



Finland: Increasingly attentive, but risks still emerge in academic engagement with China

Frans Silander

Finland's academic engagement with China has a long and active history. In recent years, concerns among academia and the public have emerged on the nature of cooperation, especially with respect to Chinese institutions with known military affiliation. Due to these concerns from both the government and academics, universities were expected to increase scrutiny when forming cooperation with Chinese institutions.

Warnings about China's research espionage by intelligence services and public discussion around partnerships like LUT University's joint programs with Chinese institutions brought questions of dual-use technology and research security into the spotlight. National recommendations and internal university guidelines shifted accordingly.

The aim of this report is to assess whether practices have evolved in recent years, analyze the breadth and scope of academic cooperation with China, and examine how Finnish universities balance academic freedom and security concerns.

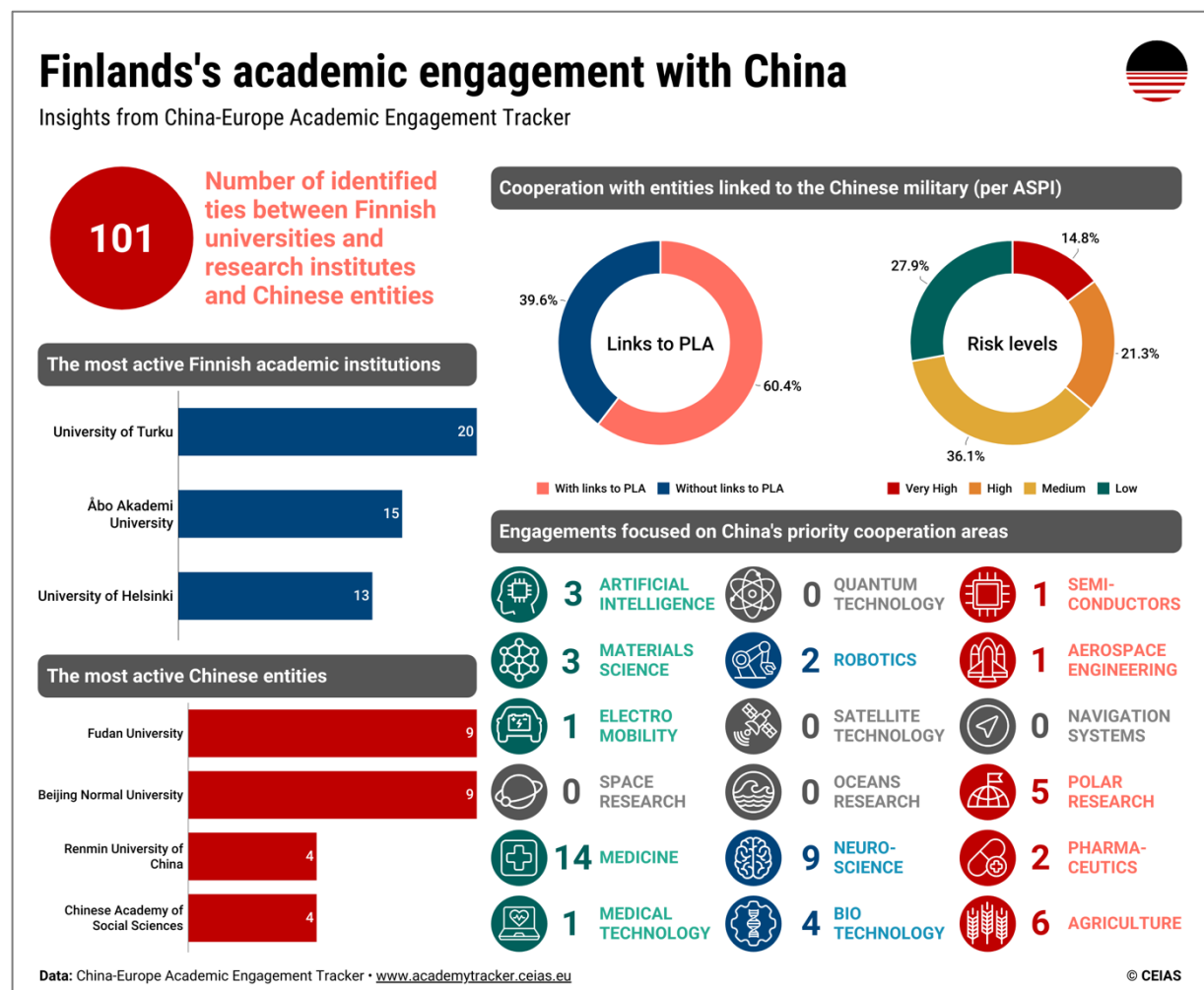
Finland has 14 public universities, one of which is the National Defense University, which is excluded from this report because it primarily trains officers for the Finnish Defense Forces and much of its research is classified. Universities of Applied Sciences also do

not fall under the scope of this report. All 13 universities surveyed responded to a freedom of information request on the topic, at least in part. Additionally, University of the Arts Helsinki reported no cooperation of any form with Chinese institutions.

Most institutes of higher education in Finland are public and, as such, are bound by the Act on the Openness of Government Activities. Under this legislation, everyone has the right to obtain information from official documents, including the universities' engagement with Chinese academia, with the caveat that broader requests for information may incur costs related to the resulting workload. The universities surveyed for this report were cooperative and transparent, and the practices and guidelines for deciding on academic cooperation with Chinese institutions were clearly informed by the earlier government guidelines, with increased scrutiny and clear guidelines reported by all.

Government guidance and governance

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Culture, in cooperation with universities and research institutes, released recommendations for academic cooperation with China. The recommendations were made to ensure that Finnish higher education institutions are themselves proactive in monitoring risks and the scope of their engagement with China's academic institutions. The development of the guidelines resulted from both



broader scrutiny of Chinese academic engagement at the EU level and espionage concerns within the Finnish intelligence community.

The recommendations are divided into three goals: safe cooperation and partnerships based on institutions' own principles and positions; ethical and value-based choices; and awareness of risks. In principle, the guidelines form only a broad baseline for academic cooperation and research security. The principles and decisions still fall within the purview of the individual university's administration. Several universities reported that they operate a trans-administrative working group or a cross-departmental body to ensure that these kinds of guidelines are met in international cooperation. In practice, this means that universities analyze risks and potential issues in cooperation on a much broader scale, incorporating expert input from across the university's staff. Key decisions on cooperation are made by the rectorate, the deans, and the heads of departments.

Indeed, the year after the guidelines' release, the University of Helsinki, Finland's oldest and largest, discontinued cooperation with the Confucius Institute by not renewing the cooperation agreement. Before this, Finnish staff at the institute, as well as university leadership, had expressed criticism about hosting the institute at the University of Helsinki. Concerns ranged from the inherent conflict between preserving academic freedom at the institute and receiving the funds necessary to run it from a foreign government, to issues with freedom of speech and research, and to perceived unacademic practices by the Chinese vice-chairman. The Confucius Institute had been established at the University of Helsinki in 2007 in collaboration with Renmin University and was the only one of its kind in Finland. No Confucius Institutes have been established at Finnish universities since then.

This increased awareness, following the publication of the guidelines on academic engagement with China, was also evident in the universities' current situation for this report, as most universities had clear procedures in place when considering cooperation with Chinese institutions and used internationally established processes and databases. Practically all of the surveyed universities conducted some form of risk analysis when evaluating cooperation with Chinese institutions, and many used databases such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) China Defense Universities Tracker to gain insight into their prospective academic partners.

Academic cooperation

In total, 101 links were found between Finnish universities and Chinese partners. Some 22 of the links were with Chinese universities deemed high or very high on the ASPI university defense tracker. 17 links were with Chinese universities with a history of espionage or misconduct, according to the ASPI data.

The University of Helsinki, as well as the University of Turku, engages most with Chinese partners on a bilateral level. Most of the cooperation is through student exchange agreements, as well as in education and health sciences. Aalto University is particularly active in design and fashion with China through its School of Arts, Design, and Architecture. LUT University was found to be active in areas of aeronautics, robotics, and AI. LUT University was also the only link to a Chinese university among the "Seven Sons of National Defense," universities closely linked to the People's Liberation Army.

A large portion of academic cooperation in China occurs through large university consortia, such as Fudan University's Fudan Nordic Center and the Sino-Finnish Joint Learning Innovation Institute with Beijing Normal University. Similarly, the University of Helsinki, University of Lapland, and University of Eastern Finland cooperate with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and others through the Finnish China Law Center, based at the University of Helsinki. A broader collaboration and footprint in China for a single university is rare, with the exception of Shanghai International College of Design and Innovation (Shanghai D&I), formed by Aalto University in collaboration with Tongji University. Shanghai D&I, based at Tongji University, offers master's programs accredited either through Aalto or Tongji University. The college is also a medium through which the universities collaborate on research.

Academic cooperation is especially prevalent in health sciences and education, though areas of cooperation vary across universities. Universities with strong engineering programs cooperate with their partners in China, often in chemical and electrical engineering, and research projects concerning green tech and renewables. Finnish media has previously reported that the University of Helsinki has cooperated with the Chinese genomics firm BGI Group and has reportedly purchased services from the firm for over €2 million. Other universities have cooperated with the firm as well, though on a smaller scale, and have reportedly ceased cooperation in recent years, as has the University of Helsinki. The firm utilized aggressive pricing tactics to win contracts, and approached many institutes known for having large health and genetic datasets.

LUT University is also among the few who offer complete degree programs in collaboration with a Chinese institution. LUT University has four bachelor's programs offered together with Hebei University of Technology (HEBUT) in energy technology, as well as in mechanical, electrical, software and systems engineering. The collaboration recently made headlines when Finnish students enrolled in the program mistakenly received an email from an HEBUT coordinator stating that supporting the leadership of the Communist Party of China is a requirement for receiving the degree. The email, meant for students from HEBUT enrolled in the program, though erroneous, followed earlier media reports about spying by Chinese students and research espionage. Additionally, LUT University has signed a memorandum of understanding with Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (NUAA) for general academic collaboration, and an agreement for a joint doctoral program, in which LUT University will supervise a doctoral candidate conducting research in mechanical engineering and robotics. NUAA belongs to China's "Seven Sons of National Defense."

Finnish universities are very aware of the risks that they might face when cooperating with Chinese institutes and universities, and aware of the boundary between academic freedom and security concerns. Still, risks emerge. Health data and projects in engineering and medicine are likely to be more sensitive research topics, potentially involving data from Finnish citizens or innovations that could be used in military applications. Universities must exercise due diligence when cooperating in these more sensitive areas and understand whom they are partnering with.

Recommendations

More centralized understanding of the breadth and areas of cooperation. Some universities reported having no complete databases on research collaboration with China. Although general guidelines on academic cooperation with China are in place at

the surveyed universities, key decision-makers, such as the rectorate and deans, need the knowledge to guide decisions.

Avoid becoming dependent on Chinese funding. Though not prevalent at present, expanding collaboration to seek additional funds without proper vetting can prove harmful. Budget concerns may drive some universities to seek partnerships with Chinese institutions that offer funding or tuition-paying students. This can leave Finnish universities playing second fiddle to avoid losing out on much-needed extra cash, thereby compromising academic integrity.

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

As of April 2025, data from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Greece, France, Luxembourg, Italy, and Slovenia were published on the Tracker. In September 2025, we added data for Croatia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In January 2026 we updated the tracker with data from Estonia, Sweden, Belgium and Ireland. In March 2026, data for The Netherlands, Malta and Denmark was added. As of June 2026, data for Portugal, Finland, and Norway was published.

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**
- **Geo-economics & Technology Center**
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- **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.

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