

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor And Collaboration In Higher Education: Trends, Perspectives And Prospects

Dr. Sadaf Bashir¹, Dr. Shabana Noreen², Muhammad Bilal Awan³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: sf.bashir84@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Islamia College Peshawar, Pakistan. Email: shabana@icp.edu.pk

³M.Phil in Economics from Qurtuba University of Sciences & IT, Peshawar. Email: mbilal.economics@gmail.com

Abstract

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a mega-investment project that has accelerated Pakistan's socio-economic growth. Pakistan's higher education sector is one key area to be upgraded under CPEC. Since the conclusion of CPEC agreement in 2015, Sino-Pakistan collaboration in higher education is expanding. Beijing is offering scholarships, vocational training and Chinese language courses to Pakistani youth and providing opportunities for academic and research collaboration. This study is an attempt to examine China's effective employment of higher education as a soft power tool to increase its influence and prestige in Pakistan. It argues that growing educational cooperation is fostering intercultural linkages as well as faculty and students' mobility between Pakistan and China. The article suggests that Islamabad needs to expand cooperation with Beijing in areas such as faculty development, emerging fields of science and technology, industry-university linkages and digital collaboration of technology in higher education sector.

Keywords: Connectivity, CPEC, Economy, Higher Education Commission (HEC), Human Development, Industry-University Linkages, Social Sector, Soft Power.

Introduction

Pakistan is expanding exclusive trade and economic ties with China, using China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the major fulcrum of this cooperation (Wolf, 2019). In 2013, Pakistan signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that served as the basis of the CPEC. The Corridor is part of Beijing's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) which aims to increase trade and connectivity linking 70 states in Asia, Africa, and Europe ("How Will," 2020). In 2015, during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping CPEC agreement was concluded. Initially Beijing announced to invest 46 billion dollars to develop

the energy and transport infrastructure in Pakistan over a period of 15 years (2015-30). Later, the estimated investment size increased to over 60 billion dollars. The CPEC includes connectivity projects consisting of infrastructure, ports, fibres, railways, energy projects and people-to-people projects to enhance Pakistan's economic linkages across South, Central and West Asia and improve its trade and commerce (Sayed, 2019). The flagship project links Gwadar port in Pakistan to Xinjiang in China, cutting short Beijing's maritime trade routes with the world approximately by 12,000 miles (Siddiqui, 2020). The establishment of power plants, construction

and optimization of the nine Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Pakistan aim to foster industrial development and boost up economic growth in Pakistan. As Sino-Pakistan economic corporation under the CPEC continues to grow, partnership in the education sector has also been expanding. Arguably, China employs soft power to attract Pakistani citizens with its culture to secure its influence via higher education. Chinese educational support for Pakistan focuses on scholarships, vocational training programmes, and Chinese language courses (Safdar, 2021). Furthermore, educational exchanges and research collaboration are a major element of educational collaboration. This study examines Sino-Pakistan collaboration in higher education under CPEC. It begins with an overview of China's employment of higher education as a soft power tool under CPEC and Pakistan's objectives for pursuing higher education collaboration. Next, it explores trends and perspectives and concludes with a discussion on possibilities and prospects in educational cooperation between the two states.

China's Soft Power and Higher Education Collaboration under CPEC

Nye (2004) defines "soft power" as "the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion." Nye writes:

"A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it.....This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them."

Hence, a state may attract others through its cultural values, political norms and policies. In that sense, exchange programmes, broadcasting

of a state's cultural appeal, promoting a state's society and language are considered as instruments of soft power. Moreover, soft power can also be exerted by non-state actors such as multinational corporations, organizations, cities, regions and other associations (Miao, 2021). Kurlantzick (2006) broadens the concept of soft power by noting that "soft power implies all elements outside of the security realm, including investment and aid." Investment and aid are used by Beijing as soft power tools. China's ambitious BRI, driven by investments and development also focuses on linking diverse cultures and societies across different regions. With the emergence of digital technologies and changes in socio-economic constructs, channels to exert soft power have increased such as increasing availability of broadband and wireless internet, the speedy growth of social media and a growing middle-class in developing states. In a globalized world, exchange of competing ideas and traditions is fast and wide, thus, the wielding of soft power through state and non-state actors to secure a state's influence is on the rise. Higher education is one such avenue, which could play a key role given a growing demand for and increasing internationalisation of higher education (Sheng-Kai, 2015).

Soft power shapes the preferences of foreign audience when it has an inspiration to study and appreciate the traditions, cultural values and institutions of the "power-welding society." Undoubtedly, Chinese culture and society exert vast influence and many people around the world attracted towards it. For them, learning Chinese language is a logical next step in order to study Chinese culture (Gill & Huang, 2006). With the operationalization of CPEC, increasingly Pakistani people see incentives to reap the economic benefits of the Project of learning mandarin and studying at Chinese universities. China's soft power aims to attract Pakistani citizens with its culture, language, ideas to secure

its influence via higher education. Confucius Institutes, China Studies Centres at Pakistani Universities and collaboration with higher education sector focus to attract Pakistani public.

Higher Education Collaboration: Pakistan's Objectives

Pakistan's prime objective is to boost its socio-economic development through CPEC. Pakistan's human development indicators particularly education, health and poverty reduction remain the lowest among South Asia (Wolf, 2019). Pasha (2018) notes that the HDI has three components relating to the level of education, health and the per capita income of a state. He points out education among the three components of HDI where Pakistan's performed worst and strongly recommends that Pakistan needs to invest more on education, especially at the secondary and higher levels. It is important to note that in Pakistan the past two decades witnessed a rise in 'brain drain' as more highly educated and skilled people opt to work in developed countries. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes more than 60 percent increase in highly skilled migration rate of the country from 1992 to 2000. Between 2008 and 2013, 2.7 million people left Pakistan for employment opportunities (Ahmad, 2018). The record of Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment indicates that more than 0.3 million professional and technical workers left the country in 2018. The number grew to 0.5 million in 2019. Undoubtedly, the flight of human capital is a serious issue for the country as losing its human capital directly impacts the economic development. Chairman Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC), Mr. Javed Saleem Qureshi said: "The field of engineering is the worst hit due to lack of development in the country." He argued: "Our system of education is deeply flawed. We need competent people to be in this field." (Ahmed, 2019). Moreover, people want to study

emerging fields of engineering, science and technology, such subjects aren't being offered in Pakistani Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), and even if these are, there is little 'scope' in the future to secure employment in the relevant field, if the person decides to stay and work in Pakistan, hence 'brain drain' (Ahmad, 2018). Pakistan expects that CPEC could attract skilled and trained people who are currently living or planning to live abroad and engage them in development of its economy. Wolf (2019, p. 80) argues:

"Islamabad is hoping to turn 'brain drain' into a 'brain gain' through the creation of lucrative jobs and business opportunities as well as through the buildup of CPEC related scientific research and higher education capacities. Furthermore, it is expected that CPEC will not only attract foreign capital but also convince Pakistani entrepreneurs to invest in their own country rather than abroad."

Higher Education Cooperation under CPEC

According to Ministry of Planning Development & Special Initiatives (2019), operationally, CPEC is divided into three phases: In the first phase, ("early harvest" phase), the priority projects were infrastructure development and power generation by 2020. The second phase (2021-2025) centres on industrial cooperation through the construction of SEZs, agricultural modernization and socio-economic development. The third phase focuses on long-term projects which are to be completed by 2030. In November 2018, framework agreements on agriculture, industrial and socio-economic cooperation were concluded. During current phase, 27 projects focusing on education, health, water supply, poverty alleviation and agriculture have been identified of which 17 are on priority list to

boost socio-economic development. In the second phase of the CPEC, focus remains on the social sector particularly in fields such as education, vocational training, poverty alleviation, health and agriculture, mostly in underdeveloped areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Southern Punjab, and Balochistan for their socio-economic uplift (Sayed, 2019). In this connection, collaboration in higher education has become more prominent and Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan is playing an instrumental role. The HEC is a government statutory body established in 2002 to oversee, regulate and reform higher education sector in Pakistan. The HEC stated that HEIs can be key players in harnessing the benefits of CPEC by overcoming challenges pertaining to language and cultural differences of both the nations. Moreover, people to people contact, academic exchanges, cultural and knowledge sharing will be instrumental to facilitate trade and commercial ties and “result in well connected, integrated region of shared destiny, harmony and development” (Hamza, 2019). In this connection, the universities and HEIs role is key considering the following factors:

- The HEIs need to bridge the huge knowledge and cultural gap between Pakistani and Chinese people.
- According to Vice Chancellor, University of Sargodha, universities can play a major role to devise and influence public policy focusing on agricultural, industrial, technological and economic cooperation (Ahmad, 2020).
- Collaboration in higher education will bolster Industry-Academia Linkages (IAL) under CPEC.
- Cooperation in higher education will bridge the digital divide.

CPEC Consortium of Universities

The CPEC Consortium of Business Schools was established at Islamabad in August 2017 under the auspices of HEC and China Association of Higher Education. The main aim was to boost trade and business linkages between the two states, but in November 2017 its scope was expanded to other subjects and the association was renamed as “CPEC Consortium of Universities” in the follow-up meeting held in Fudan. University Exchange mechanism meetings (Annual Conferences) have been held in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The Chinese Secretariat of the Consortium is hosted by Fudan University and Pakistani Secretariat by Pakistan Higher Education Commission. The 2nd China-Pakistan Economic Corridor University Alliance Exchanges Mechanism Conference was held on Zhejiang Campus in November 2018, more than 70 representatives from around 30 Chinese and Pakistani universities participated and discussed collaboration in four areas: innovation & entrepreneurship, information engineering, agricultural sciences and medicine & health (Qiuyi, 2018). On the 3rd annual conference held in Islamabad in 2019, Pakistan’s Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Reforms Makhdoom Khusro Bakhtiar said:

“We have broadened the cooperation through CPEC, in areas of socio-economic development, agriculture, industries, infrastructure, energy and people-to-people contacts through the universities for enhancing the multilateral relations between the two countries and to shape future economic growth” (CPEC Consortium, 2019).

Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Yao Jing said that the China has increased the number of scholarships for Pakistani students, funded 100 modern classrooms and 10 agriculture research centers in Pakistani institutions (CPEC Consortium, 2019).

The membership of the Consortium has increased from 19 in 2017 to 55 in 2020 (including 36 Pakistani and 19 Chinese Universities). In 2019, the member universities carried out 117 visits to China and received 67 delegations from China. The member universities won 206 scholarships, 16 research grants and organized 120 China focused events, signed 61 and conducted 44 trainings, 17210 persons learnt Chinese language (Shah, 2020). In 2021, the number of Universities in the Consortium grew to 83 with 22 of them are from China and 61 from Pakistan. The Consortium's rapid progress indicates expanding educational cooperation between the two states (Abrar, 2021).

Trends and Perspectives

This section reviews the current trends and highlights important aspects of Sino-Pakistan expanding education cooperation. First, the CPEC's second phase focuses on trade, agriculture and socio-economic development and industrial cooperation with investment in SEZs and there is a growing realization in Pakistan that China's economic cooperation and investments will widen and deepen. Pakistani people also believe that China's political capital is growing in global affairs. Hence, many Pakistanis aim to secure the forthcoming benefits of studying at Chinese universities and to gain from Beijing's increasing economic power (Safdar, 2021). The number of Pakistani students in China has grown from 9,630 in 2013 to 25,000 in 2020 to learn Mandarin, science & technology and medicine. The main factor behind the increase is award of Chinese scholarships and a series of preferential policies for Pakistani students after the announcement of the CPEC project (Malik, 2021). According to Chinese officials:

“Over 22,000 Pakistani students, making them the third largest group of overseas students in China, are currently studying in different fields, including studies of China's history and culture, medicine,

information technology, environmental science, Chinese language teaching and international economic and trade” (“Over 1,000 Pakistani Students,” 2018).

Second, Pakistan's education sector, particularly HEIs, China study centers at local Pakistani universities and the Confucius Institutes play an important role not only in providing cultural understanding but also creating a greater awareness by disseminating information about China's higher education sector, scholarships, Chinese language test, and competition. Strong links between Pakistani universities and Chinese Universities are established after CPEC. For example, Confucius Institutes have been established in Pakistani Universities. Currently, there are five Confucius Institutes (CI) and two Confucius Classrooms across Pakistan. The CI cultivates the understanding of the Chinese culture and society and provide language lessons. Zhang Daojian, Vice President of the Confucius Institute of NUML University commented that CI also holds cultural activities which include calligraphy exhibition, performance and cultural festivals. He stated: “The focus is to let local students experience it by themselves, which can stimulate their interest in further exploring the Chinses culture.” (Malik & Hao, 2021). Hence, Confucius Institutes serve as an effective soft power tool to enhance China's influence in Pakistan.

Third, a large number of Pakistani students are investing in the Chinese language skills to study at Chinese universities and capitalize on future job opportunities. In Pakistan, the growth in Mandarin-language learning has been witnessed in recent years. Chinese and Pakistani governments provide direct funding to students for this purpose. Many Pakistani HEIs have started Chinese classes and there is growing need of Chinese language teachers. To tackle the growing number of students, China offered about

5,000 scholarships to Pakistanis in 2016 — highest number of scholarships offered as compared to any other state (Hadid & Sattar, 2018). Pakistani government has also been sending talented students in Chinese universities to learn Mandarin on scholarships. In March 2017, Prime Minister of Pakistan during his visit to Gwadar, announced 50 scholarships for the Students of Gwadar to learn Mandarin in China. As per HEC report, the project was completed at the cost of 143.861 million rupees (Higher Education Commission, 2020). A female student from Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar, who went on Pakistani government scholarship to China to learn Mandarin, said that young Pakistanis are keen to learn Mandarin because they think that CPEC will create employment opportunities and they can seize job opportunity in Pakistan as a fluent Mandarin speaker (personal communication, September 5, 2019).

China expects that some of the scholarship recipients after returning home will teach Chinese language and build “a sustainable Pakistani network” for teaching Mandarin (Hadid & Sattar, 2018). It is noteworthy that under CPEC, China will relocate part of its manufacturing industry to Pakistan, creating employment opportunities for Pakistani labour to work in those industries and manage them. Besides, many firms are going to set up their offices, warehouses, and factories in different regions across Pakistan and they will need interpreters to communicate with local people and businesses. There is a great need of such local interpreters in near future (“Scope of Chinese,” 2017). Official figures indicate that as many as 5,000-7000 jobs are being created for Chinese language learners all over Pakistan. A Chinese language instructor at National University of Modern Languages (NUML) at Islamabad noted that after the launch of CPEC in 2015—there has been an exceptional rise in the number of students keen to learn Mandarin. He

commented: “Prior to CPEC we had some 200 students learning Chinese. Now we have over 2,000 in our different programmes” (Baloch, 2017). According to a Chinese language instructor at Karakoram International University in Gilgit, “in the past, English was the sole language of upward mobility” in the country. It was considered as a means of access to Western educational institutions, markets and employment. Now, Mandarin has become the “hot new trend.” (Toppa, 2018).

Fourth, private sector is also playing an important role in advancing objectives of higher education collaboration. Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad, a local think tank, has close ties with Chinese officials, especially at the Chinese Embassy. Some private firms provide educational consultancy services for Pakistani students keen to study in China. (Safdar, 2021).

Fifth, it is noteworthy that the Pakistani youth studying in Chinese universities come from a broader cross-section of Pakistani society having different economic backgrounds & geographical areas and upon their return represent a diverse, erudite and skilled workforce in different sectors of Pakistan’s economy. Moreover, these students will also be more inclined towards the East (entering the ‘Asian Century’) and will serve as goodwill ambassadors between Pakistan and China fostering stronger people-to-people contacts (Safdar, 2021).

Sixth, the lower education costs and quality education are important factors for increase enrollment at Chinese Universities. According to a Pakistani student who studied in China, many Pakistani students pursue MBBS degree programmes in China because of easy admission process, lower tuition fee, qualified faculty, teaching technology and modern equipment in hospitals. The expense of living in China is very low especially due to affordable transport and scholarships are easily available. Together, these

factors make enrolling in a Chinese university very attractive (Malik, 2021).

Prospects

The Long Term Plan for CPEC (2017) envisions major hurdles to Pakistan's socio-economic development and to boost economic partnership of both states. It declares:

“By 2025, the CPEC building shall be basically done, the industrial system approximately complete, major economic functions brought into play in a holistic way, the people's livelihood along the CPEC significantly improved, regional development more balanced and all the goals of Vision 2025 achieved.”

In this connection, Sino-Pakistan collaboration in higher education needs to be furthered. There are at best four areas where the educational collaboration should focus:

I. Research and Development (R&D) Centres at Universities

The CPEC project envisions to bring a significant and robust exchange under research and development in science and technology. Pakistani Universities and research institutes lack innovative capacity and proper facilities for research. To that sense, Science and technology cooperation will strengthen Pakistan-China ties by promoting economic development under CPEC. It is important to note that China-Pakistan Higher Education Research Institute was launched at the 4th Exchange Mechanism Conference of CPEC Consortium of Universities in October 2021 in Beijing, which aims to further facilitate the research (Abrar, 2021). According to Member of the Commission at HEC, Lieutenant General (Retired) Muhammad Asghar, “economic supremacy of China was due to its technological advancement, as it had excelled in 5G, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, quantum computing and other technological spheres.” (Khan, 2020). In this regard, there is a need of establishing research centres of Information Technology (IT), drone and stealth technology and space technology at Pakistani HEIs on the pattern of Chinese universities. Similarly, the Centres for biotechnology, agricultural research and medical research also need special support (CPEC & Development, 2019). China’s educational cooperation can foster an enabling environment for joint research and collaboration with Pakistani HEIs. Several Pakistani Universities have made academic and research collaborations with Chinese institutions a top priority. For example, University of Sargodha in Punjab has concluded exchange agreements with Lanzhou University in dryland agriculture and with the South China Agricultural University in precision agriculture and citrus research by establishing China-Pakistan Joint Research Centre for Citrus Disease and Insect Pest Management (Niazi, 2019). Such joint ventures will also promote faculty and students’ mobility between the two sides.

Pakistan needs R&D centres that could harness the potential available in semiconductor industry. To that end, training a work force for both academia and industry will be crucial. The semiconductor industry is expected to grow exponentially and currently China faces a manpower shortfall of around 200,000 in the semiconductor industry. Beijing needs skilled researchers specializing in advanced chip development and experienced managers. Provincial government of Punjab already took the lead to develop skills in micro and nano-electronics design technologies in the universities. Pak-China collaboration in semiconductor sector can adequately prepare skilled persons and build semiconductor manufacturing and service companies in Pakistan, thus making it a hub for innovation in this field, integrating it with the global value chain ("Punjab Govt Approves," 2021).

2. Industry-University Linkages (IAL) under CPEC

The CPEC's second phase (2021–2025) aims for industrial cooperation in SEZs under the framework of CPEC. There is immense opportunity to establish University-SEZ linkages to boost industrial development. The focus should be on establishment of various research and development centres including environment and climate change wings at higher education institutes, technical education and training for building skilled workforce. The Academic Research and Development Unit at HEC (Hamza, 2019) could play a crucial role in establishing AIL and collaboration of China in this connection. In July 2019, Faisalabad Industrial Estate Development and Management Company, Institute of Quality and Technology Management and Punjab University signed an MoU to promote industrial development in the SEZs. A Chinese scholar noted that Chinese entrepreneurs and engineers' active participation in the "seamless connection" between Pakistan's companies and

universities to create linkages between academia and industries is important to achieve desired goals. He emphasized:

"The combination of the management ability of the enterprise and the research and development ability of the university will produce tangible economic and social benefits, allowing the enterprise to obtain the source of intelligence, and giving the university the opportunity to exert its own advantages" ("Industry-Academia Linkage," 2020).

Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Yao Jing argued that the universities consortium on CPEC would be instrumental in the completion of mega projects. The Chinese government has sponsored 100 modern classrooms, 10 agriculture research centers in Pakistani institutions and increased the number of scholarships for Pakistani students. Yao highlighted that the "next stage of CPEC would be more people-oriented where students, academia, universities, institutions would be the main players" in Pak-China cooperation. He said that the next stage of CPEC would be technology based and universities can provide research-based solutions for the progress, which can be beneficial for societies of the two countries.ⁱ

3. Development of Pakistani Academia

The economic interdependence offered by CPEC is the stage of advancement for faculty exchange and training and hence development of Pakistani academia ("CPEC & Development," 2019). Moreover, enhanced University collaborations create opportunities for Pakistani students studying in China and building linkages with Chinese students and faculty for inter-cultural understanding and information exchange.

The HEC has decided to set up CPEC academic research and development unit for academic exchanges among members; study of Pakistan-China history, culture and language; training and

high-level specialised talent cultivation and research on CPEC-related areas. The HEC aims to develop joint research centres and laboratories linking HEIs of both the states. It also plans to offer scholarships and short training visits of Pakistani faculty and students in Chinese universities for broader cooperation (Hamza, 2019). National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad collaboration with a China's Xingjiang Normal University provides way for further linkages and intellectual exchange of faculty and students ("CPEC & Development," 2019).

4. Bridging the Digital Divide in Education under CPEC

Covid-19 has exposed the technology gap in Pakistan's education system particularly low digital literacy rates and unequal access to digital or electronic devices. In December 2019, Pakistan started the 'Digital Pakistan Initiative' to prioritize 'access and connectivity' and given Chinese expertise of IT & e-learning, Pakistan can speed up to rectify this digital divide, particularly in higher education sector. Nazir Ahmed Sangi, former Vice-Chancellor of Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) stated:

"China is spending billions of dollars in Pakistan under various projects, and the second phase of CPEC will focus on social sector projects in which the Chinese government will help Pakistan in education among other social fields. It is the need of the hour that Pakistan introduces policies to make the best use of the Chinese support in the field of e-learning" ("CPEC Has Potential," 2019).

Under CPEC, establishment of various optical fiber cables for the development of the IT sector of Pakistan can enhance connectivity, use of technology in teaching and learning and e-learning. This is particularly important for the

digital inclusion of youth of underdeveloped areas of Balochistan and Tribal Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under CPEC project.

Conclusion

The second phase of CPEC Project is intended to create immense educational benefits for Pakistani citizens. At the same time, it is increasing Chinese influence and prestige in Pakistan. With the establishment of CPEC Consortium of Universities and various R&D centres and growing Pakistani HEIs linkages with their Chinese counterparts, educational cooperation is promoting intercultural linkages as well as faculty and students' mobility between the two states. Moreover, educational cooperation under CPEC is expected to bridge the supply and demand gap of technical skilled workforce and arrest brain drain of the country. To further expand the collaboration in higher education, Pakistan should focus to harness the potential in areas such as faculty development, IAL, emerging fields of science and technology, distance and e-learning between the two states.

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