

The FHNW School of Business's engagement with China

“We train innovative and responsible leaders for a connected and dynamic world”

1. What is the goal of the FHNW School of Business's activities involving China?

Our aim is to keep students and partners of the School of Business – in particular Swiss SMEs and individuals in Switzerland with a special interest in the subject area – abreast of developments in China that matter to Switzerland, thus providing them with a fact-based and informed basis for forging cooperations with Chinese institutions, companies or individuals.

Criticism of China among the Swiss public has been increasing of late. The growing unease over the country is understandable in view of what has been happening in the totalitarian world power that is China. Any strategy formulated by the Swiss Confederation in respect of cooperation and engagement with China must adapt to the evolving international context. The FHNW School of Business's involvement with China follows this logic: rather than turn our back on the country, it is preferable to engage with it and compete with it at a system level. The FHNW China Centre actively contributes to this by networking and channelling its knowledge of China in Switzerland and beyond, and making it available to decision-makers in business, politics and society.

2. What, in concrete terms, are the FHNW School of Business's activities involving China?

As the FHNW China Centre, we have pursued engagement with China for over 25 years. All our activities are designed to provide Swiss business, politics and the public with up-to-the-minute, fact-based knowledge about China. Examples:

- **“SME Guide China”, a practical guidebook:** an annual publication of case studies on Swiss SME engagement with China, with recommendations for action for Swiss business (see [here](#)).
- **Swiss China Update Forum:** an annual networking event for business, politics and the general public featuring up-to-the-minute data on China, practical insights from experts, and the opportunity to share ideas and compare practice (see [here](#)).
- **“China live and direct”, an online roundtable:** a series of virtual discussions held six times a year on a variety of China-related topics (see [here](#)). The featured experts ask questions and provide answers.
- **Sino-Swiss Innovation Centre:** established in partnership with the Shenzhen University of Technology in China, this centre of excellence promotes close cooperation with Swiss universities of applied sciences; it is led by the FHNW University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland. Its key cooperation foci are innovation promotion and vocational training research.
- **Executive development programmes / initiating business with China:** management courses for Chinese executives held in Switzerland several times a year on topics such as the Swiss vocational training system, environmental technology and the food industry. Thanks to the company visits which form part of the courses, host companies have the opportunity to make initial contact with Chinese decision-makers from politics and business. So far, upwards of 1000 Chinese executives and 800 Swiss companies have been involved in these programmes.

In the area of education, our students are offered the opportunity to learn Chinese and complete an exchange semester at one of our total of 17 partner universities in China. In addition, as part

of the 'Insight China' project seminar (see [here](#)), our students can benefit from a two-week visit to China featuring tours of companies.

3. How does the FHNW School of Business's engagement with China relate to the mandate given by the sponsoring cantons to the FHNW's schools?

As a practice-oriented knowledge organisation, it is our task to gather facts and impart knowledge. This perforce includes engaging with the world power that is China. China has more than twice the population of the European Union (EU), more than four times that of the USA and around ten times that of Russia. 128 out of 193 countries in the world now conduct more trade with China than with any other country. In Switzerland's case, China is its third largest trading partner. As an exporting nation, 80% of all jobs in Switzerland have an international dimension. Moreover, China has become a research giant in recent years, spending almost as much on science as the US and more than the EU as a whole. It follows that knowledge about China is a must for all business school graduates today. Our aforementioned mission statement underscores this requirement. We anchor China-related topics in education and provide our students with opportunities to gain their own experience of the country.

4. How does the FHNW China Centre conduct critical engagement with China?

The FHNW China Centre continuously reflects on all its activities with regard to their benefit for Switzerland and their compatibility with the values and aims of our school. It is necessary to take a differentiated look at the specific contexts, goals and contents of each activity. As a result, clarifications, where needed, can be initiated with the Chinese partners and advantageous development paths identified. Our goal is to put our cooperation on an equal footing and to insist on changes where doubts exist; we even contemplate cancelling projects if we become aware of a threat to our values, if the freedom of science is curtailed, or if our staff come under pressure.

The critical debate finds expression amongst the members of the FHNW China Centre's advisory board, which is made up of twelve representatives from the four sponsoring cantons as well as from the business community and the public. They include one representative each from the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport and a Swiss IT security company; their role is to evaluate the security risks of our engagement in Asia. Critical issues such as human rights violations are always part of the discussion.

5. How is the FHNW China Centre structured and funded?

The China Centre has nine members of staff, four of whom are native Chinese speakers. The Centre is headed by Prof. Dr. Ruedi Nützi, a member of swissuniversities' International Relations Delegation and a participant in all joint meetings involving Switzerland's State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation and the Chinese Ministry of Education. The FHNW China Centre is managed as a profit centre within the School of Business. Thanks to income from consultancy services and continuing education, the FHNW China Centre's activities are almost entirely financed by third-party funds.

6. What have been the benefits of the management programmes offered by the FHNW China Centre to Chinese executives and CEOs for the past 25 years?

The programmes generate financial resources that are channelled into the School of Business's China-oriented activities. Secondly, the programmes are instrumental in forging a network in China that we make available to entities in Switzerland with an interest in China. Thirdly, the sharing of ideas and practice with the programme participants helps boost the school's China competence.

The programmes come in for criticism at times. One criticism is that Swiss knowledge is made available to Chinese participants, thereby weakening Switzerland's position and strengthening that of China.

It can be looked at this way: the school and the individuals involved must keep asking themselves what the benefits of the programmes are. Knowledge is the result of exchange and engagement with a cross-section of people and perspectives, something that applies to all the school's international activities.

Any entity seeking cooperation with China soon finds itself facing a delicate situation due to the country's size and power; this makes talk of a level playing field with China rather meaningless

Switzerland has maintained diplomatic relations with China for 70 years. The FHNW School of Business's involvement with China follows this logic: rather than turn our back on the country, it is preferable to engage with it and compete with it at a system level. The FHNW China Centre helps Swiss universities of applied sciences, for instance, to coordinate their activities in China and so strengthen their position. An expression of this attitude is the Sino-Swiss Innovation Centre, launched by the FHNW in partnership with the Bern University of Applied Sciences.

Anyone cooperating with China inevitably ends up facing a dilemma: China's political, economic and cultural actions stem from a single source. The partnership between two orchestras from Switzerland and China ultimately serves the Chinese Communist Party's hold on power. But is the answer not to engage with China at all?

Let us not be naive: whenever the school enters into a cooperation with a Chinese university, e.g. to organise an international conference, the Chinese Communist Party is there, sitting at the table. That is why it is important that we as Swiss players actively champion the school's principles and Swiss values and do not shy away from discussions around social and economic realities. Addressing human rights issues is the task of Swiss foreign policy, not primarily that of a knowledge organisation.

7. How should School of Business staff involved in China-facing activities address internal and external criticism of its engagement with China?

The School of Business seeks to promote critical thinking and the acquisition of knowledge at all levels. It follows that the discourse surrounding the international engagement of the school in general and its engagement with China in particular should be open, respectful and fact-based. Discourse of that nature leads to enhanced knowledge and independence of attitude and opinion. That is what a university should be aiming for.