exercising vigilance is equally imperative. On the one hand, the European Union seeks to maintain its cooperation with China, particularly considering China's substantial strides in science and technology. On the other hand, the European Union has introduced more rigorous measures to ensure that collaborations with China do not undermine academic freedom, intellectual property rights, or the security of European institutions.

Nonetheless, the objectives of bolstering collaboration with China and preserving academic freedom and security can sometimes create a paradox, given different actors'

### Abstract

Geopolitical tensions and shifts in global power dynamics have profoundly influenced the internationalization of higher education, particularly evident in EU–China higher education cooperation. This article examines the emerging challenges in this cooperation, identified as paradoxes in collaboration objectives, mutual misperceptions, and concealed risks to sustained collaboration. Through scrutinizing these elements, the author proposes recommendations for policy makers and practitioners engaged in the field to transform these challenges into potential opportunities for enhanced cooperation.

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disparate interests and motivations. Collaborating with China presents new avenues for academic and scientific innovation, yet it may also expose universities to risks associated with Chinese policies and practices concerning academic freedom and intellectual property. Consequently, those engaged in academic partnerships with China may face challenges in striking a balance between the benefits of collaboration and the need to protect academic freedom and security. This uncertainty leaves academics pondering about the future.

### **Misperceptions in EU–China Higher Education Cooperation**

The current state of higher education cooperation between the European Union and China is marred by mutual misperception. Within the European Union, it is widely believed that China's authoritarian system heavily intertwines political discourse with the practices of its higher education institutions in cooperation with Europe. However, the reality in China tells a different story; while the Chinese government engages in tough dialogues with the European Union, it anticipates that the views expressed in political discourses are loosely linked with the activities related to Chinese universities' collaboration with their European counterparts. Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that Chinese universities are grappling with how to maintain their European partnerships amid the charged atmosphere of geopolitical tensions.

In China, it is assumed that European higher education institutions, owing to their longstanding tradition of academic autonomy, maintain significant independence from political discourses concerning cooperation with China. Yet, the reality within the European Union reveals a different scenario. The attitudes of European higher education institutions toward collaboration with China align with governmental positions. However, the situation is not simply a direct correlation between state policies and university positions; the wider EU–China relations and certain unfortunate experiences with China collaborations have negatively affected the perceptions of individuals at European universities regarding China.

Regrettably, these misperceptions not only cloud the true realities but also result in misguided actions, hindering collaborative progress. China has strategically opted for different approaches when engaging with the European Union and the United States, driven by the need to traverse complex geopolitical challenges. While China is ready for tension in relations with the United States across various sectors, it anticipates that Chinese universities can maintain collaborations with European counterparts, independent of political rhetoric between the European Union and China. However, this expectation is flawed, as European higher education institutions' actions are more congruent with national and EU-level policy discourses than previously understood. Consequently, Chinese universities might encounter unexpected hurdles and confusion in their day-to-day operations within the European Union. For example, cooperation agreements with European partners may not be renewed upon expiration, and new initiatives might receive lukewarm reception from their European counterparts.

In devising strategies for higher education cooperation with China, the European Union and its member states often refer to the practices of the United States and occasionally Australia. They tend to foresee challenges akin to those presented in the United States' academic cooperation with China. However, it is important to note that Chinese higher education institutions face fewer governmental constraints when collaborating with the European Union, in contrast to their dealings with the United States. As a result, the European approach to higher education cooperation with China may have been overly cautious. While security and academic freedom concerns are indeed valid, policy makers and practitioners could be excessively stringent in their interpretation and enforcement of these principles. This might lead to missed opportunities for truly mutually beneficial cooperation, contributions to global sustainability efforts, and the advancement of European interests.

### **Hidden Risks in EU–China Higher Education Cooperation**

Undeniably, current misperceptions between the European Union and China have had adverse impacts on their higher education cooperation. However, it is vital to note that these misinterpretations can catalyze a much deeper and more worrying issue—a vicious

cycle where misunderstandings (and distrust) intensify and cooperation weakens. On the one hand, the lack of mutual understanding exacerbates the challenges inherent in higher education collaboration, forming a barrier to effective communication and the pursuit of shared goals. On the other hand, as cooperation deteriorates, it significantly dampens people's motivation and commitment to learn from and understand each other, further deepening the divide. The emergence of such a destructive cycle is becoming increasingly apparent, and if left unaddressed, it will severely hamper the long-term prospects of EU–China higher education cooperation. Even if both sides develop a desire to strengthen the partnership in the future, it will be extremely challenging to restore the relationship to its former state due to the erosion of trust and capacity.

### **Suggestions**

To address the aforementioned challenges in EU–China higher education cooperation, the following recommendations are made for the involved actors, including policy makers, university leaders/administrators and academics. First, capacities for mutual understanding and cooperative problem-solving, which are essential for breaking the aforementioned vicious cycle, should be continuously improved. Second, both sides should consciously foster an open and transparent environment during collaboration discussions, especially when addressing the impact of current geopolitical challenges. Third, there should be a heightened (self-reflexive) sensitivity toward aligning academic cooperation with the political and economic agendas of the European Union and China. Fourth, sustainable development should be prioritized in collaborations to form a common ground for reconciling diverse interests within the EU–China cooperation context. Lastly, new perspectives should be developed for assessing risks and benefits, particularly regarding what European higher education and the European Union in general can gain from collaboration with China despite the risks. While these recommendations might already have been incorporated to some extent in various practices, given the escalating EU–China competition and tension, they have become more relevant than ever. ▲

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