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## **#29 Dutch collaboration with PhD students sponsored by the China Scholarship Council**

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### **Key Takeaways**

- Collaborations with the China Scholarship Council (CSC) have come under scrutiny in the Netherlands and beyond due to various knowledge security concerns; concerns that CSC PhD students may facilitate undesirable knowledge transfer or other forms of foreign interference activities, and concerns about possible dependencies of Dutch knowledge institutions on CSC PhD students.
- There were approximately 2,197 CSC PhD students in the Netherlands in 2023. Close to half of this number performs research in fields that are of strategic importance both to China and the Netherlands.
- Dependencies of Dutch knowledge institutions on CSC PhD students in strategic areas of research are limited.

### **Recommendations**

1. Provide guidance to Dutch knowledge institutions on collaborating with CSC.
2. Coordinate and support national level discussions with CSC.
3. Explore the possibilities of European joint efforts to improve the conditions of collaboration with CSC.
4. Provide (certified) translations of relevant CSC documents to increase institutions' awareness and knowledge about CSC policies and regulations.
5. Strongly encourage and support Dutch knowledge institutions in their efforts to diversify the sources of PhD scholarship funding and provide support in exploring alternatives where needed.
6. Encourage Dutch knowledge institutions to formulate contingency plans for the scenario of an abrupt discontinuation of research collaboration with China.

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## Executive Summary

Number of CSC PhD students in the Netherlands: The Netherlands is the **4th largest host** of CSC sponsored students and researchers worldwide. In 2023 approximately 2,197 CSC PhD students were working at Dutch research universities and national research institutes. Close to half of this number, approximately 1,145 CSC PhD students, is engaged in research in the fields of engineering, technology, and natural sciences, including biology, and agricultural technology. The second largest group, approximately 602 CSC PhD students, studies at medical faculties.

Benefits: The main drivers for working with CSC PhD students are strategic: CSC PhD students are seen as valued colleagues that often make important contributions to the scientific output, particularly in fields where there is a shortage of talents or in types of research that are not easily financed by other subsidy providers. They sometimes facilitate broader cooperation with China.

Risks and challenges: The **lack of reciprocity** in (a) transparency, (b) access to research sources, and (c) data exchange, and the risks of infringement of academic freedom by Chinese authorities and self-censorship among CSC PhD students where sensitive research topics are concerned.

**Undesirable knowledge transfer**, dual use and infringement of Intellectual Property Rights were considered less relevant in the case of CSC PhD students and the types of research (low Technology Readiness Levels) they are usually engaged in. With regard to the CSC PhD students' personal wellbeing, the low amount of the CSC scholarship's monthly allowance and the risk of stigmatisation and discrimination of Chinese students and scholars were mentioned as serious areas of concern.

Dependencies: The dependencies of Dutch knowledge institutes on CSC PhD students are **limited**. There are no financial or strategic dependencies at university level; at faculty or department level there are eleven cases in which the ratio of CSC PhD students compared to all PhD students is considerable, namely more than 15 percent. There are a few faculties or departments with a CSC PhD student ratio of more than 20 percent, indicating a risk of dependency on CSC PhD students.

Contracts: All thirteen universities and five national research institutes examined host CSC PhD students. Only six universities have a university level contract with CSC. None of the national research institutes surveyed have a contract with CSC. In case there is no university level or institutional level contract, the CSC students come to the Netherlands on an individual basis through the General CSC Grant Programme. The researchers found **no political conditions** in the six contracts between the universities and CSC. The **documents that do have political conditions** are contracts between CSC and PhD students, as well as the guidelines published on the CSC website: they include clauses requiring the student to support the leadership of the Communist Party and to regularly report to the Chinese Embassy or Consulate and to obey their leadership.

Mitigation of risks: All universities and the national research institutes with CSC PhD students are developing and implementing knowledge security policies, some having progressed further than others.