

EU-China Academic Exchanges in the Context of People-to-People Diplomacy: Significance and Challenges for China's New Leadership

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Abstract

China's new leadership still attaches great importance in further strengthening the bilateral strategic partnership with the European Union. China and European Union (EU) have a strategic relationship in economic as well as in security sector. However, nowadays, in the era of globalization and under new leadership in China, both sides create a new dimension in their cooperation, beyond the political and economic aspect towards the cultural and to people-to-people exchanges. The EU-China High People-to-People Dialogue, (the so-called 'third pillar' in the strategic partnership) is the tool for mutual understanding of European and Chinese culture and for bolstering policy and civil society exchanges on education and training. In the frame of the Dialogue, the EU-China academic exchanges have the dynamic to be significant on the one hand, for China's public diplomacy by contributing in bolstering China's soft power in EU and in building China's positive image in Europe and, on the other hand, for the modernization of PRC's higher education system. The fact that during the last decade China's higher education institutions attract more researchers and students from EU countries indicates firstly, the increasing role of China and its rising economy in global politics, secondly, the EU's priority for fruitful and beneficial relationship with China and lastly, the creation of more positive perceptions about China among the European publics as a result of China's public diplomacy effectiveness. Despite the difficulties in EU-China academic exchanges, the challenge for China's new leadership in order to reinforce PRC's soft power in EU is to more concentrate into political strategies in the field of higher education by coordinating with other higher education actors in order to attract more academics from EU countries and to build a positive "higher education image" in Europe.

Key Words: EU-China academic exchanges, China's new leadership, people-to-people diplomacy, soft power, higher education image

Introduction

In the frame of the EU-China High People-to-People dialogue, the paper discusses the academic exchanges between European and Chinese researchers as a tool of mutual understanding. In the first part, the paper provides an analytic description of the general characteristics of the academic mobility between the two sides during the last decade as well as a description of the main stakeholders and schemes which contribute to the implementation of the academic exchanges. The second part, on the one hand, focuses on the significance of EU-China academic mobility for the modernization of the Chinese higher education system and the for bolstering China's soft power in European Union, and on the other hand, it discusses the challenges which China's new leadership faces in the field of academic exchanges with EU, such as for example the lacking knowledge on China and the obstacle of the different values between the EU and China. In this context, the significance of the paper is to provide several suggestions for the contribution of China's new leadership in bolstering PRC's soft power and positive image in the EU by strengthening the academic exchanges. More specifically, China's new leaders should pay more attention to the role of the academic exchanges with EU by focusing on the innovation of higher education system in coordination with other actors of the Chinese higher education in public as well as in private sector.

In general, discussing for China's soft power motivations, it is obvious that China has been strengthening its soft power and "positive image" by developing its public diplomacy strategies. However, it is true that China's public diplomacy strategies focus on culture as a resource for building soft power in EU which includes the alternative values for facing on international problems and not that much on higher education and in academic exchanges.

However, it is needed an effective "people-to-people diplomacy" in order to overcome misunderstandings, prejudice and suspicions that European people and academics might have towards China. In this frame, the academic exchanges in the context of public diplomacy are highly important.

China's new leadership and the Sino-EU Relations

In order to create the whole picture of the challenges for China's new leadership generally in Sino-EU relationship and more specifically in the Sino-EU cooperation in higher education, we should first observe its main characteristics.

China's new leaders were appeared to the world during the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and they will be in power until 2022. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang have taken the places of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao respectively as President and Premier.

However, China's leadership transition occurs at a time of the global economic crisis that has translated into lower economic growth rates for Chinese economy. The new leadership is immediately facing multiple domestic challenges such as the transition from a labor-intensive and export-oriented to an innovation-driven and sustainable economic development model as well as foreign policy challenges. China's new leaders have already pronounced the struggle to create a more sustainable growth model and less brittle political system. However, due to the fact that China's role in global economic and strategic affairs is dynamic, the responsibility of the new leaders is increased as its policies and practices which have implications to the whole world.¹

Precisely because of these domestic challenges, it is very likely that in the Xi Jinping era, China will remain a primarily inward-looking country. In this sense, China's international relations will be largely predicated on its domestic agenda. China will seek to expand its external exports markets, and secure technology and capital for its economic upgrading. It will also prioritize domestic security concerns over external ones, as Xi Jinping has already profiled himself as a hardliner when it comes to China's core interests.²

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Nicola Casarini, "China's new leaders uploaded"

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In foreign policy, the new leadership is more confident about China's growing importance in the international arena. Concerning the neighboring policy, in the region of East Asia, China's new leadership is more pragmatic in making efforts to capitalize the growing economic interdependence in East Asia and push for further regionalization. Globally, China is no longer a "low-profile actor" and the new leadership strives to maintain fruitful relations with the Western countries by avoiding confrontation. China remains a normative power by making efforts to promote a normative model in the international arena, based on the idea of a developmental sovereign state over the values advocated by the US and the EU (e.g. human rights). As it is obvious, China has become a key player not only in Asia and the Pacific, but also in Africa and Latin America; it is also involved in conflict areas such as Sudan, Libya and Syria. This indicates that the new leadership leaves China's low profile by making efforts to promote a positive "higher profile" in the international arena.

Regarding the EU-China partnership, despite EU's debt crisis Chinese leaders continue to view the EU as a possible counterweight to American power. In this frame, for the new leadership, EU still attaches great importance while pledging to further strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership. China also evaluates the relationship with EU as an important relationship because EU's development and social model can be an example for China's model and in parallel, the trade with EU is beneficial for China's economy and it offers a great chance for access in the European market.³ EU on the other side sees China as an opportunity from economic aspect and not as a threat.

Under the new leadership EU and China have great potential for closer bilateral cooperation in economic and security issues. However, beyond the economic and political aspect, the need for mutual understanding and further cooperation in other fields (such as for example, higher education, energy and environment, in civil societies exchanges etc) still exists. The paper explores the significance of EU-China

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people-to-people academic exchanges for PRC's image in EU and the challenges that the new China's leadership is facing in the field of the academic mobility.

EU-China High People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD)

The EU-China relationship represents an important relationship in contemporary international relations in bilateral as well as in multilateral level. China, as the biggest developing country, and EU, as the biggest regional group of developed countries, represent the East and the West civilization. In this sense, EU-China cooperation is beneficial principally in economic as well as in security sector and both parties follow policies which are in the direction of building a harmonious relationship. In this context, the people-to-people exchanges are at the heart of the new dimension of EU-China relations for mutual understanding and the civil society exchanges.

In particular, "People-to-People links", in the frame of the "Mobility for European and Chinese students, academics and researchers" address further the objectives of the EU- China "Third Pillar on People-to-People Contacts" to contribute to the knowledge and common understanding between China and the EU and to open a new channel for discussions of strategic societal issues of common interest to the EU and to China.

The People-to-People Dialogue, the so-called '**third pillar**' in the EU-China strategic partnership was agreed by the EU and China leaders during the EU-China Summit on 14-15 February 2008. The High Level People- to -People Dialogue (HPPD) builds on the two previous cooperation agreements as a part of the EU-China relations – the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue and the High Level Strategic Dialogue.⁴

⁴ EU-China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD), available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/china_en.htm

The HPPD aims at strengthening cultural cooperation by encompassing strategies for bolstering policy exchanges on education and training, fostering multilingualism, promoting civil society exchanges and mutual understanding.

In the context of the High People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD), both sides maintain a “positive dialogue policy” by improving the non-governmental exchanges, media, sports and research institute exchanges. In this context, the paper focuses on the challenges and the significance of the academic exchanges for China’s new leadership.

EU-China Academic Mobility: General Characteristics

In the field of higher education, people-to-people contacts, are rapidly gaining importance and status. The EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) is the political framework which contributes to enhancing mutual understanding and establishing closer links between European and Chinese universities, research centers and enterprises.⁵

According to the data available from the Ministry of Education of PRC and the European Commission, from 1978 to the end of 2010, the total number of **Chinese students** studying in Europe was **37 million** an number which is increasing by **25.8%** every year. ⁶On the other side, the **European students** accounted for **15.06%** of the whole in 2009. Since 1980s with the boom of the Chinese economy a large number of scholars and academics from Europe in any field of science choose China in order to understand better a mysterious world and in order to benefit from a rising economy. However, in the context of the EU-China relations, the academic exchanges are part of the further development of the harmonious and beneficial partnership between EU and China in high politics issues (security, trade) as well as in low politics issues (culture, environment ,civil society exchanges etc).

More specifically, concerning the academic mobility from the EU to China, according to data collected by the MoE in China, there were over **22,600 EU students** in China in 2009. The number EU students in China has nearly doubled in the past

⁵ Sources available at the action fiche for EU-China academic mobility, EU Delegation to China and Mongolia, September 2012

⁶ Student and Academic Staff Mobility between China and EU :Data, Programs and Recommendations, *submitted by* Renmin University, School of International Studies and Centre for European Studies at Renmin University, March 2011, p.1

five years, increasing from 11,700 to 22,600 from 2005 to 2009. The country sending the highest number of students to China is France, with nearly 5,500 degree students studying in China in 2009 followed by Germany and the UK⁷.

The Chinese students in the EU are generally full-degree students, in contrast with EU students in China who are mostly non-degree students (90%) participating in short-term mobility programs. These students generally study in the area of economics and language courses. However the number of degree students is increasing.⁸

Regarding the mobility of academic staff the data are not collected on a systematic basis. Based on the available figures, at least **6,697 academic staff of Chinese nationality** worked in the EU during the period 2008 to 2009. Regarding the academic staff from the EU to China, there is even less information. However, based on figures of academic staff who worked in China under mobility programs, in 2008, **156 EU academic staff** worked in China.⁹

In particular, the available data indicate, on the hand, the development of the EU-China academic mobility during the last decade and on the other hand, the increasing number of European students and academics who are choosing China for the development of their career. In addition, the increasing number of EU students and academic staff who study and work in China's higher institutions indicates firstly, the increasing level of China's public diplomacy effectiveness in EU and secondly the EU interest in gaining benefits from the rise of China's economy in all the levels even in the academic field. In this basis, the principal challenge for China and the new leadership is to improve PRC image in Europe by developing its people-to-people diplomacy via the academic exchanges.

Stakeholders and Programs for the EU-China Academic Mobility

⁷ Source all figures by the MoE of PRC, available at the Joint Report on "Student and Academic Staff Mobility between China and EU", March 2011

⁸ Ibid

⁹ European Commission, "EU-China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD)", available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/china_en.htm

Regarding the relevant stakeholders in EU-China academic mobility, from the Chinese side, Chinese funding organizations are keen to attract foreign researchers and academics to study in China and have recently developed their own schemes with attractive grants.

The China Scholarship Council (CSC) is the core implementer of China's government, responsible for the educational exchange policies; The CSC provides a plethora of scholarships and it has a vital contribution to the EU-China higher education exchange. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of P.R.C., and in accordance with the exchange agreements between EU countries and China, the Chinese Government Scholarship program has established the "EU window" which provides full as well as partial scholarships and schemes for the European students and scholars in order to study or to conduct research in Chinese universities and higher institutions.¹⁰ However, apart from the scholarships funded by the Chinese government the presence of several bilateral programs is also significant for the academic exchanges between EU and China. Briefly, the EU-China academic mobility action includes several programs such as:

- Marie Curie outgoing fellowships
- International Research Staff Exchange Scheme (IRSES)
- EU Member States National fellowship schemes
- Chinese grant schemes for foreign researchers (e.g. National Natural Science Foundation of China, Chinese Scholarship Council) and
- Erasmus Mundus¹¹

For instance, the Science and Technology Fellowship (STF) Program as well as the Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN) are two of the schemes which contribute to the strengthening continuation of EU-China academic exchanges and productive research cooperation.

¹⁰ China Scholarship Council, available at <http://en.csc.edu.cn/jast> view on February 2013

¹¹ Joint study between the European Commission and the Ministry of Education in China, "EU-China Student and Academic Staff Mobility: Present Situation and Future Developments", http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/mobilitysum_en.pdf, Executive Summary April 2011, pp

Significance of EU-China Higher Education Exchanges for PRC's New Leadership

Regarding the objectives of the academic exchanges, it is obvious that the specific objective is to solidify private and public institutional partnerships of excellent academic and research, innovation quality through intensified people-to-people contacts of academic individuals.

Regarding the significance of EU-China academic exchanges, it is profound of Chinese interest to take an active part and to benefit from the EU's prominence in science and technology and to build closer ties with the EU. It is true that a closer cooperation with EU in the field of higher education will bring to China new opportunities to strengthen Chinese well-being and competitiveness. More specifically, the academic exchanges are significant for China's new leadership for multiple reasons. Firstly, China has the dynamic to access new knowledge and markets; Secondly, China takes the advantage of getting knowledge from Europe on how to tackle societal challenges; Thirdly, China can build a well trained new academic generation which understands the cultural particularities of both sides and is able to apply this knowledge for China's benefit. Last but not least, China can benefit from the academic exchanges with the EU by increasing the level of modernization in its higher education.

The EU-China academic exchanges have crucial importance for the development of China's higher education and its academic and human resources. More specifically, from the academic exchanges with EU, China's higher education market has the potential to be internationalized. It is valuable to be mentioned that since China's

membership in WTO, many developed countries including EU member states have made investments in China's higher education field. These investments on the one hand, have the dynamic to enrich China's higher education resources and on the other hand, can play an active role in the process of China's higher education innovation.¹²

During the last decades, the results regarding the modernization of China's higher education are precisely optimistic by taking in consideration that with the process of absorbing foreign high-quality educational resources and the expanding of the number of expatriate students, Chinese universities make an effort to make reforms according to the international standards in order to attract more European students to study or to conduct research in China. In this context, it is significant to mention that until nowadays China has also become the sixth largest country that is attractive to the international students.

In this sense, the increasing number of European students who learn Chinese language shows the importance of China in the international system. However, the low number of Europeans who choose to get degree from Chinese universities shows the lack of credibility towards the Chinese higher educational system as well as the lack of sufficient knowledge about China. Due to the fact that China's new leaders will be in power until 2022, it is crucial domestically, for China and the Chinese people, apart from the anti-corruption battle, to create all the conditions for the modernization and the reform of China's higher education system, towards this direction, the closer cooperation in education with the EU could be useful and contributes to the acquisition of the "know-how" in the field of the higher education. For this reason, a main challenge for China's new leadership is to make more systematic efforts to improve China's higher education status and image in EU in order to attract more European academics and students in China. In this context, the role of people-to-people diplomacy is significant because of the fact that an effective diplomacy can lead to the promotion of China's positive higher education image as well as to the increasing of its soft power in Europe.

¹² Joint Report on "Student and Academic staff mobility between China and EU", by Renmin University, March 29, 2011

China's People-to-People Diplomacy and the Motivation of Bolstering its Soft Power in EU

This part of this paper focuses on China's motivations for bolstering its soft power in Europe beyond the academic mobility. More specifically, it is argued that the role of public diplomacy is significant for the promotion of China's soft power. The academic exchanges is part of public diplomacy policies which focuses on the higher education and it aims at the rise of China's image and in parallel at bolstering China's soft power in EU member states. In general, regarding the definition of public diplomacy is an indispensable part of a country's approach to foreign relations as well as an important supplement to its traditional diplomacy. Effective public diplomacy is essential for a nation to promote its national interests and achieve its foreign policy objectives.¹³

China's public diplomacy to EU countries is very important such as the economic diplomacy for the creation of a new image and prestige to EU. In this frame, China makes fruitful efforts to promote and to expend its cultural property in EU with successful results. However, it is true that an effective public diplomacy and the academic exchanges as public diplomacy's strategy could be also useful for persuading the European people that China is a peaceful rising state and a further cooperation in a range of issues from high to low politics can be beneficial not only for both parties but also for the international system and for the building of a harmonious world.

However, China does not make efforts to persuade European publics about the superiority of its economic and political model but firstly, it aims at convincing Europeans to accept an alternative social and political model that suits to Chinese people, secondly, it aims at changing the negative perceptions about China and finally it aims at preventing the fear of China's economic rise by making efforts to attract foreign investments from Europe.¹⁴ Apart from the media, and the promotion of Chinese culture, the public diplomacy is also carried out by the civil society

¹³ Mark McDowell, *Public Diplomacy at the Crossroads: Definitions and Challenges in an "Open Source" Era*, http://www.eastwestcoms.com/images/Public_Diplomacy.pdf pp.10-12

¹⁴ Ingrid d'Hooghe, "The limits of China's soft power in Europe, Beijing's public diplomacy puzzle", Netherlands Institute of International Relations, "Glingendael" 2010, pp 14-23

participants that contribute to the “brand building” of the country. In this frame, the higher education people-to-people exchanges could contribute to the changing perceptions about China in Europe.

Despite some common ideas and values between EU and China on dealing with international issues such as for example the visions for a multi-polar world; a aversion to military actions in solving crises; and the willing for promotion of multilateralism in the international system, China’s public diplomacy still needs to be focused on the building of political trust by improving the image of China’s political system, on its foreign policies and the human rights situation.¹⁵

So, as it is obvious, China makes efforts to strengthen its soft power by rapidly developing public diplomacy strategies. However, the main goals of China’s public diplomacy are greatly described by Ingrid Hooghe. So, firstly China wants to be seen as a country that strives to build a harmonious society and that works hard to give its people a better future. Secondly, China wants to be seen as a stable, reliable and responsible economic partner, a rising economic power that does not have to be feared. Thirdly, Beijing wants China to be seen as trustworthy and responsible member of the international political community, capable of and willing to contribute actively to world peace. Lastly, China wants to be acknowledged and respected as an ancient but vibrant culture.¹⁶

So, beyond the academic mobility with EU, its significance for the modernization of China’s higher education system and the acquisition of knowledge from EU, the main motivation of China’s public diplomacy via the academic exchanges and the people-to-people links is to bolster of China’s soft power in EU member states in order to promote the image of China as a rising economy and “civilization state”, a peaceful and responsible power in international politics with a domestically stable and harmonious society. In this sense, the third pillar of EU-China

¹⁵ Ingrid d’Hooghe, “ The limits of China’s soft power in Europe, Beijing’s public diplomacy puzzle”, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, “Glingendael” 2010, pp18-21

¹⁶ Ingrid d’Hooghe, “ The limits of China’s soft power in Europe, Beijing’s public diplomacy puzzle”, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, “Glingendael” 2010, p 3-6

strategic partnership and the people-to-people contacts in the academic field bring mutual benefits and lead to a closer cooperation between EU and China.

EU-China Academic exchanges: Challenges for China's New Leadership

Although the lack of knowledge among European people about China is an important issue which leads to negative European views for China, it is not, however, the most important obstacle. A bigger problem is the gap between European and Chinese ideas, values and political system.¹⁷ For instance, China does not realize how deeply European societies are permeated by the values of democracy, human rights rule of law and fundamental principles such as freedom, of demonstration, even if European governments are willing to take a more pragmatic approach to ensure a country's material interests. It is true that both sides agree on international political goals such as multi-polarity, multilateralism and democratization, but their understanding of these concepts is different. Such as for example regarding the concept on multilateralism, the Chinese have a realist state-centric understanding of multilateralism but for the Europeans, multilateralism involves the sharing of sovereignty. Furthermore, the Chinese discourse on democratization focuses on responsibility responsiveness and government accountability; while Europeans regard it as a broad system that involves free media, an independent judiciary, rule of law and full respect for civil rights.¹⁸

More specifically, regarding the EU-China academic exchanges, the presence of several challenges is a reality that the two sides (China as well as EU) should face

¹⁷ Christopher R.Hughes, "Nationalism and multilateralism in Chinese foreign policy: implications for Southeast Asia",LSE, 2009 pp.4-8

¹⁸ Christopher R.Hughes, "Nationalism and multilateralism in Chinese foreign policy: implications for Southeast Asia",LSE, 2009 pp.4-12

on. So, the first challenge for EU-China academic exchanges is the insufficient number of European researchers working in China. It is evident from the available data that the majority of the European students and academics have interest in short – terms programs of learning Chinese language and culture as well as conducting short term research in Chinese higher institutions. Despite the fact that the mobility and people-to-people contacts in the academic field are greatly acclaimed – the actual flow of researchers and students from Europe to China remains at a very unsatisfactory level. Comparisons with countries like US, Japan or Korea show that Europe is lagging far behind. A direct effect of the low flows of researchers is the increasing gap between US-China and EU-China co-publications. However, despite the admiration of the Chinese culture by the European people and the interest in learning the Chinese language, the level of understanding China’s policies and values is still very low.

By examining the reasons for low academic mobility rate from EU towards China, we can estimate that the first reason is the low profile of China as a research destination and a lack of knowledge among European researchers about China’s higher education institutions. The second reason is the common misperception in Europe about conducting sufficient research in China. The third reason is the hesitance to stay in an environment completely different and unknown as well as the issue of the different culture and language is another obstacle for the European scholars. Finally, the last reason is the ignorance about the real opportunities in natural, human, financial and infrastructure terms offered in China and about scientific excellence in certain fields.

The second main challenge for EU-China academic exchange is the incapability of existing mobility programs to encourage mobility to China. More specifically, the established mobility programs funded by the EU (i.e. Marie Curie) as well as the EU Member State national bilateral programs have not proven fully satisfactory in attracting a sufficient number of European researchers to China. The financial support for conducting research isn’t enough to address the obstacles for the academic mobility.

The third challenge is the insufficient level of collaboration between European and Chinese higher education institutions. Due to the lack of financial resources in many European universities and research institutes, as well as due to the ignorance about opportunities offered in China, the potential for cooperation between European and Chinese research institutions is still limited.¹⁹ There are still too many jointly signed declarations between European and Chinese universities that are very ambitious in theory but in practice the level of collaborative results aren't satisfactory.

The last challenge regarding the EU-China academic mobility is the insufficient collaboration between public and private sector stakeholders. However, it is recognized that only a fruitful collaboration of both public and private sectors can lead to Europe truly fulfilling its innovative potential and eventually improve its competitiveness and growth.

As we can estimate from the challenges in the academic exchanges between EU and China, China's soft power is still facing limits in EU due to the lack of knowledge and the existence misperceptions about China among the European academic people in the field of higher education. In this standpoint, briefly, the challenge for China's new leadership in order to reinforce PRC 's soft power in EU is to more concentrate into strategies in the field of higher education in order to attract more academics from EU countries.

Conclusions -Suggestions for China's New Leadership

Regarding the third pillar of EU-China relations, the people-to-people exchanges and in particular the academic mobility, both sides EU as well as China should take initiatives for the further development of the academic exchanges.

On the one side, EU for instance, should build up analytical resources over China because in EU the knowledge of China is relatively weak at level of governments, universities and think tanks. There is a need to improve the interaction with the EU mechanisms and the member states, as well as interaction between EU and China (a fruitful effort is the EU-China Academic Network).

¹⁹ Sources available at the action fiche for EU-China academic mobility, EU Delegation to China and Mongolia, September 2012

On the other side, China's new leadership should pay attention on the people-to-people diplomacy practices and leave room for other participants such as higher education institutions, universities, private sector and academics to play the role of promoting positive image of China to Europe. China's new leadership should more coordinate with other different parties for an effective public diplomacy.

As China's role in global affairs is rising, the outside world should have a clear picture of it in order to create a positive international opinion over China's peaceful rising. China's new leadership should improve the effectiveness of its public diplomacy in order to reinforce China's soft power. For instance, the academic exchanges are a great chance for China's new leadership to promote its soft power in EU. In this frame, Chinese new leadership has the responsibility to coordinate with other public diplomacy actors for better promoting PRC's "higher education image" in Europe. However, for better results from the academic exchanges, PRC's educational upgrading should be a top national priority for China's new leadership. In this sense, China's new administration should plan strategies in order to invest in higher education by incorporating research facilities equivalent to the international standards, by taking initiatives to innovate China's higher education, and attracting European scholars with illustrious academic careers to China's higher institutions and universities.

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