A Study on Effective UK-Africa University Partnership in the Post-Colonial Era: Giving Enlightenment to Sino-African Higher Education Cooperation

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Abstract: Education has long been an indispensable part of communication between countries. In an era with globalization, the close communication between countries has fostered countries' attention to the progress of internationalization in the field of higher education. In the post-colonial era, Britain has established a benign and effective cooperative university partnership with African Commonwealth countries. Through qualitative analysis, this essay analyzes how Britain and Africa effectively cooperate in higher education to sustain a long-term friendly partnership in the post-colonial era, in order to give some practical enlightenment to Sino-Africa education cooperation.

Keywords: Africa, The United Kingdom, China, Higher education.

1. Introduction

In the era with globalization and the rise of knowledge economy, the demand of talents increases dramatically. Higher education received increasing attention because it shoulders the mission of providing knowledge, cultivating talents, and enhancing national competitiveness in an international environment. Africa, as a strategically important region in the international community, has received widespread international attention. As some African countries were previously British colonies and joined the Commonwealth after independence, they have long been under the profound influence of the United Kingdom.

Educationally speaking, in the colonial period, the British Africa region was incorporated into the British empire. The start and development of higher education in these regions was the transplant of and adaption to the British model: After those countries got independence and joined the Commonwealth, they embarked on a road of self-exploration. Britain has established a benign and effective cooperative university partnership with African Commonwealth countries in the post-colonial era to achieve mutual benefit.

Since the founding of China, the internationalization of education has been always regarded as a vitally important part, in Chinese government’s view, to build a powerful country. Since the “Belt and Road” Initiative was proposed and practiced in 2015, exchanges and cooperation between China and Africa have significantly strengthened because China invests a large amount of money to help African countries build infrastructure, train specialized personnel, actively establish Confucius Institutes and develop cooperation and exchange between universities. This paper hopes to give some suggestions to the development of Sino-Africa higher education cooperation by learning the experience of effective cooperation mechanism between British and African universities.

2. Historical Evolution of Higher Education in Commonwealth Member States in Africa

2.1 In the Colonial Period (1860s-1960s)

Take the World War II as a dividing line, before the World War II, the development of higher education in British Africa regions was deeply marked by colonialism. Higher education was systematically neglected in Sub-Saharan Africa during this period because universities created intellectual elites who became leaders of political movements of independence and threatened British colonial rule. After the outbreak of World War II, however, Britain, for its strategic interests, urgently needed to obtain the support of the vast number of African colonies and the Commonwealth to consolidate its colonial empire, so it gave some political promises to Africans “to achieve the greatest possible political, economic and social development within the British Empire”. Under the shift in British imperial colonial policy, adjustments were made to its higher education policy in Africa. The UK government was much more active than ever in developing higher education in Africa. Under the recommendation of the Asquith Commission, a dependency relationship between Africa universities and the University of London was established. However, African higher education was the transplantation of and adaptation to British one by almost completely copying the academic standards, curricula and management systems of the University of London.

2.2 In the Post-colonial Era (1960s-2020s)

Because of the UK’s accession to the European Union in the 1970s, the UK's diplomatic spending on the Commonwealth was significantly reduced. The number of students from developing Commonwealth countries studying in the UK dropped significantly in the 1980s, for example, the number of students from Tanzania, Malawi studying at UK universities fell by 23% between 1978-1980[1]. The dilution of Britain's relationship with the Commonwealth has left the
Commonwealth facing a crisis of fragmentation. UK higher education sector realized an importance of a broader regional cooperation with the Commonwealth member states in Africa and supported the development Sub-Saharan African universities particularly during the 1980s. As globalization and regionalization deepened, the establishment of partnership became an inevitable trend. From 2005 onwards, the notion that higher education could contribute towards the eradication of poverty was placed back on the agenda, particularly in support of accelerating the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, in which it notes that “Higher education also forms an important part of other goals related to poverty.” Capacity building of universities, particularly through partnerships, was seen as one such intervention. The Commonwealth was committed to constructing education quality assurance system through cooperative framework and to boosting the internationalization of African higher education. With the support of the British government and universities, notable effectiveness of UK-Africa cooperation has been made in the post-colonial era. The partnership between the United Kingdom and African Commonwealth countries in higher education in the 21st century is characterized by multi-lateral participation and diversified cooperation including distance higher education, faculty training and curriculum development.

3. Effectiveness of UK-Africa Cooperation in the post-colonial Era

3.1 Multi-lateral Participation

Firstly, funding for UK-Africa higher education partnerships has wide ranges of sources including international organizations, government, and universities. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), an international program under which Commonwealth governments, offers over 30,000 individuals in Commonwealth developing countries to hold a Commonwealth Scholarship or Fellowship. A report from British Council: Bridging the Gap: Enabling Effective UK-Africa Universities Partnership summarizes the UK-Africa higher education collaborative projects, referring to the UK’s cooperation with African higher education widely through the funds of the UK Department for International Development and the UK Department for Business, Innovation, Skills (BIS) to improve the basic infrastructures of African universities and provide more funds in study and research. Besides, prestigious British universities also play an important role in contributing to the cooperation of the university partnership, for example, the Cambridge-African Alborada Research Fund awarded grants between £1,000–£2,000 for research costs fieldwork and equipment), research-related travel and research-training activities in Africa in 2020. To date, more than 240 awards have been made, to enable Cambridge researchers to engage with African colleagues from 31 African countries. The Alborada Trust awarded a further £4 million to the Cambridge-Africa Program for the period 2016 to 2026, to support further engagement between Cambridge and Africa.

3.2 Distance Higher Education

In addition, by fully use the developing information and communication technology (ICT) in the technology era, UK-African increased cooperation improves in the field of distance higher education which has played an increasingly important role in lower investment costs, better quality of education, and sharing resources. Various UK-Africa universities can share knowledge by an access to resources from each other. It financially reduces the cost of information exchanging in higher education and strengthens the capacity building of African universities. The Open University, using open and distance learning to support the Sustainable Development Goals, has partnered with educational institutions in 13 countries in south Sahara to provide teacher training in four languages – English, Swahili, Arabic and French – and this collaboration, using the Open Education Resource Platform, has resulted in cost savings and increased training efficiency.

4. Faculty Training and Curriculum Development

4.1 Progress

In addition, the African universities are also benefitted from the communication and visits between faculty institutional collaboration and curriculum development with tailored and designed programs and courses for meeting the local need of African regions. For example, from March 2017 to March 2019, the Higher Education Partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa Program – supported by the Anglo-American Group Foundation and the UK Government through the Global Challenges Research Fund – was established to help address the problem of shortage in engineering skills in sub-Saharan Africa and to showcase engineering’s role in driving economic development in the region. Using modern knowledge technologies to teach students develop environment-friendly, energy-saving and health-conscious way of producing biogas, UK-Africa universities develop their courses to adapt to the African society, matching the course learning with the practical needs of local development. Besides, the Cambridge-Africa Partnership for Research Excellence (CAPRE) (2012-2018) provides technical, resource and networking support for African scholars, focusing on humanities and social sciences, engineering and biosciences, to send 10-15 African scholars to Cambridge each year as visiting fellows for a period of 1-6 months to enhance intellectual and technical exchange. The opportunities for the African member countries of the Commonwealth to join in international academic conferences and the exchanges between scholars, professionals or teaching staff enable African universities faculty to broaden their international horizons and to promote effective collaboration between the two universities of higher education. It greatly contributes to the development needs of African Commonwealth countries by providing training for skilled and qualified professionals and academics.

4.2 Problems

However, despite the progress, problems in the cooperation between the two sides in the process of globalization cannot be neglected. Since most of the cooperation programs are short-term, program-oriented, only lasting for weeks or
months and lacking long-term strategies of improving higher education capacity building in Africa, staff in Britain lose interest to participate. As one participant noted, “partnership projects can be regarded as ‘loss leaders, not high strategy, not high prestige, not high-income projects’ and fail to engage senior staff.”[2] Besides, most UK-Africa partnership programs are led by Britain, prone to making African countries be more dependent on international aid and cause a lack of their self-development motivation. All these factors may discourage future engagement and prevent partnership from developing.

5. Enlightenment to Sino-African University Cooperation

Even though China is largely different from Britain which has a long history of cooperation with Africa, there is some value in learning from the effectiveness of the UK-Africa partnership in Sino-Africa education cooperation.

5.1 Current Situation

China’s educational cooperation with Africa began at the Bandung Conference in 1955. University partnerships between China and Africa go back to at least the 1980s and 1990s[3]. In the 21st century, with the establishment of FOCAC in 2000 and the implement of the “Belt and Road” initiative, Sino-Africa exchanges and cooperation in higher education have witnessed significant developments. Government scholarships, short-term training, school construction and Confucius Institutes play a very important role in China’s cooperation with Africa in university partnerships. In 2009, China’s Ministry of Education launched the “20+20 Cooperation Plan[4]” at the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of FOCAC. The program formulated one-to-one partnerships between 20 Chinese and 20 African higher education institutions in 17 African countries, and sought to promote capacity building and sustainable development in Africa itself. In general, Sino-African higher education has made great development, however, problems still exist.

5.2 Problems and Strategy

In the first place, compared with UK-Africa university partnership programs launched with multi-lateral participation including government and universities like Cambridge University and London Open University, Sino-Africa education cooperation is mainly a government action (mainly including the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Education, China Scholarship Council), while the private forces (including universities, companies, etc.) has not been active parts in the cooperative programs. It so happens that university leaders in China do not attach importance to the construction and development of African disciplines; there is a serious lack of funding for research institutions; students are not interested in African studies; the number of universities capable of offering courses related to Africa is very small, etc. Not to mention the multilateral cooperation with international organizations, such as NGOs, has yet to be developed. Therefore, in the Sino-African university partnership, it is necessary for universities actively to develop well-established and sustainable partnerships with African counterparts to fit in with a university’s overall strategy and create high-quality projects to gain the support of a wide range of staff and students.

Second, learning from how UK-Africa university partnership develops its curriculum, China-Africa universities can fully utilize the information and communication technology (ICT) to share open educational resources and develop distance learning. What matters most is the continued consideration of the designed courses for African universities’ independent development. At present, the traditional aid system to Africa has been increasingly criticized in the international community. Despite that poverty and unemployment are still very prominent problems in Africa, China should not only give financial supports to African countries to renovate and build more training facilities but also launch programs and courses to train more technically skilled talents, and to enhance the self-development capacity of African countries[5], which would prevent Africa from being so dependent on China. Apart from that, given the fact that African Commonwealth countries, which have partly been colonized by Britain for a long period of time, have a sense of linguistic and cultural identity with its former colonist, China should not copy the UK-Africa model since major differences in values, ways of thinking, cultural identity and attitudes towards life between China and Africa can easily lead to contradictions and conflicts in the process of interaction with each other. Therefore, as Confucius Institutes already have a lot of experience in construction and practice, the Sino-African university cooperation can offer more relevant courses and institutes about Chinese language and culture to strengthen cultural and language exchanges to reduce barriers in communication.

6. Conclusion

In the era with more attention paid to higher education and calls for eradication of poverty in developing countries, partnership with African university plays an increasingly significant role to follow the trend. UK and Africa have a long history of cooperation. Despite bridges to be crossed, the UK-Africa partnership in the post-colonial era, in general, is effective, with the multi-channeled support and diversified cooperation including distant learning with open resources, faculty training and curriculum development. As China’s “Belt and Road” initiative has also greatly practiced, China should think about how to strengthen educational cooperation with Africa to widen African development capacity. However, a shared vision is important but is simply not enough. Partnership needs to gain supports from all sides and increase cultural and language exchanges between the two countries. In the meanwhile, continued consideration of the designed courses for African universities’ independent development are very important.

References

