



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

The Netherlands: Can cooperative knowledge security policy mitigate risky cooperations with China?

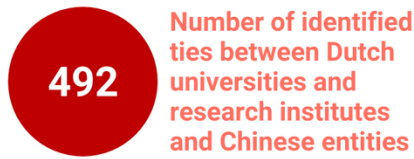
Sense Hofstede

This report analyzes a dataset of academic engagement between the Netherlands and China. There are some areas of concern, but overall, the relatively advanced Dutch approach offers lessons for other European countries. Yet the cooperative model is running into its limitations as the extent of universities' compliance diverges from the government's policy priorities.

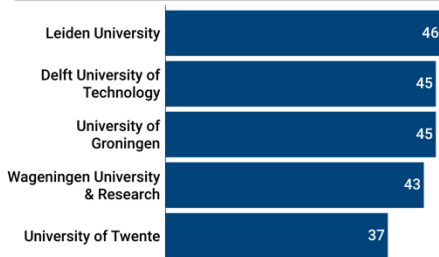
The dataset on which this analysis is based stems from freedom of information (FOI) requests by investigative journalism platform Follow the Money and research using open sources. In the course of his interpretative work, the researcher was greatly aided by journalistic output. This includes Follow the Money and various university newspapers. The research has yielded almost 500 ties. Of these, 40% involve People's Liberation Army-linked universities, and half of those links are "High" or "Very High" risk. The most common priority area is agriculture, with limited sharing in other sensitive areas. The technical universities of Delft and Twente are joined in the top 5 by the

Netherlands' academic engagement with China

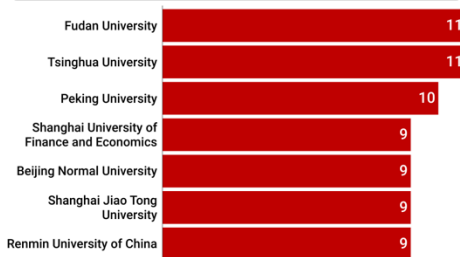
Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker



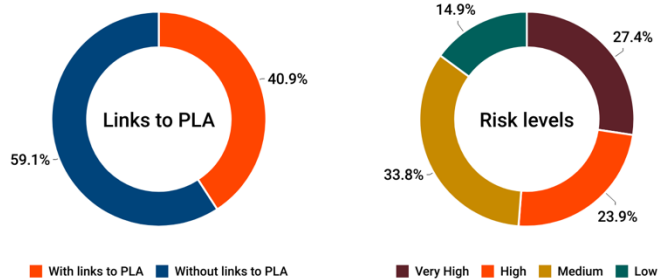
The most active Dutch academic institutions



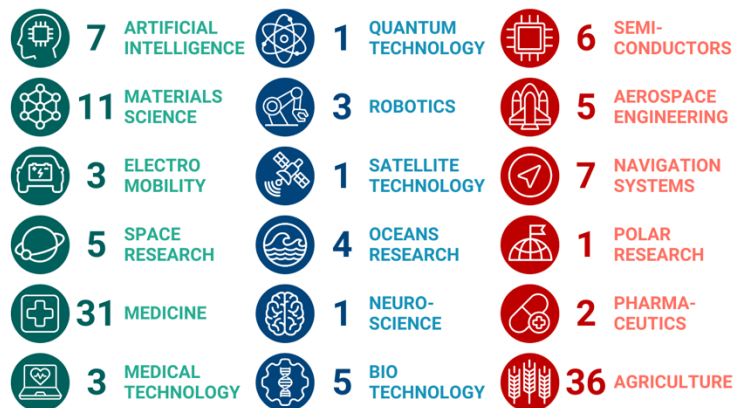
The most active Chinese entities



Cooperation with entities linked to the Chinese military



Engagements focused on China's priority cooperation areas



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

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agricultural powerhouse of Wageningen and the enthusiastic general universities of Groningen and Leiden.

The Netherlands has an internationally competitive university sector that has attracted a growing number of international students and researchers. In response, a “knowledge security” approach has been developed in cooperation between the field and the government. The government has established a “Knowledge Security Window” where institutes can go for non-binding advice based on input from all relevant agencies. The country has had “Knowledge security guidelines” since 2022, in which the government and research universities jointly define the risks and responses. This document was followed by the establishment of knowledge security teams at universities implementing university-level frameworks.

Direct Chinese sponsorship

The Netherlands stands out for the relative lack of directly sponsored institutes and programs. Parties generally bring their own funding to partnerships. The exceptions are the Confucius Institutes and a controversial human rights center.

Two Confucius Institutes still operate in the Netherlands, in Groningen and Maastricht. The Hanze University of Applied Science and the University of Groningen, together with

the Communication University of China, host the Groningen Confucius Institute (GCI), which was also active in Amsterdam. In Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences collaborates with Dongbei University of Finance and Economics through the Confucius Institute Maastricht.

The University of Leiden, the traditional seat of sinology in the Netherlands, worked with Shandong University from 2007 until 2019 to host the Confucius Institute at Leiden University, initially focused on The Hague, which is no longer aligned with the university's China strategy. Government-commissioned research into Chinese political influence in higher education found no indication of Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classrooms' influence at the secondary schools they collaborate with.

GCI officers played an important advisory role in the University of Groningen's drawn-out process to establish a branch campus in Yantai, Shandong province, in cooperation with China Agricultural University. The project was terminated in 2018 due to resistance from the staff and student-elected university council over practical and political concerns. After public broadcaster NOS reported in 2021 that Hanban shared half the cost of Groningen's new chair of Chinese Language & Culture on the condition that Chinese national interests and image would not be hurt, that cooperation was halted, too.

The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam hosted a Cross-Cultural Human Rights Center, funded by the Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing, from 2018 until 2021. Although launched with Dutch officials in attendance, the outrage following public reporting on the funding led to a quick halt to the Chinese sponsorship.

Academic interactions

An important driver in research cooperation between the Netherlands and China has been the Dutch Research Council (NWO). It has a cooperation program with the National Natural Science Foundation of China, focusing on urbanization, and another with the Chinese Academy of Sciences. These programs allow joint research projects between Dutch and Chinese institutions and involve government funding from both sides.

The University of Groningen is a rare example of Dutch funding going to China. It has a unique Dutch Studies Centre at Fudan University. Groningen also has a European Studies Centre at Tsinghua University that helps explain EU integration.

Another driver of cooperation has been the interest in Chinese talent. Until recently, many research universities had agreements with the China Scholarship Council for PhD researchers. These are now mostly cancelled or under review following a critical report commissioned in response to questions from the legislature.

The Technical University of Delft stands out especially. It has direct agreements to bring in students from lesser-known engineering universities as well as students of transport engineering and microelectronics from better-known institutes. The Technical University of Eindhoven (TU/e) obtained sponsorship from regional tech firms in exchange for cooperation. Inholland University of Applied Sciences offered double degrees in agriculture that appear to have ended very recently.

The question now is whether this beneficial but unidirectional exchange of talent is tenable in an era of Dutch funding cuts and growing Chinese excellence. The same can be said of the future of joint research institutes, which are generally based only in China. Chinese partners may lose interest in the expertise Dutch universities have to bring to China through research centers or in the education Chinese students can obtain from Europe. A more closed-off China means meanwhile that the expertise allowed to flow in the other direction, to the Netherlands, is getting more limited just as Chinese institutes are getting ahead in many areas.

The changing situation was perhaps best illustrated by Philips China's 2020 decision to terminate the tripartite Brain Bridge Program, which had existed between Philips, Eindhoven, and Zhejiang University, with a letter expressing Philips China's intention to enter into a bilateral relationship with Zhejiang alone.

PLA-linked institutes and Seven Sons of National Defense

Of the almost five hundred connections identified, 40% involve universities linked to the PLA. Half of those PLA-involved relationships are “High” or “Very High” risk. Beyond institutional university connections, there are also individual researchers with PLA connections working at Dutch universities. Press reports from 2022 identified several researchers in the Netherlands with affiliations or partnerships with institutes linked to the Chinese military.

One notorious example was research into armored concrete at the Technical University of Eindhoven that was provided with NATO bullets by the Dutch defense ministry. The Erasmus University Rotterdam's medical center was the subject of reports in 2019 of a researcher who had done work on facial recognition and Uyghur DNA for the Chinese police via the Beijing Institute of Genomics. These universities' knowledge security practices changed in response.

The Technical University of Delft is known for its expertise in aerospace. It has or had cooperation with the sensitive companies AVIC and Huawei, as well as four of the “Seven Sons of National Defense”: Beihang University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Harbin Institute of Technology, and Northwestern Polytechnical University.

The technical university in Eindhoven—home to many of the fruits of Philips Electronics' legacy, including ASML—has worked extensively with Zhejiang University, initially in cooperation with Philips China. It has a joint International Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the ZJU-TU/e Joint Research Institute of Design, Optoelectronics and Sensing. The South China Normal University is a frequent partner of Dutch universities. Eindhoven has an SCNU-TU/e Joint Laboratory of Device-Integrated Responsive Materials, aided by former Philips China employees.

Groningen works with the South China Normal University on display technology. The northern university also has an agreement with the Beijing Institute of Technology for a Joint Research Laboratory on Intelligent Systems and Control. In Amsterdam, the Dutch Research Council's world-famous National Research Institute for Mathematics and Computer Science (CWI) has a Joint Research Laboratory for Foundations of Software Technology at the East China Normal University.

Corporate cooperation

The FOI documents obtained by Follow the Money include a variety of agreements with corporate partners. Two parties stand out. Wageningen University & Research (WUR) and Huawei. The WUR contributes significantly to the overall academic cooperation with China in the Netherlands, due to the university's focus on agriculture. The Netherlands is an attractive partner for China in this area, because of the country's advanced agricultural and horticultural sector, with WUR at the center of much R&D.

The WUR's three big partners are the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, China Agricultural University, and Nanjing Agricultural University. Beyond these links, several commercial ventures in horticulture and projects with Fujian province stand out.

The WUR has also helped train Chinese companies, particularly in dairy and horticulture. It does more work with local governments and (state-owned) corporations than other Dutch universities. Its Sino-Europe Technology Promotion Center plays a vital role in these links. The only other institute that comes close to this level of official engagement is the University of Twente. Twente's Faculty of Geo-information Science and Earth Observation, before 2010, an independent institute, has extensive engagement with Chinese government entities, mainly through training.

Huawei is very active in the Netherlands. It cooperates with seven Dutch research universities: Delft University of Technology, Eindhoven University of Technology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Leiden University, the University of Amsterdam, the University of Groningen, and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The related HiSilicon cooperates with the University of Twente.

Huawei's most intensive cooperation is in research with Delft's Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science, and with the joint center at the two universities in Amsterdam. The extent to which Delft's cooperation with Huawei touches upon priority areas is hard to fully ascertain because the topics are blacked out. Concerns have been raised about the applicability of the smart city projects in Amsterdam to surveillance purposes.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data shows that direct Chinese sponsorship is limited. The most controversial are past cases of cooperation that the universities themselves have already ended. In the future, foreign researchers in sensitive areas will have to undergo government screening under a new law. One area that could need further work is the so-called *hogescholen*—known as “universities of applied science” in English—of the *hoger beroepsonderwijs* (higher vocational education) type of bachelor's degree-granting institutes.

The Netherlands, in many ways, serves as an example of success in Europe. Much of the clarity this report can provide stems from the attention “knowledge security” receives. Journalistic work and pressure from the legislature are part of this. The government has also proactively commissioned reports that help the public understand the nature of the interactions. The results of cooperation between the government and institutes have provided further insight.

However, a very conscious approach to cooperation with China for Dutch and scientific benefit is now running into the limits of what is possible in changing circumstances. As an increasingly ambitious China is closing down, the existing guardrails and balances need to be rethought. In this situation, the cooperative Dutch model of involving all stakeholders is reaching its limits without harming some interests.

While concerns remain in the Dutch national security sphere, the author knows from personal conversations and observations that many academics themselves are already unhappy with the extent of measures so far. In time, this could limit the effectiveness of the non-binding cooperation on which the Dutch model rests. Past issues have been resolved, but some ties remain. The unidirectional nature of academic exchange is a major issue that will only grow. Universities of applied science are the next area for improvement. In general, the work to explain the necessity of knowledge security to academics in the field continues. Universities need to continue their proactive attitude to preempt more direct government intervention.

Recommendations

- **Continue to rethink the desirability of ties with higher-risk universities**, especially the Seven Sons of National Defense.
- **Devise policies to deal with the unidirectional nature of exchanges** in the face of a China that is both getting more advanced and more closed off.
- **Universities need to continue taking policy changes seriously** or be forced to adapt by government force.
- **Include a more explicit role for the political and moral questions** of staff and students through the universities' elected representative bodies.
- **Include universities of applied sciences in policymaking**, especially when they share campuses with technical universities.

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

Author

SENSE HOFSTEDE • Independent Researcher

Dr. Sense Hofstede is an expert in the influence of the Chinese party-state on Beijing's foreign policy, cross-Strait politics, and the international relations of the Indo-Pacific. He has completed his PhD in Comparative Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and has previously worked as a Lecturer at Leiden University and a Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute.



sense@hofstede.fr



[Sense Egbert Hofstede](#)

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 are focused into **several programs and centers**:

- **Global Perceptions of China Center**
- **Geo-economics & Technology Center**
- **EU-Taiwan Center**
- **Indo-Pacific Program**
- **EU-China Relations Program**
- **Southeast Asia Program**
- **Human Rights & Law Program**

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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Authors: Sense Hofstede

Editors: Matej Šimalčík, Adam Kalivoda

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Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
www.ceias.eu
office@ceias.eu

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