



# Higher Education Collaboration with China

TFK programme info session 11.3.2024

Olli Suominen

Counsellor, Education and Science

Embassy of Finland, Beijing

# Setting the stage - China's political, economic and societal system I



Political power in China resides with the Communist Party of China (CCP).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping (2012 -) CCP's power has grown, while the civil society is enjoying less freedoms.

CCP's priorities: maintaining power, social stability, economic growth.

China has become a “fully authoritarian state”.



# Setting the stage - China's political, economic and societal system II



State and party hierarchies run side by side, in a parallel fashion; dual track system.

In essence, the party leads through governmental/state institutions.

Applies to ministries, companies, universities etc.

Often the same people hold both institutional/party positions; same level institutional/party positions not equal in reality.

In universities, for example, the rector is often the university party office vice-chairman.



# Education system in China II



The Ministry of Education is the highest authority responsible for the development and monitoring of the entire education system in China.

Development is guided by plans, which are written to mirror each other at different levels.

At all levels of education, the education system is still deficient in many ways, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Although the administration has increased investments in education, the increase in supply still falls far short of society's needs.

- The rather limited number of study places has led to extremely hard pressures on schoolchildren and students
- Although gender equality is achieved in China's education system quite well, there are still problems with girls getting to school, especially in rural areas. Otherwise, China's huge regional differences are also clearly visible in the education sector
- Educational opportunities for ethnic minorities and the disabled are also still quite limited, and representatives of minorities are subject to clear prejudice and outright discrimination both in the education system and elsewhere in Chinese society.

# Education system in China I



Due to the influence of both Confucian and Marxist ideological history and educational tradition in China, the central government has played a very central role in role education.

As a result of the education reforms that started in the 1990s and continued until the 2010s, the Chinese education system placed increasing importance on improving the quality of education.

In recent years, the reforms that started at the end of the 1990s have been slowly canceled and more liberal practices have been rejected.

The role of CCP increasingly salient in the education sector.

Strong ideological-political education permeates all educational levels and subjects in China.



# Higher education system in China I

Chinese higher education institutions are mainly (~75%) publicly funded, but private actors are also allowed in the higher education sector.

There are more than 3,000 universities in the country, although they vary in their type and level.

Burden of administration and funding of universities – but not the final say in policy matters – has been transferred to provinces and regional authorities, “centralized decentralization”.

The top universities are concentrated in the eastern and coastal parts of the country (Tsinghua, Peking University, Fudan etc.). They are very well resourced. Many of the best universities are located directly under different ministries.

The entrance requirements to the country's most prestigious universities are very high and the competition for admission is very fierce.



# Higher education system in China II



The Chinese government has various flagship projects for higher education institutions, which aim to comprehensively develop the international competitiveness of top Chinese universities.

In recent years, China has emerged as a superpower in higher education and science, and it has set itself the goal of being the leading country in higher education and research by 2050.

The rankings of Chinese universities in international university comparisons have improved at a steady pace.

Political control of universities has tightened under Xi. Academic freedom is being replaced by party-loyalty.

The CCP has made it clear that it aims for further centralization of decision making in education, science and technology sectors. The plans tell, at least on a symbolic level, about the growing strategic and ideological importance of the sectors in China.





# Higher education system in China III

As elsewhere in the Chinese society, in the higher education sector China is aiming for increased self-reliance.

In recent years, signs have begun to appear that China wants to break away from international university rankings.

China is determined to link scientific and technological know-how and the cooperation aimed at acquiring it not only to China's economic-technical development, but also to the development of the state's security machinery and military technology. China does not unreservedly support the established and generally accepted rules of open scientific inquiry and HEI cooperation. For example:

- Scientific malpractice
- New legislation on data movement
- Intellectual property rights
- Talent attraction programs
- Requirements of political loyalty.

In addition to the above, challenges in research cooperation with China are related to China's position in issues such as restrictions on air connections China's position *vis-à-vis* Russia's aggression against Ukraine (incl. intensifying research cooperation with Russia).



# Higher education cooperation with China - fields



STEM sciences are highly emphasized and their importance is seen as increasingly strategic.

The risk of dual use is present in any type of cooperation involving potential technological applications.

China not very supportive of cooperation in the fields of humanities, arts and social sciences.

Cooperation in “delicate” topics virtually impossible – increasingly many topics belong to this category. No explicit lists.

Cooperation in other topics and fields tolerated, but often not supported.

However, as China’s economic growth is slowing down, China is realigning it’s priorities also in the higher education system.

# Higher education cooperation with China – student and researcher mobility to and from China



Many Chinese students go abroad these days, especially at the higher education level, although the trend seems to be slowing down.

Especially Anglo-American universities have been popular. With increasing great power rivalry, new alternatives are emerging.

With the Chinese economic growth slowing down, more and more Chinese students are now struggling to finance their studies abroad.

The CCP is known to mobilize Chinese student communities to further its political interests abroad.

Chinese students warned of possibility of foreign interference and spies

Increasingly difficult for scholars to travel.

Student mobility to China has slowed down considerably. Chinese HEIs have high hopes of the resuming student inflow.



# Higher education cooperation with China – joint programs



Chinese universities have thousands of joint study programs with foreign HEIs.

Different types and levels of joint studies.

Especially previously China has been very open to such collaborative ventures, but lately universities have become more selective.

# Higher education cooperation with China – international approaches



China is an extremely important cooperation partner for many countries and individual universities.

Increasing concerns that cooperation with China leads to China learning from us, but us not learning from China.

Western countries have increasingly limited scientific cooperation to selected, non-sensitive areas.

# Higher education cooperation with China – TFK projects in China



- Co-creation Hub in Nursing Education
- Finland-China collaborative course on Global Food Safety: An approach to enhance global sustainability
- Finland-China Joint Training Program in Smart Mobility Systems and Services
- Global Media Education through Development of Online Teaching
- Research Career Pathway for PhD and Young Faculty Members
- Towards Carbon Neutral Societies: Developing and Testing a Digital Climate Change Curriculum in Architecture Education

# Higher education cooperation with China– points to consider I



HEIs in China are very to eager to cooperate at the moment.

HEIs in China sometimes wish to use international cooperation as means to boost their institutional CV rather than to further actual cooperation.

HEIs sometimes wish to pit international partners against each other, and even try to make it difficult for them to coordinate with each other.

Research universities in China are increasingly selective – they wish to cooperate with HEIs of similar status (i.e. other research universities).

# Higher education cooperation with China– points to consider II



Total refusal to cooperate with China not in our interest.

Urging others to avoid sensitive cooperation with China has also been used as a way to gain a competitive edge by some actors.

Need to firmly assert that a country the size of Finland cannot cooperate with every interested party.

Despite challenges, there are still many fields, in which China's and Finland's interests are aligned; for example climate change, circular economy, sustainable development and health, educational games and toys etc.

As a result of the change in China's demographic and economic priorities, new emerging opportunities in, for example, design and arts, lifelong learning, VET, HEI – work life cooperation.

# Higher education cooperation with China– points to consider III



Crucial to follow the governmental developmental plans.

Knowing the background of your partner is important.

In the case of China, it is especially important to know what is the status of the partner HEI *vis-à-vis* the CCP and Chinese military.

Developing ties with the CCP (i.e. university party office) a necessity to get things done.

Exchange of information among likeminded partners (both national and international) crucial.

Continued (re-)evaluation of ongoing cooperation etc.

Urging China and Chinese institutions to comply with the accepted norms of science and scientific cooperation even when cooperation is carried out.