

Russell Group – Written evidence (TRC0028)

1. Background

- 1.1 Russell Group universities exemplify Global Britain, hosting 230,000 international students¹, 32,000 international researchers², and collaborating with international partners in every continent on cutting-edge research that can help create innovative new products, services, and treatments for British patients, consumers, and businesses.
- 1.2 International students and researchers, including those from China, are vitally important to the UK research base, bringing specialist skills and valuable perspectives to our campuses, classrooms and laboratories.
- 1.3 International collaboration increases the quality of UK research outputs and will be key in tackling the environmental, economic, and healthcare challenges we face today.
- 1.4 However, some international research collaborations can involve some security risks. To this end, universities are working with sector bodies, Government departments and technical agencies to strengthen the processes used to assess and combat risks posed by hostile actors to UK research.

2. Chinese students in the UK

- 2.1 There are approximately 139,000 Chinese students at UK universities, broken down by level of study in Table 1.

Table 1 – number of Chinese domiciled students at UK universities, 2019/20³

	Undergraduates	Postgraduate taught	Postgraduate research
Number	56,630	74,265	8,230
% of international student cohort from China	20%	36%	18%
% of all students (UK, EU and non-EU) from China	3%	15%	7%

¹ Defined as non-UK domiciled students, based on HESA data for the 2019/20 academic year

² Based on HESA data for the 2019/20 academic year and defined as those on 'teaching and research' or 'research only' contracts. Includes EU researchers.

³ Based on full-person equivalent data for the academic year 2019/20, taken from HESA

- 2.2 Existing datasets do not provide a robust estimate of the tuition fees paid by Chinese students across our universities, as different universities and courses have different fee structures for international students.
- 2.3 As reflected in the Government's current International Education Strategy, international students bring significant economic, social and soft power benefits to universities, the UK, and the local communities they are situated in. New analysis suggests education exports are now the UK's single largest service export, totalling £23.28bn in 2018.⁴

3. Risk assessment process for international students

- 3.1 Whilst the overwhelming majority of international research students in the UK are legitimate and are an invaluable asset to UK research, corporate and technological espionage is a historically common feature of international relations and universities are aware their world-leading research is a target for this type of activity.
- 3.2 The UK Government has in place a robust vetting process for the risk assessment of international research students applying to carry out research connected with sensitive technology areas. The Government requires all overseas research students to obtain security clearance (an 'ATAS certificate') from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office before starting research if those students are carrying out research into sensitive technology areas. From May 2021, most international researchers⁵ will also require an ATAS certificate before beginning research into sensitive technology areas.

4. Chinese researchers and research collaborations with China

- 4.1 Russell Group universities employ approximately 3,680 Chinese researchers.⁶
- 4.2 We do not have access to reliable data that shows the scale of funding provided by Chinese entities for UK research. However, the scale of research collaboration between China and the UK has increased in the last 20 years, with co-authored papers rising from 750 per year in 2000 to 16,267 papers in 2019.⁷
- 4.3 Research collaborations involving international partners improve the quality of UK research.⁸ Indeed, our success as a knowledge economy hinges on our ability to collaborate with the best minds across the world.

⁴ Using data from DfE and ONS, cited in The Policy Institute's 'The China Question' report

⁵ Nationals of EU countries, the European Economic Area (EEA), Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland or the United States of America do not need an ATAS certificate.

⁶ Using a bespoke dataset provided by HESA to the Russell Group, for the 2018/19 academic year, where 'academic employment function' is either 'research only' or 'research and teaching'. This excludes postgraduate research students.

⁷ Taken from The Policy Institute's 'The China Question' report, available at <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/china-question.pdf>

4.4 The scientific landscape has grown ever more international and many of today's challenges are global, from tackling climate change to fighting cancer and developing new energy sources. There is growing recognition that these require a critical mass of excellent research and diverse minds to solve them. International cooperation is becoming more prevalent and more important: while around 90% of UK research output was domestic in 1981, less than half is now produced domestically.⁹ Global cooperation in research can bring a range of benefits, including access to complementary expertise, knowledge and skills; access to unique sites, facilities or population groups; sharing costs and risks; and establishing standards (especially within industrial collaborations).¹⁰

5. Guidance on security risks and Trusted Research

5.1 As is common with international collaborations, there are important risks to consider, particularly where collaborations involve research with potential military applications. Universities are working with Government departments and technical agencies to enhance internal processes involved in assessing risks associated with international research partnerships.

5.2 In October 2020, UUK published sector guidance to help universities mitigate risks posed by some international activities, for example protecting sensitive research from cybertheft.¹¹ This guidance was produced in consultation with universities, technical agencies, and government departments.

5.3 Since the guidance was published in October, Russell Group universities have¹²:

- Terminated some international collaborations early, including contract research projects.
- Introduced new governance structures for the oversight of international partnerships, for example establishing ethics committees with representation from University Councils.
- Introduced mandatory training programmes for staff and research students, focussed on protecting research and managing international partnerships, including training relating to cybersecurity risks.

⁸ For example, average Field-Weighted Citation Impact for Russell Group university publications with an international co-author is 2.6, compared to 1.7 with a national co-author and 1.4 with a co-author based in the same institution: SciVal platform accessed September 2018. Analysis includes co-authored publications with UK institutions between 2015-2017.

⁹ 'International research collaboration after the UK leaves the European Union' - Digital Science Consultancy for UUK (April 2017).

¹⁰ L. Georghiou, 'Global Cooperation in Research', Research Policy 27 (1998).

¹¹ 'Managing risks in internationalisation: security related issues' is available at

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/managing-risks-in-internationalisation.aspx>

¹² Actions taken by members differ, given the nature of issues and threats differs by university.

- Reviewed internal academic freedom policies, ensuring staff are protected in the UK and when travelling overseas.
- Enhanced IT systems to protect sensitive research in collaboration with technical agencies – including measures to protect vaccine research.
- Undertaken internal communication campaigns promoting awareness of risks and the steps required to mitigate these.

5.4 Alongside the UUK guidance, the Government's Trusted Research guidance has been extremely valuable in helping universities assess the risks associated with international collaborations and establishing new ways to combat these risks. Russell Group universities continue to embed the approaches and processes advocated in the UUK guidance, working with Government departments and technical agencies to combat new and emerging threats, for example cybertheft of vaccine research.

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