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**ULRICH GROTHUS | in**  
President of ACA

Ulrich Grothus is president of ACA. Before his retirement in July 2018, he was Deputy Secretary-General and head of the Berlin office of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

He obtained a master's degree in Political Science at the Freie Universität Berlin in 1976. He then worked as a journalist before joining the International Division of the former West German Rectors Conference in 1982.

He worked for DAAD from 1988 through 2018, first as spokesman and head of the president's office. From 1991, he was consecutively director of all three DAAD program directorates, for the Southern and Northern hemisphere and for supra regional internationalization programs. In between, he served as director of the Paris office from 1998 to 2000 and of the New York office from 2004 to 2008.

Grothus speaks five foreign languages and has given three others a try.

## European Higher Education Cooperation in a Global Context

### Academic Cooperation Between Openness and De-coupling

*"National security ranks higher than academic freedom."*  
– Who would have believed only three years ago that this [statement](#) did not come from one of the authoritarian usual subjects, but from the Dutch minister of education, culture and science Robert Dijkgraaf, himself an international renowned physicist?

The quote, of June 2022, is just one example of the sea-change that has recently happened to international cooperation and exchange in higher education and research. That shift is due to **dramatic changes and multiple crises in the global political environment**, some of which can be briefly listed here.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine and the rising tensions between the US and China have led to a return of geopolitics to international relations. Most European countries, research and internationalization agencies have frozen most scientific cooperation with Russian institutions. Research cooperation with China and even the presence of Chinese scholars and students at European or American institutions is increasingly suspected of opening the door to unwanted "foreign interference" and technology transfer.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only reminded all of us how much the world is one, for better or worse, but has also challenged the globalization paradigm of free trade and interdependence. Global supply chains are now widely perceived as a risk, rather than a benefit. Globalization has been a powerful driver of internationalization in our field. Putting globalization on hold, or even rolling it back, may also affect outgoing mobility, as international experience is perceived to be less of an advantage than in the recent past.

Time to reverse or at least prevent further climate change is clearly running out: without dramatic efforts, we may reach the point of no return in less than a decade. The scientific assessment of factors contributing to climate change and the development of technologies to stop it require the contribution of researchers around the globe.

Last but not least, academic freedom is clearly

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on the retreat, according to the [latest \(2022\) Academic Freedom Index](#) published by the universities of Gothenburg and Erlangen. While there have been some advances over the last ten years, e.g., in Kazakhstan, Montenegro or the Gambia, there are significant setbacks even in long-time beacons of freedom like the US and the UK, not to speak of the dismal record of Russia, Turkey, Egypt or, not least, China. The latter three all rank in the bottom 10% worldwide.

At the same time, the global landscape of research is also changing dramatically. As recently as 2001, the EU, the US, the UK, Japan and Canada put together accounted for 77% of academic publications. That share was down to 48% in 2020. Over the same period, [China's share was up from 4 to 23%](#). China is now the first research nation as to total publication output and is about to overtake the US even in the most widely quoted "excellent" publications. The time when the bulk of scientific research was done between Novosibirsk and San Diego seems over for good.

Academic freedom and integrity are fundamental to the endeavor of higher education and research. The 2020 ministerial meeting of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in Rome defined the value basis of the EHEA as follows: "[We commit to upholding institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education.](#)" That still seems to be a good working definition, and it was even agreed to, if only in words, by Russia and Turkey.

These values are frequently cited as "European", along with human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They were first developed in the European enlightenment and put into practice by the American and French revolutions. Unfortunately, they were also frequently trampled on by many of the very nations that first proclaimed them. Still, they are universal in character, and there is good reason to stand for them everywhere. Nevertheless, some of the world's leading research nations do not 'live' them in practice, if even in words.

There are thus **several dilemmas and conflicting goals that need to be reconciled**. We probably need to work with people and systems that do not share these values, for the advancement of knowledge and in order to be able to truly tackle *global* challenges. We want to keep international cooperation as open as we possibly can, but we cannot ignore the challenges to freedom, intellectual property and security. Huge nations in the global South do not take the stance against the Russian

aggression that we would like them to take. But can we possibly work with only "like-minded" countries and systems (as the European Commission has suggested in documents like the Global Gateway Communication)? For many partners with a European colonial legacy, the claim for "value-based" cooperation may sound pretty shallow. And with regard to the world's biggest research system, is de-coupling (or, as it is now more fashionably called, "de-risking") a realistic option? The advance of knowledge, including for tackling global challenges, would suffer for sure. But has China actually more to lose from de-coupling than the West? China is now not only the first research nation, it is also the first source of internationally-mobile students. The price of a segregation of educational markets and of blocking the influx of young researchers could be very high indeed. For systems that heavily depend on the fees paid by international students, the price may even be unaffordable.

### How can we strike a reasonable balance between these conflicting goals?

Inspired by an ACA [reflection paper](#) on "*Europe's International Higher Education and Research Cooperation in Times of Uncertainty*", published in November 2022, I would like to put forward some personal **suggestions**.

First: *Be open but not stupid*. Most teaching and research carried out at universities is, and should remain, public. However, in the limited areas where there is a real risk of research cooperation and academic exchange being abused for military and surveillance purposes, universities need to be more alert than they have sometimes been in the past. Some ACA member agencies have set up guidelines and offer expert advice to help universities assess the risks involved. One example is the Competence Center for International Academic Cooperation (KIWi) set up by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2019. The number of cases where German institutions and individual scholars have sought advice from KIWi has doubled last year – and so has its budget. The Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills and the Finnish national forum for internationalization are also developing guidelines and visions for higher education institutions in their countries.

On the other hand, *beware of a general securitization of higher education and international academic cooperation*. While there are considerable risks in some specific fields, there are none in most. More so, there are fields like climate change, infectious diseases or biodiversity where we all depend on involving



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researchers and research facilities from as many countries as possible. We thus need a differentiated approach – by purpose of cooperation, subject areas, individuals and institutions.

Second: *Be realistic*. For many years, our community has thought that cooperation and dialogue will automatically lead to more openness and freedom in partner countries. That has clearly not always worked across the board or to the extent we wanted. We need some sort of academic *Realpolitik*, that assesses in a realistic way the opportunities and the limits of what we can achieve.

Third: *Stand for academic freedom and 'live' it at home*. If we cannot make sure that our partners uphold the values and standards we cherish, we can, and should, still speak out for them ourselves, also when that might lead to some uncomfortable debate. Not least, the best way to defend academic freedom worldwide is to practice it ourselves. As the Academic Freedom Index shows, there is unfortunately still a lot to improve even in EU member states. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy include the right of institutions, scholars and students to decide themselves on how to work with whom.

At any rate, European universities should remain *a safe haven* for scholars and students at risk in their own countries. Fine examples are the Scholar Rescue Fund, originally launched by the US Institute for International Education (IIE), as well as the Philipp Schwartz and Hilde Domin initiatives in Germany. Experience shows that you can both protect scholars and students at risk and continue to work with the systems that they fled from.

Fourth: *Understand and respect the perspectives of our partners*. There continues to be an enormous imbalance in the intellectual and financial resources between universities in the West and in developing countries. Our partners there have the right to expect us to discuss on an equal footing rather than being lectured on how they should behave. It is also not in our European interest to divide the academic world into conflicting blocks.

Fifth: *Make the case for science (or knowledge) diplomacy*. While academic cooperation alone can certainly not save the planet or restore peace, it can still make people – whose governments and many of whose fellow citizens would not even talk to each other – interact, and work together for a greater good, be it the advancement of knowledge or for tackling specific challenges. All sorts of diplomacy mean to, often difficultly, identify common ground on which to move

forward. Students and academics have the privilege to already have identified shared interests in their respective fields. Experience has taught that they can start dialogue from there and make borders, religious and political frontlines a bit more porous.

These are just some first suggestions on how to strike a balance between openness and realism. Some of them are likely controversial, and an open and frank discussion is called for. Internationalization agencies, with their long and huge experience in dealing with a great variety of international partners as well as with swimming in, at times, muddy political waters, can contribute a lot to this discussion, along with higher education institutions, scholars and students. We need to share our experience and develop a Team Europe approach. ACA strives to serve as a forum and a platform for this necessary debate.

*Ulrich Grothus is the President of ACA. This article is an opinion piece.*



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This article is part of the **2023 "ACA Think Pieces" series – European higher education cooperation in a global context**, launched in May 2023. Through their expert contributions in the series, the authors constructively reflect on some of the ongoing debates around the role, the principles and desired openness of international cooperation in higher education (and research), in an increasingly complex geopolitical context. The pieces invite for critical reflections, together with the authors, around some of the much-debated concepts of "knowledge security" and "knowledge diplomacy", values-anchored international cooperation and "European values", prioritising "like-minded" partners, and more, as well as for visionary approaches and practical solutions paving the future of cooperation. The series also channels responses from outside of Europe to these debates and their relevance from partners' perspectives, when assessed through their own priorities, needs and expectations towards cooperation with European partners. The articles are published electronically towards the end of each month on the ACA website, from May until December 2023.