

RESEARCH COLLABORATION WITH HIGH-RISK COUNTRIES: WHAT DOES THE UK PUBLIC THINK?

BY DR HELENA IVANOV



**CENTRE ON
SOCIAL &
POLITICAL RISK**

DEMOCRACY | FREEDOM | HUMAN RIGHTS

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About Us



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The **Henry Jackson Society** is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



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The **Centre on Social & Political Risk (CSPR)** is a citizen-focused, international research centre, which seeks to identify, diagnose and propose solutions to threats to governance in liberal Western democracies. Its fundamental purpose is to underscore the potential harm that various forms of social, cultural and political insecurity, conflict and disengagement can pose to the long-term sustainability of our democracies.



FRESHWATER
STRATEGY

About Freshwater Strategy

This paper has been produced in cooperation with Dr Michael Turner (Director) and Morgan James (Consultant) from Freshwater Strategy.

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About the Author

Dr Helena Ivanov is an associate research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. She recently completed a PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research focuses on the relationship between propaganda and violence against civilians. In her thesis, Helena examined the role propaganda played during the Yugoslav Wars and produced a model for studying propaganda which details the key phases, functions, discourses, and techniques of propaganda (the model itself is applicable to other contexts). Additionally, Helena also served as a Manager at the Centre for International Studies at the LSE.

Prior to her PhD, Helena completed an MPhil in Political Theory at the University of Oxford, and holds a BA in Politics from the University of Belgrade.

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Executive Summary

In this report, we examine the extent to which the British public welcomes research output, research partnership and professors coming from high-risk countries. As part of the research, polling was conducted from a representative sample of adult residents in the United Kingdom (UK), analysing which countries are perceived as high-risk; which areas of research are particularly problematic from the point of view of British citizens; and what kind of restrictions (if any) the British public supports when it comes to academic collaboration.

Our polling shows that Russia, China, and Iran were viewed by respondents as having opposing interests to the UK, and as often working against the UK's own interests, with national security and data privacy being the two most sensitive risk factors. In terms of research areas, cyber security and DNA testing were seen as the most sensitive areas for collaboration with high-risk states, while data privacy represented the largest risk factor on average across associated research areas. Finally, strong restrictions on collaboration with research partners from high-risk countries were sometimes seen as appropriate depending on the research area in question.

We conclude that while some kinds of collaboration do come with risks, protecting the freedom of universities and academic research stipulates that an outright ban would not be productive and could be very costly. Indeed, from our polling, we can also see that such bans are not supported by most of the British public. However, given the scale and rapid escalation of research collaboration with China, a review of safeguards and restrictions in areas deemed high-risk, such as national security and data privacy is largely supported by the public. This is especially important given the relationship between the Chinese state and many Chinese corporations, and particularly in areas where these concerns are most sensitive for the British public, such as cyber security and DNA testing.

However, striking the right balance between freedoms and adequate protections is likely to be difficult, especially when it comes to China. As it stands, research collaboration with China is seeing a steady rise, and the public's view about China remains softer in comparison to say Russia or Iran. There are strong reasons why views towards China remain softer in comparison. For example, many admire China for its economic development in the last forty years. Moreover, the West has formed very important economic relations with China – and restricting those will come with substantial costs for the West as well. Finally, unlike Russia, there are still ongoing debates regarding the real challenge that China actually represents to the current world order.

For these reasons, the West has formed relations with China which are now very hard and costly to disentangle. However, as we detail in our report, remaining enmeshed is becoming increasingly risky and difficult to ignore. Along those lines, the British public remains concerned about research collaboration with Chinese institutions in areas such as cyber security and DNA testing as it understands such collaborations can pose serious risks to national security and data privacy. All of this makes it very difficult to strike the right balance, especially when it comes to research collaboration.

Thus, this paper urges the UK Government, universities, and UK-based research programmes to be more security-minded and risk-aware of the serious risks involved when engaging in potentially sensitive research collaboration projects that could impact on national security or data privacy.

Introduction

The UK has long been known as one of the global centres for education and academic research, and it continues to attract some of the best academics from across the world. As it stands, “more than half of UK research is a product of international partnerships” and “a fifth of the world’s scientific papers are produced through international collaboration”.¹ There are multiple different ways academic institutions cooperate.

First, the UK is home to many international students. Despite some concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic may have a negative impact on the number of international students arriving to study in the UK, the “demand for UK HE remained strong in 2021.”² To illustrate, between 2020 and 2021, international students “accounted for 22.0% of the total student population.”³ In particular, “China, India, Nigeria, the US, and Hong Kong were the top sending countries for international students going to the UK. Chinese and Indian students made up 32.4% and 18.3% of all non-EU students at UK higher education institutions.”⁴ Furthermore, the UK saw a substantial rise in students arriving from India and Nigeria, a decrease in those who are coming from the United States, and a slight increase in the number of Chinese students. According to the data, most of the students who come to the UK tend to study business and management, engineering and technology, and social sciences.⁵

Table 1: Top 5 Domiciles of International Students in the UK (By Rank in 2020-2021)⁶

Rank	Domicile	2020-2021	Growth Rate
1	China	141,475	1.70
2	India	79,745	51.80
3	Nigeria	20,925	63.30
4	United States	18,740	-7.40
5	Hong Kong	16,260	1.80

Second, the UK is also a home for many international academics who come to work and teach at British universities. In particular, “in 2020-2021, 71,475 international academic staff worked at UK higher education institutions, representing a third (32.1%) of academic staff.”⁷ Fields with the most international staff are “engineering and technology (47.7%), biological, mathematical and physical sciences (40.2%), and administrative and business studies (38.9%).”⁸ Italian, Chinese, German, Irish and American professors dominate the international academic staff, as they have since 2005.⁹ Additionally, there is a noticeable decline in international academic

¹ “Trusted Research Guidance for Academia”, National Protective Security Authority, 25 February 2023, <https://www.npsa.gov.uk/trusted-research-academia>.

² “UCAS end of cycle 2021: Strong demand for UK HE amidst a global pandemic”, UCAS, 27 January 2022, <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-end-cycle-2021-strong-demand-uk-he-amidst-global-pandemic>.

³ “International Facts and Figures 2022”, Universities UK, 20 December 2022, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-publications/international-facts-and-figures-2022>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

staff arriving from EU countries – notably from Italy and Germany, whereas the number of Indian and Chinese academics in the UK is increasing.

Table 2: Top 5 Nationalities of International Academic Staff in the UK in 2020-2021 and Percentage Change since 2019-2020¹⁰

Rank	Domicile	2020-2021	Growth Rate
1	Italy	6,635	-0.30
2	China	5,660	2.80
3	Germany	5,505	-2.80
4	Ireland	4,620	2.10
5	United States	4,485	1.10

Third, UK institutions, as well as individual academics, tend to engage in various partnerships and collaborations with foreign research institutions and academics. “The UK’s most frequent collaborative research partners between 2018-2021 were the US, China, and Germany, with 19.6%, 8.7%, and 36.7% of publications respectively, featuring one or more UK co-authors.”¹¹

In particular, the UK saw a substantial rise in research partnerships with India and China – with research collaborations with India growing by 38.2% and with China by 34.7% between 2018 and 2021.¹²

As for the research areas that see the most collaborations featuring UK co-authors, earth and planetary sciences continues to be the top subject area, followed by multidisciplinary studies, agricultural and biological sciences, physics and astronomy, and environmental science.¹³ And of course, one should not forget that many academic collaborations go unaccounted for – like informal meetings or closed academic research conferences. Thus, in reality, one can assume that the actual amount of cooperation between British and international academics is larger than the data itself shows.

Table 3: Top 5 Collaborative Partners and Percentage Change 2018-2021¹⁴

Rank	Country	Co-Authored Publications	Growth Rate (%)
1	United States	146,197	8.2
2	China	76,773	34.7
3	Germany	76,360	8.9
4	Italy	58,259	16.6
5	Australia	54,908	13.9

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Finally, the UK's academic institutions often receive funds from international sources. For example, "In 2017-2018, UK universities received £8.2 billion in research income, £1.39 billion of which came from international sources."¹⁵ Furthermore, "In 2020-21, 21.6% of UK research funding came from international sources."¹⁶ EU funding amounted to more than half of the total amount of funding received, although this has been decreasing, and some concerns on this remain given the uncertainty of the UK's association to Horizon Europe.¹⁷

These various forms of collaboration have brought immeasurable benefits to the UK. First, by attracting the very best students and academic staff to the country, the UK has become a leading global hub where the best ideas are produced and developed. Second, the UK economy continues to benefit financially – not just from the funds its institutions receive, but also from the international students. For example, "In 2018-19, international students contributed around £28.8 billion to the UK economy... Of this £28.8 billion, approximately £22.7 billion came from non-EU students and £6.1 billion was generated by EU students."¹⁸ Finally, many recognise that these academic collaborations and student exchanges contribute to Britain's soft power and image across the globe. According to the British Council, "cultural and educational exchange plays a key role in positive perceptions of the UK."¹⁹ Thus, there are strong reasons to continue these academic collaborations and to make Britain as attractive as possible to international students and academic staff.

Nevertheless, these forms of collaboration do not come without risks, the severity of which depends on the research area and the institution with which the UK collaborates. For example, risks can become substantial in instances where they involve working with institutions based in high-risk countries whose interests stand in contrast with those of the UK. The UK Government and its research institutions are aware that:

State and non-state actors may target and seek to exploit academic institutions and collaborations – for example, to transfer or steal information and intellectual property. Cyber attacks are just one method. Physical access to research sites and personnel offered by academic collaboration are also effective in obtaining and transferring or compromising research and expertise.²⁰

Given these concerns, the Government and other relevant non-governmental institutions often find themselves between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, it is important to keep the UK's research institutions independent and open for collaboration due to the immense benefits that such collaborations bring, and also because openness and freedom of education is one of the key pillars of free, liberal and democratic societies. On the other hand, absolute openness without any control can bring serious harms to national security. And the current geopolitical climate – with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and looming concerns about China's positioning globally – further complicates this picture, especially given the aforementioned growth in collaboration between Chinese and British academic institutions which has seen a steady rise in recent years.

In an attempt to bring about an adequate balance between the benefits and concerns pertaining to academic collaboration, the UK Government and other non-governmental organisations

¹⁵ "Trusted Research Guidance for Academia".

¹⁶ "International Facts and Figures 2022".

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Global Britain: the UK's soft power advantage", British Council, July 2021, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/global-britain-uk-soft-power-advantage>.

²⁰ "Managing risks in international research and innovation: An overview of higher education sector guidance", Universities UK, June 2022, https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2022-06/managing-risks-in-international-research-and-innovation-uuk-cpni-ukri_1.pdf.

have adopted various risk-aware and security-minded measures which do not seem to impede on the freedoms of academic institutions. Full analysis of all the policies exceeds the scope of this paper, but some of the adopted measures include:

- Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, parts of which focus on higher education bodies²¹
- Guidance for export controls which also applies to academic research. In particular, the guidance is “for academics or those doing postgraduate research in fields where there is a high risk it could be used for military purposes. This includes the development, production, use or delivery of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).”²²
- The Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group which “brings together academics from UK higher education institutions, who are supported by relevant civil society representatives and the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG) to work on the protection of academic freedom and engage in advocacy for members of the academic community at risk across the world.”²³
- A detailed set of guidelines produced by Universities UK on how to manage risks in internationalisation and security-related issues; these guidelines outline ways to protect the reputation and values of universities, the people, the campuses and the partnerships from threats such as cyber security and intellectual property.²⁴
- Various Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) guidelines which provide advice on how to assess risks and conduct due diligence in instances where UK universities need to work with foreign governments and organisations.²⁵
- UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which, among other things, ensures that research funds in the UK are allocated in line with national security and other strategic objectives.²⁶
- The National Protective Security Authority which provides Trusted Research Guidance for Academia which “aim to support the integrity of the system of international research collaboration.”²⁷

Given the difficulties involved in striking the right balance between protecting national security interests and allowing academic freedom, we felt it was important to analyse how the British public feels about the research outputs, research partnerships and professors coming from high-risk countries. In particular, we wanted to examine whether they welcome such academic collaborations, which countries they perceive to be high-risk, and what kind of restrictions (if any) they believe should be put in place to protect the UK and its academic institutions.

²¹ For further details see: “Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015”, [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/section/32/enacted), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/section/32/enacted>.

²² For further details see: “Export controls applying to academic research”, Export Control Joint Unit, Department for International Trade, and Department for Business and Trade, 31 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/export-controls-applying-to-academic-research>.

²³ For further details see: “About the AFIWG”, Human Rights Consortium/School of Advanced Study, University of London, <https://hrc.sas.ac.uk/networks/academic-freedom-and-internationalisation-working-group/about-afiwg>.

²⁴ For further details see: “Managing risks in internationalisation: Security related issues”, Universities UK, October 2020, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Reports/managing-risks-in-internationalisation.pdf>.

²⁵ For further details see: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>.

²⁶ For further details see: UK Research and Innovation, <https://www.ukri.org>.

²⁷ For further details see: “The UK and beyond: Research & collaboration at a glance”, National Protective Security Authority, <https://www.npsa.gov.uk/trusted-research-academia>.

Methodology

To do so, we conducted a survey of adults living in the United Kingdom. Interviews were conducted online and lasted 10-15 minutes. The total sample size was 1,015 and the final results were weighted to match the profile of the adult population living in the UK based on national statistics collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), as well as the results of the 2019 General Election and 2016 EU Referendum. After weighting, the maximum margin of error for this poll at the 50% estimate, is +/- 3.5% when analysing top-line results.²⁸

Within the results, a breakdown of various demographics did reveal several patterns of variation. Certain groups tended to be more concerned about research collaboration with high-risk countries on sensitive areas. These included the over-55s, those with no degree, Brexit voters and women. Other groups, notably men, those aged 18-34, degree-holders and Remain voters, did share these concerns, but often to a lesser degree.

However, and especially when questions were framed in terms of the treatment of high-risk countries, there tended to be considerable and consistent agreement across all groups. Overall, the polling results were striking in demonstrating that the public's view on these issues is not deeply polarised, but in fact fairly unified.²⁹

Finally, due to the reasons of scope, we had to focus on a limited number of research areas and a limited number of risk dimensions that academic collaborations have. In this report, we focused on five research areas: *cyber security*, *carbon capture*, *agricultural techniques*, *DNA testing* and *social research*. As for the risk dimensions, we looked at the risks these collaborations can produce for *IP protection*, *human rights*, *data privacy*, *economy* and *national security*.

Among other things, the polling shows that Russia and China are seen by the vast majority of Britons as having opposing interests to the UK and they were seen as often working against the interests of the UK. Moreover, national security and data privacy are the two most sensitive risk factors. Cyber security and DNA testing are shown to be the most sensitive research areas for collaboration with high-risk states. Data privacy represents the largest research area concern on average across associated research areas. Finally, outright bans on collaboration are often seen as a step too far, even for the most high-risk countries, although Britons did say that strong restrictions are often appropriate, depending on the collaborator, and the research area in question.

²⁸ Please note that caution should be taken when analysing subsamples, as these figures will be subject to a significantly higher margins of error. In particular, inferences drawn from small subsamples (n<=50) should be treated with caution.

²⁹ For reasons of scope, we are unable to discuss all the demographic differences.

The Results

Key highlights

We began by examining which countries were perceived as having aligned and opposing interests to the UK - this allowed us to establish which countries are considered high-risk by most of the British people. As seen in Figure 1, unsurprisingly, the USA and Australia (among others) featured as countries which the UK should cooperate with as they are seen as having compatible interests. Contrary to that, as shown in Figure 2, Russia, China, and Iran are seen as countries with opposing interests to those of the UK. Additionally, 78% of our respondents also think of Russia as actively working against the interests of the UK, with 33% saying the same thing for China.

Figure 1: Countries Aligned with the UK's Interests

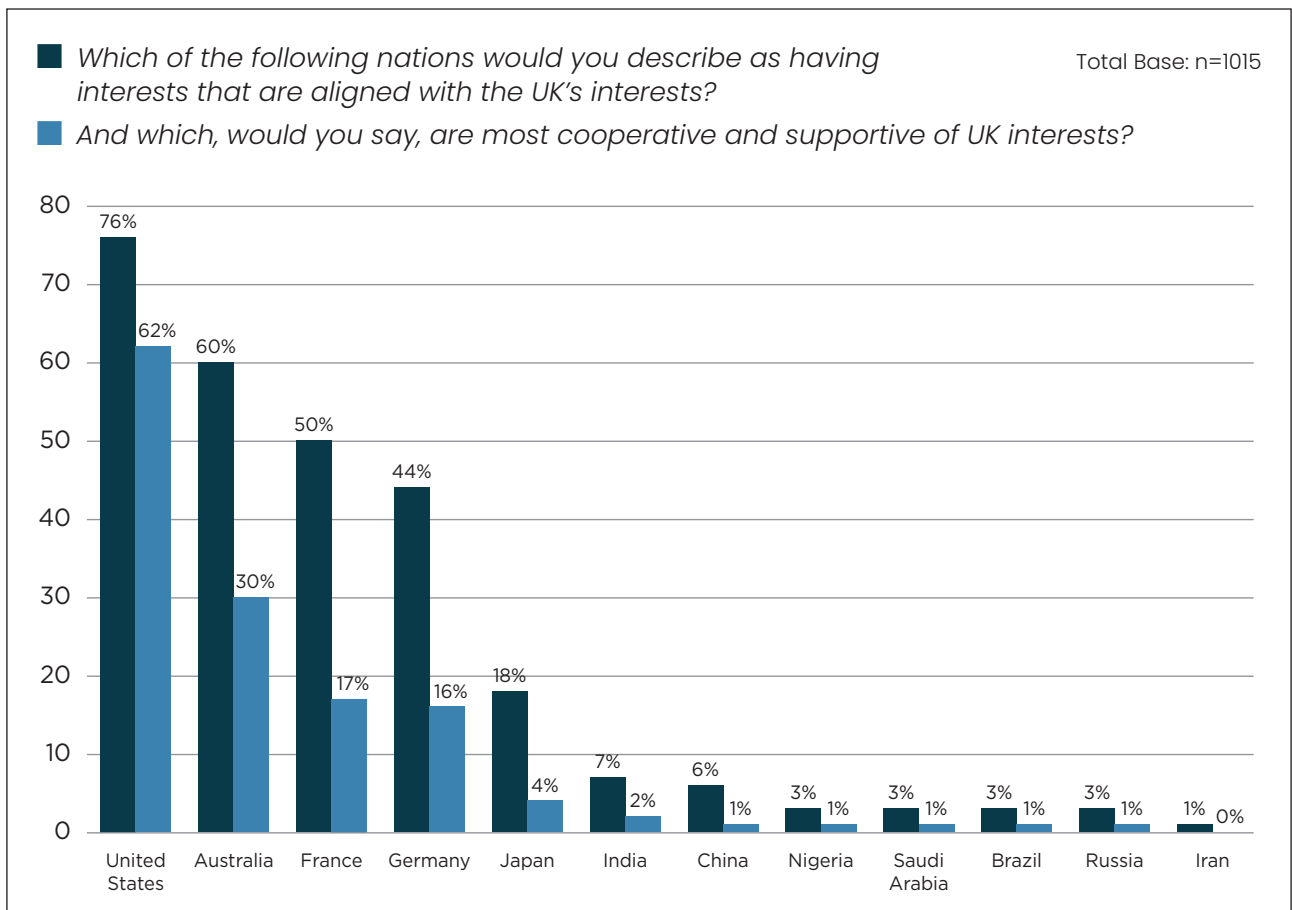
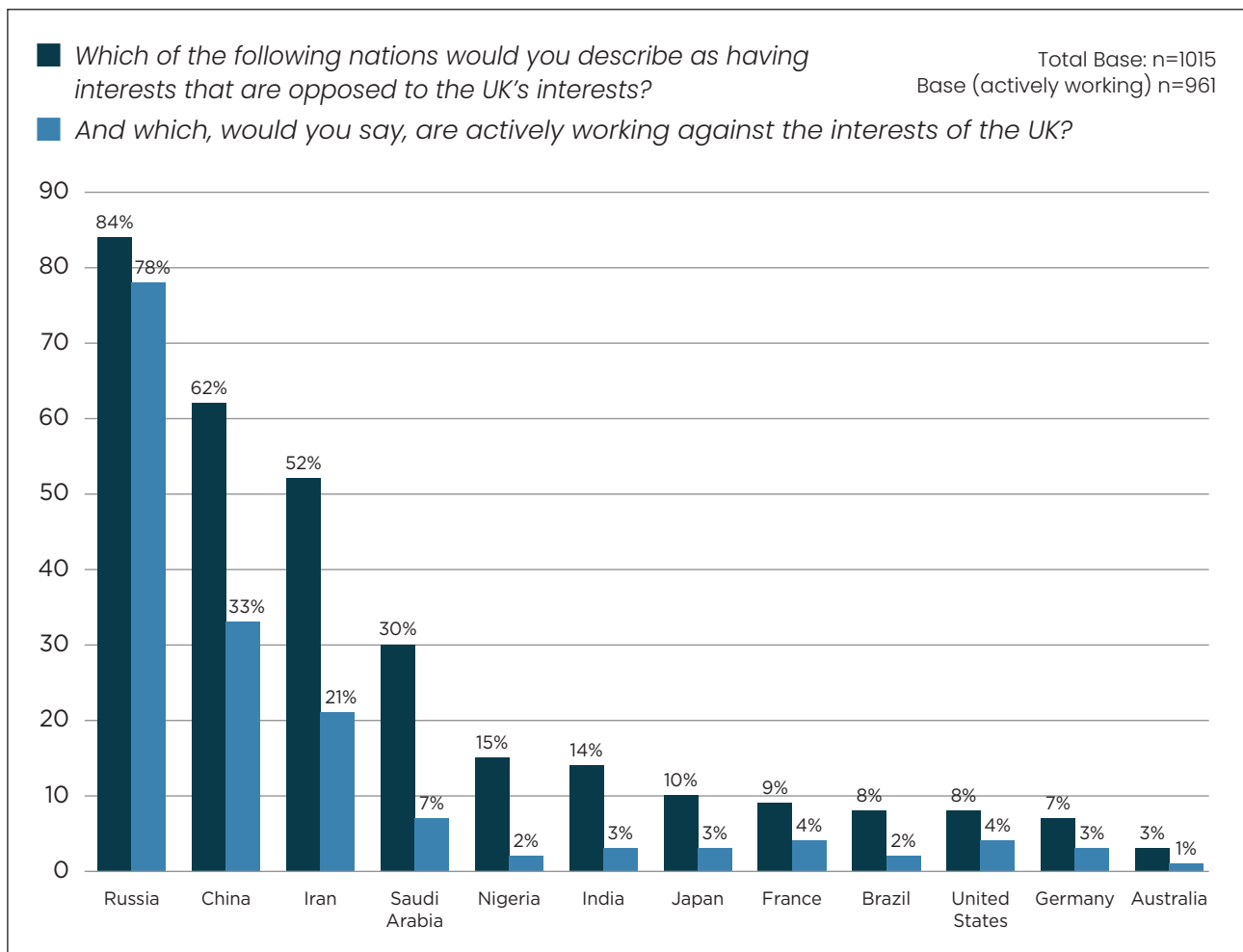
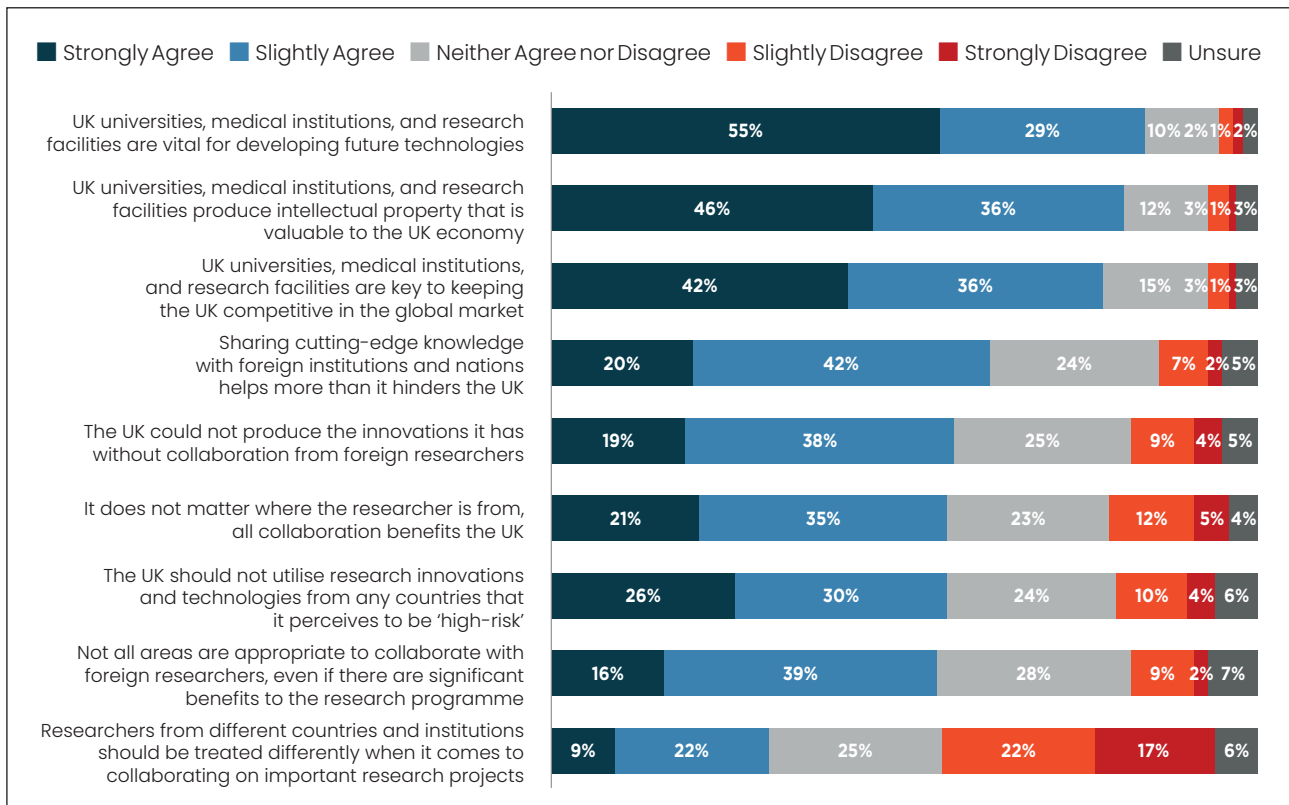


Figure 2: Countries with Interests Opposed to the UK



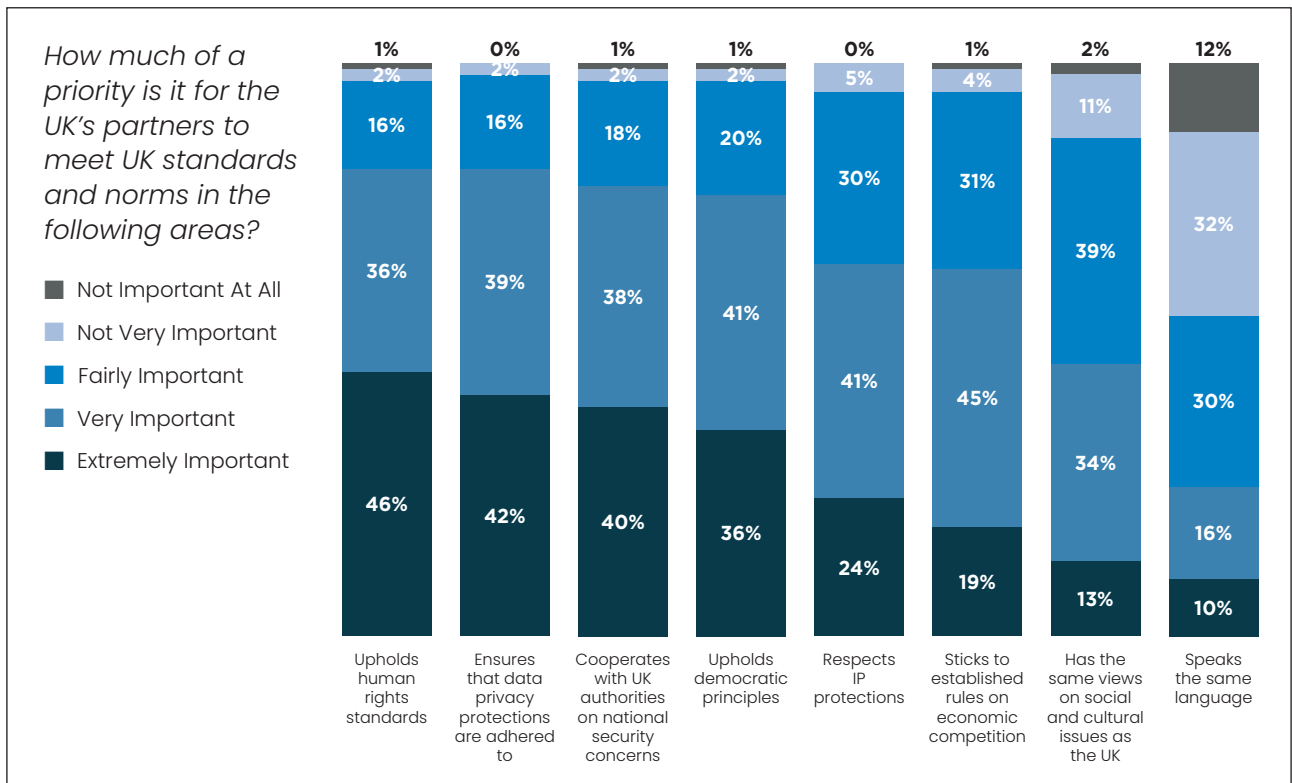
We proceeded to examine the British public's attitudes towards various types of research collaboration, and how valuable a role it plays - the data suggests that most Britons do indeed value a broad variety of cooperative research. We can also infer a nuanced view around different kinds of research collaboration, and which are on balance, beneficial. For example, the British public has a largely positive view on UK universities and medical institutions and the contributions they bring to the country. However, the weighting between harms and benefits changes when it comes to sharing cutting-edge knowledge with foreign institutions. Nevertheless, despite these nuances in opinions, the British public remains positive on the whole when it comes to research and academic collaborations and the roles those play in the UK.

Figure 3: Role of Research Collaboration



Next, we asked how much the British people care whether the UK’s partners meet national standards in various areas – testing several factors from upholding human rights and democratic principles, to respecting intellectual property (IP) protections, or elements such as speaking the same language. Similar to above, different things mattered to a different degree but the core standards that the British public wants the UK’s partners to uphold were centred on personal and collective social liberties. This potentially explains why China and Russia are considered as high-risk by so many respondents, given the substantial and well-known concerns around China’s and Russia’s protections of personal and collective social liberties.

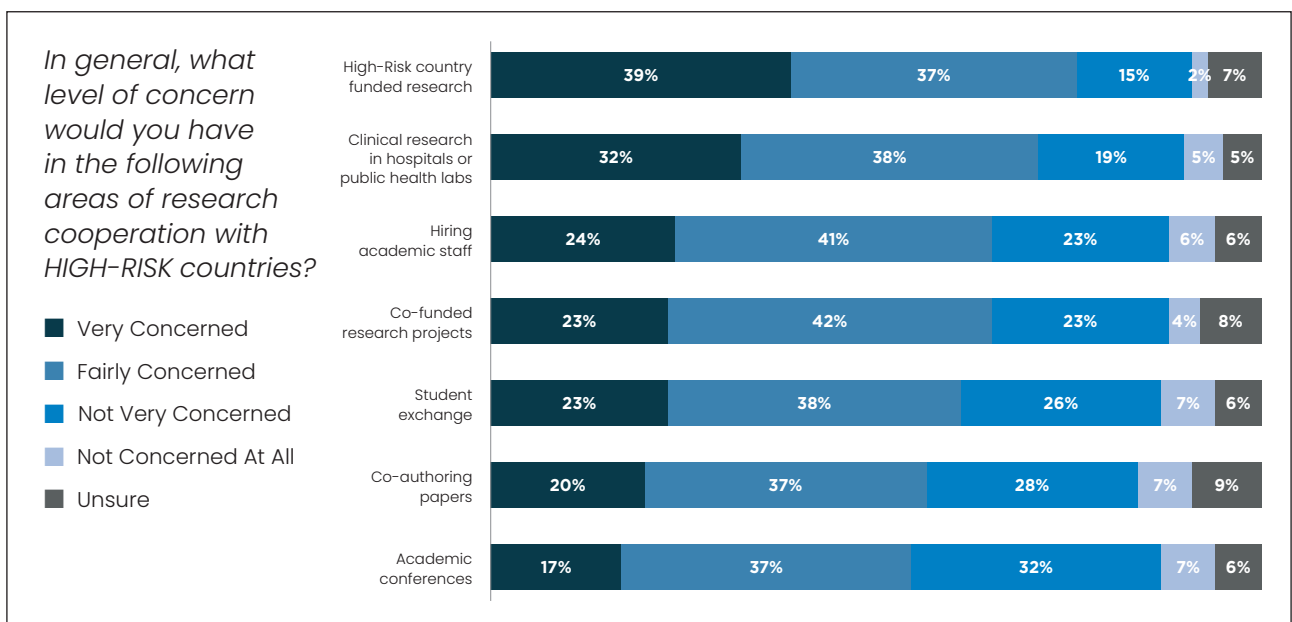
Figure 4: UK's Research Partners and Standards



Risk dimensions and research areas

There are different kinds of academic collaboration each of which comes with its own set of benefits and potential risks. Subsequently, we wanted to see what kinds of collaboration were particularly concerning from the British public's point of view. In general, co-authoring papers, giving joint academic conferences and student exchanges are not very concerning. However, the British public is very concerned about academic collaborations that involve direct funding from high-risk states, as well as any research that pertains to health.

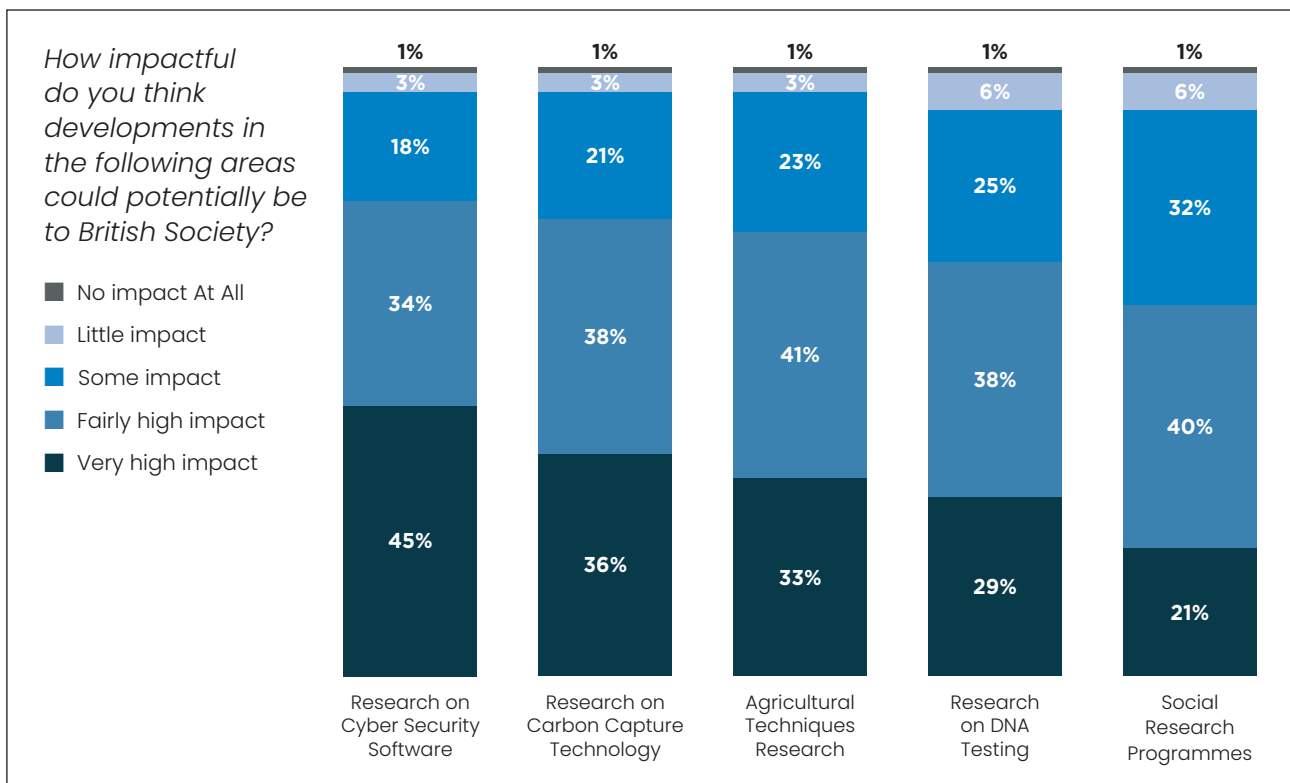
Figure 5: Academic Collaboration with High-Risk States



We wanted to dive deeper into the specific risks and research areas that may be of more or less concern to the British public. However, as mentioned above, due to the reasons of scope, we were unable to analyse all the research areas in which academics cooperate or all the risks such collaborations could pose. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we provide more detailed insights pertaining to the five key research areas and five key risk dimensions. Further research is of course welcomed, especially if it were to focus on risks and areas not covered in this report.

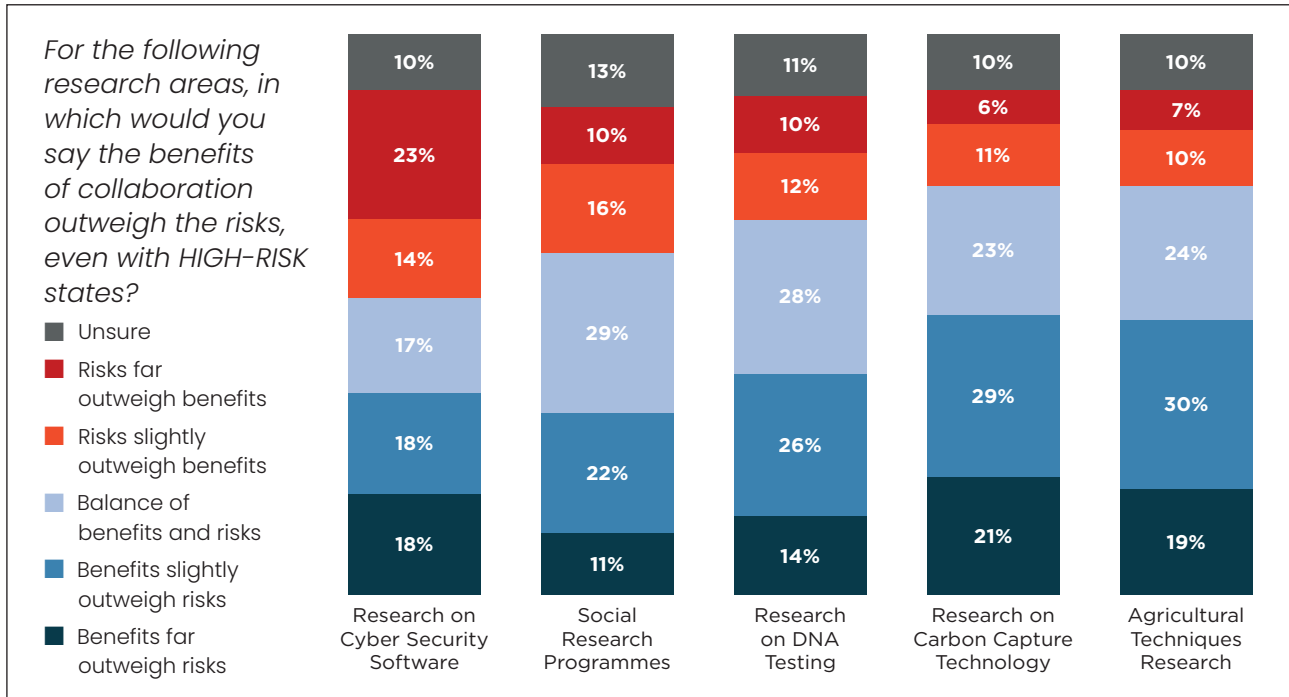
To begin with, we wanted to see how the British people viewed the potential impact of developments in the key research areas examined in this report – and while all research areas are seen as impactful, cyber security is seen as most relevant among our respondents.

Figure 6: Research Areas and Perceived Impact



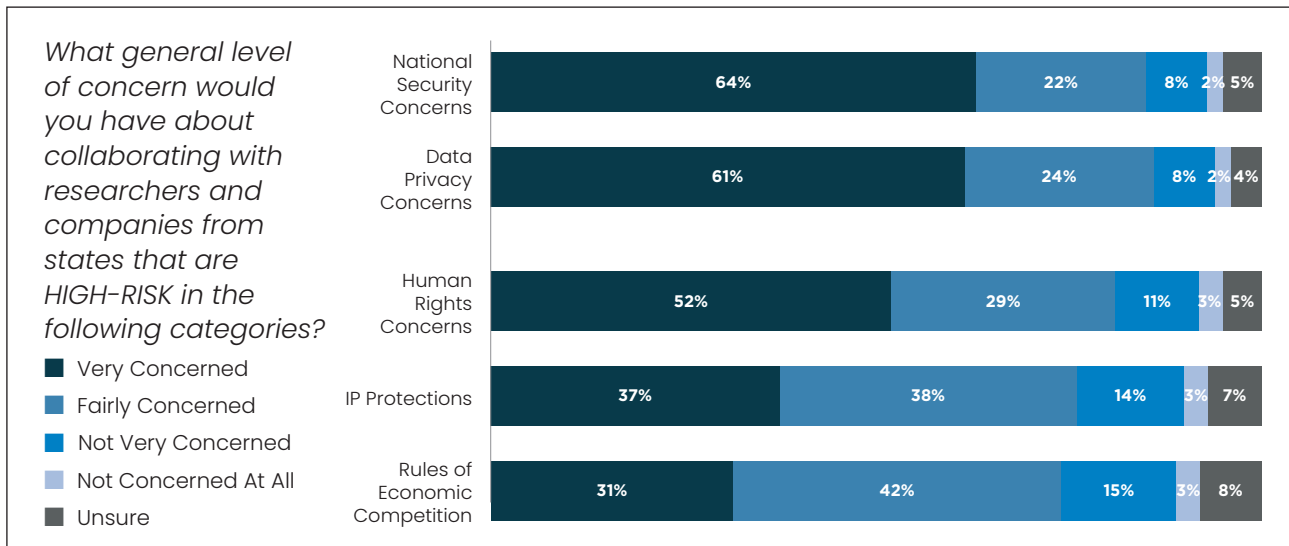
However, impact aside, each of these research areas highlighted different degrees of risks and benefits associated with research collaboration. Speaking broadly, the British public has a rather balanced perception of the risks and benefits. For example, 23% suggest that the risks far outweigh the benefits when it comes to research on cyber security, whereas only 6% think the same when it comes to research on carbon capture. Thus, the British public understands that different research areas come with different risks associated. This is a very pertinent insight for the Government to have in mind when drafting policies – namely, not all research areas should be treated in the same way. Instead, policies need to take into account the different risks associated with specific research areas.

Figure 7: Perceived Benefits Versus Risks of Research Collaboration



When it comes to the five risk dimensions studied in this paper, British people are most concerned when research collaboration poses risks to national security and data privacy.

Figure 8: Research Risk Profile



However, since different research areas pose different risks, we wanted to see how the British people think about risks involved in the five key research areas. Thus, we asked them to tell us how concerned they would be if UK institutions engaged in collaboration with countries/companies/entities/researchers that:

- have poor intellectual property protection (Figure 9)
- have poor human rights records (Figure 10)
- have poor data privacy protections (Figure 11)
- have poor levels of respect for the rules and norms of economic competition (Figure 12)
- pose a risk to UK national security (Figure 13).

Figure 9: Research Risk Dimensions (IP Protection)

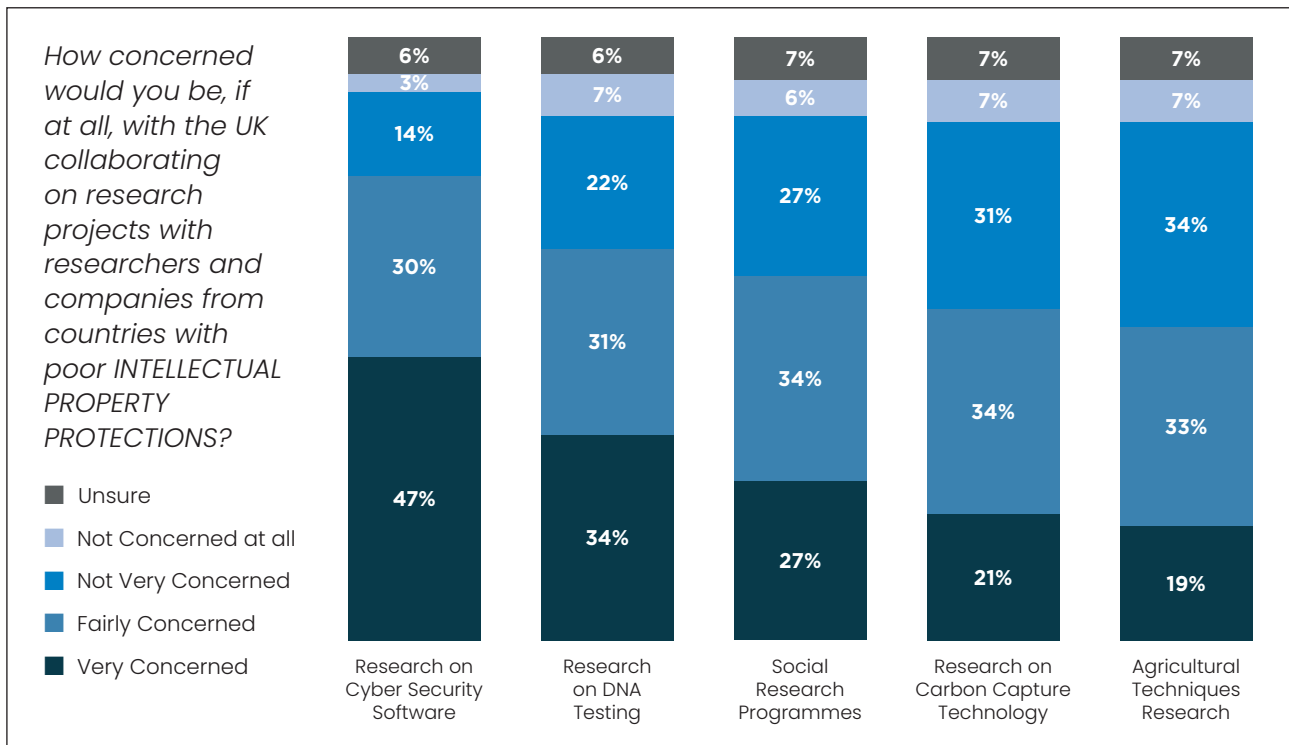


Figure 10: Research Risk Dimensions (Human Rights)

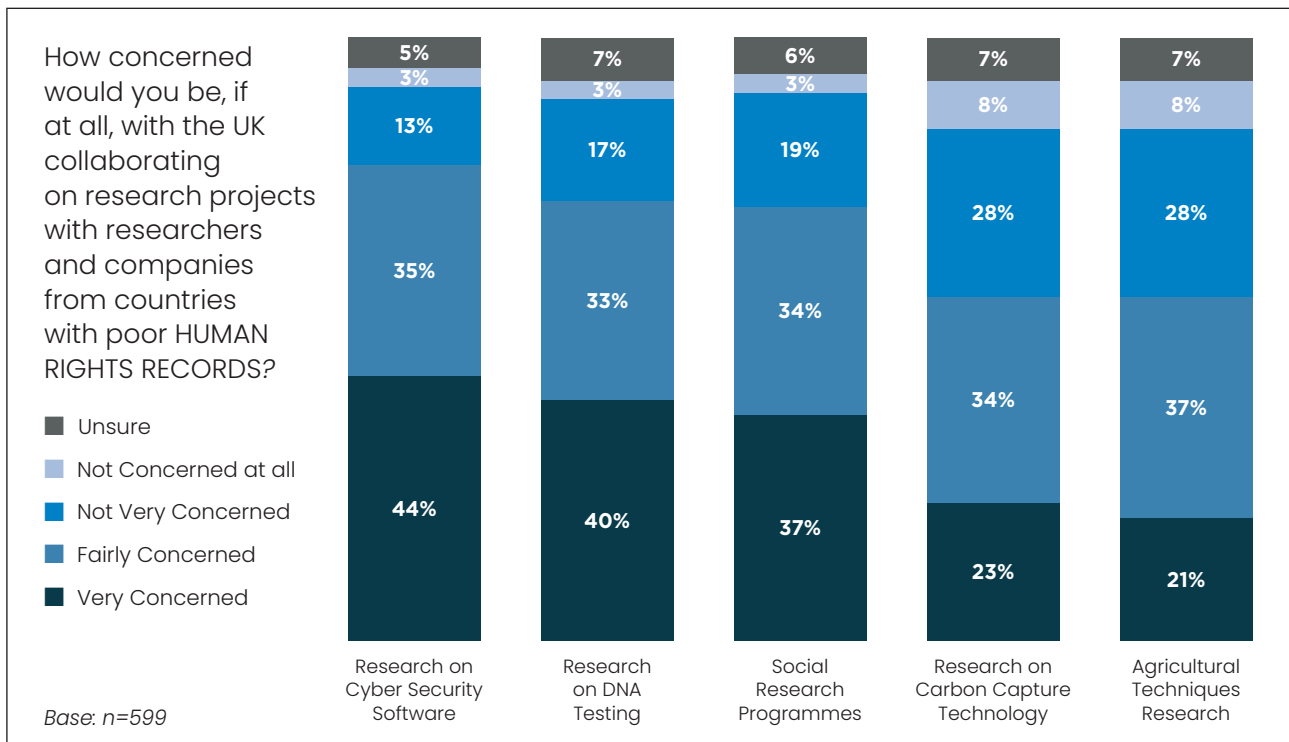


Figure 11: Research Risk Dimensions (Data Privacy)

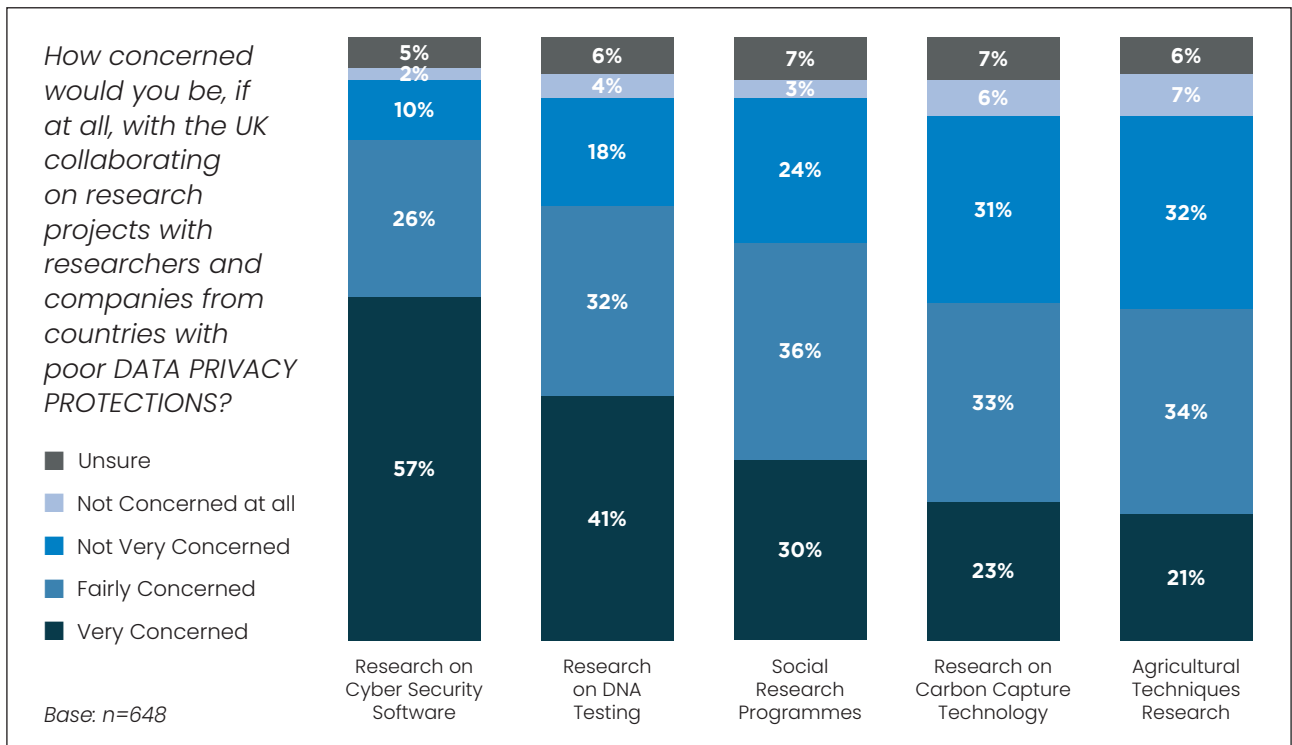


Figure 12: Research Risk Dimensions (Economic Competition)

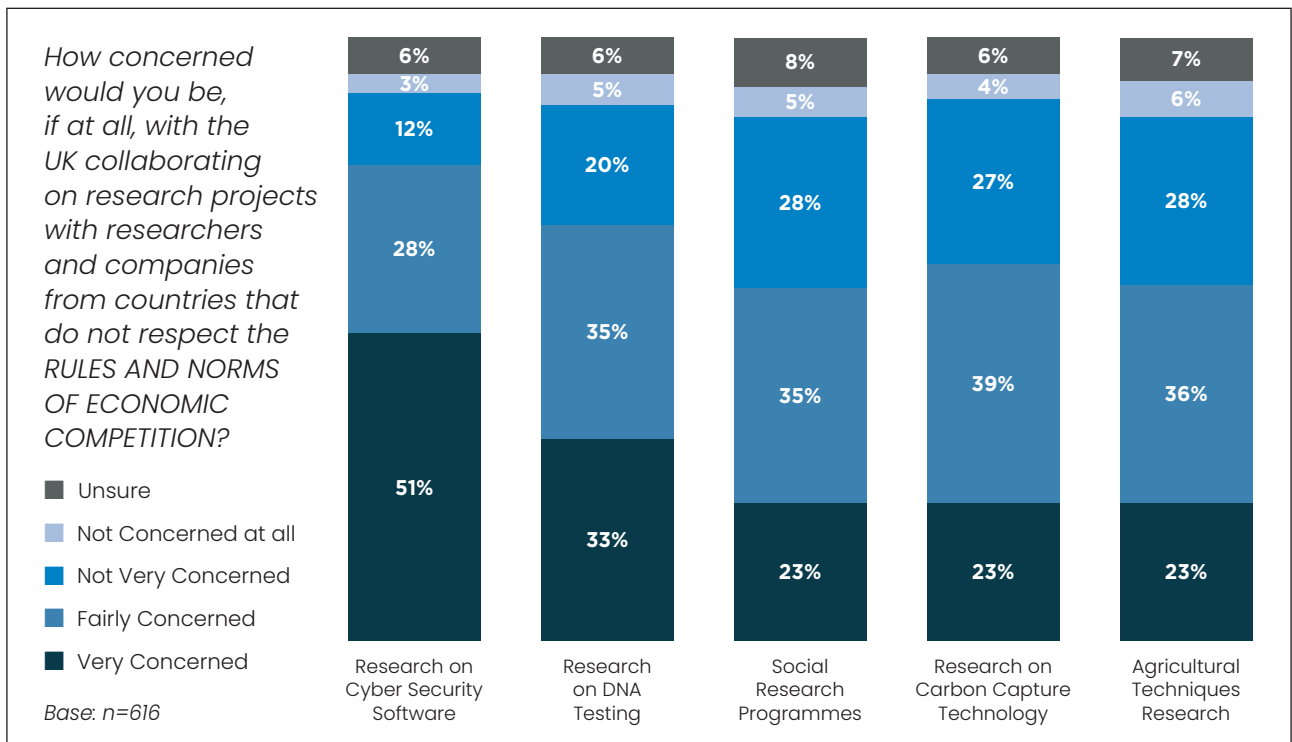
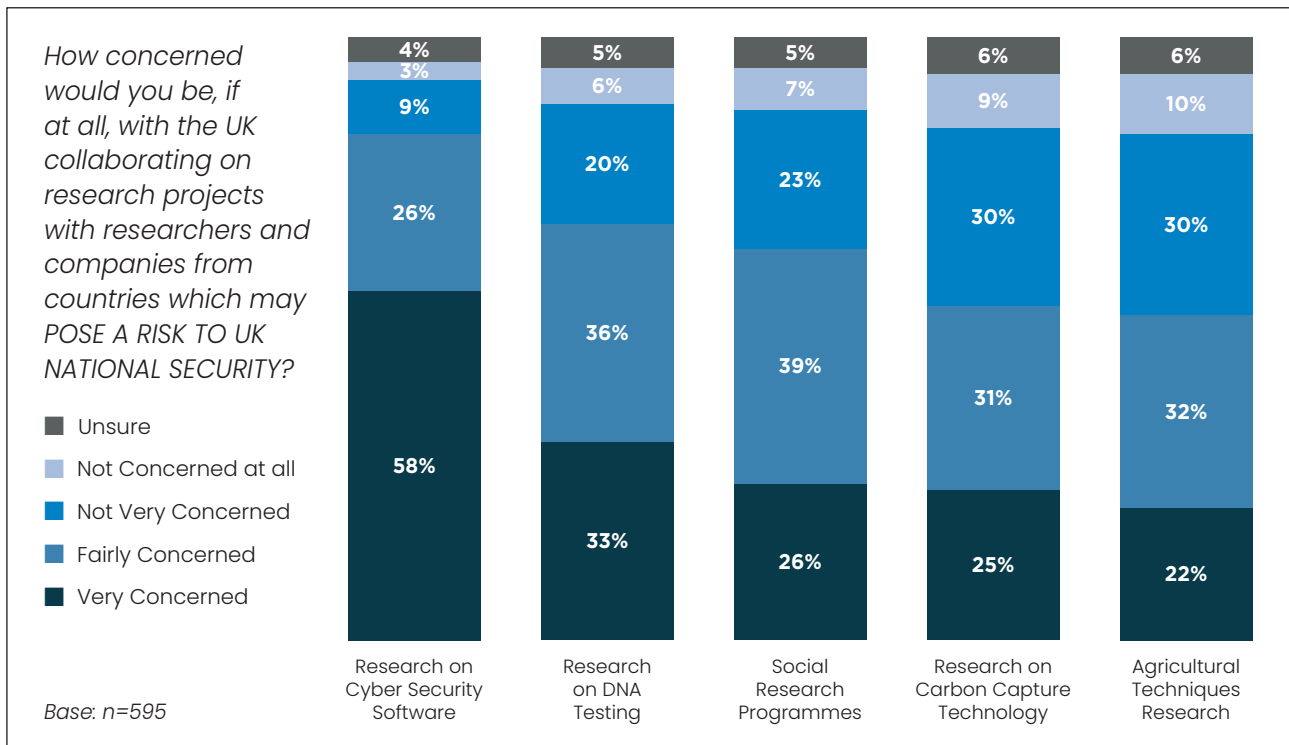


Figure 13: Research Risk Dimensions (National Security)



Based on this data, we can clearly see distinctions in how the British people perceive specific risk dimensions and research areas. In fact, the respondents seem to identify a clear distinction between more or less problematic types of cooperation and the risks associated with those. This reaffirms that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be welcomed by the UK public as they understand that different policies and approaches are necessary for different research areas and types of academic collaboration.

When it comes to these research risk dimensions, we found that cyber security rated most highly overall, especially around national security and data privacy, while DNA testing also held some substantial concerns, aligning closely with data privacy and human rights. Social research also correlated with human rights risks, demonstrating the variability and nuance of the public’s risk perception.

High-risk countries and research

On top of examining how respondents viewed various research areas and the associated risk dimensions, we wanted to see how these risk dimensions were aligned with the countries the UK is cooperating with. This research is important given its implications on whether the Government ought to have different approaches depending on the country with which UK institutions form partnerships. As we have already seen, there are different levels of concern related to risk dimensions and research areas, thus it is equally possible that the British public differentiates between different countries when it comes to the level of concern they have with research cooperation. We analysed how the concerns around the give risk dimensions change depending on the country in question, and found notable differences depending on the risk dimension in question. Overall, the British citizens are particularly concerned about academic collaborations with Russia and China. The level of concern associated with China is especially important – given that we are seeing a substantial rise of cooperation between British and Chinese academic institutions and researchers.

Figure 14: Country Risk Profile (IP Protections)

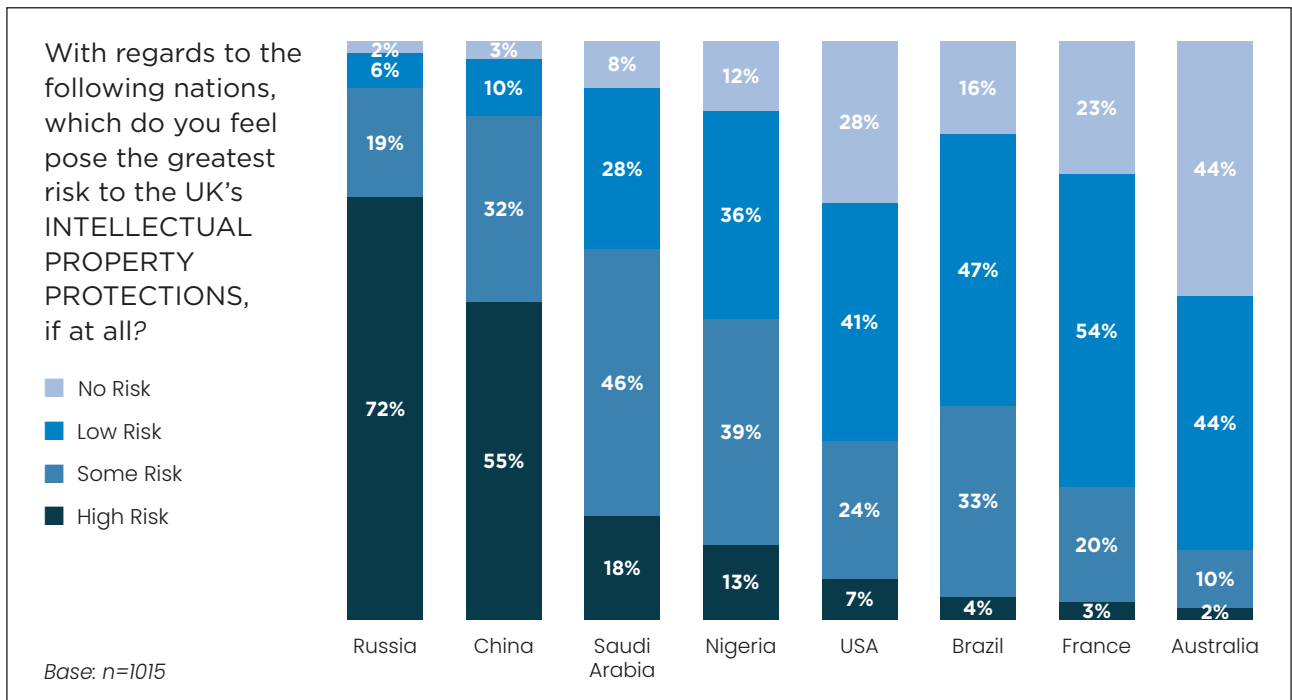


Figure 15: Country Risk Profile (Human Rights)

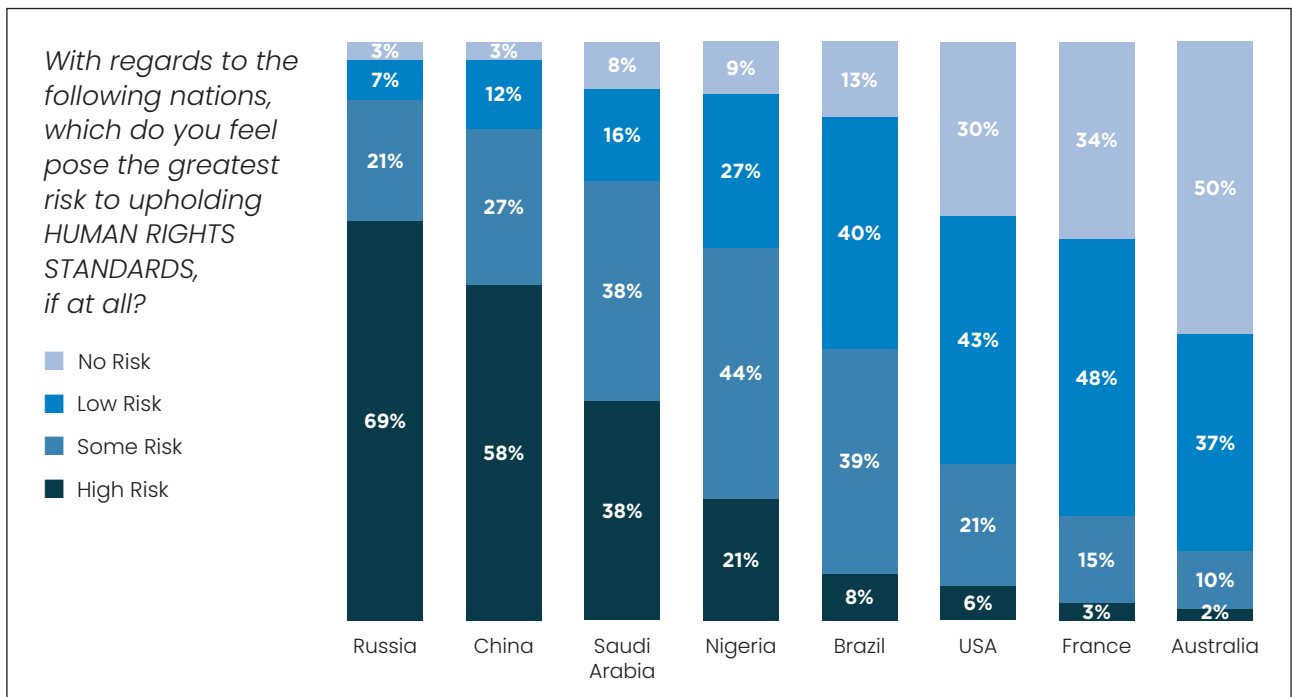


Figure 16: Country Risk Profile (National Security)

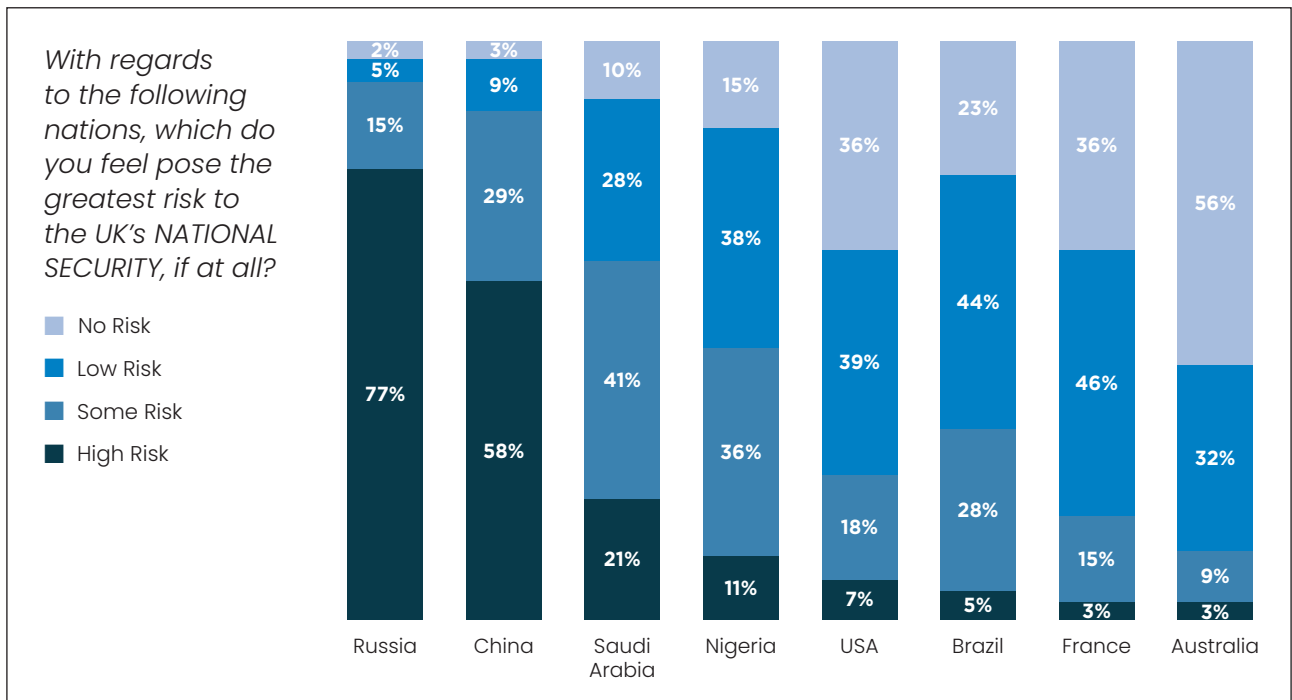


Figure 17: Country Risk Profile (Economic Competition)

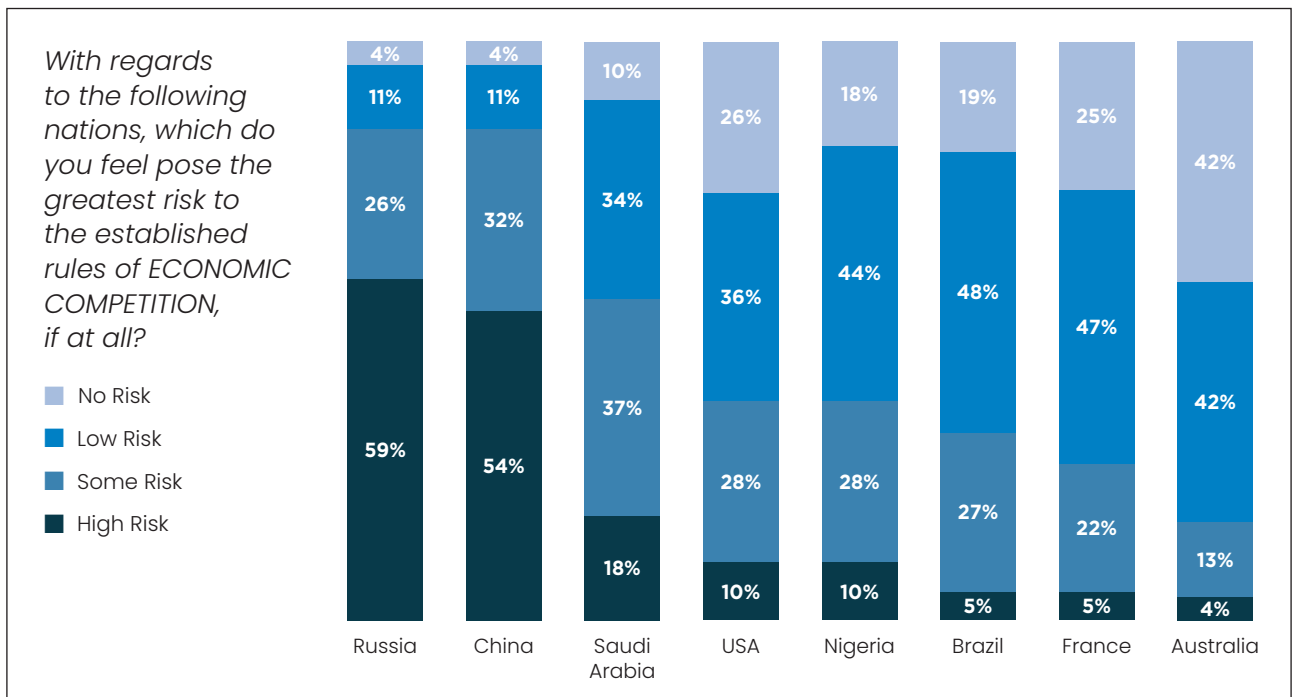
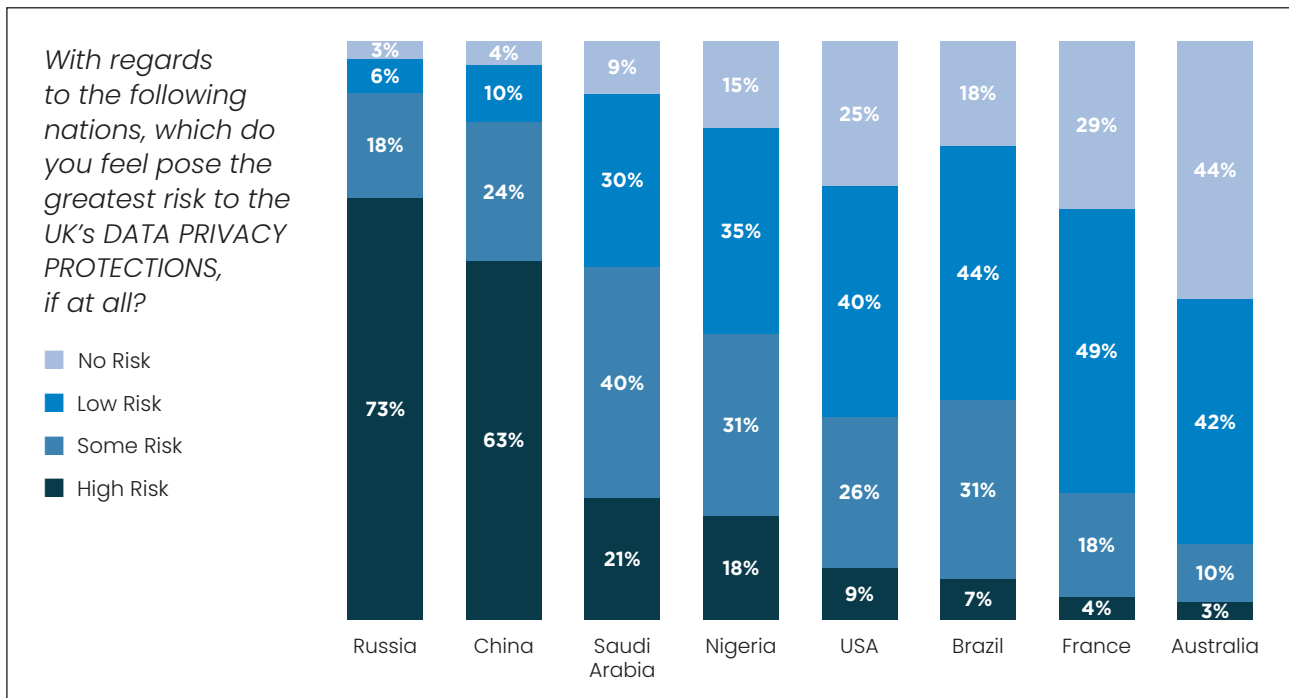


Figure 18: Country Risk Profile (Data Privacy)



From the figures above we can see that the British public is overwhelmingly concerned about research cooperation with Russia. This is not particularly surprising given the historically strained relationship between the UK and Russia and especially following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In reality though, research collaboration between Russia and the UK is generally rather low and, consequently, this data is not particularly alarming.

However, the figures that we are seeing when it comes to China pose a greater challenge. On one hand, the British public remains highly concerned across all risk dimensions when it comes to research collaboration with the Chinese Government, universities and companies. At the same time, as seen in the introduction, research cooperation with China is increasing more than any other nation, notable both in terms of scale and growth. Consequently, to address the concerns of the British public, the Government needs to clearly communicate its policies to protect British universities, research institutes, and health labs from potentially risky collaborations.

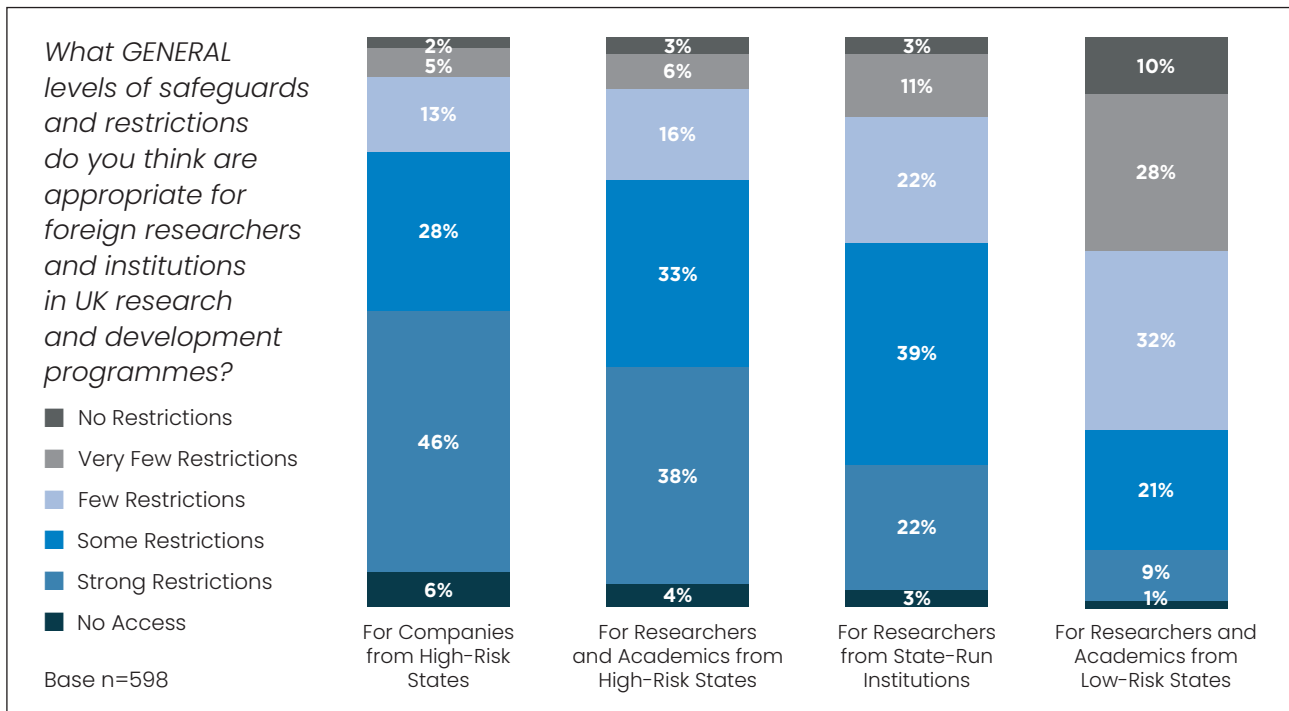
Once more, this data reaffirms that the British public has a nuanced view on the risks that cooperation with various countries poses. For example, while concerns about cooperation with Saudi Arabia are comparatively lower, they rise when it comes to upholding human rights. Thus, we are again reminded that even when it comes to academic collaboration with countries considered high-risk, the UK Government should not have a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, depending on the country and the type of research and risk, different policies should be put in place.

Protections

Once we established that the British public is indeed concerned about some types of academic collaboration, we wanted to examine what kind of restrictions – depending on the risk dimensions and research areas – would be seen as appropriate. We found that total bans on academic cooperation are seen as a step too far. Instead, for some collaborations, the British public opted for strong restrictions. In addition, such restrictions and safeguards are seen as more appropriate for companies or state-run institutions, especially from high-risk states.

Interestingly, restrictions and safeguards are seen as more appropriate when involving state-run institutions, increasing further in severity for high-risk state researchers, and even more so for companies. Considering high profile scandals with companies such as Huawei, TikTok or BGI,³⁰ including banning in some cases,³¹ these attitudes would appear to reflect an anxiety amongst the British public when it comes to collaboration with high-risk corporate entities in areas sensitive to risk.

Figure 19: General Safeguards and Restrictions



³⁰ “Chinese firm got Covid contract despite trying to hack NHS data, minister says”, *The Guardian*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/mar/08/mps-call-for-uk-to-ban-chinese-gene-research-firm-from-government-contracts-bgi-group>.

³¹ “Politicians vote to ban TikTok in Montana over United States security fears with China”, *ABC News*, 15 April 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-15/montana-politicians-vote-to-ban-tiktok-in-the-state/102227210>

Figure 20: Safeguards and Restrictions and Research Risk

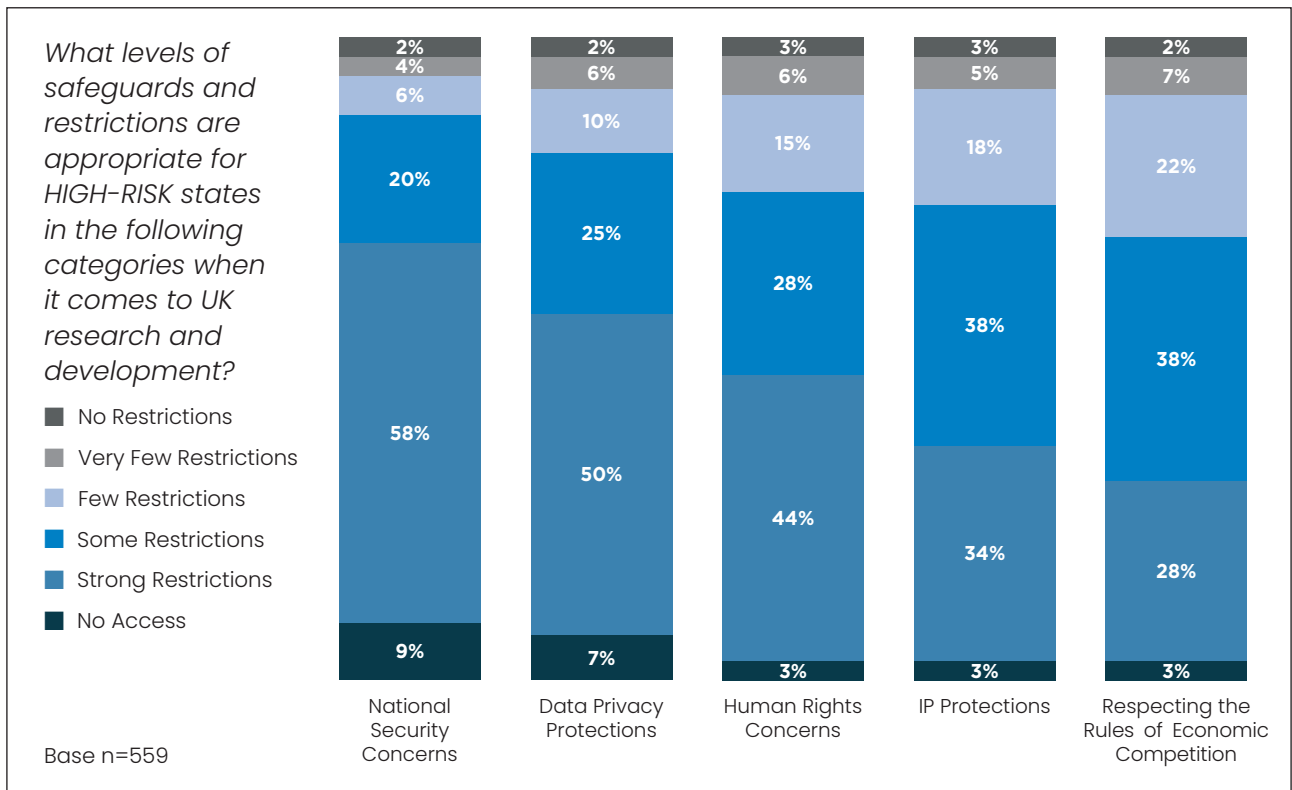


Figure 21: High-Risk State Participation and Research Risk

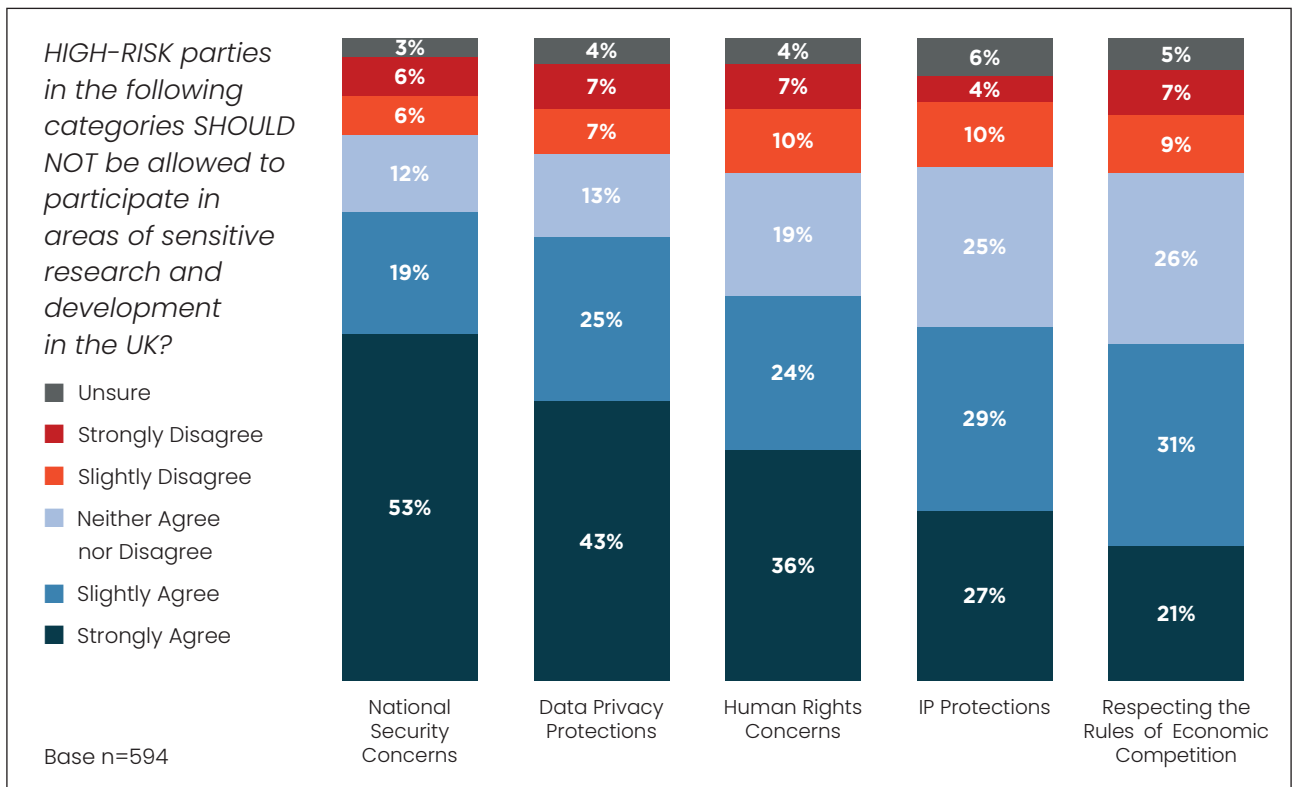


Figure 22: High-Risk State Participation and Research Area

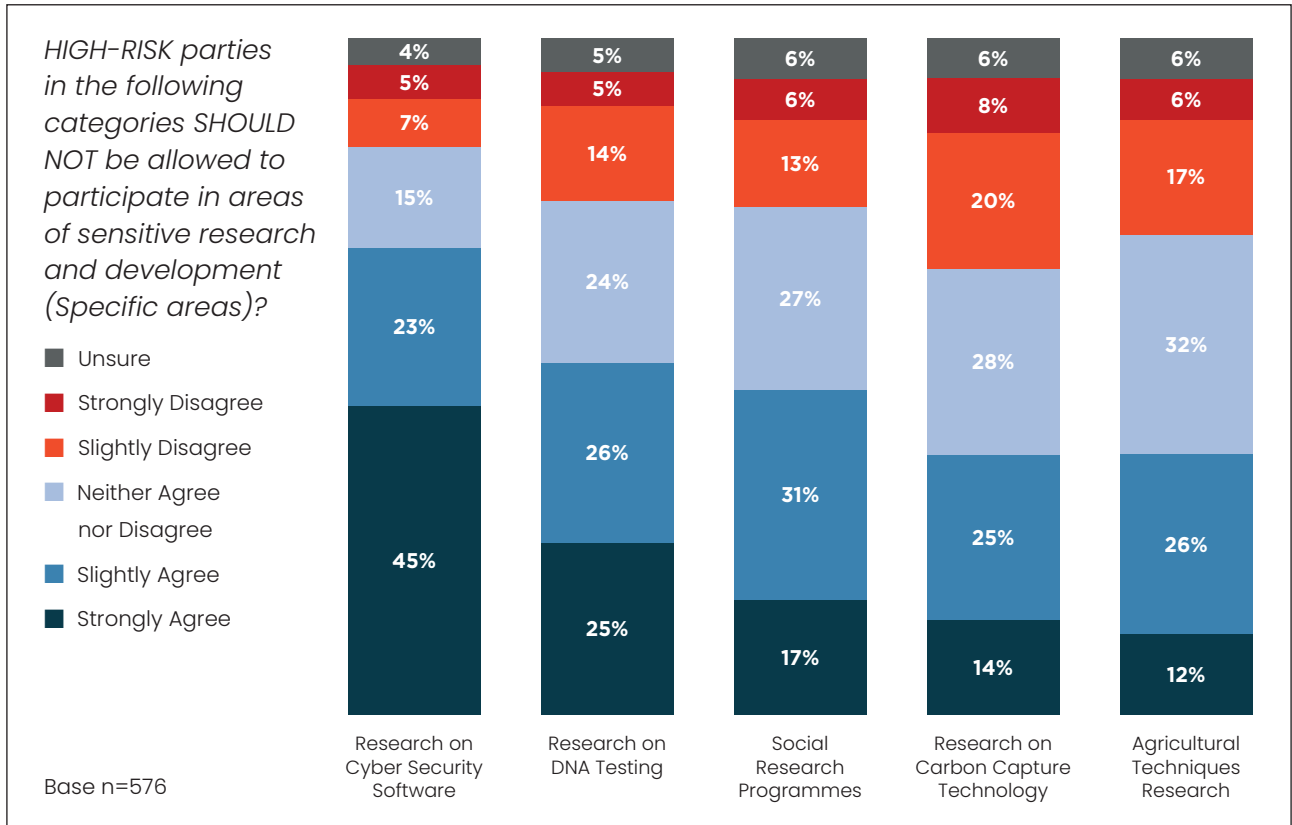


Figure 23: Safeguards and Restrictions and Research Area

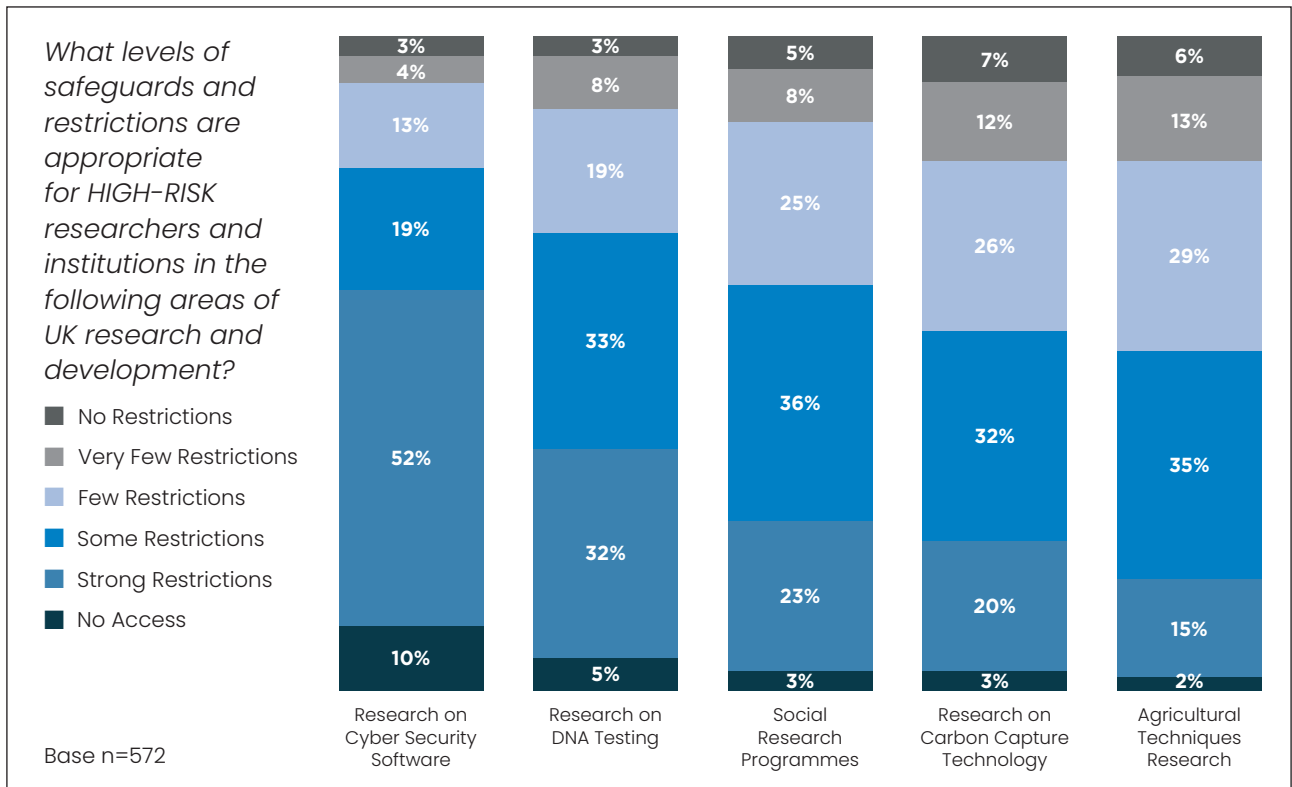
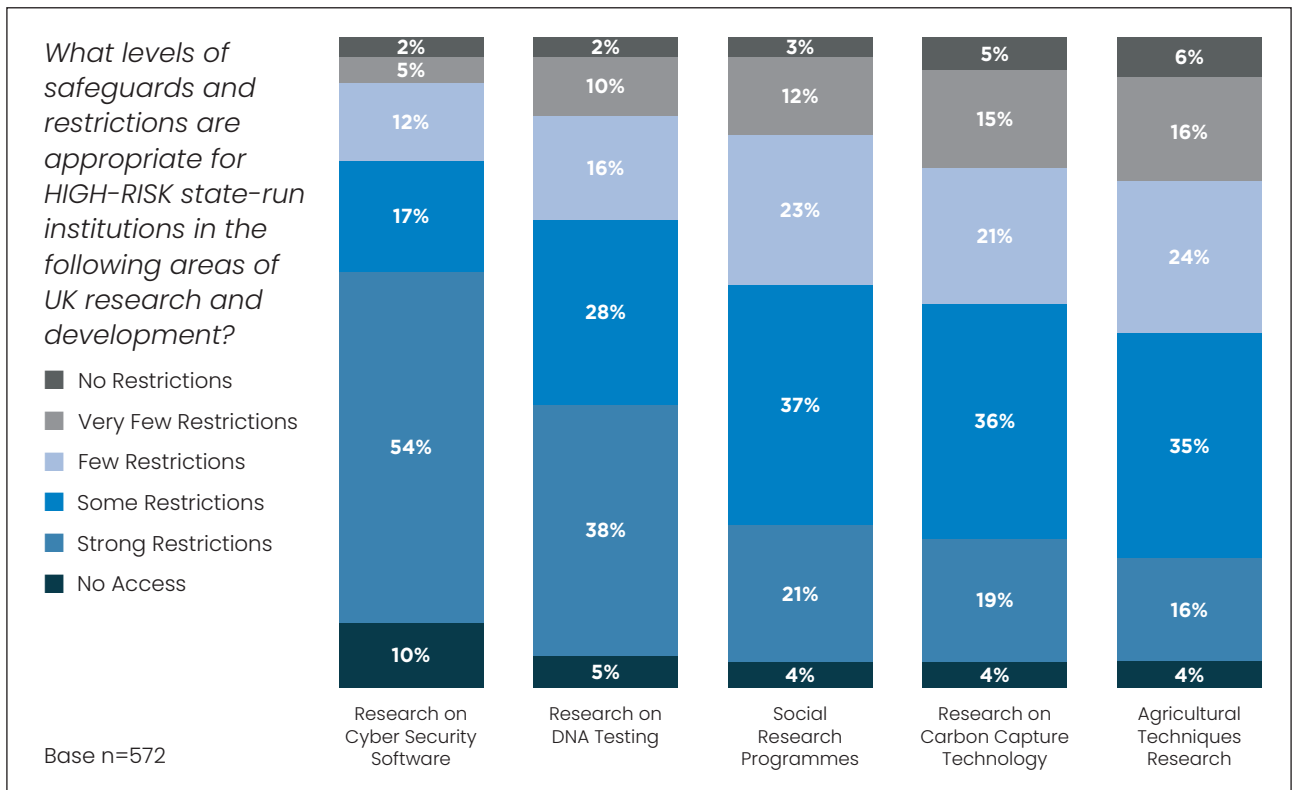


Figure 24: Safeguards and Restrictions and State-Run Institutions



In line with their concerns, the British public generally supports strong restrictions to mitigate the risks posed to national security and data privacy. Consistently, the public favours extreme scrutiny with research that poses risks to national security and data privacy. Concretely, 53% and 43% of the respondents suggest that high-risk parties should not be allowed to participate in areas of sensitive research if such research involves risks to national security or data privacy, respectively. As for other risk dimensions, while some concerns remain, their level is generally lower across the board.

As for the research areas, cyber security remains crucial. In fact, the public requires strong scrutiny for any research around cyber security software with 45% of the respondents saying that high-risk parties should not be allowed to work with the UK on these matters. Correspondingly, for any research on cyber security, the public favours strong restrictions, even though support for outright bans remains low. Thus, even when it comes to protections, the public’s view is clear – different risk dimensions and different research areas warrant different policies and severity thereof.

Conclusion

The increase in international academic collaborations between British and foreign institutions and researchers has brought about thorny questions regarding security. And the current geopolitical situation – with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and looming questions regarding China’s global positioning – only further complicates the picture. On one hand, it is very clear that academic collaborations bring about significant benefits both to the research outputs and also to British society. At the same time, some of these academic collaborations can also put the UK at risk. Thus, striking the balance between the benefits and risks associated with academic collaborations is a difficult and complicated task. And while the UK Government has been working on this issue for quite some time, so far we knew very little about the perceptions that British people have on the matter.

In this paper, we examined the extent to which the British public welcomes research outputs and research collaborations between the UK and countries that may be considered high-risk. We began by investigating which countries they perceive as high-risk – either because they have opposing interests to the UK or because they are perceived to be actively working against the UK. Our data showed us that China and Russia are always seen as high-risk and that the British people are particularly concerned about collaborations with these two countries or their academic and educational institutions.

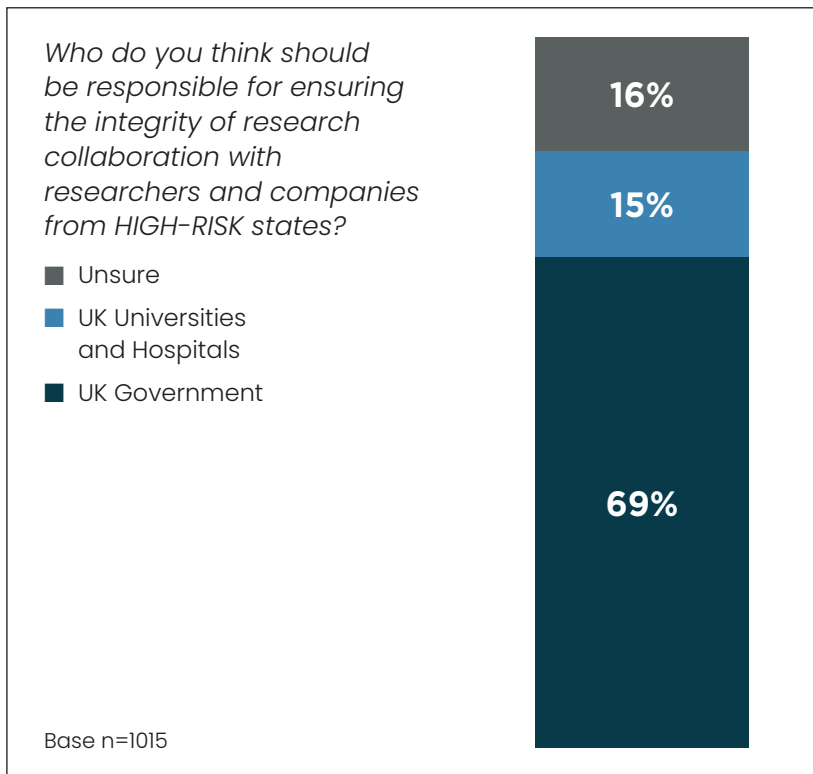
We proceeded to focus on five key risk dimensions and five key research areas and examined the conditions under which the British people are more or less concerned about academic collaborations. We concluded that national security and data privacy are the two most sensitive risk dimensions, and that cyber security and DNA testing were the most sensitive research areas for collaboration with high-risk states.

We also investigated what kind of policies are adequate to protect the UK from problematic academic collaborations and found that outright bans are not popular, but that strong restrictions are sometimes seen as appropriate.

We conclude that the British public has a very nuanced view regarding the risks associated with different research areas and different countries. For example, research collaborations in cyber security with China, especially when there are risks to national security and data privacy, are likely to be very concerning to the British public. What is more, the British public would be very supportive of strict regulations and extensive scrutiny for any such research collaboration. However, research into agricultural techniques, for example, would not be as concerning, even with China.

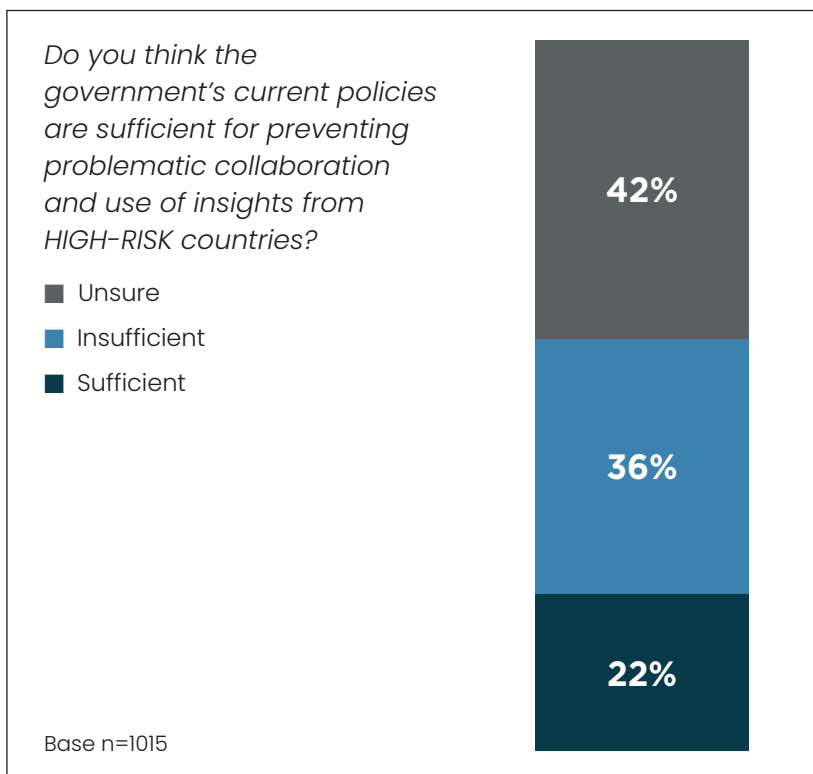
Finally, going forward, we thought that it was important to ask the British public who should be the authority to decide on and implement the policies. Strong arguments can be made that this should be the Government’s responsibility – as indeed, some of these academic collaborations could put the whole country at risk. At the same time, involving the Government in this decision-making process could jeopardise the freedom and integrity of UK academic institutions – in which case, it is perhaps more prudent to allow universities and research centres to decide on the matter. Despite this debate, the British public places a lot of confidence in the Government to do the right thing – with 69% of the respondents saying that the integrity of research collaboration is the responsibility of the Government.

Figure 25: Ensuring the Integrity of Research Collaboration



Despite the trust they place in the Government to ensure the integrity of the research with high-risk states, the British public is uncertain as to whether the current policies are sufficient to protect the UK from problematic academic collaborations. A substantial amount also thinks that the current policies are insufficient.

Figure 26: Government Policy and Preventing Problematic Collaboration



What remains unclear are the causes of this uncertainty. On one hand, it could be the case that people simply do not know about the policies that are currently implemented and are subsequently uncertain as to whether they are sufficient. On the other hand, it could be that while people are aware of the regulations, they don't know whether they are actually effective. These matters ought to be investigated further, and if it is the case that the British public is simply uninformed, the Government should work to promote its policies and explain to the British public why they were implemented and how effective they are. On the other hand, if it turns out that the British public is informed, but not persuaded that the policies are effective, the Government should invest more effort in promoting them and defending the decision to institute them.

When it comes to policy formulation, striking the right balance will be particularly difficult, especially with China. While the British public also thinks of Russia and Iran as high-risk states, in reality, British research institutions have not seen large amounts of collaboration with either Russian or Iranian research organisations. Contrary to that, there is a steady increase in academic cooperation with Chinese institutions - which is beneficial but also comes with risks. Moreover, even the British public seems less concerned about China than Russia - which further illustrates the complexities involved in formulating the best policies for cooperating with China. There are strong reasons why views towards China remain softer in comparison. For example, many admire China for its economic development in the last forty years. Moreover, the West has formed very important economic relations with China - and restricting those will come with substantial costs for the West as well. Finally, unlike Russia, there are still ongoing debates regarding the real challenge that China actually represents. All of this makes it very difficult to strike the right balance, especially when it comes to research collaboration.

That being said, given the scale and rapid escalation of research collaboration with China specifically, a review of safeguards and restrictions in areas where the country is deemed high-risk, such as national security and data privacy, is largely supported by public concern. This is especially important given the proximity of the Chinese state to many Chinese corporations, and even more so in areas where these concerns are most sensitive such as cyber security and DNA testing.

The report concludes that academic collaboration is important and brings significant and immeasurable benefits to British society as a whole - and as such, it ought to continue. And indeed, most of our respondents, on balance, think that research collaborations are beneficial. However, and in line with public opinion, some measures need to be put in place to protect the UK's interests and to ensure the integrity of any potentially controversial research outputs. Depending on the research area and the risks that specific research may pose, different policies may be more or less suitable and it is important that the Government continues having a nuanced approach rather than a one-size-fits-all way of policy making. Finally, given the importance of this issue and the implications it has on everyone's lives, the UK Government must ensure that the policies are implemented in a transparent manner and that the British public is adequately informed.

TITLE: "RESEARCH COLLABORATION
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By Dr Helena Ivanov

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