

China–Africa Education Cooperation: From FOCAC to Belt and Road

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Abstract

Purpose: The article discusses the relationship between the human resource traditions of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and those supported by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in particular by the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*, issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2016.

Design/Approach/Methods: The article draws upon discourse analysis of both the FOCAC VI and VII documents and the key MOE 2016 *Action Plan*.

Findings: Given the trans-continental coverage of the BRI, it is suggested that its ambitious pledges in respect of education and human resource development (HRD) actually complement or even exceed the commitments made by FOCAC VI and VII.

Originality/Value: This is the first article explicitly to compare the HRD pledges of FOCAC with those associated with BRI's *Education Action Plan*.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China–Africa Cooperation, Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), human resource development (HRD), people-to-people exchanges, South–South Cooperation (SSC)

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The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has encouraged wide-ranging engagement with Africa since its foundation in 2000. Arguably, FOCAC is the formalization of China’s links with Africa that go back to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (Taylor, 2011).¹ Across its very wide spread of cooperation, social and development commitments have been substantial, and within this focus, Education and Human Resources, have always constituted a major element. There has consistently been a common core of scholarships and short-term training within the human resource development (HRD) package, but there have been additional, institutional elements depending on the particular FOCAC conference or summit. Although school building has featured in two of the FOCAC Action Plans, the main focus of the commitments has generally been in the area of higher education (King, 2013). Capacity building or more recently capacity cooperation have been key elements in the FOCAC pledges, and these have not of course been limited to the education sector, but have been widely applied to other sectors, such as health, environment, science and technology, and infrastructure.

One of the other core elements in the FOCAC packages has been the claim of mutuality or of common development between China and Africa. In other words, China has always talked of these agreements in terms of mutual benefit or mutual support rather than employing the language of donors and recipients. These constitute, therefore, forms of South-South cooperation (SSC). Thus, there has frequently been a description of some of the FOCAC pledges as illustrating people-to-people and cultural exchanges. In this way, the FOCAC discourse underlines the sense that the agreements are two-way or win-win; it is, therefore, commonplace for the text to talk of “the two sides agreed . . .” or other similar expressions. This affirms the role of African agency in the agreements, and this is supported by the activity of the senior officials’ meetings and of the African diplomatic corps in Beijing in the preparations of FOCAC documentation. Despite this discourse of two-way collaboration, it is clear that the bulk of the HRD pledges are in reality one-way provision of scholarships and training awards.

This context means that this short article is a small contribution and a corrective² to the literature on SSC (Kragelund, 2019) as well as adding to the growing literature on China-Africa research cooperation.³ It is noteworthy that although Education and Human Resources development are constant features of the FOCAC Action Plans, there has been relatively little academic research on these dimensions. For instance, in a recent volume on *New Directions in Africa-China Studies*, none of the 21 chapters examine the history or contemporary aspects of Africa-China studies in education (Alden & Large, 2019). There is a parallel with studies of India’s cooperation with Africa. Despite HRD and capacity building being central to India’s program of support to Africa, there are very few critical studies of the role of education (King, 2019a; Mawdsley & McCann, 2011).

A key question for this article is how these and other FOCAC traditions of support to HRD are reinforced by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in particular by the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*, issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2016 (MOE, 2016). Given the trans-continental coverage of the BRI, does this mean that its pledges, especially in respect of education and HRD, actually complement or even overlap with the commitments made by FOCAC? Unlike FOCAC, where virtually all 54 African countries are now represented, BRI's African partners have grown dramatically from just 6 in 2018 to 32 at the time of the Second BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2019.

Another international dimension that will be touched upon is whether the Belt and Road or FOCAC may connect at any stage, or be contrasted, with the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), promoted by India and Japan since May 2017.

From FOCAC VI to FOCAC VII

Johannesburg Summit, 2015

Given that the only accessible study in English on FOCAC (Taylor, 2011) treats only the first four FOCACs (from 2000 to 2009), it will be appropriate to focus attention on the fifth and sixth FOCAC in this analysis. In doing so, it may be useful to bear in mind Taylor's (2011) final comment on this set of fora:

Symbolism and spin then is at the root of the whole FOCAC enterprise and works at various levels and is directed both toward Africa, toward the world *and* toward the Chinese population [*sic*]. (p. 103)

The Johannesburg Summit⁴ in December 2015 covered many different dimensions of capacity building and HRD. Historically, as mentioned above, China's cooperation with Africa has not usually focused narrowly on schools or on formal education, even if two earlier FOCACs did support the development of a small number of schools (total 150).⁵ Instead, the support to HRD in FOCAC VI can be found under very many different titles, including capacity building, training opportunities, scholarships, cultural partnerships, mutual learning, knowledge sharing, research, and people-to-people exchanges. The overall focus remains higher education.⁶

Education and HRD are principally treated together in FOCAC VI under "Social development cooperation" along with medical care and public health, and other issues, but this should not be regarded as the only focus on capacity building in the FOCAC VI Action Plan; many different dimensions of training and capacity development are also covered under the various sections of "Economic cooperation" such as agriculture, industry, infrastructure, information, energy, tourism, investment, and trade. In these economic investments, there is a constant reference in the text to human capacity development, technology transfer, and skills training. Beyond this, there are

institutional development pledges—including the building of five “transportation universities” and a “China-Africa Aviation School.”

Specifically, under the section on “Social development cooperation” are some of the largest and most ambitious training numbers FOCAC has seen so far. Again, these pledges are not restricted to the sub-section termed “Education and human resources development,” but there are major training initiatives in the sub-section on “Medical care and public health,” including the training of doctors, nurses, public health workers, and administrative personnel from African countries, as well as the building of an African Union Disease Control Center and regional medical research centers.

Similarly under the “Exchanges of experience on poverty eradication strategies,” China pledged to provide degree programs on poverty eradication and to help train specialized personnel in this field. Equally, under the sub-section on “Science and technology cooperation and knowledge sharing,” there are a whole series of joint building projects for research and demonstration, as well as plans for sending “outstanding African youths and technical personnel to participate in exchanges to and training in Africa.”

Specifically under the section “Education and human resources development,” China pledges to provide some 32,000 government scholarships to Africa. This is almost twice as many as the 18,000 offered in the previous FOCAC V of 2012.

Given the alleged bottleneck on skills development in Africa, it is noticeable that China intends to renovate as well as build more vocational and technical training facilities in Africa, including an unspecified number of regional vocational education centers. Intriguingly, the provision of “colleges for capacity building in Africa” is mentioned, though nothing more is said about these. Beyond this, there is the promise of training no less than 200,000 local technical and vocational personnel, and of providing 40,000 training opportunities for African personnel in China. It must be assumed that this latter figure of 40,000 is for short-term training of some 2–3 weeks of the kind that has been offered traditionally through the FOCAC HRD process. This, too, is much larger than the 30,000 provided through the previous FOCAC V. Equally under this same heading of education and HRD, there is the pledge to build an SSC and Development Institute in China for the benefit of senior African professionals.

Still, under education and HRD, there is a continuation of China’s support to the UNESCO-China Funds-In-Trust which had been running at US\$2 million annually in FOCAC V. There is also a promise of more support to African countries wishing to establish Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. Equally, at the university level, there is a financial encouragement to African universities to establish China research centers “and vice versa”. Presumably, these last three words are meant to encourage Chinese universities to open more African research centers.

Under the separate section termed “Cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges,” there is a whole series of proposals covering culture, media, academia, think tanks, youth, volunteers, women, trade unions, and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). It is noticeable that the agreements proposed here are mainly (21 of them) prefaced by the term “The two sides . . .”; only six are prefaced by “The Chinese side . . .” This suggests that there is more of a symmetrical, two-way set of proposals in this key section of the Action Plan. China does, however, plan to build five more cultural centers in Africa, but parallel African centers in China are also encouraged.

China is very aware of the negative way in which its presence and activities in Africa are often portrayed by much of the Western media. It is suggestive, therefore, that China is offering to train no less than 1,000 African media personnel annually. It is also planning to run “training and capacity building for African countries” news officials and reporters.

Still under “people-to-people exchanges,” there is the planned continuation of cooperation between think tanks and academia on both sides, with encouragement to do more research, and invite African scholars to China.

Youth exchanges are a further dimension of collaboration, with no less than 500 going annually for study trips from Africa to China. From the Chinese side, volunteers are also mentioned as continuing, but no numbers are given.

In reviewing these many pledges, it should be noted that they are announced at a Pan-African level in the FOCAC conventions, but they are not, at the fora, allocated to specific countries across the continent. That process is carried out bilaterally between China and a whole series of specific countries. Thus FOCAC V promised support to more Confucius Institutes, but bilaterally there is an agreement completely to renew the Confucius Institute in the University of Dar Es Salaam and to provide the University with a state of the art library.

As far as evaluating these pledges and action plans is concerned, there is a Chinese Follow-up Committee and this works in conjunction with the Senior Officials’ Meeting and representing the corps of African ambassadors in Beijing. Thus, FOCAC is by no means just “symbolism and spin”; there are mechanisms for judging delivery.

This Chinese mix of Pan-African pledges with bilateral agreements differs markedly from the India-Africa Forum Summits (IAFS) which India supported from 2008, and again in 2011 and 2015. The pledges made at the IAFS were left to the African Union to distribute to specific countries. Arguably, this made for much slower implementation, since the African Union allocated the pledges according to its view of the needs of the Regional Economic Commissions (King, 2019b).

Beijing Summit, September 2018

FOCAC VII took place in Beijing in early September 2018. One of the more obvious changes between FOCAC VI and VII is that the Silk Road was only mentioned once back in 2015, in a

telling phrase of Africa welcoming China's championing "the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" "which includes the African continent" (FOCAC, 2015, section 3.5.1). By contrast, in FOCAC VII, the terminology of the BRI and of the Silk Road was used many times, as will be seen after analyzing the HRD pledges of this Beijing Summit.

As is usual in the FOCAC Action Plans, the Education and Human Resources' agreements fall in a different section from the Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges. There is a reference back to some of the pledges made in Johannesburg. One of the more significant of these, under Education and Human Resources, is the establishment of the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development. This was duly set up in the National School of Development of Peking University. It is presented in the iconic language of mutuality: "as a platform for South-South cooperation featuring equality, mutual trust, mutual benefit, solidarity, and mutual support, and support other developing countries in their exploration of development paths suited to their own national conditions" (FOCAC, 2018a, section 4.3.2).

Another item that was mentioned in Johannesburg was Colleges for Capacity Building. Though there is no specific mention of these in the text of the 2018 Action Plan, there is an affirmation for the construction of an African Capacity Development Institute, to be headquartered in the African Capacity Building Foundation in Harare.

Still under Education and Human Resources, the FOCAC VII Action Plan reinforces the positive comments made in FOCAC VI about the increasing role for Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, as was seen above, but there is no further mention in FOCAC VII about the setting up of China research centers in African universities and their African counterparts in China.

One of the areas within the education pledges that is keenly followed in each FOCAC Action Plan is whether China will really be able to continue to improve on the total number of long-term scholarships and short-term training slots from the previous triennium. Here the key sentence is that "China will provide Africa with 50,000 government scholarships and 50,000 training opportunities for seminars and workshops and train more professionals of different disciplines for Africa" (FOCAC, 2018a, section 4.3.3). This betters the Johannesburg numbers of scholarships by almost 20,000, and of short-term professional training by 10,000. In addition, it is mentioned that there will be a special "tailor-made programme to train 1,000 high-caliber Africans" (FOCAC, 2018a, section 4.3.3). There is no further detail on this, but it is possibly a scheme to bring potentially influential "high flyers" to China.

A further item carried over from the commitments in Johannesburg involved research centers supported by China in the continent. One of these is supported by both sides in the FOCAC VII Action Plan and is termed the China-Africa Joint Research Center; its concern covers a wide range of scientific research and professional training, including ecology, health, and renewable energies.

This particular research center will have responsibility for selecting 150 African students for masters or doctoral training in China.

As in the previous FOCAC Action Plans, Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges are treated separately from Education and Human Resources. FOCAC VII repeats some of the promises of FOCAC VI, such as opening more Chinese Cultural Centers in Africa—though it is not clear if there are now more than the five centers that were in operation in 2015 (Mauritius, Nigeria, Benin, Egypt, and Tanzania).

But of more direct interest to our concern with the links between FOCAC and BRI is that there is quite a range of developments in the cultural and people-to-people sphere that use the new Silk Road discourse. Thus the following invitation suggests an expansion of the cultural world to the one which just talked of an African Arts Festival in 2015 to a broader vision: “China welcomes Africa’s participation in the Silk Road International League of Theatres, the Silk Road International Museum Alliance and the Network of Silk Road Art Festivals” (FOCAC, 2018a, section 5.1.5). Similarly, there is perhaps the incorporation of the NGO activity mentioned in Johannesburg in 2015 into a wider network: “The two sides value the role of the Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network in promoting friendly exchanges and cooperation between China and Africa” (FOCAC, 2018a, section 5.4.4).

There are many other parallels in cultural and people-to-people cooperation between FOCAC VI and VII. One of the intriguing developments is that where FOCAC VI had mentioned large-scale support to local vocational training in Africa, as was seen above, the FOCAC VII talks about specific institutional development for the first time for vocational training: “Ten Luban⁷ Workshops will be set up in Africa to provide vocational training for young Africans” (FOCAC, 2018a, section 5.5.2).

In respect of the implementation of this 2018 pledge, it should be noted that the first of the 10 Luban workshops was opened in Djibouti in March 2019, doubtlessly linked to the China-funded railway linking Addis Ababa and Djibouti. A second was being established in Cairo’s Ain Shams University.⁸

Looking over both FOCAC VI and FOCAC VII, however, it is clear that there is a very strong emphasis on training, not just vocational training and skills development, but capacity building and capacity cooperation.⁹ This is, of course, in line with China’s desire to present its support as cooperation and not as conventional aid. The confirmation of this discourse of cooperation is that the terms “mutual” and “joint” appear as many as 33 and 37 times, respectively, in the Action Plan, and the whole document emphasizes that these are shared agreements and actions. Hence the phrase “the two sides” (i.e., African and Chinese) occurs no less than 130 times in the Plan.

Overall, the Action Plan pays more attention to the African Union’s Agenda 2063 than to the UN’s Agenda 2030, but that is perhaps understandable given the continental focus of the document.

From FOCAC VI and VII to the BRI

It is valuable to have available an English version of the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative* (MOE, 2016). Even though the BRI was unveiled in September 2013, this Action Plan had become accessible in July 2016, between the dates of FOCAC VI and VII, and just over a year before the opening ceremony in Beijing for the BRI in May 2017. By the time of FOCAC VII in September 2018, it was possible to reflect on the eight major lessons of FOCAC VII, but put them in the context of several other policy documents, including from BRI, the UN, and the African Union: “China and Africa: Toward an Even Stronger Community with a Shared Future through Win-Win Cooperation” [FOCAC VII Declaration]

pools the strength of the Belt and Road Initiative, UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, AU Agenda 2063, and the development strategies of individual African countries, places emphasis on fostering indigenous growth capacity for Africa, create new ideas and ways of cooperation, and will bring China-Africa cooperation to new heights [*sic*]. (BRI, 2018, p. 1)

It is noteworthy that one of the eight major lessons of FOCAC VII was “capacity building activities” (BRI, 2018, pp. 13–15). This summarized all of the major dimensions of HRD, education, and people-to-people exchange, many of which have been mentioned, but it is significant that the document appears on the Belt and Road Portal, suggesting that there is convergence between the thinking about human resource for FOCAC and for the Belt and Road.

The *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative* will offer further evidence of the extent of the overlap in the thinking about FOCAC and BRI. It has already been noted that the terminology of the Silk Road had begun to be used in some of the cultural pledges of FOCAC VII, but this becomes much more evident in the large ambitions for educational cooperation among the countries of the New Silk Road. It will be seen that many of the new initiatives are now termed “Silk Road.”

Not surprisingly, the discourse of the *Action Plan* has resonance with the discourse of FOCAC. This is true of its plans for education collaboration but also of its collaboration in other sectors. But it is important to underline that in the view of President Xi Jinping, the chief architect of BRI, human resource exchange and development are one of just four major connectivities: “enhanced infrastructure connectivity, increased trade connectivity, expanded financial connectivity, and strengthened people-to-people connectivity”. The latter covers cooperation in education, health, culture, and science. It is best captured in Xi’s own words, from the opening ceremony of the BRI in May 2017:

These four years have seen strengthened people-to-people connectivity. Friendship, which derives from close contact between the people, holds the key to sound state-to-state relations. Guided by the Silk Road spirit, we the Belt and Road Initiative participating countries have pulled [*sic*] our efforts to build the

educational Silk Road and the health Silk Road, and carried out cooperation in science, education, culture, health and people-to-people exchange. Such cooperation has helped lay a solid popular and social foundation for pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative. (Xi, 2017a, p. 3)

In the “vision for cooperation” of the *Education Action Plan*, it is perhaps significant that promoting closer people-to-people ties is the first element, followed by cultivating talent, and achieving common development. This emphasis on mutuality and sharing knowledge was evident across FOCAC texts. But they are also critical to the BRI education vision:

The countries along the routes will work together to deepen mutual understanding, expand openness, strengthen cooperation, learn from each other, to pursue common interests, face our shared future, shoulder common responsibilities, and work concertedly to build a Belt and Road educational community. (MOE, 2016, p. 1)

The *Action Plan* has four “principles for cooperation.” These follow the vision in stressing the nurturing of the people, but very much through sharing, learning from each other, and encouraging dialogue between different civilizations. The emphasis is particularly on building bridges for people-to-people exchange across the entire BRI region (MOE, 2016, pp. 2–3).

These principles are then fleshed out in three priority areas for educational cooperation, with each of these containing several components (MOE, 2016, pp. 3–8). Many of these dimensions go far further than FOCAC commitments, as they seek to build and coordinate policy across a vast and highly differentiated set of countries. On the one hand, this suggests mechanisms for mutual recognition and joint degrees. But it also speaks to the need for joint laboratories, research centers, and technology transfer centers. “Cooperation” is the core theme across the tightly argued 11 pages, occurring no less than 77 times (MOE, 2016).

Only a few examples of such cooperation can be illustrated here, but one of the more suggestive of these is concerned with “breaking the language barriers between the Belt and Road countries” (MOE, 2016, pp. 4–5). The main focus is on encouraging the use of each other’s languages, and the implications of this for foreign language training in the BRI universities. There is a strong appeal “to institutions from the Belt and Road countries to work in partnership with Chinese institutions to establish programmes that teach their own languages in China” (MOE, 2016, p. 4). Alongside this, there is a call for more social actors to consider establishing Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. But in this regard, it is worth underlining that the BRI is not concerned solely with the promotion of Mandarin.

While there is a very strong promotion of education for international understanding into the curricula of BRI countries, and for introducing what is termed “Silk Road cultural heritage protection” into curricula along the routes, there is also a forceful promotion for the mutual recognition of qualifications in the region.

This “Silk Road” brand in respect of heritage is also extended to several other dimensions of education in the BRI countries. One of these is the “Silk Road Teacher Training Enhancement Programme” which aims to ensure that the best practice in teacher education is shared around the region. It is worth noting that though China is ready to support this, it does not assume that all good practice derives from China. Quite the opposite. China states that they will facilitate the export of equipment, courseware, and teaching solutions “from countries along the routes” (MOE, 2016, p. 7).

A further example of the Silk Road brand in the service of shared development is covered by the *Silk Road Joint Education and Training Enhancement Programme*. This is a powerful call to universities to carry out joint training projects, and not just in a few areas such as those previously linked to the Millennium Development Goals. Rather, they could be “in fields such as languages, transportation, architecture, medical science, energy, environmental engineering, hydraulic engineering, bio-sciences, marine sciences, ecological preservation, and cultural heritage protection” (MOE, 2016, p. 7).

In the FOCAC Action Plans, as was noted above, a crucial element was always the paragraph giving the numbers of scholarships for Africans to learn in China, as well as short-term training awards for African professionals to go there. In the *Education Action Plan*, while there is space given to the Silk Road Scholarship, aimed at students and technicians along the routes, there is strong encouragement for more Chinese students to study in the Belt and Road countries. At the present moment, very large numbers of privately funded Chinese students go to some five main Anglophone countries (Canada, U.S., U.K., NZ, and Australia), but the *Action Plan* would like to redirect some of this mobility toward the BRI countries and would see some alterations of student mobility priorities beyond students coming to China:

China will place equal importance on sending students overseas and receiving international students, equal importance on funding students to study overseas and encouraging self-sponsored overseas studies, equal importance on increasing the number of international students and improving the quality of education offered to them, equal importance on law-based management of the students and improving services to them, as well as equal importance on cultivating the talent and giving full play to their roles (MOE, 2016, p. 6).

But the *Action Plan* is not just about university students and short-term professional training. Technical vocational education and training (TVET) is perceived as an equally important priority, and not least because of the association of TVET with the crucial role of infrastructure development across BRI countries. The talk is of “multi-layered cooperation in vocational and technical education and training” developing talent for the BRI regions. There is, in addition, a challenge to China’s top vocational and technical institutions to consider an overseas branch presence, through links with industry (MOE, 2016, p. 6).

Although the majority of the *Action Plan* text is concerned with joint actions and shared programs, there is still a role for “Silk Road Education Assistance”. This will be delivered in the usual form of

SSC and will target the least developed countries along the routes. This is not just seen as government to government, but ideally, it should involve nongovernmental resources. Such diversified funding, from state and non-state actors, is also encouraged for each country along the new Silk Roads:

By combining government funding, private financing, and public donations, we aim to broaden the funding sources for education, enlarge the scope of education assistance, and achieve shared development in education (MOE, 2016, p. 8).

Belt and Road: From education ambitions to action

The last section of the *Education Action Plan* acknowledges that there has to be a pooling of resources across the education communities in the BRI countries, but recognizes that China can play “a proactive and exemplary role” (MOE, 2016, p. 9). China perceives the challenge as involving not just central government but also provinces and major cities. Following a very long-standing tradition of provinces partnering with particular African countries, it is suggested that China’s provinces and cities should identify “friendship provinces” and “sister cities” across the BRI regions (MOE, 2016, p. 9). It is recognized that these measures will help the internationalization of all the different partners.

In concluding the ambitions of the *Education Action Plan*, the text chooses the moral high ground. It argues for an ethical international education policy that works with and for others and recognizes that this means learning from and benefiting from educational cooperation. This quotation captures the core values of the *Action Plan*:

Guided by the old Chinese motto that “He who craves for success empathizes with others and helps them to be successful”, Chinese schools and universities should steadily expand cooperation and exchange with their counterparts in the Belt and Road countries. They should take their best educational resources with them as they engage in cooperation and exchange outside China, and select the most valuable educational resources to bring home from other countries, being inclusive and tolerant, and both learning from and teaching others. In this way together we can make our education more internationalized and strengthen our ability to act in service of the common development of the Belt and Road Initiative. (MOE, 2016, p. 10)

To parallel the Chinese adage about cooperation being the road to success, an African saying is also drawn upon: “He who travels alone travels faster, yet he who travels in company travels farther” (MOE, 2016, p. 11). In this cooperative spirit, the *Action Plan* ends with a major emphasis upon mutuality, and even with an aspiration to usher in an era of beauty:

Based on principles of mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual assistance and mutual learning, we shall join hands to promote the development of education and closer people-to-people ties. With these efforts, we will build an educational community among the Belt and Road countries together and create a new chapter of beautiful life for all humanity. (MOE, 2016, p. 12)

Three years later, in April 2019, there was a chance for the BRI to report on “Progress, contributions and prospects” just before the second BRI conclave in Beijing from April 27, 2019 (BRI, 2019). As usual, in the FOCAC and BRI reports, there was a section on HRD, “Closer people-to-people ties”. Despite all the coverage given to the networking of roads, ports, railways, energy, and air transport, it was claimed in the report that these people-to-people ties were “the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road” (BRI, 2019, section 5.1). According to the report, there have been, in the two years since the first BRI forum in April 2017, a welter of Silk Road events, covering theaters, museums, arts festivals, libraries, and NGOs. But apart from the cultural dimension, there have been achievements claimed in the sphere of formal education and training. Already in 2017, no less than 66% of all Chinese government scholarships were going to students in the BRI countries. It was noted, in addition, that there were 153 Confucius Institutes operating in 54 BRI countries. This figure illustrates just one way of describing the coverage of the BRI. But, as noted earlier, it is the connectedness rather than the China-centeredness that is at the heart of BRI vision. So instead of promoting the idea of all roads leading to Beijing, the “road of connected civilizations” is projected on the shared BRI map:

In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we should ensure that with regard to different civilizations, exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority. This will boost mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust between different countries. (BRI, 2019, para.6)

From FOCAC to Belt and Road—On the ground

This article has analyzed and compared some of the discourse of FOCAC Action Plans VI and VII with the *Education Action Plan* of BRI. Textual analysis and comparison of the language of goals, plans, and pledges, of course, are very different from tracing the implementation on the ground, or from talking to African students in China, or discussing capacity cooperation with Chinese investors in Ethiopia or Kenya. Some of these realities of studying in China or investing in Africa were discussed in *China's Aid and Soft Power in Africa* (King, 2013),¹⁰ and were discussed further in Tanzania in the November 2018 conference on Sino-Africa Education Policy Reform and Institution Innovation.¹¹

It is also possible to compare the language and discourse of major schemes such as the AAGC with the overall *Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative* or with the sector-specific *Education Action Plan* (King, 2018). Very substantial differences in approach can be detected between the AAGC and the BRI, and not least in the fact that the authorship of AAGC was solely carried out by three Asian think tanks, with no substantial involvement by Africa. By contrast, it can be seen that the FOCAC plans are widely endorsed by “the two sides,” though the *Education Action Plan*

remains the ambition and aspiration of China's MOE, and not yet of the very substantial number of countries along the routes, in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the text of key discourses remains powerful in its own right. This could be as true now of the "Eight principles of economic aid and technical assistance to other countries" enunciated by Zhou Enlai in January 1964 in Ghana, as it is of the 14 principles of "Xi Jinping thought". It is crucial that these latter contain the conviction that social welfare is central to development: "Improving people's livelihood and well-being is the primary goal of development" (Xi, 2017b).

Words do, however, make a difference—even before they are translated into reality. Hence the contrast by Frankopan between a US administration that seeks to reshape the world to its own interests, using the stick, rather than the carrot; on the other, a Chinese government that talks of mutual benefits, of enhancing cooperation and of using incentives to weave together peoples, countries and cultures in a "win-win" scenario (Frankopan, 2018, p. 242).

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Notes

1. Taylor's book on FOCAC only treats the first four FOCAC summits.
2. Despite education and HRD being central to SSC, it often receives little attention. See just two pages in Kragelund (2019).
3. See the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network. <http://china-africa.ssrc.org/about/>. See also the China Africa Project. <https://chinaafricaproject.com>.
4. Every second FOCAC summit is held in Africa, so far in Ethiopia, Egypt, and South Africa. For the South African FOCAC meeting, see also King (2015).
5. For all the past FOCAC conferences, see https://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/.
6. See for the Johannesburg Summit (FOCAC VI): https://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/t1327961.htm.
7. Lu Ban is said to have been the father of Chinese architecture.
8. See Yang (2019), 10 Luban workshops to provide training in Africa.
9. "Training" appears no less than 43 times in the FOCAC VII Action Plan.
10. For African students in China, see also King (2019a).
11. This conference took place in the University of Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania on November 26, 2018.

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