



China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker • Country Briefing

Denmark: From naiveness to tight security screenings on Chinese academics

Thomas Foght

A strategic partnership agreement signed in 2008 was meant to usher in a new era of research cooperation between Denmark and China. Danish officials had spent years courting the “new global superpower,” and the deal placed particular emphasis on education, innovation, and research cooperation with China. It promised greater student mobility and easier access for Danish universities to recruit talented Chinese researchers.

Nearly two decades later, there is broad agreement across university leadership, experts, and politicians that Denmark’s approach was naïve—and, in some cases, irresponsible. Within Danish authorities, a new consensus has taken hold: China offers opportunities, but it must also be treated as a potential security threat to Danish research.

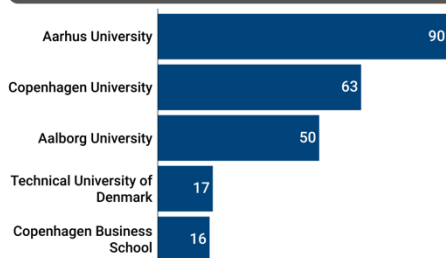
Denmark's academic engagement with China

Insights from China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker

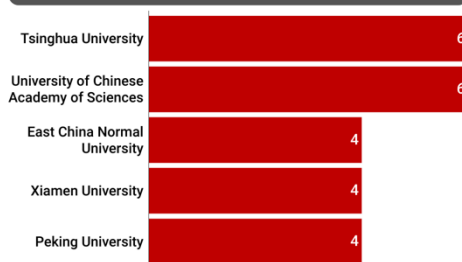


248 Number of identified ties between Danish universities and research institutes and Chinese entities

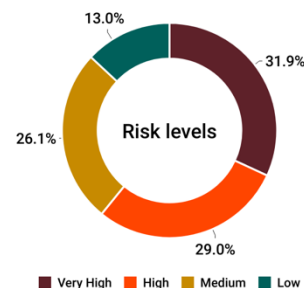
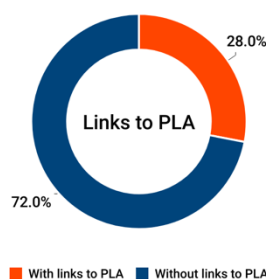
The most active Danish academic institutions



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

© CEIAS

A paradigm shift in international cooperation

In recent years, the Danish government and the country's eight public universities have introduced a series of tightening measures designed to increase vigilance toward collaborations with Chinese research institutions. When the latest set of guidelines was published in 2022, Denmark's Ministry of Higher Education and Science, argued that stronger safeguards were necessary for national security, competitiveness, fundamental values, and trust in Danish research.

Under the updated framework, universities are expected to identify and protect research considered strategically important. That includes data or research with high global value, as well as research that could be used for military purposes. Universities have also been given lists of predefined sensitive technologies intended to support screening and risk assessments. Beyond this, institutions must demonstrate a thorough understanding of their partners and cultivate a culture of awareness to reduce the risk of espionage.

The shift reflects Denmark's strong position in areas such as the green transition, quantum technology, and wind energy—fields closely tied to prosperity, social development, and international competitiveness. Few in Copenhagen want to jeopardize that advantage.

Several factors accelerated the change in course. Danish media have repeatedly scrutinized questionable research partnerships, Confucius Institutes, and what they described as inadequate control over the activities of prominent Chinese researchers, as well as links to programs such as the [Thousand Talents Plan](#), a program by the government of the People's Republic of China to recruit experts in science and technology from abroad.

At the same time, Danish intelligence services have raised their [focus](#) on the issue through information [campaigns](#) and progressively stricter risk assessments of educational and research cooperation with Chinese entities. In 2024, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) published a 24-page [guide](#) for research institutions titled “Is your research in danger?”, outlining risks of espionage, potential consequences, and practical recommendations for academics.

Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes never gained a stable foothold across Denmark's major universities. Over the years, the [University of Copenhagen](#), Roskilde University, and Aarhus University all declined to host an institute, citing concerns over academic independence. The University of Southern Denmark also rejected a proposal, stating that Hanban (the Chinese government body that oversees Confucius Institutes) made demands regarding teaching materials and literature. As one senior university figure [put it](#) when the issue surfaced publicly in 2018, “there was a strong influence that if we were to be a Confucius Institute, we would have to pull it in certain directions.”

Even so, two institutions did host Confucius Institutes for extended periods. [Aalborg University](#) ran one from 2009 to 2019, then terminated the collaboration, saying it wanted to reprioritize. During that decade, the university received more than €1.3 million from Hanban, which was used to purchase teaching materials and pay Chinese guest teachers. The Copenhagen Business School [hosted](#) a Confucius Institute from 2007 to 2017 and received roughly 1.1. Million EUR (DKK 8.25 million) over that period.

Although both institutions closed their institutes voluntarily, heightened public attention to censorship, influence, and espionage risks, alongside growing political skepticism toward China, formed part of the broader context. Today, there are no Confucius Institutes at Danish universities.

Key findings

Danish research and education are typically characterized by transparency, and Denmark's Freedom of Information Act often provides the public with access to administrative records. Yet a comprehensive mapping of Danish universities' collaboration with Chinese entities has proven difficult. Several universities said internal search systems could not conduct broad queries across cooperation agreements with Chinese partners. The alternative—a manual review of all agreements—would take more than 25 hours, allowing universities to refuse requests under rules related to disproportionate administrative burden.

As a result, the available mapping covers 453 university collaboration agreements with Chinese entities, drawn primarily from Aarhus University, the University of Copenhagen, and Aalborg University. The Technical University of Denmark (DTU) and the University of Southern Denmark were unable to provide complete data on their partnerships, though a smaller number of collaborations could be identified through publicly available university webpages.

Within the 453 agreements, 41 were signed with Chinese universities categorized by the ASPI tracker as “high-risk” institutions, while 40 involved “very high-risk” institutions. In 58 cases, Danish universities collaborated with Chinese university units that had previously been linked to espionage or misconduct. The projects covered fields such as science and technology, energy engineering, electronic systems, health, and technical sciences. However, the universities could not provide granular detail on whether these agreements included especially sensitive areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology, semiconductors, or neuroscience.

The mapping also indicates 12 instances of collaboration with China’s so-called “seven sons of national defense,” a group of universities closely associated with China’s defense-industrial ecosystem. Five of those cases involved the Harbin Institute of Technology, and they were described as focusing on science and technology. Danish universities did not provide further details on the specific research.

The most striking finding concerns DTU: it had collaborated with all “seven sons” over several years. DTU described the scope as research and innovation within energy engineering and computer science. In 2024, the university terminated all agreements with the “seven sons,” explicitly citing concern about contributing to China’s military industry. A vice-rector said DTU had been too naïve. DTU maintained that, to its knowledge, its work had not contributed to military products in China, but the decision was taken to reduce risk.

Another notable case involves Aalborg University’s long-running cooperation with Huawei. The university entered into 67 agreements with Huawei on research, including wireless communications, energy, and data storage. In many instances, the partnerships were covered by non-disclosure agreements. Aalborg University’s China partnerships have repeatedly drawn critical scrutiny in Danish media, and in 2020, the university conducted a broad review of existing agreements. It later tightened internal controls so that all new formal collaborations with Chinese partners require dean-level approval.

Overall, Denmark’s approach to China in research and education has shifted dramatically in just a few years—from openness and optimism to heightened caution and institutionalized control. Danish universities now conduct automatic background checks and screening of researchers from China seeking to work in Denmark. In early 2025, the Danish government further tightened cooperation with China through a new agreement limiting opportunities for joint research in areas including quantum, space, and defense.

Recommendations

The effort to compile data on university partnerships has also exposed a basic administrative weakness: large differences in how universities record and retrieve information about cooperation agreements. In some cases, universities could not provide elementary details, not because disclosure was legally prohibited, but because internal systems made it technically difficult or time-consuming.

There is clear scope for improving transparency. Standardized record-keeping, consistent journaling practices, and uniform search functions across universities would make it easier for the press and the public to scrutinize cooperation agreements, not only with China but globally. Universities already maintain public databases of research publications; adding a parallel layer for formal collaboration agreements and key partnership details, including contracts and funding arrangements, could strengthen accountability.

Denmark's new academic approach to China is among the most restrictive in Europe. While it enjoys broad political support, it has also generated unease within parts of the research community. Critics worry that intensified security procedures could gradually constrain academic freedom or discourage international collaboration. The challenge in the coming years will be finding a workable balance between preventing foreign influence and protecting open research. Universities will also have to ensure that screening processes are robust without becoming indiscriminate, so legitimate researchers are not wrongly excluded.

For now, Danish universities are conducting extensive background checks on researchers from China, Iran, and Russia. Yet the broader dilemma remains: science is global, and risks of influence and espionage can emerge from many directions. Managing that risk, without undermining the openness that underpins research excellence, will be a lasting test for Denmark's universities.

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

Author

THOMAS FOGHT

Thomas Foght is a Danish journalist and correspondent with 10 years of experience within investigative journalism. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, covering the Global South at Jyllands-Posten, major nation-wide newspaper in Denmark.



[Thomas Foght](#)

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**.

Connect with us online



office@ceias.eu



[linkedin.com/ceias-eu](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ceias-eu)



[instagram.com/ceias_eu/](https://www.instagram.com/ceias_eu/)



[youtube.com/@CEIAS_eu](https://www.youtube.com/@CEIAS_eu)



ceias.eu



[facebook.com/CEIASeu](https://www.facebook.com/CEIASeu)



x.com/CEIAS_eu



bsky.app/profile/ceias-eu.bsky.social

Denmark: From naiveness to tight security screenings on Chinese academics

Authors: Thomas Foght

Editors: Matej Šimalčík, Adam Kalivoda

Copyediting: David Hutt

Cite as: Thomas Foght (2026): *Denmark: From naiveness to tight security screenings on Chinese academics*. China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker – Country Briefing. Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS).

Published by:

Central European Institute of Asian Studies
Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
www.ceias.eu
office@ceias.eu

All rights reserved.

© Authors

© Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2026



CEIAS

Central European Institute
of Asian Studies

www.ceias.eu