

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

RIGHT-SIZING RESEARCH SECURITY: A SURVEY OF CHINESE- BACKGROUND SCIENTISTS IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Executive Summary

This report examines how Chinese-background researchers working in STEM fields at Australian universities experience the changing environment for China-related research collaboration.¹ It draws on 109 complete survey responses collected in July and August 2026 from academic and professional research staff who were working, or had worked, within the previous five years, at an Australian university. Nearly all respondents (96%) reported being born in mainland China, while 94% were Australian citizens or permanent residents. The sample was relatively senior and experienced.

The composition is relevant because respondents are firmly established in Australia's research system while many also bring direct experience of, and continuing professional connections with, China. Their perspectives are particularly significant given China's position as one of the world's largest research systems and a major source of global R&D activity.

The survey findings point to a consistent distinction between support for managing research security risks and concern about how those risks are identified and managed in practice. Respondents overwhelmingly valued research collaboration with China and favoured case-specific risk assessment, while reporting increased security scrutiny, uncertainty about policy boundaries and changes to research behaviour.

These findings sit within a research system that is both highly internationalised and important to Australia's wider innovation performance.

Australian higher education organisations performed \$16.4 billion of R&D in 2024, postgraduate research students accounted for 52% of R&D effort within higher education, and 90% of Australia's 50 most-cited papers between 2013 and 2023 involved international co-authors. China is a major part of these networks, with China-based collaborators involved in around 52% of Australian top-decile cited STEM publications since 2020. Changes affecting collaboration, research talent, mobility and funding may therefore have implications beyond individual research projects.

A companion qualitative report, *Right-Sizing Research Security in Practice: Interviews with Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities* (October 2026), published by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney, draws on extended interviews with a smaller group of researchers to examine in greater depth how these issues are experienced and navigated in practice.²

Key survey findings:

- **China-related research collaboration remained extensive, although some more structured forms were reported less frequently than five years earlier.** Ninety-three percent of respondents had current or previous experience of China-related research collaboration and 63% were currently collaborating. Co-authorship and informal scholarly exchange were broadly stable, while joint grants, research projects, co-supervision, researcher visits and infrastructure sharing were reported less frequently. These retrospective comparisons do not definitively establish that research security policy caused the changes but they are consistent with it. Policy is now also moving to more tightly regulate co-authorship and informal scholarly exchange.
- **Respondents near-unanimously saw important benefits to Australia from China-related collaboration. They also generally supported research security safeguards in principle, but were less likely to regard China-related collaboration itself as presenting distinctive risks.** Twenty-six percent agreed that some China-related collaboration can raise national security risks for Australia, while 19% considered those risks different in nature or degree from collaboration with many other countries. Sixty-two percent agreed that Australia needs policies to manage national security risks in international research collaboration and 57% supported a legitimate role for universities in managing such risks. At the same time, 96% agreed that China-related collaboration provides important benefits to Australia's research system and 73% favoured case-by-case assessment.
- **Perceptions of increased security attention were substantially more widespread than perceptions that the underlying risk had increased.** Thirty percent considered the national security risks associated with China-related collaboration to have increased over the previous five years. By comparison, 64% said China-related collaboration was viewed through a national security lens to a greater extent, 69% said universities had become more cautious and 69% said government and university policies required greater consideration of security risk.
- **The strongest concerns related to clarity, differentiation and proportionality.** Seventy-five percent disagreed that policies were applied consistently across countries according to the specific risks of each collaboration; 72% disagreed that current policies protected national security without unnecessarily restricting academic freedom; 71% disagreed that government guidance was clear and practical; and 70% disagreed that policies adequately distinguished lower- from higher-risk collaboration. Eighty-four percent considered the overall level of scrutiny applied to China-related research collaboration too strict.
- **Research security requirements were reported to have affected research practice.** Seventy-three percent said security-related requirements had affected their research at least moderately, including 45% who reported a significant or very significant effect. Fifty-seven percent agreed that they had avoided, changed, delayed or ended China-related collaboration because of research security policies, procedures or related institutional expectations. The most commonly reported changes concerned collaborator selection (74%), grant applications (63%), supervision, hosting or recruitment (62%), research topics (59%) and international co-authorship (54%). Sixty-one percent said they considered security implications often or very frequently when making research decisions.
- **Respondents also reported effects on professional comfort and belonging.** Fifty-two percent did not feel comfortable discussing China-related collaborations within their university, 55% were not confident that aspects of their personal background did not inappropriately influence how their collaborations were perceived, and 61% reported that current debates had negatively affected their sense of belonging within Australian academia. Half did not feel comfortable maintaining visible connections with China-related research networks, topics or public discussion.

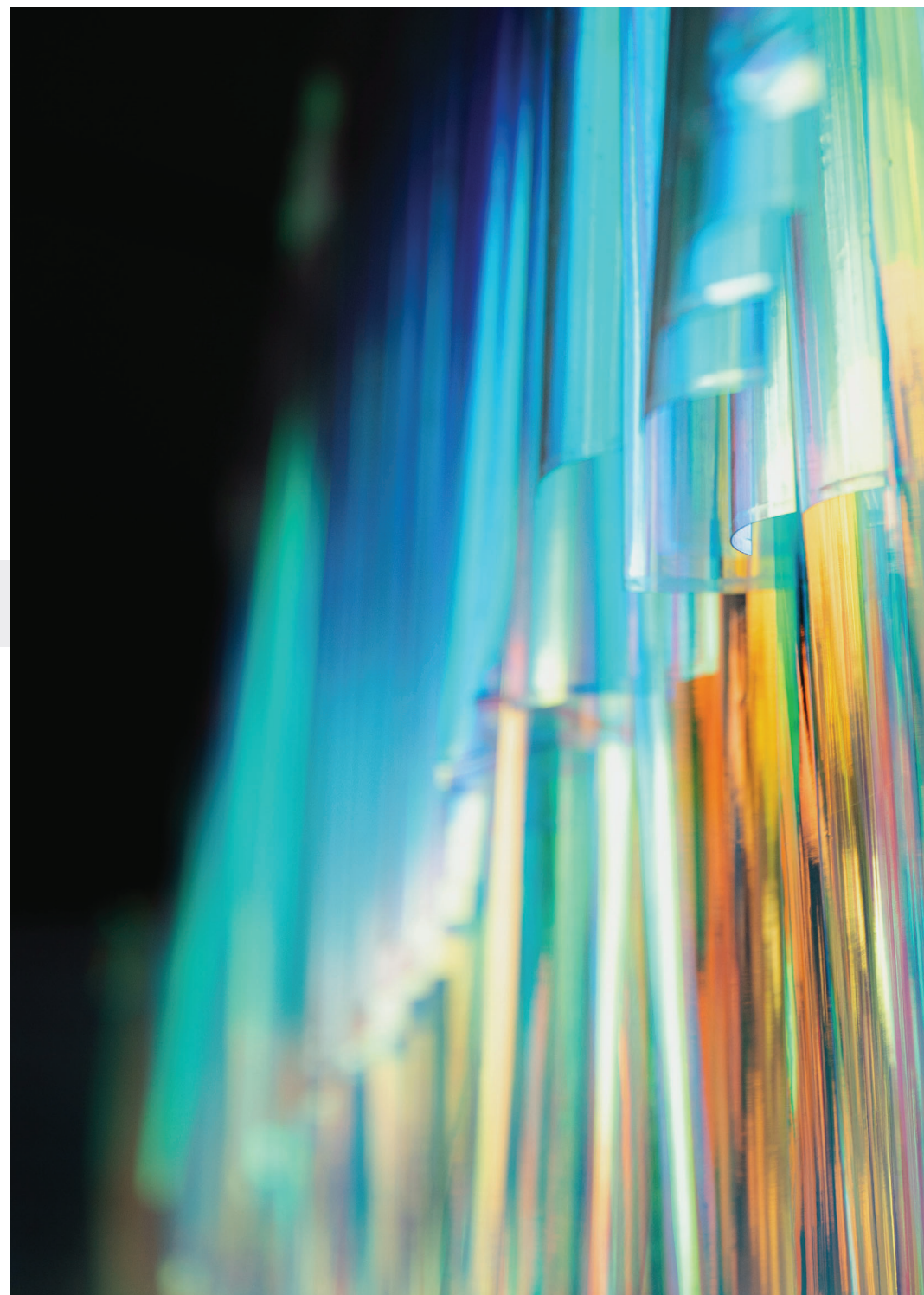
1 For the purposes of the survey, *Chinese-background researchers* were defined as researchers of Chinese heritage, including Chinese-Australian researchers and Chinese nationals working in Australia. In practice, the respondent group was more specific with 96% reporting being born in mainland China. *China-related research collaboration* was defined in the survey as research involving researchers, institutions or partners in mainland China, Hong Kong or Macau.

2 Wanning Sun, Elena Collinson, James Laurenceson, Marina Yue Zhang and Xunpeng Shi, *Right-Sizing Research Security in Practice: Interviews with Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026 <<https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2026/10/right-sizing-research-security-in-practice>>.

- **Respondents strongly endorsed the potential bridging role of Chinese-background researchers but were less positive about whether current conditions enabled it.** Seventy-seven percent agreed that Chinese-Australian and Chinese-background researchers could play a constructive bridging role between Australia and China, while 59% disagreed that current conditions allowed that role to be played effectively. Seventy-two percent considered reduced institutional understanding of China a somewhat or very likely potential outcome of current research security settings.
- **Career effects were reported by a minority and were generally one factor among several.** Twenty-three percent reported either uncertainty about continuing their academic career in Australia or no longer being based at an Australian institution, with research security concerns at least one factor.
- **Respondents' preferred changes focused primarily on implementation rather than removing safeguards.** The highest priorities were more transparent, predictable and timely review processes (83%), clearer written guidance distinguishing higher- from lower-risk collaboration (80%) and greater dialogue between government, universities and Chinese-background researchers (78%). Majorities also prioritised more accessible advice, clearer appeal mechanisms, greater transparency around evidence and reasoning, and additional training.

Respondents generally accepted the need to manage legitimate risks while questioning whether current settings consistently distinguish higher-risk activity from routine academic collaboration. Their responses point particularly to clarity, case-specific assessment, proportionality, procedural transparency and predictability.

The survey was conducted before the new foreign research project requirements introduced by the 2026 amendments to the *Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act* took effect. As such, it provides a snapshot of the preceding research security environment and a baseline for assessing subsequent changes. The survey was voluntary and self-selected and is not statistically representative of all Chinese-background researchers at Australian universities. As such, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the experiences and views of respondents rather than as estimates of their prevalence across the wider population.



Respondent Profile

50%

were permanent residents of Chinese heritage; 44% were Australian citizens



96%

were born in mainland China



58%

identified engineering or technology as their main field; 29% identified natural sciences



58%

were associate professors or professors



60%

had more than 10 years of research experience in their field



85%

had conducted research in Australia for at least seven years



69%

reported working in a critical or emerging technology field



Research Collaboration with China

93%

had current or previous experience of China-related research collaboration.



63% were currently collaborating.

87%

currently reported at least one co-authored publication per year, compared with



83% around five years ago.

81%

had established collaboration through personal academic networks



72% established collaboration through academic activities such as conferences, seminars and visits.

60%

currently reported at least one informal scholarly collaboration or research advice interaction per year, compared with



59% five years ago.



More structured forms of collaboration were reported less frequently than five years ago.

	5 years ago	Current	Change
Joint grants	39%	→ 26%	↓ -13pp
Joint research projects	38%	→ 28%	↓ -10pp
Co-supervision	47%	→ 37%	↓ -10pp
Hosting or visiting researchers	63%	→ 55%	↓ - 8pp

Experience of Research Security Requirements and Effects on Research



62%

agreed or strongly agreed that Australia needs policies to manage national security risks in international research collaboration.



96%

agreed or strongly agreed that China-related research collaboration provides important benefits to Australia's research system.



73%

agreed or strongly agreed that research security risks in China-related collaboration should be assessed case by case.



71%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that Australian government guidance on research security risk is clear and practical.



75%

disagreed or strongly disagreed that research security policies are applied consistently across countries according to the specific risks of each collaboration.



84%

considered the overall level of scrutiny applied to China-related research collaboration to be too strict.



Perceived change in underlying risk over the past five years (context)

30%

● said risk had increased

30%

● said risk had remained about the same

14%

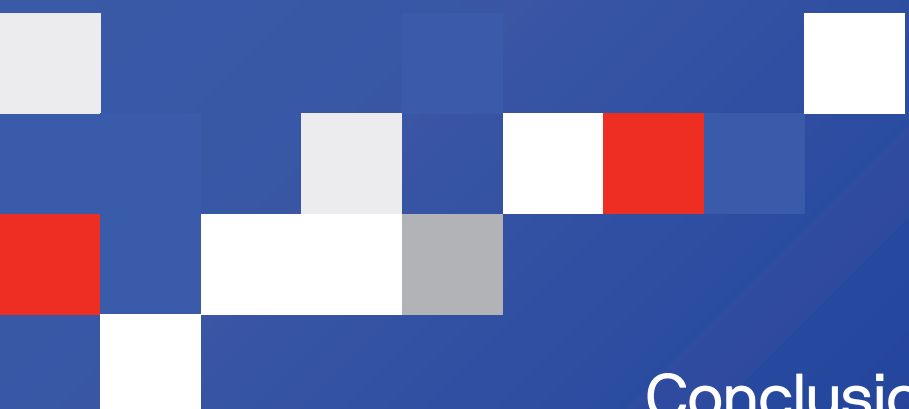
○ said risk had decreased



There was no majority view that national security risks in China-related research collaboration had increased.

Inclusion, Belonging and Career Intentions





Conclusion



The findings point to a policy challenge of adjustment rather than a simple choice between openness and security. Respondents generally accepted the need to manage research security risks but questioned whether current settings distinguish sufficiently between higher-risk activity and routine academic collaboration.

The survey suggests that this distinction matters in practice. Researchers reported changes not only to formal collaboration, but also to how they select partners, pursue grants, recruit students and staff, choose research topics and engage publicly. At the same time, many continued to see substantial scientific value in collaboration with China and in the bridging role of Chinese-background researchers.

The clearest pattern in respondents' views concerned implementation. Respondents consistently prioritised clearer guidance, more transparent and predictable review processes, case-specific assessment and better explanation of how decisions are made. These are not arguments for weaker safeguards, but for safeguards that are more targeted and easier to navigate.

Because the survey was conducted immediately before the latest expansion of Australia's foreign research framework, it provides a useful baseline for assessing how the new arrangements are implemented. A key question will be whether broader scrutiny can be applied with sufficient clarity and proportionality to protect genuinely sensitive research without unnecessarily constraining legitimate collaboration.

This question is particularly important for Australia. Its research system is relatively small and highly internationalised, while China's much larger domestic research base gives it greater capacity to absorb disruption to individual international relationships or diversify towards alternative partners. Existing publication evidence does not establish that China-related collaboration is irreplaceable for Australia but suggests that the opportunity costs of disruption are unlikely to be distributed evenly.

The policy challenge is therefore not simply to choose between research openness and security. It is to identify where risks lie, protect sensitive research accordingly, and avoid imposing unnecessary costs on the international networks through which Australia also acquires scientific capability, talent, knowledge and innovation capacity.