



Status and Prospects of Higher Education Cooperation between China and GCC Countries from the Perspective of the "Belt and Road" Initiative

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Abstract: GCC countries occupy a unique and indispensable position in the Belt and Road Initiative. It is crucial for China and GCC countries to foster humanistic exchanges and support talent development through cooperation in higher education. Since the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China-GCC higher education cooperation has made significant progress, including the initial establishment of cooperation mechanisms, the consolidation of historical foundations in humanities and social sciences exchanges, and the creation of new opportunities for collaboration in science and technology. However, compared to Western countries, China-GCC higher education cooperation remains relatively weak and has substantial room for development. Future efforts can elevate this cooperation by promoting joint educational programs, establishing higher-level mechanisms for humanities exchanges, and deepening collaboration in frontier fields.

Keywords: The Belt and Road, China, GCC, higher education cooperation

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) comprises six countries, all situated along the Persian Gulf coast (also referred to as the Gulf), including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. The Gulf region has been a focal point in the Arab world due to its significant geographic features and environment. After nearly two decades of development, the GCC countries' comprehensive strength has significantly increased, not only in economic development but also in human environment improvements, establishing themselves as the undisputed leaders among the Arab countries with a pivotal position in the international community. China has historically maintained close exchanges with the Arab region. Following the launch of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, Arab countries, due to their unique and indispensable significance, have engaged in close cooperation and exchanges with China across economic and cultural domains. Given their status as leading Arab nations, the deepening cooperation between China and GCC countries (hereinafter referred to as "China-GCC") holds heightened strategic significance.

Currently, China-GCC cooperation is noteworthy, with green energy cooperation emerging as a highlight, and economic, trade, investment, tourism, and financial cooperations flourishing [1]. However, there is a conspicuous absence of cultural exchanges. Without the smooth implementation of cultural cooperation, any deepening of cooperation will encounter "people-to-people connectivity" challenges. Moreover, transforming the concept of cooperation into reality requires not only a robust system to ensure cooperation in political and economic domains but also the cultivation of deep mutual trust and comprehensive cultural and conceptual exchanges. Engagement and cooperation in higher education represent the most effective means to achieve this goal. Thus, it is imperative to prioritize and advance the in-depth development of bilateral higher education cooperation. This research summarizes the current cooperation statutes of higher education between China and GCC countries and offers future prospects.

2. The Status of China-GCC Higher Education Cooperation

Since China acceded to the WTO, the development of higher education has trended toward internationalization. However, this development has primarily focused on "North-North" cooperation between developed countries and "South-North" cooperation between developed and developing countries, while "South-South" cooperation among developing countries has received less attention [2]. Following the launch of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, Chinese higher education has sought to enhance its regional and international influence by actively promoting "South-South cooperation" in the field of higher education. Consequently, progress in higher education cooperation between China and the countries and regions along the Belt and Road region, particularly in GCC countries, has been observed.

2.1 Cooperation Mechanism has been initially Established

In recent years, China and Arab countries, including GCC countries, have continuously optimized the mechanism of

educational exchanges, laying a solid foundation for cooperation in higher education. Since 2004, China and Arab countries have jointly established the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (CACF) to deepen bilateral dialogue and cooperation. As of July 2023, nine ministerial meetings, 18 senior officials' meetings, seven strategic dialogues at the senior officials' level, and other relevant cooperation mechanism meetings have been held under the forum's framework. At the Ninth Ministerial Meeting of CASC in July 2020, the Execution Plan 2020-2022 of CASC was adopted. Article 12 of the plan elaborates on the future path of China-Arab cooperation in education and scientific research. First, continue to strengthen cooperation in education and scientific research by encouraging exchanges between educational and research institutions of both sides. Strengthen and support exchanges between Chinese and Arab universities, gradually increase the number of scholarships for master's and doctoral degrees, and promote the active establishment of inter-university ties between Chinese and Arab universities. Additionally, encourage Chinese and Arab universities to carry out activities in history, culture, scientific and technological applications, particularly in the fields of land-based scientific and technological transfer, nanotechnology, and biotechnology. Second, support the training program for Chinese language teachers in Arab countries by increasing the number of scholarships and establishing more Confucius Institutes in these countries. Additionally, implement the "China-Arab Joint Training Program for Translators. Third, foster collaboration between Chinese and Arab research institutions by organizing seminars, conferences, and lectures, and by exchanging academic journals and think-tank publications [3].

China and Arab countries, including GCC countries, have established regular exchange platforms for higher education. These include the "China-Arab (10+1) Seminar on Cooperation in Higher Education", "China-Arab Seminar on Cooperation in Higher Education and Scientific Research", "China-Arab Forum for University Presidents", and "10+10 Cooperation Programme between Chinese and Arab Universities". These platforms have formulated specific strategic action plans. To make higher education exchanges and cooperation more concrete, China has signed a series of agreements and memoranda with some GCC countries. For example, China has signed agreements on educational cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, in the Alliance of Asian Universities established in 2017, United Arab Emirates University and King Saud University are founding members.

2.2 Humanities and Social Sciences Exchanges have been Enhanced

Cooperation in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in language teaching, has been central to China-GCC educational collaboration, consistently playing a foundational and leading role. By the end of 2023, China had established four Confucius Institutes across three GCC Arab countries. In 2018, the UAE announced the introduction of Chinese language programs in 100 primary and secondary schools. As a significant aspect of the deepening of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia planned to incorporate Chinese language instruction into all stages of higher education, as well as primary and secondary education, starting in 2019. Currently, around 50 institutions in China offer Arabic language majors, enrolling over 3,000 students. In 2018, the University of Sharjah in the UAE and Xi'an International Studies University initiated a bachelor's degree program in Arabic [4]. This program aims to cultivate applied and versatile talents with an international outlook, cross-cultural communication skills, and the ability to disseminate Chinese culture. In addition, universities and think tanks from both sides actively contribute to the development of bilateral relations and cooperation in language teaching by organizing academic forums. The "Forum on Saudi Arabian Language Education in China", jointly organized by the Centre for Arab Studies at Beijing Language and Culture University and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for the Arabic Language, explored new models of Arabic language education in China.

2.3 Cooperation in the Field of Science and Technology Based on Higher Education has Become a New Opportunity

Expanding cooperation in higher education has become a crucial aspect of strengthening the China-GCC strategic partnership. The scope of China-GCC educational collaboration has broadened, transitioning from traditional language teaching and cultural exchanges to a science and technology-oriented approach, emphasizing fields such as artificial intelligence, new energy, and technology application. Khalifa University of the UAE and Beijing Institute of Technology have engaged in in-depth cooperation in intelligent unmanned systems and have jointly established a laboratory. King Abdulaziz University has established research collaborations with Peking University, Renmin University of China, and China University of Geosciences in Chinese medicine, earth sciences, natural disaster early warning, and economic research. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology have conducted collaborative research in marine ecology and nanotechnology [5].

3. The Prospects of China-GCC Higher Education Cooperation

Historically, the GCC countries have primarily learned from the educational exchanges with Europe and the United

States, resulting in a relatively weak basis for cooperation with China. However, since the introduction of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the GCC countries have adopted the "Look East" strategy, seeking cooperation with China. This shift has opened new opportunities for higher education collaboration between China and the GCC countries. Consequently, the GCC countries can become a focal point for future higher education cooperation between China and Arab nations. In the future, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates can serve as leading countries. By aligning their higher education strategies with their social development needs, the two sides can deepen their cooperation in three key areas.

3.1 Promoting Cooperative Education Programs

China-GCC cooperation in higher education began relatively late, leaving significant room for improvement in both scale and level. As the initiator of the "Belt and Road" initiative, China should fully leverage the driving role of international cooperation in higher education to promote overall development. This can be achieved by increasing educational openness, developing high-level cooperative education with world-class resources, integrating higher education resources, and continuously optimizing and expanding the types of cooperative education. Additionally, collaboration should aim to enhance Chinese-foreign cooperative education and transnational education. Countries with strong higher education systems, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, can attract their top colleges and universities to collaborate with China, creating a pool of high-quality educational resources. Simultaneously, it is crucial to support Chinese universities that are capable of establishing campuses abroad. The Arab region stands as the foremost active area globally in the development of cross-border higher education. Of the estimated 100 branch campuses currently operating worldwide, over one-third are in the Arab region and the majority are established by America and European countries [6]. In contrast, a significant gap is evident between China, the U.S., and European countries regarding educational cooperation in the Arab region. Therefore, Chinese colleges and universities should be supported in exporting high-quality educational resources to GCC countries and encouraged to establish overseas partnerships or branches in these regions.

3.2 Establishing Higher-level Cooperation Mechanisms in Humanities and Social Sciences

China and GCC have fostered humanities exchanges through the establishment of cultural centers, translation of texts, and scholarly visits. To further enhance these efforts, it is essential to expand the number of participating schools and disciplines, thereby broadening the involvement of schools, experts, and scholars. Creating an open, inclusive, and free academic environment will encourage universities to engage in international research collaborations. Establishing a higher-level exchange mechanism in the humanities and social sciences, grounded in shared Chinese and Islamic values, is also crucial. Regular academic symposiums, presidents' forums, and special cooperation agreements can significantly facilitate collaborative research. Additionally, the mechanism should also focus on sharing academic resources and creating a big data platform for research and dissemination.

3.3 Deepening Cooperation in Frontier Fields

The "Belt and Road" initiative has significantly strengthened China-GCC cooperation, leading to numerous agreements and partnerships that foster mutual development. As GCC countries transition from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based one, there is a growing emphasis on enhancing collaboration in scientific research, technological innovation, financial services, and education. In 2020, China surpassed the European Union to become the GCC's largest trading partner, underscoring the deepening economic ties. This shift has also increased the demand for high-level talent within the China-GCC region. Universities play a crucial role in this context by collaborating to train international professionals who are proficient in English or Arabic, knowledgeable about Islamic culture, and adept in cross-cultural communication. Key areas of collaboration include medicine, energy, agriculture, biological sciences, and cultural heritage protection. Establishing a talent training platform is essential to develop a robust talent pool, thereby supporting more profound exchanges and cooperation between these regions.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the status of higher education cooperation between China and GCC countries and provided prospects and recommendations for future collaboration. It aims to enhance China's educational partnerships in the Gulf, balancing competitive advantages in educational cooperation between Western countries and the GCC, and strengthening "people-to-people connectivity" between China and Arab nations. Additionally, the study offers valuable insights for higher education cooperation efforts in other countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative.

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