

Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative has already spawned three university alliances, but little has been investigated about their forming new higher education spaces. These three university alliances include members from within and beyond the Belt and Road. They can be interpreted as China's rising leadership in internationalization of higher education; however, they also appear to help institutions that are usually marginalized in internationalization to gain more visibility both domestically and internationally.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Higher Education

Aisi Li and Alan Ruby

Most of the commentary on China's One Belt One Road strategy (also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) is about infrastructure, ports, and railways. With more than US\$900 billion injected into the project, it is hard to imagine that academic and intellectual cooperation will remain unaffected. In fact, BRI has so far spawned three university alliances.

The Alliances

In May 2015, the Universities Alliance of the New Silk Road (UASR) was established in Xi'an, initiated by Xi'an Jiaotong University. Its current membership is 151 universities from 38 countries and regions sharing a mission of developing the Silk Road Academic Belt, promoting regional openness and development, and stepping up exchanges and collaborations. Although it has a specific geographic focus on the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian region, with 40 or more universities from China and more than 20 from Russia, many of its members are from beyond this region—including two from New Zealand and more than 10 from France.

In the same year, 46 universities from eight countries formed the One Belt One Road University Strategic Alliance (OBORUSA) in Dunhuang, Gansu. OBORUSA has grown to include more than 170 universities from 25 countries and aims at developing a common higher education space along the Belt and Road, enhancing higher education exchange and cooperation and facilitating economic and societal growth.

In 2016, the China–Central Asia University Alliance (CCAUC) was established in Urumqi, Xinjiang, with members of 51 higher education institutions in seven countries along the Belt. CCAUC sets out to organize regular forums, enhance student mobility, and credit

transfer between China and Central Asia. In addition, it intends to facilitate the growth of the Confucius Institutes in the region.

Admission to these alliances is relaxed. Although their establishment was prompted by the BRI, membership is not restricted to countries along the Belt and Road pathways. While the networks include China's coastal universities, the founding members or initiators of all three networks are located in places that are significant on the historical Silk Road. Xi'an was the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, while Dunhuang was a major historic stop, and the most well-known route of the historical Silk Road ran through Xinjiang from the east to its northwestern border. In contrast to the better-known internationalization activities along east and southeast China, these three alliances have brought attention to China's internationalization efforts in landlocked, but historically important areas.

Potentials

Among the three alliances, two have explicitly expressed as a goal the development of a common higher education space, akin to the European Higher Education Area. All three emphasize their role as platforms for international and interregional higher education cooperation, with the ultimate aim of closer economic and social cooperation and development.

The formation of these alliances is a result of top-down and bottom-up efforts, with governments and universities contributing to their establishment and maintenance. Local governments, provincial or municipal, appear to be financially supportive of these alliances. In support of OBORUSA, Gansu provincial government has set up Silk Road Scholarships with an annual fund of RMB 5 million (about US\$730,000) to attract international students. This special funding is expected to go up if student demand increases. Similarly, Xi'an Jiaotong University, the founding member of UASR, makes it clear in the alliance's charter that it will continue to fund the alliance. Although the Chinese government does not have a central fund to support these alliances, financial commitments from local governments and universities are likely to facilitate their further growth.

While all three networks aim to build regional political and social cooperation, collaboration is not restricted to geographical or cultural proximity, as demonstrated in their respective memberships. Instead, the alliances have a global outlook that stretches from China to Asia and beyond, to Europe and the Baltic states. As a result, deepening regional higher education cooperation under the BRI can be interpreted as enhancing global higher education cooperation. After all, BRI's ultimate aim is to build connectivity globally. Connecting various levels of regions to form a global partnership serves this aim, and thus the alliances are as much regional as global constructions.

Obstacles

As these alliances are in their infancy, shared standards have not been established or articulated. A coordinated higher education policy is also absent. As a result, it is too early to discuss harmonization and convergence within these alliances.

As the Bologna Process demonstrated, creating a common higher education space is not without obstacles and takes time, even when there is some cultural and geographical proximity and a lot of labor mobility between nations. The BRI alliances' ambitious attempts to develop a common higher education space in spite of cultural and geographical differences will involve a variety of languages, academic traditions, and academic calendars. Despite increased flows of students into and out of China, there is less movement of talent among BRI nations to fuel the case for aligning qualifications, compared with the Bologna Process. There are also impediments to the mobility of faculty between the various alliance members. Work visas are not always easy to obtain, and visas for spouses and educational opportunities for dependent children are rare or expensive. None of the alliances offer access to research funds that would provide a basis for sustained collaborative work.

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Looking Ahead

Many would argue that these three alliances symbolize China's rising leadership in internationalization of higher education. Yet the alliances are not led by the usual suspects in the capital, Peking University and Tsinghua University, but by Xi'an and others in the Western Provinces, which are beginning to emerge economically. Therefore, rather than simply seeing these networks as symbols of China's ambition to become a leader in internationalization, these networks appear to help institutions that are usually marginalized to gain more visibility, both domestically and internationally. If the student scholarship funds are sustained and a research funding pool established, they are likely to mature and encourage greater academic cooperation. ▲