

OPINION

Canada's universities and colleges are navigating challenges created by China

By MARGARET MCCUAIG-JOHNSTON (/AUTHOR/MARGARET-MCCUAIG-JOHNSTON) SEP. 9, 2019

When our unjustly detained Canadians are returned to us, we can expect Canada-China relations to begin to improve, and academic collaborations will be one of the important bridges for that reconciliation. In the meantime, each collaboration should be assessed carefully for benefits to Canada, risks to our IP, and the safety of our researchers and students in China.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured on Dec. 5, 2017, with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China. *Photograph courtesy of PMO photographer Adam Scotti*

China's kidnapping and detention of two innocent Canadians, the execution court sentences for two more, and trade actions against our agricultural products are giving many Canadian organizations concerns about their partnerships with China, including the academic community.

Canada's science collaborations with modern China go back to the 1950s, and have become one of the most significant of our international engagements. Thousands of Canadians have helped China to develop their science and technology capacity – allowing China to move from 29th to 14th on the [Global Innovation Index](#) in just four years.

But after decades of partnership, Canadians are asking whether we are getting real benefits. Some researchers are telling me that, despite China's dramatic improvements in innovation, their research collaborations are still very much a one way street, with the Chinese partners learning much more from their Canadian colleagues than the reverse. The touchstone now for all collaborations should be benefit to Canada, including retention of IP rights.

Research collaborations with Huawei have been controversial, not just because Beijing's actions against Canadians are in disproportionate retaliation for the arrest of a Huawei executive, but for the way the company has [acquired Canadian IP](#) in exclusive arrangements, sometimes not even compensating the researcher or their institution. In the U.S. the company [has tried to circumvent national security](#) legislation by making financial donations to a professor's work and then requesting a royalty free licence for the results of the research. *Prominent American universities have [cancelled their research collaborations with Huawei](#).*

Most Canadian researchers are not yet aware of China's recent policy for the [integration of military and civilian technology development](#)

Chinese scientists and engineers are being compelled to work with military counterparts to look for military applications of their research. Canadians partnering in China could easily have their work redirected into the Chinese military establishment, and areas such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and biotechnology are particularly susceptible.

Another concerning development was brought to light by the [Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#) which identified scientists and engineers from China's military universities studying or working in western universities including those in Canada. We had 84 published collaborations with researchers from such institutions in 2017, 106 the year before. University administrations and the granting councils should remind our researchers of their important obligations under Canada's [Controlled Goods Program](#).

Furthermore, professors and students are asking whether it is safe to travel to China now. While it is not known if academics are included on [Beijing's list](#) of 100 Canadians who could potentially be detained, those planning to visit China should review thoroughly the [Global Affairs Canada travel advisory](#) which says Canadians should exercise a high degree of caution in China due to the risk of arbitrary enforcement of local laws, ensure all paperwork and visas reflect the actual work being done, and register with the local public security bureau within 24 hours of arrival. It also warns of increased screening of travellers' digital devices and "exit bans" which can keep foreigners in China for months or years against their will. It is also advisable to look at the [U.S. State Department's travel](#)

advisory. Some researchers are simply deciding to work by video conference. There is also a broader issue of China's interference on Canadian campuses. There is well documented [evidence](#) of pressure on Chinese students here not to criticize China and to report on activities of other students. Human Rights Watch has issued a very useful set of [guidelines](#) for college and university administrators to support students and ensure academic freedom and open exchange of knowledge. The issues described here are very much on the radar of the Canadian Government and organizations such as Universities Canada. Consultations have taken place with university and college administrators as well as with other western governments that are seeing the same trends. There has been a good sharing of best practices, precedents and formulations for guidance, but as yet no directives or advisories for how Canadian professors and students can most effectively navigate these challenges.

When our unjustly detained Canadians are returned to us, we can expect Canada-China relations to begin to improve, and academic collaborations will be one of the important bridges for that reconciliation. In the meantime, each collaboration should be assessed carefully for benefits to Canada, risks to our IP and the safety of our researchers and students in China.

Margaret McCuaig-Johnston is a senior fellow at the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa, a senior fellow at the China Institute at the University of Alberta, and is the former executive vice-president of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council.

The Hill Times