

China–Africa Higher Education Engagement: A Win–Win Situation?

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Abstract

China's economic activities in Africa have been accompanied by several initiatives to promote African higher education development. This forms part of China's soft power strategy. But does this lead to a win–win situation for Africa and China? And what does the future hold for Africa as a result of China's increasing engagement?

Investing in infrastructure and in higher education boosts the development of a country. However, necessary public funds in African countries are limited and aid from traditional Western donor countries has almost come to a standstill. China, an emerging global economic power, has capitalized on this situation, actively funding public infrastructure and assisting in human resources development in Africa while, in return, benefiting from Africa's huge mineral resources and markets for its manufactured goods.

From the perspectives of both China and Africa, this is a win–win situation. Western countries, however, express concerns, not only about China's poor human rights records and undemocratic practices, but equally that China is embarking on neocolonialism and that a large portion of China's investment in Africa is in the form of loans, not aid, leading African countries to be debt strapped. The West's concerns fall on deaf ears in Africa.

China's engagement with Africa in higher education is in line with its strategy of wielding not only economic power but also soft power. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a regular triennial event where Chinese and African leaders agree on a three-year plan for economic cooperation, including human resource development. China's higher education initiatives for Africa are embedded in the various FOCAC resolutions.

Scholarships

The grant of scholarships to Africa under FOCAC, increasing from 30,000 in 2015 to 50,000 in 2018, has resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of African students studying in China, from just under 2,000 in 2003 to nearly 50,000 in 2015. China is now, after France, the second country hosting the largest number of African students.

Almost all African students return home after their studies, which is advantageous not only to Africa but equally to China in its quest to spread its influence in Africa. However, very little information is available on the areas of study of the African scholars, the acceptability of the Chinese degrees in African countries, or the employment of graduates upon their return.

Partnerships

Under the 2009 FOCAC, China launched a “20+20” scheme linking 20 African universities with 20 Chinese universities and, in 2015, a similar “10+10” proposal to establish cooperation between 10 Chinese agricultural institutions and 10 African agricultural institutions was announced. There is hardly any information available about the linked institutions and the projects undertaken under these schemes, but it has been reported that the number of research papers in agricultural and biological sciences coauthored by African and Chinese academics has significantly risen, and that the number of Chinese postgraduate students at African universities has increased as a result.

Confucius Institutes and University Infrastructure

Perhaps the most powerful instruments used by China in its soft power strategy are its Confucius Institutes (CIs). Launched in 2004, there are now over 500 CIs within universities worldwide and 54 of them are in Africa. Each CI is linked to a Chinese university and its main objective is to promote Chinese language and culture.

Although CIs have been criticized in the West, where several of them have been closed down on grounds of promoting China's ideology and propaganda or undertaking industrial espionage, no such criticisms have emerged from Africa, where they are warmly welcomed.

By providing soft loans, China has also assisted in building university infrastructure in Africa to increase access and improve quality. Two prominent examples are the Malawi University of Science and Technology, an impressive campus built near Blantyre and opened in 2014, and the library at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, completed in 2018 and the largest ever built by China in Africa. It would have been impossible for these two African countries to put up such infrastructure without China's support.

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Win-Win?

The win-win question must be examined from two perspectives: one that relates to African countries generally, and the other specifically to their higher education sector. With regard to African countries, the concerns expressed by the West could be legitimate and need to be scrutinized. It is imperative for African academics to critically study the implications of China's access to Africa's natural resources and the consequences of massive Chinese loans. There is hardly any institution in Africa undertaking such research at present.

As to the higher education sector, the collaboration is heavily one-sided and Africa appears to be the main beneficiary, but since China's assistance to African higher education development forms part of its soft power strategy, one could argue that this is a win-win situation. However, there is sparse information on the scholarships being awarded and the activities under the various partnerships. Every CI in Africa, as part of its mandate, should collect data on the scholarships, undertake surveys of returning graduates, and record research activities under the partnerships. Only with such data can the real benefits to Africa be assessed.

The Future

Because of its colonial heritage, Africa has inevitably been influenced in its development by Europe's values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and it has adopted European languages as part of its culture. The United States and Europe have been regarded as role models by Africans ever since independence.

However, the perceived racism of the current US administration, and the recent rise in populism and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, now encourage Africa to look toward the East, China in particular. Africa admires China for its economic development but feels uneasy about its culture, values, and governance system. Will China's soft power strategy eventually win the hearts and minds of African people and inspire them toward a model of development akin to China's? What then would be the implications, positive and negative, of such a shift on African countries? These are issues that need to be debated by African academics in Africa. And these same issues need to be on the West's agenda for Africa's future development. ▲

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