



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

# Ireland: Increasing exposure to authoritarian influence through educational partnerships with China

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Ireland's expanding academic ties with China have created opportunities for universities, but the accompanying risks of authoritarian influence warrant closer scrutiny. The main concerns relate to Irish institutions' growing involvement in transnational education (TNE) programs in China and to the presence and influence of controversial Chinese-linked entities, such as Confucius Institutes and Huawei.

This study draws on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted to 17 Irish universities listed by the Higher Education Authority. In total, we collected 208 records from 20 Irish institutions. Of these, 186 records (89.4%) were provided by universities in response to FOI correspondence, while the remaining 22 (10.6%) were obtained through secondary-source research.

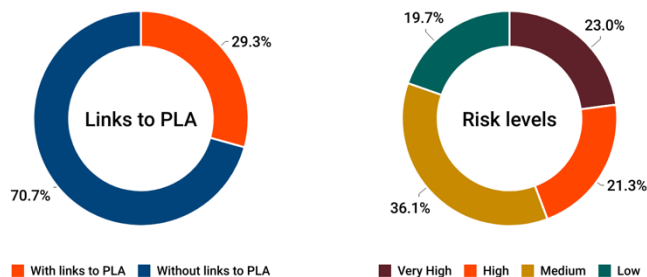
# Ireland's academic engagement with China



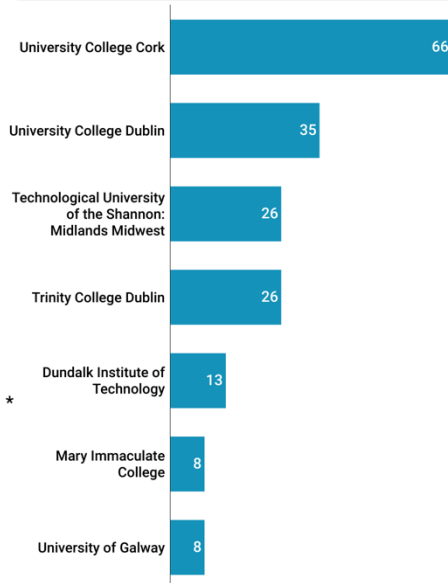
Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

**208** Number of identified ties between Irish universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

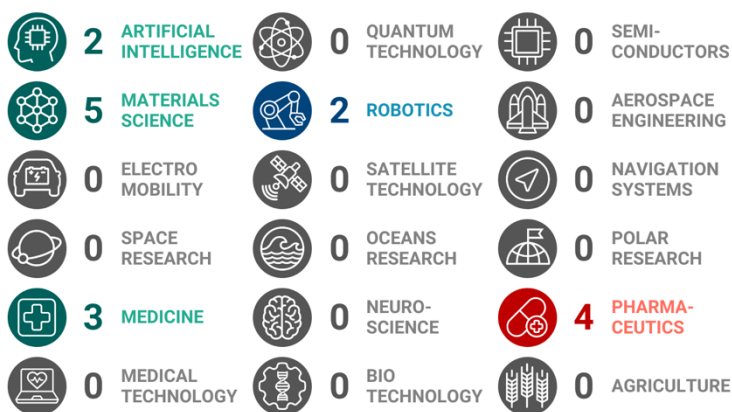
## Cooperation with entities linked to the Chinese military



## The most active Irish academic institutions



## Engagements focused on China's priority cooperation areas



Data: China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker | [www.academytracker.ceias.eu](http://www.academytracker.ceias.eu)

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## Transnational education

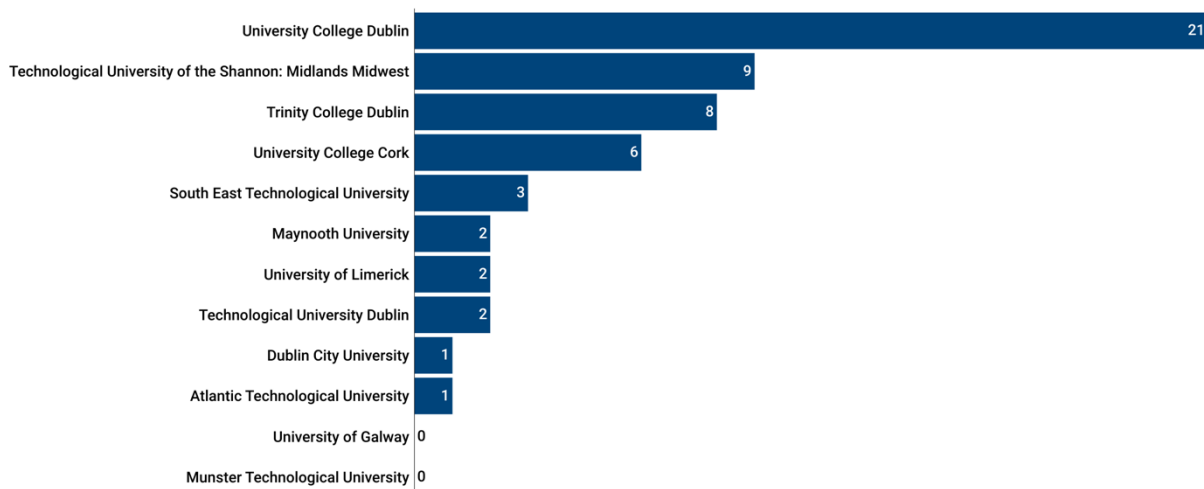
TNE is a defining feature of Ireland–China academic relations. It enables higher education institutions to deliver degrees and qualifications outside their home jurisdiction.

In this study, 69 records (33.2%) relate to TNE collaborations between Irish and Chinese institutions. Ten of Ireland's 12 public universities operate TNE programs or institutes in China; the two exceptions are the University of Galway and Munster Technological University. Overall, 18 Irish institutions captured by this study have TNE partnerships in China.

TNE partnerships in China, one of the world's largest educational markets, can generate substantial financial returns. They open revenue streams overseas and support ongoing student recruitment tied to lucrative international tuition fees.

In China, foreign universities can offer courses only through partnerships with a Chinese institution, nominally under shared governance arrangements. In practice, program administration is ultimately overseen by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials, who often function as de facto managers of joint programs.

## Irish public universities' TNE programs in China



Data: China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker | [www.academytracker.ceias.eu](http://www.academytracker.ceias.eu)

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These arrangements expose Irish universities to significant risks, including to the welfare of students and staff and to the safeguarding of academic freedom. A China Strategic Risks Institute study of UK universities' TNE campuses in China found that, in some cases, students and academics on joint campuses faced ideological controls, surveillance and restrictions on free speech. Students, despite studying for UK degrees, were required to take accredited courses aligned with the CCP's authoritarian worldview, while extracurricular activities were closely monitored by CCP-affiliated ideological staff.

Warning signs have already surfaced in Ireland's growing reliance on China-based TNE. In 2020, University College Dublin, which now operates three joint campuses in China, circulated a draft document describing "academic freedom" as an "obstacle" to its internationalization strategy. Although the draft was later withdrawn, University College Dublin has continued to expand its TNE footprint in China.

## Confucius Institutes

Ireland hosts three Confucius Institutes (CIs), a small number compared with larger European neighbors. The UK hosts 30, for example, while France has 15. Even so, the Irish cases offer some of the clearest indications of how CIs can pose risks to academic freedom. In 2021, a CI-affiliated entity was permitted to teach an accredited University College Dublin module on Chinese politics, despite explicit concerns raised by the university's School of Politics and International Relations, which argued that allowing an organization linked to an authoritarian state to teach students about that state's political system posed a direct risk to academic integrity.

Nevertheless, the teaching proceeded. At the time of writing, University College Dublin's Confucius Institute and its affiliated Institute for Chinese Studies (both overseen by the same director) continue to offer courses on Chinese politics. The other two CIs in

Ireland, hosted by University College Cork and the University of Galway, also remain active.

## Research security

Research collaboration between Irish universities and Chinese entities is extensive and supported by government-level cooperation. One prominent example is the [SFI-NSFC Partnership Program](#) launched in 2017, backed by a joint funding pool of more than €12 million from Science Foundation Ireland and the National Natural Science Foundation of China.

In this study, we identified 11 records relating to research collaborations between Irish and Chinese partners. However, many Irish universities were unable to provide comprehensive records in this category, either because retrieving records at scale was deemed too burdensome or because of commercial sensitivity exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act 2014.

Joint research centers are a particular source of concern. In 2018, Dublin Institute of Technology opened a joint center with the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC), known as the Sino-Irish Research and Innovation Institute for Novel and Emerging Sciences and Technologies. The center's focus on [artificial intelligence](#) raises the possibility that its work could align with military-oriented [priorities](#) within Beijing's scientific agenda. It is [rated](#) "very high risk" for ties to People's Liberation Army (PLA)-linked research in the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's China Defense Universities Tracker. It has also appeared on end-user export control lists [maintained](#) by the United States and Canada. It has been linked in open-source reporting to [suspected](#) Chinese state-sponsored hacking activity.

Joint research centers with Chinese universities operating in sensitive technological domains can pose clear risks: they may be exploited to support PLA weapons-development programs or contribute to research that enables human rights violations. Similar concerns have been repeatedly raised in other countries, including the [UK](#) and the [United States](#).

## Undue authoritarian influences

The most significant risk arising from Ireland-China academic collaboration is the potential chilling effect on academic freedom within Irish higher education. The incidents at University College Dublin noted above, including the integration of its CI into accredited teaching on Chinese politics and the characterization of "academic freedom" as an obstacle to internationalization, should be treated as early indicators of the pressure authoritarian regimes can exert through institutional partnerships.

Irish universities' links with controversial Chinese companies also illustrate these risks. In 2021, the head of Huawei Ireland [wrote](#) privately to the then Minister for Defense to protest an article critical of the company authored by a University College Dublin academic, requesting the Minister's "full support in mitigating the damage that has been done." When concerns about this intervention were raised with its leadership, the university president reportedly [dismissed](#) them as an "overreaction".

Huawei has previously been criticized for supplying technology used in ethnically targeted surveillance against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and its 5G equipment has been banned in multiple countries on national security grounds. In 2023, the Irish Dáil introduced an amendment to the Communications Regulation and Digital Hub Development Agency Act that could enable the company's exclusion from Ireland's critical national infrastructure.

At least two Irish universities, Trinity College Dublin and the University of Galway, acknowledge research collaborations with Huawei in areas such as advanced computing and electrical engineering, with no financial disclosures attached.

## Recommendations

- **Increase scrutiny of transnational education with China.** Irish universities' TNE activities are overseen by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012. The current framework gives limited attention to student and staff welfare and to risks of adverse foreign influence on academic freedom in transnational programs, leaving Irish TNE operations in China particularly exposed to CCP leverage. As a first step, QQI should introduce systematic reviews of TNE activities, explicitly accounting for China's restrictive academic freedom environment and the risks it poses.
- **Improve awareness of risks in Chinese collaborations.** The scale of Chinese involvement in Irish higher education remains poorly documented; few statistics or official reports provide a clear picture. This lack of visibility should not be mistaken for an absence of risk. Repeated controversies, particularly those centered on University College Dublin, Ireland's most deeply connected university in this area, should prompt greater attention from university leaders and policymakers. Irish institutions and regulators should map existing China-related collaborations more systematically and facilitate frank, informed discussion of the risks they entail.

**[Visit the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker](#)  
and explore the data on [Ireland-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 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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## **United Kingdom: Opaque research ties, hidden CCP influence at the expense of a large Chinese student diaspora**

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**Copyediting:** David Hutt

**Cite as:** Yang, Tau (2026): *Ireland: Increasing exposure to authoritarian influence through educational partnerships with China*. 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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