Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.35695

International Education Assistance from a Chinese Perspective: Normative Reframing, Policy Instruments, and Governance Tensions

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Abstract. International education assistance is becoming a more plural field in which emerging development partners, multilateral organizations, recipient governments, universities, and firms interact. China is increasingly visible in this field, yet its engagement is often interpreted either as distinctive South-South cooperation or as geopolitical influence. This article examines how Chinese policy discourse reframes education assistance, how this perspective is translated into policy instruments, and what governance tensions arise in implementation. Based on qualitative analysis of Chinese and multilateral policy documents issued between 2014 and 2025, supplemented by peer-reviewed research, the study develops a framework of resource transfer, capability formation, and institutional co-production. China's approach combines commitments to mutual benefit, recipient demand, non-conditionality, and autonomous development with infrastructure, scholarships, professional training, vocational education, digital resources, and multilateral trust funds. However, resource asymmetries, fragmented coordination, uneven localization, and limited outcome data constrain the transition from project delivery to locally owned system strengthening. China's contribution therefore lies less in offering a complete alternative aid model than in broadening the repertoire of international education cooperation.

Keywords: China, International Education Assistance, South-South Cooperation, Education Development, Global Education Governance

1. Introduction

Education is a human right, a foundation for development, and a global common good. Yet education systems in many lower-middle-income countries remain constrained by inadequate financing, shortages of qualified teachers, weak institutional capacity, conflict, and unequal digital access. UNESCO estimates an annual financing gap of approximately USD 97 billion if these countries are to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030 [1].

This environment has increased the importance of development partners outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC). China is particularly significant because its engagement combines grants, school construction, equipment, scholarships, training, vocational education, digital platforms, and multilateral

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partnerships. Its scale is nevertheless difficult to assess because China does not report through the OECD-DAC system and official data are generally aggregated rather than project-level and country-disaggregated [2]. Chinese policy documents also avoid fixed "donor" and "recipient" identities, preferring South-South cooperation, mutual learning, and common development.

Research offers two main interpretations. One views China's emphasis on sovereignty, infrastructure, practical skills, and demand responsiveness as a meaningful alternative to conventional aid [3-5]. The other highlights relational power, strategic interests, and bureaucratic fragmentation, warning that formally reciprocal partnerships can reproduce substantive asymmetries [6, 7]. Both perspectives are useful, but asking whether Chinese assistance is altruistic or strategic is too narrow. All development cooperation combines norms, organizational interests, and political relationships. The more productive questions are how Chinese principles are translated into instruments and whether those instruments generate sustainable and locally governed educational capacity.

This article asks: How does China define international education assistance? Through which instruments is this perspective implemented? What tensions constrain movement from project delivery toward locally owned system development? It argues that China's significance lies in expanding the available repertoire of education cooperation, while the legitimacy of this repertoire depends on ownership, localization, and accountability.

2. Conceptual framework and method

2.1. From aid effectiveness to South-South cooperation

The conventional aid architecture developed around bilateral donors, multilateral financial institutions, and United Nations agencies. The Paris Declaration attempted to correct donor-driven priorities, fragmented projects, and parallel administrative systems through ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability [8]. However, the language of partnership did not automatically redistribute authority because donors generally retained control over finance, expertise, procurement, and evaluation.

The rise of Southern providers has pluralized this landscape. South-South cooperation is associated with solidarity among developing countries, sovereignty, mutual benefit, demand responsiveness, and the sharing of development experience. It may increase partner governments' choices and bargaining space. Nevertheless, institutional growth also generates demands for transparency, coordination, and effectiveness. The analytical task is therefore to recognize difference without assuming that the language of solidarity eliminates power disparities.

2.2. Three stages of cooperation

This article distinguishes three stages. Resource transfer refers to finance, buildings, equipment, scholarships, digital content, and externally supplied expertise. Its key question is whether resources reach constrained institutions and groups. Capability formation refers to durable human and organizational capacity, including teachers, local trainers, maintenance systems, curricula, and professional networks. Its key question is whether cooperation reduces dependence on continued external delivery. Institutional co-production refers to joint problem definition, curriculum design, standard setting, evidence production, and governance. Its key question is whether partner-country actors exercise meaningful authority over design, adaptation, and evaluation.

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Three tests apply across the stages. Ownership concerns who controls consequential decisions. Localization concerns how technologies, curricula, and standards are adapted to local institutions and labour markets. Accountability concerns evidence on implementation, learning, employment, distribution, and institutional effects. Mutuality is thus treated as an empirical achievement rather than an official label.

2.3. Method

The study uses qualitative document analysis. The primary corpus includes China's 2014 foreign aid white paper, the 2021 international development cooperation white paper, the 2021 Measures for the Administration of Foreign Aid, the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027), Ministry of Education accounts of vocational and digital cooperation, and UNESCO documentation for the China Funds-in-Trust. Documents were coded for normative principles, instruments, intended beneficiaries, localization, and evaluation. Peer-reviewed studies were used to triangulate official claims.

Policy documents express intentions rather than outcomes. This article therefore maps policy evolution and governance tensions rather than estimating total financing or causal effects. Commitments, outputs, and demonstrated educational impact are kept analytically distinct.

3. China's perspective and practice

3.1. Normative reframing

Chinese policy documents place education assistance within South-South cooperation. The 2021 white paper emphasizes mutual respect, equality, non-interference, responsiveness to national conditions, improvement of livelihoods, and autonomous development [9]. The 2021 administrative measures formalize human resource development as a recognized project category and stress consultation, effectiveness, and sustainable capacity [10].

This framing changes the stated object of assistance. The objective is not only to fill resource gaps but also to support nationally selected development pathways. Education is linked to employment, industrialization, poverty reduction, and state capacity. The formulation of "teaching people how to fish" expresses a preference for capability development, while "mutual learning" suggests benefits for Chinese institutions as well as partner countries.

FOCAC documents intensify this language of joint action. The 2024 action plan commits China and African partners to new or upgraded Luban Workshops and schools, 60,000 training opportunities, university partnerships, and a regional digital education cooperation centre. Nevertheless, relational language does not dissolve material asymmetry. China supplies substantial finance, equipment, training access, and technical expertise. Mutuality should therefore be assessed through decision rights and institutional arrangements rather than vocabulary alone.

3.2. From infrastructure to capability formation

Material assistance remains foundational. The 2014 white paper reported more than 80 education facility projects between 2010 and 2012, including schools, universities, libraries, computer equipment, and distance-learning systems [11]. Such projects address visible constraints and can rapidly expand access. Yet buildings require teachers, operating budgets, electricity, maintenance, and materials; digital equipment requires connectivity, technical support, replacement cycles, and data governance. Resource delivery is therefore necessary but insufficient.

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Human resource development provides a bridge to system capacity. Scholarships and professional training can create credentials, technical knowledge, organizational links, and professional networks. However, short seminars may not change institutional routines, and graduates may return to workplaces that lack the resources needed to apply new knowledge. Effective programs connect individual learning to organizational change.

The China Funds-in-Trust Phase III illustrates this stronger design. Implemented with UNESCO in six African countries, it supports higher technical education, industry collaboration, labour-market-oriented teaching, and competency-based learning [12]. UNESCO contributes technical frameworks and convening power, China provides finance, and participating countries supply institutional sites and national priorities. This arrangement moves beyond bilateral delivery, although country-level evidence remains necessary to demonstrate organizational effects.

3.3. Vocational and digital cooperation

Technical and vocational education and training is the field in which China's development experience is most visibly translated into an international instrument. Luban Workshops link Chinese and overseas vocational institutions through equipment, teacher training, curricula, and industry connections. By 2023, the workshops offered more than 70 specializations, enrolled over 6,100 qualification students and 31,000 non-degree participants, and trained more than 4,000 overseas teachers [13].

Their significance depends less on equipment export than on institutional co-production. A workshop moves beyond resource transfer when local teachers can maintain and revise curricula, qualifications are recognized within the host system, and competencies are valued beyond a single sponsoring company. Risks remain: equipment may exceed maintenance capacity; curricula may align too closely with Chinese technical standards; and evidence on employment, gender inclusion, and institutional diffusion is uneven [14]. Success should therefore be judged by partner-institution autonomy rather than the number of branded sites.

Digital education creates another pathway. China's digital platforms and the 2025 World Digital Education Conference demonstrate substantial capacity in resource aggregation and standard development [15]. Digital resources can function as education public goods when they are accessible, reusable, multilingual, and adaptable. Yet openness does not guarantee access. Connectivity, devices, electricity, language, disability access, teacher confidence, interoperability, and data protection shape who benefits. Digital cooperation must therefore support localization and institutional capacity alongside content provision.

4. Governance tensions and implications

4.1. Mutuality and material asymmetry

The central tension is a mutuality-asymmetry paradox. A partner ministry may request a project while lacking the data or personnel needed to compare alternatives. A college may co-design a curriculum while depending on external equipment, trainers, and certification. These arrangements may be more negotiated than classical conditional aid, but they are not automatically equal.

Mutuality becomes meaningful when it creates reciprocal accountability. Programs should establish joint steering committees, transparent selection criteria, shared intellectual property, local procurement where feasible, partner-led evaluation questions, and a funded transfer of management

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authority. The strongest evidence of partnership is the local institution's ability to continue, modify, or reject a program.

4.2. From projects to systems

Facilities, scholarships, and workshops are visible and administratively bounded; education systems are not. They require recurrent finance, teacher careers, curriculum governance, assessment, inclusion, and institutional learning. A successful project may remain an enclave if disconnected from these functions.

China's emphasis on practical delivery is valuable in a field sometimes dominated by policy advice. Delivery and systems thinking should nevertheless reinforce each other. Multi-year country partnership frameworks could connect infrastructure to teacher deployment, vocational projects to national qualifications frameworks, scholarships to reintegration plans, and digital resources to continuing professional development. Evaluation should move from completed activities toward the durability and diffusion of capabilities.

4.3. Localization, knowledge, and evidence

Education cooperation carries assumptions about valuable knowledge and desirable development. China's experience offers lessons in mass education, technical training, digital scale, and the relationship between education and industrialization, but experience does not travel intact. Localization must go beyond translation to include joint diagnosis, curriculum adaptation, local research, and recognition of knowledge already present in partner institutions. Partner-country scholars should participate as principal investigators and theory producers, not only as respondents or implementers.

Accountability also requires better evidence. Official documents provide aggregate information and program examples, but consistent country-level data on commitments, disbursements, beneficiaries, and outcomes remain limited. A dedicated education cooperation database could report project objectives, partners, financing modalities, locations, implementation periods, and evaluation summaries. Indicators should distinguish facilities built from facilities used, participants trained from practices changed, and graduates placed from employment sustained. Joint evaluation teams should include partner-country researchers and publish findings in locally accessible languages.

5. Conclusion

China's role in international education assistance reflects the pluralization of development cooperation. Its portfolio combines infrastructure, scholarships, training, vocational education, digital resources, and multilateral partnerships with an official discourse of equality, non-interference, mutual benefit, and autonomous development.

This perspective should not be equated with a completed Chinese model. Resource transfer can expand access, capability formation can reduce dependence, and institutional co-production can make partnership more substantive, but movement across these stages is not automatic. China's most important contribution may be to broaden the options available to partner countries. Realizing that potential requires greater governing authority for partner institutions, deeper integration with local education systems, and transparent evaluation of educational outcomes.

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