

FORUM

MEMBER
MAGAZINE

Discussing international education



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“It is in our power to decide how and when we react to external factors”

324 EXCHANGES DURING COVID-19

18

“Whatever else happens, science diplomacy never ends”

IN CONVERSATION WITH KAI SICKS



25

“Organisations cannot simply see ‘the’ environment; instead, they actively construct their environments”

ASSESSING RISK, SEIZING OPPORTUNITY

35

“Full disengagement would come at a very high cost – not just for individuals or institutions, but for society more broadly”

WALKING THE LINE: THE UK AND CHINA



EDITORIAL

The Spring 2023 issue of *Forum* magazine looks at risk and response in relation to international education. As civil society and our institutions find a new balance after three years of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have perhaps never been more aware of the risks faced by our institutions, staff and students in the pursuit of an international agenda.

In early 2020, who would have predicted the global health trajectory that we were forging? And who was planning, just over a year ago, for the consequences of war in Europe? While risk management has always featured in the thinking of an international educator (perhaps specifically in relation to international travel), this edition of *Forum* asks whether we have now fine-tuned our approach to risk in international education with a new set of responses.

Higher education institutions have certainly long had a focus on risk management in their activities, and many institutional risk registers now contain updated entries in relation to global health and geopolitical instability. Indeed, if the last few years have taught us anything, it is to always be prepared for the unexpected. But how will we retain the learnings from recent crises – from the hosting of refugees, to responses to climate change and threats to academic freedom – not to mention the next global pandemic or further political unrest leading to violence? Beyond updating risk registers and frameworks, what tangible examples exist of how institutions and international educators have responded to new threats in innovative ways?

In this edition, I am pleased that we are able to present some compelling examples of good practice – from Europe and beyond – which draw on many elements of global risk, from managing geopolitical tensions in partnerships, to travel safety management, protecting academic freedom, and universities as sanctuaries. An article on scenario planning also reminds us about a useful methodology which readers can deploy on their campuses to model different responses to risk.

I am delighted that Dr Kai Sicks, Secretary General of the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst – DAAD) agreed to be interviewed for this issue. Stepping into this role in February 2021, Dr Sicks was immediately faced with managing a rapidly-evolving set of risks across the distributed network of DAAD offices around the world. As a national agency, the DAAD has also been responsive to growing government concerns about foreign interference and mounting geopolitical risks.

From a longer-term risk perspective, the DAAD has moved to ensure that its business operations are climate-neutral by 2030 and published its first ever Climate Report in November 2022. If you are particularly interested to know more about the risks of climate change and how institutions are responding, please refer to the Spring 2022 edition of *Forum* on ‘Our changing climate’, which covered this topic in detail.

For Europe and for other world regions, one key question at this juncture relates to the risk of further social division, and indeed war, in response to



rising nationalism. And yet the original goal of the Erasmus programme was to create lasting peace in a fragmented post-war Europe through cultural exchange. Although the causes and origins of conflict are complex, what are our reflections today on the success of the European programmes that were intended to create European cohesion and mitigate against the risks of a further war in Europe?

Whilst this edition of *Forum* cannot answer all of the hard questions on risk, I hope that it will help frame further discussion among EAIE members. With thanks to the authors and to Ragnhild Solvi Berg on the EAIE Publications Committee, who joined me in reviewing submissions for this issue.

I hope that you enjoy reading this edition of *Forum*.

— DOUGLAS PROCTOR, EDITOR
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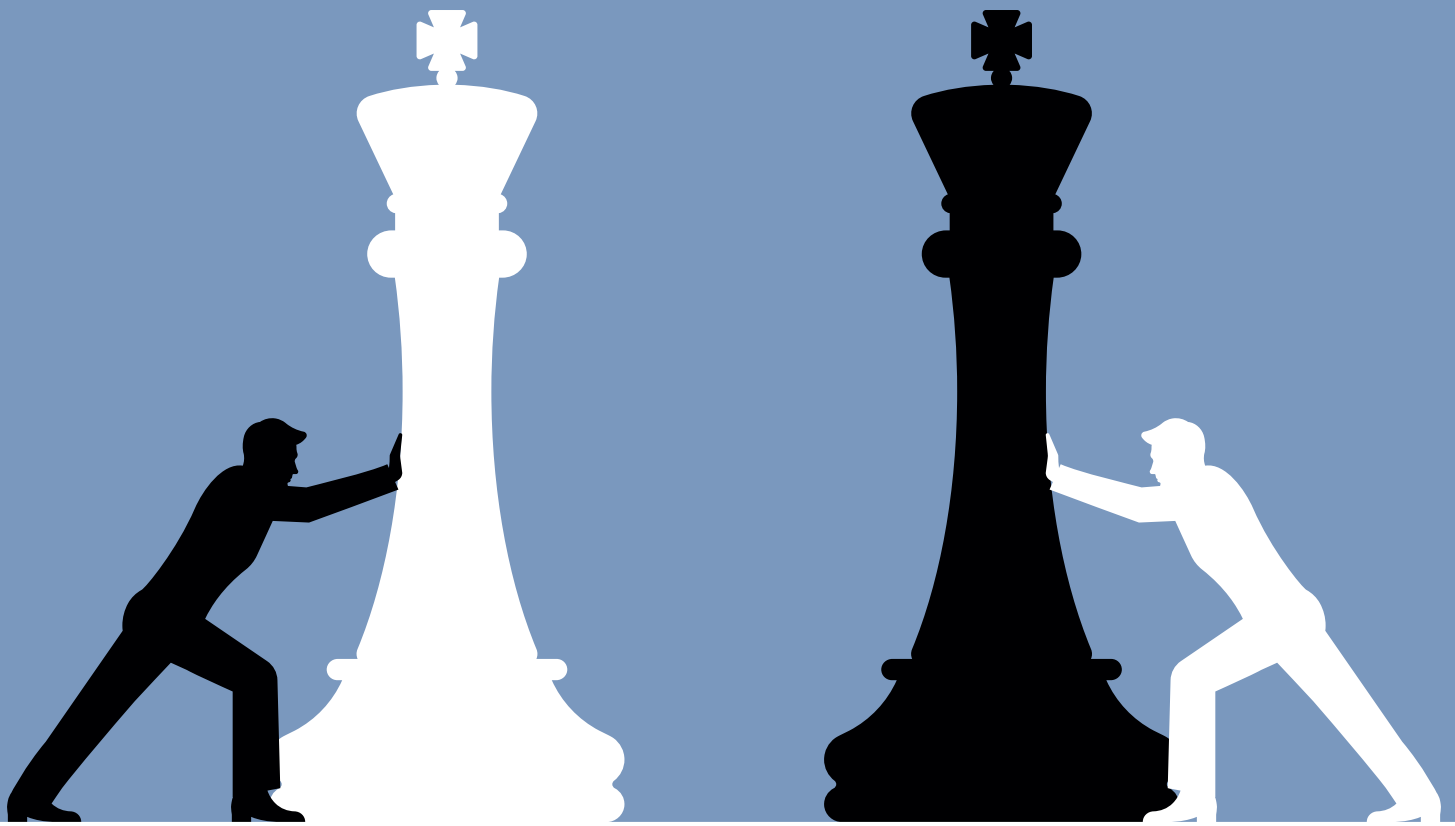
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WALKING THE LINE

THE UK & CHINA

As geopolitical tensions continue to complicate international cooperation, national higher education sectors are forced to ask themselves difficult questions. Perhaps no relationship captures this dynamic as quintessentially as that of the UK and China, whose interdependence in the realm of higher education is becoming a conundrum for policymakers on both sides of the globe. ▶

Being a globally-engaged institution requires astute navigation on a choppy and unpredictable ocean, buffeted by geopolitical tensions beyond our control.

University-to-university relationships have been affected by recent friction between the West and both Russia and China. The mission of higher education and the underpinning ethos of internationalisation support an approach where the pursuit of knowledge and the fostering of relationships across borders normally transcend any political disagreements. Most of the time, universities argue that it is essential to maintain academic relationships. Academic boycotts are enacted only in exceptional circumstances. This can put universities at odds with more isolationist government positions and – in some cases – public opinion.

Full disengagement would come at a very high cost – not just for individuals or institutions, but for society more broadly

There are many potential areas of tension between institutions operating in different cultural contexts: divergent values; freedom of speech; national security; intellectual property; commercial sensitivity; unequal power relationships. However, the benefits of engagement and partnership (whether this takes the form of research or teaching collaboration, transnational education, recruitment or exchange of staff and students) can be immense for both parties.

Full disengagement would come at a very high cost – not just for individuals or institutions, but for society more broadly.

UK RELIANCE ON CHINA

Over the past decade, international student recruitment to the UK has become increasingly reliant on demand from China. Two significant policy factors contributed to that reliance. First, the ‘golden era’ fostered warm Sino-British relations under UK prime minister David Cameron (2010–2016). Second, the 2012 discontinuation of post-study work visas for international students discouraged student demand from price-sensitive countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria.

This was further exacerbated when all education providers were required to apply for ‘highly trusted sponsor’ status. If 20% or more of the students they offered

recruitment efforts in ‘low-risk’ countries for student visas, to make up for their losses from India, Pakistan and Nigeria.

When a post-study work route was reintroduced almost a decade later, in July 2021, much of the UK higher education system had embedded student demand from China through UK transnational education degrees and other locally-delivered courses recognised by UK higher education institutions. The UK also had a high reliance on high-calibre PhD students – either through partnership arrangements with university partners in China or funded, typically by the highly selective China Scholarship Council. Analysis shows that self-funded PhDs from China accounted for 68% of the overall growth in non-UK self-funded entrants to UK doctoral programmes over the period 2017–2018 to 2020–2021.¹

The high proportion of doctoral researchers from China is the most likely explanation for the increasing proportions of academic staff with Chinese nationality – which is most pronounced in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subject areas. China has become one of the UK’s top research partners: about 11% of the UK research output in 2019 was published with co-authors from China.² In niche STEM areas like telecommunications and materials science, collaborations with China account for more than 30% of the UK’s research output.

A CHALLENGING CONTEXT

Despite the many benefits of this close relationship, the mutual dependency that

places to were refused visas, institutions would lose or would not be granted ‘highly trusted’ status. This threshold was lowered to 10% in 2014. Double-digit visa refusal rates for many countries in Central and South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa disincentivised student recruitment. An unintended consequence of this policy was, therefore, a shift in student recruitment towards countries with very low visa refusal rates, such as China and others in East Asia. Universities intensified their

has developed between UK and Chinese higher education is increasingly perceived as a risk. The political climate is hawkish on both sides, to the extent that Vivienne Stern, chief executive of Universities UK, urged UK universities in July 2022 to “scenario-plan for a catastrophe in relations with China”, while pushing back against “a mindset that resists international engagement”.³

Whilst most institutions have been trying for some time to diversify their student recruitment beyond China, it is neither possible nor, in most cases, desirable simply to cut off partnerships that have been carefully nurtured over many years. The growing power and reach of China’s own international higher education and research also needs to be acknowledged. China accounts for a fifth of the world’s

huge rewards that engagement with international students brings.

This takes us full circle to the shared mission of maintaining curiosity about one another to boost mutual understanding and facilitate the pursuit of knowledge across borders. Those of us working in international education need to find a formula that combines pragmatism and realism with our internationalist ideals.

— JANET ILIEVA & VICKY LEWIS

It is neither possible nor, in most cases, desirable simply to cut off partnerships that have been carefully nurtured over many years

Meanwhile, the UK government used new national security legislation to block a technology transfer sale by the University of Manchester to a Chinese company, with former universities minister Jo Johnson warning that “our universities need to prepare for a geopolitical shock that sees a security grid come down on many more of their activities, including knowledge partnerships with China”.⁴

Beyond this, there has been scrutiny of Confucius Institutes, with suggestions that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is looking to close the 30 or so located in the UK, considering them “a threat to civil liberties in many universities”.⁵

A BALANCED RESPONSE

Against this background, UK universities are striving to find a balanced response that supports international engagement while respecting the tensions that exist and operating within a fluctuating policy context.

tertiary learners. To use a colloquialism, there is a risk of ‘cutting off our nose to spite our face’.

A nuanced response to some of the challenges can be found in the 2021 report ‘The China Question’,² which argues for the importance of improving the UK’s China (and Asia) literacy. It is noted that the UK’s dwindling capacity in the area of Chinese studies and language is a major point of vulnerability. Despite an almost 50-fold growth in the number of Chinese students in the UK since 1998, a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute shows that, over the same period, the number of students studying Chinese studies has not increased.⁶

A lack of such understanding is a major risk. It means that students are increasingly caught up in a geopolitical tussle that may have little relevance to their circumstances. More seriously, the UK may inadvertently throw away the

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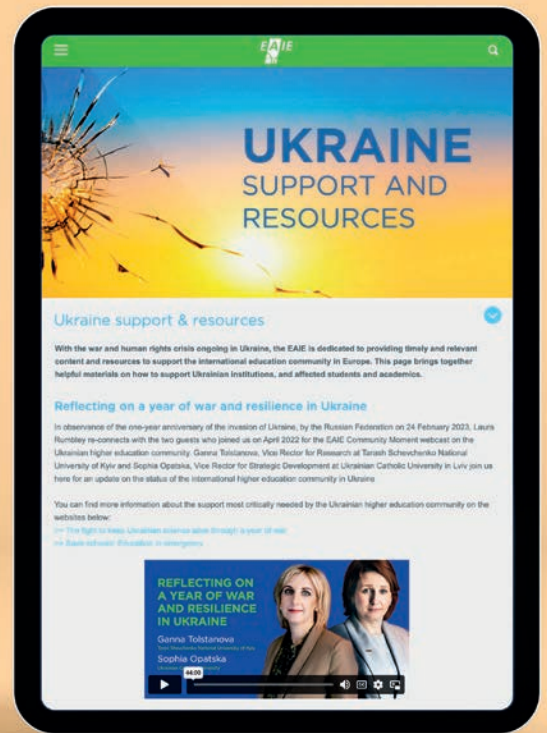
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