

RIGHT-SIZING RESEARCH SECURITY IN PRACTICE: INTERVIEWS WITH CHINESE-BACKGROUND SCIENTISTS IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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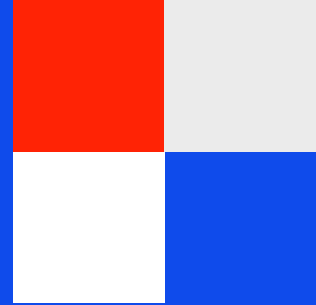
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Executive Summary

This report examines how Australia's research security settings are experienced by 12 senior Chinese-Australian scientists working across engineering, materials science, energy, computer science, artificial intelligence, photonics and related STEM fields. All have spent substantial parts of their careers in Australian universities and have extensive experience in competitive research funding, research leadership, industry engagement and international collaboration.

The report is the qualitative companion to *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities* (October 2026) by Elena Collinson, Wanning Sun, Marina Yue Zhang, James Laurenceson and Xunpeng Shi, based on responses from 109 Chinese-background researchers. While the survey, published by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), shows how widely particular views and experiences are shared, the interviews examine how research security settings are interpreted and navigated in practice, and how they affect decisions about collaborators, students, funding, travel, research direction and careers.

The interviews do not point to opposition to research security itself. All 12 participants accepted that international research could present serious national security risks and that governments and universities need safeguards. As one participant put it:

[D]efinitely necessary. From what I can see, no country today can afford not to have a policy like this.

The disagreement was primarily about where the boundaries are drawn, how consistently they are applied and what happens when researchers cannot easily determine which activities will attract additional scrutiny.

Key findings

- **Participants supported research security but wanted clearer differentiation between different levels of risk.** Interviewees generally accepted tighter controls around classified information, sensitive technology, defence-related research and other identifiable security risks. Their concern was that the boundary between these activities and lower-risk, open research could be difficult to identify. One participant said:

I don't think I've seen a clearly written document telling me precisely what I can do or cannot do. It feels more like a policy direction that's communicated to us by universities using very opaque language.

The companion survey reflects the same concern. While 62% agreed that Australia needs policies to manage national security risks in international research and 73% favoured case-by-case assessment, 70% disagreed that current policies adequately distinguish lower-risk from higher-risk collaboration.

- **Research security settings often influenced behaviour before any formal decision was made.** Participants described leaving China-based collaborators off grant applications, discouraging prospective students, limiting travel and conference activity, documenting interactions more extensively and deciding not to pursue some opportunities. In several cases, the issue was not that an activity had been formally prohibited, but that the expected administrative burden, delay or scrutiny changed the researcher's calculation. After completing extensive university due diligence for a prospective doctoral student whose visa was then delayed for more than a year, one participant said:

| *So, I asked myself: why bother?*

Another described no longer pursuing grant applications involving China-based collaborators:

| *I have stopped trying, as I know that if I involve China-based researchers and Chinese universities, I won't even jump through the hoop of my university's gatekeepers.*

- **Universities were a key point at which broad security settings were translated into practical decisions.** Participants described considerable variation between universities, faculties and research offices. Several believed that institutional incentives encouraged caution: the consequences of approving a collaboration that later attracts regulatory or public criticism are visible, while the scientific opportunity lost by delaying or declining it is harder to see. One participant characterised university behaviour in these terms:

| *From their perspective, it's about managing risk, so they are unlikely to want to confront the policy head-on or resist it.*

Another described the perceived incentives more sharply through the Chinese metaphor of the 'black gauze hat', making the case that some administrators were primarily concerned with avoiding decisions that might expose them to criticism.

- **Participants believed Australia-China scientific exchange is increasingly reciprocal, rather than principally a one-way transfer of knowledge.** Several said that policy debate still reflects an earlier period in which China was primarily acquiring scientific and technological capability from more advanced research systems. In their own fields, they described Australian researchers now seeking access to Chinese expertise, research infrastructure, equipment, large research teams and industrial capability. One participant reflected on changes in the steel sector:

| *Fifteen years ago, Chinese steel mills were still learning from overseas. Today, there is probably very little they still need to learn from abroad; instead, others are coming to learn from them.*

Another put the issue in terms of research speed:

| *In science, time is everything. Everyone wants to be the first. Australia may not aspire to be the first, but why should we deliberately slow ourselves down?*

Participants did not argue that China's growing scientific capability removed legitimate security concerns. Rather, they argued that the opportunity cost of limiting collaboration has also increased.

- **Participants linked international collaboration to research capability and research translation, not only to publications.** They described access to researchers, infrastructure, follow-on funding, industrial partners and markets as important in moving research from proof of concept towards application. One participant described the constraint in practical terms:

| *If there is no more funding to follow up, and if we cannot collaborate with China, then even if you have the research capability, you still need money and students to continue the work.*

Another connected collaboration more directly to Australia's innovation capacity:

| *At the end of the day, it's people who do it.*

The interviews cannot establish the aggregate effect of reduced collaboration on Australian innovation or productivity, but they show why participants regarded international networks as part of the process through which scientific ideas are developed, tested and translated.

- **Some participants believed their Chinese background affected how their research relationships were perceived.** Concerns about procedural fairness and differential treatment were expressed particularly strongly by several interviewees. One participant said:

Too often, I get this feeling that university research bureaucrats are not respectful of scientists with Chinese heritage like myself.

The companion survey provides a broader indication of this concern. Fifty-five percent of respondents were not confident that ethnicity, birthplace, language background or personal networks did not inappropriately influence perceptions of their China-related collaborations.

- **Dissatisfaction with research security settings often coexisted with strong commitment to Australia.** Several participants had spent decades in Australia, raised families here and described their professional identity in explicitly Australian terms. One participant reflected:

I've always believed this is a really, really good country... So I've always wanted to give something back and make a genuine contribution to this country.

Another said:

My home is here. My children are Australians. I see myself as an Australian.

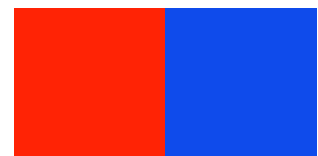
These accounts complicate any interpretation of criticism as simple disengagement. For several participants, frustration arose precisely because they believed that restrictions or uncertainty were making it harder to undertake research that they regarded as contributing to Australia.

- **Participants also linked the research environment to decisions about where scientists build their careers.** They described colleagues moving to China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Europe and the Middle East in response to a combination of constraints in Australia and attractive research opportunities elsewhere. One participant described scientific research as a vocation:

Scientists consider the pursuit of scientific research to be their calling. If you don't allow them to do research, that's a very painful thing to endure. So, they go to places where they can.

The companion survey found that 23% of respondents were either uncertain about remaining in Australian academia or had left an Australian institution where research security concerns were at least one factor.

For the participants in this study, right-sizing research security means making distinctions clearer – identifying genuinely sensitive activity, applying scrutiny in proportion to the risks involved and giving researchers enough certainty to continue pursuing international collaboration where those risks are lower.



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Introduction

Australia-China scientific collaboration now operates within a more security-conscious policy environment. China has become one of the world's largest research systems and an important scientific partner for Australian universities, while Australian governments and universities have expanded the processes used to assess foreign interference, sensitive technologies, data, institutional affiliations and other risks associated with international research.

There are substantive reasons for research security to form part of this relationship. Chinese universities operate within a system that links higher education, scientific research and technological development closely to state strategic objectives. International scientific engagement continues to be encouraged, but many forms of overseas academic exchange, publication, data transfer and research involving strategically sensitive resources are subject to substantial state and institutional oversight.

Australia also has a long-standing system of controls relevant to sensitive and dual-use research, alongside a broader university research security framework that has expanded substantially in recent years. This framework increasingly requires universities to assess and manage risks associated with international research and collaboration through governance, due diligence and institutional risk assessment, while government guidance has emphasised proportionate, risk-based responses. Further legislation enacted in August 2026 extends these requirements more directly to research projects involving researchers employed or engaged by foreign entities.

The central question examined in this report is therefore not whether China-related research should be subject to security assessment. Institutional affiliation, access to sensitive data or technology, dual-use potential, defence links and intended application can all be legitimate considerations. The question is how these factors are translated into assessments of particular researchers, projects and collaborations, and whether activities presenting materially different levels of risk are sufficiently differentiated in practice.

This report examines that process through in-depth interviews with 12 senior Chinese-Australian scientists working across materials science, engineering, energy, computer science, artificial intelligence, photonics and related STEM fields. All have spent substantial parts of their careers in Australian universities and have extensive experience of competitive research funding, laboratory leadership and international collaboration. Several have directed major research centres, served on Australian research bodies or worked extensively with government and industry. Their careers provide direct experience of both Australia-China scientific collaboration and the processes through which research security requirements are implemented.

The focus on Chinese–Australian scientists is deliberate. Many participants have long-standing professional networks spanning the Australian and Chinese research systems and work in fields in which collaboration with China has been scientifically significant while also attracting security attention. Their experience places them at the point where broad policy settings are converted into decisions about collaborators, students, funding, travel, research direction and institutional approval.

This report forms the qualitative component of a broader study and should be read alongside the companion quantitative report published by the Australia–China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities* (October 2026).¹ Based on responses from 109 Chinese-background researchers, that report examines the prevalence and distribution of views and experiences relating to research security and provides broader context on Australia–China scientific collaboration, the Chinese and Australian research security environments and Australia’s innovation and productivity system.

The survey findings provide an important starting point. Support for research security and support for China-related scientific collaboration were not mutually exclusive. Sixty-two percent of respondents agreed that Australia needs policies to manage national security risks in international research collaboration, while 96% agreed that China-related collaboration provides important benefits to Australia’s research system. Seventy-three percent favoured assessing China-related risks case by case.

The sharper disagreement concerned differentiation and implementation. Seventy-one percent of respondents disagreed that Australian government guidance on research security risk was clear and practical, 70% disagreed that current policies adequately distinguish lower-risk from higher-risk collaboration, and 75% disagreed that policies are applied consistently across countries according to the specific risks involved. Fifty-seven percent reported having avoided, changed, delayed or ended some China-related collaboration because of policies, procedures or institutional expectations.

The interviews provide greater depth on how these experiences arise and how researchers respond to them. Participants also considered consequences extending beyond individual collaborations.

Four sections organise the analysis.

Section 1 examines how participants understand the rationale and scope of Australia’s research security settings, including the influence they attribute to geopolitics and ideology, the problem of distinguishing higher from lower-risk collaboration, and China’s changing scientific capability.

Section 2 examines how research security settings are encountered in practice through recruitment and mobility, research funding and project approvals, university governance, media and reputational pressures, and assessments of dual-use research and defence-linked institutions.

Section 3 considers the consequences participants associate with reduced Australia–China research collaboration for access to research capability, innovation and research translation, and research choice and institutional openness.

Section 4 examines the individual and professional effects described by participants, including administrative burden, anticipatory self-regulation, reduced research ambition, perceived differential treatment, commitment to Australia, and career mobility and exit.

The report therefore starts from two propositions that are not inherently contradictory. Research collaboration with China can present genuine national security and governance risks. It can also provide substantial scientific and innovation benefits to an Australian research system that relies heavily on international collaboration. The interviews examine how Chinese–Australian scientists experience and navigate the tension between these objectives in practice.

1 Elena Collinson, Wanning Sun, Marina Yue Zhang, James Laurenceson and Xunpeng Shi, *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of 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-a-survey-of-chinese-background-scientists-in-australian-universities>>



Do Chinese-Australian Scientists Understand Australia's Research Security Policy?

This section examines how participants interpreted the rationale and scope of Australia’s research security settings. Their accounts show broad acceptance of the need for safeguards, alongside disagreement about how risks are framed and applied to China-related research.

1.1 Acceptance of the need for research security

All 12 interviewees accepted that national security considerations have a legitimate place in research governance. They understood why governments and universities have policies intended to manage risks associated with international research collaboration, including collaboration involving China. Participants did not argue for unrestricted international collaboration or for the removal of safeguards around sensitive technologies, classified work or activities that present identifiable security risks.

Interview participant (hereafter, IP) 8 described research governance policy informed by national security as:

[D]efinitely necessary. From what I can see, no country today can afford not to have a policy like this.

The interviews therefore did not reveal a dispute over whether research security is needed in principle. The central disagreement concerned the scope and operation of the framework, including how broadly risk is defined, whether China-related activity is treated as distinctively risky and whether current decision-making sufficiently differentiates between routine academic collaboration and research with more direct security relevance.

Table 1. Support for research security safeguards and case-specific assessment

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Support for safeguards and case-specific assessment	
62%	agreed that Australia needs policies to manage national security risks in international research collaboration.
73%	said risks in China-related collaboration should be assessed case by case, including the research field, partner, funding source, data, technology and intended use.
96%	agreed that China-related research collaboration provides important benefits to Australia’s research system.

Source: Elena Collinson, Wanning Sun, Marina Yue Zhang, James Laurenceson and Xunpeng Shi, *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of 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-a-survey-of-chinese-background-scientists-in-australian-universities>>. (Hereafter, Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026).

1.2 Geopolitics, ideology and the expansion of the security lens

Participants commonly situated the current research security environment within the broader deterioration in Australia-China and US-China relations. They differed, however, in how they interpreted the main driver of that change.

Several participants emphasised strategic competition between the US and China. IP 2, a materials engineer, viewed Australia's research security settings as reflective of Australia's strategic alignment with the US. IP 8, a professor in biochemical and process-related engineering, similarly described research policy as being drawn into a broader geopolitical contest:

The great power rivalry between China and the United States is like a tornado that has swept everyone into it. Countries are being forced to choose sides, and Australia has clearly chosen the United States. Once you become part of the American ecosystem, you also begin to adopt its language and way of framing the issues. You then end up treating China in much the same way as the United States does.

IP 2 expressed this view considerably more strongly, saying, 'In strategic terms, I think Australia is not an independent country. It's effectively the 51st state of America', but the analytical point across these accounts was not a shared assessment of Australia's alliance policy. It was participants' perception that research security settings had become more closely connected to the wider strategic relationship with China.

Other participants placed greater weight on ideological difference. IP 5, a professor in materials engineering, said that ideological distinctions between China and Western countries were being given too much weight in determining the boundaries of scientific cooperation:

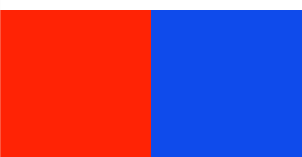
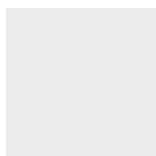
They are always talking about ideology. Of course, the two countries have somewhat different ideologies, but just how great is the difference, really? I don't think it's that great. Every country is different, but you need a degree of tolerance. Without an open and tolerant attitude, cooperation is impossible, isn't it?

IP 6, by contrast, regarded contemporary policy as primarily geopolitical rather than ideological, saying that China's strategic weight, rather than its political system alone, explained the intensity of current scrutiny:

I think that many of the current Western policies targeting China actually have little to do with whether China is communist or something else. They have nothing to do with whether you have a market economy, a communist economy or a socialist economy. It is simply because it is China.

Several participants also distinguished between the formal wording of research security settings and how they believed those settings operated in practice. Although policies and institutional processes were not always explicitly framed in China-specific terms, some interviewees considered China to be the principal focus of their application.

IP 11 described their faculty using an existing set of international benchmarks relating to transparency and corruption when assessing collaboration with China-based researchers. IP 11 initially found the connection between these measures and research security risk unclear, but came to interpret their use as a way of applying additional scrutiny without identifying China explicitly. He described this through the Chinese expression *sheng dong ji xi* (声东击西), literally 'make a noise in the east, but attack in the west':



But it was not strategic, and perhaps unacceptable, to name-check China explicitly. And they brought in a set of templates which are totally unrelated to China, since they had no other documents or provisions to work with. Do you see what I mean?

IP 11's account reflects a broader perception among some participants that formally general risk management tools could nevertheless be experienced as China-specific in their application. This perception also appeared in other interviews, including accounts of university briefings, grant decisions and additional scrutiny of China-related collaboration.

The quantitative survey provides a broader indication of this perceived shift. Thirty percent of respondents believed the underlying national security risk associated with China-related collaboration had increased over the previous five years. Larger shares, however, reported an increase in the surrounding security environment. Sixty-four percent 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 requirements placed greater emphasis on security risk. The interviews help explain how some researchers interpret the gap between those two sets of perceptions.



Image credit: MatchaBeer / Shutterstock

1.3 The problem of differentiation

A recurring concern was whether the research security framework provides sufficiently clear distinctions between activities presenting different levels of risk. Participants generally accepted tighter controls where research involved classified information, sensitive defence applications or clearly identified critical capabilities. Their concern was that, in practice, the boundary between these activities and lower-risk, open research was often difficult for researchers to identify.

Dual-use research was frequently cited as one example of this broader problem. Participants recognised that research with potential civilian and military applications can warrant additional scrutiny, but several questioned whether researchers are given sufficiently clear guidance about when such potential becomes a material security concern. This issue is examined in greater detail in Section 2.5, which considers how dual-use assessments operate in relation to particular fields, projects and institutional affiliations.

Participants also connected the problem of differentiation to the clarity of institutional guidance. IP 2 said that, from a researcher's perspective, formal boundaries were often difficult to identify:

I don't think I've seen a clearly written document telling me precisely what I can do or cannot do. It feels more like a policy direction that's communicated to us by universities using very opaque language. I also feel the policy seems to be forever subject to change. I understand that my university now has a unit tasked with countering foreign interference force, but to be honest, I can never figure out what they do.

In comparing Australia with research security governance in the US, IP 2 considered the Australian framework less explicit in identifying restrictions. IP 2 pointed to US systems that more explicitly identify restricted institutions or sensitive technology categories, arguing that clearer boundaries would make it easier for researchers to anticipate when additional scrutiny is likely to apply.

Other participants described differences between universities, faculties or schools in how similar cases were handled. IP 4, a professor in electrical and data-related engineering, gave the example of a prospective doctoral student who was rejected by one university but subsequently admitted to another university in the same city. IP 4 interpreted such differences as evidence that institutional risk tolerance, rather than a uniform external rule, can materially affect outcomes:

I know a PhD applicant who wanted to come to my university but was rejected, but then subsequently was accepted by another university in the same city. You also often hear colleagues comparing notes, commenting that applicants with almost identical backgrounds getting into PhD programs in some universities but would have no chances of getting an offer from his own university.

For several participants, the question of differentiation was ultimately connected to how they understood Australia's own national interest. IP 1 expressed this concern in particularly strong terms:

As an Australian citizen and a taxpayer, I believe that the Australian government has the responsibility to think seriously about whether the current national security policy is serving the Australian interest. I don't think so.

This view reflected a broader argument made by several participants that both the security benefits and the scientific costs of restrictions should form part of assessing Australia's interests. In their view, insufficient differentiation between higher and lower-risk activities could impose costs on research that do not necessarily correspond to the security risk being addressed.

Table 2. Perceptions of differentiation and clarity in research security policy

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Perceptions of differentiation and clarity in research security policy	
71%	disagreed that Australian government guidance on research security risk is clear and practical.
70%	disagreed that current policies adequately distinguish lower-risk from higher-risk collaboration.
75%	disagreed that 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 too strict.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.

1.4 China’s changing research capability and the perceived direction of knowledge flows

A second major theme concerned changes in China’s scientific and technological capacity. Many participants believed that Australian policy debate still implicitly reflects an earlier period in which China was primarily viewed as acquiring knowledge and technology from more advanced research systems. In their assessment, this no longer describes many areas of contemporary science and engineering.

Participants drew heavily on direct professional experience. IP 1, an engineering professor, described taking a German mining company to China and observing the visitors’ surprise at the technological capability of Chinese operations, as well as the level of confidence demonstrated by Chinese engineers. The Chinese engineers were ‘happy to show German visitors around, and shared information about their operation’.

IP 5 recalled helping arrange a visit by Australian steel industry representatives to China:

Fifteen years ago, Chinese steel mills were still learning from overseas. Today, there is probably very little they still need to learn from abroad; instead, others are coming to learn from them.

When I helped arrange a visit to Chinese steel mills, it became clear to Australian steel industry that it was the Australians who need to learn. China’s progress has been remarkably rapid.

The point made across these accounts was that the direction of scientific benefit is increasingly reciprocal and, in some fields, may favour Australian access to Chinese expertise, infrastructure, scale or speed of experimentation.

IP 4 expressed this in terms of the kind of knowledge exchanged in open academic collaboration:

When we engage with them, people assume that China is stealing from us, but what we exchange is academic research, and what we publish is open access anyway. When we meet, we may simply discuss something like how to calculate inductance more quickly and accurately because that is the kind of work we do. There is nothing sinister about it. To us scientists, all these suspicions are simply baffling.

Other participants made a similar point about assumptions concerning intellectual property and the direction of knowledge transfer. IP 10 argued that concerns about China acquiring Australian ideas or research were, in some instances, no longer consistent with the relative capabilities IP 10 observed in practice. IP 5 put the point more bluntly:

I'm not sure who should be stealing from who.

IP 7, a professor in engineering, made the related point in terms of research speed:

In science, time is everything. Everyone wants to be the first. Australia may not aspire to be the first, but why should we deliberately slow ourselves down?

Some participants drew a broader implication from this change in relative capability. IP 5 questioned whether Australia's interests necessarily aligned with efforts to slow China's technological development, arguing that Australia had limited capacity to affect China's trajectory and could itself lose access to advanced research capability:

China is already at the forefront, and the idea that Australia could somehow help the US to slow it down is like a 'mantis trying to stop a chariot'.

Some participants also challenged a strictly zero-sum interpretation of researcher mobility and training. IP 12 used Chinese government-funded doctoral students as an example of reciprocal benefit:

There is an assumption that, because these students are funded by the Chinese government, allowing them to come to Australia is necessarily harmful to Australia. Sure, these students come and acquire research capabilities as individuals which ultimately may benefit China, but while they are here, they also spend many long hours in the lab working on their supervisors' Australian-funded projects, doing the hard work that local Australian graduates are mostly unwilling to do.

This was reflected in how participants framed the policy objective. A number advocated an approach broadly consistent with the idea of a 'small yard, high fence', a narrow definition of genuinely sensitive activities, combined with continued openness in lower-risk research. IP 2, a materials science and engineering professor, summarised their preferred principles as 'compliance, transparency, reporting of conflicts of interest, protection of undisclosed technologies and maintaining normal open scientific collaborations.'



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How Does the
Research Security
Framework Operate
in Practice?

The first section addressed how participants interpret the policy environment. This section examines where they encounter research security requirements in practice.

Across the interviews, four points of contact were especially prominent:

1. recruitment and mobility
2. research funding and project approval
3. university governance, and
4. media attention and reputational risk.

Participants also described uncertainty around dual-use research and defence-linked institutions as cutting across each of these areas.

2.1 Recruitment and mobility

Difficulty recruiting doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers and visiting scholars from China was one of the most consistent operational concerns. Participants described laboratory research as dependent on sustained access to technically capable researchers, particularly in fields requiring intensive experimental work.

Interviewees offered several explanations for their reliance on Chinese research students. They cited a limited domestic pool of students seeking research degrees in some STEM disciplines, the scale of China's graduate population, and the technical preparation of applicants from highly competitive Chinese universities. These assessments are participants' own and should not be generalised to all students or disciplines. Their practical concern was that delays or uncertainty in admitting preferred candidates could leave projects under-resourced.

IP 5 described how a larger laboratory team had previously allowed work to be divided and integrated efficiently:

All these students worked collaboratively in the lab, with each person working on a different aspect before everything was brought together. That way, we were very efficient, and we could get results quickly.

IP 6, a professor working across materials science, chemistry and physics, described accepting a less suitable candidate after preferred students were unable to commence:

When the students we ideally want were not coming, there was little choice but to move forward and compromise by taking a less capable student instead.

IP 6 connected staffing constraints to research speed and follow-through. In their account, a team might establish an idea or proof of concept but lose the race to optimise or apply it if it lacked sufficient researchers to continue the work:

As your preferred students aren't coming, your project progresses slowly. So, in the end, you often find yourself saying that your group was the first to come up with the idea and proof of concept. But the version with the best performance wasn't developed by us. Because we didn't have the team to follow through to the application stage, very often someone else beat us to it.

IP 2 described the same mechanism more succinctly: 'Look, it's simple – no students mean no research data, no data means no research outputs and results; no outputs mean no further funding.'

Participants described internal admission or due diligence processes and visa processing as cumulative stages. Completing university approval did not necessarily resolve uncertainty about whether, or when, a preferred researcher could commence. For some interviewees, that combination of delay and uncertainty affected recruitment decisions before a formal refusal occurred.

IP 2 described changing the advice they gave prospective Chinese students on this basis:

When Chinese students approach me, I simply tell them not to bother, as I know they won't get visas.

2.2 Research funding decisions and project approvals

Participants also described research funding as an important point at which security considerations shape collaboration choices. Several said that including China-based collaborators in grant applications had shifted from being perceived as an advantage to being perceived as a possible source of delay or disadvantage.

IP 11 recalled that Chinese collaborators had previously been considered an asset, strengthening proposals where they brought strong publication records, equipment or complementary expertise. But things are ‘just the opposite now’, IP 11 said, describing a change in researchers’ calculations:

In the past, listing Chinese collaborators was unquestionably a positive. Today, however, the calculation has changed. Including a Chinese collaborator is widely perceived as a potential risk, to the point that many researchers are reluctant to do so because they expect it to create disadvantages rather than benefits.

IP 2 recounted an unsuccessful Australian Research Council (ARC) application involving a China-based team. IP 2 said that subsequent feedback encouraged him to consider collaboration with researchers in the United States, Southeast Asia or Europe. The feedback did not explicitly state that the China-based collaboration caused the result; IP 2 nevertheless interpreted the advice as a signal to avoid similar proposals in future. IP 2 said:

They did not explicitly say I shouldn't have involved Chinese collaborators, but the message is clear enough.

IP 3, a professor in materials and energy research, described a more extensive adaptation, saying that they had stopped applying for ARC funding where China-based researchers or institutions were involved because IP 3 expected difficulty at internal review stages:

I have stopped trying, as I know that if I involve China-based researchers and Chinese universities, I won't even jump through the hoop of my university's gatekeepers.

IP 7 also described examples of Australia-China collaborations that proceeded when they were supported or initiated through state or federal government channels, citing an example of a collaborative project between the University of Queensland and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. For IP 7, these cases suggested that the acceptability of China-related collaboration could depend not only on the research topic and partner but also on the institutional pathway through which a project was established. A few other interviewees also offered examples of such collaboration, stressing that though not common, government-initiated collaboration with China does still happen.

Table 3. Effects of research security requirements on research practice

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Effects of research security requirements on research practice	
73%	reported that security-related requirements had affected their research at least moderately.
57%	reported avoiding, changing, delaying or ending some China-related collaboration because of policies, procedures or institutional expectations.
63%	reported visa-related complications associated with China-related research collaboration.
50%	reported difficulties hosting, supervising or recruiting researchers or students.
49%	reported project approval delays.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.

2.3 University governance

For most interviewees, universities were the institution through which research security requirements were encountered most directly. Participants described interactions with research offices, faculty administrators, due diligence processes and internal approval committees. Their accounts varied by university, but a common theme was that institutional risk management could produce more caution than broader statements of strategy might suggest.

IP 6 described the leadership at their university as supportive of international research collaboration, including collaboration with China, but said that this position did not always determine decisions at lower organisational levels:

So, the VC understands very clearly that collaboration is essential and that China's research is extremely strong. Overall, the atmosphere at our university is quite positive. But you know, sometimes the senior leadership encourages collaboration, yet it's the schools and faculties further down that have to implement those policies. If they decide to be overly cautious, there's not much anyone can do about it.

IP 6's account points to a feature of implementation, namely that research security decisions are often made through several organisational layers. Participants therefore experienced policy not primarily through senior university leadership, but through research offices, faculties, schools and administrative units responsible for assessing individual applications and collaborations.

Participants also noted a tension between universities' research security settings and other institutional objectives. IP 2, who had been involved in preparing material for university rankings, observed that institutions continue to value internationalisation, publication output and global research partnerships while, in IP 2's experience, becoming more cautious about some forms of collaboration with China. IP 2 saw this as creating competing incentives for researchers and administrators.

Several interviewees described these processes as producing a strong institutional preference for caution. In their view, universities faced asymmetric incentives. Approving a collaboration that subsequently attracted regulatory or public criticism could carry a visible institutional cost, while the scientific opportunity lost through delaying or declining a collaboration was less immediate and more difficult to observe. Participants therefore described a tendency for uncertainty to be resolved conservatively.

IP 10, a professor in photonics, characterised this as a risk management response:

In general, university leadership tends to take a more risk management approach. From their perspective, it's about managing risk, so they are unlikely to want to confront the policy head-on or resist it.

Some participants went further, interpreting the behaviour of individual administrators as shaped by professional incentives as well as institutional risk. IP 10 said that some administrators could use research security requirements as a 'big stick', while IP 8 argued that officials may be particularly concerned with avoiding decisions that could expose them personally or institutionally to criticism.

IP 8 expressed this view through the Chinese metaphor of the 'black gauze hat' (*wu sha mao*, 乌纱帽):

They don't worry about the university's long-term interest; they don't even care about Australia's national interest. They want to be seen to be doing the 'right thing', so that they don't lose their own 'black gauze hat'.

Table 4. Institutional research security processes

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Institutional research security processes	
39%	disagreed that their institution’s guidance on China-related collaboration was clear and easy to understand.
38%	disagreed that research security decisions were explained to affected researchers.
38%	disagreed that research security decisions were applied consistently from case to case.
40%	disagreed that researchers had meaningful opportunities to request review or appeal of research security decisions.

Neutral and unsure responses were also substantial across these items, indicating that some respondents may not have had direct experience of the relevant institutional processes.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.

2.4 Media attention and reputational risk

Interviewees also identified media scrutiny as an additional influence on how China-related research collaboration is managed within universities. Several described being conscious that collaborations involving China could attract public attention even where researchers believed that formal compliance requirements had been met. In their accounts, the significance of media coverage lay less in its direct regulatory effect than in its potential to increase reputational risk for universities and, in turn, encourage more cautious institutional responses.

IP 8 described this pressure using the Chinese expression *jin gu zhou* (紧箍咒), a reference to the constraining spell in *Journey to the West*. IP 8 used the metaphor to describe what they saw as an indirect disciplinary effect: researchers and university administrators anticipating the possibility of adverse publicity and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. Other interviewees similarly argued that media reporting could shape institutional perceptions of China-related activity, particularly where research relationships were presented through a national security lens.

This perception was not confined to the interview sample. In the companion survey, 53% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that media coverage and political debate about China-related research collaboration generally distinguish evidence-based security risks from broader political concern or speculation, while 15% agreed or strongly agreed.

Interviewees also described possible downstream effects on individual researchers. IP 6, who had not herself been named in media reporting, believed that public scrutiny could affect subsequent grant applications, employment security and the level of documentation expected for future China-related collaborations:

So, in reality, media absolutely does impact on people's career. This is my impression.

IP 8 referred to the case of a Chinese-Australian scientist whose ARC-funded work was, according to his account, subjected to additional background checking following media reporting about the scientist’s involvement in a patent arising from an earlier collaboration in China. IP 8 noted that at the time the scientist’s name was added to the patent application, the political climate was different and collaboration with China was encouraged.

2.5 Dual-use research and defence affiliations

The broader problem of differentiation discussed in Section 1.3 was especially apparent in interviewees' accounts of dual-use research and collaboration with institutions that have defence-related affiliations. Participants generally accepted that these factors are relevant to research security assessment. Their concern was with how potential dual-use is translated into judgments about the risk associated with a particular project, researcher or institutional relationship.

Several interviewees noted that research in fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, materials science, photonics and engineering can have both civilian and military applications. They did not question the relevance of this potential to security assessment. Rather, they distinguished between identifying research as potentially dual-use and determining that a particular activity presents a sufficiently material risk to warrant additional controls or restriction.

IP 8 described the breadth of the issue in the following terms:

After all, it's difficult to think of any technology that could not, in some way, be considered dual-use. In this political climate, everything becomes a security issue simply because people want to avoid making mistakes. As a result, if your work involves artificial intelligence, biology, medicine, genetic information, or virtually any branch of engineering – mechanical, electrical, information engineering, and so on – it can all be labelled as 'dual-use'. That's because modern military capability is itself a systems enterprise: it draws on and integrates advances from virtually every field of science and technology.

This issue became more pronounced where collaboration involved Chinese universities with defence affiliations, links to defence-related institutions, or research programs that may contribute to military capabilities. Interviewees generally accepted that such institutional relationships can be relevant to assessment. Several, however, questioned whether institutional affiliation should itself be treated as sufficient evidence of the risk associated with an individual researcher or project. They argued that assessment should also consider the nature and maturity of the research, the sensitivity of the information involved, the form of collaboration, intended outputs and any access controls already in place.

IP 2, who has worked with the Australian government on defence-related research, noted that university participation in defence research is not unique to China. In his view, the relevant issue is therefore not simply whether an institution undertakes defence-related work, but how that work is organised and governed:

It is very common for universities around the world to participate in defence-related research. The key difference between China and Australia, therefore, is not whether Chinese universities conduct defence research, but rather how the defence research system is organised and the role universities play within it.

IP 10 made a related argument from the Australian context. IP 10 noted that defence-related research already operates through differentiated access and classification requirements, with some projects open to broad academic participation and others restricted by residency, citizenship or security clearance. In her view, these mechanisms demonstrate the possibility of distinguishing sensitive work from research intended for open publication:

Ultimately, all of the research we do is published openly. That means our collaborations are really confined to the fundamental research level. The genuinely high-level work isn't something that researchers from foreign universities can access. To give you a simple example, in Australia there is also defence-related research. It is subject to different levels of security classification. If a project is not classified, then anyone can generally work on it. But once it carries a security classification, there are strict eligibility requirements. Some projects require you to be an Australian permanent resident, while others require Australian citizenship. Those requirements are enforced very rigorously.

IP 10 therefore questioned whether additional scrutiny of China-related collaboration always corresponded to an identifiable increase in risk, illustrating this as seeking in some fashion to ‘find a bone in an egg’. In this context, the metaphor captured her view that additional controls should be linked to identifiable characteristics of the research or collaboration, rather than inferred principally from national or institutional affiliation.

Table 5. Clarity and consistency of dual-use risk assessment

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Clarity and consistency of dual-use risk assessments	
58%	disagreed that the concept of ‘dual-use’ is clearly defined in research governance.
60%	disagreed that China-related collaborations involving potential dual-use risk are assessed using the same risk criteria as other international collaborations.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.





A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consists of a grid of squares in white, light gray, dark gray, and blue. To the right of this grid is the number '03' in a large, white, outlined font. Further to the right is a vertical bar with a white top half and a red bottom half.

03

What Consequences Do Participants Associate with Reduced Australia-China Research Collaboration?

Participants were asked to consider the broader consequences of the changes they described. Their responses concentrated on three related mechanisms: access to research capability and infrastructure, the translation of research into applications and the effect of heightened caution on research choice and institutional openness. The interviews are most informative about how participants believe these effects arise, rather than about estimating their aggregate economic or scientific impact.

3.1 Access to research capability

All 12 interviewees believed that a sustained reduction in Australia-China scientific collaboration would impose meaningful costs on Australian research. The strength of this view reflected their assessment of the relative size of the two research systems and the role China now plays in several STEM fields.

Participants also described the potential costs of reduced collaboration as asymmetric. In their view, China's larger research system and industrial base would be better placed to absorb a contraction in Australian engagement than Australia would be to replace access to Chinese research capability. IP 5 put the point this way:

If China and Australia were to decouple in areas like energy, batteries, materials and automation, the impact on China would actually be almost negligible. But for Australia, the impact would be quite significant.

Participants repeatedly referred to access to specialist facilities, large research teams, equipment and datasets. IP 4, an electrical engineer, described collaboration with Chinese laboratories partly as a way of accessing equipment that would be expensive to reproduce in Australia:

The lab equipment we need is extremely costly to purchase and maintain, so we can't afford to purchase or upgrade lab equipment like the Chinese do. If they're happy to let us work in their labs and use their equipment, we can pursue our projects cheaply. And we can also piggyback on their infrastructure to train our own students.

IP 7 emphasised the role of scale and speed. In IP 7's view, an idea can lose scientific value if a better resourced team elsewhere is able to develop, test and publish it more rapidly. IP 7 therefore saw access to larger external research systems as a way for Australian researchers to compensate for domestic constraints in staffing and infrastructure.

IP 7 described the interaction between ideas, people and infrastructure in the following terms:

Twenty years ago, China was still catching up, but now it is leading in most fields. Science develops so fast these days; you may have a good idea, and I might also have a good idea, but ultimately, it is down to who have material and human advantage that get to develop these ideas. If we don't collaborate, we would not be able to keep pace with China, let alone to innovate.



Table 6. Exposure to China-related research collaboration

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Exposure to China-related research collaboration	
93%	had current or previous experience of China-related research collaboration.
63%	were currently collaborating with researchers or institutions in China.
More resilient	direct forms of scholarly exchange, particularly co-authorship.
Less frequent than five years earlier	more structured forms of collaboration, including joint grants, joint projects, co-supervision and researcher visits.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.



3.2 Innovation and research translation

A second concern was the capacity to move from an initial scientific result to a developed technology, application or commercial outcome. Participants described this process as requiring resources beyond an individual laboratory, including follow-on funding, larger research teams, specialist equipment, industry partners and access to markets. In their accounts, international collaboration could contribute at several stages of this process by bringing together complementary expertise, infrastructure and pathways for further development.

IP 10 framed innovation primarily as a human and collaborative process. IP 10 noted the emphasis placed on innovation in Australian policy and questioned whether this objective could be pursued effectively while simultaneously creating additional barriers to international scientific exchange:

The question is: who is actually going to do this innovation? At the end of the day, it's people who do it. The reality is that scientific and technological development depends on diversity. No single country can solve all the world's problems on its own. In today's highly globalised world, with such an extensive international division of labour, no country can monopolise an entire industry. Supply chains are multinational. So you have to have this kind of international division of labour and collaboration. Australia is already geographically isolated. If you then create additional barriers to collaborating with other countries, how can it continue to develop?

IP 6 made a similar argument from their experience of international collaboration more broadly. IP 6 emphasised that their point was not specific to China – scientific advances often emerge from interactions between researchers with different disciplinary and institutional backgrounds. IP 6 recalled that one of her most productive research ideas originated during a three-month visit by a German student to her laboratory. For IP 6, the value of international collaboration therefore lay partly in exposing research teams to ideas, methods and expertise that would not necessarily emerge within a single laboratory or national research system.

At the same time, participants regarded China as increasingly important within this wider international research environment because of the scale of its scientific workforce, research infrastructure and industrial capacity. IP 6 argued that engagement with Chinese researchers could provide access not only to scientific expertise but also to larger research networks and resources relevant to the development of laboratory findings. IP 6's concern was that reduced access to students, collaborators and research infrastructure in China could narrow some of the pathways available to Australian researchers for advancing work beyond its initial stages.

For IP 4, the central issue was what happens after an early-stage idea has been demonstrated. IP 4 described a gap between support for initial research and the resources required to continue development:

When we develop a new idea, the ARC is often willing to support the initial concept, because our proposal on rotating systems and rotating magnetic fields promises innovation. But if you want to take that research further and continue developing it, there is often no further support. Yet isn't the purpose of this research ultimately to create applications? So you need to find collaborators. But if there is no more funding to follow up, and if we cannot collaborate with China, then even if you have the research capability, you still need money and students to continue the work.

IP 4's account identifies a specific mechanism through which international collaboration can contribute to research translation. Where domestic follow-on funding, personnel or infrastructure are limited, external collaborators may provide resources that allow a project to progress from proof of concept towards further development or application. From this perspective, the consequence of reduced collaboration is not simply fewer publications or formal partnerships, but potentially fewer pathways for continuing work after an initial scientific result has been established.

Participants also linked research translation to access to industry and markets. IP 10 argued that scientific capability alone is insufficient to generate practical or commercial outcomes: research must also connect with demand, industrial partners and the capacity to develop ideas into products or applications. Her concern was that Australia may have strong research capability but fewer opportunities to translate that capability at scale without access to larger external innovation ecosystems.

IP 8 made a similar argument, placing greater emphasis on industrial and market scale. In IP 8's view, scientific knowledge generates economic value only when it can be connected to firms, production systems and markets capable of developing and adopting new technologies. IP 8 saw engagement with major Asian innovation ecosystems, including China, as one potential pathway through which Australian research could gain access to these complementary capabilities:

The strongest market and the most dynamic region is Asia – more precisely China. China today is where innovation and entrepreneurship are most active, and the activity level of the Chinese market remains the highest.

...

Look, we are really looking at two things here: growth rate and share of global output. In terms of global share, if Australia cannot connect its universities and research system with a strong market force and strong industrial driving force outside the country, then most of its innovation potential will remain unrealised.

IP 10 also described attempts to preserve these pathways in practice. IP 10 referred to taking a Melbourne delegation to China to explore whether technologies developed overseas could be introduced into Australian industry. IP 10 framed this not as an alternative to domestic innovation, but as one way of connecting external technological capability with Australian firms and applications:

If we take technologies from overseas and help Australian industries develop locally, those technologies can help the local economy.

This argument extends the concern raised by IP 4. Participants were not only describing a shortage of follow-on research funding; they were also pointing to the wider set of relationships required to move from scientific discovery to application. In their accounts, international collaboration can provide access to complementary resources at several stages of that process, including researchers, infrastructure, industry partners and markets. Reduced collaboration with China was therefore viewed by some participants as potentially narrowing one set of pathways through which Australian research could be developed and scaled.

External benchmarking provides additional context for this concern. In the 2025 Global Innovation Index, Australia ranked 22nd of 139 economies and had improved from 23rd in 2024. More relevant to the interview theme of research translation, Australia ranked 16th for innovation inputs but 27th for innovation outputs. While the Index does not identify the causes of this gap, it provides a broader indicator of the distinction between the resources and conditions supporting innovation and the outputs generated from them.²

Against this background, IP 12 was pessimistic about Australia's future position, predicting, 'It's going to slip further, and the slip will continue.'

2 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), *Global Innovation Index 2025: Australia*, accessed September 21 2026 <<https://www.wipo.int/gii-ranking/en/australia>>.

3.3 Research choice and institutional openness

A third system-level concern was the effect of uncertainty on the range of research relationships and activities that academics were willing to pursue. Participants referred to changes in collaborator choice, research topics, travel, data access and the willingness to pursue or discuss China-related opportunities.

IP 8 was the participant who most directly framed this as an academic freedom issue. In IP 8's view, the concern was not necessarily that collaboration had been formally prohibited, but that the possibility of security scrutiny altered how freely researchers felt able to make scholarly choices:

So, in a situation like this, if there are no issues involved, people can collaborate freely. That is, after all, part of academic freedom—you collaborate with whoever you want to collaborate with. But once the issue happens to be connected with this so-called “security” concern, then things become much more complicated. You can no longer simply take it lightly, even if you have no intention of doing anything wrong. Some may say that because I am Chinese-Australian that I should stay silent. In fact, I think I have even more reason to speak out, because I understand China better.

For IP 8, the significance of this extended beyond individual collaboration decisions. IP 8 also described what they perceived as a reluctance within some research institutions to engage openly with China-related questions or opportunities, arguing that the subject was often ‘avoided’ or ‘deliberately left out’ of discussions about research direction. IP 8 summarised their concern in the following terms:

Whether you like it or not, whether you love it or not, China is unquestionably one of the most important countries in the world, and not talking about it does not make it disappear.

Other interviewees generally used less normative language but described comparable practical effects. They referred to excluding China-based collaborators from proposals, avoiding topics considered likely to attract additional scrutiny, limiting travel or conference activity, and deciding that some collaborations were not worth the anticipated administrative or reputational cost.

These accounts suggest that the effect of research security settings can extend beyond formal decisions to the choices researchers make in anticipation of how an activity may later be assessed.

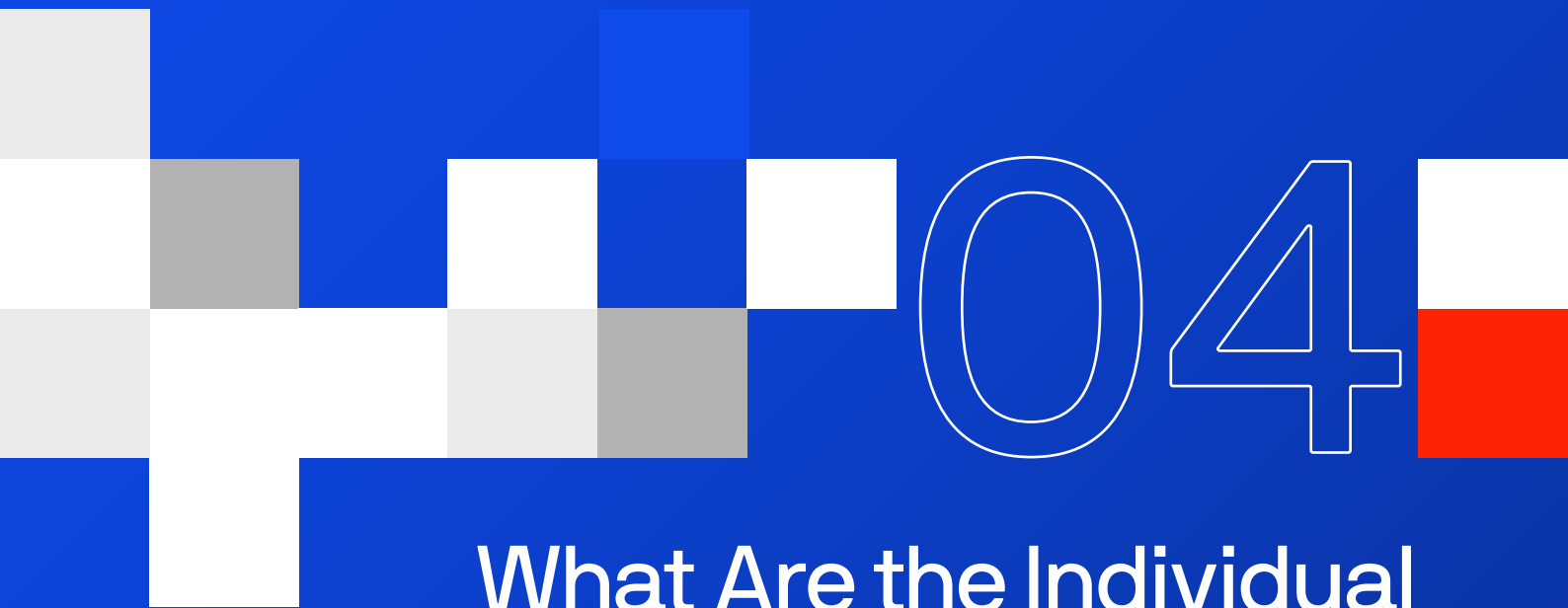
The interviews therefore point to a narrowing of practical choice under conditions of uncertainty. Scientific considerations remained central to participants' decisions, but some described giving greater weight to possible administrative delay, institutional scrutiny or reputational consequences when selecting collaborators, projects or forms of engagement.

This distinction is important. With the exception of IP 8, most participants did not characterise their experiences as a direct loss of academic freedom. Nevertheless, their accounts repeatedly concerned elements closely related to research autonomy: whom to collaborate with, what questions to pursue, what data or facilities to access, and whether particular forms of international engagement were worth initiating.

Participants also connected openness in research decision-making to creativity and innovation. In IP 8's view, researchers are more likely to generate new ideas where they are able to explore relationships and opportunities on scholarly grounds rather than primarily through an assessment of how those choices may be perceived institutionally.

Section 4 examines this mechanism at the individual level, focusing on the strategies researchers adopted in response, including additional documentation, modification of collaboration arrangements, anticipatory self-regulation and, in some cases, withdrawal from particular activities.





What Are the Individual and Professional Costs for Chinese-Australian Researchers?

The final section turns from system-level consequences to individual responses. Participants described a continuum ranging from increased administrative effort and cautious adaptation to reduced engagement, demoralisation and, in some cases, consideration of leaving the Australian research system. These varied according to field, institutional support, career stage and the extent to which a participant's research depended on China-linked collaboration.

4.1 Administrative burden and the declining willingness to pursue collaboration

Participants repeatedly described the cumulative burden of compliance rather than any single approval requirement as a deterrent to collaboration. Activities such as recruiting a student, hosting a visiting delegation or initiating a project could require multiple layers of due diligence, disclosure and approval.

IP 8 used the example of inviting a Chinese delegation:

Let's take something as simple as inviting a delegation from China to visit. Nowadays you have to go through rounds of approvals at the department and university levels. By the time you've finished all the paperwork, either the visitors are no longer coming, or they feel the process is simply too much trouble. And from the host's perspective, who wants to deal with that much administrative burden just to invite someone?

The concern described here relates specifically to the Australian host-side procedures encountered by interviewees. Cross-border academic mobility can also be subject to requirements imposed by counterpart institutions and authorities outside Australia; the interviews did not attempt to compare those systems. Participants' concern was with the cumulative transaction cost created when university approval, due diligence and immigration processes interacted.

IP 4 described a prospective doctoral student whom they regarded as particularly strong. After completing extensive internal due diligence, the student's visa remained delayed for more than a year. IP 4 said:

I was approached by a very bright student who could be an asset for my project, so I thought it was worth a try, even though I was aware of the admin work. My perseverance paid off: after many hours complying with due diligence process, I finally got approval to accept this student, only to have this student's visa to be held up by immigration. The student has now been waiting for more than a year. So, I asked myself, why bother?

This response identifies a mechanism by which formal compliance processes can change behaviour without formally banning an activity. If the expected administrative cost, delay or uncertainty exceeds the expected research benefit, researchers may choose not to proceed.

4.2 Adaptation and anticipatory self-regulation

Most interviewees had not disengaged from international research altogether. Instead, they described adapting the form of their activity. Common strategies included excluding China-based collaborators from grant proposals, limiting collaboration to co-authorship, avoiding sensitive topics when organising conferences, declining financial support for travel, documenting interactions more extensively, or redirecting partnerships toward Australian institutions and industry.

IP 1 described in recent years restricting collaboration with China to attending conferences in China or hosting research symposiums in Australia. Even in these activities, IP 1 said they exercised additional caution. When invited to speak at a conference in China with offers of paid travel and accommodation, IP 1 would pay their own expenses and document the trip on return. When inviting China-based scholars to conferences in Australia, IP 1 avoided topics considered geopolitically sensitive and preferred that the host university did not publicise the activity due to anxiety about undue attention it might attract.

IP 1 described this caution as China-specific:

No problems with us going to other countries with all expenses paid, or we inviting attendees from other countries, but China is different.

Several participants described this caution as extending beyond formal compliance requirements. They were attentive not only to whether an activity was permitted, but also to how it might later be interpreted by universities, funding bodies or the media. IP 8 linked this to a reluctance among some Chinese-Australian researchers to speak publicly about research security issues, citing concern about professional, reputational and possible legal consequences. In IP 8's account, the effect was not simply behavioural adjustment but reduced confidence in pursuing work that might attract scrutiny:

This fear carried a significant emotional burden. We are not simply changing our behaviour to minimise risk; we also have less confidence in our ability to pursue our work without jeopardising our own safety and our career security.

IP 6's account shows how research security expectations can be internalised as part of routine research conduct. Rather than treating compliance simply as an external constraint, IP 6 framed caution and adherence to approval processes as consistent with responsible research practice and her understanding of Australia's interests:

Whenever those conversations come up, the first step is to go through the university's approval process. Everything produced in our laboratory belongs to Australia, so we have to follow the proper procedures. If the university, or my supervisor, believes that doing so would benefit Australia, and they approve it, then we'll go ahead. If they don't approve it, then we won't. Our priority is always to benefit Australia as much as possible. I suppose I'm a fairly cautious person. I've always placed limits on myself in this respect, because I believe everything has to be done through the proper procedures.

IP 9, a professor in computer science and artificial intelligence, likewise described themselves as deliberately cautious. IP 9 connected this approach to what they perceived as the China-specific emphasis of institutional risk messaging:

Someone from the University's Research Office came to speak to our Faculty specifically about risks associated with collaborations with China. Nobody from the Research Office has ever talked to us about risks with collaborating with the US or anything like that.

IP 2 described a more substantial narrowing of activity, saying they no longer included China-based collaborators in ARC proposals or recruited students from China to staff their laboratory, but continued to co-author publications with China-based researchers where permitted by IP 2's university. IP 2 said permission was given so long as the topic of the co-authored publications was not directly related to IP 2's research in Australia. IP 2 said they were able to contribute to these publications from a methodological perspective, and their institutional affiliation would contribute to their university's efforts to increase research output and improve its position in global rankings. IP 2's account illustrates adaptation through the reconfiguration, rather than complete cessation, of international collaboration.

4.3 Reduced research ambition

A consequential response described by several participants was a reduction in willingness to initiate ambitious or uncertain work. Unlike the adaptations discussed in the previous section, which involved changing how research was conducted, these accounts concerned researchers' motivation to pursue additional opportunities in the first place.

Several participants described becoming more selective about whether a new collaboration, funding application or research idea was worth the expected effort and uncertainty. In their accounts, this did not necessarily involve withdrawing from research altogether. Rather, it meant placing greater limits on discretionary activity: pursuing fewer new opportunities, avoiding projects likely to require extensive approvals or concentrating on work that could be completed with less institutional complexity.

IP 10 captured this approach through the Chinese expression *duo yi shi bu ru shao yi shi* (多一事不如少一事), 'the less trouble, the better'. IP 4 expressed a similar idea more pointedly:

If we are lazy, the current situation in fact would give us an excuse to do nothing.

The remark was partly rhetorical, but it captures the incentive effect described by several interviewees: where pursuing an additional opportunity entails substantial administrative effort or uncertainty, there may be fewer reasons to undertake work beyond what is necessary to maintain existing research activity.

IP 2 described this shift more directly in terms of their own research ambition:

I keep telling myself not to get carried away with potential ideas for innovation. I often tell myself not to take it too seriously. It's just a job.

IP 5, approaching the later stages of their career, expressed a similar withdrawal of discretionary effort:

I'll just do what I need to do and then retire.

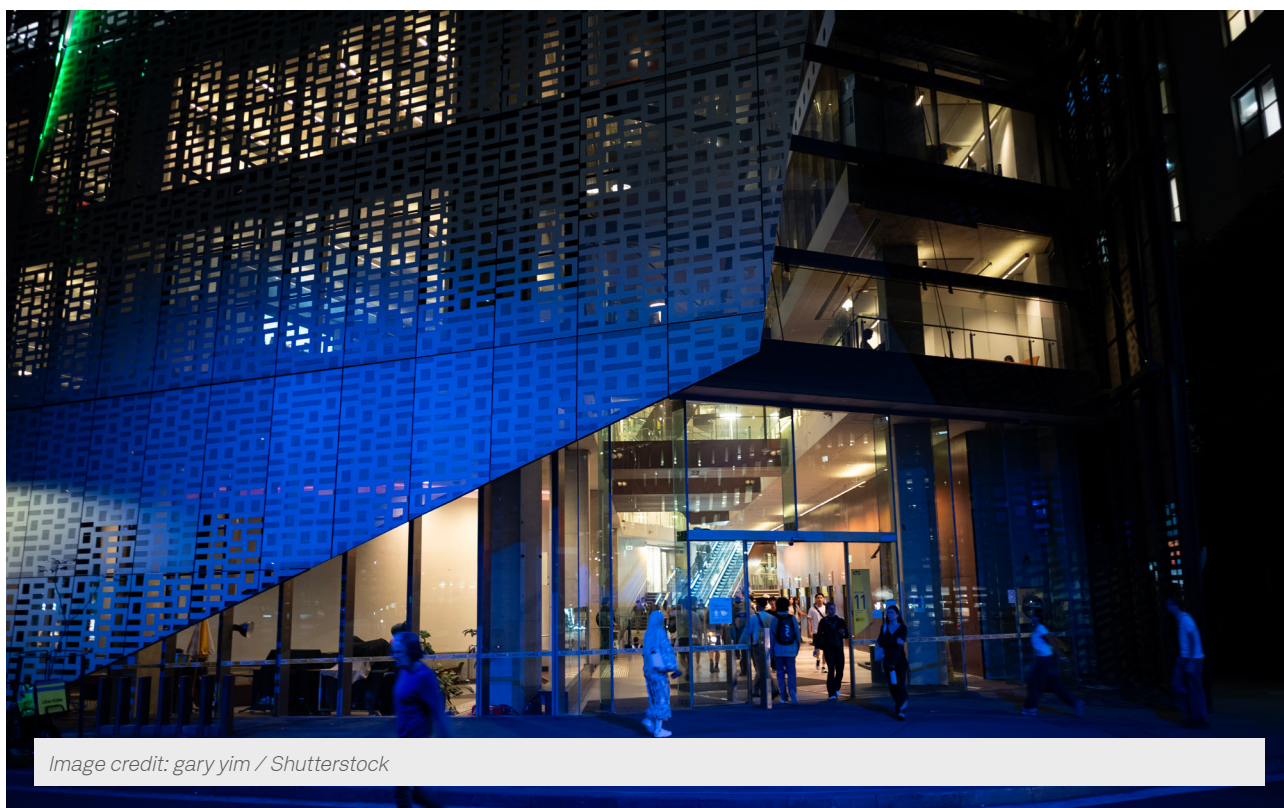


Image credit: gary yim / Shutterstock

4.4 Perceived differential treatment and procedural fairness

Several participants believed that scrutiny of China-related research was influenced not only by the content of the collaboration but also by the researcher's Chinese background. These participants saw differential treatment as having implications beyond individual research decisions. They described concern that repeated association between Chinese background and security risk could affect their sense of professional inclusion within Australian academia.

IP 10 expressed the concern in strongly personal terms, describing Chinese-background scientists as having contributed substantially to Australian science while feeling that those contributions were insufficiently recognised when security concerns arose. IP 10 said:

We came here full of enthusiasm, wanting to give something back. We've made contributions to this country. There are so many fields in which Australia is a world leader, including materials science, for example, as well as some areas of engineering and design, and people with Chinese heritage have played a major role in those achievements. Yet people like us have been left feeling so disheartened.

Our whole family has settled here, and this is where we plan to stay. Australia is an immigrant country. So why are Chinese people treated this way? Why do we face this kind of discrimination after contributing so much? Maybe we've just been too quiet. Even when we're treated unfairly, we don't speak up.

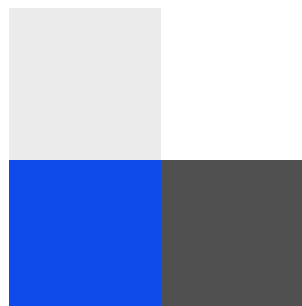
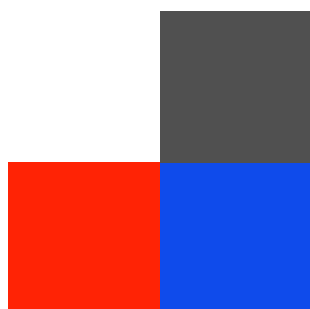
IP 3 contrasted their own willingness to speak publicly with that of a prominent non-Chinese Australian scientist known for extensive China collaboration, who vocally champions China collaboration in solar cell research. IP 3 believed a Chinese-Australian researcher would face greater personal risk in taking the same public position. IP 3 said:

I am Chinese. Ninety-nine percent of Chinese-Australians would not dare to speak out. Nor would our words carry any weight anyway, even if we did dare to speak out.

IP 2, whose field of materials engineering falls within areas treated as strategically sensitive, accepted that the subject matter of their research could warrant additional scrutiny. IP 2 nevertheless believed their Chinese background sometimes added another layer to how they were treated:

Too often, I get this feeling that university research bureaucrats are not respectful of scientists with Chinese heritage like myself.

The quantitative survey provides a broader indication of similar concerns. Fifty-five percent of respondents were not confident that aspects of their ethnicity, birthplace, language background or personal networks did not inappropriately influence how their China-related collaborations were perceived.



4.5 Commitment to Australia alongside dissatisfaction with policy

These concerns did not translate straightforwardly into disengagement from Australia. Indeed, a notable feature of the interviews is that criticism of the research security environment often coexisted with strong commitment to Australia. Several participants had lived in Australia for decades, were citizens, had raised families in Australia and described their professional identity in explicitly Australian terms.

IP 6, a highly established scientist, described a 20-year career supported by Australian colleagues and institutions:

I've been working in Australia for 20 years now, and I'm also an Australian citizen. To be honest, I'm incredibly grateful to Australia. After finishing my PhD in China, I came here on my own, and my career has gone extremely well. The people around me – my industry collaborators and my university supervisors – have all been local Australians, and they've been wonderful. They've been incredibly supportive and have judged me entirely on my performance, not on anything else. I've always had a great relationship with them. I've always believed this is a really, really good country, a place that is, comparatively speaking, quite fair. That's how I've always seen Australia. So I've always wanted to give something back and make a genuine contribution to this country.

IP 10 made a similar point:

[S]ome people choose to leave Australia to go somewhere else or return to China. That's certainly one option. But my home is here. My children are Australians. I see myself as an Australian. I love Melbourne, and I keep asking myself how I can really make a contribution to this country.

These statements complicate a simple interpretation of policy dissatisfaction as disengagement from Australia. For many participants, frustration appeared to arise precisely because they understood their research contribution as part of an Australian professional and civic commitment.

Table 7. Belonging and the bridging role of Chinese-background researchers

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT	
Belonging and the bridging role of Chinese-background researchers	
61%	reported that current research security debates had negatively affected their sense of belonging within Australian academia.
77%	agreed that Chinese-background researchers can play a constructive bridging role between Australia and China.
59%	disagreed that current conditions enable that bridging role to be played effectively.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.

4.6 Career mobility and exit

Participants also reported observing colleagues leaving Australia for China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Europe and the Middle East. They described mobility as the product of both ‘push and pull factors’ such as greater difficulty securing students or funding in Australia, alongside well-resourced offers elsewhere. This outward-bound research mobility, according to IP 7, the director of a nationwide network in the field of energy transition research, happens at all levels, including senior professors, mid-career researchers, and early-career researchers such as postdoctoral fellows, and ranging from Australian citizens, permanent residents, and long-term visa holders who are Chinese nationals.

IP 7 interpreted this primarily through scientists’ desire to continue their research:

Scientists consider the pursuit of scientific research to be their calling. If you don’t allow them to do research, that’s a very painful thing to endure. So, they go to places where they can.

IP 2 similarly linked mobility to a combination of delayed student visas, reduced willingness to include China in grant applications and uncertainty for postdoctoral researchers, while other research systems offered laboratories, teams and competitive remuneration:

Here in Australia, we discourage doctoral students from coming by delaying their visa applications; senior academics no longer propose to collaborate with China in their funding applications, and postdocs’ future employment is uncertain because there is less and less ARC funding to employ them. In the meantime, other countries, especially China, have become increasingly appealing, with offers of well-resourced labs and research teams as well as good pay.

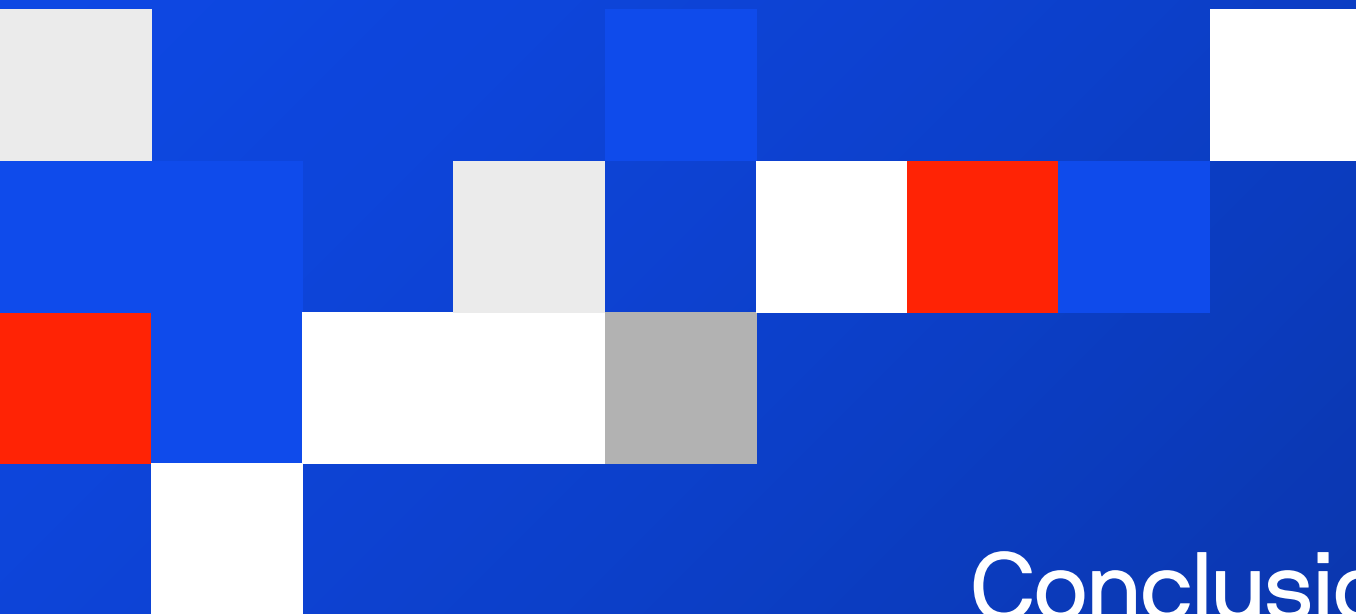
IP 3 expressed the same concern in terms of both inward and outward mobility:

The purpose of this research policy is to protect Australia’s own interests, but in reality, it ends up damaging those same interests. For example, you can’t get the best students. They are either pushed away or simply choose not to come. So, you’ve got the best people here leaving, and you also see that the best people can’t get there.

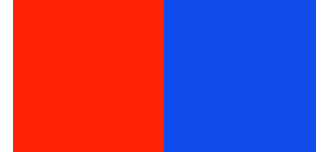
Table 8. Career intentions and exit

QUANTITATIVE CONTEXT Career intentions and exit	
23%	reported either uncertainty about remaining in Australian academia or having left an Australian institution where research security concerns were at least one factor.

Source: Collinson et al., *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 2026.



Conclusion



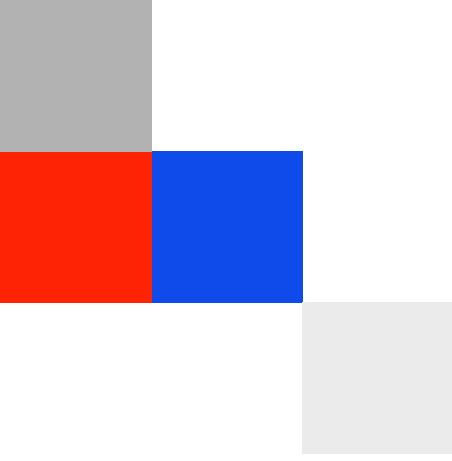
All 12 interview participants accepted that some international research presents genuine national security risks and that governments and universities need safeguards. Their concern was with how those risks are judged in practice, particularly where the boundary between sensitive and routine academic activity is unclear.

That uncertainty matters because it can shape behaviour even when no collaboration has been formally prohibited. Participants described leaving Chinese collaborators off grant applications, discouraging prospective students, limiting travel and conference activity, keeping more extensive records of interactions and, in some cases, deciding that a project was not worth pursuing. Research security settings therefore affected decisions not only through formal approvals or refusals, but also through researchers' expectations of delay, scrutiny or institutional difficulty.

The interviews also point to a strong institutional incentive for caution. The consequences of approving a collaboration that later attracts regulatory, political or media criticism are visible. The costs of delaying or discouraging a worthwhile collaboration are much harder to observe. Participants believed this imbalance could encourage universities and administrators to resolve uncertain cases conservatively. Their accounts of different approaches across universities, faculties and research offices also suggest that the practical effect of research security policy can depend considerably on how broad requirements are interpreted at the institutional level.

Some of the resulting effects are difficult to measure. A rejected grant, delayed visa or unsuccessful application can be recorded. A collaboration that is never proposed, a student who is discouraged from applying or a researcher who decides not to pursue a new idea is less visible. Yet these were recurring features of participants' accounts. Several described not only changing how they conducted research but becoming more selective about whether to initiate new or uncertain work at all.

Participants also argued that the costs of reduced collaboration need to be considered against changes in China's research capability. Many rejected the idea that scientific exchange is primarily a one-way transfer of knowledge from Australia to China. In their fields, they described Australian researchers gaining access to Chinese expertise, equipment, research teams, industrial capability and faster experimental development. Their argument was not that these benefits remove security risks. Rather, it was that the benefits foregone when collaboration is restricted can now be substantial in some areas and should form part of the assessment.



This was particularly evident in participants' discussion of research translation. They described international collaboration as one way of accessing the people, infrastructure, follow-on resources, industry relationships and markets needed to move research beyond an initial result. The interviews cannot establish the aggregate effect of reduced Australia-China collaboration on Australian innovation or productivity. They do, however, show why some senior scientists see collaboration as relevant not only to publication output, but also to the ability to develop ideas into applications and sustain research beyond proof of concept.

The individual effects were more mixed than a simple story of disengagement. Participants described administrative burden, anticipatory self-regulation, reduced research ambition and concern about differential treatment. Some also reported a weaker sense of professional inclusion. At the same time, several spoke strongly about their commitment to Australia, the opportunities they had received here and their desire to contribute to Australian science and industry. Their criticism of current settings often came from the belief that those settings were making it harder to undertake work they regarded as beneficial to Australia.

These accounts sit alongside the findings of the companion quantitative report, *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of Chinese-Background Scientists in Australian Universities* (October 2026).³ The survey shows that concerns about clarity, differentiation, institutional caution and changes in research behaviour extend across a wider group of Chinese-background researchers. The interviews add detail about how those concerns can translate into decisions about collaborators, students, funding, research direction and career choices. Together, the two studies point less to opposition to research security itself than to questions about how clearly and consistently different levels of risk are distinguished in practice.

The practical challenge is to manage security risks without allowing uncertainty itself to become a reason for limiting collaboration. How well that distinction is made will affect not only the operation of research security policy, but also researchers' willingness to pursue international partnerships, recruit students, develop new ideas and invest effort in longer-term scientific opportunities.

3 Elena Collinson, Wanning Sun, Marina Yue Zhang, James Laurenceson and Xunpeng Shi, *Right-Sizing Research Security: A Survey of 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-a-survey-of-chinese-background-scientists-in-australian-universities>>

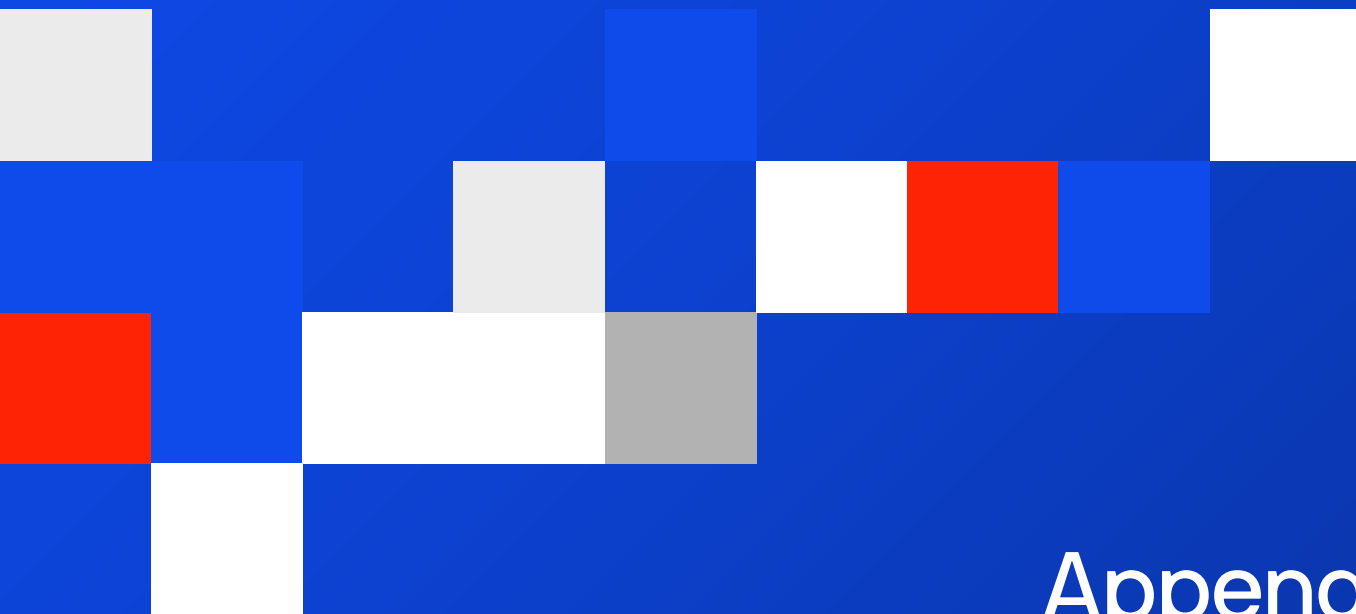
Methodology

The 12 senior academics interviewed were selected to reflect, as far as possible, diversity in gender, state representation and fields of STEM research.

All 12 interviewees were senior academics; the study did not include mid-career or early-career researchers. This focus reflected several considerations. Senior academics were able to speak not only from their own experience as researchers, but also from their roles as research project supervisors and leaders in their respective fields. They were also more likely to have direct experience of research governance at the governmental and institutional levels, as well as with research funding organisations. Finally, senior academics were generally more willing to participate in interviews on the condition of anonymity, whereas mid-career and early-career researchers were considerably more circumspect about participating in research on these issues.

The research employed informal, one-on-one, in-depth and open-ended conversations with participants, conducted either face-to-face or via WeChat video calls. Rather than following a fixed set of questions, the conversations allowed participants to raise issues they considered important and enabled the interviewers to explore emerging themes in greater depth. In many cases, subsequent communications with participants provided opportunities to follow up on points raised in earlier conversations, clarify responses, and further develop or expand on issues as they emerged during the research process.





Appendix

Interview Participants (IPs)

Participant	Profile
IP 1	Professor in engineering with more than 30 years of academic and industry experience. Has led major industry-linked research programs and worked extensively with Australian government, industry and research organisations. Has secured substantial competitive and industry research funding.
IP 2	Professor in materials science and engineering who leads a university research centre. Has received substantial competitive research funding and is internationally recognised for contributions to the development of advanced materials.
IP 3	Distinguished professor in materials and energy research with extensive experience in battery and energy storage technologies. Has held major national research fellowships, received substantial competitive research funding and been recognised by Australian scientific and professional bodies.
IP 4	Professor in electrical and data-related engineering who completed doctoral training in Australia and has extensive experience in Australian university research.
IP 5	Professor in materials engineering who has held faculty-level academic leadership roles. Has more than 20 years of research experience, substantial government and industry funding, experience in national research assessment, and significant engagement with industry.
IP 6	Professor working across materials science, chemistry and physics, with more than 20 years of experience spanning university and industry research in Australia. Has held a major national research fellowship and received substantial competitive funding and scientific recognition.
IP 7	Professor in engineering with experience in both academia and industry. Has led major university and nationally funded research centres and has substantial experience in technology development and research translation.
IP 8	Professor in biochemical and process-related engineering with extensive experience leading large research programs. Has attracted substantial Australian and international funding, received major scientific recognition and held senior editorial roles in international academic publishing.
IP 9	Professor in computer science and artificial intelligence who leads a university research group or centre. Has attracted research funding from government, competitive funding bodies and major technology companies.
IP 10	Distinguished professor in photonics and related technologies who has held senior research leadership roles. Has received significant national recognition and has experience contributing to Australian research assessment and funding processes.
IP 11	Senior academic in mechanical and mechatronic engineering with substantial experience in Australian university research.
IP 12	Distinguished professor in materials and technology research with a long record of research leadership. Has held a major national research fellowship and received significant Australian scientific and professional recognition.

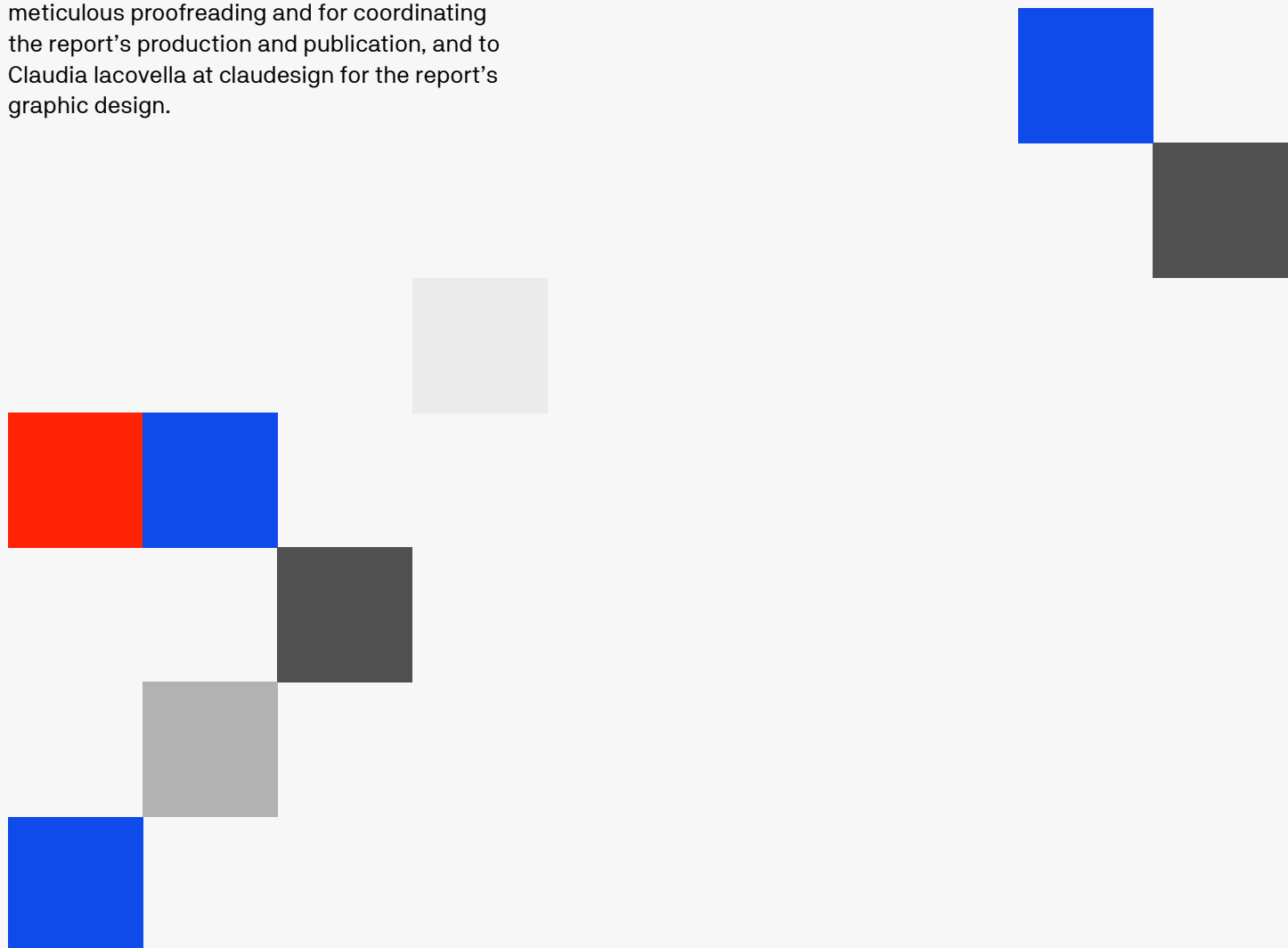


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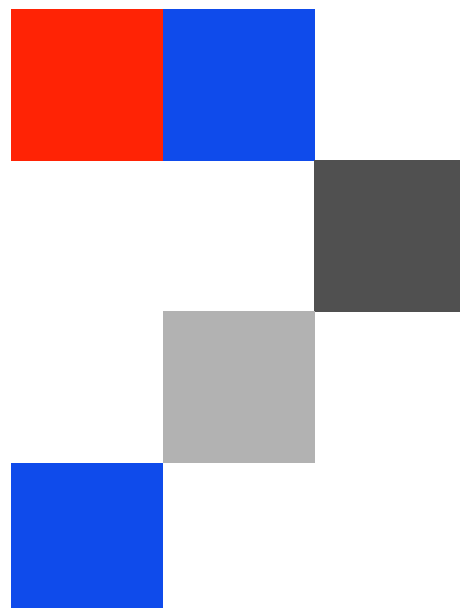
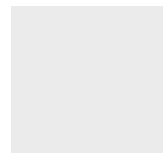
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About UTS:ACRI

The Australia-China Relations Institute (UTS:ACRI) is an independent, non-partisan research institute established in 2014 by the University of Technology Sydney. Chinese studies centres exist in other Australian universities. UTS:ACRI, however, is Australia's first and only research institute devoted to studying the relationship of these countries.

In the past Australia's dominating economic relationships have been with the British Empire, the United States and Japan. Australia's most important trading relationship is now with China, a nation very different in governance, politics and values. As China's economy grows, so too does its strategic weight and the challenges and opportunities this presents to Australia.

UTS:ACRI seeks to inform Australia's engagement with China through research, analysis and dialogue grounded in scholarly rigour.



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