

Reflections on China - ASEAN Higher Education Cooperation in the Context of the “Belt & Road Initiative”

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Abstract—As the regional higher education cooperation is attracting more attention than ever before, the landscape of global higher education is reshaping. China has put forward an ambitious initiative, known as the “Belt and Road initiative”, to the world. The initiative provides a historic opportunity for China and over 70 related countries and regions to comprehensively deepen their economic, social, educational and cultural cooperation. Research shows that China-ASEAN cooperation in higher education is the most active one comparing to China’s other regional cooperation along the Belt and Road routes in terms of the intergovernmental cooperation platform and mechanism, Student mobility and cooperative run schools. Researches also find that the China-ASEAN higher education cooperation is vital for China to demonstrate its intention. However, the cooperation also faces major challenges. The greatest internal challenge is caused by uneven development of higher education in ASEAN member countries, and the major external pressure comes from the US policy for Asia-Pacific region. To tackle the above challenges and realize the China-ASEAN higher education convergence, a series of suggestions has been made regarding establishing mutual trust, inter-government coordination, and cooperation route map.

Keywords—belt and road initiative; China-ASEAN cooperation; higher education internationalization

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to promote and facilitate the implementation of the “B&R Initiative”, Chinese government released the official document-- “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” during Boao Forum for Asia in 2015. It was the first time that Chinese government officially set forth the principles, concept, priorities and cooperation mechanism and framework of the “B&R initiative” to the rest of the world [2]. The Initiative provides a historic opportunity for China to comprehensively deepen the economic, social, educational and cultural cooperation with “B&R Initiative” related countries. In regard to the economy, more than 70 countries and international organizations have actively participated in the initiative and over 30 countries have signed the cooperation agreement with China by the end of 2016. The total trade volume between China and the “B&R Initiative” countries reached 6.3 trillion RMB with an increase of 0.6% [3]. In addition, the

establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Silk Road Fund and China - Eurasian Economic Cooperation Fund has marked a favorable start of the “B&R Initiative”.

As mentioned above, economic integration is a strong catalyst to trigger the process of higher education convergence. With the implementation of the “B&R initiative”, the depth and breadth of higher education cooperation between China and the countries along the “Belt and Road” have reached an unprecedented level. Chinese Ministry of Education issued the “Educational actions on Jointly Promoting B&R Initiative” on August 11, 2016. The document proposed the specific ideas, important cooperation contents and some basic methods to support the “B&R initiative” via education [4]. Besides, the document also suggested establishing an educational community of the B&R countries to encourage the student mobility by implementing the “Silk Road Overseas Study Scheme”, to boost the cross-board education, and to jointly cultivate talents. By promoting the mutual understanding of languages and culture, mutual recognition of academic qualifications, bridging the people to people communication, education cooperation shall greatly facilitate the implementation of the “B&R Initiative”. According to the statistics, by April 2017, China has signed 45 bilateral or multilateral educational cooperative agreements with “B&R countries”. China also signed agreement on mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications with 24 “B&R countries”. China has established 137 Confucius Institutes and 131 Confucius classes in 53 countries along the B&R routes. Chinese universities have set up 4 overseas campuses and 98 overseas programs in 14 countries and regions, and the majority of these countries and regions are participated in the “B&R initiative”. For student mobility, there are more than 200,000 foreign students from “B&R countries” studying in China, while 75,000 Chinese students studying in these countries in 2016, with a rise of 38.6% comparing to the year of 2012 [5].

Since the higher education cooperation between China and other “B&R Initiative” countries are booming, how about China and Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN)?

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In 1991, China launched diplomatic dialogue with ASEAN, marking a new and historical beginning of the cooperative relationship between China and ASEAN. In 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) was established, forming the largest free trade zone among developing countries. CAFTA is also known as a successful model of south-south cooperation. In 2015, the bilateral trade volume of CAFTA reached 472.16 billion USD with an annual average growth of 18.5% [6]. Just like the European Union has spawned the European Higher Education Area, with the deepening of economic cooperation, the integration of China-ASEAN higher education is also imperative. Now China-ASEAN cooperation in higher education has achieved the following achievements:

1. The intergovernmental and intercollegiate cooperation platform and mechanism have been gradually established and improved, making it the cornerstone for the future China-ASEAN higher education cooperation. China has hosted the China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week (CAECW) for nine consecutive years since 2008. Now the CAECW has become an all-round and effective cooperation platform and there were over 800 educational cooperation agreements have been signed during the CAECWs since it was first launched in 2008 [7]. In 2016, ministers of education from China and ASEAN member countries attended the Second China-ASEAN Ministerial Roundtable Conference and signed the China-ASEAN Action Plan on Education Cooperation (2016-2020) [8]. This is the first time for China and ASEAN to jointly set the common goals and sketched out a framework to build on in the following five years. Furthermore, to facilitate and encourage the all-round, high-level higher educational cooperation in multilateral and bilateral mode, China and ASEAN also closely worked on the mutual recognition of credits and qualifications and quality assurance system.

2. The increasingly frequent flow of students further strengthened the China - ASEAN higher education cooperation. According to the statistics of 2015, the total scale of student mobility between China and ASEAN exceeded 190,000, comprising 72,000 Chinese students studying in ASEAN and 120,000 ASEAN students studying China. It is estimated that by 2020, the total numbers of Chinese student studying in ASEAN and the ASEAN student studying China will both exceed 100, 000 [9]. At present, China has signed agreement on mutual recognition of academic degrees and qualifications with five ASEAN countries, namely Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia [10]. As more favorable and reciprocal agreements are expected to be signed, the student mobility in China-ASEAN region will be more frequent.

3. Overseas campuses help to enhance the mutual trust and compatibility of different education systems between China and ASEAN. Presently, Chinese universities have set up 3 overseas educational institutes in Malaysia, Laos and Thailand respectively and approximately 30 overseas education programs in ASEAN countries [11]. The ASEAN countries also have established two Sino-foreign Cooperative-run schools (Singapore) and 36 Sino-foreign Cooperative-run programs in china. By mutually introducing educational institutes and programs, it will facilitate the convergence and

coordination of different educational ideas, educational systems, teaching methods and evaluation mechanisms. All these practices will eventually deepen the mutual trust and increase the compatibility of the higher education systems in China-ASEAN region.

Compared with other regions in the context of the “B&R initiative”, the development of higher education cooperation between China and ASEAN can be regarded as the most rapid and inclusive one.

Due to the comparatively weak economic and social links, and the gap of higher education quality, the higher education cooperation between China and South Asia lags behind the cooperation between China and ASEAN. Take the largest country in South Asia--India as an example, in 2013, the number of Chinese students studying in Indian universities was only 694, while there were 13, 578 Indian students studying in China in 2014 [12]. For all South Asia countries, there are only 4 Sino-foreign cooperatively-run programs in China, and all are Sino-Indian programs. For the educational cooperation between China and League of Arab States, there are two important educational mechanisms, namely, Sino-Arabic Higher Education Cooperation Symposium and China Arab university presidents forum. However, China has not yet signed any agreements on mutual recognition of academic degrees and qualification with any of the member country of the League of Arab States. Due to the language barrier, cultural shock and regional instability, the student mobility is quite small between China and League of Arab States. As for the cooperation between China and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, it is largely depended on the Sino-Russian cooperation. Statistics has shown that roughly 85% of CIS students studying in China are actually from Russia. Out of 123 Sino-foreign Cooperative-run schools and programs jointly run by Chinese universities and CIS universities, 119 are Sino-Russian cooperative-run schools or programs. In addition, China has signed 3 agreements on mutual recognition of academic degrees and qualification with three CIS countries: Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Except for Confucius Institute, the higher education cooperation between China and Eastern Europe still lack of “vitality”. In 2013, only 3,000 students from Eastern Europe came to China for education, and merely 2,000 Chinese students went to that region for study. Poland is the only one country, which carried out one Sino-foreign Cooperative-run school and five programs with China.

It is obvious that the current higher education cooperation between China and ASEAN is more active and diversified comparing to the rest of the regions along the “B&R Initiative” routes. The China-ASEAN higher education cooperation will definitely play a demonstrative role in promoting the higher education cooperation in the context of “B&R initiative”. In this sense, the higher education cooperation between China and ASEAN will become the first step for China to reshape the global higher education landscape.

II. THE CHALLENGES FOR CHINA - ASEAN HIGHER EDUCATION COOPERATION

Even in the context of “B&R initiative”, China-ASEAN higher education cooperation also faces internal and external challenges. The toughest internal challenge is the development

gaps among different higher education systems in China-ASEAN region, while the greatest external challenge comes from the US Policy of Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy.

It is obvious that the higher education systems among ASEAN member nations are different from country to country in terms of the development levels. Due to economic and political reasons, except for Singapore and Thailand, the higher education systems in the rest of the ASEAN countries are still comparatively underdeveloped and insufficiently internationalized. A recent research shows that except for Singapore and Thailand, the higher education in rest of the 8 ASEAN countries are still in elite or mass stage [13]. When comparing with China, the gap will be even more visible especially in terms of the scale and inputs of the higher education. It is commonly known that sustainable higher education cooperation should be complementary for all and should achieve a win-win situation. However, in China-ASEAN context, it is difficult for China and each ASEAN member country to complement each other comprehensively. In reality, it would be more likely that China shall provide more to build up the cooperation. Even China is eager and willing to do so, China and ASEAN still should consider solutions to some practical issues, which may erode the China-ASEAN higher education convergence. These issues may include but not limited to the one-way flow of students, unification of the quality assurance, and supranational coordination mechanism.

The “B&R initiative” is an important economic and diplomatic route map proposed by China to build up a new model of major-power relationship. It may change the current rules and orders of global economy, politics, society and even education. Therefore, it will inevitably be questioned and obstructed by the vested interest group led by the United States. One of the countermeasures to the “B&R initiative” is advocating and pushing the “Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy”. The main purpose of this strategy is to curb China's upward trend by fully offsetting China's influence in Southeast Asia. The “Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy” is not only limited to politics, military and economy, but also extended to the so-called soft power--the influence of the ideology, education, culture and etc. As a response to this challenge, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed six key tasks to facilitate the cooperation between China and ASEAN, when attending the China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Laos (Vientiane) on July 25, 2016. He also emphasized that the social and humanistic communication will be the new pillar supporting the future China-ASEAN cooperation and Both China and ASEAN should enrich the connotation of social and educational cooperation [14].

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR CHINA - ASEAN HIGHER EDUCATION COOPERATION

In view of the great significance of China - ASEAN higher education cooperation in the context of “B&R initiative” and the challenges it faces, it is suggested that the higher education sector in China-ASEAN region should promote regional higher education convergence in the following three aspects:

Firstly, under the top-level design of promoting the “B&R Initiative”, Chinese higher education sector should build mutual trust, establish reciprocal ties and enhance the cohesion

with ASEAN counterparts. The ultimate goal of the “B&R Initiative” is to jointly boost coordinated development of the countries along the routes, and increase the well being of the people through connectivity. Higher education cooperation between China and ASEAN should not be confined to the field of education only, it should be an open cooperation, which may include the involvement of universities, industries and research institutes. Only in this way, could the China-ASEAN cooperation in higher education better meet the economic and social demand of the relevant countries, create innovative cooperation models, and provide more reciprocal opportunities for the people and the country. This will be also helpful to strengthen the cohesion and sustainability of the cooperation itself.

Secondly, on the basis of mutual trust, China should adapt itself to and actively participate in the ASEAN model of coordination mechanism. Due to historical reasons and different interests, ASEAN countries have created the “ASEAN Model” as their unique supranational governance model to coordination issues among member countries. This model is based on consultation and consensus, and encourages non-contractual dialogues and “soft institutions”, which makes it highly inclusive and tolerant. But in reality, this model was labeled as lacking of strong leadership and implementation efficiency due to the inadequate binding force over its member countries [15]. In order to facilitate and speed up the convergence of the China—ASEAN higher education, it is suggested that China and ASEAN should draw lessons from their European counterpart--European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process. The European coordination mechanism, known as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) are based on “soft laws” and is approved to be efficient in European context [16]. China and ASEAN should adopt some essential concepts and elements of OMC, such as guidelines, indicators, benchmarks and sharing of best practices, and improve the ASEAN model gradually to create a stronger and more efficient intergovernmental coordination mechanism for their higher education cooperation.

Thirdly, China and ASEAN should draw their own “route map” to deepen their higher education cooperation by learning from the experience of the European Higher Education Area. China-ASEAN higher Education convergence can be fulfilled progressively by replacing the complex and lengthy “10+1” multilateral cooperation mechanism with a relatively easy “N+1” cooperation mechanism. To make a breakthrough in the process of higher education convergence in this region, China and some of the ASEAN member countries, which have stronger desire of internationalization and cooperative willingness, should harmonize their higher education system first. This will help them to explore and establish an “N+1” cooperative mechanism. Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia probably will be the suitable countries for this breakthrough because their higher education systems are more internationalized and their governments' attitudes are more open. China and the above three countries should draft, sign and implement guidelines, action plans and setup the indicators and benchmarks to form the regional cooperative framework. With this prototype of regional higher education convergence mechanism, the remaining ASEAN member countries and even

other neighboring countries can participate. Eventually the ultimate goal of establishing a China-ASEAN Higher Education Area shall be achieved.

In summary, although the concept of “B&R initiative” was firstly announced by president Xi Jinping in 2013, the first official action plan was released in March 2015. Therefore, like most of the research focusing on the correlation between “B&R Initiative” and China-ASEAN higher education cooperation, there are only a few related data and foreign viewpoint can be collected and obtained. This could be one limitation for all the researchers and this paper.

The “B&R Initiative” is an ambitious vision proposed by China aiming to enhance the economic, and social collaboration with countries and regions along the routes, but it need to be clearly understood and fully supported. As one essential element of the initiative, higher education cooperation will greatly facilitate the implementation of the initiative. Since China-ASEAN higher education cooperation is by far the most active and diversified one along the “B&R Initiative” routes, it will definitely play a demonstrative role in promoting the higher education cooperation in other regions. Higher education sectors in China and ASEAN region should strengthen their mutual trust, establish more efficient coordination mechanism and create more innovative cooperation model and route to overcome the internal and external challenges and boost their cooperation.

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