

# South-South Cooperation in the Internationalisation of African Higher Education: The Case of China<sup>1</sup>

**Kenneth King**

## **Abstract**

Set within the discourse of South-South Cooperation, the article seeks to disentangle some of the essential history of university partnerships, before looking in more detail at the kind of partnerships associated with China's involvement with African universities. In reviewing China-Africa university partnerships, it pays attention to some of the history of this modality, as well as looking briefly at two more recent manifestations, the Confucius Institute partnerships between China and Africa and the 20+20 partnership between twenty African institutions of higher education and twenty counterparts in Mainland China.

**Keywords:** Partnership, Cooperation, Confucius Institute, 20+20 higher education project

## **Introduction**

In a paper connected to a major conference in 2012 on Teaching and Learning (T & L), it may be important initially to relate South-South Cooperation (SSC) to T & L. Unlike a good deal of North-South Cooperation, in higher education, where it is widely assumed that the North

---

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this article was presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Teaching and Learning Conference in UKZN, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

is building the capacity of the South through partnership, SSC claims that there is a symmetrical relationship between the actors in the partnership. Indeed, in *China's African Policy* (2006: 3), it is claimed that 'China and Africa will learn from and draw upon each other's experience in governance and development, strengthen exchange and cooperation in education, science, culture and health'. The same language can be found in the Delhi Declaration which resulted from the India-Africa Forum Summit of April 2008 (GOI 2008). In other words, the emphasis of the South-South Cooperation discourse is on learning from each other, which shares some ground with the discourse of Teaching and Learning.

Central also to this SSC discourse is the notion of partnership. This is a notoriously slippery concept, as it conjures up ideas of symmetry, and yet all too often partners may not be financially symmetrical. For instance, aid donors began some years ago to rename themselves 'development partners' but the recipients are seldom called by this same name. Equally, even within the same nation, such as South Africa, there can be what we may call partnerships-for-development between stronger and weaker universities or technical colleges, and it is clear that one of the purposes of the partnership is to draw up the weaker partner through association with the institutionally stronger. On the other hand, when universities are developing partnership relations with foreign institutions, much attention is given to ensuring that the relationship is with an 'internationally' reputable university or college. The same use of the word 'international' to mean 'high quality' is frequent in reference to publications in particular journals, or to research, to staff or to students.

In this complex situation of the 'politics of partnership'<sup>2</sup>, we shall seek to disentangle some of the essential history of university partnerships, before looking in much more detail at the kind of partnerships associated with China's involvement with African universities. In this review of China-Africa university partnerships, we shall also pay attention to some of the history of this modality, as well as looking briefly at two more recent manifestations, the Confucius Institute partnerships between China and Africa and the 20+20 partnership between twenty African institutions of higher education and twenty counterparts in Mainland China.

---

<sup>2</sup> See *NORRAG News* No 41, The New Politics of Partnership.

### **A Different Partnership Discourse?**

We should start by discussing the character of the partnership discourse used by so-called emerging economies, another name for the stronger of the countries in the South. It has several characteristics. First, it stresses that there is a shared identity between the Southern ‘donor’ and its recipients because fundamentally they are both still ‘developing countries’. China, for example, very frequently claims that it is the largest developing country relating to the continent (Africa) with the largest number of developing countries. Second, emerging economies which are becoming donors tend to emphasise that they have appropriate recent experience of successful development. As compared to UK or France, whose dramatic economic development lies back in earlier centuries, South Korea or China can point to extraordinary developments that have taken place in the last thirty years. Third, these new collaborators do not use the discourse of aid or charity, or of donor-recipient relations. They refer to South-South Cooperation. Fourthly, they continually discuss the importance of mutuality, solidarity, reciprocity and learning from each other. Finally in the economic sphere, they constantly refer to win-win outcomes and ‘common good’ or ‘common development’, thus underlining the fact that development is something that works for both partners, and not something that one partner helps the other to achieve<sup>3</sup>.

### **An Earlier Partnership History**

We should not forget that versions of what we are calling partnership-for-development were critical to some of the earlier university foundations in the developing world. The model of the University of London with its many associated colleges was influential in colonial India where the central university examining body as in Calcutta, Delhi or Bombay was surrounded by multiple associated colleges. There was again a University of London

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this discourse in relation to many emerging economies, see *NORRAG News No. 44*, The Brave New World of ‘Emerging’, ‘Non-DAC’ Donors and Their Differences from Traditional Donors. See also Mawdsely 2012.

linkage developed as universities were set up in the British colonies. Whether in the West Indies, East, West or Central Africa, Malaya or Hong Kong, the new university colleges were linked to the mother institution in London, and there were crucial connections maintained for accessing staff as well as securing curricula and examinations. Ashby's classic account of *Universities: British, Indian, African: A Study in the Ecology of Higher Education* (1966) remains an invaluable account of this particular era of partnership. Of course, there are many other examples of where a new foundation, whether Harvard, Cape Town, or Tuskegee, has retained a powerful link with an original source of institutional development.

Disciplinary associations have also been critical to the maintenance of scholarship across newer and older institutions. These have operated at the national, regional and world level, and may be illustrated from many different disciplines, including comparative education<sup>4</sup> or teaching and learning itself.

At the Pan-African and global levels, there are university associations which connect universities in arrangements of assumed symmetry. Thus, instead of the older relations between London and the new colleges in the former colonies, there has emerged, since 1963, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), still however headquartered in London<sup>5</sup>. There are parallels with Francophone universities and their relations with the metropolis. Then within Africa itself there have emerged partnerships which cut across the main languages of the continent in the Association of Africa Universities (AAU) established in 1967. An interesting partnership-for-development would be the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA), linking a number of US foundations with eight Sub-Saharan African universities. At the continental level, the once donor-driven Donors to African Education changed in 1988 into the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). Disciplinary organisations continue to be vital for linking scholarship across the whole or parts of the

---

<sup>4</sup> For an account of how the field of comparative education was constructed, see Manzon (2011).

<sup>5</sup> In celebrating its centenary in 2013, the ACU looks back to the Universities Bureau of the British Empire (1913) and to the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth (1948).

continent of Africa, such as the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) [founded in 1980], and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) [founded in 1973].

The independence of the newer nations has not removed the need for development partnerships in higher education. Indeed many OECD countries have maintained for years mechanisms for linking higher education institutions in lower and middle income countries with those in the particular OECD country. Variations of these North-South institutional partnerships are evident in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, the UK, Ireland, Switzerland, Spain, France, and Germany, as well as in Canada and the USA. The rationale for these partnerships has altered over time, even if a key element in their discourse has been the capacity building of the allegedly weaker Southern partner by the stronger Northern partner. In most cases, they can be considered as a form of tied aid as the southern partner has to link with a partner in the particular northern, donor country. There are some variations of the North-South model; thus Japan has encouraged the notion of an Asia-Africa Dialogue, with financial support from JICA, but a key catalytic role has been played by the Centre for International Cooperation in Education (CICE) of Hiroshima University, for partnerships between some twelve African countries and countries in Asia, notably India, the Philippines and Indonesia.

In some situations, partnership with the South has become a precondition for securing research funds in the sphere of development. Thus, many opportunities for Northern scholars to bid for research funds from Northern donors now require a Southern partner, and even the successful winning of scholarship funding by a Northern researcher for doctoral work can in some situations require the identification of a Southern scholar as an advisor-cum-monitor.

### **UKZN's Partnership Portfolio**

It would be interesting to analyse the range and character of partnerships within the UKZN itself, acknowledging of course that the university is itself an example of a partnership-for-development, including the former University of Natal with a number of initially less powerful partners, such as

Durban Westville. First of all, the formal claim by the university on its website is that it has no less than 250 institutional links (or partnerships) world-wide. Naturally, some of these linkages are supported by memoranda of understanding, but they may not progress beyond that; they are, in fact, 'paper partnerships'. Another way of looking at the partnership portfolio is to assess with what kinds of universities, North or South, does UKZN have active agreements. At a glance, it would appear that the bulk of UKZN's exchange agreements are with OECD countries, though there are not large numbers of UKZN students taking advantage of these agreements. One exception in the northern pattern of exchanges is the Gandhi-Luthuli Chair of Peace Studies funded in UKZN by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). On the other hand, at the merger of the University of Natal with Durban Westville, the latter's Centre of Indian Studies was disbanded, thus cutting the link between India and one of the cities with the largest number of Indians outside the sub-continent.

At the student level, the great bulk of the 'international students' in UKZN (as many as 80%) are from the SADC countries. These are supported by a South African 'aid' policy which allows such students to pay the same fees as South Africans, apart from a levy per semester of some 950 Rand. There is a strong distinction between SADC and non-SADC international students in terms of fee levels, but intriguingly at the full-time masters and doctoral level, from 2009, there don't appear to be any fees charged at all, whether for local, SADC or international students. The rationale for this generous provision needs careful analysis.

Another dimension of the 'international' versus the 'local' relates to research. In terms of 'international' research and publications, it is noteworthy that South Africa maintains a list of approved South African journals as well as identifying some researchers as rated in different categories by the National Research Foundation. This may be seen as a South African construction of the 'international' for the purposes of rating publications and research standing.

Overall, we can see that running through this UKZN partnership portfolio there are a series of working assumptions about linkages, partnerships, publications and research excellence. The critical importance of the last of these for the university's research funding from government is certain to have an impact on what linkages, partnerships and publications are

supported. Interestingly, the University's vision: 'To be the premier university of African scholarship' makes the important point that African scholarship must be seen as 'international'. The lack of clarity about the exact meaning of 'African scholarship' does not appear to get in the way of the university striving to be one of the three or four top South African universities, and also to figure in the other world class rankings.

## **South-South Cooperation in Higher Education – The Case of China-Africa**

This brief review of UKZN's partnerships may suggest that its most significant version of partnership is what might be termed transformative South-South cooperation in which, within the nation state, universities with different historical apartheid legacies are put in a partnership-for-development process. There is a small element of Indo-African partnership also as we have seen in the Gandhi-Luthuli chair. But so far there is very little of a China-Africa higher education dimension in UKZN; indeed, Taiwan has been much more evident than mainland China through its 2012 tour of all the UKZN's constituent colleges. We shall turn therefore to look more broadly at China's discourse on and conception of higher education partnership with Africa, illustrating this where possible from South Africa.

Partnership is in fact the principal modality whereby China engages with overseas universities, whether in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. On the few occasions where it builds a tertiary institution, as it has done in Liberia, Ethiopia and Malawi, for example, it delivers the staffing, if required, through a partnership with a Chinese university. China-Africa university partnerships are also the method China has adopted for spreading its Confucius Institutes both in Africa and in all other regions of the world. Then there are also a whole series of China-Africa Higher Education partnerships set up through the pledges of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). We shall examine a few of these, and particularly the so-called 20+20 partnership between 20 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa and 20 in China.

Several of these partnership mechanisms have been used by the OECD countries mentioned above in promoting their version of partnership;

so in several of these examples, there may not be anything distinctive about the China-Africa partnership. Two dimensions, however, do seem to differentiate China's approach from that of the traditional donors. One is the strongly ethical discourse that is connected to the delivery of higher education cooperation; and the second concerns the promotion of Chinese language and culture via the host university. We shall examine these briefly in turn.

### **China's Ethical Discourse on Cooperation**

Going back for some 60 years, China has maintained an almost identical account of why it was involved in cooperation with other developing countries. We have alluded to this earlier in our discussion of the partnership discourse of so-called emerging donors. In China's case, some of this derives from the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence developed in the 1950s with their emphasis on 'equality and mutual benefit'. These principles were reinforced in early 1964 in Premier Zhou Enlai's Eight Principles of Foreign Aid, announced in Ghana. Their emphasis is on 'the poor helping the poor', in Zhou Enlai's words, and not at all on China's providing 'unilateral alms' to Africa. Despite their being almost 60 years old, they seem remarkably modern, and are widely referred to in China's current discussions about cooperation with Africa. The demand that Chinese experts in Africa should not expect to be treated any differently than the local experts is still particularly relevant<sup>6</sup>. It remains a critical dimension of China-Africa partnership.

There is a powerful concern, at least at the level of the discourse, with sincerity, reciprocity, solidarity, mutual benefit and symmetry in these principles. The focus is on cooperation that benefits both parties; hence the term 'common development' and the frequent use of the phrase 'win-win'. The employment of the term 'mutual' seventeen times in just eleven pages of *China's African Policy* (2006) underlines this focus on cooperation that is

---

<sup>6</sup> 'The experts dispatched by China to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities' (China 2000).

claimed to be advantageous both to China and to Africa. ‘Cooperation’, too, is an absolutely vital notion, and is much preferred to the word ‘aid’; indeed in this same short White Paper on Africa, it occurs no less than 78 times in eleven pages, while ‘aid’ appears just once, and then only in relation to humanitarian aid. Finally, the key term ‘friendship’ is central to the Chinese understanding of the relationship with Africa. This is not a term that appears at all in the four White Papers by UK’s Department of International Development since 1997.

An ethical discourse is one thing, but what does this amount to in the actual practice of higher education cooperation between China and Africa? Is the ‘new type of China-Africa partnership’ really different from the other partnerships mentioned earlier? Is there some difference, in the ethical domain, in the experience of an African student in China as compared to an African student in Europe, Japan or North America?<sup>7</sup> Is a Confucius Institute partnership between a Chinese and an African university different from any other cultural or language partnership with Europe or North America? These are complex questions and they cannot be easily answered without the kind of qualitative analysis of Chinese human resource projects which may be difficult to find at the moment. We can perhaps get a little closer by looking at the operation of the Confucius Institutes in Africa.

## **The Confucius Institute as a Unique University-to-university Partnership**

By any standard the Confucius Institute initiative since its inception in late 2004, in South Korea, is quite simply the largest language and culture project the world has ever seen. It is not of course only a China-Africa project, but one that extends to all regions of the world. Whether its China-Africa arm is in any way distinctive from its operation in other regions would be hard to establish. But what can be claimed, more generally, is that the Confucius Institute (CI) partnership operates in a substantially different way from the comparator French, British, German or Spanish language and cultural

---

<sup>7</sup> For the complex history of African students in China, see King (2013) chapter 3.

institutes. The most important distinction is that the CI is essentially a partnership between a Chinese and a host country university, and it is not a stand-alone institute set up by the British Council, Goethe Institute etc. These European comparators are **not** organized on a partnership basis.

Illustrative of the partnership assumptions is that there are always two co-directors of any CI, one Chinese from the Chinese partner university and one from the host university. In addition, the host university is expected to provide accommodation for the CI and for its Chinese staff, and the Chinese partner provides staff, while Hanban (The Chinese Language Council) supports the host university with an annual grant for the CI, to cover course provision as well as regional travel and travel to the annual conference in China of all the CIs. The University Principal or Vice-Chancellor would normally also attend this annual convention.

There is no single pattern for this CI relationship. Even within the three existing CIs in South Africa, there is a wide diversity. The CIs in Rhodes and in the University of Cape Town (UCT) have been responsible for introducing Mandarin at the degree level into their respective universities, while in Stellenbosch, as there was already established Mandarin teaching, the CI has played a key role in extending language teaching into surrounding primary and secondary schools and also into a college. When South Africa's fourth CI starts in Durban's University of Technology later in 2013, it will again be possible for Mandarin degree level teaching to be started.

Over the last nine years, the CI partnership has not only been effective in offering a new international dimension to almost 400 universities around the world; it has also contributed greatly to the internationalization of the Chinese university partners. For example, Xiamen which is the partner of Stellenbosch University has no less than fourteen other partner universities around the world with which it has a CI link. But Jinan University which is partnered with Rhodes only has a single CI. There does not seem to be a common pattern for CIs; each one develops its own identity, and is encouraged so to do.

What is clear is that the CI as a mechanism does offer an opportunity for the kind of people-to-people exchange that is so often talked of in China's cooperation policy with Africa. There is a lot of traffic of staff and volunteer teachers coming from the Chinese partner, and a lot of both long- and short-term visits from the African partner. These are not just officials or

high level academic administrators, but include some of the very people who are attending classes, whether in the main university classes or in the satellite classes outside the university. The CI also offers the opportunity for African learners to meet some other members of the Chinese community who may be working in Cape Town, Nairobi, Cairo or wherever the 33 operational African CIs are located. The celebration of Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year and of China Weeks brings some of these other Chinese celebrations into the host university.

### **Other China HE Partnership Opportunities**

The Confucius Institute is just one of the more visible partnerships affecting universities in some 33 African countries. There have been older HE partnerships, in some cases going back into the late 1990s. In many cases, it seems to be that the newer modalities of university cooperation have been built on to these early initiatives in partnership. Thus China's resource bases for specialist short-term training are sited in universities such as Zhejiang Normal and Nanjing Agricultural which have had long links with Africa. The same is true of the development of CI partnerships with African universities. Equally, one of the latest modalities of university cooperation, the 20+20 scheme between tertiary institutions in China and Africa, includes at least twelve participating universities in Africa which have a Confucius Institute.

We therefore have an intriguing situation where there are several different layers of HE cooperation found in the same Chinese and African university. Thus the University of Stellenbosch is a member of the 20+20 programme; it has a CI; and it also participates in the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange plan; and it will be the Africa partner in the China Africa School for International Business with Zhejiang Normal. The same is true on the China side; those universities which are most active in Africa participate in many different modalities, including in some cases having a Centre for African Studies, and they are resource centres for the training of African professionals.

In this sense, the link with Africa has certainly helped to put a university like Zhejiang Normal on the internationalisation map. The speed with which this has happened has been truly remarkable.

It will be interesting to see what shape the 20+20 partnerships take<sup>8</sup>. But it seems that, like the CIs, there will be considerable diversity and no standard pattern. At one point in 2011, it looked like China would help UNESCO to play a role in trilateral HE cooperation between the China and Africa partners, but it is too early to be clear what may happen in this area. A second meeting convened by UNESCO in October 2013 on the 20+20 partnership offered an opportunity to look critically at this form of trilateral cooperation. But more generally, at the moment, just some three years after they were launched, the Chinese and African partners are testing the water, and exploring what kinds of partnerships make best sense.

## **In Conclusion**

Even though China has been partnering African universities for a long time, there is still relatively little known about the ‘feel’ and detail of these partnerships. We currently lack rich qualitative accounts of how Confucius Institutes are operating, or indeed how all the different layers of collaboration with Africa are altering the shape and focus of a number of key Chinese universities and vice versa<sup>9</sup>. It will be fascinating to see how somehow some of these partnerships impact on Africa over the next ten years. What will be the influence of the CIs over this period? What will be the impact of the tens of thousands of short- and long-term African trainees and students returning from China over this next decade? At the moment only some 10% of the academic writing on China-Africa is being carried out by African scholars. But as China plans for the expansion of China research centres in African universities, will there naturally be larger numbers of young African scholars making the study of China in African education their chosen field of study?

Putting this another way, will a university like UKZN with its mission to be the premier university of African scholarship recognize that such African scholarship will need to be able to include research on some of

---

<sup>8</sup> The author is participating in a new research project on the 20+20 higher education project from May 2013.

<sup>9</sup> There are some preliminary insights available in King (2013), *China's Aid and Soft Power in Africa*.

the newer partnerships with Brazil, India and China, and perhaps through this on different traditions of university teaching and learning? Equally, will UKZN, with its tradition of critical scholarship, be one of the first African universities to carry out rigorous research on what university partnerships with China mean in practice? As a university which does not itself have a CI and is not a 20+20 partner, could UKZN play an influential role in analyzing the symmetry, rationales and realities of China-Africa partnerships, particularly in Southern Africa? The question of whether China's higher education partnerships with Africa constitute an alternative partnership paradigm is surely a relevant one<sup>10</sup>, but getting behind the persuasive rhetoric of South-South Cooperation cannot be achieved without detailed qualitative research on the reality of partnership-in-practice. Currently, there has been very little research on this challenging dimension, though King (2013) has begun the process of interrogating this lacuna.

## References

- Ashby, E 1966. *Universities: British, Indian, African: A Study in the Ecology of Higher Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press,.
- China, People's Republic of 2000. Premier Zhou Enlai's Three Tours of Asian and African Countries, 17 November 2000, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao/3602/3604/t18001.htm>. (Accessed on 2 July 2011.)
- China, People's Republic of 2006. *China's African Policy*, 12 January 2006. Available at: [gov.cn/misc/2006-01/12/content\\_156490.htm](http://gov.cn/misc/2006-01/12/content_156490.htm)
- GOI (Government of India). 2008. *India Africa Forum Summit, 8-9 April 2008*. Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. Available at: <http://itec.mea.gov.in>.
- King, K 2013. *China's Aid and Soft Power in Africa: The Case of Education and Training*. James Currey/ Boydell and Brewer, Oxford.

---

<sup>10</sup> See the title of the 7<sup>th</sup> Teaching and Learning Conference, 2013: 'Re-envisioning African Higher Education: Alternative Paradigms, Emerging Trends, and New Directions', 25 - 27 September 2013.

---

*Kenneth King*

Manzon, M 2011. *Comparative Education: The Construction of a Field*. CERC Studies in Comparative Education 29. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.

Mawdsley, E 2012. *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape*. London: Zed Books.

*NORRAG News No. 41. The New Politics of Partnership: Peril or Promise?*  
Available at: [www.norrag.org](http://www.norrag.org).

*NORRAG News No. 44, The Brave New World of 'Emerging', 'Non-DAC' Donors and Their Differences from Traditional Donors*. Available at: [www.norrag.org](http://www.norrag.org).

Kenneth King  
Centre of African Studies  
University of Edinburgh, Scotland  
[Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Kenneth.King@ed.ac.uk)