

WORKING PAPER

Academic and Scientific Cooperation Between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China: Field for Mutual Benefits or Major Drawbacks?

Muamer Hirkić

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping



Academic and Scientific Cooperation Between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China: Field for Mutual Benefits or Major Drawbacks?

Muamer Hirkić¹

The intention of this research is to explore advantages and disadvantages of a potential increase in the scope of academic and scientific cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina (as a developing state) and China (as one of the world leaders). So far, the collaboration mostly related to the work of the Confucius Institutes at the University of Sarajevo and University of Banja Luka, as well as the establishment of the Chinese language department at the University of East Sarajevo. At the same time, cooperation in a wider number of natural, social, and human sciences has been absent – implying that there is a need to discover specific ways in which academic participation could be accelerated. On the other hand, in a number of European Union countries, as well as in the United States, there is a growing number of criticism(s) at the expense of links with the Chinese universities, primarily due to different views on the political character of the organization of states. This qualitative study includes eight interviews with representatives of different public and private universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who work in offices for international cooperation and have knowledge of current trends in the development of transnational academic and scientific partnerships. The study showed that there is a willingness of universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to cooperate with Chinese universities, but also an understanding of the negative aspects of closer connections. At the same time, some of the sectors highlighted as important for further intensification of joint collaboration are the technology sector, tourism, economy, and construction.

Key words: internationalization, academic cooperation, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, benefits, drawbacks

¹ Muamer Hirkić holds an MA in International Relations and Diplomacy from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo. He also holds a BA degree in English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Philosophy. Currently, he works as a Researcher at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, and in the previous years he was a participant of many domestic and international conferences, seminars and workshops dealing with international politics, conflict resolution and peace studies. His research interests include the role of China in the Balkans, soft power politics and great powers competition, as well as radicalization and violent extremism among youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
E-mail: muamerhirkić@gmail.com ; muamer.hirkic@fpn.unsa.ba

1. Introduction

This research attempts to offer the first outlines of institutional perceptions of academic and scientific cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China – while considering the views of university employees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who work in the field of international cooperation. The need for such a study emerged after the first impulses were given to inter-institutional collaboration through the establishment of the first Department of Sinology at the University of East Sarajevo and the opening of the Confucius Institutes at the Universities of Sarajevo and Banja Luka. However, it is also evident that there is a significant field of cooperation that has not yet been “unlocked,” and accordingly, the author attempts to assess the previous initiatives, future cooperation, as well as the negative aspects of an increase in the scope of mutually-beneficial projects. As Hasić points out in his analysis, the increased presence of Chinese companies and tourists in Bosnia and Herzegovina also means a greater need for learning the Chinese language and Chinese culture (Hasić, 2022, p. 17). The “entry” of Chinese universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina has so far only concerned the teaching of the Chinese language, while the connection of universities in other areas such as technology, tourism or economy has largely been absent. In one of the studies that assesses Chinese cultural soft power in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Stević points to changes in students' perceptions of the way they see China, in cases when they were “directly exposed to Chinese culture” – meaning that students at Confucius institutes had more positive attitudes towards China (Stević, 2022, p. 117).

On the other hand, Cai argues that “practices in the past decade signify an integration of Chinese higher education with the international community, as part of the governmental strategies for building world-class Chinese universities” (Cai, 2019, p. 170). Chinese universities continue to rise in the global rankings, and as Kirby states, two of them – Tsinghua and Peking – could be among the world's top ten in short order (Kirby, 2022). A study conducted by Zhang and others shows that “international research collaboration output accounted for about 22% of China's overall research output during 2016–2020”, which represents a growth from previous 14.4% in 2010 (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 6). On the contrary, it is also evident that skepticism towards Chinese universities grew exponentially (primarily in Western countries), where a large number of Confucius Institutes have been shut down – as in the case of the United States (Burke, 2022). Still, the universities in continental Europe depend less on international fees from Chinese students, than those in the United States or the United Kingdom – which also suggests that most of Europe has fewer exchanges with China than these

countries (Jorgensen, 2022). When speaking about the internationalization of universities and collaboration with China, Philipsen highlights that “there is a need to understand that different societies have different views and preferences regarding social, cultural, legal and political issues” (Philipsen, 2021). Accordingly, this paper examines some of the negative sides and potential obstacles that could appear in the cultural and political sense, when it comes to the intensification of cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China.

This qualitative research was conducted with a total of eight respondents from different higher education institutions (universities) from Bosnia and Herzegovina. All respondents work directly or indirectly on international cooperation projects and/or in international cooperation offices at their respective institutions. All interlocutors took part in a written or oral online interview, answering to the same set of questions that look at various aspects of the initiatives between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China such as: the assessment of the scientific contribution of the universities of the two countries, the possible space for future cooperation, and the potential obstacles and negative aspects of closer connections. In this study, all respondents are referred to by their institution, in order to achieve anonymity and protection of the personal data of the research participants.

The results of the research show that the previous international cooperation of the universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina is dominantly directed towards the programs of the European Union. At the same time, there is a positive perception among the respondents when it comes to the scientific contribution of Chinese universities, but also an evident negative view of the contribution of Bosnian universities, which do not have sufficient institutional support. Currently, cooperation with Chinese universities is most pronounced in the cases of the University of Banja Luka and the University of East Sarajevo, which have had strong ties with universities in China for several years now. In the case of intensification of cooperation, respondents emphasized the importance of “getting to know each other” approach, as well as increased cooperation in the sectors of information and communication technologies, tourism, economy, construction, as well as the exchange of scientific personnel and the development of programs that would enable dual degrees. In the end – as the main negative aspect of increased cooperation – the respondents recognized the lack of harmonization of positions between the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina and China, as well as the general “frozenness” of Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy due to ethnic polarization.

Nonetheless, the rest of this paper is structured in the following way. Section two offers a methodological overview that includes research objectives, criteria for the selection of participants, research activities, and challenges and limitations. Section three offers the results of the study, with a focus on international cooperation of Bosnian universities, perceptions of Chinese and Bosnian universities, current partnerships, visions of future cooperation, negative aspects of cooperation, and the relationship between state politics and academic partnerships. Finally, section four offers the main conclusions derived from the aforementioned sections.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research objectives

The main goal of this study is to make a baseline overview of the academic and scientific cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China, while defining some of the benefits and potential shortcomings. This study attempts to answer several main questions (but is not limited to them), which serve as a basis for examining the attitudes and perceptions of higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in relation to scientific cooperation with China:

- i. How do universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina assess the current academic and scientific contribution of China and Chinese universities, as well as Bosnian universities?
- ii. What type of cooperation could be established in the future and in which fields?
- iii. Are there negative aspects of the increase in scope of cooperation, and what is the relationship between politics and scientific partnerships?

2.2 Criteria and method of selecting participants

During the selection of respondents, several important criteria were taken into account. First, all respondents had to be long-term employees of the institution they represent, so that they could speak about the previous inter-university cooperation of the university. Second, all respondents had to be directly or indirectly employed within the international cooperation services of their institution or have experience in coordination of international scientific research projects. The research was conducted during the month of October 2022 with a total of eight respondents from different higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (public and private). Out of a total of eight state universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author successfully conducted interviews with respondents from six (University of Sarajevo,

University of East Sarajevo, University of Banja Luka, University of Tuzla, University of Mostar, and Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar) – where only the University of Bihać and the University of Zenica did not participate. Although the majority of respondents come from state universities, for a better and broader understanding of Bosnia and Herzegovina's higher education, two respondents from two important private universities – International Burch University and University of Travnik – were also included in the study.

2.3 Research activities

When establishing contact with the university offices for international cooperation, it was confirmed to the author that each of the respondents is an employee, holding a position there that includes international cooperation, coordination of international projects or scientific research work with foreign partners. Respondents were asked the same questions through a semi-structured interview (6 main questions with several sub-questions), and their answers were recorded in anonymized categories – meaning that the author did not use the personal data but referred to the institution as a whole. Also, there was a possibility to answer the questionnaire in two ways – in writing and orally – where five respondents answered in writing, while an online interview was held with three via Zoom. Each respondent, regardless of the oral or written form, allocated an average of 15 to 20 minutes to answer all the foreseen questions. After the answers have been received or transcribed, in accordance with the national laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina (primarily the Law on the Protection of Personal Data), as well as general ethical provisions when conducting research with adults, the personal data of all respondents was protected (in this case stored under a password), and no one except the author had access to their answers.

2.4 Challenges and limitations

When conducting the interviews and writing the study, two main challenges were noted. First, the research could serve as a significant baseline study on a larger scale – if in the future it would include the remaining state universities, as well as a larger number of private institutions. Second, the research was conducted exclusively in an online format – implying that for the future research of this topic, it would be important to conduct the interviews in an offline format, and at the same time to perform an on-site mapping of university capacities such as human resources and infrastructure. In this way, it would be possible to offer more detailed guidelines for further improvement of cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China. Third, due to the pandemic, a large number of activities moved to an online format,

which led to the saturation of online forms of examination (e.g. online conferencing tools and online surveys) – suggesting that the questionnaire itself had to be maximally shortened to 6 basic questions with several sub-questions, so that the respondents could give their oral and written answers in a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes. Nevertheless, despite the limited resources and exclusive online conducting of interviews, this study offers an important initial guideline for the study of international scientific cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China, the interplay between politics and international academic partnerships, as well as the more general, mutually-beneficial, and strategic cooperation.

3. Results

3.1 International cooperation at home and perceptions of Chinese and Bosnian universities

The majority of universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are exclusively focused on cooperation programs of the European Union, where the Erasmus+ program – which started to develop in most institutions since 2014 – stands out. Thus, different universities have a different number of international Erasmus+ projects, as well as a different number of partners – where the focus is primarily on cooperation in the European “pool” and with partners from the neighborhood. An important segment of the examination of the interlocutors' perceptions was the discussion about the views on the scientific contribution of Chinese and Bosnian universities. Among the respondents, there is an opinion that Chinese universities are respected and represent leaders in development changes, primarily in the field of technology. The respondent from the University of Sarajevo somewhat agrees with this view, saying that “although we are not sufficiently familiar with the work of Chinese universities due to geographical distance, they certainly had to provide a contribution to the development of China”.² On the other hand, despite the fact that progress in the field of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is evident, there is still insufficient cooperation of universities with industry and policymakers, as recognized by the interviewee from International Burch University:

It is still in the initial stages in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we need more regulation. The path should be clear for them to eventually have an impact on the local

²Online interview with female representative from the University of Sarajevo, October 2022

*community. It is necessary to create a legal framework. It is necessary that all those things that are researched reach the end users. We still do not have good cooperation between the academy and the end users.*³

Some of the additional problems concerning poor funding in the education system and the poor socioeconomic status of society were identified by a respondent from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, who says:

*The scientific contribution of Bosnian universities in certain segments is satisfactory, however there are also certain obstacles that are reflected in the current state in which our country is. Areas such as economy, agriculture, sports, and culture are the foundations of scientific research and scientific contribution. Weak investment in the entire education system, distinct types of political influence, poor economic power of society, and other factors affect scientific contributions. There are individual contributions in science, but the scientific rating of Bosnia and Herzegovina is still bad.*⁴

The respondent from the University of Tuzla agrees with this view, adding:

*In Bosnia and Herzegovina, scientific research work is not supported at any level of government. Universities rely on grants from European funds, but access to these funds is also exceedingly difficult due to the lack of internal funds intended to encourage and improve scientific and research work. On the other hand, universities are an invaluable source of data related to the analysis of the situation and could provide recommendations related to the development of all segments of society... It seems that universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have completely lost their development component, and the result is clearly visible in all segments and all levels of functioning of Bosnian society.*⁵

3.2 Current initiatives with Chinese universities

The two universities that have so far achieved the most notable connections with Chinese partners are the universities from the Republika Srpska entity – the University of East Sarajevo and the University of Banja Luka. The latter began intensified cooperation with the

³Online interview with female representative from the International Burch University, October 2022

⁴Online interview with male representative from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, October 2022

⁵Online interview with female representative from the University of Tuzla, October 2022

establishment of the Confucius Institute in 2017 (in cooperation with Tianjin University), after which it expanded significantly with the introduction of Serbian language as an elective course at the Faculty of Philology in Tianjin and Chinese language at the Faculty of Philology in Banja Luka – and eventually culminating with the opening of Sinology studies in Banja Luka in 2022. The respondent from the University of Banja Luka notes that the cooperation is highly successful “in terms of exchange of knowledge, professors and students, publication of joint works and participation in conferences”.⁶ However, she added that currently a lot depends on the “individual involvement of one or two professors”, because “in some cases there is a tendency to sign cooperation agreements, but without concrete implementation”.⁷ The University of East Sarajevo, according to the current scope of activities, has the widest spectrum of academic cooperation with universities in China, and this is confirmed by the respondent from this university, who says:

University of East Sarajevo, in cooperation with the Embassy of the Republic of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sends students to the Republic of China for one- and two-semester studies, where students have the opportunity to gain valuable new experiences. So far, more than 140 students, including students of the first and second cycle of studies, have received the scholarship of the Government of the People's Republic of China. The Department of Sinology of the Faculty of Philosophy is the initiator of the establishment of the HSK center for evaluating the knowledge of the Chinese language. The HSK Center is an international center for the Chinese language, where students, and all those who deal with China and the Chinese language, have a unique opportunity to take tests at the Faculty of Philosophy in Pale and receive internationally recognized certificates of knowledge of the Chinese language. The HSK center has already had over 250 applicants, and many of them, due to their outstanding results, received one-semester and two-semester scholarships for studies in the People's Republic of China, which were awarded by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China.⁸

In addition, this university is also active in the local community, where they collaborate intensively with high school students who take part in Chinese language competitions, as well

⁶Online interview with female representative from the University of Banja Luka, October 2022

⁷Online interview with female representative from the University of Banja Luka, October 2022

⁸Online interview with female representative from the University of East Sarajevo, October 2022

as with Chinese language teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nonetheless, at some universities, such as the one in Sarajevo or the University in Mostar, cooperation developed sporadically, through the Confucius Institute and/or the introduction of the Chinese language as an elective course at the Faculty(s) of Philosophy. On the other hand, in the case of the University of Tuzla, the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, as well as the University of Travnik, there was no recorded forms of cooperation, where these universities are mostly focused on the region of Southeast Europe, as well as the wider European continent. One of the interviewees from the International Burch University notes that cooperation is mostly present at the individual level:

We had a couple of professors who went on short exchanges and that was resolved in an individual arrangement. We contributed in terms of administrative support. We had no contracts and no formal cooperation. We have a distance learning program where Chinese students also participate, so cooperation happened sporadically. At one time we had Chinese as an elective course. There was interest in that subject, only to sporadically start to decline. It is possible that COVID-19 had an impact.⁹

3.3 Future steps

When assessing future steps and the possible expansion of activities with Chinese institutions, it was pointed out that China will have an increasing influence, because of the constant and consistent development trends. At the same time, it was emphasized that cooperation should first of all be based on the principle of “getting to know each other,” i.e., on cultural exchanges that will educate both students and teaching staff who in most cases see China as a geographically distant culture. Moreover, the sector of information and communication technologies, as well as technology in general, was underlined as an important pillar for the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina's academia and economy – implying that Bosnia and Herzegovina could have the greatest benefits from cooperation with China in this field. This would also mean expanding the hitherto pronounced focus on learning the Chinese language to the more institutionalized cooperation with Chinese universities and the labor market. The respondent from the University of East Sarajevo notes that the plan is to expand

⁹Online interview with female representative from the International Burch University, October 2022

the existing 11 agreements and intensify the participation of a wider number of faculties such as Economics and Agriculture:

First of all, we want to intensify the current cooperation between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of exchange of scientific personnel, dual degrees, as well as the participation of partner Chinese universities in conferences of the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Agriculture and Philosophy. Many planned projects in the field of economics and business are already being realized, while many other projects of importance for the entire University and the community are planned.¹⁰

The respondent from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar notes that it is important to cooperate in all those areas in which China dominates the world market, such as “economy, tourism and construction”¹¹, while the respondent from Banja Luka adds that Bosnia and Herzegovina “could get the opportunity to promote its scientists in China, as well as tourism and other potentials”.¹² Also, the respondent from the University of Tuzla claims that this university is “interested in cooperation in the field of exchange of academic staff and students in areas related to joint master's studies, as well as in international and research projects that would contribute to the development and improvement of our institutions”.¹³ Although there is a significant opportunity to work on issues related to energy, medicine, construction and mining, what currently stands out as the main shortcoming are the insufficiently productive relations, which lack a clear and strategic planning. In that case, it is difficult to determine the mutual benefits, but as one of the interviewees says – in case of a better connection – China would also get “an opportunity for more projects in the field of economy and education, and our students more opportunities for employment”.¹⁴ The respondent from the University of Sarajevo notes that it is difficult to expect that the Chinese and Bosnian universities could achieve a more notable cooperation in the field of social sciences (political science or security studies) – primarily due to different views on democratic processes, human rights issues and political systems – but on the other hand, good practices in social work or sociology could be

¹⁰Online interview with female representative from the University of East Sarajevo, October 2022

¹¹Online interview with male representative from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, October 2022

¹²Online interview with female representative from the University of Banja Luka, October 2022

¹³Online interview with female representative from the University of Tuzla, October 2022

¹⁴Online interview with female representative from the University of East Sarajevo, October 2022

fields of mutual interest.¹⁵ When it comes to the difference between technical and social sciences, the respondent from the University of Travnik has a similar opinion:

[Cooperation] would be particularly interesting for the field of technical sciences where, through potential cooperation, China's achievements and technological progress could be used as experiences of good practice. The fields of information technology, graphic design, architecture, textile design and construction are fields that are multidisciplinary from the point of view of openness, and as such are not limited by the framework of states. Social sciences are often subject to the standards and acts of a specific country.¹⁶

3.4 Negative aspects of closer partnership

Partial misunderstandings and disagreements when working on joint scientific projects cannot be excluded, and as one of the interviewees points out, they are often the result of misunderstanding and diverse cultural backgrounds.¹⁷ Although there is a partial opinion among the respondents that academic cooperation can produce exclusively positive results, several of them still pointed out two possible problems, which could arise in the event of an increase in the volume of exchange between the two countries. The first is related to the problem of harmonizing the positions, or more precisely the positions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union, where Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a situation where it must follow the foreign policy goals of the European community. On the other hand, a significant problem could also be the harmonization of positions within Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there is a significant divergence in opinions on most issues. Thus, one of the interviewees notes the following:

Negative aspects could be the attitude and position of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a potential candidate country for joining the EU and a country that seeks to be part of the NATO alliance. Academic and scientific cooperation, unfortunately, would depend on attitudes related to Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy. Although

¹⁵Online interview with female representative from the University of Sarajevo, October 2022

¹⁶Online interview with female representative from the University of Travnik, October 2022

¹⁷Online interview with female representative from the University of Mostar, October 2022

*academic and scientific cooperation should be exempt from politics, we see that this is not the case with the example of current events with Russia.*¹⁸

On the other hand, another important aspect of thinking about the improvement of cooperation concerns the acquisition of knowledge and the use of that knowledge elsewhere, outside the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is where the long-standing problem of the so-called “brain drain” came to prominence – meaning that a considerable number of educated young people still leave Bosnia and Herzegovina and move to the European Union countries. Therefore, one of the interviewees claims that there is a real danger that “know-hows” provided by Chinese partners, could perhaps motivate youth to move away and stay where they are appreciated.¹⁹

3.5 Politics and academic cooperation

While speaking about different political viewpoints and obstacles for academic cooperation, all respondents agree that politics should not affect university cooperation in any way. One of the interviewees from the University of Banja Luka believes that different political perceptions do not have to be an obstacle for the development of scientific cooperation, with mutual understanding and acceptance of different points of view – which is also a feature of communication and cooperation in the academic world.²⁰ Until now, the high-quality bilateral relations between China and Bosnia and Herzegovina, strengthened through the mechanism of *Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* (14+1, or formerly 17+1 and 16+1), have demonstrated China's commitment to improvement and development of relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina through different spheres of interest. Therefore, the interviewees note that it is important for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be ready to approach the entire process without prejudice and with sufficient information about partners before the intensification of collaboration. The specific political context in Bosnia and Herzegovina in a considerable number of cases can also dictate any form of foreign partnership – which is best reflected in the foreign policy actions of various political leaders. Among several interviewees, there is an opinion that in Bosnia and Herzegovina every segment of society is under the negative influence of politics – although some of these segments, such as education, sports and culture, are pillars for the development of society – and as one of the interviewees from the

¹⁸Online interview with female representative from the University of Tuzla, October 2022

¹⁹Online interview with female representative from the International Burch University, October 2022

²⁰Online interview with female representative from the University of Banja Luka, October 2022

Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar says “scientific community is not spared from this influence”.²¹ Nevertheless, one of the examples of good practice comes from the International Burch University, where the respondent asserts that the staff works quite well, even though they come from different ethno-religious backgrounds within the country.²²

4. Conclusion

The main goals of this research were to review current perceptions of academic and scientific cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and China, including initiatives that have been launched so far, as well as those that could be established. At the same time, the author examined the readiness of domestic universities for cooperation with Chinese partners, as well as the possible negative aspects of increasing the scope of joint projects and programs. A total of eight universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the research – six state universities (University of Sarajevo, University of East Sarajevo, University of Banja Luka, University of Tuzla, University of Mostar, and Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar) and two private (International Burch) University and University of Travnik). All respondents come from the international cooperation office of the university they represent or are in some other way involved in international projects and programs. Written or oral interviews were organized with all respondents, and their personal data was protected throughout the process of analyzing the results.

The research results are divided into several sections. First, the examination of current international cooperation programs showed an almost complete focus on European Union projects and regional cooperation in the wider context of the European community. The general perception of universities from Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the universities from China is positive, where Chinese universities are seen as desirable partners and leaders of global development. On the other hand, the perception of universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina is somewhat more negative, where respondents emphasized many shortcomings such as a lack of support for research projects, the impossibility of reaching end users (local communities) and a weak connection with the market and policymakers.

²¹Online interview with male representative from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, October 2022

²²Online interview with female representative from the International Burch University, October 2022

Second, a review of current initiatives showed China's exclusive focus on establishing Confucius Institutes and departments for the study of the Chinese language and culture, without major deviation and “unlocking” of other fields such as economy, tourism, or agriculture. Likewise, the author noted a slightly more intense cooperation with two universities from the Republika Srpska entity, which can be explained by China's closer relationship with Serbia, and therefore with the Serbian population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some of the universities that participated in the research (such as the University of Tuzla and the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar) have not had any form of formal cooperation until now, despite their openness to such a form of partnership. The conclusion is that in most cases, links were built and established individually, and it is often the case that formalized contracts fail to be realized – which means that they do not necessarily have to be a guarantee of advanced cooperation.

Third, when it comes to future steps and expansion of cooperation, the respondents emphasized that it should be based on sincere acquaintance with each other. At the same time, it is possible to draw the conclusion that some of the branches that were mentioned as adequate and beneficial for both parties are the information and communication technology sector, tourism, economy, and construction. At the same time, an important form of improving relations could also be the establishment of study programs with dual degrees, as well as the exchange of scientific staff. Fourth, some potentially negative aspects of greater interaction were also highlighted, including the harmonization of the positions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Union and China, as well as the general sluggishness of Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy. Likewise, the issue of “brain drain” was mentioned, where a sizable number of youth from Bosnia and Herzegovina left once they got the so-called “know-hows.” In the end, the respondents confirmed that different political viewpoints should not be an obstacle for academic and scientific cooperation. However, they emphasized that the academic community is often not spared from this influence, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the political context can often “enter” all social segments.

Appendix

The questionnaire

1. How would you rate the international cooperation of your university so far? What scientific projects are you working on and who are your partners?
2. How do you see and evaluate the current academic and scientific contribution of China and Chinese universities? Are these universities a desirable partner for joint work and cooperation? On the other hand, how do you view the scientific contribution of Bosnian universities?
- 3.
4. How do you assess your university's cooperation with China so far? Was there any form of collaboration?
5. Is there any kind of cooperation that you think could be established in the future? In which fields? Could a mutually beneficial cooperation be established? What benefits would Bosnia and Herzegovina have, and what benefits would China have?
- 6.
7. Are there any negative aspects of the cooperation that has existed so far or that could eventually be established?
8. Should, and to what extent, different political viewpoints be an obstacle for the development of academic and scientific cooperation? Should academic and scientific cooperation be separated from politics?

References

Burke, M. (2022). *What next for scientific collaboration as the stand-off between China and the West heats up?* Chemistry World. Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/what-next-for-scientific-collaboration-as-stand-off-between-china-and-the-west-heats-up/4016361.article>

Cai, Y. (2019). China-Europe Higher Education Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 14 (2), 167–179.

Hasić, J. (2022). The Role of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Vangeli, A. (Ed.) *The Role of China in Southeast Europe* (pp. 16-21). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Jorgensen, T. (2022). *Academic cooperation and geopolitics in a new world*. University World News. Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220106110659254>

Kirby, WC (2022). *On academic engagement with China*. The Wire China. Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.thewirechina.com/2022/08/28/on-academic-engagement-with-chinese-universities/>

Philipsen, N. (2021). *The importance of academic collaboration with China*. Maastricht University. Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/blog/2021/04/importance-academic-collaboration-china>

Stević, Lj. (2022). Chinese cultural soft power: A case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *International Problems*, LXXIV 1/2022, 103-128.

Zhang, D., et al. (2022). Exploring the role of International Research Collaboration in building China's world-class universities. *Sustainability*. 14 (6), 3487.

Interviews

Online interview with female representative from the University of Sarajevo, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the University of Banja Luka, October 2022

Online interview with male representative from the Džemal Bijedić University of Mostar, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the University of Tuzla, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the University of Mostar, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the International Burch University, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the University of East Sarajevo, October 2022

Online interview with female representative from the University of Travnik, October 2022