# Future-Proofing German–Chinese Partnerships in Higher Education

**Marijke Wahlers**

**Abstract**
Building on solid, long-term cooperation, it is now time to future-proof German–Chinese university collaboration. Taking a nuanced view of the specific parameters, objectives, and content of individual partnerships is key. Open dialogue on opportunities and challenges—both within one's own university and with partner institutions—will help clarify matters and identify development pathways. The German Rectors' Conference's guiding questions on university partnerships with China are intended to support and enhance this dialogue.

The development of cross-border collaboration and academic exchange between German and Chinese universities in the past thirty years can truly be called a success story. Due to overall political conditions at the time, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) recorded less than 100 partnership agreements between German and Chinese universities during the 1980s. Just two decades later, in the 2000s, the number had already tripled. Today, after another two decades, there are approximately 1,400 partnership agreements involving more than 200 German and almost 400 Chinese universities. As a result, we can confidently speak of a stable bridge between German and Chinese academia. While partnerships were at first often based on bilateral agreements between individual academic persons, they now cover the entire range of collaborative activities, from individual student and researcher mobility, joint study programs, and doctoral projects to joint research and innovation initiatives and transnational education offerings. As Chinese partners recognized the great potential of German universities of applied sciences early on, engagement on the German side extends fairly evenly across all institutional types.

**Balancing Interests**

A closer look, however, reveals a few cracks—some smaller, some larger—in the jointly built bridge. In terms of subjects, for example, partnership activities have always focused rather one-sidedly on certain fields, i.e., the natural and technical sciences, economics, and law. To this day, the other social sciences and the humanities are underrepresented in these alliances. A clear imbalance is also evident regarding the mobility of students and researchers. The pronounced research strength of Chinese universities and research institutions in numerous fields has not (yet) led to a noticeable increase of German students and academics bound for China.

Furthermore, there are some indications that, at least in the early stages, the institutional arrangements that governed collaborations did not adequately consider the concerns of German universities or the benefits they reaped. Far-sighted strategies, on an institutional as well as a systemic level, were needed to counteract this imbalance. As early as 2005, the HRK had already emphasized in recommendations for joint German–Chinese study programs that partnerships should create added value for all parties and that joint study programs should be designed with a view to addressing the needs of students in both countries. Given the increasing differentiation within the sector and German universities' enhanced efforts to create distinct institutional profiles, these aspects have come into greater focus. The internationalization approach employed by German universities has since changed markedly, moving away from one of seizing opportunities as they arise (instead of systematically seeking them out) toward a truly strategic approach to internationalization that links the activities of individual university members in a holistic fashion. Despite these trends, a 2018 study commissioned by the federal ministry of education and research and the federal foreign office concluded that although German universities have begun to place greater emphasis on exploring and thinking about China as a key global player, knowledge about, and expertise on, China among students, teachers, and researchers still need to be significantly expanded.

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**Founding Partnerships on Solid Value Systems**

Global geopolitical developments and political changes in Germany and China have also left their mark on institutional collaboration between both countries. As a result, we are currently witnessing a confluence of different currents: While the partnering process has been an overwhelmingly positive experience, and while joint projects continue to operate successfully in some areas, cooperation in other areas has been significantly affected.

In recent years, many German partner universities have faced an increase in legal requirements and organizational hurdles on the Chinese side. Moreover, growing state influence on curricula and processes at Chinese universities and the expanding curtailment of academic freedom are straining partnerships, even bringing them to a complete standstill in some cases.

Anchoring universities' cross-border activities in firm and sound value systems is becoming crucial, which is why the HRK underscores that freedom of research and teaching is indispensable to the successful operation of universities. In the HRK's view, this freedom is a fundamental, nonnegotiable principle that also applies to German universities' international activities and partnerships. In light of the profound changes on the global stage, the HRK published in April of this year guidelines and standards governing international university partnerships.

Additionally, the HRK recently issued guiding questions on university cooperation with the People's Republic of China. They complement the general guidelines and standards by detailing necessary as well as optional courses of action that relate specifically to cooperating with Chinese academic partners. The guidance is meant as motivation to validate and, where needed, to recalibrate existing partnerships with Chinese universities and academic institutions. At the same time, it seeks to encourage German universities to continue to expand their academic efforts in China, and to proactively shape the collaboration with Chinese partners.

**Differentiated Approach Key to Resilient Partnerships**

The guiding questions are designed to provide both universities as institutions and individual university members with motivation, support, and orientation when establishing and further developing resilient partnerships with Chinese universities and academic institutions. The questions are divided into three main categories: strategy and governance; joint teaching, learning, and research; and universities as transnational spaces. They address the prerequisites, requirements, and objectives of a partnership on an equal footing. The HRK believes that the careful selection of subjects and partners is one key factor to fruitful cooperation. The added value and sustainability of international partnerships are equally rooted in the university's structures and processes. In addition, they are closely connected to how the university defines itself, its mission, profile, institutional principles, and values.

The HRK holds the view that intensifying dialogue and cooperation with Chinese partners across all fields is essential. This is a science-driven rationale, first and foremost; however, it is also in the interest of society to convince students and researchers to engage more extensively with China and, in doing so, to help build up expertise on China. Taking a nuanced view of the specific parameters, objectives, and content of individual partnerships is key here, as it will facilitate the clarification of matters with Chinese partners as needed and, at the same time, identify rewarding development pathways. In negotiating opportunities and risks, it is imperative to proactively identify areas of opportunity without jeopardizing institutional values and standards in the process. The HRK will make every effort to support its members in the upcoming development process to ensure that we continue to build academic bridges with solid foundations, both now and in the years ahead. ◢

*Marijke Wahlers is head of the Department for International Affairs, German Rectors' Conference, Germany. Email: wahlers@hrk.de. URL: www.hrk.de/guidance_China_cooperation.*