



How University Consortia Can Reframe Internationalisation

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Since the establishment of the **Association of Commonwealth Universities** in London in 1913, around 200 domestic and international university associations have been founded as registered entities worldwide. These membership-based entities, known as university networks, alliances, associations or consortia, operate at various territorial scales – national, international, regional and global.

They facilitate joint academic programmes, research initiatives, student and staff exchanges and policy advocacy, creating synergies that address global challenges and expand international opportunities for their members.

East Asian cultures believe that while a single chopstick is weak, a bundle is unbreakable. This is a concept that underpins the formation of 10 UK-East Asia university consortia over the past decade. Our **PEER project** explores how these consortia navigate cultural and geopolitical challenges to reframe internationalisation of higher education and remain resilient.

East Asia-UK consortia timeline

The term 'consortium', originating from the business world, features in the names of 10 UK- East Asia groupings. The first was established in 2012 (UK-Japan) and the latest in 2023 (UK- Taiwan).

Ranging from seven to nearly 50 members, these consortia aim to pool resources, expertise and networks to enhance research capabilities, educational offerings, societal impact and influence beyond what their members could achieve individually.

Here is a timeline:

- 2012: the Japan-UK Research and Education Network for Knowledge Economy Initiatives (**RENKEI**)
- 2016: UK-China University Consortium on Engineering Education and Research (**UCEER**)
- 2016: UK-China Humanities Alliance (**UKCHA**)
- 2017: The **UK-China Joint Institute Alliance**
- 2017: Jiangsu-UK World Class University Consortium (**JSUK**)
- 2020: UK-Indonesia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Sciences (**UKICIS**)
- 2021: UK-Singapore Universities Alliance for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (**UKSAEI**)
- 2020: **Thai-UK World-class University Consortium**
- 2022: UK-Malaysia University Consortium (**UK-MUC**)
- 2023: Taiwan-UK University Consortium (**TUKUC**).

These bi-national consortia create new collaborative spaces, introduce new actors and set evolving priorities and relationships across universities, industry and in UK-East Asia diplomatic circles. Many of these flagship consortia have been initiated and supported by ministers and heads of diplomatic missions on both sides.

This diplomatic role requires university consortia to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes while presenting opportunities to foster adaptive and strategic international engagement.

The UK-China University Consortium on Engineering Education and Research (**UCEER**) and Jiangsu-UK University Consortium (**JSUK**) have refined their research focuses and activities to

maintain **balanced and constructive collaboration**, demonstrating their commitment to resilient partnerships that transcend **political fluctuations** and provide essential stability in international relations.

Collaborative advantages

The power of a collective voice enables university consortia to influence policies, attract public and philanthropic funding and engage industrial partners. This is evident in consortia such as the Japan-UK, UK-Thailand and Jiangsu-UK partnerships, where local and national governments, along with the British Council, have provided financial support for their activities.

In international higher education, cooperation and competition are often seen as antithetical. UK-East Asia consortia dampen competition among members and create collaborative advantages.

British and Asian universities form consortia to develop new programmes, like those in the **UK-China Joint Institute Alliance**, and undertake major research projects, as seen in the UK-Japan consortium (**RENKEI**) and the **Thai-UK World-class University Consortium**.

The costs of research experimentation and innovation sometimes exceed what a single institution is willing or able to bear. Consortia allow institutions to share risks, access a broader research data and maximise rewards.

Larger UK-East Asia consortia, like **UK-Malaysia** and **Jiangsu-UK**, expand the intellectual community for scholars from smaller universities or departments that may have been overlooked by international partners and funders.

Diaspora academics and the British Council

East Asian diaspora academics in the UK are crucial bridges in establishing and strengthening bi-national consortia. They leverage their bicultural understanding, linguistic skills and networks to facilitate collaborations.

For instance, Indonesian diaspora academics helped form the UK-Indonesia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Sciences (**UKICIS**) amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Chinese diaspora academics contributed to the Jiangsu-UK University Consortium by decoding institutional priorities and cultural nuances that might otherwise impede successful partnerships.

In UK-Malaysia, UK-Singapore and UK-Thailand consortia, diaspora academics build trust, shape mutually beneficial research agendas and promote genuine knowledge exchange. Their insights into both British and Southeast Asian academic environments enable them to identify complementary strengths and create impactful research initiatives, particularly in areas like sustainable development and public health.

Asian diaspora academics also engage in informal knowledge sharing by mentoring junior colleagues, fostering connections and advocating for greater recognition of Asian knowledge traditions within UK institutions. Their efforts reshape how knowledge can be produced and shared across geographical and cultural boundaries, fostering more equitable and productive partnerships.

Alongside diaspora academics, the British Council plays a pivotal role in developing UK-East Asia consortia, serving as a catalyst and coordinator for cross-continental partnerships. Through its Going Global Partnerships initiative, the Council promotes knowledge co-production, enhances research capacity and supports thematic priorities like sustainable development, public health and emerging technologies.

In countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and China, it enables bidirectional knowledge flow between UK and Asian universities while mobilising resources and co-funding streams. This approach

recognises shifting dynamics, positioning UK-Asian partnerships as equitable rather than one-directional.

Challenges

Consortia are not, however, a cure-all. They face challenges like unrealistic expectations, political tensions and costly coordination. Managing a consortium requires significant resources, including a secretariat.

For example, the UK-Indonesia consortium had to scale down its activities due to financial constraints. Participation often demands substantial expenses from member universities.

Mapping UK-East Asia consortia reveals a shift in spatial organisation, but tensions exist between inclusivity and selectivity. While promoting broad cooperation, membership often favours elite institutions, reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Regional representation often skews towards wealthier institutions, limiting participation from less-resourced universities that might contribute valuable perspectives. For example, the UK-Malaysia consortium offers Malaysia private universities an associate status only; and the UK-Thailand consortium is dominated by elite universities.

Larger consortia, like the Jiangsu-UK or UK-Malaysia, face free-riding risks, where some members contribute less or the consortium fails to deliver meaningful outcomes beyond signing memoranda of understanding.

This imbalance threatens sustainability, as core contributors may become dissatisfied, challenging consortia secretariats to manage complex socio-psychological dynamics and ensure active participation. Additionally, diaspora academics often experience 'dual marginality', balancing between two worlds without fully belonging to either.

Determinants of sustainability

The sustainability of UK-Asia university consortia depends on shared research interests, time commitment and financial investment. Dedicated individuals with cross-cultural competence and institutional support are key, while flexible yet clear consortium governance structures ensure adaptability across diverse contexts.

Alignment around common goals fosters cohesion, especially when addressing societal challenges in the UK and East Asia. Relevance to stakeholders – including students, academics, industry partners and governments – ensures ongoing support and engagement.

Digital infrastructure increasingly enables remote collaboration, though face-to-face interaction remains essential for relationship building. Regular evaluations guide adjustments. Resilient consortia embrace cultural differences as strengths rather than obstacles, creating environments where diverse perspectives enhance innovation and knowledge production.

The British Council should support lasting collaborative research ecosystems and enhance UK-East Asia consortia's academic output and global influence. They can act as resilient bridges and 'soft infrastructure' for stability and cooperation beyond political cycles in today's complex geopolitical environment.

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