

Briefing: Confucius Institutes in the UK

- A major new analysis by the China Research Group shows that British schools and universities are reliant on a network of 30 Confucius Institutes - the highest number of any country - to coordinate teaching of Mandarin, funding and expertise.¹
- New Confucius Institutes are still opening in the UK. The Open University opened the “world’s first Online Confucius Institute” just last month (May 2022).²
- Almost all UK government spending on Mandarin language teaching at schools - with at least £27m allocated from 2015 to 2024 - is channelled through university-based Confucius Institutes.
- The number of Confucius Institutes in the UK and their tight integration across the education system is unusual amongst our peers.
- Governments in countries including the US, Netherlands and Germany have discouraged their universities from renewing partnerships with Confucius Institutes, or introduced mandatory financial disclosures.
- Given that Confucius Institutes are so closely tied to China’s Ministry of Education and the CCP, the UK’s approach is outdated.

Contact: Julia Pamilih, Director of China Research Group on julia@chinaresearchgroup.org.

¹Number of active Confucius Institutes in 2022: UK (30), France (21), Germany (19), US (18), Italy (16), Australia (13)

² [Open University](#) (2022)

Mandarin teaching in schools

It is a welcome success that Britain has made strides in improving uptake of Mandarin school age learning in recent years. In England, growth is largely driven by two programmes: the Department for Education’s Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) and Swire Chinese Language Foundation Centres (Swire Centres).

Between the two programmes, over 26,800 state school students - and 160 schools which did not previously offer Mandarin - have enrolled in Mandarin teaching. Yet this has also had the effect of creating complex funding arrangements and dependences which deserve more scrutiny.

Summary of Confucius Institute ties

Programme	Location	Description	Funder	Delivery partner	Funding
Mandarin Excellence Programme	England	Pioneering DfE-funded intensive Mandarin teaching programme for students from Year 7, currently teaching around 8,000 students.	Department for Education and individual schools	UCL Institute for Education Confucius Institute, British Council	c. £3m a year (up to £25.4m from 2016 - 2025) ³
Confucius Institute for Scotland’s Schools	Scotland	Based in the University of Strathclyde as part of Scotland’s National Centre for Languages. The scheme has 22 Confucius classroom hubs.	Scottish Government (33%) Tianjin Normal University (25%) CLEC (45%) ⁴	University of Strathclyde and Confucius Institute for Scotland’s Schools	£0.7-1.6m per annum ⁵
Wales China Schools Project	Wales	Works with over forty schools, with programmes including GCSE and A-level courses, WJEC qualifications and culture courses.	Welsh Government and CI	University of Cardiff and Cardiff Confucius Institute (based within the Language School)	£45k per annum ⁶

³ [DfE press release](#) (2016), [UCL press release](#) (2021)

⁴ CRG correspondence with CISS

⁵ CRG correspondence with CISS, [Scottish government press releases](#) (2018).

⁶ [Welsh Government FOI response](#) (2022).

Confucius Classrooms at Ulster University	Northern Ireland	Funding for 48 Chinese teachers through 8 hub schools who roll out Mandarin Chinese and cultural awareness programmes in Northern Irish schools.	<i>Presumed CIHQ</i>	Confucius Institute at Ulster University	<i>Undisclosed, estimated £0.5m per annum (£3m for 2020-2022)⁷</i>
--	------------------	--	----------------------	--	---

Concerns around Confucius Institutes

Concerns about the presence of CCP-funded organisations on campus should be carefully balanced against the benefits they provide to language teaching and uptake.

- **State links:** Confucius Institutes are effectively run as an arm of the state, supervised by the Ministry of Education. Given the tightening environment in China, it is not inconceivable that the CLEC would seek a firmer line on academic freedom abroad. This could force UK universities into an uncomfortable position.
- **Level and quality of teaching:** Confucius Institutes usually focus on beginner level courses, which minimises the risk of interference. However, this also caps their usefulness in developing China expertise. At university level, the teaching quality of CIs is not particularly highly regarded by Sinologists. Four of the UK’s leading China centres have no Confucius Institute (Oxford, Cambridge, King’s and SOAS). Five universities (St Andrew’s, Birmingham, Chester, Regent’s, Portsmouth) have recently begun offering Chinese Studies courses without a Confucius Institute.
- **Hub for UK schools:** Many Confucius Institutes have developed strong ties to local schools through the Confucius Classroom system. The provision of language assistants by Confucius Institutes is seen as a high-value contribution.
- **Interference:** Confucius Institute teachers are approved and evaluated by a central body, and warned not to cover political issues, such as Taiwan and Tibet. There are a few examples of blatant interference, such as the removal of documents mentioning Taiwan at a Confucius Institute-organised conference at the University of Nottingham or the removal of references to Chinese dissidents in 2017. But the most high-profile controversies have happened in other countries: one of Germany’s largest publishing houses claimed that the Chinese consul general in Dusseldorf forced the cancellation of an online talk on Xi Jinping by two German journalists at an event which had been organised by the Confucius institutes in Hanover and Duisburg-Essen.
- **Self-censorship:** A more thorny problem is the perception of self-censorship or monitoring of students on campus. There have been several complaints from both

⁷ [Northern Ireland Bureau China 2020-2022 Strategy Report](#) (2020)

Chinese and Hong Kong students based in the UK about the perceived threat of monitoring on campus by individuals employed by the CCP who work for a United Front organisation.

- **Opaque funding:** 24 out of 29 Confucius Institutes in the UK refuse to disclose what funding they receive. By extrapolating from reports about the average annual funding per Institute, we can make a rough estimate that the Chinese state has spent around £15m-£28m in the past decade on Confucius Institutes in the UK.⁸
- **Value for money:** We also know that UK universities - and governments - have contributed millions of pounds to Confucius Institutes, whether directly or through benefits such as office space or staffing costs. There has been little evaluation as to whether this constitutes value for money, given the concerns around quality of teaching and the spillover risks of self-censorship.

⁸ This does not include additional financial contributions, in the form of the air fares & salaries of Chinese instructors, as well as teaching materials (each CI receives a standard amount of 3,000 vols of Chinese textbooks among other resources) and funding for events, conferences and scholarships.

International comparisons

US: There are 18 Confucius Institutes in the US, down from 103 in 2017. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 included a provision that prohibited universities hosting Confucius Institutes from receiving funding for Chinese language studies from the Department of Defense. In 2021, the Senate passed a bill which pledged to cut federal funding from universities which continued to host a Confucius Institute. A small number of universities have circumvented the situation by renaming their Confucius Institutes.⁹

Sweden: All Confucius Institutes in Sweden have closed after bilateral relations with China deteriorated. The final Confucius Institute closed in 2019 and the final Confucius Classroom in 2020¹⁰.

Australia: There are 13 Confucius Institutes in Australia. In a high-profile case, the New South Wales Department of Education scrapped its Confucius Institute, which had been the first in the world to be embedded within a government education department. Australia's 13 remaining Confucius Institutes must declare their funding and activities under Australian laws which give the Australian government veto power to cancel agreements between foreign governments and Australian states, territories and universities that contradict Australia's foreign policy.¹¹

Germany: Confucius Institutes caused controversy in 2021 after one of the largest publishing houses claimed that the Chinese consul general in Dusseldorf forced two local institutes to cancel an online talk by two German journalists.¹² Germany's education minister said it was "unacceptable" that Beijing exercised "high-level influence" on German public life through Confucius Institutes.

Netherlands: The Netherlands has two Confucius Institutes. Leiden University closed its Confucius Institute in 2019. In 2021, the Dutch education minister warned Dutch universities to reconsider their partnerships with Confucius Institutes.¹³

Canada: There are now 10 Confucius Institutes in Canada, down from 15. In 2013, McMaster University closed its Confucius Institute after a former Institute teacher and Falun Gong practitioner filed a complaint over a clause in her employment contract which prohibited employees from engaging in 'illegal activity', including belonging to the Falun Gong movement.¹⁴

⁹ [Foreign Policy](#) (2021)

¹⁰ [The Times](#) (2020)

¹¹ [Sydney Morning Herald](#) (2021)

¹² [The Times](#) (2021), [Deutsche Welle](#) (2021)

¹³ [DUB](#) (2021), [Rijksoverheid](#) (2021)

¹⁴ [Globe and Mail](#) (2013)

France: The University of Lyon closed its Confucius Institute after a disagreement over the integration of the institute into the university.¹⁵

Belgium: Vrije Universiteit Brussel closed its Confucius Institute in 2019 after reports that it was used to facilitate espionage.¹⁶

¹⁵ [Gregory Lee](#) (2013)

¹⁶ [SCMP](#) (2019)

Appendix 1: List of Confucius Institutes in the United Kingdom

Confucius Institute	Years active	Agreement	Transparency	Funding 2011 - 2021 (estimated in italics)
SOAS China Institute	2005-2021	Agreement	Yes	£134,241.60
Confucius Institute for Scotland in University of Edinburgh	2006-present	Agreement	Partial	
UCL Institute of Education	2006-present	Agreement	Yes	£1,286,640
Chinese Language and Culture for Business (formerly CIBL)	2006-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at University of Manchester	2006-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute for Traditional Chinese Medicine at London South Bank University (LSBU)	2007-present	Agreement	Redacted	£2,643,438 (2015-2021)
Confucius Institute at University of Nottingham (NCI)	2007-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at University of Sheffield	2007-present	Not disclosed	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at Cardiff University	2007-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD CI)	2007-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at University of Central Lancashire	2008-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at University of Liverpool	2009-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Lancaster University Confucius Institute	2011-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at University of Glasgow	2011-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at University of Southampton	2011-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at Ulster University (CIUU)	2011-present	Agreement	Partial	
Business Confucius Institute at University of Leeds	2012-present	Agreement	Partial	£762,825.00
Confucius Institute for Dance and Performance at Goldsmiths, University of London	2012-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute for Scotland's	2012-present	Agreement	Redacted	

Schools, University of Strathclyde				
Confucius Institute at Bangor University	2012-present	Agreement	Partial	£1,045,000
Confucius Institute at Newcastle University	2013-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at University of Aberdeen	2013-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at Edge Hill University	2013-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at De Montfort University (DMU CI, Leicester)	2013-present	Agreement	Partial	£365,391 (2015-2021)
Scottish Confucius Institute for Business and Communication at Heriot Watt University	2014-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at Queen Mary University of London	2014-present	Agreement	Partial	
Confucius Institute at University of Hull	2015-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at Coventry University (CUCI)	2016-present	Agreement	Redacted	
Confucius Institute at Oxford Brookes University (CIOBU)	2016-present	Not disclosed	Redacted	
Confucius Institute of Science and Technology Innovation at the University of Huddersfield	2019-present	Agreement	Partial	
Open University Online Confucius Institute	2022-present	Not disclosed	No	

Appendix 2: How Confucius Institutes work

Before 2020, universities negotiated agreements with Confucius Institute HQ (then known as Hanban) and a Chinese partner university. Universities signed a contractual agreement: the CI is run by a joint council of UK university leadership and Hanban officials. Hanban contributed \$150,000 (roughly £110,000) to the cost of the initial set-up of the CI. It then funds and sends teachers as needed, which is estimated to cost roughly £100,000 a year. Funds were often matched by the host university, or it provided benefits such as an office or full-time staff to manage the CI.

A series of negative press stories and the effective ban of Confucius Institutes in several countries, including the US and Sweden, led to changes. In July 2020, the Confucius Institute governance structure was reformed and split into the recently established Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF) and the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC).¹⁷

CIEF is nominally a non-profit charitable organisation which now manages the Confucius Institute brand. The CLEC is affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, responsible for National Chinese Language Proficiency tests; supporting the provision of teaching resources; operating international Chinese language education programmes such as the "Chinese Bridge" series and China Studies Programme; and organising relevant activities of international exchanges and cooperation.

In the UK, this has meant that many Confucius Institutes now receive funds and benefits in kind directly from their partner universities (although the Chinese partner universities typically draw down the funds directly from the CLEC). But the UK has a diverse array of Confucius Institutes with significant variation between models, so there is no one size fits all model.

¹⁷ [Global Times](#) (2020)