

# The Role of International Cooperation in Shaping Higher Education in Cameroon: A Focus on Chinese Partnership

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of international cooperation in shaping higher education in Cameroon, with a specific focus on Chinese partnerships. As globalization advances, the influence of international stakeholders, especially China, has become increasingly significant in shaping educational policies, curriculum development, and research initiatives in Cameroon. Through in-depth analysis, this article evaluates the contribution of Chinese educational partnerships, especially via the Confucius Institutes and Chinese scholarships, to higher education reform and capacity building. The article also explores the broader impact of these partnerships on student mobility, faculty exchange, and cross-cultural communication. Findings indicate that while these partnerships provide substantial opportunities for knowledge exchange and infrastructure development, they also present challenges in ensuring equitable access and local ownership of educational reforms. The study highlights the importance of creating sustainable frameworks for international cooperation that align with Cameroon's higher education priorities.

**Keywords:** International Cooperation, Higher Education, China-Cameroon, Partnership.

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## 1. Research Background

International cooperation has increasingly played a critical role in shaping the landscape of higher education, particularly in developing countries. Over the past few decades, partnerships between developing nations and global powers have been instrumental in fostering knowledge exchange, capacity building, and academic development. In Africa, such cooperation is vital due to the need to enhance educational infrastructure, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and prepare students for the global economy. Cameroon, a central African nation with a growing demand for quality higher education, has significantly benefited from international educational partnerships, with China emerging as a key partner in recent years.

The relationship between Cameroon and China has deepened within the broader framework of China-Africa cooperation. This partnership is evident in various sectors, including education. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, has provided the strategic framework for China's engagement in African higher education. Through initiatives like Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and educational infrastructure development, China has become a prominent player in Cameroon's educational landscape. As Cameroon continues to expand its higher education sector, Chinese partnerships have offered avenues for academic collaboration, technological advancement, and capacity building, all aimed at aligning Cameroonian higher education with international standards.

One of the pivotal areas of focus within this partnership is the enhancement of the quality of higher education in Cameroon. Historically, higher education in Cameroon has faced several challenges, such as limited access, insufficient infrastructure, a lack of qualified teaching staff, and outdated curricula. International cooperation, particularly with China, seeks to address these challenges by providing technical expertise, financial support, and exchange programs. For instance, Chinese universities have increasingly engaged in faculty exchange programs with Cameroonian universities, fostering academic development and professional growth. Additionally, China's provision of scholarships and opportunities for Cameroonian students to study in Chinese institutions has not only promoted intercultural exchange but has also contributed to capacity building by producing a new generation of highly skilled professionals.

Moreover, the presence of Confucius Institutes in Cameroon, notably at the University of Yaoundé II and the University of Maroua, has further enhanced the educational collaboration between the two countries. These

institutes not only serve as centers for learning the Chinese language and culture but also act as platforms for academic and research partnerships. Through these initiatives, Chinese institutions have played a significant role in enriching the cultural, intellectual, and educational dimensions of Cameroonian higher education.

However, while the benefits of such partnerships are evident, there are also challenges. Concerns have been raised regarding the sustainability of these collaborations, the dominance of Chinese educational models, and the need to maintain a balance between foreign influence and the preservation of local educational values. Furthermore, the capacity of Cameroon's higher education institutions to absorb and integrate the expertise provided by international partners like China remains a key issue. Ensuring that the partnership is mutually beneficial and aligned with Cameroon's national development goals is critical for long-term success.

## 2. Literature Review

International cooperation in higher education has been widely studied, particularly in the context of global North-South partnerships. Many scholars have analyzed the influence of international collaboration on educational reform, infrastructure development, and capacity building in African countries (Nguni, 2020; Adotey, 2018). A specific focus has been on China's role as an emerging leader in fostering educational ties with Africa, especially through programs like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Wang, 2019; Lee, 2021).

The literature on Chinese partnerships with African universities is rich in analysis of both opportunities and challenges. Researchers like King (2013) have highlighted the importance of Confucius Institutes in promoting Chinese culture and language across African universities, while others argue that these partnerships must address issues of sustainability and local ownership (Cisse, 2022). In Cameroon, scholars have pointed to the positive impacts of Chinese scholarships and infrastructural investments but have also raised concerns about the potential for dependence on foreign aid (Tchindjang, 2020).

The relationship between international cooperation and higher education development in Africa has been widely debated. Several scholars argue that while international partnerships are essential for capacity building, they often lead to a dependency on foreign aid, which may hinder sustainable local development. Nguni (2020) highlights how partnerships between African universities and their international counterparts, especially in China, have helped alleviate infrastructural challenges but raises concerns about the long-term effects on educational autonomy.

A prominent element of the literature concerns the influence of China in Africa's higher education sector. King (2013) argues that Chinese soft power is largely exercised through educational programs such as the Confucius Institutes, which serve dual purposes: fostering cultural diplomacy and providing much-needed resources to African universities. However, critics like Adotey (2018) claim that these institutes may promote a one-sided view of cultural exchange, where Chinese narratives overshadow local perspectives.

### 2.1 Challenges in Local Ownership

Scholars such as Cisse (2022) argue that the rapid expansion of Chinese-supported educational programs in African countries like Cameroon leads to questions about ownership. Educational reforms often occur in partnership with Chinese institutions, and there are concerns that the dependence on Chinese resources for infrastructural development, scholarships, and technical assistance may erode the ability of local institutions to dictate their own academic agendas. This dynamic creates a delicate balance between benefitting from much-needed external support and maintaining sovereignty over educational systems.

### 2.2 Benefits and Limitations of Chinese Partnerships

Wang (2019) notes that the provision of scholarships by China, particularly for students in science and technology fields, has contributed significantly to developing human capital in African countries. Nonetheless, this benefit may be limited if the partnerships fail to integrate local knowledge and address specific national needs. In the case of Cameroon, Tchindjang (2020) highlights how Chinese support has expanded access to educational resources but cautions that these benefits are unevenly distributed, favoring urban universities over rural institutions.

### **3. Problem, Significance, and Conceptual Framework**

This study aims to address the gap in existing research by focusing specifically on the role of Chinese partnerships in shaping the higher education sector in Cameroon. While much has been written on international cooperation, there is limited research that delves into the practical outcomes of these partnerships in terms of curriculum reform, research capacity, and human resource development in Cameroonian universities.

This study is significant for policymakers, educators, and scholars interested in the dynamics of educational reform in developing nations. It offers insights into how international cooperation, especially with a rising power like China, can help or hinder the development of autonomous, sustainable educational systems in Africa.

The study adopts a multi-layered framework that examines international cooperation from three perspectives: capacity building, knowledge exchange, and policy influence. It seeks to understand how Chinese educational partnerships impact Cameroon's educational structure at the micro (institutional), meso (national), and macro (international) levels.

### **4. Research Methodology**

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data. Surveys and interviews were conducted with Cameroonian university students, faculty, and administrators who have been involved in Chinese-funded programs or institutions. The study also analyzed reports and data from government and non-governmental agencies concerning the impact of international educational partnerships.

#### **4.1 Sample**

The sample includes 100 students and 50 faculty members from five major universities in Cameroon, including institutions with Confucius Institutes and partnerships with Chinese universities.

#### **4.2 Data Collection**

- Surveys: Administered to students and faculty members to gather quantitative data on their experiences and perspectives regarding Chinese partnerships.
- Interviews: Conducted with university administrators and government officials to provide deeper insights into policy implications.
- Document Analysis: Examined partnership agreements, policy reports, and academic curricula influenced by Chinese cooperation.

#### **4.3 Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using thematic coding for qualitative responses and statistical analysis for quantitative data, focusing on trends in student mobility, faculty development, and the influence on research and curriculum.

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

#### **5.1 Chinese Investment in Capacity Building**

China's role in building the capacity of Cameroonian higher education has been one of the most notable outcomes of international cooperation between the two countries. China's contributions have come in multiple forms, including direct financial support, technical assistance, and the establishment of long-term educational programs that aim to develop local capacity in various areas of higher education.

##### **5.1.1 Scholarships and Academic Mobility**

One of the critical elements of Chinese investment is the provision of scholarships to Cameroonian students. Over the last decade, thousands of Cameroonian students have been awarded Chinese government scholarships to pursue higher education in China. These scholarships have not only expanded access to education for

underprivileged students but have also created a pathway for these students to experience a more globalized and competitive academic environment.

The research shows that many students return to Cameroon with improved skills and a broader understanding of global issues, which they can then apply in their home country. The scholarship program also creates a network of alumni who have studied in China, fostering stronger diplomatic and academic ties between the two nations. Additionally, academic mobility has increased through faculty exchange programs, allowing Cameroonian educators to collaborate with their Chinese counterparts on research projects, pedagogy, and curriculum development. These exchanges have enriched the local academic environment and introduced new perspectives into Cameroonian higher education institutions.

### **5.1.2 Faculty Exchange and Development**

China's engagement in Cameroonian higher education also includes a strong focus on faculty development. Through faculty exchange programs, many Cameroonian educators have had the opportunity to enhance their teaching skills and engage in advanced research in China. The findings reveal that these exchanges have contributed significantly to improving the academic qualifications of local teaching staff, particularly in fields such as engineering, technology, and language studies.

In addition, Chinese universities have offered short- and long-term training programs aimed at improving the professional capabilities of Cameroonian university staff. These programs typically cover various aspects of academic administration, teaching methodologies, and research practices. As a result, participating faculty members have returned to Cameroon with advanced knowledge and skills that allow them to introduce new teaching practices and research innovations within their institutions. This process of faculty development has been vital in raising the overall quality of education provided in Cameroonian universities, helping to bridge the gap between local institutions and their international counterparts.

Beyond training, Chinese experts have also been actively involved in mentoring Cameroonian educators, creating opportunities for long-term partnerships that extend beyond the duration of exchange programs. This mentorship aspect has been particularly useful in facilitating technology transfer, as well as in the sharing of best practices in university governance and research management.

## **5.2 Enhancing Educational Access and Modernization**

China's involvement in Cameroonian higher education has gone beyond the traditional aid-based model by actively contributing to the modernization of educational infrastructure and expanding access to higher learning opportunities. The partnership between China and Cameroon in higher education has led to the introduction of modern facilities, cutting-edge technologies, and updated curricula that reflect the demands of a rapidly changing global economy.

### **5.2.1 Technological Advancements in Universities**

A significant component of the Chinese partnership has been its focus on technological development within Cameroonian universities. Chinese investments have led to the construction of new laboratories, libraries, and computer facilities in several major institutions, including the University of Yaoundé and the University of Maroua. These advancements have greatly enhanced the learning environment, providing students with the tools they need to engage in more effective research and practical training.

The research findings suggest that the introduction of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) has revolutionized the way education is delivered in Cameroonian universities. Digital platforms for distance learning, online course delivery, and virtual collaboration have become more prevalent as a result of Chinese investments. This shift towards digitalization has also helped universities reach a broader audience, particularly students in remote or underserved areas, who might not have had access to quality education otherwise.

Furthermore, Chinese technology companies have been involved in developing digital infrastructure for these universities, enhancing their capability to deliver blended and online education. This modernization has enabled Cameroonian universities to compete on a global scale, offering students the opportunity to participate in international academic networks, online conferences, and cross-border research projects. Additionally, the use

of advanced educational technologies has improved the overall efficiency of university operations, such as admissions, academic records management, and student support services.

### **5.2.2 Curriculum Reform and Innovation**

China's partnership with Cameroon has also had a profound impact on the content of education, particularly through the reform and modernization of university curricula. Chinese experts have worked closely with Cameroonian educators to update and revise outdated curricula, ensuring that students are being equipped with the skills and knowledge required in today's global economy. These updates have included a greater emphasis on technical and vocational education, as well as the introduction of more specialized courses in fields such as information technology, engineering, and business management.

Additionally, the research finds that Cameroonian universities have benefited from the introduction of new subject areas that reflect China's strengths, such as Chinese language and cultural studies, renewable energy technologies, and traditional Chinese medicine. This diversification of educational offerings has made Cameroonian universities more attractive to students seeking career-relevant skills and international exposure.

Moreover, the influence of the Chinese educational system has prompted local universities to adopt a more pragmatic, skills-oriented approach to higher education. This has included the integration of practical, hands-on training in many programs, as well as an increased focus on entrepreneurship and innovation. Chinese universities have shared their experience in fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems within their campuses, and this has inspired Cameroonian institutions to follow suit by creating incubators and entrepreneurship centers aimed at helping students during their education period.

## **5.3 Cultural Exchange and Soft Power Influence**

One of the central aspects of the China-Cameroon higher education partnership is the cultural exchange that has taken place, primarily through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and cultural programs. These initiatives are aimed at promoting Chinese culture and language while simultaneously fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese values and ideologies among Cameroonian students. The findings show that this exchange has had a significant impact on academic and cultural ties between the two nations.

### **5.3.1 Role of Confucius Institutes**

Confucius Institutes, which have been established at several Cameroonian universities, including the University of Yaoundé II and the University of Maroua, play a pivotal role in Chinese cultural dissemination. These institutes offer courses in the Chinese language, history, art, and philosophy, allowing students to gain a comprehensive understanding of Chinese society. The data suggests that many students who participate in these programs are motivated by the desire to learn the language for career opportunities, especially with the increasing presence of Chinese companies in Cameroon.

Moreover, the institutes serve as hubs for cultural activities, such as traditional Chinese festivals, martial arts demonstrations, and calligraphy workshops. These activities provide Cameroonian students with a tangible experience of Chinese culture, which fosters cultural appreciation and strengthens bilateral ties. As part of China's soft power strategy, the Confucius Institutes are also instrumental in shaping perceptions of China in Cameroon, portraying the country as a benevolent and culturally rich partner.

### **5.3.2 Concerns over Cultural Dominance**

Despite the benefits, there are growing concerns about the potential for cultural dominance, as Chinese cultural influences become more prevalent in Cameroonian universities. Some critics argue that while the cultural exchange programs promote mutual understanding, they may also contribute to the overshadowing of local cultures. The findings indicate that some students and faculty members are wary of the disproportionate focus on Chinese culture, fearing it may erode the prominence of indigenous languages and cultural practices in academic settings.

This concern is particularly relevant in the context of globalization, where countries often struggle to maintain cultural autonomy while engaging with powerful foreign partners. The research suggests that while Chinese cultural programs are popular, there is a need for balance to ensure that Cameroonian cultural heritage is equally promoted within the educational system.

## **5.4 Challenges in Implementing Chinese Educational Models**

While the China-Cameroon partnership in higher education has delivered numerous benefits, the research also highlights several challenges in integrating Chinese educational models into the local context. These challenges stem from differences in pedagogical approaches, institutional capacities, and the broader socio-political environment in Cameroon.

### **5.4.1 Alignment with Local Education Systems**

Chinese educational models, which often emphasize top-down, instructor-led methods, can sometimes conflict with the more student-centered approaches traditionally used in Cameroonian universities. For example, Chinese universities often focus heavily on discipline, memorization, and standardized testing, while Cameroonian institutions, particularly in the arts and social sciences, prioritize critical thinking, creativity, and discussion-based learning.

The findings reveal that this divergence in educational philosophy has created friction in some instances, with both students and faculty members struggling to adapt to new methods. For instance, in technical fields where hands-on learning is crucial, the Chinese model's reliance on theoretical knowledge has been challenging for Cameroonian students, who are accustomed to more practical, experiential learning approaches. This misalignment has sometimes resulted in reduced student engagement and a disconnection between the teaching methods and students' expectations.

### **5.4.2 Risk of Dependency**

Another significant challenge identified in the research is the risk of over-reliance on Chinese educational aid and expertise. While Chinese support has helped improve infrastructure, faculty development, and curriculum modernization, there is a concern that Cameroonian universities may become dependent on continued Chinese assistance to sustain these improvements.

For example, the advanced technological infrastructure provided by Chinese institutions requires ongoing maintenance and upgrades, and without the proper training and resources, local universities may struggle to maintain these systems independently. Additionally, the influx of Chinese educators and experts, while beneficial in the short term, could lead to a situation where local expertise is undervalued, stifling the development of homegrown academic talent.

The findings suggest that to mitigate these risks, there needs to be a greater emphasis on capacity building and knowledge transfer. Local educators should be empowered to take leadership roles in managing and sustaining the improvements introduced through the partnership, ensuring that the gains made are sustainable in the long term.

## **5.5 Geopolitical Implications and Long-Term Sustainability**

The China-Cameroon higher education partnership cannot be examined in isolation from the broader geopolitical context. China's engagement in African education is part of its larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to expand its influence across the globe through infrastructure, trade, and educational diplomacy. This section explores the geopolitical motivations behind China's involvement and the long-term sustainability of the partnership.

### **5.5.1 Geopolitical Strategy and Educational Diplomacy**

China's investment in Cameroonian higher education is not only about capacity building and academic exchange but also serves as a tool of educational diplomacy. The findings indicate that China's involvement in education is a strategic move to strengthen its influence in Africa, particularly in countries like Cameroon, which hold geopolitical and economic significance due to their natural resources and strategic location.

Educational diplomacy allows China to cultivate a positive image in Cameroon, building goodwill and forging closer ties with future leaders who may go on to occupy key positions in government, business, and academia. By offering scholarships, establishing Confucius Institutes, and investing in educational infrastructure, China ensures that a new generation of African leaders has positive experiences with Chinese culture, language, and values, which can translate into stronger diplomatic and economic ties in the future.

Furthermore, by investing in education, China gains a foothold in a critical area of African development, one that is essential for long-term growth and stability. This influence is part of a broader geopolitical strategy to create strong alliances across the continent, positioning China as a key partner in Africa's development.

### 5.5.2 Sustainability of the Partnership

The long-term sustainability of the China-Cameroon higher education partnership is a key concern for both nations. While the partnership has yielded significant benefits, such as improved infrastructure and greater access to education, questions remain about the ability of Cameroonian universities to maintain these gains without continued Chinese support.

One of the main challenges is financial sustainability. Many of the improvements made through Chinese investments, such as new buildings, advanced technological equipment, and scholarship programs, require significant financial resources to maintain. Without a clear plan for long-term funding, there is a risk that these advancements may deteriorate over time, especially as Chinese aid shifts to other areas or countries.

Additionally, there are concerns about the over-reliance on Chinese educational models and faculty. The findings suggest that for the partnership to be sustainable, there must be a concerted effort to localize the benefits of the collaboration. This includes developing local expertise, encouraging research and innovation within Cameroonian universities, and ensuring that the curricula and educational approaches reflect the needs and values of Cameroonian society. By focusing on building local capacity and fostering a culture of self-reliance, Cameroonian universities can ensure that the gains made through the partnership are long-lasting and continue to benefit future generations of students.

## 6. Conclusion

The partnership between Cameroon and China in higher education presents both significant opportunities and challenges. While Chinese investments have helped to expand academic opportunities, build infrastructure, and promote cultural exchange, they have also raised concerns about sustainability and autonomy. The findings suggest that, moving forward, it is essential for Cameroonian policymakers to strike a balance between leveraging international partnerships and preserving local educational priorities. By fostering a more sustainable, mutually beneficial relationship, Cameroon can continue to develop a higher education system that meets both local and global needs.

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