



CHINA

The coming 'China crisis' in global higher education

Philip G Altbach 06 April 2019

Universities in major countries have come to depend on Chinese students for their increasingly important international student enrolments – and are to some extent dependent on these students to balance budgets and, in certain cases, to fill empty seats.

Significant numbers of post-docs, necessary to staff research laboratories and sometimes to engage in teaching, also come from China.

For a range of reasons, China's global higher education role is about to change significantly – with implications for the rest of the world.

One-third of the 1.1 million international students in the United States are from China – similar proportions are found in such major receiving countries as Australia (38%) and the United Kingdom (41% of non-European Union students). This has created an unsustainable situation of overdependence.

There are also major challenges relating to China's Confucius Institutes and Chinese participation in research in several host countries, among others.

In short, there are a number of key points of conflict and crisis that will affect China's higher education relations with important partners. Not only does China have the world's largest enrolments, it is also by far the biggest exporter of students, with more than 600,000 studying abroad in 2017. Around 35% of those were graduate and professional students.

For the first time, China is itself active in international higher education. More than 440,000 students from abroad, the large majority from other Asian countries, are studying in China. The multibillion dollar 'Belt and Road Initiative' has a significant higher education component.

The generally sunny relationships between China and the major receiving countries are already beginning to undergo a dramatic and highly negative set of changes. Here is a brief summary of key points that combine to show that a crisis is pending.

Transformations in China

Within China, several important transformations are taking place. Demographic trends, combined with the dramatic expansion of China's higher education system, mean that there will be greater opportunities for study in the country.

Of specific importance for geographically mobile students, there is more access to China's best universities as billions have been spent upgrading the top 100 or more Chinese universities.

At the same time, there are significant new restrictions on academic freedom and a 'shrinking' of intellectual space in China. Ideology has reclaimed a more central place in academic life, and access to information, never fully available, is better monitored and controlled with new technologies.

These developments may push in opposite directions. Some students may find fewer reasons to study abroad to obtain access to high-quality university courses, while tightened censorship may push some to leave.

Also, within China, academic collaboration arrangements with foreign universities are slowing. Last summer, 234, or one-fifth, of its international university partnerships were closed, including more than 25 with American institutions – many of which were inactive anyway.

Finally, the idea of 'liberal education', for a while popular in elite universities, has been called into question. In short, for both internal political reasons and as a reaction to foreign criticism, especially from the United States, China is likely to become less open to international collaboration with top-tier universities.

Increasing criticism of China

China has come under increasing criticism and pressure from abroad – criticism that is likely to lead to restrictions from some countries and probable reactions from China itself.

The United States, for example, has tightened rules for Chinese visa holders in some STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has warned of academic vulnerabilities to Chinese espionage and the Trump administration has re-established a committee to monitor the involvement of foreigners (mainly Chinese) in classified research.

A report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute has warned that collaborations between academic scientists in some Western institutions and People's Liberation Army scientists are providing research findings on artificial intelligence and other areas to "rival militaries".

A British study has also warned of inappropriate research collaboration with China.

And US President Donald Trump has called Chinese students and academics in the United

States “spies” – hardly encouraging for scientific cooperation.

Confucius Institutes, which have been established at more than 100 American universities and number more than 500 worldwide, have come under heavy criticism recently. A report by US-China experts has recommended more transparency in the contracts between Hanban, the Chinese agency managing the Confucius Institutes, and American universities.

A half-dozen institutes have been closed recently and more are under review. What started out as an effort to popularise Chinese culture and teach Chinese language on foreign campuses, while clearly part of China’s soft power initiatives, is now seen by some as a potentially dangerous foreign agency on campuses.

China’s efforts to impose censorship on Western academic journals in China has received widespread publicity and condemnation in the West. Pressure on the prestigious *China Quarterly* and its publisher, Cambridge University Press, to censor 300 online articles resulted in their removal – only to be restored after widespread criticism among Western academics.

Multinational publisher Springer Nature censors some of its content and prevents its distribution in China as a result of Chinese regulations.

These policies, and controversies, have contributed to a negative image of China.

The inevitable implications

As with the current trade war between China and the United States, where China imposed retaliatory tariffs on US products – and cleverly targeted them toward the states that supported President Trump – China will inevitably react against the anti-China rhetoric and actions currently evident in many Western countries.

The nature of such reactions is not clear, but Chinese authorities may try to curtail outward student mobility to some extent – through specific policies, ‘guidance’ from the government and media and financial pressure, such as cutting back on the China Scholarship Council and the other rather limited scholarship programmes offered, tinkering with the local job market for returning graduates and other means.

While very difficult to predict, it is quite likely that the numbers of Chinese students going abroad to several of the key receiving countries will slow or even decline.

Doctoral student numbers to the United States have significantly slowed already and while the overall number of Chinese students has slightly increased, the number of newly enrolled doctoral students has declined, a likely forerunner of future trends.

Mobility trends largely unrelated to the political situation will also create serious problems. For example, the less prestigious colleges and universities will see significant declines as a smaller number of Chinese students compete for places in top institutions – or choose to

remain at home.

In the United States, there is already a shift of Chinese students away from colleges and universities in the middle of the country, places perceived as 'pro Trump' and perhaps less friendly to outsiders.

It is quite possible that China will tighten regulations relating to foreign branch campuses operating in China or even make it impossible for them to function at the same time that the Trump administration is threatening to tighten regulations from the US side. Similar restrictions are likely to be placed on foreign research centres operating in China.

While it is impossible to predict exactly the future of China's higher education relations with the rest of the world, it is clear that, at least for the countries that have had the closest academic relations with China and have received the large majority of Chinese students, there will be significant negative developments.

For those countries and institutions that have come to rely on Chinese students to fill classroom seats and provide needed income, these developments will create serious problems.

Global scientific relations with an emerging scientific power will be disrupted. On the other hand, countries working with China on its Belt and Road Initiative are likely to see an increase in cooperation and involvement.

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