

MANAGERIAL INSIGHT

Boundary organizations in transnational academic labor markets: Managerial insights from EURAXESS China and the Galileo Galilei Italian Institute

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Abstract

Purpose - This Managerial Insight reframes two “boots-on-the-ground” European intermediaries—EURAXESS China and the Galileo Galilei Italian Institute (GGII, Chongqing)—as boundary organizations that enable cooperation across political, institutional, and career-system boundaries. Building on boundary-organization theory, we show how these entities sustain transnational academic cooperation while translating policy priorities into workable institutional practices and individual career opportunities.

Design/Methodology/Approach - We develop a comparative, practice-oriented insight based on document-based evidence and secondary sources on EU–China academic cooperation, and we reinterpret the two organizations through the lens of boundary organizations, boundary spanning, and boundary objects.

Findings - EURAXESS China and GGII exhibit classic boundary-organization features: dual accountability (to funders/states and to mobile researchers), boundary objects (calls, mobility schemes, fellowships, hosting arrangements, information days), and translation mechanisms (policy → institutional routines → individual careers). Their value is amplified under shifting EU–China conditions (de-risking, funding eligibility changes, and heightened research security), because they generate credibility and actionable pathways on both sides of the boundary.

Practical implications - For university leaders, research-office directors, and HR managers, the two cases suggest an actionable design logic: (1) build a portfolio of boundary objects, (2) invest in bilingual “translation capacity,” (3) institutionalize credible neutrality, (4) manage risk transparently, and (5) maintain dense multi-level networks that connect ministries, universities, labs, and individual scholars.

Originality/Value - We extend boundary-organization theorizing beyond science–policy interfaces toward transnational academic labor markets and career systems, where cooperation depends as much on HR pathways and mobility infrastructures as on research agendas.

KEYWORDS

Taxpayers’ perception; Taxation System; Health facilities, Education facilities; Transport facilities.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Academic and research ties between Europe and China are extensive and historically layered, yet increasingly shaped by changing policy priorities, competitiveness, and research-security considerations (Cai 2023,

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d'Hooghe and Lammertink 2020, Matthews 2025, Pinna 2024). Cooperation has moved from an era dominated by expansion and “bridge building” to one where institutions must simultaneously pursue scientific opportunity, manage political risk, and protect organizational legitimacy (DAAD 2024, Matthews and Guerini 2023, Wen et al. 2025). For managers in universities, research institutes, and public agencies, the practical challenge is rarely “whether” to cooperate, but how to operationalize cooperation so that projects remain fundable, compliant, attractive to talent, and credible across multiple audiences (European Commission 2006 n.d., Pérez García 2016). In that context, small but specialized intermediaries—often overlooked in strategy discussions—become decisive. This article focuses on two such intermediaries: EURAXESS China and the Galileo Galilei Italian Institute (GGII) in Chongqing (Bonaglia et al. 2025, Di Minin and Fasulo 2023).

Boundary organizations are entities that operate between communities characterized by different logics, incentives, and accountability regimes, while maintaining credibility and usefulness on both sides of the boundary (Guston 2001, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008, Wang 2024). They achieve this positioning by sustaining dual accountability (e.g., answering simultaneously to governments or funders and to researchers or user communities), and by developing boundary objects—standardized yet adaptable artifacts that enable coordination without full consensus, such as mobility schemes, calls, fellowships, and hosting arrangements (Carlile 2002 2004). In addition, boundary organizations rely on translation capacity, that is, the capability to convert policy language and strategic expectations into actionable institutional routines and legible career pathways for individuals (Bechky 2003, Carlile 2004, Viainon 2024). Finally, they are underpinned by boundary-spanning networks and roles, meaning people and recurring routines that circulate information, build trust, and broker relationships across organizational borders (Ancona and Caldwell 1992, Tushman and Scanlan 1981). This framing matters because EU–China cooperation is not only a science-policy issue; it is also a career-system and labor-market issue. Mobility, recruitment, affiliation models, and research services determine whether cooperation becomes real work and real careers—or remains diplomatic rhetoric (Hyland 2023, Pinna 2009, van der Wende 2020).

2 | EU–CHINA COOPERATION IS MULTI-LEVEL AND POLITICALLY SENSITIVE

EU-level cooperation has long been associated with strategic partnership narratives and structured policy dialogue (European Commission 2006), but the operational reality is fragmented across sub-state actors, universities, and discipline-specific communities (Kamiński 2019, van der Wende 2020). Over time, academic cooperation has also become entangled with innovation competition, technology transfer debates, and the broader political economy of connectivity (Bani et al. 2018, European Commission 2025b, Pérez García 2016). Meanwhile, Europe–China higher education cooperation is repeatedly reinterpreted

through shifting institutional logics and expectations (Cai and Zheng 2024, d'Hooghe et al. 2018, Pinna 2024).

In parallel, the symbolic and historical dimension of Europe–China knowledge exchange remains salient—from early scientific encounters to contemporary academic publishing and evaluation ecosystems (Hyland 2023, Kow 2016, Lingfeng 2007). Managers therefore face a dual imperative: protect institutional integrity while preserving the relational infrastructure that makes cooperation productive (DAAD 2024, Matthews 2025).

3 | CASE 1 — GGII (CHONGQING): A BOUNDARY ORGANIZATION ROOTED IN PLACE, TALENT, AND APPLIED COOPERATION

The Galileo Galilei Italian Institute was established through cooperation between Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and Chongqing University and has operated as a long-term platform for Italy–China academic engagement in Western China (Di Minin 2017, Di Minin and Fasulo 2023, Sant'Anna Magazine 2017). Chongqing's context matters: compared to China's top-tier coastal hubs, the city often requires stronger relational and institutional work to internationalize partnerships, recruit talent, and sustain visibility (Galilei Institute 2023).

3.1 | Why GGII is a boundary organization

GGII must remain useful to Italian partners (academic quality, reputational stakes, institutional expectations) while being locally legitimate and aligned with Chinese institutional priorities (Di Minin and Fasulo 2023). This is a classic “two principals” problem, solved not by choosing a side, but by designing boundary practices.

GGII operationalizes cooperation through “objects” that can travel across institutional boundaries: joint programs, lab-to-lab connections, structured events, visiting arrangements, and standardized cooperation formats that remain adaptable to local constraints (Carlile 2002, Lissilour and Rodríguez-Escobar 2020). In practice, these objects become the practical grammar of cooperation: partners can coordinate without fully sharing the same assumptions.

GGII translates between policy and practice: it helps convert high-level internationalization goals into concrete collaborations, and it helps individuals translate collaboration into career capital (Bechky 2003, Carlile 2004). This includes making sense of administrative expectations, aligning timelines, and ensuring that “cooperation” is legible to both HR logics and research-performance logics.

Boundary organizations thrive on credibility. GGII's credibility is grounded in recognizable institutional anchors and continuity over time—features that reduce perceived opportunism and increase partner willingness to commit (Guston 2001, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008).

3.2 | Managerial insight from GGII: “Place-based brokerage” for transnational careers

A core lesson from GGII is that geography is strategy. Operating in Chongqing entails higher “translation costs” because collaboration must be made legible across administrative, scientific, and cultural boundaries, yet it also creates strategic differentiation by providing privileged access to local ecosystems, emerging laboratories, and policy priorities beyond the usual coastal circuits. For managers, this implies treating the intermediary as career infrastructure rather than merely a project facilitator, because boundary organizations can convert “one-off projects” into sustained talent pipelines and durable collaboration routines (Ancona and Caldwell 1992, Tushman and Scanlan 1981). It also requires measuring success not only through publications and events but through relational assets and repeatable cooperation formats, including reusable templates and recurring mobility arrangements that lower transaction costs over time. Finally, it highlights the importance of investing in bilingual boundary roles: individuals capable of working across institutional logics and professional communities are not simply support personnel but strategic assets for sustaining credible cooperation under complex conditions (Bechky 2003, Tushman and Scanlan 1981).

4 | CASE 2 — EURAXESS CHINA: A BOUNDARY ORGANIZATION SCALING MOBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

EURAXESS China (formerly EURAXESS Links China, launched in 2009 and later renamed) is part of the EU’s global EURAXESS network supporting researcher mobility and research and innovation cooperation (European Commission 2025a). Over time, EURAXESS has been closely linked to EU framework programs (e.g., Horizon 2020) and to the practical task of making EU opportunities legible and accessible to researchers and institutions abroad (European Commission 2025a n.d.).

4.1 | Why EURAXESS China is a boundary organization

EURAXESS China must implement EU-level priorities (mobility, excellence, structured cooperation, compliance) while meeting the concrete needs of researchers and host institutions navigating different administrative and career systems (Guston 2001, O’Mahony and Bechky 2008).

EURAXESS produces standardized objects—calls, fellowship information, information sessions, portals, guidance, and community events—that enable coordination without requiring full institutional convergence (Carlile 2004). These objects are standardized enough to scale but flexible enough to be locally meaningful.

Policy shifts—such as changing funding eligibility rules and the growing salience of research security—create interpretive uncertainty for managers and researchers (DAAD 2024, Matthews 2025, Matthews and Guerini 2023). EURAXESS China’s comparative advantage is translation: clarifying what changes mean operationally for proposal strategy, partnerships, mobility planning, and career decisions (Cai 2023, Cai and Zheng 2024).

Like other boundary organizations, EURAXESS must be perceived as credible by multiple audiences. Its effectiveness depends on being simultaneously aligned with EU policy and trusted as a practical, service-oriented actor by mobile researchers and host institutions (European Commission 2025a, Guston 2001).

4.2 | Managerial insight from EURAXESS China: “Standardize the pathway, not the partnership”

EURAXESS points to a transferable design principle for managing international cooperation: standardize the mobility and cooperation pathway while leaving room for diverse partnership forms. This approach is especially important when partners operate under different constraints, incentive systems, and reputational risks, because it reduces uncertainty without forcing institutional convergence (Cai 2023, Cai and Zheng 2024, Pinna 2024). For managers, the implication is to rely on boundary objects to lower transaction costs—using standardized calls, templates, and recurring information routines that make collaboration easier to initiate and maintain (Carlile 2002). At the same time, compliance should be designed into the pathway itself: as research security becomes more salient, organizations need operational mechanisms that make “responsible internationalization” actionable rather than merely rhetorical (DAAD 2024, Matthews 2025). Finally, EURAXESS reinforces that mobility should be managed as a talent strategy, since in transnational academic labor markets, mobility infrastructure functions as HR infrastructure that shapes recruitment, retention, and career development across borders (Hyland 2023, van der Wende 2020).

5 | CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS: FIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR BOUNDARY ORGANIZATIONS IN ACADEMIC LABOR MARKETS

Across GGII and EURAXESS China, a consistent managerial logic emerges.

TABLE 1 Design principles for boundary organizations in transnational academic labor markets

Principle	Managerial logic
1. Anchor legitimacy, protect operational flexibility	Boundary organizations need recognizable institutional anchoring (e.g., ministries, EU delegations, reputable universities) while retaining enough flexibility to respond to changing conditions (Guston 2001, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008).
2. Manage a portfolio of boundary objects	Do not rely on a single program. Maintain a portfolio (e.g., calls, schemes, events, hosting arrangements, information routines) so the organization remains useful under policy shifts (Carlile 2002 2004).
3. Invest in translation capacity as a strategic capability	Translation is not "communication." It is the ability to transform policy categories into institutional action and career opportunity (Bechky 2003, Carlile 2004).
4. Build credibility on both sides through visible neutrality and reliable service	Credibility depends on perceived fairness, competence, and continuity—especially when geopolitical narratives heighten suspicion (Cai 2023, Matthews and Guerini 2023, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008).
5. Treat boundary-spanning roles as high-value talent	Boundary spanners enable information flow and trust formation across communities. In practice, bilingual staff and culturally competent brokers often determine whether cooperation survives friction (Ancona and Caldwell 1992, Tushman and Scanlan 1981, Braun Střelcová and Zheng 2025).

6 | CONCLUSION: EXTENDING BOUNDARY ORGANIZATIONS TO TRANSNATIONAL ACADEMIC LABOR MARKETS

EURAXESS China and GGII illustrate that the boundary-organization concept travels well beyond classic science-policy interfaces (Guston 2001). In today's EU–China environment, cooperation increasingly depends on how well institutions manage the labor-market and career-system infrastructure of science: mobility, affiliation, recruitment, and the everyday translation of policy into workable practice (O'Mahony and Bechky 2008, van der Wende 2020). For managers, the key take-away is practical: in volatile geopolitical contexts, intermediary capacity is not overhead—it's resilience.

6.1 | Managerial implication

For leaders of universities and research institutes, the first step is to map cooperation risks and opportunities as a career-system problem—including mobility, recruitment, and affiliation models—rather than treating international engagement solely as a project portfolio issue (Hyland 2023, van der Wende 2020). This perspective naturally leads to partnering with (or building) boundary organizations that can standardize cooperation pathways through reusable calls, templates, and due diligence routines while still allowing diverse partnership forms adapted to local constraints (Carlile 2002, European Commission 2025a). It also requires creating explicit incentives for boundary spanners and recognizing them as strategic staff, because their relational work and cross-boundary coordination are essential to making cooperation sustainable over time (Ancona and Caldwell 1992, Tushman and Scanlan 1981).

For public agencies and funding bodies, a parallel implication is to support intermediaries as cooperation infrastructure, particularly when

policy shifts heighten uncertainty and raise the costs of coordination (European Commission 2006, Matthews 2025). Success, in turn, should be evaluated with multi-dimensional indicators—talent mobility, durable networks, reuse of cooperation formats, and risk-managed continuity—rather than only publications or grant volume (Guston 2001).

Finally, for managers responsible for international HR and talent pipelines, boundary organizations offer a practical way to convert diffuse "interest" into structured mobility pathways with clear steps and support mechanisms (European Commission 2025a), while anticipating that research-security concerns and eligibility changes will reshape the perceived attractiveness of destinations, institutions, and collaboration formats over time (DAAD 2024, Matthews and Guerini 2023, Pinna 2024).

6.2 | Future research directions

Future research could extend this Managerial Insight in several complementary ways. First, scholars could develop comparative designs across boundary organizations operating in different geopolitical corridors (e.g., EU–China, US–China, EU–India) to test which boundary-organization features (dual accountability, boundary objects, translation capacity, and boundary-spanning roles) are most predictive of sustained cooperation under varying levels of uncertainty (Lissillour and Sahut 2022, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008, Guston 2001). These studies could implement a practice-based design (Lissillour and Silva 2024) so as to take into account the social structure and power struggles within which the boundary organisations operate (Lissillour et al. 2023). Second, researchers could examine the microfoundations of translation work, including how boundary spanners broker meanings, manage ambiguity, and maintain credibility across occupational and institutional communities (Ancona and Caldwell 1992, Bechky 2003, Tushman and Scanlan 1981). Third, future studies could evaluate how boundary organizations

design and govern boundary objects (e.g., calls, mobility schemes, hosting templates) to reduce transaction costs while enabling adaptation across administrative contexts (Carlile 2002 2004). Fourth, because this article argues that boundary organizations structure transnational academic labor markets, an important avenue is to assess outcomes at the career level: mobility trajectories, affiliation stability, and signaling value, alongside institutional outputs such as projects and publications (Hyland 2023, van der Wende 2020, Charman and Bahadori 2025). Finally, work is needed on the ethics and governance of boundary organizations under heightened research-security concerns, including how “responsible internationalization” is operationalized through due diligence routines and how such routines affect trust, inclusion, and reciprocity in long-term collaborations (Sahut et al. 2023, Matthews 2025, Matthews and Guerini 2023, Pinna 2024).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interests.

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