



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

Belgium: A fragmented landscape of academic cooperation and research security

Eleftheris Vigne

Belgian universities maintain a dense web of cooperation with Chinese partners, ranging from institutional agreements and student (and sometimes staff) mobility to joint research and teaching programs. These links have expanded over the past two decades alongside broader internationalization strategies, growing student flows and China's rising research capacity. In recent years, however, European and Belgian debates on economic security, dual-use risks and foreign interference have pushed research security higher up the agenda.

This paper maps links between Belgian universities and Chinese entities and highlights where exposure to research-security risks may be highest, focusing on sensitive research areas and partners assessed as high risk. It also reviews the trajectory of Confucius Institute arrangements and outlines how research-security governance is evolving across Belgium's fragmented higher-education landscape. The analysis draws on data collected directly from Belgian universities, supplemented by public sources.

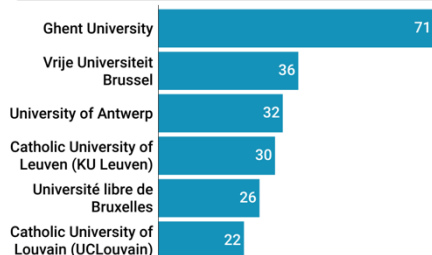
Belgium's academic engagement with China

Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker



283 Number of identified ties between Belgian universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

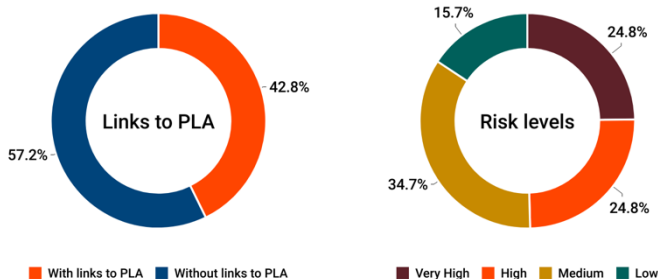
The most active Belgian academic institutions



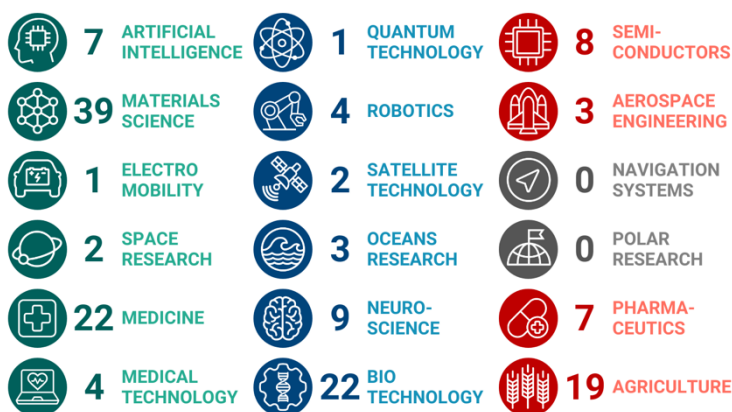
The most active Chinese entities



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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Mapping academic interactions with Chinese entities

The inventory identifies 266 institutional links between Belgian universities and Chinese entities. The vast majority (nearly 87%) involve Chinese universities. The most frequently cited partners include Fudan University (8 occurrences), Shanghai Jiao Tong University (5), Renmin University of China (5), Xiamen University (5), Shanghai International Studies University (5), Tsinghua University (4) and Beihang University (4). The remaining links involve research institutes (often connected to the Chinese Academy of Sciences), corporations such as Huawei, and state bodies such as the China Scholarship Council.

Cooperation most commonly takes the form of student exchanges, which account for nearly 60% of cases. Academic staff exchanges and joint research projects each appear in roughly one-third of partnerships. Several joint teaching programs also exist, mainly in engineering and applied sciences (materials, chemistry, textiles, photonics, optoelectronics), as well as in economics and management. More occasionally, joint programs appear in the social sciences and Chinese studies.

In disciplinary terms, cooperation spans a wide range of fields, but the emphasis is clear: links are strongly oriented towards STEM, especially engineering, alongside economics/business and law. Medicine and the fundamental sciences, particularly

chemistry and physics, are also present, though less prominently. Overall, the pattern suggests that while interactions are multidisciplinary, they concentrate in domains that are often central to research-security debates.

Sensitive areas and high-risk collaborations

Just over 35% of partnerships (94 of 266) fall within at least one “priority area” coded in the dataset, derived from China’s science, technology and innovation priorities. The most frequent category is materials (39 occurrences), followed by medicine and biotechnology (22) and agriculture (19). Other potentially sensitive sectors also appear, including neuroscience (9), semiconductors (8) and artificial intelligence (7). While these categories do not map one-to-one onto EU taxonomies or official lists of critical technologies, there is substantial overlap: materials science, biotechnology, semiconductors and artificial intelligence also feature prominently in European policy debates on critical and potentially dual-use technologies.

Some 21% of collaborations involve Chinese partners classified as high risk in ASPI’s China Defense Universities Tracker. Of the 266 relationships identified, 57 involve institutions assessed as presenting a “high” or “very high” risk. Nearly half (28) of these collaborations also fall within at least one priority area. The institutions concerned include Beihang University (3 occurrences), Northwestern Polytechnical University (3), Beijing Institute of Technology (1) and Nanjing University of Science and Technology (1)—all members of the “Seven Sons of National Defense”, which are closely linked to China’s military and defense industry.

This combination of high-risk partners operating in sensitive areas suggests substantial exposure to research-security challenges within the Belgian academic landscape. It also aligns with a recent bibliometric analysis of Sino-Belgian co-publications, which finds that around 10% relate to critical technologies, include researchers affiliated with Chinese institutions linked to the military sector, and roughly one-third involve partners classified as “very high risk” in the China Defense Universities Tracker.

Confucius Institutes

Four Belgian universities have hosted, or been linked to, Confucius Institute (CI) activities. Confucius-related activities were hosted at KU Leuven’s Campus Group T. KU Leuven has framed the CI in Leuven as operating via a separate entity (“GROUP T Academy”) rather than as a KU Leuven unit. While no public explanation of the substantive reasons has been identified by the author, the “Confucius Institute at GROUP T Academy” was dissolved, and its liquidation was closed in December 2023.

Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université libre de Bruxelles both decided in December 2019 not to renew their CI hosting agreements. The University of Liège announced in June 2023 that it would not renew its agreement. These arrangements primarily focused on Chinese language teaching and cultural exchange, sometimes complemented by cultural activities and, in some cases, initiatives related to China–Europe relations.

Structurally, however, Confucius Institutes appear to have played a limited role within Belgian higher education. Chinese language teaching and China-related expertise also exist outside CIs, including through university language centers and degree programs. The University of Liège is illustrative: when the CI agreement ended, the university explicitly maintained an internal Chinese-language and culture offering, suggesting that China-related teaching capacity can be sustained independently of a CI.

At Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the non-renewal decision followed publicly reported suspicions of espionage involving the institute's director: Belgian civil intelligence reportedly issued an unfavorable opinion, and authorities did not renew his visa. The episode attracted extensive media coverage and intensified concerns about interference, political influence and pressure on academic freedom. More broadly, Confucius Institutes have declined in Belgian higher education amid growing concern about research security, institutional autonomy and risks of foreign interference.

Policy framework and research security

Research security is becoming more salient across Belgium's academic system, driven in part by European recommendations on economic security and protections against foreign interference. Despite this shift, Belgium still lacks a fully harmonized and operational national framework that sets uniform guidelines for academic cooperation with authoritarian regimes. As a result, practices vary, with universities largely responsible for designing and implementing internal risk-assessment procedures.

In the Wallonia–Brussels Federation, a growing number of universities have strengthened and formalized screening and governance mechanisms, largely through institution-led initiatives. At Université libre de Bruxelles, for example, all new partnerships are subject to a fundamental-rights test and include a suspension or termination clause in cases of serious violations of academic freedom or human rights. It has also established a dedicated committee to assess whether institutional collaborations, particularly international ones, comply with international law, fundamental rights and dual-use regulations.

These mechanisms have been applied in practice. In May 2025, following the committee's recommendations, the Université libre de Bruxelles' Academic Council decided to suspend its institutional partnerships with Beihang University and to exclude any new institutional partnership with the "Seven Sons of National Defense" universities. The decision cited opacity and elevated risks of unwanted transfers of sensitive technologies that could be used in ways contrary to international law and/or fundamental rights. While such mechanisms are not uniform across French-speaking universities, they reflect increased awareness of risks related to interference, political pressure and technological misuse.

In Flanders, the approach appears more structured at the inter-university level. The Flemish Interuniversity Council, representing the five Flemish universities, has developed and updated common guidelines on research security, dual-use risks, and the prevention of misuse of scientific results. In parallel, the Research Foundation–Flanders has formalized a research-security policy intended to integrate risk analysis more systematically into project funding. This includes a "Research Security Appraisal" embedded in application forms: applicants identify risks linked to the topic, country and

partner and propose mitigations; “high risk” files require institutional research-security approval; and follow-up is integrated into reporting.

In January 2024, the Flemish government confirmed in parliament that it would exclude new publicly funded collaborations with the Chinese “Seven Sons of National Defense” universities, and it announced plans to set up a “knowledge security desk” to support risk assessment and facilitate reporting of suspicious cases to the competent security services.

Academic cooperation with China, however, has not been halted. Joint programs between the Research Foundation–Flanders and China’s National Natural Science Foundation, whether for projects or mobility, remain active. This points to a strategy of filtering and selective engagement rather than broad decoupling. Overall, Belgium appears to be pursuing a “de-risking” approach consistent with European guidelines: maintaining scientific openness while strengthening verification mechanisms and, where necessary, applying targeted exclusions to high-risk partners.

Conclusion

The analysis points to a dense landscape of Belgian–Chinese cooperation, with a strong STEM focus and substantial exposure to high-risk Chinese institutions. The key question is not whether to maintain academic cooperation with China, but how to embed it within a more structured and better-equipped framework for managing associated risks.

Belgium’s higher-education system still lacks an integrated, fully harmonized national approach to research security. In Flanders, inter-university coordination has helped structure practice through shared procedures and more systematic risk assessment. In the Wallonia–Brussels Federation, responses to date appear more institution-driven, operating within a less formalized inter-university framework.

A core recommendation (aligned with European guidance) is to establish, at the national level, a minimum set of common principles for research security. This baseline would allow universities to go further if they choose, while ensuring a consistent level of protection across the country. Harmonization would help narrow the gap between a relatively consolidated Flemish framework and a more fragmented set of practices in the Wallonia–Brussels Federation, while preserving university autonomy. It would support a more coherent national approach, maintaining the benefits of cooperation while mitigating the most significant vulnerabilities.

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

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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), 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:**

- **Global Perceptions of China Center**
- **Geoeconomics & Technology Center**
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- **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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