



# At what cost?

Chinese funding and academic freedom in Europe

June 2023

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**INDEX**  
ON  
**CENSORSHIP**  
A VOICE FOR THE PERSECUTED



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# Introduction

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES HAVE become increasingly international over the last decade, fostering relationships with researchers, institutions, private companies, and students around the world. While academic internationalisation provides many opportunities, it also presents challenges. “European academia must recognise that vulnerability to authoritarian and illiberal interference is an undeniable reality in the contemporary context of globalised knowledge production,” the European Commission said in a working document published last year.<sup>01</sup> “Risks encountered in this context crystallise as threats to the principles of academic freedom and integrity.”

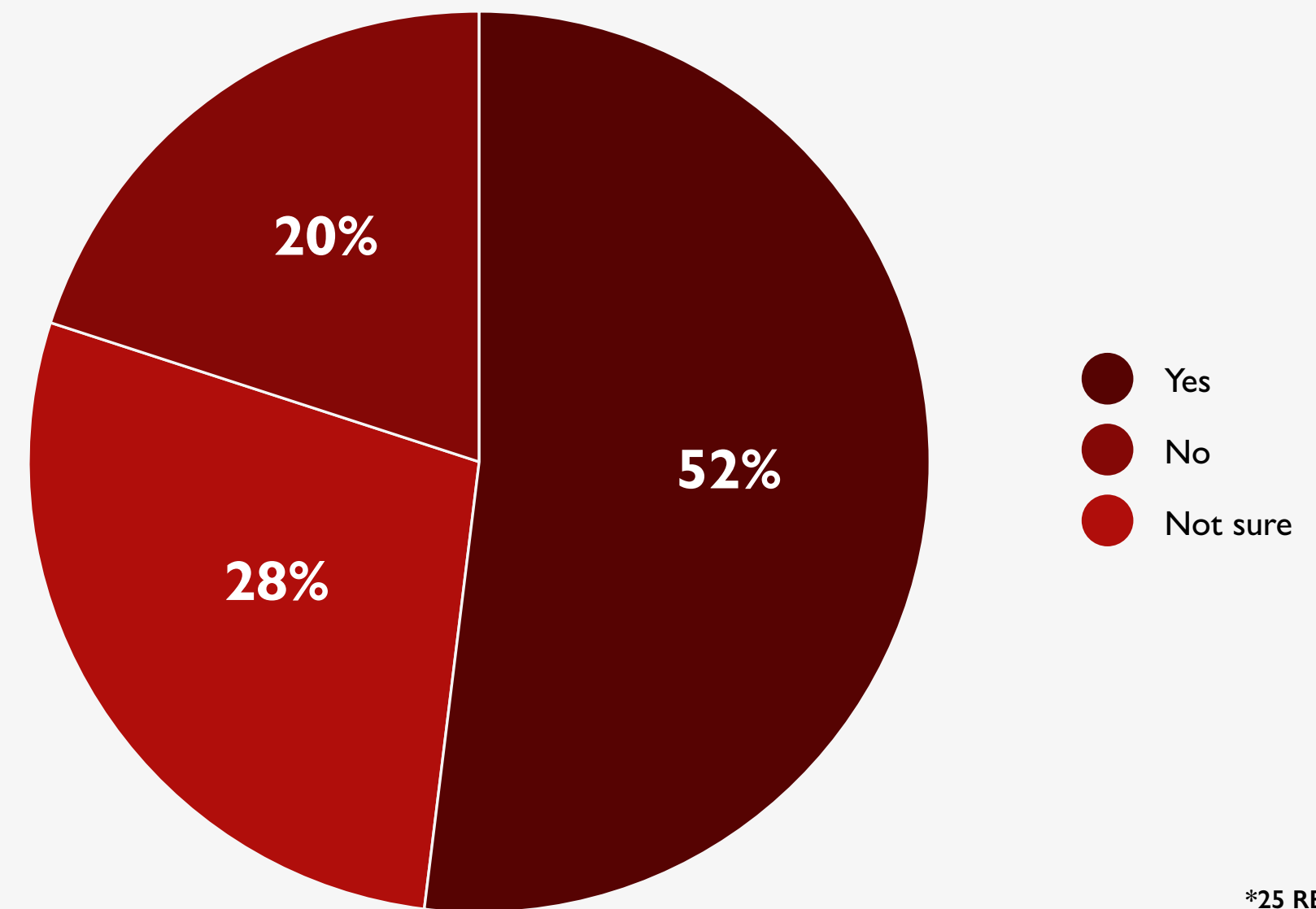
The Commission didn’t single out threats from any one country, but its document was published amid heightened concerns about interference from China. When asked whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses a threat to academic freedom in Europe, only 20% of academics recently surveyed by Index

on Censorship said “no”.<sup>02</sup> Over half (52%) said they believe that the CCP did pose a threat. “There is limited direct intervention but there is widespread self-censorship,” one survey respondent from the UK explained. The issue of self-censorship was independently raised by 20% of survey respondents, with several people citing concerns that visa applications for research trips could be denied or access to research funding could be withheld if applicants did not toe the line.

“We of course have concerns how institutional links with China [impacts] academic freedom, but this issue cannot be solved unless you recognise the big elephant in the room which is the presence of business universities that need to make money,” Eva Seiwert of the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg told Index.<sup>03</sup>

In the years following the 2008 economic crisis, European universities underwent significant budget cuts. In Ireland, funding to third-level institutions was cut by around

1 | In your personal opinion, do you think that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses a threat to academic freedom in Europe?\*



\*25 RESPONSES

01: Tackling R&I foreign interference (Staff working document), Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (European Commission) (2022). Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/eu-law-and-publications/publication-detail/-/publication/3faf52e8-79a2-11ec-9136-01aa75ed71a1> [Accessed 5 June 2023]

02: The survey of academics was carried out by Index on Censorship between February and May 2023. The survey was sent to universities in the EU and UK. There were twenty-five respondents from nine countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.) They represented a range of disciplines including but not limited to: history, politics, international relations, computer science, and sociology.

03: Seiwert, E. Interview with Index (23 February 2023).

I'm not asked any more to develop courses to fill an educational gap or for the public good, rather only to get fee income in-

32%.<sup>04</sup> Spanish universities saw their research budgets cut in half.<sup>05</sup> And Greek universities were pushed to the point of collapse as a result of budget cuts.<sup>06</sup>

“At my university, I'm not asked any more to develop courses to fill an educational gap

or for the public good, rather only to get fee income in,” Luke Martell of the University of Sussex wrote in 2013.<sup>07</sup> Three years previously, the UK government announced that it would no longer fund most teaching at universities.<sup>08</sup>

Last year the European University Association warned that, although universities expect the core national public funding to remain stable in nominal terms, the funds “may be affected by growing inflation” and therefore “prove insufficient to cover the rising costs of higher education”.<sup>09</sup>

At the same time, despite increased restrictions to academic freedom, China has put education at the heart of its economic and social policies and it has been subject to heavy investment as a result.<sup>10</sup> According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), tertiary education in China experienced a “huge expansion” in

the 21st century, with international mobility and cooperation having been “promoted dramatically”.<sup>11</sup>

In 2015 a state-led industrial policy, “Made in China 2025”, was launched aimed at making China a dominant power in global high-tech manufacturing, including in industries such as new advanced information technology, automated machine tools, and robotics.<sup>12</sup> Universities around the world have been identified as key partners to help realise this ambitious plan.<sup>13</sup>

To what extent is Chinese money being used to fund European universities?<sup>14</sup> To what extent is it eroding academic freedom in the process? This report will try to address these questions by looking at funding from Chinese companies, Chinese international students, and the protections the EU and UK have in place to prevent undue interference. ✘



04: Loughlin, E. (2016) Foreign student increase to boost Irish colleges, Irish Examiner (18 January). Available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20376724.html> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

05: Mendoza, S.P & Moraga, C. (2014) El Gobierno ha recortado en dos años a las universidades más de la mitad del presupuesto en investigación, eldiario.es (5 March). Available at: [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/i-d-i-universidades-gobierno-pp-psoe\\_1\\_4998644.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/i-d-i-universidades-gobierno-pp-psoe_1_4998644.html) [Accessed 5 June 2023].

06: Smith, H. (2013) Austerity measures push Greek universities to point of collapse, The Guardian (25 September). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/austerity-measures-push-greek-universities-collapse> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

07: Martell, L. (2013) The marketisation of our universities: Economic criteria get precedence over what's good in human terms, LSE (29 November). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-marketisation-of-our-universities/> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

08: Stratton, A. (2010) University funding to be cut before increase in tuition fees, The Guardian (19 December). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/dec/19/university-funding-cut-tuition-fees> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

09: Bennetot Pruvot, E; Bunescu, L & Estermann, T. (2022) Public Funding Observatory 2021/2022. Part 1: Sector perspectives on funding, European University Association (February). Available at: [https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/2022%20public%20funding%20observatory\\_part%201%20final.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/2022%20public%20funding%20observatory_part%201%20final.pdf) [Accessed 5 June 2023].

10: Education in China: A Snapshot, OECD (2016). Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/china/Education-in-China-a-snapshot.pdf> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

11: Ibid.

12: Kennedy, S. (2015) Made in China 2025, Center for Strategic and International Studies (1 June). Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/made-china-2025> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

13: Ibid.

14: For the purposes of this report, Index defines “Europe” as the European Union and the United Kingdom.



# Funding from companies

“OUR UNIVERSITIES ARE afflicted by an endemic shortage of funds and the fact that [funding] comes from companies offers the possibility of carrying out projects that wouldn’t otherwise be carried out,” Nicola Casarini of the Italian think-tank Istituto Affari Internazionali said in 2021.<sup>15</sup> “The downside is that it is not charity: in return, China wants technology and know-how without too many checks.”

Huawei, a technology company that is among China’s best-known exports, has said it sees universities as “lighthouses” for its industry. In 2021 alone, it invested approximately £322 million (US \$400 million) in university collaborations around the world.<sup>16</sup>

While some states – including the UK, Sweden, and Denmark – have blocked or limited Huawei’s involvement in sensitive infrastructure projects due to national security concerns, European universities have continued to work with and accept funding from the company.<sup>17</sup> In the UK, Oxford University appears to be unique in that it has vowed to no longer pursue funding opportunities with Huawei.<sup>18</sup>

Between 2017 and 2021, Imperial College London received nearly £18.4 million in research funding from Chinese companies or individuals.<sup>19</sup> Sixteen of the forty projects were funded by Huawei, while a number of other donors were Chinese state companies. The

university received a further £10.2 in donations from Chinese sources, some of which was also from Huawei.<sup>20</sup>

The University of Edinburgh is also a major recipient of Huawei funds. Since 2020, the university’s School of Informatics and School of Engineering has received approximately £15 million in research grants and funding from Huawei. The largest and most recent instalment – £7.5 million – came in February 2023.<sup>21</sup> Both universities have separately defended the funding, saying that the collaborations underwent rigorous due diligence processes, however neither provided details about what their checks involved.<sup>22</sup>

“By increasing dependency on finance

from a country that has been declared a national security threat by governments across the West, universities are threatening their very future,” Scottish MP Stewart McDonald told Index.<sup>23</sup> “We cannot talk about Huawei as if it is a legitimate source of income for Scotland’s education sector - to do so would amount to a Faustian pact with the Chinese Communist Party.”

The UK’s National Cyber Security Centre has advised academics to recognise the “significant risk” of over-dependence on a single source of funding, “whether that is from a single organisation or from a single nation”.<sup>24</sup> It said that over-dependence creates an opportunity for funders to exercise →

15: Foschini, G; Vitale, G. (2021) La Cina all’assalto degli atenei italiani. I Servizi in allarme, la Repubblica (19 December). Available at: [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2021/12/19/news/cina\\_italia\\_universita\\_-330732008/](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2021/12/19/news/cina_italia_universita_-330732008/) [Accessed 5 June 2023].

16: Huawei: Industry-Academia Collabs Key to “Top Challenges” and Talent Cultivation, [Huawei.com](https://www.huawei.com/it/news/2022/5/the-summit-2022) (31 May 2022). Available at: <https://www.huawei.com/it/news/2022/5/the-summit-2022> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

17: Noyan, O. (2021) EU countries keep different approaches to Huawei on 5G rollout, Euractiv (19 May). Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/eu-countries-keep-different-approaches-to-huawei-on-5g-rollout/> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

18: MacAskill, A. (2019) Oxford University suspends funding from China’s Huawei, Reuters (17 January). Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uk-huawei-oxford-idUSKCN1PB2DS> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

19: Research funding from Chinese companies and institutions, 2017/18 - 2020/21, Imperial College London. Available at: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/secretariat/public/information-governance/Funding-from-Chinese-companies-and-institutions-IMPFOI-23-170.pdf> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

20: Ibid.

21: University of Edinburgh, Response to freedom of information request (10 April 2023). Available at: [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/956911/response/2283674/attach/3/Response%20and%20Enclosure%20FOI2023%2000168.pdf?cookie\\_passthrough=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/956911/response/2283674/attach/3/Response%20and%20Enclosure%20FOI2023%2000168.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1) [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

22: Imperial College London in email to Index; Kemp, K. (2018) Edinburgh University defends Huawei relationship, [Insider.co.uk](https://www.insider.co.uk/news/huawei-technologies-uk-edinburgh-university-13710211) (10 December 2018). Available at: <https://www.insider.co.uk/news/huawei-technologies-uk-edinburgh-university-13710211> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

23: McDonald, S. in email to Index (4 May 2023)

24: Trusted Research: Guidance for academics. CPNI: Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure, National Cyber Security Centre. Available at: <https://www.npsa.gov.uk/system/files/Trusted%20Research%20Guidance%20for%20Academia.pdf> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

“inappropriate leverage” including by “pressurising an organisation where it seeks to protect freedom of speech or even academic freedom”.<sup>25</sup>

The effect on academic freedom is something that Frank van Harmelen of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam said was at the forefront of his mind when he was setting up DREAMS Lab, a collaboration between Huawei, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and the University of Amsterdam. His project, which has received more than £3 million (€3.5 million) in funding from Huawei, is focused on developing next generation search technology using artificial intelligence.<sup>26</sup>

Van Harmelen said that collaborating with large multinational companies is a “routine” thing for him and his colleagues. “AI is one of those academic fields where there is a very intense dynamic between commercial and

academic research,” he said. But he warned that universities should not become overly reliant on that source of funding.<sup>27</sup> He also said that guardrails were written into the DREAMS Lab in order to limit Huawei’s access to the universities’ data, networks, and servers.

Concerns about the potential for research conducted at European universities to be used by the Chinese military have abounded in the media.<sup>28</sup> Under the CCP’s “military-civil fusion policy”, introduced in 2017, all new technologies developed by China’s civilian sector – including technology companies and universities – must be made available to the Chinese military.<sup>29</sup>

Asked about whether he has concerns about his research having such an application, van Harmelen said that every piece of computer science research, regardless of the funder or researcher, is dual use. “Anybody who tells you

differently is either lying to you or themselves, or both,” he said. “This is the curse of our life in computer science.”<sup>30</sup>

Jo Smith Finley of Newcastle University told Index that she believes that universities’ potential collaboration with Chinese companies around artificial intelligence rings a “massive alarm bell”.<sup>31</sup> She pointed out that such technologies have many other malign applications beyond just the military. “AI technology and research is used for all kinds of nefarious and hideous surveillance purposes in Xinjiang and beyond,” she said.

Van Harmelen said that the moral and ethical implications of their collaboration with Huawei is a “much trickier discussion” than the academic freedom one. “I would find it very surprising if Huawei products were not involved in the Uyghur region. That would be naïve,” he told Index. “If they [asked] us to

work on face recognition, I think we would have said ‘no thank you’”.<sup>32</sup>

Huawei is not the only Chinese company funding European universities but it seems to be by far the most visible and most generous donor. Many other companies, particularly those in the technology and energy sectors, have provided funds to European universities.<sup>33</sup>

In 2021, Tim Loughton MP commended the University of Manchester for having cancelled their agreement with the state-owned China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC) after warnings that it had supplied the tech platforms and apps used by Beijing’s security forces in the mass surveillance of the Uyghurs.<sup>34</sup> “We need to do more to make sure we are not aiding and abetting these parts of the Chinese regime,” he told the House of Commons. ✘

25: Ibid.

26: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

27: Ibid.

28: Devlin, H. (2022) Imperial College to shut joint research ventures with Chinese defence firms, The Guardian (11 September 2022). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/11/imperial-college-to-shut-joint-research-ventures-with-chinese-defence-firms> [Accessed 5 June 2023].

29: Xinhua (2018) Xi visits BeiDou-3 launch site, extends festival greetings to all servicemen, The State Council Information Office: The People’s Republic of China (13 February 2018). Available at: [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2018-02/13/content\\_50506398.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2018-02/13/content_50506398.htm) [Accessed 5 June 2023].

30: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

31: Smith Finley, J. in interview with Index (30 March 2023)

32: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

33: For example: Research funding from Chinese companies and institutions, 2017/18 - 2020/21, Imperial College London. Available at: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/secretariat/public-information-governance/Funding-from-Chinese-companies-and-institutions-IMPFOI-23-170.pdf> [Accessed 5 June 2023].  
<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/secretariat/public-information-governance/Funding-from-Chinese-companies-and-institutions-IMPFOI-23-170.pdf>

34: Loughton, T. (2021) Human Rights: Xinjiang, Hansard (22 April) Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-04-22/debates/6FA4F300-D244-443E-A48C-57378876DE54/HumanRightsXinjiang?highlight=artificial%20intelligence%20university#contribution-E385ABF1-93D7-4292-842E-6D0AEB8EDB16> [Accessed 6 June 2023]

# Funding from tuition fees

SINCE 2008, DENMARK, Finland and Sweden have introduced tuition fees for international (non-EU/EEA) students, while Belgium, Ireland, the UK, and the Netherlands have increased the fees for international students. The fee that international students are charged varies from university to university, but British and Irish universities charge as much as double that of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe.<sup>35</sup>

The UK has long had the lowest share of public funding in tertiary education among OECD countries, with this figure at 24% (2019) compared to the OECD average of around 66%.<sup>36</sup> The lack of public funding means that the UK is particularly dependent on the significant funding brought in by

international students' fees. In 2022, the Department of Education "estimated that international students contributed some £17 billion to GDP."<sup>37</sup>

Last year, Chinese students accounted for 30% of all international students in the UK, more than from any other country.<sup>38</sup> The UK's reliance on Chinese international students is evidenced by the fact that, during the pandemic, dozens of flights were chartered in order to bring students from China to the UK.<sup>39</sup>

In the UK, Scotland has the highest proportion of Chinese international students among its student population. "It is clear to see examples of where Scotland's education sector is more vulnerable to Chinese influence than anywhere else in the UK," Stewart McDonald

told Index.<sup>40</sup>

Last year, Chinese international students provided the University of Edinburgh with 13.25% of its total income or £172 million in tuition fees.<sup>41</sup> By comparison, the University of Leiden in the Netherlands received just 9% of its income from domestic and international tuition fees combined.<sup>42</sup> The University of Edinburgh identified "over-reliance on sources of international student income, research funding, and partnerships" as a potential threat to the "overall reputational and financial health of the institution."<sup>43</sup> It did not mention the potential threat to academic freedom.

Several academics interviewed by Index cited concerns that their universities are prioritising the protection of their reputations over the

protection of academic freedom. Ge Chen of Durham University told Index on Censorship that universities put a lot of stock in the annual rankings, which do not appear to take academic freedom into account. "The suppression of academic freedom is completely irrelevant, as long as the commercial marketing is successful. And all UK universities and law schools take the ranking [seriously]," he said.<sup>44</sup>

Jo Smith Finley of Newcastle University, who was sanctioned by the CCP in 2021 for speaking out about the Uyghur genocide, believes the overreliance on the income generated from Chinese international students is the "single most pressing" problem facing British universities. "[I]f you are heavily reliant on tuition fee income from Chinese →

35: International medical students at the University of Amsterdam can expect to pay €23,430 (£20,391) per year, but up to £45,420 at King's College London and up to €59,000 (£51,348) at University College Dublin

36: Spending on tertiary education (indicator), OECD (2023). Available at: <https://data.oecd.org/eduresource/spending-on-tertiary-education.htm> [Accessed on 5 June 2023].

37: House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2022), Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22593/documents/166272/default/> [Accessed on 6 June 2023]

38: Includes Hong Kong and Macau. 'Where do HE students come from?', HESA (31 January 2023). Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> [Accessed on 5 June 2023]

39: Hogan, S. (2022) INTO runs UK charter flights for Chinese students, The Pie News (30 September 2022). Available at: <https://thepienews.com/news/into-charter-flight-chinese-students/> [Accessed on 5 June 2023]; Moriarty, G. (2020) Queen's University charters flights to bring Chinese students to Belfast, The Irish Times (4 October 2020) Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/queen-s-university-charters-flights-to-bring-chinese-students-to-belfast-1.4371794> [Accessed on 6 June 2023]

40: McDonald, S (2023) in email to Index (4 May)

41: University of Edinburgh, Response to freedom of information request (10 April 2023). Available at: [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/956911/response/2283674/attach/3/Response%20and%20Enclosure%20FOI2023%2000168.pdf?cookie\\_passthrough=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/956911/response/2283674/attach/3/Response%20and%20Enclosure%20FOI2023%2000168.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1) [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

42: Universiteit Leiden (2021), Feiten en cijfers. Available at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/over-ons/feiten-en-cijfers> [Accessed on 5 June 2023].

43: Annual Report and Accounts for the Year to 31 July 2022, The University of Edinburgh (2022) - Available at: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/202207\\_uoe\\_annual\\_accounts\\_2022\\_20.pdf](https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/202207_uoe_annual_accounts_2022_20.pdf) [Accessed on 5 June 2023].

44: Response to survey conducted by Index on Censorship



→ international students, then you don't want to do anything or say anything that could upset Chinese students or the Chinese government," she told Index.<sup>45</sup>

She believes that universities are censoring themselves and their staff in an effort to protect the flow of funding from China. "The universities are bending over backwards not to say or do anything to upset the Chinese government or the Chinese international students," she said.

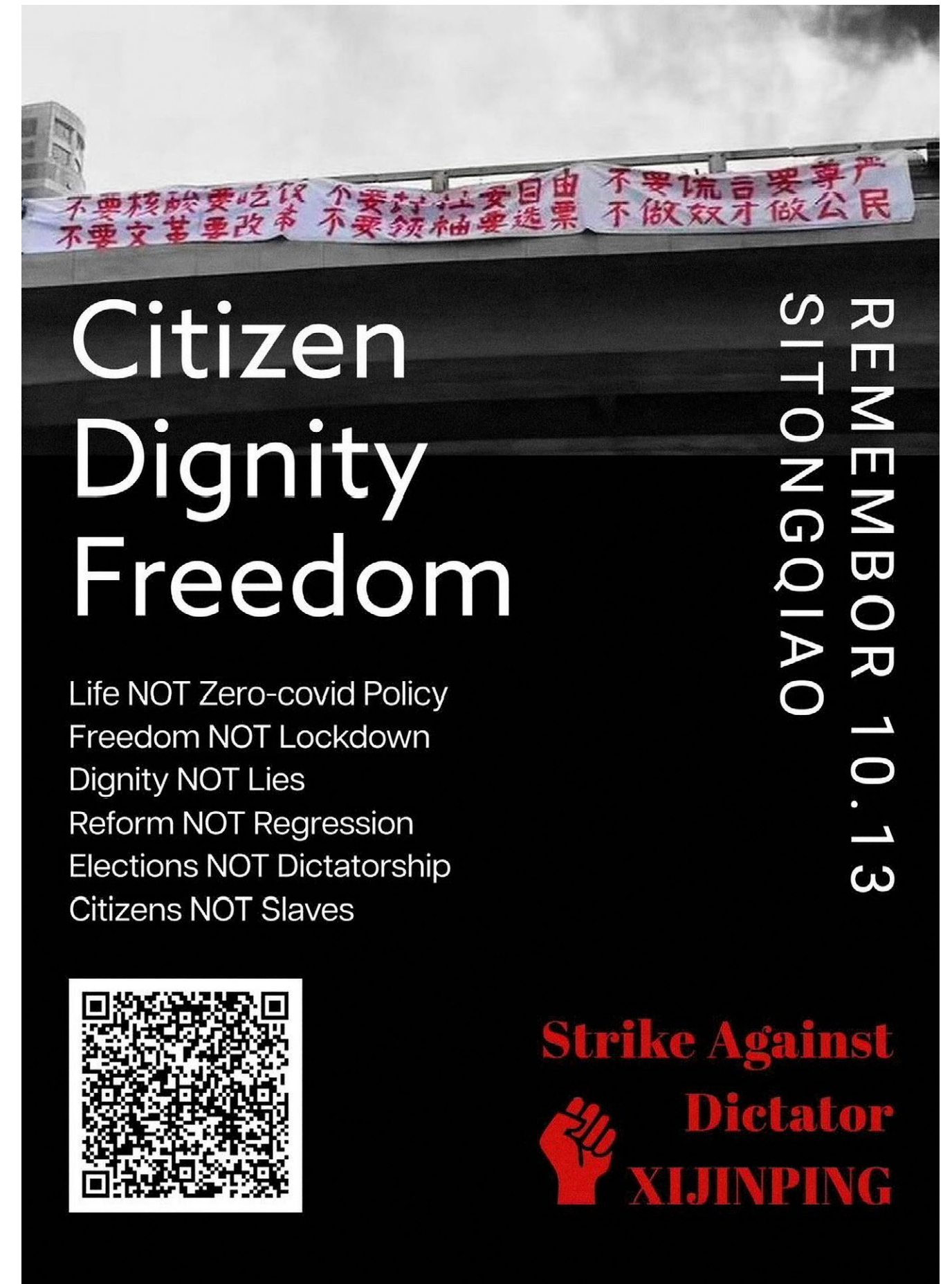
Following the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest that took place last October, ethnic Chinese university staff and students around the world expressed their support for the "disappeared" lone protestor. In Newcastle University, Smith Finley said that some of her Chinese colleagues put up protest posters in the corridor of their department reading "Citizen, Dignity, Freedom". But, she said, the posters were removed after only a few days. She was furious when she heard that the posters had been brought to the School's office, "most of them in tatters – torn up – by a Chinese student, a CCP loyalist" she said.

Her Chinese colleagues put the posters back up again. "But one day I came out of my office, and I glanced to see if the posters were

there, and they were gone again," she told Index. When she found a Chinese international student with the posters still in his hands, she said she challenged him about what he was doing, and an altercation ensued that attracted the attention of her line manager.

"[My colleagues] have a right to put a poster up and if [the student] wants to oppose what they are saying then he can put his own poster up next to that poster. This is freedom of speech," she said. "But I had the keen impression that the attitude of [management] was that I was basically shouting at a student who paid loads of money in fees, and I was thereby negatively impacting his student experience," she said. "On this occasion, the core tenet of academic freedom seemed unimportant to them."<sup>46</sup>

While UK universities, in particular, appear to be embracing Chinese international students, the British government appears to be increasingly concerned about their participation in academic research, especially in the areas of science and technology. Last year a record 1,104 scientists and postgraduate students, many of whom were Chinese, had their applications to study in the UK rejected on national security grounds.<sup>47</sup> ✘



RIGHT: Posters supporting the Sitong Bridge protests like this one were torn up and removed from walls at Newcastle University in late 2022

45: Smith Finley, J. in interview with Index (30 March 2023)

46: Ibid.

47: Devlin, H. (2023) 1,100 scientists and students barred from UK amid China crackdown, The Guardian (15 March). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/15/1100-scientists-and-students-barred-from-uk-amid-china-crackdown> [Accessed on 5 June 2023].



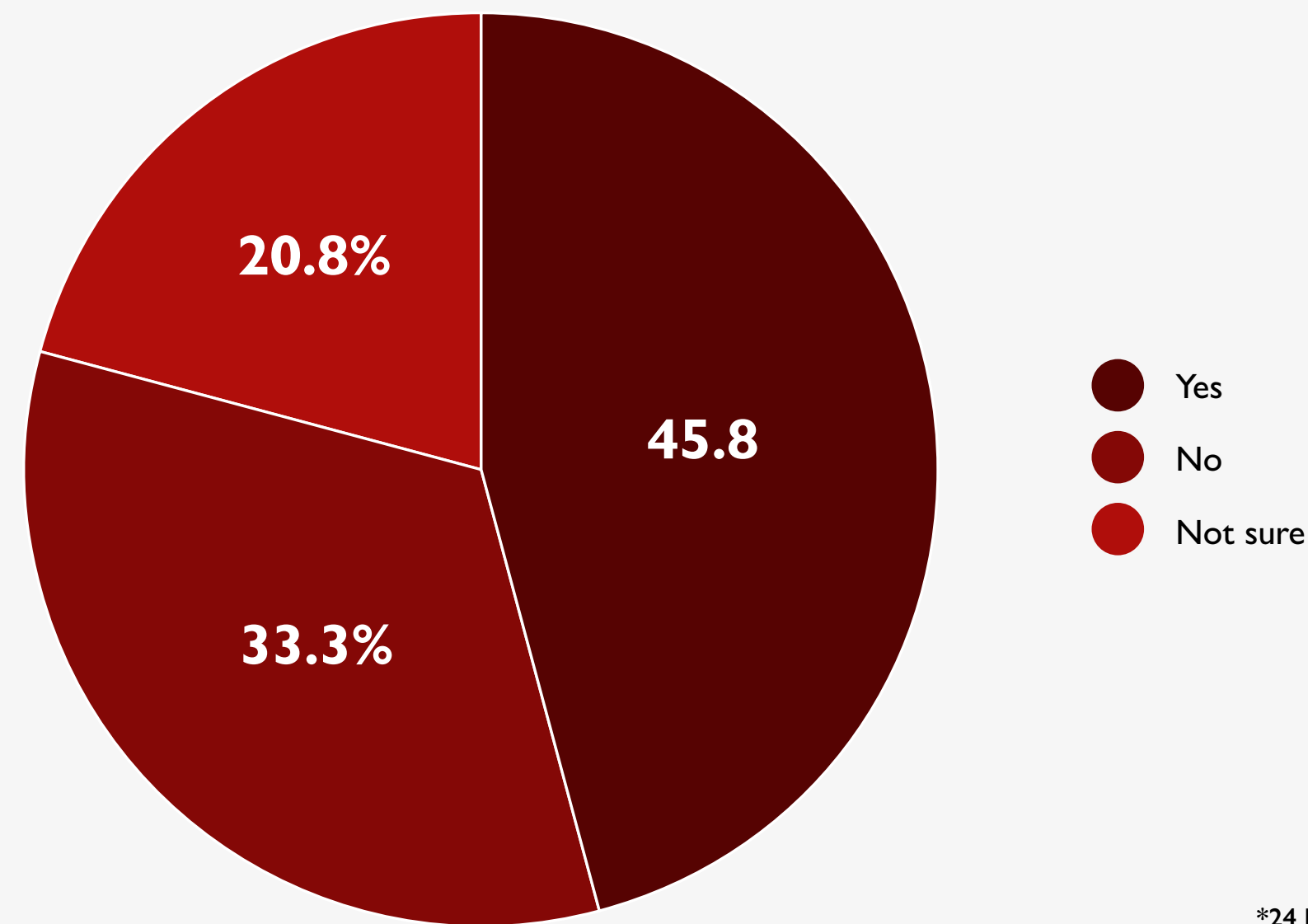
# Protecting academic freedom

JUST 45.8% OF academics surveyed by Index said they believed that their universities have sufficient safeguards in place to protect academic freedom from undue interference arising from links to authoritarian countries.

“Universities are certainly not doing enough,” Andrew Chubb of Lancaster University told Index.<sup>48</sup> He believes that most academic staff aren’t empowered to protect academic freedom in the way they should be. “We should be involved in the governance of the institution but it has been separated out to this managerial class so that you are either in the managerial stream or in the teaching and research stream.”<sup>49</sup>

Junior staff members feel particularly disempowered to speak up. “They can’t afford to, they have little job security and their promotion prospects and everything will be affected if they are seen to be making trouble,” Chris Hughes of London School of Economics told Index. “People should be positively encouraged and rewarded for raising the red flag or blowing the whistle, not the other way

2 | Do you believe that there are sufficient safeguards in place at your university to protect academic freedom from undue interference arising from links to authoritarian countries?\*



\*24 RESPONSES

They have little job security and their promotion prospects will be affected if they are seen to be making trouble

around. But this requires real governance change.”<sup>50</sup>

Many academics who spoke to Index raised the topic of codes of ethics and of conduct as a potential means to bring about such change. “[I]t is important that universities – as is the case for other organisations – ensure transparency and alignment with their code of ethics,” Michael Gaebel of the European University Association told Index.<sup>51</sup>

But several academics said there was a →

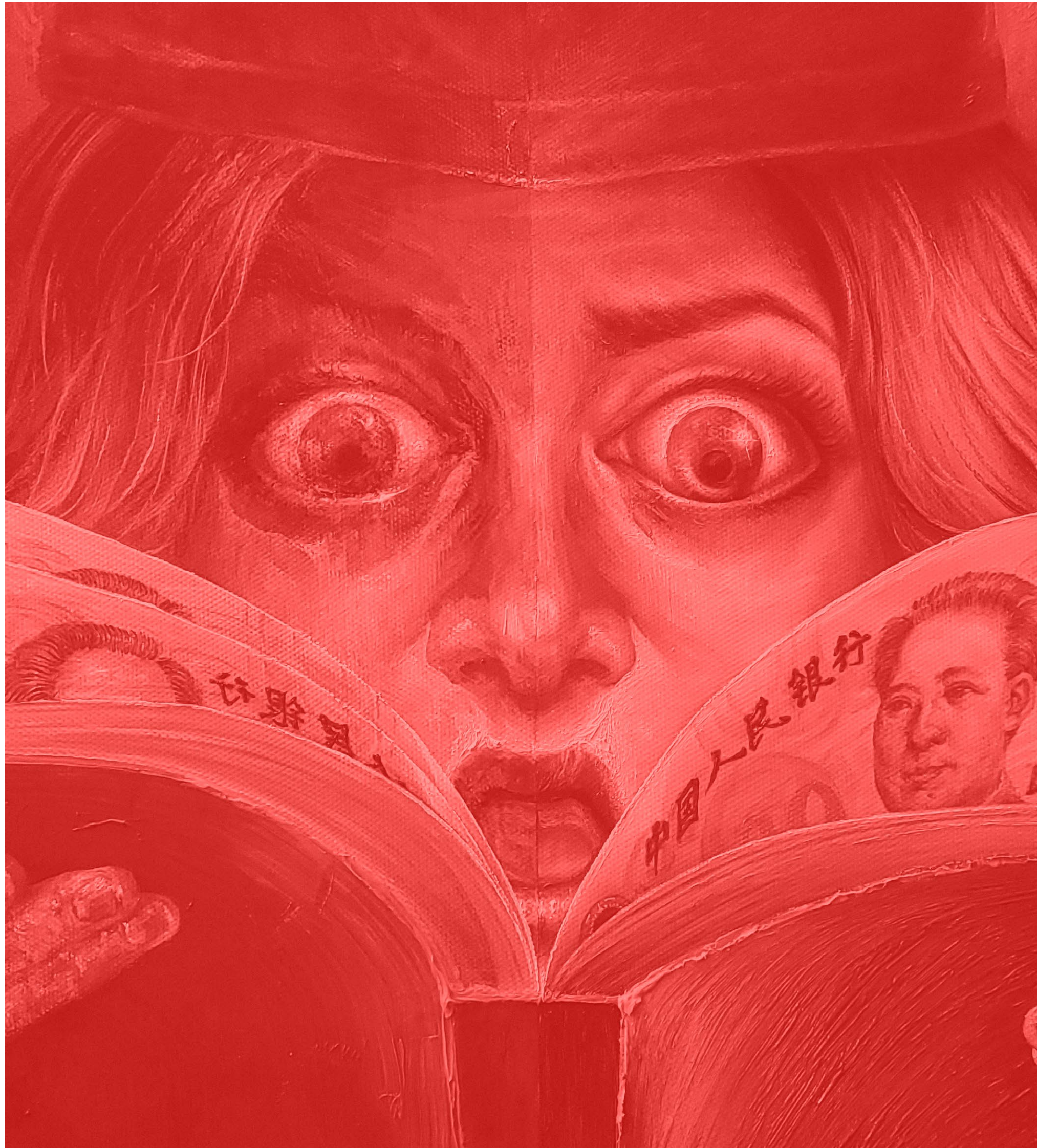
48: Chubb, A. in interview with Index (16 February 2023)

49: Ibid.

50: Hughes, C. in interview with Index (16 February 2023)

51: Gaebel, M. via email to Index (17 May 2023)





→ lack of understanding around the application of codes of conduct in particular. “In Germany we have a few codes of conduct, but no-one knows how to apply them,” Alexandra Kaiser of the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg told Index.<sup>52</sup> Frank van Harmelen told Index that he feels there is “a gap” between the “very high-level principles” in the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and “the day-to-day choices you have to make.”<sup>53</sup>

In 2020, the UK’s Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group (AFIWG) published a model code of conduct to enable British institutions to “strengthen the protection of academic freedom” from risks arising from internationalisation.<sup>54</sup> According to the Working Group, it is unclear how many universities have already incorporated, or plan to incorporate, the model code into their due diligence processes.

Pär Svensson of Sweden’s Lund University told Index that while their Checklist for Global Responsible Engagement is not “prescriptive or associated with any form of clearance or approval”, it has created discussion and has increased awareness across the university.<sup>55</sup>

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He said that, so far, only the medical faculty and the faculty of engineering have started to develop their own due diligence processes, building on the university-wide checklist.<sup>56</sup>

Even if university staff are in a position to do so, many feel they don’t have the information and tools they need to protect themselves and their institutions from undue interference.

“Who am I to assess the relationship between →

52: Kaiser, A. in interview with Index (17 March 2023)

53: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

54: Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group, Draft Model Code of Conduct Available at: <https://hrc.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/governance/AFIWG%20-%20DRAFT%20MODEL%20CODE%20OF%20CONDUCT%20final.pdf> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

55: Svensson, P. and Hofvendah, H. in interview with Index (12 May 2023)

56: Ibid.



## A concern is clearly that governments use ‘risk of foreign interference’ as a pretext and opportunity to restrict universities

→ Huawei (the company) and the CCP?” Frank van Harmelen of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam asked rhetorically when he spoke to Index.<sup>57</sup>

Van Harmelen said that the Dutch Security Services and the Ministry of Science and Education were among those he consulted when carrying out due diligence before starting to work on DREAMS Lab. “It’s not the normal

thing for us to go and talk to the Ministry of Science and Education about every project we do, but in this one we did,” he said. “The ministry cannot tell the university what to do or not to do, neither can the security services. They are not in a position to give us their approval, but they certainly didn’t give any objections.”

Some European countries, including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands, have set up mechanisms aimed at enabling institutions to more readily mitigate the risks of potential international collaborations. The UK government set up the Research Collaboration Advice Team aimed at enabling researchers to access advice and “confidential consultation on sensitive and emerging issues.”<sup>58</sup>

The Dutch equivalent is the National Contact Point for Knowledge Security, which is aimed at “ensuring that international collaboration occurs safely, balancing opportunities and risks while respecting academic values.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Swedish

researchers who are considering collaborations with Chinese-linked entities can avail of advice from the Swedish National China Centre, which is in the final stages being set up by the Swedish government and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.<sup>60</sup>

Several interviewees warned that, in protecting academic freedom from foreign interference, there is a risk of it being undermined by domestic actors. “A concern is clearly that governments use ‘risk of foreign interference’ as a pretext and opportunity to restrict universities,” Michael Gaebel of the European University Association told Index.<sup>61</sup>

In April 2023, the vice-chancellors (rectors) of thirty-seven Swedish institutions wrote to the government expressing concern that the government was threatening the independence of higher education institutions.<sup>62</sup> The letter was in response to the government’s decision to shorten the terms served by universities’ external board members by half in order to allow ministry-ordered security experts to

join. The government cited security threats - including from China - as a reason for their decision.<sup>63</sup>

Stefanos Zafeiriou of Imperial College London told Index that the National Security and Investment Act 2021, which came into force in the UK last year, is now a “huge” bureaucratic burden on universities.<sup>64</sup> Under the legislation, universities need to get approval to undertake research with foreign industries on areas that are deemed “sensitive” to national security. Artificial Intelligence - one of Zafeiriou’s areas of research - is one of them. “There is very limited industrial funding now,” Zafeiriou told Index. “It takes six months to get approval - no one wants to do that.”<sup>65</sup>

New legislation aimed at “bolstering” academic freedom - Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 - recently came into effect in the UK, but it will do nothing to ease the financial strain that is causing universities to rely on students from repressive regimes for funding.<sup>66</sup> ✘

57: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

58: Solloway, A. (2021) Launch of Research Collaboration Advice Team (25 May). Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-05-25/hcws53> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

59: Government of the Netherlands, Contact Point for Knowledge Security. Available at: <https://english.loketkennisveiligheid.nl/> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

60: Swedish National China Centre, Policy-relevant, research-based analysis and advice on China-related issues. Available at: <https://kinacentrum.se/en/> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

61: Gaebel, M. via email to Index (17 May 2023)

62: Letter from the rectors to the Swedish government (28 April 2023). Available at: <https://suhf.se/app/uploads/2023/04/Till-regeringen-Utb-Land-Skrivelse-angaende-styrelserna-SUHF-SU-850-0024-23-REV.pdf> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

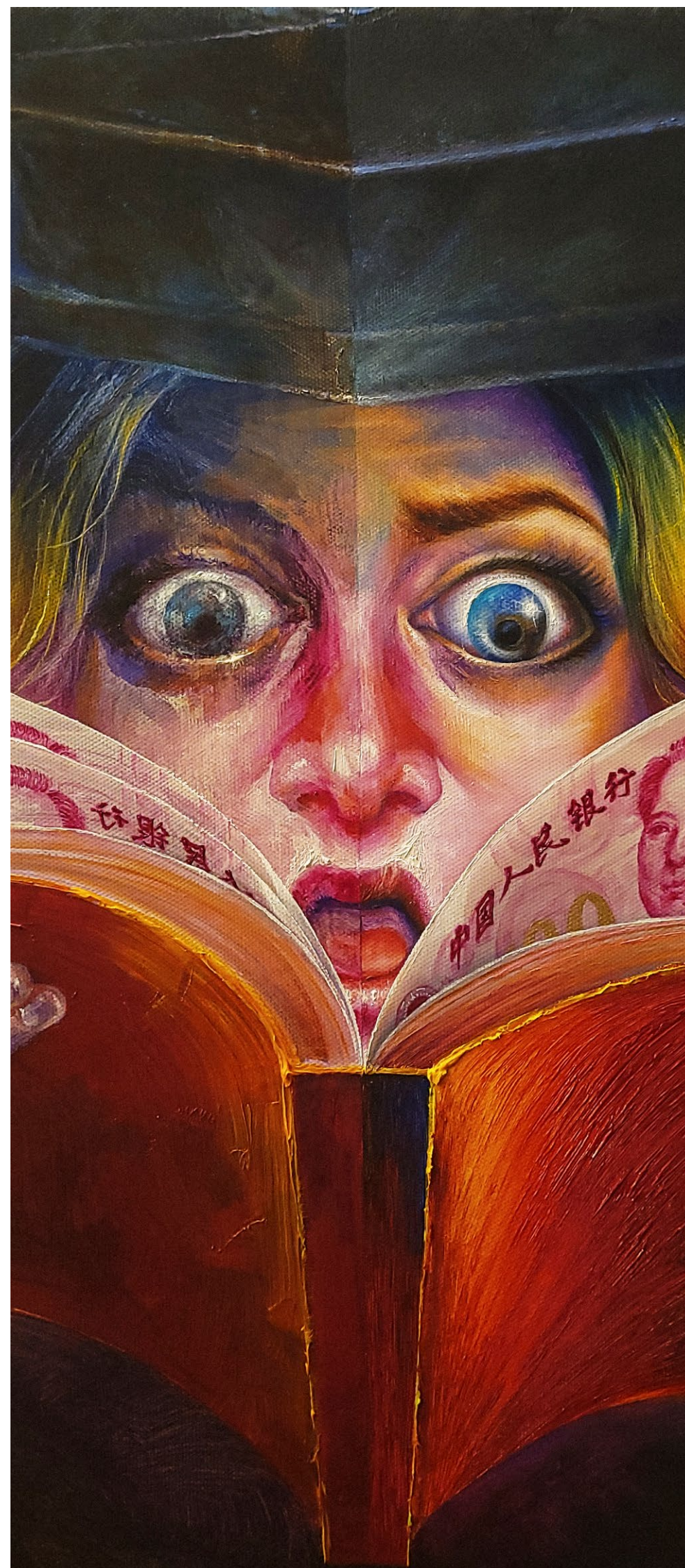
63: Upton, B. (2023) Swedish alarm over ministry-ordered security experts on boards, Times Higher Education (8 May). Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/swedish-alarm-over-ministry-ordered-security-experts-boards> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].

64: Zafeiriou, S. in interview with Index (19 May 2023)

65: Ibid.

66: UK Department for Education, University Freedom of Speech Bill becomes law, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/university-freedom-of-speech-bill-becomes-law> [Accessed on 6 June 2023].





# Conclusion

SOME EUROPEAN POLITICIANS have expressed concerns about European universities cooperating with Chinese entities altogether, but most of those that spoke to Index emphasised the need to engage with China - albeit with caution. “If we were to blanket ban collaboration with China, we would be shooting ourselves scientifically in the foot because we are telling ourselves to no longer collaborate with one of the main players in the field,” Frank van Harmelen told Index.<sup>67</sup>

“We have no choice but to engage with China. But we should do so on our own terms, and there must be the procedures in place to do so [to] allow us to engage without undermining our core values, some of which are freedom of expression and thought,” Chris Hughes told Index.<sup>68</sup>

The need for transparency was repeatedly emphasised by interviewees. Michael Gaebel of the European University Association told Index that it should be about mitigating risks, not

||||| We have no choice but to engage with China. But we should do so on our own terms

cutting collaboration.<sup>69</sup> “EUA’s point of view has long been as much openness as possible, as much caution as necessary,” he said.<sup>70</sup>

This appears to have been Van Harmelen’s strategy when he was setting up the DREAMS Lab research project with Huawei. “We said from the beginning that we would investigate the collaboration and do it extremely openly,” he told Index. He advises other academics considering partnerships with Chinese entities to involve all possible stakeholders and to speak to the media about the project, “even if they don’t ask you for it”.<sup>71</sup>

Interviewees, especially those in the UK, also emphasised the need to diversify their

international student intake away from Chinese international students. “It is not viable to rely on Chinese money to address the problems that universities face and cannot be viewed in isolation from its effect on academic and intellectual freedom,” Stewart McDonald MP told Index.<sup>72</sup>

“What needs to happen now is that universities need to diversify their international student intake away from China,” Jo Smith Finley told Index. She said making sure that Chinese international students live and study outside of China is an important way to “[break] the stranglehold that the CCP have on the political narrative”.<sup>73</sup> ✘

67: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

68: Hughes, C. in interview with Index (16 February 2023)

69: Gaebel, M. via email to Index (17 May 2023)

70: Ibid.

71: van Harmelen, F. in interview with Index (10 May 2023)

72: McDonald, S. in email to Index (4 May 2023)

73: Smith Finley, J. in interview with Index (30 March 2023)





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