UK Universities and China

Edited by Michael Natzler

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Higher Education Policy Institute

About the Editor

Michael Natzler joined HEPI as Policy Officer in September 2019 having completed his undergraduate degree in Classics at the University of Bristol. While at Bristol he was involved in student representation, worked at the Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching and pursued a funded interdisciplinary research project in Ancient Greek and Russian theatre. Michael has a long-standing interest in East Asia and Chinese foreign policy.

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Introduction

Professor Gary Rawnsley, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences & Professor of Public Diplomacy, University of Nottingham Ningbo China[i]

In 2004, the University of Nottingham opened the first Sino-foreign joint venture university in China (UNNC). Working at UNNC both at the time of its creation (with just 250 students from one province) and again since 2018 (currently we have almost 9,000 students from across the world), I claim a unique vantage point from which to observe the progress of higher education in China.

We are living through 'interesting times', with higher education institutions across the world now confronting at least two major disruptive forces: the growing influence of nationalism (in China, the UK and US and elsewhere) challenges ambitions for the genuine internationalisation of higher education; and the Covid-19 pandemic has upended many of the working practices, pedagogies, financial models and student recruitment strategies that have sustained higher education for generations.

These are increasingly anxious times for higher education institutions – the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London is one of many now facing major financial difficulties and an uncertain future, and while many universities in China re-open (students returned to UNNC at the beginning of May 2020 for the resumption, where possible, of face-to-face teaching), we should be mindful that Chinese students

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i The views in this article are the author's alone. They do not represent the opinions of either the University of Nottingham or the University of Nottingham Ningbo China.

are still affected by the closure of universities over several months and the transition to online delivery. Meanwhile, many Chinese students are still abroad facing their own experiences of lockdown in unfamiliar places and their families are understandably worried. It is a new world and higher education must rise to the challenge for the benefit of the next generation of students.

This collection provides a fascinating insight into the difficulties and opportunities facing higher education engagement with China in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable environment. The essays are also prescriptive, offering valuable ideas that should find their way into the strategic plans of universities that either (like Nottingham) have campuses in China or depend on Chinese students to vindicate their claims to 'internationalisation'. Several contributors focus on the student experience, learning practices, issues around employability and cultural representation – subjects that are too often overlooked by higher education institutions in their rush to attract students from overseas.

The value of this report is embedded in one essential fact that all the contributors address in their own way: just how little higher education institutions truly understand China and Chinese students. Kerry Brown is correct to observe: 'The greatest problem of dealing with China is often lack of knowledge and proper understanding'. The veracity of this claim is most visible in the essay by Salvatore Babones, who provides a striking comparison of India and China as sources of overseas students. Any international strategy expressing confidence that India is sufficiently robust to match or even replace China as the primary market of international students will benefit from the shrill wake-up call of Babones's analysis.

In their discussion of cultural diversity, Sylvie Lomer and Jenna Mittelmeier likewise reveal the lack of institutional understanding not just of China, but also 'international' in general. They argue that 'vast diversity is present *within* China that is often overlooked', and they call on higher education institutions to examine the identities of international students through 'intersectional lenses' that look past nationality. In western universities Chinese students are often considered representatives of a single entity called 'China' and its culture and so we fail to appreciate their assortment of experiences and backgrounds.

One further area of valuable insight and advice for those of us working in and with China focuses on employability and how we can better prepare our students for the workplace. As a scholar working in the fields of public diplomacy and soft power, I am aware of claims around the attraction of British education among Chinese students. We see the numbers applying to UK higher education institutions as an indicator of brand strength and educational tradition, and certainly at UNNC we are proud of the British experience we offer. However, Lomer and Mittelmeier caution readers that the value of a British degree and the so-called 'transferable skills' that we claim students will learn from even the most abstract syllabus is limited. Rather, we must consider a 'strong integration of employability in the global context into the curriculum'.

As the Dean of a Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in China, this is a pressing concern: it can be difficult to persuade students, their parents and their potential employers that a degree in History, Communications or English is a valuable gateway to a range of worthwhile (and profitable) career choices. Of course, this is not unique to China. Worldwide, the

Humanities and Social Sciences are struggling to maintain their profile and relevance, but in China we have to confront the added difficulties presented by not only the growing investment in STEM research and teaching (at the cost of the Social Sciences and Humanities), but also by the political culture in which we work. I am conscious of the perception, as described by Simon Marginson, of the problems we face: 'There are … ongoing tensions in the Social Sciences and the Humanities where the party-state is uncomfortable with open discussions of social values and freewheeling critical debate of the kind we know in the UK'. Honest conversations are possible at UNNC and occur on a routine basis; and while we are all aware of where we are working and the constraints on us, we still encourage and facilitate the kind of 'open discussions' and 'freewheeling critical debate' among students that are essential in the Social Sciences. Moreover, most of the students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences take advantage of our exchange programmes with universities in the UK and pursue postgraduate study outside China. They are not only exposed to a wider range of subjects and approaches to the Humanities and Social Sciences than is possible inside China, but they also arrive in their host institutions well equipped to participate fully in the British higher education experience.

The message is clear: Covid-19 should have convinced higher education institutions to re-think their commitment to the student experience. This includes managing students' expectations around online delivery of teaching, but also requires universities to consider their responsibilities in ensuring the health and safety of their staff and students. Reports about the harassment of Chinese students in the UK send a negative message that may impact on the decisions students and

their parents make; while at the same time, the anti-foreigner sentiments that have bubbled away at the margins of Chinese society have unsettled some international staff and students living and working in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This report also leads me to conclude that the 'international' should be embedded in every aspect of higher education – including the structures and working practices of institutions – and all students, regardless of their background, must be encouraged to have diverse cultural experiences in safe, tolerant and welcoming environments.

1. The importance of UK-China science research

Professor Simon Marginson, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Oxford and Director of the ESRC/OFSRE Centre for Global Higher Education

The building of Science and Technology in China to a strong number two world position is an astounding story which, like the space race in the 1950s/1960s, the eradication of the scourge of smallpox in the 1970s (the world's very final case was at the University of Birmingham Medical School in 1978) and the creation of a networked planet in the 1990s/2000s, shows what people working together can achieve by sustained focus.

Science and higher education in China developed from near zero in 30 years. After the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, institutes and laboratories were scarcely functioning and the universities, with a handful of students, were still politicised. The army was on campus. Deng Xiaoping, who was the principal leader of China between Mao Zedong and 1990, took charge of higher education and research policy. Of the 'four modernisations', he saw Science and Technology as the most crucial, the key to the transformation of agriculture, industry and the military. In itself scientific knowledge was neutral, he said. It could be adapted to the purposes of any country and any social class. The universities must be refocused on Education and Science. The Maoist slogan 'better red than expert' had to go. It was enough that scientists were loyal to the country and the party. Let them get on with their work. Academic entry was restored and the building process began.

Deng went to France and then the United States where he was photographed in a broad-brimmed cowboy hat in Texas. China was generations behind the West and needed to open itself to foreign ideas and personnel, he said – not to replicate Western practices in China but to learn from them so as to build China's own capacity in original science. The new policy on science and universities paralleled the managed opening up of the economy to foreign capital, first in the new economic zones, 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' and then on a broader basis. In the 1980s, China began to send students and researchers abroad to gain know-how. Deng knew that most would not return when they finished their studies but said that they would become national assets later. China's Government also encouraged visits from Western universities. The fruits showed a generation down the track, but the early assumptions on which science policy was built were crucial to later success.

The 1980s determination of the party-state in China to engage with the West was matched by the willingness of Western countries, particularly the US, to engage with China in all sectors, including the military for a time and higher education and science for longer. The mutual commitment survived the shock of the Tiananmen repression in 1989. In the US, China was seen as an ally against the Soviet Union, a vast potential market and site for low-cost offshore production, and a country that would change its way of life and its political system through extended contact with superior American culture. The last expectation was to be disappointed. China embraced consumer capitalism and educated careerism, fostered by the party-state. No doubt many would have welcomed a more open society, but few Chinese people had an appetite for the

wholesale Americanisation of the political system. It is likely that after the respective experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic in the US and China, still fewer Chinese people would want to take that path.

In the mid-1990s, higher education and science in China began to take off. By 2018, participation in tertiary education was at 50 per cent of the school leaver age group and the number of science papers had jumped from 55,382 in the year 2000 to 528,263 in 2018, moving ahead of the US. That is, science output in the second language, English, multiplied by almost 10 times and grew at the extraordinary rate of 13.6 per cent a year – in comparison, the UK published 97,681 science papers in 2018. While the US research system has remained well ahead of China's in the total production of top 5 per cent high-citation science papers, in Computing and Mathematics research several Chinese universities now top the world table and Tsinghua is number one in Physical Sciences and Engineering, in front of MIT. However, US, UK and European research in the Life Sciences and Medicine remain well ahead of China. Overall, the Social Sciences and Humanities also seem to be a higher priority in the West than in China, though because of language differences it is not possible to directly compare research outcomes in those fields.

The key 1980s policy moves that made all this possible were internationalisation and regulated autonomy, both of which were rolled out consistently across Chinese science. China combined the focused building of national science and growing investment linked to targets with openness to all countries, universal academic English, vigorous publishing, and bringing back the diaspora of Chinese researchers working abroad. Chinese universities received a growing

corporate freedom to pursue their own strategies. They used benchmarking against top global research universities and departments to drive continuous improvement, and fostered continued collaboration, especially with Anglo-American researchers. The number of papers in *Scopus* that were co-authored by American and Chinese scientists rose from 2,122 in 1996 to 55,382 in 2018; the largest nation-to-nation collaboration in world science. UK universities have not shared the depth of commitment of their American colleagues to working in China – partly because of the UK focus on European research programmes – but, in 2018, UK researchers published 14,763 papers co-authored with researchers from China.

In his reforms, Deng saw it as essential that science and the universities had operational autonomy, within the structure of dual authority in which the party secretary sat alongside the expert-leader. Such structures had a long history in Imperial governance in China. The dual system, which is still in place, enables Chinese universities to function much as Western universities function on a day-to-day basis, with scientists making decisions about science, including the choice of international partners, while at the same time their work is framed by performance management systems locked into focused national priorities. Regulated autonomy in China parallels university systems across the world – though, arguably, China achieves a stronger purchase on reflexive improvement and tighter state control than does the UK government. There are other differences with the UK. Science is in very high standing in government and society and leading universities and researchers have considerable clout inside the party-state. They are free to criticise policy behind closed doors. Nevertheless, there are lines they do not cross: science power

has limits. From time to time, there is political interference in scientific decisions, and there are larger ongoing tensions in the Social Sciences and the Humanities where the party-state is uncomfortable with open discussion of social values and freewheeling critical debate of the kind we know in the UK and other Western societies.

In essence, the environment inside Chinese universities is much the same as in UK universities. The commitment to disciplinary cultures is both profound and instrumental, as in the UK. At the same time, the party-state presence has been asserted more strongly on campus under Xi Jinping. There have been worrying developments – for example, the striking down of the regulations guaranteeing free thought at Fudan and Nanjing universities, and state-instigated changes in university leaders that have strengthened the party's direct hold on the leading institutions. Despite this, open international relations have been maintained in the Xi years. China's system continues to encourage intensive engagement with the world's universities and researchers.

The larger problem is that global geopolitics have deteriorated, with spill-over effects into higher education. It was inevitable that rising China would eventually collide with America's self-appointment as world leader, a role endorsed by both Republicans and Democrats. Given that China rose to number two in the world without pushback from the US, it is fair to say that American disillusionment with its erstwhile ally China came surprisingly late, in the Trump years, three decades after Deng Xiaoping went to Texas. But the change has come, as shown by the technology and trade wars and the tensions over research security and political interference on campus. US-China scientific cooperation is now in serious doubt, with

visa blockages, hostile media and prosecutions in the US of American researchers with Chinese names who hold dual appointments in American and Chinese universities. What was seen as research cooperation yesterday is seen as spying today, in some quarters, though the essential activity is unchanged. Nevertheless, if the US evacuates its fecund science collaboration with China, there will be new opportunities for scientists from other countries.

Having achieved a strong national system and major global presence, China has kept on building science. The 'Double World-Class' programme funds leading universities at a higher level. More provincial universities are entering the world rankings. Chinese science is well engaged with research-intensive industry, with universities conducting research for the public enterprises that dominate most sectors. The English language skills of many Master's and doctoral students are impressive. Westerners have not reciprocated by learning Chinese at the same scale but the East-West interaction in higher education has broadened curiosity about China's culture. Science funding is likely to keep increasing through the economic downturn after the Covid-19 pandemic, which will not happen in all national systems. Increasingly, China is important to all fields of Science. The significant respect for UK universities and research in China provides a good starting point for relations.

At the same time, working in China is challenging and depends on a willingness to learn and change, while maintaining a clear-minded commitment to core academic values. We do not censor academic publications or dictate learning and teaching, nor are our vice-chancellors appointed by government. There is common support for scholarly freedom in Chinese universities,

but when push comes to shove it is practised less publicly than in the UK. Differences between Western visitors and Chinese hosts are often tactical. Working offshore in any country rests on mutuality, patience, openness and respect. Here there is much to respect and with which to engage and not just the modern achievements. This is a rich and complex civilisation, at least as deep as Anglo-America: an evolving amalgam of Confucianism and Daoism, Imperial governance and Leninism, Western liberalism and market-capitalism, science and culture, individual and family, state and society and an abiding sense of the collective good. In a more plural world, there are several cultural strands that will be part of the human story forever. China is one such strand. Universities everywhere are thought leaders with long-term effects. The present encounter in higher education between Anglo-America and China will shape the future.

What are the policy and practical implications of this perspective, for UK higher education? These include:

1. **Research:** The changing geopolitical setting has new opportunities for finding funded science partners in China, especially in the Physical Sciences STEM cluster (in which China leads the world in certain fields), and in Biomedicine and Health Services (where the UK has so much to offer);

2. **Talent flows:** The UK is well served by the inflow of fee-paying middle-class Chinese students, but as well as market-based people flows between the two countries, it is at least equally vital to foster merit-based people flows, especially though scholarships targeted to areas of priority; and

3. **Language:** Ultimately the capacity of any nation to develop

productive relations in China will be determined by the depth and width of its knowledge of China's written and spoken language.[1] Western countries have lagged in acquiring Chinese, partly because China has done so well in learning European languages, but high-calibre understanding and cooperation is impossible without language. The field is open: this could be a source of profound comparative advantage for the UK.

2. The importance of countering hostile rhetoric and defending our engagement with China

Vivienne Stern, Director of Universities UK International

Almost half-a-million international students study in UK higher education institutions. Nearly a quarter of them are Chinese. While many of these students returned home when the Covid-19 pandemic began to grip the UK, those who are still here face difficult circumstances. Anxious parents, financial pressure and distance from loved ones adds to the strain which all students are under as they adjust to a new way of living and learning, without the usual sources of human contact and support.

For some Chinese students, there has been an additional dimension to their distress. From early January onwards, there were several reports of harassment and intimidation, particularly online, linked to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan.[2] The Metropolitan Police recorded a significant increase in hate crime directed towards ethnically Chinese people between January and March 2020: there were 267 offences in the period compared to 63 offences between January and March 2019.[3] Chinese students reported feeling uncomfortable wearing face masks, which prompted passers-by to stare or avoid standing close to them.[4] A survey of current and prospective Chinese students and their parents, conducted by the Association of British Chinese Professors, found that when asked about their main concerns about studying in the UK, three-in-four reported 'concerns about discrimination and hate speech against Chinese people'.[5] Recent British Council surveys have also found high levels of anxiety about 'personal safety' amongst prospective applicants.[6]

Universities have been swift to act, encouraging students to come forward, ensuring that incidents are reported to the police and issuing statements of solidarity with their Chinese students. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Exeter, Professor Sir Steve Smith, describes how one incident was handled:

> *I wrote to the Chief Constable about an incident, and within an hour of sending the email he had replied, within five hours he had rung my office, and because I was in a meeting, spoke to our Head of College Operations. And he followed up by appointing a senior person for direct contact (her personal mobile number is on the whiteboard of our security team's office). The Chief Constable then contacted us personally twice by phone in the next ten days. It was incredibly impressive.*

However, vigilance remains necessary. Covid-19 may have triggered a wave of hostility towards ethnically Chinese people, but my concern is that underlying factors have been quietly stoking the conditions for this hostility for some time. I am also concerned that we have been constrained in speaking out about this because we know we will be accused of being wilfully naïve, and of protecting financial interests rather than human beings.

In 2019, there was steady growth in public debate about China's influence. Policy discussions about collaboration with China shifted fast. The question of universities' exposure to influence and risk through its engagement with China became a frequent topic of discussion in Whitehall.

UK Universities and China:

In November 2019, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published a report entitled *A cautious embrace: defending democracy in an age of autocracies.*[7] In it they reported having 'heard alarming evidence about the extent of Chinese influence on the campuses of UK universities' and expressed surprise that 'the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's submission to this inquiry did not identify academia as being a distinct area at risk of influence by autocracies'.[8] The UK's approach contrasted with that of Australia, where the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITSA) was introduced in December 2018. FITSA intended to provide 'visibility of the nature, level and extent of foreign influence on Australia's government and political process'. Universities are included within the scope of the scheme, which requires registration of certain activities, including the receipt of funding or donations from foreign entities. In the US, a Senate report called on the US Department of Justice to probe whether Confucius Institutes should register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Earlier, in 2018, *Politico* reported on a private dinner attended by Donald Trump:

> *At one point during the dinner, Trump noted of an unnamed country that the attendee said was clearly China, 'almost every student that comes over to this country is a spy'.*

The suggestion that universities may be seen as useful vectors for foreign actors with malign intent is not new. Systems and legislation designed to pre-empt and protect national interests already exist, particularly in relation to security-sensitive research. There is always work to be done to make sure universities are engaging internationally with their eyes

open, and that they are equipped to recognise and respond to new threats as they emerge.

But not all foreign influence is malign – after all, we tend to be rather proud of the 'soft power' generated by our universities' extensive connections around the world.[9] We value the presence of students from all over the world on our campuses precisely because it means that we can challenge preconceptions and spread better mutual understanding among our students. It is a rather wonderful thing that in any major UK university, there will be students studying together whose countries are at loggerheads, or even in open conflict – even if opposing student groups block each other's student union motions.

So yes, universities should take the risks seriously. They should also be robust in their defence of their own fundamental values. Indeed, Universities UK is undertaking a major programme of work in this area, led by Sir Peter Gregson, Vice Chancellor of Cranfield University.

A responsible attitude to risk is essential if we are to stand up for the principle of engagement in teaching and research, irrespective of geography or politics. However, none of this should distract us from the imperative that we defend the students who study with us from racism and an insidious growth in suspicion and fear. We should also robustly defend the principle of international engagement itself.

China's growing global role is a fact. In research, China was projected to spend $658 billion on research and development (R&D) in 2018 and to overtake the US as the world's largest R&D investment nation by 2022. China is the UK's third most

important collaborative research partner and our research partnerships with China have increased by 116 per cent since 2013. It is the second most important host of UK programmes delivered overseas, with 37,000 students studying UK programmes in China. Chinese institutions are rapidly rising up the major international rankings, with Tsinghua and Peking Universities both featuring in the top 30 in the *Times Higher Education* World Rankings.[10]

China is therefore, unsurprisingly, becoming an increasingly popular destination for UK students who wish to spend time studying abroad. China now ranks 9th as a destination for UK students studying full degrees abroad. We have also seen a 17 per cent year-on-year growth in the number of students spending short periods in China as part of their studies at a UK university. We should encourage more of this reciprocal mobility, seeking to double the proportion of UK students who spend time in China. Chinese language should be a priority within a new national language strategy.[11] In achieving this, our universities' extensive networks in China are a significant national asset.

At home, we can make better use of the presence of Chinese students in the UK. We argue that the international students we host benefit from the education UK universities offer, but they also contribute to it, creating global classrooms in which UK students can test their assumptions and preconceptions against those formed in different circumstances. However, while I know many universities put huge efforts into the integration of international students on campus, I suspect there is still a way to go. A 2016 report for Universities UK International found that one-in-four international students struggled to make friends from the UK.[12] Yunyan Li discusses

her own experiences of this in Chapter 8. I have heard from several universities that some international students have found it easier to participate in online class discussions than in traditional classroom settings, so there may be new models of integration and exchange which emerge from the change to the way universities are currently working.

We could also learn from initiatives such as the University of Sheffield China Gateway scheme, initiated by the Department for International Trade's predecessor body, UK Trade and Investment.[13] This scheme placed graduates with Chinese language skills in small and medium companies in Sheffield to help them develop export capacity. This scheme could be reignited across the UK, drawing on international students from a range of countries, taking advantage of the new Graduate Route to be introduced next year.

International students are an economic asset too, now and for the future. It is a well-established fact that international students contribute significantly to the UK economy. The HEPI / Kaplan report *The Costs and Benefits of International Students* found that the net return to the UK was £20.3 billion.[14] But I would argue the contribution goes beyond the immediate return, and could be increased if we encourage UK and international students to lay foundations for future trade and cooperation in all areas, not just in education, research and innovation. Frankly, China will continue to matter to the UK and, in the future as now, the greater the number of influential individuals who have studied in the UK, and hold some affection for it, the better.

However, for that to be possible, we need to do a great job of looking after all international students, including Chinese students, while they are with us. In a post-Covid world,

international students and their parents will think hard about their health and welfare before they decide to travel, as the British Council's brilliant *Insights* work is beginning to show.[15] We will need to demonstrate that we will not tolerate hostility towards Chinese or any other students on the grounds of their ethnicity. That includes not being apologetic about our ties with China.

Additionally, while most, if not all, of the incidents reported earlier this year took place outside universities themselves, it remains our responsibility to call out harassment and challenge the rising tide of hostility and suspicion off-campus and in public debate, just as we need stand up to other forms of discrimination and hatred. The death of George Floyd has reinforced the urgency of not leaving the challenge of standing against discrimination to those who are victims of it. As the UK's first Chinese Vice Chancellor, Max Lu, has put it 'We should not risk our strong reputation as a welcoming nation of great education and science heritage'.

This may become even more important as the UK emerges from the Covid-19 crisis and begins to understand its economic and social consequences. Having enjoyed a brief few months of benign policy relating to international students and staff, with the creation of the Graduate Route reinstating post-study work rights for students starting in the academic year 2020/21, do we risk another clamp down as the public appetite for connectivity and openness shrinks? Worse, might the strain on society lead to out-grouping, demonisation and the hunt for common enemies?

If so, it is not too early to be on guard.

3. China and self-censorship

Professor Kerry Brown, Professor of Chinese Studies and Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London

The issue of self-censorship for those writing, studying and commenting on China is a difficult one. It is more difficult than simply claiming that Chinese government actors attempt to influence non-Chinese bodies like universities and companies through overt pressure or threats. While one can sometimes find tangible evidence in the form of conversations, emails, letters or other means that pressure has been placed, with much self-censorship the act itself is invisible – it occurs in people's heads, before and as they write and is very private. Unless there is evidence of a direct instruction from an outside body to deliver certain kinds of content in a specific way, how does one know anyone really self-censors, except if the person accused acknowledges the act? Failing that, it is all down to it being deduced from contradictions and inconsistencies in their writing. Even then, writers can claim that they have changed their mind or decided to take a different approach to an issue of their own volition.

What is clear is that accusations of self-censorship regarding work on China have intensified in recent years. Lecturers in Australia have been accused of being forced to issue apologies over the language they use about Taiwan and its contested status in classes.[16] In America, institutions either having research centres in China, or hosting Confucius Institutes partially funded by the Chinese Government have also been accused of avoiding contentious or difficult issues that might irritate the Chinese Government.[17] These concerns and others have arisen partly because of the rising prominence

of China and its role in the world. They are also because of the more vociferous and active role agents of the Chinese party-state have taken in recent years in expressing opinions about issues like Hong Kong, Taiwan and domestic matters – along with anything that relates to China's interests abroad. Offending China was never difficult. In the era of current President and Communist Party head Xi Jinping, it has become extremely easy, and the Chinese Government has not been coy in expressing this for everyone who wants to hear it. The assumption that this sort of environment must necessarily impact on the way people write and deal with China in some way, usually problematic, has strengthened.

This is partly because there is a mass of evidence that censorship and fear of reprisals is a massive issue within the People's Republic. In the last few years alone a government edict leaked in 2013, Document No 9, clearly instructed those working in Chinese universities to avoid discussing ideas like democracy, federalism or constitutionalism.[18] There have been many cases of academics removed from their positions for failing to toe the line, one of the most high profile recently was that of law expert Xu Zhangrun from elite Tsinghua University in 2019.[19] Even foreign experts working in Chinese universities have felt the icy hand of control: American Christopher Balding departed his post in southern China in 2018 due to feeling unsafe and unable to speak freely.[20]

In the relatively recent past, it was fairly straightforward to work out the topics that might arouse comment and direct interest from Chinese government officials, embassies and the official state media. Output produced in English mostly did not register. Only those referring to specific issues that appeared in high-profile outlets like the *Financial Times*, *Economist*, *Wall*

Street Journal and *New York Times* tended to gain attention. Someone writing on the oppression of Tibetans, the vast detentions of people of Uyghur ethnic minority status in the Xinjiang region since 2017, or about Taiwan and pressure on its autonomy (the island currently enjoys de facto independence, though the People's Republic insists it remains part of China), in any of these outlets, or in Chinese, in ways which was critical of the Chinese Government's position was likely to get rebutted. In some cases the author(s) would even be invited to discussions in person with Chinese Embassy officials. There were times when more prominent figures were even banned from the country – or at least placed on a visa blacklist. Foreign scholars who wrote a book about Xinjiang in the 2000s are a well-known example.[21]

As China attempts to tell its story more widely in the world and be more proactive about its global messaging, there has been a more assertive stance. Sometimes this takes the form of attacks on social media when posts go up by commentators or writers critical of China by the army of *wumao* activists – those sometimes paid by the Chinese Government to put content in comments sections attacking critics and defending China. Many of these are by those who sincerely believe in what they are writing. China is increasingly willing to call out those who criticise it. For universities, this can run the risk of impacting on the recruitment of Chinese students, or undertaking research collaborations with China. Universities like the University of Nottingham, which has a campus in Ningbo, have been viewed as particularly susceptible to having their interests directly impinged on if academics are critical of China.

Despite this, as the case of Nottingham also proves (while it certainly has academics who are critical of China, their freedom

to be so has not been affected by their University's broader interests in the People's Republic of China), it is very difficult to distinguish the perception that China is seeking to pressurise specific academic work from the reality of whether it actually is. This relates directly to self-censorship. Are people pre-emptively censoring their writing because they erroneously think the issues they write about will cause problems and responses, or are people self-censoring their writing to pre-empt and avoid a negative response because the issues they write about are genuinely sensitive topics likely to provoke a response? The first is almost a speculative act – 'I am doing this because I think there might be a problem' – as opposed to one based on real evidence – 'I am doing this because there will be a problem, and I can predict it'.

Pre-emptive self-censorship from over-anxiety and misjudgement may well be a greater problem than self-censorship that is undertaken because it really is about things that will cause reactions. While it does show the general risk and nervousness about writing around issues like China, it does not show conclusively whether that nervousness is right or appropriate. What is clear is that in the last few years, the fear and anxiety of facing individual and institutional consequences for straying over the ever-shifting red line that manages to offend China has risen dramatically.

Fear of what *might* happen is as much a problem as about what actually *has* occured or *will* occur. This fear is reinforced by the fact that China is much more powerful now. This is further strengthened by the fact that, for many, China is also not well known. That China has a political system and a cultural and philosophical view of itself and its relationship to the outside world means that it requires a knowledge-based, nuanced and

sophisticated analysis and understanding. Its rise to global prominence presents many challenges to it and the rest of the world.

The Covid-19 crisis in early 2020, which spread from China to Europe and the US, dramatically illustrates this. In this context, the need for a neutral space in universities, think tanks and elsewhere, where the implications of China's rise can be understood in different frameworks and better conceptualised, has become more critical. The need for credible voices, untainted by claims they are partisan or undertaking self-censorship, has never been greater. And yet, both the often visceral attacks by those antipathetic to China because of its political system, its human rights issues and its actions over Tibet, Taiwan or the South China Sea, and the equally passionate responses and defences either by the Chinese Government or its supporters, means that this space for neutrality has become squeezed and compromised almost to the point of becoming uninhabitable.

Those who experience the issues of how to research and understand China objectively in their work, while also being very aware of the consequences if they stray into the many areas of sensitivity, are doctoral students and early career researchers. Some of these may originally come from China, and have to protect friends, family and networks there. Others are involved in field research in sensitive ethnic minority areas, or around potentially contentious social policy issues like land ownership reform or migrant labourer rights. For these, the worst that can happen is that they are detained. But for those not from China, while they at least do not get to see the inside of a Chinese detention centre, they do run the risk of ending up being unable to get visas, and then unable to do their

field research and to produce the all-important work that will further their academic career. These are serious consequences, which universities outside China need to be aware of, and demonstrate an understanding of. They are exacerbated by the very precarious situation that most researchers embarking on their careers endure in any field. It makes a difficult situation even worse.

In acknowledging the complexity of self-censorship as an issue, one final matter has to be added. This is the simple need to sometimes write about contentious issues in a way that is even-handed and sensitive. The Hong Kong protests in 2019 offer a case in point. In some analysis, these were framed as a fight between defenders of democracy and freedom against the autocratic Chinese central state. In others, Hong Kong was viewed as a place descending to anarchy, proving that democracy was debilitating and corrosive to social cohesion. Between these extremes, there were a range of positions. In writing about these issues at the time, and afterwards, I had to make two admissions. First, that the complexity of what was happening in Hong Kong, the speed of events and the range of actors, meant that no one could claim to be absolutely authoritative. A Clausewitz-like chaos of war had descended, where events and time had sped up. The best option was to reserve at least some space for contingency in judgements about what was happening and what it all meant.

The second choice I made was to acknowledge that everyone involved in the events had some measure of culpability. The Chinese Government had adopted heavy handed, almost imperious policies towards the city since Xi's rise in 2012. The administration of Chief Executive Carrie Lam had been incompetent, and at times simply lost control of the public

situation. There was no clear sign of a coherent political strategy among many of the different activists and protest groups or their advisers. They want a range of diverse things, from political reform to outright independence. Some just wanted to protest. Nor did it help that the US, Britain and other governments had sometimes well intentioned, but often opportunistic, politicians and public figures using Hong Kong for their larger purpose of simply attacking China itself. Their newfound 'expertise' around Hong Kong was curiously timed. Many of these have now migrated to using Covid-19 as their main point of attack though their objective remains unchanged.

This is not to denigrate the sincerity of many of those involved in the Hong Kong protests or the management of them. But sincerity does not mean people are doing wise, correct or decent things. The greatest problem was the cast-iron certainty with which many approached understanding the Hong Kong issue. As an observer, all I could do was provide a note of scepticism and doubt – for everyone.

Is tact or neutrality along these lines also self-censorship? Or is it an admission that for certain important messages addressed to the Chinese Government, who after all continue to have the most influence over issues in their own country, means deploying more neutral, diplomatic language and strategies? It also means recognising complexity. There is a big difference between sounding like one is commanding something and suggesting the same thing. One can indeed berate Beijing for its measures in Xinjiang. The repression in this region is appalling – and has been for many years – before it intensified over 2017 into 2018. Is writing categorically critical attacks of the events there likely to change minds in Beijing, or would

it be better simply to point out the policies implemented in the last few years are very likely to lead to the very thing they have ostensibly been aimed at preventing – building up local resentment and fuelling radicalisation? The consequences of this will take decades to handle. If one wants to try to do something, anything, about Xinjiang as an outsider, it seems to me more likely that the second tactic – focussing on policy effectiveness and clear, profound questions about this in the region – is likely to work better than the first.

Some could argue that the role of scholars is not to influence but to record. This is a statement by some academics I often hear when attending international seminars. They need to record with absolute veracity, not frame things in a neat, policy-friendly framework which might not currently exist. On an issue like this, however, knowing something very often means at least wanting to do something about it. The question is what. Many who write and think about Xinjiang tend to drift into some form of active engagement. The issue is so current and so extreme. Even writing about it so more people know what is happening there is a form of action. The question is what one tries to do. There are various paths and choices that lie ahead; it depends on the individual scholar or researcher about which they take.

With China, especially now, there are no easy answers. It was always a highly politicised subject, right from the creation of the People's Republic in 1949. Figures as significant as Joseph Needham and Joan Robinson in the 1950s and 1960s were accused of being over-supportive and friendly to China. They defended themselves by saying they believed the Communist Party was delivering a better standard of living to people who had experienced war, famine and poverty in the earlier part

of the century. In a different way, but every bit as divided, the debate about China today still rages. As for the issue of self-censorship, the one thing I have learned in 25 years dealing with this issue and this country and its culture is to stand by one specific motto: it's complicated.

Therefore, all universities must think through, and rapidly adopt, a risk management strategy for any dealings with China. This should cover all areas of intellectual enquiry. It should spell out clearly and without naivety the risks, and opportunities, of doing work with China and on China. It should also offer some ideas on how to manage issues such as demands from Chinese partners. European and American universities mostly have clear charters covering free speech and expression. They need to make sure these are absolutely upheld and that China does not cause them to make exceptions. They should set up a designated body including all the key partners in the institution who research or work with China, to gain their input and advice. They need to be ready to say no to demands or issues from China that they feel violate their own values, but ensure they do this in a neutral and respectful way. There needs to be more co-ordination for a strategy relating to China in bodies like the Russell Group, producing advice and ideas for all members that is non-politicised and pragmatic. The greatest problem of dealing with China is often a lack of knowledge and a proper understanding. Building knowledge up among themselves, and within themselves, would greatly help universities. Once these measures are in place, while the issues of self-censorship might not be wholly put to rest, they are at least placed in a context where people feel more protected and more able to get on with doing their jobs: thinking, writing, and trying to understand.

4. Is there a future for international Chinese students in Australia?

Salvatore Babones, Adjunct Scholar, Centre for Independent Studies, and Associate Professor, University of Sydney

Before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 was shaping up to be a record year for Chinese student recruitment and enrolments in Australia. In 2019, Australian higher education institutions enrolled 164,619 Chinese students (which account for about 90 per cent of the international student revenue of Australia's higher education sector), up 8 per cent on the year before.[22] Australia ranked second in the world as a destination for Chinese tertiary students, after only the United States, a country 13 times its size.[23] Australia's enrolments of Chinese higher education students had expanded by roughly a factor of 10 since the turn of the millennium.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of the international education market everywhere, but Australian universities have been particularly affected by it. The southern hemisphere's school year typically begins in late February or early March, and the Australian Government's Covid-related travel restrictions first went into effect on 1 February. Many commencing international students were likely caught overseas and never able to take up their studies in Australia. In addition, many continuing Chinese students would have been home in China for the Lunar New Year holidays.

It has been reported that more than half of the University of Sydney's Chinese students did not return to Australia for the 2020 school year.[24] It is likely that other Australian universities

are in similar situations. It is difficult to analyse the situation in any definitive manner because Australian universities publish few details about their international student enrolments. The Australian Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment reports international student figures for individual universities and a country of origin breakdown for Australia as a whole, but it does not report country-of-origin statistics for individual universities. The universities themselves do not systematically publish these figures, leaving journalists and researchers to estimate numbers based on the dribs and drabs of information that are occasionally made public.

Australian universities' reticence may reflect the political sensitivity of their extremely high Chinese student numbers. There seem to be only 10 universities in the world outside China itself that enrol more than 5,000 Chinese students; seven of these are in Australia (see Table 1). Five Australian universities seem to have been drawing at least one-fifth of their students from China; at the University of Sydney the figure seems to have been nearly one-third. What is more, these figures are based on student counts, not full-time equivalent (FTE) student loads. In Australia, it is generally the case that international students must study full-time, whereas many domestic students study part-time. In addition, Australia's international student statistics do not include international students who are permanent residents of Australia, a situation that frequently occurs when Chinese parents relocate their families to Australia. Thus, the true presence of Chinese students on campus at Australian universities is even higher than the figures in the table would suggest.

Unlike the situation at American universities, where many Chinese students are research students on PhD fellowships, nearly all Chinese students in Australia are fee-paying students, with a particular concentration in coursework Master's programmes in Management and other Business disciplines. At the University of Sydney, more than 87 per cent of all Master's students hail from overseas, with China almost certainly accounting for most of these.[25] This extraordinary statistic highlights the key issue in the race for international (and especially Chinese) student enrolments: how much is too much? When only one-eighth of the students in Master's programmes hail from the local country, and (although this is only a guess) six-eighths likely hail from China, is international education serving to enrich the classroom experience with multicultural viewpoints from around the world? Or is the university, in effect, operating an offshore programme for Chinese students?

Roughly speaking, one-third of Australian universities rely on international students for more than one-third of the FTE student loads – and this does not include either New Zealand students nor students who are Australian permanent residents. In most cases, by far the single largest source of international students is China. Although Australian universities routinely talk about diversifying the source of their international student enrolments, they almost never talk about reducing international loads overall. Given the number of international students they seek to enrol, diversification is not realistically possible. For example, although many Australian universities have 'India strategies', the number of Indian families who can afford international education is roughly one-eighth the number of Chinese families.[26]

Table 1: Only 10 universities outside of China enrol more than 5,000 Chinese students

University	Country	PRC students	Percent	Notes
University of Sydney (1)	Australia	21,000	31%	Estimate
Monash University (1)	Australia	19,000	23%	Estimate
University of Melbourne (1)	Australia	15,000	22%	Estimate
University of New South Wales (1)	Australia	15,000	24%	Estimate
University of Toronto (2)	Canada	12,571	14%	2018-2019
University of Queensland (1)	Australia	11,000	20%	Estimate
University of Technology Sydney (1)	Australia	8,000	17%	Estimate
RMIT University (1)	Australia	8,000	12%	Estimate
University of British Columbia (3)	Canada	6,257	9%	2018-2019
University of Illinois (4)	United States	5,738	11%	2019-2020

Sources: (1) https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/top-universities-face-12bn-coronavirus-hit/news-story/424ba001f0228f9733dd5f7b6c396209;

(2) https://www.utoronto.ca/about-u-of-t/quick-facts;

(3) https://academic.ubc.ca/academic-community/news-announcements/news/read-201819-annual-report-enrolment; and

(4) https://isss.illinois.edu/about/statistics.html

The simple economic fact is that every state of India (with the exception of tiny Goa) is poorer than every province of China: even India's national capital territory of Delhi is poorer

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than western China's remote Gansu province. Australian universities that are opening representative offices in India's major cities might as well recruit in China's poorest provinces. India already has roughly one-third as many tertiary students studying abroad as does China, which, given India's relative poverty, implies that the Indian outbound market is already overexploited relative to the Chinese one.[27] It is flatly unrealistic to expect Indian students to drive increasing international student numbers in the near future.

India is expected to have serious difficulties in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that China will be even more important than ever as a source of international students in the northern hemisphere for 2020/21 and southern hemisphere for the 2021 school year. But Chinese parents will be understandably reluctant to send their children overseas at a time when there are legitimate fears that top study destinations like the US, UK and Canada will still be experiencing Covid-19 cases (though Australia and New Zealand are likely to be virus-free by the time their next school year starts in February 2021).

Perhaps more importantly for the long-term, there are three strong reasons to suspect the Chinese Government will use the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to reduce permanently the number of Chinese students going abroad for university degrees:

1. due to demographic decline, China's own universities need the students;

2. since 2016, China has increasingly limited its citizens' access to foreign exchange; and

3. China is actively using its purported success in fighting the Covid-19 for propaganda purposes.

China has already announced that in light of the 'current relationship' between the two countries, its students will not be allowed to start new courses in Taiwan – existing students will be permitted to finish courses in progress.[28] With the Australian Government actively calling for an international investigation into China's handling of the initial Covid-19 outbreak and US President Donald Trump repeatedly emphasising the pandemic's origins in China, it would not be surprising if they, too, experienced a backlash from China. Student withdrawals are an easy way for the Chinese Government to express its displeasure, especially when it can reasonably portray its political actions as being motivated solely by public health concerns.

For most universities in most of the world, the withdrawal of Chinese students would be unwelcome, but hardly catastrophic. The most China-exposed university in the United States, the University of Illinois, has even insured itself against that eventuality.[29] But at least four Australian universities with more than twice the China exposure have not. These universities (and many other Australian universities further down the list) can only hope that Chinese students return in 2021. Caught between geopolitical arm-wrestling and a global public health crisis, there is next to nothing these universities can do to ensure the retention of their Chinese students, and it is too late for them to insure against their loss. Only luck can save these universities from catastrophic revenue declines, and when luck is your last resource, a failure of leadership is clearly indicated.

5. Teaching Chinese international students: ethical tensions

Dr Sylvie Lomer, Lecturer in Education and
Dr Jenna Mittelmeier, Lecturer in International Education,
University of Manchester

In the UK, student demographics have internationalised rapidly, especially in subjects such as Business & Administration, Science and Engineering.[30] These changing demographics have had profound impacts on teaching and learning processes. We propose that this has led to a number of ethical tensions in the ways we teach and work with international students. We pose these below as challenges to the sector, centred on three main themes: international student demographics in the UK; perspectives towards the diversity of international students; and international students' employability.

International student demographics in the UK

The largest group of international students originate from China, representing more than one third of international students in the UK.[31] Yet the brand image of 'Education UK' depicts classrooms with multiple diverse nationalities of students, and this is marketed as the campus experience. These assumptions are frequently replicated in academic literature related to curriculum internationalisation, which often implicitly assumes that broad national diversity is present in the classroom and can encourage intercultural learning.[32] However, this is not the reality for most teaching staff at UK universities, as illustrated in Figure 1. On the one hand, staff may instead be teaching to almost exclusively international student cohorts, often from the same country. On the other hand, there are many courses and institutions in the

UK with few international students (see Figure 2). The impact that intercultural exchange has on learning experiences is, therefore, patchy on a national level and varies significantly by region (see Figure 3).

This raises the first ethical tension for staff teaching on courses dominated by one nationality of international students: how do we reconcile the reality of our classrooms with the way our universities and programmes are marketed?

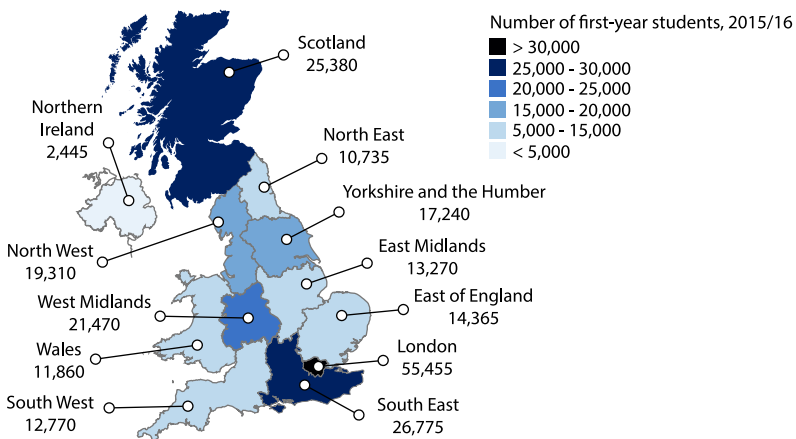*Figure 1: International student numbers in the UK by subject area*
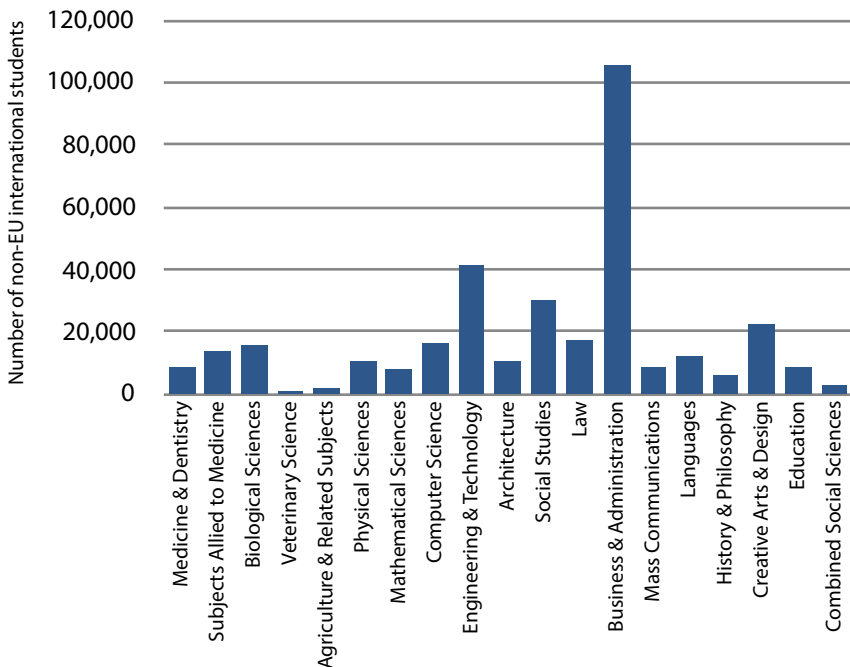
Source: HESA higher education student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2018/19
https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/what-study

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Figure 2: Numbers of non-EU international students enrolled in each higher education institution in the UK
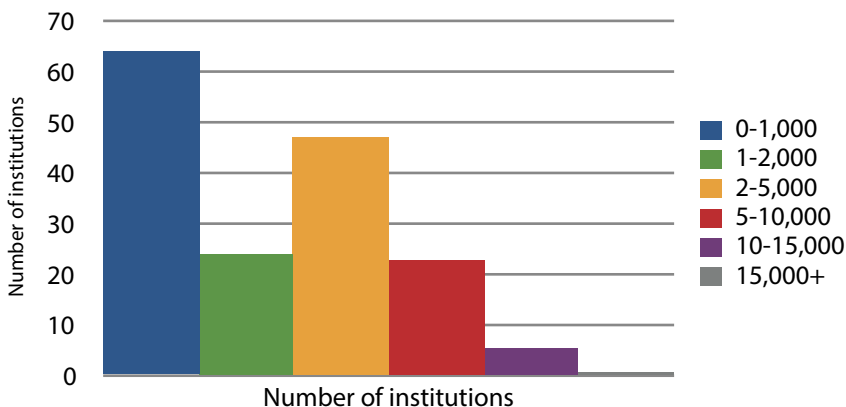
Source: HESA HE student enrolments by HE provider and domicile, https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sfr247/figure-6

Figure 3: Number of non-UK first-year students by UK region

Source: HEPI / Kaplan International Pathways, *The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency,* January 2018. Note: All student numbers are rounded to the nearest 5.

Perspectives towards the diversity of international students

'Diversity' equated with 'nationality'

A number of assumptions are often made about international students and the perceived value of their diversity.[33] To start, many narratives about international students are interested only in one form of diversity: nationality. For example, marketing materials often talk about 'international cohorts' of 'students from over 130 countries', focussing on national diversity at the expense and exclusion of other aspects of diversity. Yet in the context of widening participation narratives for home students, other intersectional aspects of identity are understood as important: ethnicity, gender, class, age, disability, minority language speakers, religion and so on.[34]

This means a wide range of intra-national diversity is ignored, often assuming singular cultures within national borders. For example, in many individual programmes, there may be more Chinese students than any other nationality; this is often constructed by university staff or students as an over-representation and problem in terms of lack of diversity. Yet, vast diversity is present within China that is often overlooked, including 55 recognised ethnic minority groups and dozens of regional language varieties. Although this is recognised more readily for home students, it often seems that what counts for international students is simply their nationality.

This focus on national diversity stems from the notion that nationality or citizenship can be equated with one's culture.[35] Regardless of their individual biographies,

personalities or actual knowledge, once in the institutional context, international students frequently become primarily understood by university staff as a representative of their national culture.[36] Intercultural learning, therefore, is often assumed to require only different nationalities, ignoring other forms of intersectional diversity or diversity present within nation states.[37]

Students from the same country may be assumed to have similar experiences or perspectives.[38] This can be exacerbated in classrooms dominated by one nationality, where it can be assumed that 'intercultural learning' is impossible. Chinese students, in this instance, are represented as a homogenous group, embodying a singular national culture and masking individual variation. They are also often presumed to struggle homogeneously with academic skills and adaptation.[39] Therefore, opportunities to explore the differences between individual life experiences and the variations within countries are often missed. Taken together, these points raise another ethical tension: how do we ensure that international students' identities are examined through an intersectional lenses?

Homogenisation of international students

At the same time, international students across the university are frequently seen as a collective group, assumed to have the same needs or challenges, despite their individual experiences or cultures. This causes international students to be singled out as having different needs compared to home students, leading to support services or programmes specifically targeted at international students.[40] However, academic literature has highlighted all students experience multifaceted transitions to higher education.[41] For example, home students

may also need support with developing academic language and writing, despite many universities providing pre-sessional and in-sessional language support strictly for international students. Thus, an additional ethical tension is present: how do we ensure that diverse needs are supported across our student populations, rather than arbitrarily divided between home and international students?

Dissatisfying teaching and learning experiences

For many staff and students, the policy and curricular narratives equating diversity with nationality have generated dissatisfaction in their teaching and learning experiences. From the perspectives of lecturers, this dissatisfaction can too frequently be linked to a negative stereotyping that paints international students, particularly East Asian and Chinese students, as silent, lacking critical thinking, at risk of plagiarism, dependent and lacking the necessary language skills.[42] Similarly, some home students have demonstrated negative stereotyping towards the academic abilities of their international student peers, leading to preferences for working with colleagues from their own country.[43] For many international students, these narratives have led to harmful experiences of bias and racism within higher education classrooms.[44] As such, this raises the ethical consideration: how do we ensure that negative stereotyping towards international students are not present in our classrooms and departments?

Employability of international students

Challenges related to the employability of international students

UK policy frames international students as pursuing self-improvement through study abroad, situating education as

part of the process of acquiring social and cultural capitals.[45] In this regard, many international students may expect increased employability as a result of studying abroad.[46] UK universities therefore market themselves on the premise that having a UK degree confers prestige and scarcity in highly competitive job markets, an image bolstered by findings that UK graduates on average have higher salaries than the home country average. However, recent graduates are less satisfied than final year students, possibly due 'to the uncertainties they face after graduation'.[47] This has led to consequential concerns of reputational harm.[48] In rare cases, this has even led to students prosecuting universities for false marketing.[49]

Unlike undergraduate home students, employability for international students does not factor into quality metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework or into global rankings.[50] There has thus been no incentive for universities or the nation to systematically embed international employability skills into the curriculum. This leaves universities who recruit widely among international students, particularly at the postgraduate level, in an ethical quandary: dependent on international fee income generated by the promise of enhanced employability, but with no evidence beyond the anecdotal that the curriculum in programmes aimed at international students does benefit them in this way.

International alumni have been placed in a difficult position by the withdrawal of the post-study work visa. It has been increasingly challenging to find eligible work in the UK after graduation due to the tighter work visa restrictions. This significantly affected the number of Indian students coming to the UK, although it has not apparently affected demand from

China.[51] The recent announcement that the post-study work visa will be reintroduced is likely to stimulate further increases in international student numbers and, correspondingly, increased expectations for integration into the local economy where students study. As such, we must question: how do universities authentically support international students in finding and maintaining employment after graduation?

Developing internationally-relevant employability skills

Clearly, institutions face an enormous challenge in providing tailored employability support for international students.[52] Keeping up with all the varied and complex labour markets in multiple countries – and embedding these into curricula – would be an impossible feat. However, in many subjects we see limited attempts to consider employability within global contexts. Frequently, like academic skills, these are outsourced to other departments in the institution such as the Careers Service, rather than forging the links between the curricular knowledge and professional skills in the core programme. This brings us to another ethical consideration: how can we build employability skills into our university programmes and course units that are relevant across the global labour market, while maintaining the appeal of a 'British degree'?

The imperative to address globalised employability must be held in tension with the symbolic capital of a 'British degree'.[53] In one sense British degrees are valued by the labour market internationally precisely because they are a 'British' in character, and this is understood to encompass a certain range of skills (for example, the English language) and capabilities (for example, intercultural team work). But, as the long-term effects of (relatively) high-volume international mobility start

to be felt in particular labour markets, this perception becomes nuanced. Some international alumni report disappointment in the differentiation of their salary and job types, although these are often better than the conditions for their domestically educated counterparts.[54] In fact, Chinese overseas-educated graduates of 'second-tier HEIs' who struggle to find work commensurate with their expectations are referred to as 'hai dai', or seaweed (floating without a direction, in contrast to the 'hai gui' or sea turtles used to describe successful graduates).[55]

It is therefore not sufficient for UK higher education institutions to rely on the perception of the value of a British degree in the international labour market. Ethical engagement, particularly with Chinese international students, demands a stronger integration of employability skills in the global context into the curriculum.

Pedagogies and teaching practices

With these issues in mind, a frequent answer to this dilemma is curriculum internationalisation, whereby international dimensions, materials and pedagogies are embedded into the curriculum, often for the benefit of home students. Yet, there remain few empirical studies, particularly comparative studies in multiple institutional settings, which have focussed on how to develop authentic intercultural learning opportunities. Instead, quick fixes are often used, such as simply incorporating readings or case studies from other countries without engaging with their underlying cultural representations. For many Chinese students, superficial incorporation of examples that fail to understand the context is seen as lip-service. Thus, it is worth considering the ethical question: how do we develop international curricula and pedagogies that are authentically intercultural?

One way forward is a recognition that diverse learners have diverse prior educational experiences, different cultural values in education and varied expectations of teaching and learning. Much of our university learning services for international students assumes a degree of assimilation; for example, what a 'good' essay looks like or 'appropriate' participation in class. In so many of our international student support services – pre-sessional courses, language centres, library services – there is a perceived need for Chinese students to adjust to British modes of education and ways of thinking, even if they have no intention of living and working in the UK afterwards or consider them ineffective.[56] This brings up another ethical consideration: how do we encourage and allow for diverse learning perspectives while still ensuring degree standards are met?

It is often assumed that adapting to these academic practices is an intrinsic part of what it means to study abroad, and that opting for an international degree entails acceptance of this bargain. Higher education institutions believe they clearly and transparently communicate their learning and teaching practices through marketing and course information that undergoes rigorous review. Yet home students, for example, are often taken aback by the limited contact time.[57] This suggests that transparency about pedagogies remains a challenge for institutions and is made more difficult by language and cultural barriers. It is therefore difficult to maintain that it is ethical to insist on upholding a bargain whose terms are not mutually transparent.

In fact, many of these practices lack a substantial evidence-base in their favour. Although most higher education institutions continue to propose the lecture as the dominant method

of instruction, any reader of the *Times Higher Education*, for instance, will note the debate as to its utility. Likewise, how effective generic study skill provision is at reducing plagiarism or enhancing academic performance is difficult to prove. Thus, internationalisation can be an impetus for challenging and enhancing entrenched educational practices.

Another assumption is that international students are in the position to act as representatives of their home countries and cultures for the benefits of others' learning. For example, it is often noted that international students are 'resources' for intercultural learning, assuming their knowledge can be exploited for the benefit of others. This assumes, of course, that students *want* to represent their country or are willing to contribute their experiences. As such, we encounter the ethical question: as we develop intercultural learning exchanges in our higher education classrooms, how do we avoid exploiting international students for their culture and knowledge?

Conclusion

We have raised a number of ethical dilemmas and tensions related to teaching international students, which require wider reflection in future research and practice. Many of these questions are infrequently engaged within institutional, policy or research narratives, which often instead disseminate overused tropes of international students and stereotypes of their experiences.

For ease of reference the ethical challenges raised are:

1. *How do we reconcile the reality of our classrooms with the way our universities and programmes are marketed?*

2. *How do we ensure that international students' identities are examined through intersectional lenses?*

3. *How do we ensure that diverse needs are supported across our student populations, rather than arbitrarily divided between home and international students?*

4. *How do we work away from negative stereotyping towards international students in our classrooms and departments?*

5. *How do universities authentically support international students in finding and maintaining employment after graduation?*

6. *How can we build employability skills that are relevant across the global labour market into our university programmes and course units, while maintaining the appeal of a 'British degree'?*

7. *How do we encourage and allow for diverse learning perspectives while still ensuring degree standards are met*?

8. *As we develop intercultural learning exchanges in our higher education classrooms, how do we avoid exploiting international students for their culture and knowledge?*

At this time, we offer no answers or resolutions to these dilemmas, but hope instead to incite further discussion and research with an aim towards ethical and inclusive internationalisation in higher education. Movements towards decolonising the curriculum offer promising directions and there is important work to be done on the pedagogies that implement curricular moves.[58] Curricular decolonisation, itself very much a work in progress, is only part of the challenge to

ensure that international classrooms are ethical, in the sense that they are 'equal, unprejudiced and inclusive'.[59] How we teach those curricula, our behaviours, attitudes, side remarks, teaching approaches and fundamental beliefs and values also need to be interrogated from the position of dismantling our internalised cultural bias. An effective engagement with this rigorous intellectual project would help to address questions 2, 3 and 4 above.

Universities could commit to undertaking a reflective process of self-examination in the course of changes to the curriculum and teaching adaptations in the post-Covid-19 environment, to address challenges 7 and 8 in the context of decolonising the curriculum. A similar re-examination of what a UK degree means and how it is marketed will be necessitated by the dynamics of delivering partially online degrees in the next academic year.

Challenges 5 and 6 require university careers services to work in tandem with academics, building an evidence informed approach to international employability.

Our own ongoing programme of research aims to gather empirical evidence on some of these questions in future publications and we look forward to contributing to a future narrative around these issues.

6. What do international students expect from their representatives?

Riddi Viswanathan, Former Diversity Officer at the University of Manchester Students' Union and Overseas Representative at the National Union of Students

In recent years, internationalisation has become one of the most widely discussed topics in the UK higher education sector and has been one of the most significant elements to be affected by Covid-19. The sector and individual universities have set themselves highly ambitious internationalisation goals. Institutions have been pursuing this vision by expanding international student recruitment teams, extending distance learning programmes, increasing institutional research partnerships abroad, aggressively promoting outward mobility programmes and, most importantly, initiating efforts to enhance the student experience by diversifying their campuses and promoting a truly accessible and inclusive curriculum.

Yet, in the pursuit of achieving internationalisation goals, have UK universities sufficiently extended support to international student representatives to help them cater to and support the growing needs of the international student population? While the UK higher education sector has witnessed an increase in overseas student numbers, was this matched with an appropriate increase in the number of student leaders representing these international students?

Drawing on my experiences and the lessons I learned as the first full-time International Students' Officer at the University of Manchester Students' Union and as the Overseas

Representative at the National Union of Students (NUS), I will discuss what international students expect from their representatives and, building on these expectations, how the higher education sector can better support international student representation going forward.

What do international students expect from their representatives?

UK universities are home to thousands of students from over 195 countries, who each bring with them their unique experiences and expectations. Given the diversity of the international student population at our universities, it is difficult to answer 'What do international students expect from their representatives?' because it is reductive to put a blanket over the term 'international student expectations' as every international student journey is unique and each student has their own expectations.

I aim to summarise some common general expectations, reflecting particularly on my interactions with Chinese students and societies, both at the University of Manchester and nationally.

1. Be engaging and reach out to students before they reach out to you. Office hours for Sabbatical Officers is one practice that has worked particularly well in many students' unions. The University of Manchester Students' Union called it 'Officers on Tour' while others refer to it as 'open discussions' or 'surgeries'. These sessions are integral in enabling the student representative to understand first-hand the challenges faced by students. The open and informal atmosphere allows students to discuss their problems freely. Most international students I spoke with agree that they are more likely to engage

with representatives who reach out to students rather than waiting for the students to reach out to them. The primary expectation of students is for their representatives to engage with them.

2. Be relatable and visible role models. During a leadership workshop, some international students described the immeasurable positive impact their representatives had on them and their university experience. Some students even stated that the journeys of their representatives were so relatable and inspiring that it motivated them to engage with the students' union and university and to run for leadership positions. Students who are relatable and lead by example will foster more engagement with international students, which in turn will improve the student experience and the wider experience of students at the institution. Good leadership from student representatives plays a huge role in creating a positive student experience.

3. Promote cultural integration. Many international student societies and clubs expect their representatives to support them in organising events that celebrate their culture and identities. As opposed to the myth that international students often keep to themselves and have friends only from their own country, an increasing number of international student societies expect their representatives to provide avenues for collaboration. International societies want representatives, students' unions and universities to collectively promote celebrations like Chinese New Year and Diwali as events open for every international and home student interested in Chinese and Indian culture, as opposed to events particularly targeting specific groups of international students. International students often expect their representatives to facilitate better

integration between diverse student groups by organising events including 'Global week' and 'cultural evenings' where they have opportunities to celebrate the diversity on campus and make new friends from different countries.

In light of these expectations, I would like to share my key learnings from my interactions with thousands of international students: the power of simplicity and the craft of listening.

While the main focus of sectoral support for international students is on issues such as the international student attainment gap, employability and campus development – and critically to involve student representatives at a senior level in these discussions – international students also expect straightforward support from their representatives. This might take the form of setting up their cultural society or simply increasing the number of vegetarian and halal food options in halls. It is important these smaller issues are not sidelined, as every single issue, big or small, has a significant impact on the international student experience. While international students are a vital voice at the table in the broader initiatives, only an appropriately supported international student representative can deliver the simpler, smaller but equally vital initiatives.

Simplicity goes hand-in-hand with the craft of listening, an area in which student representatives, universities and the sector as a whole have a long way to go. There is a tendency to rely on data, surveys and analytics to make decisions about resource allocation, recruitment strategies and improving the student experience, yet what international students expect is for us to listen to them. That means acknowledging and representing their issues and challenges while respecting

the terms in which they present them, to create a sense of belonging and connection. Simply put, while improving the international student attainment gap is important, cultivating events and a positive day-to-day experience will go much further. Several universities and sector bodies have taken impressive steps to increase the number of students on their decision-making boards as a measure to improve students' experience at university.

The task ahead for the sector, then, is to act on the art of simplicity in supporting international representatives to deliver on simple but powerful measures, alongside listening to the voices of international students at the very least by increasing the number of international students in their decision-making processes.

International student representation in the UK

While universities have been increasing resources in international recruitment teams, allocating huge budgets to promote study abroad programmes and the UK higher education sector has witnessed an increase in the number of overseas students, unfortunately very little seems to have been done to support and enhance international student representation.

According to the 2018 benchmarking survey conducted by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), among its members only 26 per cent of the respondents said that they have a dedicated international students' committee composed of international student representatives at their institutions or students' unions.[60] Furthermore, out of the more than 600 students' unions affiliated to the National Union of

Students (NUS), fewer than 10 students' unions have a full-time sabbatical officer position dedicated exclusively to represent and support international students. Students' unions like Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham, Lincoln and Bristol are the some of the few unions that have a full-time International Students' Officer position to support their students.

In the national context, the removal of the full-time International Students' Officer position at the National Union of Students (NUS) in 2019 – the only national student representative position representing international students – was a blow to international student representation and the international student experience accordingly.

Nick Hillman, HEPI's Director, has previously estimated that it would only cost universities £350 each to fund a new NUS International Students' Officer – or just £75 if each of the 600 institutions with an NUS-affiliated union contributed towards the estimated cost of £45,000 a year. Surely now more than ever, this is an easy victory for the sector and international students? Not only would an International Students' Officer add significant value to thousands of international students' experiences, but this would be a clear message to international students unsure about coming to the UK in light of Covid-19 that their experience at UK universities is a priority.

With the significant international student numbers – even after the effects of Covid-19 and the positive impact created by international student representatives – UK higher education institutions should aim to support international student representation.

UK Universities and China:

Support for better international student representation

The higher education sector has accomplished great wins through the collective co-working of higher education umbrella bodies, including universities, high commissions, students' unions and student representatives. One example of this is the reintroduction of the post-study visas from the 2020/21 academic year. To continue this success, the UK higher education sector should engage more with student representatives, help to increase the number of international student representatives and genuinely make efforts to engage them in decision making fora.

The #Weareinternational Student Ambassador Programme by UKCISA is a great initiative to enhance international student representation in decision-making.[61] There is an expectation that other sector bodies will follow suit, to promote best practice, initiate and sustain engagement with student representatives for achieving internationalisation goals.

My recommendation to the sector is not just to include international students in decision-making, but also to support student representatives on the ground, to enhance their skills through leadership training and resources so that they can make best use of their position to support the international students on their campuses.

It is through an integrated working approach that we as a sector, and as institutions, can guarantee a truly positive and fulfilling international student experience.

7. The recruitment and integration of international Chinese students

Kathy Daniels, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor International (Recruitment and Global Pathways), Aston University

The number of Chinese students coming to the UK to study has risen over recent years according to data from HESA. In 2018/19, 35 per cent of all non-EU students studying in the UK came from China. There were 120,385 Chinese students studying in the UK, an increase from 89,540 in 2014/15. The size of this cohort is emphasised by comparing the number to students from other countries, such as India (the second largest country cohort in the UK). In 2014/15, there were 18,300 students in the UK from India and by 2018/19 this had grown to 26,600. Comparisons with the EU are also revealing; in 2018/19 Italy, France and Germany each sent around 13,000 students to the UK to study, a small number when compared to China.[62]

Students coming from China to the UK to study are an essential part of university numbers, and universities are not stopping their efforts to attract Chinese students. Almost one-in-five students at the University of Liverpool comes from China and in 2006 they created Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJLTU) in Suzhou (near Shanghai). The University of Nottingham also has a campus in China and numerous universities have formed strategic partnerships with Chinese universities.

If China is such an important source of students for the UK, individual higher education institutions need to understand what attracts Chinese students to the UK and how to ensure that Chinese students have an excellent experience while they study.

The recruitment of Chinese students

The HESA data show us that there are considerable numbers of Chinese students wanting to come to the UK to study. However, most UK universities are competing for these Chinese students. There are two steps to being successful in this competition – first to understand why students come to the UK to study and, secondly, to understand how students choose the UK institution at which they want to study.

Why do Chinese students come to the UK to study?

The *Bright Futures Project* helps to understand this question, with their study of 8,000 students.[63] The project compared those who opted to stay at home to study with those who chose to study in the UK or Germany (the project does not explore the reasons why some students opted to stay to study in China).

This survey found the main reason given for wanting to study in the UK was 'quality of education'. Of the respondents, 93 per cent rated this factor as 'very important' or 'extremely important'.

This focus on the quality of education could link to the desire 'to better oneself' which is often given as a reason by all nationalities for seeking additional education. A common misconception is that this opportunity is only accessible to those from rich backgrounds and the findings of *Bright Futures* demonstrate just that. As 69 per cent of Chinese students studying in the UK categorised their parents as 'professional and higher administrator', this suggests that nearly one-third come from less privileged backgrounds.

Those coming from less privileged backgrounds might be expected to struggle more to afford a UK education. Research suggests that the Chinese one-child policy has meant that families are better able to afford education – with the extended family often contributing – because of only needing to support one child.[64] One must also note that the costs of education and living in the UK are high and therefore families might be sensitive to tuition fees and living costs. This suggests UK higher education institutions need to be focused on value for money, because Chinese students will not seek quality of education at any cost.

The *Bright Futures Project* reports that 89 per cent of Chinese students said that gaining new experiences was of high importance in deciding to come to study overseas. Meeting new people was given high importance by 83 per cent of respondents and 63 per cent gave high importance to being part of a global world.

Together, these constitute a desire to broaden experience. One must question whether UK institutions always provide this, given the large number of Chinese students on some degree courses. Are Chinese students always gaining the experience of meeting new people and learning new experiences, or are they coming to the UK to study with their fellow citizens?

What influences Chinese students in their choice of institution?

The prestige of the institution is one major influence. The *Bright Futures Project* asked Chinese students to explain how they chose where to study in the UK. The top three reasons given were:

1. the availability of the preferred subject (98%);

2. the ranking of the subject they wanted to study (89%) and

3. the overall ranking of the university (83%).[ii]

A separate piece of 2018 research approached the question slightly differently to find that the prestige of the institution was the biggest influence on Chinese students when choosing a UK institution.[65]

It appears 'prestige' is covered by a number of factors, including ranking and Russell Group membership. However, the perception of prestige is affected also by the number and opinions of existing Chinese students in a higher education institution.[66] This suggests that higher education institutions need to think carefully about their relationships with their alumni.

The second focus is on parents, who play an important part in the recruitment process because of the financial investment they are making. Academic literature suggests that 60 per cent of Chinese families invest one-third of their income to fund their child's education, second only to the expenditure they make on food.[67] Higher education institutions need to think about what information parents use in making decisions on where their child should study. Many parents will not have the same command of the English language as their children, and therefore the need for non-English sources of information is essential.

The other key influencer on students is the recruitment agent. In 2015 a Freedom of Information request from the *Times Higher Education* found that all but 19 elite / specialist

ii This is the percentage of students who rated the factor as very / extremely important.

higher education institutions in the UK used agents to recruit international students.[68] The higher education institutions were paying an average of £1,767 per recruit to the agent.

A HEPI blog by former Chinese education agent and PhD student Ying Yang summarised the range of services provided by the agent.[69] The services include filling in applications and researching institutions, but the common theme of the work of the agent is advice. This includes advice on whether to study abroad, as well as where to study. The agent is seen as a guide and counsellor, not just an administrative service provider. This role as an adviser means universities need to work closely with agents to ensure their institution is one of those recommended to prospective students.

It has been suggested that the role of the agent causes some form of power battle in the recruitment of students.[70] Higher education institutions wish to send a particular message about their courses across to the prospective student, but have to channel this through a third party. The emphasis and priority given within the message becomes controlled by the agent, rather than by the higher education institution.

Therefore, higher education institutions need to think carefully about the marketing messages they use. They must not only reach for the student audience, but also consider the most appropriate messages for agents and parents.

The integration of Chinese students

Having attracted Chinese students to study in the UK with the hope of a high-quality education, higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide a high-quality experience. What does that mean for the Chinese student, and do higher

education institutions need to adapt the way they teach to enable the integration of students?

There is a longstanding belief that Chinese students tend to learn by rote which leads to surface learning rather than deep learning.[71] Western approaches tend to focus more on deep learning, with the emphasis on developing critical thinking skills. It is thought this different approach to learning can disadvantage Chinese students. However, the findings of the *Bright Futures Project* challenge this. Only 6 per cent of Chinese students in the UK reported that they struggled to adapt to the UK learning style, with 75 per cent saying they seldom or never had problems. The suggestion that Chinese students see learning as memorising facts, rather than a process of analytical thinking, is also challenged, with just 41 per cent of Chinese students saying that memorising makes a good learner.

This is supported by more recent research which concluded that Chinese students are not averse to participating in class and want support to develop, both academically and socially.[72]

Integration is not just a learning issue, it is also a social issue. A 2016 research project examined the extent to which Chinese students are integrated into the university community.[73] Almost all students (92 per cent) were satisfied with their experience of making friends with other Chinese students, but only 60 per cent were satisfied with their experience of making friends with UK students. However, 45 per cent said they found it difficult to socialise with students from other countries. Many of the students interviewed complained they had come to the UK for an international learning experience, but the great majority of students on their courses were also from China.

This links back to the issue of prestige – institutions need to think about the quality of the student experience. If prestige is partly driven by the number and experience of existing and recent Chinese students in an institution, ensuring that positive experiences are being delivered and that messages are being passed to the next cohort of students is essential.

It is inevitable that Covid-19 will impact the 2020/21 international student intake, but what is more important for UK higher education institutions is the impact in future years. Going back to the reasons Chinese students come to the UK will be important for higher education institutions as they seek to reassure students that it is safe to come to study here.

There are currently large numbers of Chinese students wanting to come to the UK. They come for a high-quality education and they, their parents and agents are influenced by the prestige of the institution. Ensuring that students have a high-quality experience is not only the duty of UK higher education institutions, but is essential in helping to build up a prestigious reputation for the institution and increase future recruitment.

8. Reflections on my experience as a student in China and the UK

Yunyan Li, University of Bristol (PhD), UKCISA International Student Ambassador

I have been studying in the UK for nearly three years. I am now completing my PhD degree in Social Policy. In this chapter, reflecting on my personal experiences, I outline the two main differences I found between studying in the UK and in China, the challenges and transitions I have come across and some final reflections about my time studying in the UK.

The possibilities and flexibility to choose

In the UK, postgraduate programme there is the flexibility to choose optional units I like. When making a choice, most programmes provide different options and possibilities to craft individual study experiences. For example, I could choose to learn more about philosophical theory to cultivate my critical thinking ability. Also, the university provides practical quantitative techniques to support my core skills for job-seeking. Additionally, the extra-curricular resources, including talks provided by professionals and support searching for an internship, allow me to have a diverse understanding about my subject, the city I am studying in and the whole society.

The independence I need to cultivate myself

This could be phrased also as the ability to make decisions. When studying in the UK, supervisors and course convenors tell me how to do something or how I can improve my study. However, nobody will tell you exactly what you should choose or how to do it. There is no right or wrong choice of what kinds

of units to take to craft your degree. It is all about 'you'. It is all about what we, as students, want to develop and how we can make decisions independently. At the beginning, I liked to ask, 'What should I do?' and 'What is best to choose?', and, of course, friends, colleagues and lecturers gave me much support when I had difficulties. What is the most important, however, and something I have gradually come to understand, is that at the end of the day I have to be the person to listen to my own voice and make my own decisions. This is an ability that is difficult to cultivate when everyone tried to tell you what to do in my undergraduate study in China.

Challenges and transitions

The transition to an English-speaking environment inevitably makes me nervous sometimes, especially when I have to express my ideas in front of many other students. This kind of anxiety passed after one month. In most seminars, my peers are from different countries with different accents, which reduces my anxiety around speaking 'ideal' and 'native' English. I do not force myself to remove my accent much, but encourage myself to express myself confidently and logically. It would be much more difficult to go through these transitions without the support from other students and friends.

The second challenge for me is the logic of English grammar and the need to write in 'academic' English. The former is a matter of how we transition from Chinese grammar and a Chinese way of thinking to thinking in an English way and expressing ourselves in English. This is in everything we do, in writing, listening and speaking. The need to write in 'academic' English is a further challenge: the English used is unlike spoken English and requires more practice, especially when it comes

to the marking criteria. Both of these are real challenges for students if English is not their mother tongue and they need to spend time adapting to both of these changes.

In my case, most of my units are assessed through coursework. Writing several essays in a month is pretty common. I did not master the English-writing logic at the beginning, which made me quite depressed. Luckily, some of my units had formative assignments and the course convenors gave me constructive suggestions to communicate my ideas in an essay. This is incredibly important for international students because not all students are from the same education system or from English-speaking countries. Furthermore, it is inappropriate to assume all students understand fully what plagiarism is or what a proper essay should look like. Having formative assignments to support students to go through this transition is vital.

Put simply, these transitions are tough. I found it useful to make friends and form a 'study-buddy' group to deal with these challenges. Small-group learning in seminars provides many opportunities for me to meet new people. Group work also pushes me to leave my comfort zone and have more ownership in the learning process. If students have some study-buddies and can support each other to go through these transitions, it will make the beginning of student life in the UK more manageable and more positive.

I mostly socialised with those study-buddies who were on my programme and we had monthly dinners to share our happiness and difficulties. In the second semester, I joined the student ambassador team and facilitated university open days, especially for international students. Those incoming students had questions of their own to ask and urged us to share our

own experiences as students at the university. Although most of the questions they asked had the answers on the website, they felt more comfortable hearing it from a current student. The most common questions they asked me were about the structure and workload of my Master's and PhD course, what the difficulties were in completing a degree and also how inclusive the study environment was.

I was quite comfortable communicating with British students in class as they are so polite and helpful, but in comparison to other students, I feel they have a boundary of their friendship circle. One thing I noticed when in my Master's seminars was that students from the same country or with the same language background tended to sit together and this was reflected in group work too. This is hard to break as a student when you do not feel confident communicating in another language, while being in a new environment with the awareness that UK students might have stereotypes towards Chinese students. It might be a hypothesis at the beginning while it might become a fact at the end if people just take it for granted. It is dangerous to assume that Chinese students like to hang out with other Chinese students and that they do not get used to speaking up in class.

However, my course convenor gave a very prompt reminder from the first seminar, telling students to create an inclusive study environment and encouraging them to sit with the students they did not know. This light push from lecturers was useful in breaking the stereotype grouping and we started to learn more about other students from different countries. This is something both professional and academic service teams could do to increase understanding and respect throughout the variety of students in their classes, which would fight

against discrimination issues and tackle stereotypes of different cultural backgrounds. Students start university life with their own assumptions and worldviews, so it is hard to avoid all misunderstanding between international and home students due to rooted stereotypes or previously unpleasant experiences. However, as an international student, I hope that universities can begin to understand better the diversity of all students – international and home – and from there form a firm standpoint in fighting against racism and welcoming all incoming students.

Working on the open day was a valuable experience which gave me a chance to practice my communication skills and reflect on my own experiences. It might be that you do not have time to socialise outside the university, so being able to attend university events and be a volunteer are interesting activities which enrich one's daily life alongside the study experience.

Some final reflections

One-year study, as I did for my Master's programme, is intensive and stressful. If you do not plan ahead, failing one unit or getting stuck on a subject is quote common, especially during the Christmas break. One thing I did not expect was this huge stress to finish a degree in such a short time. Having four essay deadlines and two exams after Christmas was way beyond what I expected. However, the university will not lower the standards in order to pass students. Some international students – and this was to some extent true for me – do not come with an accurate expectation when they arrive at university of what they will do and the challenges they will face all within 12 months.

The Christmas break is a critical point for students: whether they have become accustomed to the UK way of life; whether they have understood the academic requirements in their subjects; and whether they have realised what they might face in the following months. These are all important in order to be successful in the months after Christmas. The international students' experiences in the UK would improve if university support teams help the incoming students to set up accurate expectations.

Where the university is inclusive and diverse, students are supported to fulfil their potential and find out what they can achieve. This is one of the reasons why I chose to continue my study in the UK. Meanwhile, these diversities have also taught me a lesson: it is very important to cultivate the independent ability to make decisions and listen to my own voice among all these possibilities and available choices. There is not a single route or just one way to craft your student experience.

Conclusion

Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China and Director of the University of Oxford China Centre

The post-Brexit environment has created a new context for a longstanding question: what is Britain's place in the world? It is increasingly clear that the higher education sector is an immensely important part of any answer to that question. For well over a century, Britain's universities have been part of its conversation with the world. China has been part of that interaction during much of that period, but rarely as prominently as now.

It is fair to say that British higher education has been responsible for shaping some of the most influential figures in modern Chinese history, whether it was the pioneering sociologist Fei Xiaotong (Fei Hsiao-tung) at the LSE, or the novelist Qian Zhongshu at Oxford. The atmosphere on China's campuses also influenced important British thinkers. Bertrand Russell's lectures at Peking University in 1920-21 helped shape his ideas about the wider world, just as his ideas inspired the young thinkers of the nationalist May Fourth Movement of the era. Joseph Needham's work on *Science and Civilization in China* was inspired by his experiences and academic interactions in World War II-era China. But it was not until the 2000s that the number of Chinese students in the UK really began to take off. This cultural encounter, one of the most important in the world today, is still in formation. As this excellent collection of essays shows, it is one that is entangled in a range of financial, cultural and political issues. The Covid-19 crisis has starkly exposed quite how important overseas students, and Chinese students in particular, have become to a range of British higher

education institutions. All the more important, therefore, to take on board the thoughtful and nuanced views found in this collection.

A message that runs through the whole set of essays is the importance of engagement. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been some shrill voices that seem (often in rather vague terms) to suggest that the only acceptable path for the UK is to cut off as much contact with China as possible. There are worrying signs that some in the US are taking a path that could carelessly destroy decades of carefully built-up academic contact. A breakdown in academic relations between the UK and China would be damaging to both sides. For the UK, the economic impact on higher education would be real, but in the long-term, it would also destroy one of the most powerful vehicles that we have to project values of open-minded, transparent engagement with knowledge, regardless of where it leads. The essays by Simon Marginson and Vivienne Stern make this point extremely well. For China, meanwhile, there is an obvious loss: access to one of the world's leading academic environments. That should be borne in mind when, as happens too often, voices from China's establishment imply that they can easily take their students elsewhere. The number of first-tier academic environments in the world is not that large. Chinese access to the higher education sector in the UK is welcome, but it is not a right, nor simply a consumer good to be accepted or rejected at will. Salvatore Babones's fascinating essay on Australia's experience shows where diversification is possible, and where it is harder. Still, Britain has lessons to learn to make sure that the Chinese students who do make it through the door are given an experience that really will stay with them as a positive memory for life. The pieces by Sylvie

Lomer and Jenna Mittelmeier, Riddi Viswanathan, and Kathy Daniels make a thoughtful case that Chinese students must be understood – and welcomed – in a context that allows the bridge from a very different cultural context to be crossed more easily and sensitively. An 'us and them' mentality needs to be broken down on both sides.

Yet sensitivity should not overshadow the fact that the UK higher education sector is different from the Chinese one, in all sorts of ways. In particular, it is vitally important in the UK that the Humanities and Social Sciences maintain a strong, and unequivocal commitment to free enquiry, particularly when it comes to the study of China itself. There is an irony that, at least for now, the least free place in the world to study China is – China. Kerry Brown's nuanced essay puts its finger on the problem for UK institutions dealing with the PRC, in that – at least in some cases – the problem is not so much direct Chinese influence as self-censorship that prevents academics or students speaking frankly about China because of fears of the consequences. As he rightly says, 'It's complicated', not least because in the 2020s, China is not a monolith mostly located elsewhere (as the USSR was), but a country that is home for colleagues, students, friends and, increasingly, families. Simon Marginson's essay points out that Chinese scientists do not just benefit China; they are a vital part of the human capital of the UK (and plenty of other western countries). Yet there is no doubt that in a range of areas, in particular criticism of the Chinese system of government and its actions overseas, the Chinese Government is becoming increasingly confrontational. This throws down an important challenge to the UK sector, making the role of the UK as a 'third space' (neither China nor the US) particularly important. Our freedom of academic debate must

be a point of pride, not an embarrassment to be wished away.

The Chinese recognise this too, even if they will not always articulate it. There is a reason that there is such a large flow of Chinese students to the west, and to the UK in particular, which is likely to rise again after the Covid-19 pandemic has been controlled. The UK will continue to be an attractive place for Chinese students for many years to come. Yunyan Li's essay, which outlines the achievements of, as well as the challenges facing such students, makes this point very well. We must welcome students from China and work harder to make sure that they feel that welcome in reality and not just in words. But we must also do so in terms that make it clear there are some values central to our sector and our society – in particular, liberal values of open, transparent research and teaching, with the freedom to debate and to ask awkward questions of the powerful – that we will not compromise. And there's a good, practical reason to do so: in the end, that is the only way to develop a relationship with China that is based not on short-term transaction, but long-term respect.

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This collection provides an overview of the opportunities and challenges faced by higher education institutions engaging with China.

Among the issues considered are the importance of UK-China scientific research, the recruitment and integration of Chinese students, and self-censorship.

The ten different contributors also cover the importance of Chinese students to Australia and the student experience of Chinese nationals in the UK.