

Abstract

Countries from around the world have developed national approaches to address risks of international academic collaboration. Based on an analysis of nine approaches, we found that engaging the higher education and research community, facilitating support and coordination between the sector and the government, and identifying opportunities for safe collaboration are crucial. This allows for the mitigation of risks while protecting the academic values of autonomy and freedom, which helps to get the community on board.

Safeguarding Sound International Collaboration

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Geopolitical developments pose new and increased challenges to open international collaboration in science and technology. In particular, the tech rivalry between the United States and China, and to a lesser extent between other OECD countries and China, have led to increased awareness of potential risks of such cooperation. This includes unwanted transfer of knowledge and technology, breaches of academic freedom, and unethical use of research, for example, for military or political monitoring purposes. Though often propelled by concerns regarding China, such risks exist in academic collaboration with countries from around the world.

As a result, a growing number of countries feel the need to defend their science and technology and develop approaches to mitigate risks. Our recent LeidenAsiaCentre study, [*How National Governments and Research Institutions Safeguard Knowledge Development in Science and Technology*](#), looks at nine national approaches to strengthening knowledge security and the forces that drive them. These approaches are not always welcomed by researchers, many of whom feel restricted by new rules and regulations. They, in turn, feel the need to defend an open academic environment and the independence of the research community and argue against securitization of research collaboration. Others indicate that they would welcome even more coordination with, or clearer instructions from, the government, through intermediating organizations.

This raises the question of how to find a balanced approach that encourages sound and safe international collaboration, but also recognizes and addresses the concerns of researchers about academic values of openness and independence. In our study, we identified several inspiring practices from among the nine national approaches. These best practices are: active engagement of the research sector; government support for the implementation of risk assessment and mitigation; and attention for opportunity management.

Engagement of the Research Sector

Most national approaches are primarily initiated by government actors with varying levels of input from the higher education and research sector. In some cases, the government has opted for a top-down approach consisting of guidelines, regulations, and sometimes legislation. However, in other countries, the sector plays a relatively large role in shaping the national approach. For example, in Germany, where the federal government does not have competency in the area of education, large associations of universities or research institutes took the lead in developing knowledge security guidelines and information brochures and are actively involved in raising awareness.

Another example is provided by Finland, where the government organizes a China roundtable as part of a country-specific approach. This is a very informal, bottom-up meeting between representatives of the international offices of Finnish universities, China scholars, and multiple ministries. Generally speaking, academics appreciate such bottom-up approaches and are sometimes critical about legislation, which is considered by some as too politically motivated or cumbersome.

Support and Coordination between Government and Sector

Developing and implementing measures to safeguard international collaboration is challenging for universities and research institutes, which often lack manpower and the specific knowledge to assess and mitigate risks. Some countries have established special organizations that facilitate direct communication and coordination between government actors and the sector. This gives scholars and universities access to expertise

from government agencies (such as security services) and provides them with the opportunity to demonstrate to the government their capabilities to self-regulate.

In the United Kingdom, the Research Collaboration Advice Team, a collaboration between the department for business, energy & industrial strategy and academia, provides the sector with a first point of contact for official advice about national security risks linked to concrete international research projects, while also improving government actors' understanding of the needs of researchers. The Netherlands has established a similar organization, the National Contact Point for Knowledge Security, which provides advice about risks and practical matters with regard to concrete (plans for) research collaboration. In Australia, the University Foreign Interference Taskforce allows for direct communication between high level representatives of the sector and the government.

Opportunity Management

The focus of most national approaches is on managing risks, while identifying opportunities for safe collaboration hardly receives any consideration. This is in particular the case for collaboration with countries that are considered both risk sensitive and important academic partners, such as China. Researchers call upon governments and higher education policy makers to invest more in creating opportunities and identifying safe areas of research and forms of collaboration, e.g., through providing "green lists" of low-risk research topics. Integrating risk and opportunity management into one approach may make security policies more attractive to the sector.

Setting International Standards

Science has no borders, and many international collaboration projects involve researchers from multiple countries. Therefore, common principles, standards, and procedures with regard to knowledge security are needed. Many countries are already organizing meetings to share and discuss their approaches, experiences, and best practices. Of particular interest are the efforts by countries such as Japan and Germany to invest in global coordination with regard to developing principles and measures that address infringement of scientific research security through the G7 Working Group on the Security and Integrity of the Global Research Ecosystem.

Conclusion

Countries from around the world have developed national approaches to safeguarding international knowledge collaboration. Among these approaches, we found that engaging the higher education and research community, facilitating support and coordination between the sector and the government, and paying attention to, and identifying, opportunities for safe collaboration are important aspects. This allows for mitigating risks while protecting the academic values of autonomy and freedom, which helps to get the community on board. ▲

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