China's Vital Role in Global Cooperation

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Openness Cooperation Trust

China has become "a true scientific superpower" committed to openness and international collaboration, Peter Gluckman, president of the International Science Council (ISC), said in an interview on October 23.

Gluckman was among the foreign scholars invited to Beijing for a series of scientific meetings. The scholars discussed ways to facilitate more exchanges and China's role in international cooperation.

'An enormous step forward'

"China has demonstrated that it can provide data and access to instrumentation that scientists from around the world, including particularly from the Global South, can engage in and partner with," Gluckman said.

The Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical radio Telescope (FAST), also known as "China Sky Eye," began accepting observation proposals from astronomers worldwide in March 2021. Foreign researchers can submit applications through the National Astronomical Observatories.

"Professional astronomy strongly needs international collaboration," Diana Worrall, general secretary of the International Astronomical Union, said. China has made "an enormous step forward," she said, pointing to FAST and the collaborative space missions with Europe or bilateral missions with France. "It's wonderful to see this very fast, very dramatic entry into large facilities, into space. It's enriching for everyone."

Geoffrey Pleyers, president of the International Sociological Association, measured openness in the social sciences by whether scholars can actually travel and meet. "In too many countries today, we have visa issues and problems of mobility," he said. "But the Chinese government is pushing for more visas. It is very easy for us to come to China." Pleyers linked mobility to cross-border dialogue, on which social science depends. He said that bringing in colleagues from China, Africa and Latin America changes what the discipline studies and how it understands the world. "The history of sociology is different when we take China in," he said.

Geoffrey Boulton, emeritus professor of geology at the University of Edinburgh and an ISC Governing Board member, first came to China in 1972. He has visited China many times since then. "There are many strong pressures to lower the amount of interaction with China," he said. "I think that's a serious mistake. No matter what the political situation, in support of science we were able to meet together."

'Showing the way'

Matthias Kaiser first came to China 35 years ago. The emeritus professor at the University of Bergen, Norway, has watched the country change over three decades. "In Europe, we are still discussing what to do with all our combustion engines in cars, and (in China) you have introduced electric cars," he said. He finds China highly digitalized in every aspect, with its digital transformation and electric vehicle rollout "showing the way."

An irrigation system in Chengdu in southwest China left an impression on Nuraini Rahma Hanifa. The researcher in disaster risk reduction at Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency visited the city during a field trip. "China has a very long history of building nature-based solutions, irrigation systems, and many other disaster risk reduction efforts," she said, adding that it is one of the countries to invest in prevention before a disaster happens.



An aerial drone photo shows a view of China's Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical radio Telescope (FAST) under maintenance in southwest China's Guizhou province. (PHOTO: XINHUA)

"The pace of advancement in China is absolutely staggering," said Sedat Hakan Orer, a pharmacologist at Koç University School of Medicine in Türkiye. "We are doing dozens of patients, and you are doing a hundred. That is fast." He also visited Capital Medical University in Beijing and was struck by its scale and organization.

Looi Lai-Meng, vice president of the ISC, pointed to a broader form of cooperation. "What China has done can benefit the world through ISC, through this capacity building, as well as through mentorships, exchange and mobility programs," she said. "Many countries are looking at China's success with admiration and are open to working with Chinese researchers and organizations."

Marcos Scheuenstuhl, executive director of international affairs at the Brazilian Academy of Sciences, described China as "a very crucial partner for Brazil" and "a strategic partner." China has been working to build a collaborative relationship among people, using science as a tool for peace, he added.

Building trust

The Beijing Science Declaration, released at the closing ceremony of the Beijing Science Dialogue on October 21, reaffirms science as an important tool for sustainable development, for building a better world with more equity and social justice, and making the achievements of science available to society as a whole, Scheuenstuhl said.

He called the declaration especially important at a time when anti-science movements are growing in several countries.

Hanifa said the declaration strengthens the meaning of science and technology, not only within the scientific community but in how science and technology can bridge government, society and industry. She particularly applauded its call for "co-design, co-produce, co-develop and co-share science toward concrete solutions that are really needed by society, government and industry."

Kaiser said the declaration reminds the scientific community what is important, especially what to keep in mind for future development. In his view, its most notable point is the ethical responsibility of scientists in shaping the world and meeting major challenges, which "is very often not mentioned in our scientific teachings and curricula."

Orer said the text is very balanced on incorporating AI into scientific activities and shows opportunities.

But Gluckman holds a caveat: "Writing words is easy. Turning words like this into meaningful action will require a lot of consultation, a lot of reflection, and then careful progress where we can make progress collectively at a global level."

'Keep doing real science'

Kelvin Mubiana Katukula of Namibia's National Commission on Research, Science and Technology thinks he is the only one from Sub-Saharan Africa to serve on his ISC committee. Katukula called for action "so that more representation can be felt and deliberately brought into the fold." Participation from Sub-Saharan Africa would "bring the impact that can transform and improve the essence of the ISC."

On AI, Gluckman said China and the United States, as the two major AI leaders, must help steer the global discussion, but AI "shouldn't be solely left to the private sector, or indeed to two powerful countries." Worrall added that AI is useful for routine information gathering, but "the questions that you ask" remain scientists' core responsibility.

Boulton said AI is a new way of knowing things, but "we still do not understand AI." In many AI systems, he said, "you cannot ask why." For a scientist, that is a problem of knowledge itself. His advice was simple: "Keep doing real science, which means really understanding where we live."

International Exchanges Build Trust and Advance Progress

Andrew Deeks, president of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and president and vice-chancellor of Murdoch University in Australia, first came to China in 2004 and has returned many times since. He was back in Beijing recently for the 2026 International Science Council Midterm Members Meeting and Beijing Science Dialogue, a flagship event of the China Association for Science and Technology's 2026 International Month, where the role of universities in promoting international cooperation was one of the week's central questions.

Between sessions, he spoke about what universities can do that no single nation can, why China's rise matters to global science, and how universities can keep international education within reach.

Calling for concerted efforts

Individual universities serve first their local community and then their national one. Every country has its own association of universities, but those bodies concentrate on the particular environment of their own system. The IAU exists to fill the gap above the nation.

Deeks describes its role this way: "What the IAU does is to bring together universities from many different systems around the world, give them an opportunity to learn from each other, and form a combined voice for higher education, particularly towards organizations such as UNESCO and the United Nations." It is that collective voice, rather than any single institution, that gives higher education standing on the global stage.

That voice now has to address a disruption nobody fully anticipated. Generative AI has unsettled the oldest routines of university life. Deeks points out that "the advances in generative



Professor Andrew Deeks. (PHOTO: S&T Daily)

AI have made many traditional ways of assessing student performance a little bit difficult, because AI can produce traditional assignments better than the students can." The real task is to identify and cultivate the distinctly human abilities that machines cannot reproduce, while teaching students to use these tools responsibly and appropriately.

He does not cast AI as a threat alone. He sees it as "a fantastic productivity tool," pointing to how it has helped researchers from non-English-speaking backgrounds publish in English-language journals and eased barriers that once held them back. For him, the technology is a reason for universities to be clearer about what only they can offer.

Building partnerships through people

For Deeks, the case for international cooperation is not abstract. It rests on partnerships built over years, and on what those partnerships make possible. For three years he served as a foreign expert at Dalian University of Technology, spending a month each year teaching students he found "very enthusiastic, very good." He also built research collaborations with professors there, and later, as president of University College Dublin, helped establish a joint international college with Beijing University of Technology.

Those years shaped his view of the country. In his words, China is "very progressive, very forward-thinking and very hardworking." The high-speed rail network is his chosen illustration. When he first arrived, there was no high-speed rail network, and skeptics doubted the schedule could ever be met. Today, the full network is built, interconnected and working. He calls it "an illustration of the forward thinking of the Chinese people to come up with the plan, and then to execute the plan."

What does a durable research partnership require? Deeks answers directly: "Successful long-term partnerships require people-to-people cooperation and people-to-people relationships." He describes scientists from partner institutions spending time in each other's laboratories, so that "together they're able to then achieve things which individually they couldn't have achieved."

The same logic explains China's growing presence in global science. He singles out the consistency of the China Scholarship Council program, which for years has sent outstanding Chinese students to pursue PhDs abroad. He himself supervised students who came through the program, and he is pleased that Murdoch University is now engaged in it and receiving those students. He sees the program's consistency over many years as an important feature.

He encourages young researchers to conduct more international exchanges. Experience in cultures different from one's own, whether national or university cultures, is valuable for everyone, and in many fields the research facilities available in China are significantly larger in scale than those at home. After two decades of watching the country evolve, his summary of this visit is that "the continual progress of China and the continual maturity of the science ecosystem is impressive, and it's great to see."

Restoring trust in higher education

The wider world of higher education is not moving in one direction. When asked about global student mobility, Deeks points to the challenge of cost. Tuition and living expenses keep climbing, and educational equity is being challenged. The IAU's response is what it calls equitable internationalization: exchange schemes in which students move between partner universities without additional visa and tuition burdens, and forms of international education delivered by video, so that students need not travel the world to learn from it. Mobility, in this vision, should not become a privilege only the wealthy can afford.

The deepest challenge is one of trust. Public confidence in universities faces pressure, and Deeks believes the remedy lies partly in better storytelling. Universities, he says, must "communicate the contributions they're making towards the solution of global problems, the energy transition, the climate crisis and challenges like these."

The rest lies in experience itself: graduate students who were well taught, who had a good experience, and who go on to become the best ambassadors their universities could ask for.

'China Understands That Science Matters for Development'

"China is a place that understands the importance of science for development." Marcelo Knobel, executive director of The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), said in an interview with *Science and Technology Daily* on the sidelines of the World Young Scientist Summit.

Knobel's organization represents a concrete need. Many developing countries lack good microscopes, synchrotron sources and advanced laboratories, limiting their researchers' ability to participate in global science. Young researchers need not only doctoral and postdoctoral opportunities but also access to equipment and infrastructure. "The core need is for both sides to work under equal conditions, with truly equal opportunities, and to advance science fairly," Knobel said.

China has long been working in this direction. In November 2024, China, Brazil, South Africa and the African Union jointly launched the Initiative on International Cooperation in Open Science. "China has made clear that collaboration is the way to go, and real collaboration requires real open science," Knobel said.

Commercial platforms claiming to be open science charge publication fees that many Global South scientists cannot afford; real openness means free journals, data repositories and platforms where complex data can be analyzed by more people. He noted that China is promoting more journals, building more data repositories and sharing data with different partners.

Knobel, who visited the Oujiang Laboratory in Wenzhou, which works on neuroscience and regenerative medicine, was impressed by its infrastructure and investment in talent. He felt the laboratory clearly needs more people working there.

TWAS has a long-standing cooperation with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, including six centers of excellence on



Professor Marcelo Knobel. (COURTESY PHOTO)

sustainable development, and provides 40 scholarships for doctoral students from the Global South to study at the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences. This time, TWAS signed an agreement with the China Association for Science and Technology to support 50 to 100 visits by young researchers to China each year. "This is new and a big step forward," he said. The arrangements build on a network of more than 60,000 researchers from the Global South.

Knobel wants the cooperation to be two-way. "We also want a counterpart arrangement, with Chinese researchers going to different places and collaborating," he said. He had proposed to the summit's leadership that TWAS help take scientists from Wenzhou to different places for more dialogues, including in Brazil, Italy and Africa, so that more people can learn about the opportunities here. "The diversity of cultures, the diversity of views and the possibility to see a problem from different perspectives are fundamental to develop science," he said.

In China, Knobel has seen "good opportunities for doing good research" because "China is a good place when other places are closing their doors and not investing in science."

Planned by WANG Junming, FENG Weidong & FANG Linlin Written by LONG Yun, BI Weizi, JIANG Yun & DAI Xiaopei Edited by CHEN Chunyou, LI Linxu & SONG Ziyan