



Advice by the Advisory Committee on Third Party Collaborations

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Contact person	Secretary to the Committee

I. Overview of the advice request

a. Project description

The current Memorandum of Understanding between the UvA and the China Scholarship Council was first signed in 2013 for an initial period of 5 years and automatically renewed in 2018 for another 5-year period. The MoU caters for PhD training of CSC-funded PhD candidates seeking to obtain their doctorate degree at the UvA, under (co)supervision of UvA professor(s). The current MoU expired in September 2023 and was extended for a 1-year period, in view of a research report on CSC-funded PhD candidates carried out by Institute Clingendael and the (pending) advice of the Advisory Committee on Third Party Collaborations on continuation of the collaboration with CSC. During the second term of the duration of the current MoU, two faculties (Medicine and Dentistry) decided to no longer participate in the programme, as the set-up of this type of PhD training no longer fits with the context in both faculties.

In 2022 the UvA developed an internal policy concerning PhD bursaries. This policy stipulates a minimum monthly allowance of 1666€ for all full-time PhD bursaries obtaining their PhD at the UvA. Given that standard CSC amount for a monthly allowance was 1350€, from 2022 onwards, all faculties hosting CSC-funded PhD candidates, provided a so-called top-up allowance to all candidates. The threshold for the minimum monthly allowance is modified on an annual basis, increasing from 1500€ in 2022 to 1666€ in 2024.

In the period 2018-2023 105 PhD candidates were admitted via the “Cooperation Channel” in the context of the MoU. It is important to note that regardless of the availability of an MoU, CSC also offers the possibility to PhD candidates to apply for PhD positions at foreign universities (the Netherlands included) beyond the scope of the “Cooperation Channel”. In such cases, the individual PhD candidates apply directly to the envisaged supervisor. In these cases, the custom regulations and admission criteria for PhD candidates as laid out in the UvA Doctoral Regulations apply. Key difference between applications in the “Cooperation Channel” and the “Individual Channel” is that in the context of the former, the nomination process is coordinated at central UvA level by the Secretariat of the Doctorate Board with the CSC European Department and formal approval of the UvA for all nominations is sought by the CSC. While in the case of the “Individual Channel”, no coordination is organised, and it is more difficult to keep track of CSC-funded PhD candidates’ applications and their eligibility and compliance with the UvA Doctorate Regulations.



b. Type of request

- Existing collaboration - Changes in geopolitical situation
- Existing collaboration - Changes in partner profile
- Existing collaboration - Other

c. Reason for reassessment

Against the backdrop of political debates on knowledge security and geopolitical developments, the collaboration with the China Scholarship Council is under scrutiny. This is reflected in the 2024 Clingendael Institute research report on CSC funded PhD candidates based at Dutch universities. In this report, no specific incidents or limitations to academic freedom concerning PhD candidates based at the UvA were reported.

The combination of the time-bound urgency of the expired MoU, the decision of the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry to discontinue their participation in this scheme, the [research study](#) conducted by Instituut Clingendael, and the aforementioned concerns, were sufficient reason for the UvA Executive Staff to advise the Executive Board to request the Committee to advise whether any serious risks are involved in continuing the existing collaboration with the CSC, by renewing the MoU. And if so, which mitigation measures (if any) should be put in place in a renewed MoU to minimize the risks.



II. Process

a. UvA policy framework

In accordance with the UvA internal policy and guidelines stipulated by the Policy Framework for Collaboration with Third Parties and draft Assessment Guidelines, the Executive Board undertook an internal reflection and reassessment on the existing collaboration in the context of the student exchange agreement. The outcome of the internal reflection resulted in the submission of a request for advice to the UvA Advisory Committee for Collaboration with Third Parties. The Committee received the advice request and undertook the assessment on the basis of the draft assessment guidelines. The committee will inform the Executive Board on the outcome of its advice.

b. Grant type and legal framework

A Memorandum of Understanding including specifications on arrangements for supervision of CSC-funded PhD candidates undertaking their PhD research project at the UvA, at university-wide level, signed by the Presidents of both universities.

d. Assessment process by the Committee

The committee reviewed the following documents:

- The current MoU between UvA and CSC
- The translation of the standard contract CSC-funded candidates need to sign with CSC upon receiving the grant
- The research report of Instituut Clingendael

The committee discussed the findings during its meetings on 12 December 2024 and 12 & 13 February 2025.



III. Reassessment

a. Key considerations

The committee noted that there have been reports that at least some PhD-students with a CSC scholarship seem to be selected and sent to the Netherlands by the Chinese government with a specific task; some of them turn out to have below-average capacities; and some receive pressure from their homeland to finish their PhD, even if they are not up to the task.

In addition, the committee has reasons to believe that some returning CSC-funded PhD candidates who conducted their PhD research in the Netherlands can be forced to provide their State with information, including data retrieved via academic research (e.g. on people or organisations participating in data collection). In doing so, candidates may be asked to share information stored in the candidates' memory, not only written materials.

It is important to note that it is unclear if CSC-funded PhD candidates who were based at UvA were affected by the aforementioned incidents. Furthermore, many UvA-based supervisors reported that they had positive experiences with supervising CSC-funded PhD candidates.

Finally, the monthly allowance of 1350 provided to CSC funded PhD candidates can no longer be considered sufficient to provide for living expenses. Over and above that, the amount does not meet the minimum requirements stipulated by the Netherlands Immigration Services (IND). This situation has been mitigated by the introduction of an internal UvA policy, which includes a clause that it is mandatory for any faculty accepting to host a CSC-funded PhD candidate, to provide a monthly top-up allowance. Furthermore, bilateral discussions with the CSC on potential modification of the monthly allowance are underway in 2025.

b. Developments in the geopolitical context in which (a) collaboration partner(s) operates

The Committee notes that in some instances there is sufficient reason to be concerned about the impact of internal policies at the CSC or PhD candidates' home universities inflicted by the regime and/or the geopolitical context on the candidates' academic freedom and freedom of speech. On the other hand, the Committee acknowledges that the opportunity to undertake a PhD project abroad can be a valuable experience for CSC-funded PhD candidates to experience the academic culture of other universities in other countries, including first-hand information on how PhD candidates based at the host universities think, as well as how etiquettes and values of academic freedom and scientific integrity are upheld and respected by the academic community



c. Changes in the profile/status of (a) collaboration partner(s)

The Committee considers it essential that academic freedom, privacy, data privacy, knowledge security and social safety of all PhD candidates undertaking their PhD research at UvA should be guaranteed, without exceptions. Being mindful of the indications that in some instances CSC-funded PhD graduates experienced restrictions in asking academically relevant questions during their research or have been asked to share confidential information on their research upon their return to their home country, the Committee makes a plea to include specific provisions and clauses into a renewed MoU to cater for the adherence to academic freedom, privacy and safety of all PhD candidates.

The concerns about the monthly allowance provided by CSC to all CSC-funded PhD candidates not being sufficient to cover for living costs, have been mitigated by the introduction of a mandatory top-up allowance provided by all faculties hosting CSC-funded PhD candidates. In addition, the CSC is expected to announce a modification to the monthly allowances of CSC-funded PhD candidates seeking to undertake their PhD research in the Netherlands, within due course.



IV. Conclusion and advice

a. Considerations by the Committee

Based on the information reviewed by the Committee, and upon deliberation on the aforementioned concerns and considerations, the Committee concludes that research collaboration under the CSC funding scheme should be handled with the utmost care. The Committee considers it essential that academic freedom, privacy and safety of all PhD candidates undertaking their PhD research at UvA should be guaranteed, without exceptions.

The Committee has no objections to continuation of the UvA collaboration with the CSC in facilitating PhD research conducted by CSC-funded PhD candidates at UvA research groups. However, the Committee does urge the UvA to agree upon additional provisions and clauses pertaining to safeguarding the academic freedom, knowledge security, data privacy and general safety of all PhD candidates in any future renewal of the MoU and supplemental letters of agreement.

In addition, the Committee advises all Deans of the Faculties to request advice of the Advisory Committee on External Collaborations for every proposed CSC-funded application. As such, the UvA secretariat to the Doctoral Board can only grant approval to the nomination lists in the “Cooperation Channel” upon receipt of a positive advice by the Committee. Any UvA-based supervisors should also be made aware that seeking advice by the Committee will be a mandatory step in confirming any obligations in supervising CSC-funded PhD projects submitted through the “Individual Channel”.

b. Advice

Based on the information available to the Committee at the time of discussion and upon deliberation on the aforementioned considerations, the Committee, in consensus, has come to the following conclusion:

- The Committee does not have objections against continuation of the collaboration.
- The Committee does not have objections against the continuation of the collaboration; however, it advises the mitigation strategies under section IV. c.
- The Committee advises negatively about the continuation of the collaboration. If the mitigations strategies under section IV. c. are implemented, the Committee is willing to reconsider.
- The Committee advises negatively about the continuation of the collaboration.

c. Mitigation strategies

The Committee urges the UvA to agree upon additional provisions and clauses pertaining to safeguarding the academic freedom, knowledge security, data privacy and general safety of all PhD candidates in any future renewal of the MoU and supplemental letters of agreement.

In addition, the Committee advises all Deans of the Faculties to request advice of the Advisory Committee on Third Party Collaborations for every proposed CSC-funded application.

Finally, the Committee supports the UvA policy for PhD bursaries to provide top-up allowances to bursaries, in case the monthly allowance does not reach the minimum threshold stipulated in the policy.