

The risks of international collaboration must be balanced with the risks of non-collaboration

Research and innovation are indispensable for improving our citizens' health, ensuring the competitiveness of our economies, and overcoming societal conflict. As the climate crisis gathers momentum, and Europe's democracies struggle increasingly with science-denying populism, Europe's researchers must be at the forefront of breakthrough knowledge. This requires collaboration. The quality of Europe's science will be distinguished by the attractiveness of European researchers for collaborations with the world's top scientists. Groundbreaking research is always – and essentially – inspired by ideas and influences coming from the best minds, irrespective of where they are and of their nationality. And, given the power of data, the most ground-breaking knowledge is produced where researchers have access to high quality data in large quantities; data that is findable, interoperable, accessible, and reproducible (FAIR) and thus (by definition) transcends borders. Life-saving scientific development in response to COVID-19 has illustrated the importance and potential of international research collaboration. We should therefore refrain from adopting policies that inadvertently impact the capacity of the research community to address shared global challenges.

The open collaboration on which research excellence depends appears to be increasingly challenged by concerns about reciprocity, misuse (and even theft) of intellectual property, and the potential for the research to be applied to military or "dual use" activities. As research-intensive universities, we take such concerns extremely seriously, but note that these must not slow down collaboration which is needed to tackle our key challenges. Rather, these challenges call on us to assess the risks associated with collaboration in fast-developing research areas, and to develop appropriate responses. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in the 2023 State of the Union speech, the approach should be to "de-risk, not decouple". We believe academic freedom to be a crucial balancing element for responsible international collaboration. The basis for a risk-based approach to international collaboration, that considers fully and appropriately the risks of collaboration vs. the risks of non-collaboration, must be based on these fundamentals:

1. Academic freedom and Institutional autonomy. Research universities in Europe must never compromise, or be pressured to compromise the fundamental essence of their research excellence, nor the academic freedom to identify cutting-edge research questions, and to address these through the appropriate research approaches and methodologies. Choosing the right collaborators is an essential component of academic freedom. And to safeguard academic freedom, institutional autonomy is essential, as it provides the space for academic self-regulation that enables researchers to produce work that is not only cutting-edge, but that also conforms to common academic codes of conduct (including, but not limited to, research ethics). Risk mitigation must not contravene the very principles of openness and trust they purport to uphold. Research collaborations must remain as open as possible and only as closed as necessary.

Therefore, possible security interventions must be designed in ways that provide clarity to institutions and academics, while respecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the decision-making process and implementation of risk-mitigated collaborations.

2. Governments and public authorities that have concerns about particular kinds of international collaboration in research must not address such issues in top-down ways. A more effective approach should enhance trust, understanding and collaboration between public authorities and researchers. Public authorities play an important role in analysing potential security consequences, however, responsible risk assessment that can adapt to changing circumstances in specific research fields will require the responsible discretion of experts. Researchers understand the frontiers and complexities of new knowledge, emerging technologies, and useful information. It is incumbent on universities to ensure that researchers have access to the resources they need to collaborate responsibly. As collegiate hosts of researchers, universities are best placed to implement security checks that can grapple with the complexities of research alongside wider implications in a timely manner. Such processes must be developed and maintained by institutions through regular improvements that take information from authorities and experts into account. If governments seek to determine specific restrictions on research collaborations in specific topics or fields top-down, they will always be behind the potential risks and benefits to society that research and innovation can provide.
3. As governments work with universities to create a culture of responsibility about international collaboration, this must be supported by transparent, up-to-date, and accurate information about which actors are of concern, and why. We acknowledge that such information is often neither easy nor straightforward to obtain, but this makes it all the more important to equip institutions with accurate information to assess the risks and possibilities of international collaboration. There is no alternative to pursuing academic collaboration according to the principle 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary'. A case for not pursuing academic collaboration should only be made by governments on an exceptional basis, based on very specific intelligence and well-founded (and articulated) concerns.
4. It is critical that governments – and indeed universities – take a long-term, holistic and strategic approach to responsible internationalisation. For instance, if public funders are increasingly concerned about Europe's strategic autonomy in key fields, it is incumbent upon them to provide universities the long-term funding and the means to ensure they are not over reliant on research workers from particular third countries. Similarly, if Europe's governments are concerned about attractive overseas programmes to recruit research talent, they need to provide attractive alternatives for researchers to stay. Europe must be competitive in its capacity to attract and retain research talent, through national and European funding.
5. To foster a culture of responsible internationalisation, including managing risks around the misuse (and indeed theft) of IP in sensitive and often highly complex and intricate

fields, we emphasise the importance of institutional peer learning. This is crucial because neither science nor the threats arising from improper use are static. Dealing with this appropriately and sensitively requires a culture that is fully owned by institutions and academics, and for this peer learning (across institutions and fields), rather than top-down rules, is essential.

We are committed to fostering a culture of responsible internationalisation that does not compromise on the essence of international collaboration for research excellence. It is inconceivable, for instance, how global pandemics, climate change, or other fundamental human challenges can be addressed without truly global research partnerships based on free flows of data and ideas. In line with the [Bonn Declaration on the Freedom of Scientific Research](#) and the [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#), we recognise the responsibility that comes with academic freedom, focusing on the need for self-regulation to do justice to the complexity of the cutting-edge research we develop, and the partnerships on which it is based. To this end, at the heart of responsible internationalisation must be the cultivation of a spirit of collective academic responsibility and risk management to ensure that our universities continue to be open to an increasingly complex and interdependent world.