

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Scholarships, Chinese Diplomatic Imagineering and African Higher Education

David Mills¹, Natasha Robinson¹

¹*University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) represents the formalization of China's links with Africa. Since its founding in 2000, the forum has increasingly prioritized its commitments to Higher Education (HE). During the 2018 FOCAC summit for example, the Chinese government pledged 50,000 government scholarships for young Africans. In 2020 the Financial Times reported that China now offers more university scholarships to Africans than leading Western governments combined. Between 2017-2018 the number of African PhD students studying at Chinese institutions rose from 4833 to 6835 – a 41% increase. What does this increase imply about HE and China's diplomatic imagineering?

While literature on FOCAC and HE has engaged with its history (Ubi, 2020) and policy commitments (King, 2020), this research seeks to understand the the diplomatic relevance of China's growing interest in African HE. In particular we seek to understand FOCAC as a new type of supranational HE space; one that uses research and training to explicitly shape both bilateral and multilateral relationships on the African continent. Drawing on in-depth interviews with scholars associated with the China-Africa Thinktank Forum – an academic subgroup of FOCAC – we offer insight into how China-Africa relations are mediated through HE.

Paper: Between 2017 and 2018 the number of African PhD students studying at Chinese institutions rose more than 40% to almost 7000, with around one-third accessing scholarships brokered through the diplomatic channels of FOCAC, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). In this paper we explore how Chinese soft-power is being exerted through FOCAC and its various fora, including support for African scholarships and research collaborations. We present preliminary findings from a series of in-depth interviews with African scholars associated with the China-Africa Thinktank Forum – an academic subgroup of FOCAC.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a key diplomatic platform for the Chinese state to demonstrate its commitment to African development through funding pledges and long term

investments. Founded in 2000, the forum has in recent years moved away from infrastructural projects to increasingly prioritize African higher education. During the 2018 FOCAC summit, for example, the Chinese government pledged 50,000 government scholarships for young Africans. In 2020 the Financial Times reported that China was now offering more university scholarships to African students than all the leading Western governments combined.

Existing literature on FOCAC's relationship to African Higher Education and HE focuses predominantly on its history (Ubi, 2020) and its policy commitments (King, 2020). This suggests that China-Africa relations are moving away from 'stadium diplomacy' towards a stronger 'people-to-people' engagement through cultural exchanges, research collaborations, and education and training. Whilst aware that China's influence on African HE is still relatively limited compared to that of existing Western donors, we suggest that FOCAC acts as a supranational discursive space that enables China to facilitate bilateral scholarship and funding agreements with African governments.

The role of higher education in facilitating soft-power diplomacy and soft power is well established (Knight, 2018). Assessing the extent to which China's discourse of 'people-to-people' engagement is actually reshaping African research cultures is underexplored, in part because this is a new development, and partly because detailed data on student demographics and funding commitments is difficult to access. One exception to this is Lefifi and Kiala's (2021) research on FOCAC and human capital development in Africa. Their findings highlight how four African countries (Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Cabo Verde) are developing their ties with China through scholarships, academia-industry linkages (eg support for Nigeria's space sector) and university expansion.

Through in-depth interviews with more than a dozen African scholars closely associated with the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum, we triangulate their different perspectives and views on FOCAC's discursive influence, and explore the role of these researchers in building and mediating diplomatic ties. The China-Africa Think Tanks Forum was established by the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University and was officially incorporated into the framework of the FOCAC in 2012. This has become a platform for high level dialogue and communication between China and Africa, bringing together diplomats, academics, think tanks, entrepreneurs and media actors. It therefore represents an unusually influential diplomatic space for African higher education advocacy.

The academics that we interviewed were all recognized by the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum as FOCAC 'scholars'. They had all conducted research in some way on China-Africa relations, and had previously presented their work at the Think Tanks Forum. Most were based at African research organisations or NGOs, including several in South Africa, whilst three were based at Zhejiang Normal University, which has a pivotal policy role in supporting and guiding FOCAC.

Different themes emerged from our interviews, depending on the histories and interests of the African countries concerned. Some FOCAC scholars saw themselves as academic champions for their governments, facilitating diplomatic understandings and brokering funding conversations. Others were explicit about promoting Chinese interests, presenting China as a development 'alternative' to Western donors. A few were more wary of China's growing influence through FOCAC, and called for African governments to be assertive in their negotiations. South Africa stands out for high levels of policy engagement through its many think-tanks, but its students show little interest in studying in China, possibly because of the quality of its own HE systems, but also because it has stronger access to international academic networks.

In this paper we recognize that whilst FOCAC seeks to 'reimagineer' the China-Africa relationship, and existing HE links are still emergent and protean. Its impact needs to be put into the context of long histories of European imperial scholarships and HE funding, as well as more recent postcolonial links and Northern capacity-building support. We argue that through FOCAC and initiatives such as the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), China crafts a new diplomatic imaginary, emphasizing its commitment to South-South collaborations and 'people to people' partnerships. Higher Education capacity-building is a key plank in this diplomatic imagineering.

References: