



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EDUCATION AS A SOFT POWER STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: AN INSIGHT INTO CHINA-NIGERIA COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

The low level of youth development in Nigeria has necessitated the Chinese intervention through educational partnerships that cover vocational training and collaboration on research and innovation. This study investigates Nigeria-China relations through the lens of education as a soft power strategy employed by China and its impact on Nigerian youth development. It aims to assess the influence of these educational partnerships, highlighting their benefits and challenges. The study is grounded in Soft Power Theory and Positive Youth Development Theory. Thematic and content analyses were applied to examine China's educational diplomacy in Nigeria. Findings reveal that these partnerships positively influence youth development by enhancing access to skills, knowledge, and cross-cultural engagement. A notable example is the agreement between Ignatius Ajuru University and Chengdu University, which opened pathways to Chinese education for Nigerian students. The study concludes that education remains a vital tool for evolving development goals. It recommends that the Nigerian government establish a regulatory body to oversee such partnerships and adopt clear policies to safeguard the interests of Nigerian youth, ensuring that collaborations yield sustainable benefits without exploitation.

Keywords: Chinese intervention, education, soft power, sustainability, youth development.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The term soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, in the late 1990s. Nye defined soft power as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 1990). According to Nye, soft power emerges from three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate or morally authoritative. In this light, soft power positively impacts the youth development of countries in collaboration with opportunities for innovation, especially in education. Unlike hard power, which relies on force or economic sanctions, soft power operates through persuasion, credibility, and shared interests. Nye initially developed the concept of soft power in response to changing global dynamics at the end of the Cold War (Nye, 2004). With the decline of direct military confrontations between superpowers, nations increasingly relied on ideological and cultural appeal to maintain influence. The United States, for example, exercised significant soft power through Hollywood, higher education institutions, and democratic values, which attracted people worldwide. In the modern international system, soft power has become an indispensable tool for states aiming to enhance their global standing, demonstrating that the ability to influence others without force can yield substantial diplomatic and economic benefits (Mukan & Saudabekova, 2020).

Soft power's effectiveness is contingent on the credibility and consistency of a state's image, and inconsistencies in policy or perceived hypocrisy can significantly undermine its impact (Gupta, 2022). In the 21st century, education has emerged as a pivotal instrument of soft power, offering nations an avenue to influence global narratives, forge strategic alliances, and cultivate long-term goodwill without coercion or force. Educational diplomacy strengthens bilateral relations and helps to further geopolitical and economic goals (Martino, 2020; Nye, 2020). This collaboration is vital for youth development, primarily through educational-industrial integration, digital education, and educational exchange programs (Carter, 2020; Ojo, 2023).

The China-Nigeria collaboration is an explicit example of this. While Nigeria seeks infrastructural and human capital advancement, China answers to this by creating a model combining various collaborations, including technical training and institutional linkages that benefit both nations. China is tactically using education as a soft power strategy to deepen bilateral ties and influence the development landscape of Nigeria (Herr, 2019). This study seeks to answer the research question: What are the impacts of Chinese educational partnerships on youth development in Nigeria?

2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Conceptual Review

Education has gained traction globally as a soft power strategy (Whitestone, Savic, Lovekin, & He, 2022). Countries like Ghana and Kenya use educational diplomacy to attract foreign nationals in Africa. They are also key recipients of Chinese partnerships such as the Confucius Institute, scholarships, and exchange programmes that have improved employability among youths. As countries engage in educational diplomacy, ensuring these relationships translate to national development is paramount. Australia and Finland have leveraged education as a soft power strategy for youth development. In this direction, Ezebuilo (2023) and Ezebuilo, Chukwudi, Obiora, & Ofuonye (2025) emphasise the importance of youth empowerment to sustainable development in every society. In Australia, higher



education is used to attract international students. In Finland, teacher training and development aids promote its education model. Both countries can successfully enhance their global images and influence, aside from contributing to youth development in countries where the students and teachers come from

Education

Education is a driver of development; it empowers the individual and improves the rate of national development and global competitiveness (UNESCO, 2020). There is a relation between education and better living standards, as established by Whitestone, Savic, Lovekin, and He (2022) and Nimco & Kaumbulu (2024). Education reduces illiteracy levels, poverty, and civic participation (Adebajo, Chukwudi, Olu-Owolabi, & Salako, 2024). There are disparities in the access and quality of education that citizens receive in various countries, as states use academic collaborations and exchange programmes to create a positive perception in the minds of those who come to study. Students' favourable thoughts of their host countries serve as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding and development (UNESCO, 2023).

Education in every society is bound to boost innovation and its structural personnel (scientists, engineers, experts of different fields), adaptability, dynamism in technology as witnessed in AI, ICT, and digital expansion, and attraction of global investors, who cherish continuous innovation. The political and economic systems must be shaped to support innovation and accommodate the new outcome.

Youth Development

Soft power strategies such as educational collaboration and cultural exchanges significantly impact youth development (Carter, 2020). China, the US, and the UK engage in scholarships, exchange programmes, and cultural events to have a long-term influence. International academic exchanges contribute to youth development by exposing them to global best practices, improving development rates, and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Nigerian students studying in China have developed technical skills, language proficiency, and cultural competence, all of which positively impact the country's innovation capacity when they return (Müller, Jung, Jazdi & Weyrich, 2022).

Dimensionally, while there are valid concerns about ideological influence and dependency, the most important thing is to harness these youths' skills by ensuring that national development plans help them thrive as they return to the country. Nye (2005) has maintained that the youths are not a problem to be fixed but nurtured and made progressive because they possess an inherent capacity to be explored. Societies must endeavour to support the youth, even with the opportunities embedded in collaborations with countries

Soft Power

Several studies on soft power have examined the influence of states on others through attraction instead of coercion. Soft power is derived from culture, political values, and foreign policies as conceptualized by Nye (Nye, 2004). Soft power is quantified using indices such as the Soft Power 30 and the Global Soft Power Index, which rank states based on digital engagement, education, and cultural reach. States like France, Germany, the UK, and Australia usually score high points due to



strong diplomatic networks and cultural exports. In Asia, empirical studies show that China uses Confucius Institutes, infrastructure diplomacy, and scholarships as soft power strategies. Chinese educational collaborations and exchange programmes have improved the perception of China among African students. Some critics argue that Chinese soft power is undermined by its authoritarian government and censorship (Nimco & Kaumbulu, 2024).

For Africa, soft power has been linked to educational partnerships, media reach, and cultural diplomacy. The media sector is vital for promoting and cooperating with other sectors, and must be professionalised for efficiency (Chukwudi, Bello, Apeloko, & Olawunmi, 2024). States with positive public images and stable democratic patterns generally attract more foreign partnerships, and the media also has a role to play in that attraction by projecting positive information such as a secure and favourable environment. It is a different investigation that can unpack the positive and negative factors that impede or strengthen collaborations.

Soft Power Theory

This study is partly understood through the lens of Soft Power Theory (SPT), first introduced by Joseph Nye, which emphasises a country's ability to shape others' preferences through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power has three (3) positive tangible qualities: kindness, competence, and commitment. This means that attraction and appeal are possible where there is kindness in place, a certain level of mastery in a valuable domain, and shared commitment to a particular ideology or identity (Vuving, 2020). When a country's culture, education, and other services are attractive, other countries can be encouraged to collaborate with them (Nye, 2008). Apart from the state, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) can influence others through soft power (Nye, 2011). In all, Doern (2008) posits that it is the perception of others that showcases the effectiveness of a country.

As a form of soft power, education is a strategic tool in international relations that encourages intellectual exchange, cultural affinity, and mutual trust. China's use of educational diplomacy in Nigeria through initiatives such as the Luban Workshop, university partnerships, and vocational training exemplifies the deployment of soft power to cultivate long-term influence and align developmental narratives (Gallarotti, 2011). These efforts not only address Nigeria's immediate development goals but also embed Chinese ideologies, technological standards, and institutional models within the Nigerian academic ecosystem, therefore showing the attraction of a country to others, as Nye (2004) pointed out.

Soft power theory is often criticised for being intangible, especially regarding its source and impact. Soft power theory maintains relevance because it creates an alternative to hard power such as military warfare (Vuving, 2020).

The Positive Youth Development Theory (PYDT)

This second theory, Positive Youth Development (PYD), was adopted because the soft power theory did not underpin youth development perfectly in this study. The theory was developed around the 1990s with key proponents such as Richard M. Lerner, Jacqueline V. Lerner, and Peter Benson. The theory emerged with tackling a deficit-based model committed to ending the misconduct of youths



such as violence, drug indulgence, and delinquency, and maintaining that the “youths are not problems to be fixed” but should be seen as resources to be taken care of because they have capacity (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Benson, 2007). When the youths' strengths are in a supportive environment, their growth will be positive and progressive (Benson, 2007). Lerner et al (2005) present the ‘5 Cs’ upon which PYD is embedded: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. The theory also posits that development programs should be implemented to harness the youth's inherent resources.

In application, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory encourages and strengthens youths in alignment with sustainable youth development (Lerner et al, 2005), as stated in this study, and in tandem with the expectations of Nigeria-China collaborations. Despite the negative features that may be found among the youths of Nigeria and China, the nurture with the application of the ‘5 Cs’ of Lerner ensures an excellent opportunity for the utmost youth Positive Youth Development is highly viewed as a channel for tackling problems such as insecurity, joblessness, divisions, and exclusions in Nigeria and Africa in general (Uzoegwu, 2023). This collaboration of the two countries gives students of FUNAAB access to industrial internships and exposure to technical matters across the manufacturing, agro-processing, and technological sectors, significantly impacting youth development.

This theory has been criticised for being founded in Western and individualistic societies like the United States of America (USA). It does not align with Asian and African culture, within which China and Nigeria are based (Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, Hilliard, Hershberg, Piñeiro, Lerner, 2015). The PYD has also been criticised for emphasising individual traits while ignoring the structural defects (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2020). The study found that the two theories (SPT & PYD) are fit for underpinning the analysis of this study, despite the criticisms.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying exclusively on secondary data sources such as scholarly journals, official university publications, and credible news reports to examine how education functions as a soft power strategy in China-Nigeria relations. The adoption of thematic and content analyses became valuable in exploring key themes of the study, such as Educational Diplomacy, Education-Industrial Integration, Digital Education, Symbolism and Cultural Messaging, and integrating them into the study. Soft power theory and positive youth development theory are chosen as the underpinning of this study. While the soft power underpins the aspect of diplomacy and avoidance of violence, the youth development theory, on the other hand, ensures that youths benefit from the relationship between China and Nigeria.

4.0. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTENT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. China's Educational Diplomacy in Nigeria

China has inaugurated several educational partnerships in Nigeria that take different forms, some technical and vocational, some with Chinese institutions and companies. There are also Chinese government-sponsored scholarships for Nigerian students to study in Chinese universities (Christopher, 2024). These programs promote people-to-people ties, cultural immersion, and the



formation of pro-China alum networks. Also, over fifteen (15) Nigerian universities have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with various Chinese universities to facilitate formal, technical, and vocational learning. During COVID-19, initiatives like the “cloud unveiling” of Luban Workshops showcased China’s ability to deliver technical education remotely. Confucius Institutes (though less emphasised in technical training) serve as centres for Chinese language and culture, enhancing soft power through cultural education and public diplomacy. Two (2) Nigerian universities, namely, the University of Lagos and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, host Confucius Institutes to promote Mandarin language skills and cultural literacy (Elekwa, 2023). A few of these educational partnerships are analysed, namely, the Luban Workshop situated in the University of Abuja, the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE), the Chengdu University MoU, and the Ogun-Guangdong Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in collaboration with the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB).

Overview of the Luban Workshop in Abuja

The Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja is one of ten in Africa, and it was set up by the Tianjin educational authorities to provide vocational training to African youths and bridge the gap between skills and degrees or certificates. The Luban Workshop, located at the University of Abuja, was established in Nigeria to enhance technical and vocational education, serve the goals outlined in Nigeria’s 2014–2043 national infrastructure development plan, and deepen China-Nigeria diplomatic relations. It aims to transfer Chinese technological expertise, develop skilled local labour aligned with industrial needs, and encourage long-term academic and cultural ties. The initiative commemorated 50 years of China-Nigeria relations and aligned with China’s broader educational outreach strategy (China Daily, 2022).

The Luban Workshop is a collaborative project involving Tianjin Sino-German University of Applied Sciences, Tianjin Railway Technical and Vocational College, the University of Abuja, China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), and Huawei Technologies. The workshop includes a basic experimental training system, a rail transit training centre at the Abuja Urban Rail Depot, and seven specialised laboratories (China Daily, 2022). It operates under a “One Body with Two Wings” model— a centralised academic training supported by localised industrial and infrastructural components (McCutcheon, Billman, Romero & Kartscher, 2021). The curriculum focuses on applied technical disciplines, particularly electrical and electronic engineering, mechanical engineering, and civil engineering. It offers four professional training directions and includes twenty-one (21) bilingual (Chinese and English) textbooks and instructional materials. The program emphasises hands-on training, industry-relevant skills, and teacher capacity-building, with Nigerian faculty receiving certification and training in China to deliver the curriculum locally. The emphasis on practical, workforce-ready education reflects China’s intent to align educational outputs with its economic and technological engagement in Nigeria.

Establishing the Luban Workshop aligns with Nigeria’s long-term development goals as outlined in the National Integrated Infrastructure Master Plan (NIIMP), 2014–2043. This plan emphasises the need to build human capital, improve technical education, and modernise infrastructure across transportation, energy, and construction sectors. This move also corresponds with the speech of heads of state and government to youths on various platforms, such as the African Development Bank



Forums, and the launch of initiatives like the Investment in Digital and Creative Industries (I-DICE) to invest in their technical skills and agricultural equipment. Therefore, the Luban Workshop addresses these priorities by equipping Nigerian students and professionals with industry-ready electrical engineering, mechanical systems, and civil infrastructure skills. These sectors have already been identified as critical for Nigeria's socio-economic transformation (Atsiya & Tenuche, 2019; Xinhua, 2024; Adesina, 2023).

Partnerships with institutions like the University of Abuja and technical support from Chinese firms like Huawei and CCECC have enabled the workshop to not only deliver vocational training but also facilitate knowledge transfer and technology localization, both of which are key components of the NIIMP. Furthermore, with the establishment of training bases such as the Abuja Urban Rail Depot, the initiative supports the development of sustainable urban transport systems as envisioned in the national plan. This ensures that the educational intervention is not isolated but embedded within Nigeria's broader strategy to diversify the economy, reduce youth unemployment, and promote inclusive growth through infrastructural modernisation and workforce development.

The Significance of Digital Education Exchanges

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital education exchanges have become the mainstay. These virtual initiatives, such as the "cloud unveiling" and "cloud acceptance" of the Luban Workshop in Nigeria, emerged as an extension of China's soft power strategies. These strategies have enabled China to showcase its capabilities and project an impression of benevolence and kindness, which are fundamental tenets of the soft power theory. The educational partnerships between Nigeria and China, specifically the Luban Workshop launched during the pandemic, embody China's commitment to adaptability and innovation in international cooperation. During the lockdown period, when physical movement was restricted to the bare minimum and physical distance was propagated, using cloud-based platforms to launch educational programs showcased China's technological capacity and resilience (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019).

Digital education tools also serve as an ideological bridge, allowing Chinese technological standards and cultural values to be championed across borders. Nigeria stands to benefit from these platforms through access to real-time technical training, virtual labs, and academic resources that would otherwise be limited by infrastructure or geography. Digital education has also enabled more inclusive participation from faculty and students across multiple regions. Another advantage is environmental sustainability, as the carbon footprint associated with physical international academic exchanges is substantially reduced. These digital modalities have empowered China to maintain its influence during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby strengthening perceptions of reliability and thought leadership in education (Kavanagh, 2019).

This collaborative approach ensures mutual respect and shared ownership of academic content. Udom, Gberville, & Osimen (2025) have stressed the values of a developed educational system in Nigeria through the impacts on personnel in different sectors, their professionalism, local and international relations. All stakeholders must endeavour to support education development (Chukwudi & Owoh, 2024). In the long term, the increased acceptance and normalisation of digital education exchanges could reshape the landscape of educational diplomacy globally and specifically, bilateral



relations between Nigeria and China, with the greater integration of technologies such as virtual classrooms, thus reinforcing China's role as a key architect of global education infrastructure.

Unarguably, there were positive records of continuous education. However, there were cases of rural-urban divide where children in the rural centres lack access to well-equipped technological infrastructures enjoyed by their counterparts in the centre. UNICEF Nigeria (2021) revealed the exclusion of girls from low-income families from educational participation due to norms peculiar to their society, where early marriage and home responsibilities are left for the female child to care for. This unequal access impedes plans to harness youth development in Africa and Nigeria.

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE) and Chengdu University MoU

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE) in Nigeria and Chengdu University in China, representing a blend of educational and sports diplomacy and showcasing how informal exchanges could evolve into structured academic partnerships. Initiated during the 2023 FISU World University Games in Chengdu, this collaboration was catalyzed by IAUE's participation and the remarkable performance of its student-athletes, which attracted international attention and goodwill. Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire was officially founded in 1949 after World War II (2) to promote peace through sports. Initially begun by a single individual, Jean Petitjean, it evolved to have a formal organizing body formed by France, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, and Switzerland in Luxembourg. After the performance of IAUE's students at the competition, both institutions recognized the potential for broader academic engagement and formalized their relationship to promote mutual development in higher education (Anosike, 2023).

The MoU covers the exchange of students, faculty, and researchers, collaborative sports science programs, education, institutional development, and a sister-school relationship. Chengdu University expressed interest in sharing resources and promoting long-term cooperation that enhances global academic networks. This partnership illustrates a key element of China's soft power strategy, leveraging shared experiences (like global sports events) to initiate educational cooperation, build intercultural understanding, and expand its influence in African higher education. It also aligns with Nigeria's aspirations to internationalise its academic institutions, promote capacity-building, and enhance the global competitiveness of its students and faculty.

This alliance further illustrates education as a gateway to soft power. Though born out of sports diplomacy during the 2023 FISU World University Games, the agreement blossomed into a formal academic collaboration (Uchegbuo, 2022; Adewale, 2023). Such transnational academic networks create a more open constituency to Chinese perspectives and knowledge systems, reinforcing Beijing's global narrative of cooperative development. These interactions go beyond short-term training, establishing long-term cultural and educational ties that promote mutual respect and influence.

Education-Industry Integration: The Ogun-Guangdong FTZ and FUNAAB Collaboration

The collaboration between the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB) and the Ogun-Guangdong Free Trade Zone (FTZ) exemplifies how education-industry integration can



function as a strategic model for mutual development and soft power projection. This partnership, rooted in the need to bridge academia and industry, leverages Chinese enterprises' resources and technological expertise within the FTZ to enhance Nigerian students' practical training and employability (Olajide & Osinuga, 2024; Adeyiga, 2024). This collaboration gives FUNAAB students access to industrial internships and exposure to technical matters across the manufacturing, agro-processing, and technological sectors. This initiative, properly used and taken advantage of, will produce a better-skilled workforce that can solve Nigeria's pressing issues, like scarcity in food supply and infrastructural development. Chinese companies will also have professionals who are familiar with the local terrain. This would improve their work efficiency, reduce overhead costs, and increase chances of local acceptance in various communities. Integrating academic curricula with industry needs will solve the challenge of the skill gap between graduates and the jobs they apply for, saving other companies the cost and time that would have been spent retraining them. The partnership, therefore, promotes innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation. The FUNAAB–FTZ model demonstrates how educational diplomacy extends beyond traditional classroom settings into the economic realm, making education a key tool in shaping bilateral economic relations and local industrial ecosystems. It also reflects China's broader strategy of fusing educational initiatives with development aid and foreign direct investment, thus ensuring that its influence is both sustainable and deeply institutionalised (Adeyiga & Eriniso, 2024).

Symbolism and Cultural Messaging in Educational Diplomacy

Symbolism denotes the meaning attached to an event or object. Cultural messaging is the use of cultural artefacts to communicate. China's educational engagements in Nigeria go beyond tangible infrastructure and curriculum development. They are laden with symbolic gestures and cultural messaging that amplify their soft power strategy. The first example in this case study is the launch of the Luban Workshop in 2020, which coincided with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between China and Nigeria. It exemplified how timing and symbolism frame such initiatives as milestones in a long-standing partnership. Similarly, the digital conveyance of the workshop during the COVID-19 pandemic, known as "cloud unveiling," communicated adaptability, resilience, and digital innovation. This positioned China as a technologically adept and dependable ally in times of crisis (Faizullaev, 2013; Khan, Ahmad & Fernald Jr., 2020).

In the case of the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and the Chengdu University collaboration, symbolic exchanges such as gift-giving and public commendation of Nigerian student-athletes who participated in the FISU Games helped cultivate a sense of mutual respect and cultural affinity. These actions are not standalone but strategically communicated and denoted. They subtly reinforce the Beijing Consensus, which portrays China as a benevolent and respectful partner seeking deeper emotional and diplomatic ties. Moreover, the integration of bilingual textbooks in English and Chinese, teacher exchange programmes, and localised training modules serves as a vehicle for cultural messaging by embedding Chinese values within Nigerian institutions (Gong, 2020). These symbolic elements collectively shape China's image as a cooperator and not a manipulator. The cultural aspect complements China's economic and geopolitical goals, ensuring its influence is deep-rooted in Nigeria's academic and cultural landscape (UNESCO, 2023). This is a measured approach that Nigeria can adopt in its foreign policies by ensuring that it is not a big brother or Giant in name only,



but also in history. As exemplified by China's soft power strategies, Nigeria can also ensure that its aid to and bilateral relations with other states positively affect its development trajectory.

It is worth noting that China's cultural messaging in Nigeria focuses on creating awareness about the values of Mandarin and Confucianism, Confucius Institute ceremonies and scholarships, mutual friendship and "win-win" cooperation, and celebrations such as Chinese New Year celebrations, student essay competition, and organised shows on calligraphy in Nigerian universities. According to Bodomo (2020), symbolic gestures are a strategy for building a positive image that showcases China as the epitome of development to align with. In opposition, Elekwa (2023) submit that the Confucius Institute is never viewed as even-handed by many stakeholders but as a platform of state propaganda with a partial and interest-laden platform.

It has been widely observed that Nigerian cultural centres were not established in major Chinese cities. Similarly, Nigerian languages and traditions are not taught within Chinese universities. Cultural products such as Nollywood and literature are not well supported at the diplomatic level of Nigeria-China collaboration (Elekwa, 2023). Despite the unbalanced reciprocity, the collaboration has continued to progress, especially in Nigeria. This continuity may be attributed to Nigeria's quest to collaborate and key into opportunities for non-violent diplomacy (soft power) and youth development targeted at sustainable development.

Benefits and Challenges of Educational Partnerships

China-Nigeria relations hold equal amounts of potential and challenges. While educational partnerships benefit both parties, measurement and evaluation are necessary to achieve strategic outcomes. The Chinese government has been able to institutionalize its influence within Nigeria's higher education system. In contrast, specific events and actions by the Nigerian government remain stand-alone and are not yet integrated into institutions and bodies that could perpetuate Nigeria's footprint. Through long-term partnerships, localized curricula, and faculty training programs, Chinese educational models will become embedded in Nigerian academic structures, shaping future generations' learning curve and professional development. This deep-seated presence offers China strategic leverage in shaping educational priorities and even policy orientations in the long run (d'Hooghe, 2021). With Nigeria playing catch-up in technology, aligning technical training with Chinese industrial needs can create economic dependence, where the Nigerian labour market becomes increasingly tailored to Chinese corporate systems and technologies.

The partnerships between Nigeria and China have evolved from traditional aid and investments to include ideological and developmental alignment. As Nigeria becomes more integrated into China's educational and economic framework, it may gradually align more closely with Chinese global narratives and diplomatic positions (Tankel, Curtis, Fitt & Goldberg, 2021). On the flip side, these collaborations offer Nigeria strategic benefits, including improved infrastructure, expanded access to modern educational resources, and exposure to global best practices. This collaboration has positively improved technical capacity, availed Nigerian students the opportunity of global interaction capacity, and economic relations (Bodomo, 2020). Bringing Mandarin and Chinese cultural content into Nigerian universities, primarily through Confucius Institutes, is a good channel for obtaining



scholarships, skills acquisition, and technological innovation in line with the standards existing in China.

One risk is that Nigeria is a country battling with the effects of colonialism on culture and education, thereby prompting actions on decolonisation. Critically, long-term implications are raised about Nigeria's cultural and curriculum independence and intellectual decolonisation. This may also lead to the extinction of people's local knowledge systems, African-centred pedagogies, and local content in Nigerian education. With these risks, Nigeria could depend on Chinese funding, technical expertise, and the educational content in centres like the Luban Workshop. This would then become a replica of dependence on Western inputs like textbooks, which are generally used in primary and secondary schools. These partnerships aim to improve national capacities, including indigenous education systems, and not ignore or replace them (Umbach, 2020). The second issue is the gradual erosion of sovereignty, where national priorities are compromised to suit the partner's interests. This could play out regarding the curricula used to teach students and development trajectories that may be edited to align with Beijing narratives (Kania, 2019). Thus, while these partnerships contribute to the nation's capacity building, Nigeria must safeguard its sovereignty and autonomy by investing in local systems across education and technology to reduce its vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, the benefits of these partnerships include capacity building via interactions with the Chinese for infrastructure, modern teaching equipment, and facilities. These partnerships give experiential learning, professional development, and transfer of technical know-how, especially in the tertiary education system, thereby improving development rates (Umbach, 2020; Gong, 2020). Nigerian youths could develop industry-relevant skills through vocational training organised by the Chinese in the engineering and technology sectors, making them globally sought after. By training students in practical, employable skills and exposing them to real-world industrial environments, such as the Ogun-Guangdong FTZ collaboration with FUNAAB, these partnerships help reduce youth unemployment and contribute to national economic productivity (Doern, 2008; d'Hooghe, 2021).

These educational exchanges promote internationalisation, allowing Nigerian students and faculty to engage with global academic networks and pedagogical practices. Through scholarships, joint research, faculty exchanges, and the inclusion of bilingual curricula, Nigerian institutions gain international exposure, while Chinese partners extend their cultural and academic influence.

4.2. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings have shown that through soft power diplomacy, China-Nigeria collaboration has benefited in numerous ways, such as education, culture, and peace development. All these sectors have added to sustainable youth development, especially in Nigeria, and these findings are underpinned by soft power and positive youth development theory. The government needs to replace the establishment of more universities with the establishment of more technical and vocational institutes, such as the Luban Workshop. Corroborating this challenge is that the Nigerian government has unwittingly created a false hierarchy where a traditional university education is valued above a technical degree (Omokaro & Akpojaro, 2022). This is evident during promotion periods where university degree holders are promoted faster or more than their counterparts who graduated from technical or vocational training institutes and colleges of education.



Also, when applying for advanced degrees like Master's and Doctoral programmes, vocational and polytechnic degree holders must take programs to convert their degrees to be on the same standing as conventional B.Sc. holders before proceeding with their advanced degree. This issue has been brought to light several times, and the government is taking steps to recalibrate national priorities.

Nigerian youths should be willing to give the time, energy, and attention needed to learn and develop themselves (Ojudu, 2025). The skills acquired through these educational partnerships are life hacks that create job offers and improve the chances of upward mobility. Other African countries like Ghana and Kenya follow the same route, investing over one billion dollars in establishing technical, vocational, and research institutes. States like the United Kingdom, Australia, Finland, and Canada have long engaged these systems by incorporating polytechnics in their institutions of higher learning, such that the technical and vocational programmes are in line with the general curricula and compulsory for every student (Doern, 2008; Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article concludes that education is a cornerstone of China's soft power strategy in Nigeria. Through institutional partnerships and vocational programmes, China can nurture academic and cultural relationships that create sustained goodwill and alignment in the long run for diplomatic improvement and youth development, which are in line with the two adopted theories, soft power theory (SPT) and positive youth development (PYD) theory. These initiatives portray China as a benevolent global leader and adequately meet Nigeria's current development needs if all stakeholders properly harness them. Educational sovereignty maintains a focal point in international relations; as such, all policies should be examined to ensure their impacts tally with national priorities. Nigeria has yet to maximise the potential of these partnerships and step up with indigenous practices that will fast-track youth development.

Therefore, it is on this basis that this study recommends that:

- i. There should be regular random checks by the Nigerian government, as there were in primary and secondary schools under the Obasanjo and Jonathan administrations, to ensure that these initiatives serve Nigerians. Ongoing evaluation of educational collaborations is essential. The Nigerian government should establish systems for regularly assessing partnerships' effectiveness, impact, and equity to make future data-informed adjustments.
- ii. Universities must ensure that academic freedom and critical thinking are preserved. This includes protecting institutions from undue ideological influence and encouraging healthy spaces where diverse perspectives can thrive.
- iii. In collaboration with universities, the Nigerian government should prioritise investments in local research, infrastructure, and faculty development. Adequate funding should be easily accessible for universities, and partnerships should be structured to include technology transfer, co-development of teaching resources, and institutional strengthening that continues beyond the tenure of any administration or foreign involvement.
- iv. Curricula used in Chinese-Nigerian educational programs should be co-developed by both partners to ensure relevance to local socio-economic needs while incorporating global best



practices. When both partners pull together, the effectiveness is assured and beneficial to China-Nigeria and the globe. The policies developed should be well clarified and transparent while employing the services and commitment of key actors, such as accreditation bodies, curriculum review committees, bilateral education commissions, and public sector advisors.

Conflict of Interest

There are no competing interests of any kind for the writers.

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