



# China Studies Centre

## Understanding China Brief



### China's international higher education environment: change and stasis

This Understanding China Brief results from a [roundtable](#) discussion organised by the China Studies Centre on 9 August 2022 to discuss the change and stasis in China's international higher education environment.

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## About the event

It seems that China's international higher education environment may be changing. This roundtable discussion focuses on the following 4 topics:

1. Several of China's leading universities have announced their withdrawal from international ranking schemes. How do more China-focussed measures of performance feed into the push for world-class universities.
2. There seems to be a push to discourage Chinese students from going overseas for international education opportunities, as for example in the postponement of US placement exams and continuing concerns about Covid-19 pandemic control. Is this likely to continue, and if so for how long and under what conditions
3. What are the prospects for recruitment of Chinese students to Australian universities.
4. What are the prospects for China's international cooperation in higher education, both in research and in delivery of joint venture programs and institutions in China.

The discussion was chaired and moderated by Anthony Welch of Sydney School of Education and Social Work, the University of Sydney, and the speakers include academic managers and leaders, academics with an interest in international higher education (China's and more generally), and those with experience of joint venture higher education institutions.

## About the speakers (listed in their speaking order):

**Professor Anthony Welch**, University of Sydney. His numerous publications address education reforms, principally within Australia, and the Asia-Pacific, mainly on Higher Education. He has advised state, national and international agencies, governments, institutions and foundations in Australia, the USA, Europe, East, Central, and Southeast Asia and. Project experience, largely in higher education. His work appears in a dozen European and Asian languages, and he has been Visiting Professor in the USA, UK, Germany, France, Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, Sweden, and Hong Kong (China) and China.

**Professor Rui Yang**, is Professor and Dean in the Faculty of Education at The University of Hong Kong. With nearly three and a half decades of academic career in China, Australia and Hong Kong, he has gained extensive experiences and contributed to leadership, with an impressive track record on research at the interface of Chinese and Western traditions in education.

**Professor Cong Cao**. Educated in both China and the U.S. and in both the natural and social sciences, Professor Cao has worked at the University of Oregon, the National University of Singapore, the State University of New York, and the University of Nottingham before joining the University of Nottingham Ningbo China in 2015. As a prolific scholar in the field of the social sciences of science, technology, innovation in China. Professor Cao has published extensively in scientific elite; human resources in science and technology; innovation and entrepreneurship in nanotechnology and biotechnology; and the reform of science and technology system.

**Professor Futao Huang.** Dr. Futao Huang is Professor at the Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University, Japan. Before he came to Japan in 1999, he taught and conducted research in several Chinese universities. His main research interests include internationalization of higher education, the academic profession, and higher education in East Asia. He has published widely in Chinese, English and Japanese languages.

**Director Michael Milne.** Michael Milne was appointed as the Executive Director of the University of Sydney's China Centre in late 2018. He has worked at the University of Sydney since 2010, as Chief Operating Officer of the University's Brain and Mind Centre till 2013 and then as the Chief Operating Officer of the Charles Perkins Centre till 2019. He has worked in various roles in the higher education and public sector for more than 25 years.

**Director Katherine Robertson.** Katherine Robertson is the Director of Faculty Advancement at Duke Kunshan University in China. She has worked at DKU for five years, mostly in the areas of faculty affairs and faculty development, and has published several articles on pedagogy and faculty development. Prior to joining DKU, Robertson lived in the US, where she did postdoctoral research at Carnegie Mellon University, and was a member of the faculty at Duquesne University and Westminster College. She has a PhD in Development Biology from the University of London, UK.

**Deputy Vice-Chancellor Iain Watt.** Iain Watt joined UTS in June 2018 as Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (International). Iain is responsible for envisioning and driving the implementation of UTS's next stage of internationalisation. He has extensive international experience and a record of significant and successful leadership in international education.

### **China's international influence in higher education (Professor Rui Yang).**

Professor Yang started with his observations that: 1. Chinese universities have achieved extraordinary and consistent performance in a variety of global university ranking schemes; 2. There has been a huge growth of research papers produced by Chinese authors; 3. Before the pandemic, China has become the third study destination for international students; 4. China's universities are reaching out through their globalisation and internationalisation. Internationalisation for China's universities is a two-way traffic, from the single eastward movement of western knowledge to the coexistence of this movement and, notably, Chinese knowledge moving westward or globally. 5. China's experience is historically unprecedented and globally significant especially for the vast non-western societies, because international pluralism is increasingly calling for learning from other societies. The ability to learn from others actually determines one's own society's sustainability.

On the other hand, Prof Yang acknowledged some defects. Not so many students from developed countries such as those in Europe and North America come to China, though China has attracted international students from East Asia and other Asian countries. The number of students enrolled in degree programs is low, mostly for language-related programmes. The low citation rates especially in social sciences hasn't changed, although it's far higher in science and technology.

## **Science technology innovation in China, one-leg crippled pattern (Professor Cao).**

Professor Cao argued that China has walked on “two legs” to achieve its current status as a rising global power in science and technology. In the first place, the Chinese government has over the years formed a system of innovation strategies and policies, signaling that system makes it more effective and efficient to response to the challenges of the society, especially the economic challenge. Secondly, China poured a great amount of money into research and has hugely invested in human resources, including the large number of postgraduate students with overseas degrees, which laid a solid foundation for collaboration and cooperation.

We can also see China has been gradually integrated into global systems of innovation and science technology. International cooperation and overseas students coming back to China have made a significant contribution to this integration. Three things to mention here: 1. China has been making active efforts to attract foreign direct investments; 2. there are so many Chinese overseas students in the past decades, and the Chinese government has made efforts to attract them back to China; 3. China has been engaging in international collaboration in science and technology.

However, China is at a junction, not just about where it will head to in the future, but as to whether it will go back to autarchy. The environment has become increasingly hostile for China, and the relationship between China and developed countries like the US is deteriorating. International cooperation and students studying overseas have become more difficult to arrange; even joint publication has peaked, and now declining slightly.

China’s international patent application has been on the rise, but the question is the quality of these patents and whether these kinds of patents could be translated into productivity, which casts doubts on the sustainability in the future of China’s innovation.

## **Recent world-class university ranking related issues (Futao Huang)**

Professor Huang focused on the issues related to China’s world-class university ranking. He pointed out that there are several reasons for several of China’s leading universities withdrawing from international university ranking tables, which made some scholars re-think the definition of world-class university in the Chinese context. The reasons are: 1. the current rules for ranking the quality of universities and disciplines failed to consider China's reality and national conditions. This was criticised by both the policymakers and scholars; 2. the factors used for these rankings differed significantly sometimes. Interestingly, for the moment it seems that none of the Chinese universities have said they will refuse to be ranked by ARWU. As a matter of fact, some Chinese universities only hire new employees graduated from the top 500 universities. Therefore, their withdrawal triggered discussions on assessment factors.

The second important topic Professor Huang shared is China’s efforts to build world-class universities and disciplines, President Xi mentioned that Chinese world-class universities should take account of China’s roots, which also should include national security and national interests. In the field of philosophy and social science, the system constructed with Chinese characteristics should be actively encouraged.

## **International universities engaging with Chinese higher education system (Michael Milnes)**

Mr Milnes explained that the Centre was established as a multi-function research and education hub. The vision is to be the leading interdisciplinary and cross-cultural education, research, and engagement hub, which would extend the University's position as the leading university of intellectual engagement between China and Australia. The University of Sydney's Centre in China serves as an active participant in a complex international system.

We've established an engagement or an incubation platform in China, and we've done this by building effective networks in China. We continue to build and nurture these networks to support our objectives. In recognizing China's role as a significant player in this sector, we realise that we need to be a good partner in the system, and we need to provide opportunities for our Chinese partners as well as develop opportunities for ourselves. International cooperation in higher education is the reason why we're there.

## **Prospects for joint venture universities in China (Katherine Robertson).**

Dr Robertson explained that there are three types of joint venture higher education operations in China: joint venture programs, joint venture colleges and joint venture universities. The main difference is that the programmes and colleges are usually run within a Chinese University, whereas the joint venture universities are independent entities.

Some people hold a pessimistic attitude towards joint venture universities in China because of the current Sino-US relationship. Certainly, there are difficulties. The difficulties come in the form of increased restrictions from both sides; things like export control regulations getting tighter, regulating the export not only of goods but of information technology from China to America and *vice versa*, making it difficult for people to collaborate in research.

The upside aspect is that China has ample fundings for research and technology, although humanity and social science department usually lack fundings for research. China is still motivated to attract international students, there's really no equivalent mechanism for increasing cross-cultural understanding in the future if universities give up this responsibility. Overall, the prospects for joint venture programs, colleges, and universities in China are still pretty good.

Some joint university venture universities, particularly the American universities, have complained recently that the Ministry of Education imposed restrictions on what we teach and how we teach. But again, it's worth remembering that this is a collaborative enterprise. We need to be patient and collaborative, and really understand the Chinese perspective when we think about what we teach.

## **The mobility of Chinese students (Iain Watt)**

Professor Watt shared his opinions on the mobility of Chinese students, particularly students going overseas and with a focus on the impact of covid and geopolitical tensions.

There is a misunderstanding that people think China sends its students to study overseas, but it's not entirely true. It's more accurate to say Chinese students choose to go overseas to study. Unless you frame your understanding of what's going on in that way, you won't avoid all sorts of blind elements and understand what's really going on.

The essential conclusion of his remarks is: the impact of Covid-19 on the choices of Chinese students is likely to be transitory, and we'll be pretty much back to where we were as soon as Chinese students can travel again; whereas the impact of geopolitics will be ongoing, which is unlikely to have a substantial impact on either the number of Chinese students who want to go overseas or their choice of destination. Many people are trying to read too much into what's happening when they're in the middle of Covid-19, and interpreting surveys of students' intentions and choices, as if those are going to be what students are going to be thinking in the post-covid period.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, some hostile attitudes from the government were evident, and criticised because it was thought they would push international students to the US, UK or Canadian counterparts. However, it turns out that international students are still eager to enrol in prestigious universities to gain better working opportunities, as soon as they can travel without restrictions. More and more Chinese international students will come to Australia based on what we have seen in the past few months from online studies and student visa applications. I'm confident that demand for international education at high-quality universities from students in China remains very strong, the number of Chinese students who can afford and want to have an international education is still growing.

## **Q&A**

A lot of meaningful questions were raised and concrete comments were offered, questions like the different attitudes between scholars and their universities; major difficulties for humanities and social sciences compared with science and technology disciplines in China; Chinese universities' influence and research outputs. All were discussed and a solid foundation laid for further exploration.

# Contact

**China Studies Centre**  
**Faculty of Arts and Social Science**

Level 7 Jane Foss Russell Building (G02)  
156 City Road The University of Sydney  
Darlington NSW 2006

+61 2 91140837  
Chinastudies.centre@sydney.edu.au

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/china-studies-centre/>

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