

# Foreign Aid Strategies and Development Cooperation in Africa: A Comparative Study of China and Japan's Education Cooperation in Nigeria Between 2015 and 2025

Eugenia Chinenye Ndukwe<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jilin University, Changchun, Jilin, China.

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**Abstract:** The impact of foreign aid in spurring development is a hot and highly controversial topic among development scholarship. In this paper, a comparative analysis will be given on education cooperation and aid strategies of China and Japan towards Nigeria in the decade 2015 to 2025. It questions the magnitude and nature of educational assistance by the two countries, the level in which the interventions assisted in the formation of human capital and the extent to which these interventions can be used as a tool of soft power projection. Based on the information presented in the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), follow-up FOCAC Action Plans and TICAD declarations, the paper recognizes a significant difference in the aid doctrine of the two nations. The education cooperation practiced by China is under the frameworks of FOCAC and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and focuses on the infrastructure provision, Luban Workshop TVET model and mass scholarship programmes. As a TICAD-member, Japan focuses on the sustained technical cooperation, qualitative capacity building and institutional reform. The paper traces the development of both systems throughout the decade, analyses the overlap of educational assistance by geopolitical rivalry and assesses the institutional obstacles limiting the capacity of Nigeria to either fully capitalize on either of the systems. It concludes by making policy recommendations of how both partnerships can be better used by Nigeria to deal with the human capital gap.

**Keywords:** Foreign Aid, Educational Cooperation, China, Japan, Nigeria, FOCAC, BRI, TVET, Luban Workshop, SMASSE, TICAD, Human Capital Development, Soft Power, Capacity Building, South-South Cooperation.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Whether foreign aid is working to stimulate development or not is a controversial issue and a point of hot debate among developmental studies. The intentions of the developed countries, which offer such assistance, and the degree at which the interventions are consistent with the developmental needs of the recipient countries are often acutely questioned. The twenty first century has changed the landscape of development aid in a great way. Most significantly, this has been necessitated by rise of China as a key and ever-assertive development partner in Africa, to age-old western donors and classical partners like Japan.

Although foreign aid has had tangible effects on educational development in developing nations such as Nigeria, the concomitant existence of the two Asian giants in the educational cooperation arena makes the aspect a powerful evaluation tool. They all work on a different institutional framework and logic of strategy. The difference

in their methods, the one being scale-based and speed-based the other being depth-based and institutional in its orientation, provokes significant questions concerning the essence of meaningful educational assistance to a nation that has to cope with the challenges of demographic expansion and industrialization, as well as with the requirements of democratic rule. This is of particular analytical interest to the decade 2015 2025. It includes the Johannesburg Summit of FOCAC (2015), the launching the BRI Education Action Plan (2016), and the Beijing Summit of FOCAC (2018). It encompasses as well the FOCAC IX and FOCAC VIII post-pandemic recalibration of Chinese engagement in Africa. On the Japanese side, it covers TICAD VI (2016) all the way through TICAD IX (2025), as Japan increasingly optimised its Africa cooperation paradigm as the Chinese influence on the continent grew. All of these developments are elements of a decade of heightened geopolitical rivalry that takes place in large measure with the tool of educational aid.

Africa has the largest population with the largest economy in Nigeria, which makes it a very instructive area to base this evaluation. Structural challenges have continued to limit its path of economic growth with acute human capital shortages being one of the challenges. According to the report given by National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria had the highest rate of unemployment recorded, since the year 2000, the country registered 33 percent unemployment in the fourth quarter of 2020 (NBS, 2021). Despite a later change in reporting procedure that resulted in an extremely disputed decrease in that number, a structural imbalance between what the educational institutions of Nigeria are generating and the needs of its developing industrial sector has not been addressed. It was estimated that Nigeria lost 1,500 university lecturers to other countries within the period between 2015 and 2020 (Tebeje, 2021). This is just one aspect of a larger brain drain crisis that has been gaining momentum in the period under consideration. As anticipated by China in terms of cooperation model, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is thus a crucial area of intervention, considering that it is directly connected between the education and the practical needs of the Hindu capacity building in the industrial sector.

In spite of the fact that the literature on Sino-African and Japan-Africa cooperation is quite extensive, there is an evident lack of research that comprehensively covers the differences in approach and effectiveness referring to one particular recipient country and its unique situation of development. This research thus aims at filling this gap. It contrasts the educational collaboration approaches of both countries in Nigeria in the frame of 2015-2025 period and puts the analysis in the context of the dual frames of recipient-country developmental needs and the soft power goals of donor countries.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### ➤ *Theoretical Framework: Soft Power and Educational Aid*

The concept of soft power is generally taken as the ability to achieve what one wants without using force (Nye, 2004). It gets its strength in the attractiveness of the culture, values and policies of a country. The international relations perspective of the foreign aid debate has changed a lot. It has now taken on the geopolitical aspect of the influence of a donor country and a demonstration of its values and political philosophy, over and above the solely developmental standards that traditionally characterized the field. In that regard, foreign aid, and its educational variants, is perceived less as the act of donor generosity and more as a tool of developing influence, spreading political ideology, and obtaining diplomatic goodwill (Vieira, 2019).

It is seen that the use of educational aid is a singularly efficient method of achieving soft power in the long term. Its strength is its ability to influence values, dispositions and worldviews of future elite of the recipient nation. The scholarship programmes especially are usually aimed at the top-level of the academic performers in the recipient countries. These students are subjected to the culture, mode of governance and scientific and technological paradigm of

the donor nation and the prospective implication of ideological alignment and institution affinity over time (King, 2013). Considering China, King (2020) notes that throughout the series of FOCAC Action Plans, the focus on education and human resources development has remained constant, albeit shifting between general scholarships and building schools to a more specifically orientated investment to higher education and, more recently, TVET cooperation. Yuan (2022) indicates the same that the educational cooperation is part of a larger strategic plan, according to which the provision of scholarships in China is incorporated, so that educational cooperation is one of the pillars of China to influence the world in the post-2015 period.

### ➤ *Foreign Aid and Educational Development in Nigeria*

Foreign aid is a critical element, which in most instances, cannot be done without in promotion of the education sector in African nations including Nigeria. Other researches have shown that foreign educational aid leads to the development of infrastructure, building capacities, and quantifiable changes in the educational results (Mukaddas, 2019). Nevertheless, the success of that aid is highly predetermined by its orientation to the local developmental requirements and the institutional potential of recipient countries to obtain it and allocate it productively.

Most conservative Western and Eastern donors in Nigeria such as Japan have generally provided educational aid in the form of exchange programmes, postgraduate scholarship opportunities and provision of instructional material. Criticism of this model has been the order of the day. The biggest criticism is the fact that it does not reflect the socio-economic reality in Nigeria. The critics have stated that although such programmes reflect the educational philosophy of the donor nations, they do not take into account the economic and developmental realities of a nation such as Nigeria (Mukaddas, 2019). Other criticisms have focused on the fact that the exchange programmes and scholarships have often been used as a channel of brain drain where highly trained Nigerians can be permanently emigrated to donor countries. The phenomenon of brain drain has taken on acute proportions during the period of review and during the period of 2016-2021 alone, more than 9,000 doctors have left Nigeria (WHO, 2023). This number indicates the systematic breakdown of the human capital retention that is covered by educational assistance as it is currently organized, does not do much.

Adebogun et al. (2024) afford a contextual analysis of the brain drain syndrome as it occurs in the Lagos State in the period between 2015 and 2023. They ascribe it to an intersection of the decline in the quality of education, insufficient funding, political and economic unrest, and insufficient employment opportunities - exactly those factors that educational cooperation should soften. Lamido (2024) also places the issue within a governmental system. He insists that the main structural cause of the Nigerians in pursuit of education in foreign countries is bad governance, and the developmental payoff of foreign educational aid will be low without institutional change in the state sector.

### ➤ *The Evolving Landscape of China-Africa Educational Cooperation*

Since the creation of FOCAC in 2000, the educational cooperation of China with Africa has experienced significant development. According to King (2020), human resource development practices at FOCAC have continued to grow, today to include the education promises contained in the BRI Education Action Plan released by the Ministry of Education in China in 2016. In most ways, these BRI undertakings have supplemented and even surpassed those of FOCAC itself. The plan ushered in the variety of different modalities of cooperation such as language education, co-construction of laboratories, and enlarging the Luban Workshop model as a means of TVET internationalisation (Yuan, 2022). Lefifi and Kiala (2021) discuss that African countries have not optimised the FOCAC scholarship framework to an impressive extent, although its volume is substantial. They also note that the governments of African countries have largely not succeeded in trying to institutionalize the mechanisms with which they are going to tap into the talents and networks of returned scholarship recipients, the so-called haigui or China itself.

The move of the Confucius Institutes to the Luban Workshops as the symbolic tool of the Chinese educational soft power in Africa is a sign of a calculated change of direction. The Confucius Institute model, in contrast to the Luban Workshop model, was based on the more prerequisite of providing vocational competencies in accordance with the needs of the Chinese finances of infrastructure (Jamestown Foundation, 2021). This integration brings educational collaboration that is more closely related to the overall economic activities of China. In the survey of the commitments of FOCAC IX, King (2025) notes another change in the framing of education. In the previous action plans of FOCAC, education was placed in the social development category whereas the FOCAC IX places education in the talent development and empowerment of women and youth category that indicates the increased understanding of China that human capital was the decisive variable in its African strategy.

### ➤ *Japan's Cooperation Philosophy and the TICAD Process*

Japanese cooperation framework with Africa, which has been coordinated by the TICAD process since 1993, has been marked by a clear focus on people-centred cooperation, Africa ownership and co-creation, and the application of Japanese developmental experience to be a transferable model (JICA, 2023). TICAD is co-organised by the World Bank, the African Union, Japan and the United Nations Development Programme unlike FOCAC in China, which is a bilateral negotiating platform between China and 53 African states. This gives it a more multilateral nature and a greater fit with the internationally accepted development standards.

The educational cooperation in Japan has remained a unique phenomenon in the sense that it has been more about capacity building at the systemic level of education as opposed to visible output. This philosophy is exemplified by the SMASSE programme that was started in Kenya in 1998

and then expanded to other African nations. Instead of building laboratories or financing scholarship opportunities, SMASSE makes teachers train to become transformative practitioners who disseminate better pedagogical approaches to their national education systems (Matachi & Kosaka, 2018; JICA Nigeria, 2025). The African Business Education (ABE) Initiative, introduced during TICAD V in 2013 applies this people-centred reasoning to the business world by offering young African professionals an opportunity to study as a graduate and work as an intern in a Japanese company (JICA, 2023). Japan committed to training 300,000 individuals with diverse careers in the next three years at TICAD VIII in 2022 (JICA, 2022). This pledge indicates the trend of Japan to favor human resource building more than physical infrastructure as the main mode of its interaction with Africa.

## III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### ➤ *Research Design*

The research is a case study, based on comparative case study, where the author will observe the strategies of providing educational aid by China and Japan in Nigeria between the years 2015 and 2025. This structure allows considering the approach of both countries in detail and within a broader context, and how it affects the development of education in Nigeria, and makes it easier to compare the different countries using a single set of analytical tools. Case study approach is specifically appropriate to this question because the causal relations between foreign educational aid and developmental outcomes are complicated, and insight into these interventions is paramount in its particular institutional and geopolitical setting (Yin, 2014).

### ➤ *Data Collection*

Various open-access materials such as publications of the donor agencies, official policy documents, and summit declarations, as well as peer-reviewed academic literature, were used as the sources of data. The primary sources of institutions include FOCAC VII based on FOCAC IX Action Plans (2018, 2021, 2024), the BRI Education Action Plan (2016), the records of the JICA projects, the TICAD VI-IX proclaims, and the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI) briefing papers. Peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and book-length researches on China-Africa and Japan-Africa educational cooperation are the secondary sources. Since much of the bilateral data is not disaggregated specifically to Nigeria, the analysis is based on evidence available in the country-specific case, such as the Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja, 2020, and country-specific SMASSE data by JICA when using it contextualized within the wider continental setting.

### ➤ *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data collected is carried out using the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative aspect uses the discourse analysis of official policy papers and the thematic analysis of secondary sources to determine the existing trends and discrepancies in the educational assistance policy of the two countries that are donors during the reviewed period. The quantitative dimension is based on the existing statistical data in order to evaluate the size and

extent of the interventions of every donor, such as the amounts of scholarships, the number of trained personnel, and the magnitude of their infrastructure investment. The combination of these techniques creates an evaluation of the comparative efficacy of both methods, its strategic correspondence with the developmental needs of Nigeria and the effects on the soft power goals of the concerned donor states.

#### ➤ *Scope and Limitations*

The scope of the study is from 2015 to 2025. Such a decade was selected due to the analytical coherence, which means that this decade covers the entire range of the evolution of FOCAC as a South-South aid forum to a geo-political charged platform, and the gradual re-calibration of Japanese commitments with TICAD because of the altered continental landscape. The major methodological weakness is the disproportionate accessibility of disaggregated bilateral information to Nigeria in particular, since both the FOCAC promises made by China and the TICAD promises made by Japan are mostly targeted at the continental scale. Another weakness is the fact that some of the programmes, such as the Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja, which was created in late 2020, do not have sufficiently long-term results to evaluate as of yet. Despite these limitations, the research offers the most detailed comparative description of Chinese and Japanese educational cooperation in Nigeria during the discussed decade.

#### IV. CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL AID TO NIGERIA (2015–2025)

##### ➤ *Institutional Framework: FOCAC and BRI as Dual Pillars*

The educational partnership between China and Nigeria in 2015 to 2025 was implemented in two institutional frameworks that were overlapping, yet able to be considered as complementary. The former is the FOCAC process, which maintained the producing of ambitious multi-year action plans. The second one is the BRI Education Action Plan that was initiated by the ministry of education in China in 2016. Combining them, the frameworks organized a series of educational interventions the logic of which, according to King (2020), is based on the discourse of win-win, in which educational cooperation is both expressed as a form of solidarity with developing countries and serves as a means of fulfilling the Chinese interests in politics and economics.

The Johannesburg Summit of FOCAC (2015) has created a detailed set of educational commitments to establish the tune of the decade. These were 200,000 training places of the African professionals, the continued running of the 20+20 Programme of partnership between the Chinese and the African higher education institutions, and the introduction of an African Talents Programme (FOCAC, 2015). Institutional mechanisms of TVET cooperation were, first, introduced in the Beijing Summit of 2018 (FOCAC VII). Most importantly, it promised to open ten Luban Workshops in Africa as specific vocational training centres (King, 2020). These commitments were reaffirmed by the FOCAC VIII Dakar Action Plan of 2021, which happened after the COVID-19

pandemic, and promised to build ten schools in Africa, invite 10,000 high-level African professionals to Chinese seminars, and invite Chinese companies in Africa to create at least 800,000 local jobs (Huang and Askary, 2022). The 9th FOCAC in 2024, is another step to develop education with the theme of talent development and the importance of human capital in the modernisation of Africa and the strategic interests of China (King, 2025).

##### ➤ *The Luban Workshop: China's TVET Flagship in Nigeria*

The opening of a Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja in November 2020 is the physicalisation of the promise concerning the TVET cooperation between China and Nigeria during the timeframe in question. In November of 2019, the Tianjin Railway Technical and Vocational College, the Tianjin Sino-German University of Applied Sciences, and the University of Abuja signed the agreement to develop the workshop in Tianjin (Xinhua, 2020). This center was launched at the same time in Abuja and Tianjin through a virtual event that saw the presence of top officials of both nations. It has course majors in Urban Rail Transit Traffic Management, Urban Rail Transit Vehicles, Railway Bridges and tunnels, electrical, power mechanisms and telecommunications (Xinhua, 2020). In doing so, Nigeria became part of a continent-wide system of Luban Workshops, which by the mid-2020s covered sixteen African countries such as Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda (Wang, 2024, as cited in Tandfonline, 2025).

The Luban Workshop model is developed in a specifically structured way such that it is meant to meet the operational needs of the Chinese-funded infrastructure by training vocations. As Jamestown Foundation (2021) indicates, laying down of Luban Workshops is strongly linked to great investments of China in host nations infrastructure. This will guarantee the availability of local trained personnel who are conversant with Chinese engineering standards and can operate Chinese-built systems. The emphasis on rail transit in the case of Nigeria can be traced to the larger investment of the Chinese in the rail system in the country, such as the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan rail lines. This approach to TVET combined with infrastructure investment is a variant of the so-called, as Vieira (2019) calls it, China model of quaternary assistance, or a mix of aid, trade, investment, and technical services.

Nevertheless, the Nigeria Luban Workshop long-term effect is yet to be evaluated in full. The workshops are not quite old in the African region, and gathering strong statistics on graduate employability will be a undertaking of the next several years (Jamestown Foundation, 2021). The first signs of the Djibouti workshop, which trained 69 local teachers and 148 students and was able to develop local talent to work in the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, are promising, albeit with a grain of salt (Modernghana, 2023). The far greater magnitude and more complicated developmental scenario in Nigeria, though, perhaps will take much longer before similar outcomes can be proven.

➤ *Scholarships, Confucius Institutes, and People-to-People Cooperation*

In addition to the Luban Workshop, China education collaboration with Nigeria had also grown throughout the decade as it provided government scholarships and Confucius Institute programming. In 2019, 6,845 Nigerian students were studying in China, 512 of them were on Chinese government scholarships (China Admissions, 2021). According to the FOCAC IX promises, additional seats to the African students on scholarships were granted. The scale-up has been coupled with an expansion of the courses available to the Nigerian students, with a significant number of them obtaining Masters and doctoral education in engineering, medicine, and agriculture, which Nigeria is in the direst need (Xinhua, 2019).

Confucius Institute in the University of Lagos which was formed in collaboration with the Beijing Institute of technology in 2009, did not cease its operations and in fact, it expanded its activities during the period under review. So did the Confucius Institute in the Azikiwe University. These schools have not only been a venue where Mandarin language is taught but also a venue where people to people interactions took place and where culture was also profounded. However, Lefifi and Kiala (2021) portend disaster. Nigeria has not realised much of the potential of these scholarships and cultural programmes and thus has not established systematic ways of tracking and exploiting the skills of scholarship recipients who have returned to the country. There is no institutional analogy of the Thousand Talents Programme in Nigeria, which corresponds to the fact that most of the human capital that is build during these exchanges is wasted when they revert to their home country, and does not lead to the sort of industrial upgrading that can be achieved through institutional innovation, as seen in the Chinese case.

➤ *Geopolitical Dimensions and the Question of Dependency*

The oppositions of Chinese model of educational cooperation in Nigeria have several substantive issues which are worth analytical consideration. The former deals with instrumentalisation of TVET. Because the vocational training offered by China is often pegged to the needs of the Chinese structure, the Nigerian graduates become trained on skills that are optimised to fit the Chinese structures without necessarily being easily adaptable to other technological systems or even those that are not affiliated to Chinese. This threat of technological lock-in is further aggravated by the greater tendency of Chinese enterprise dominance in the industries of the sectors where TVET programmes are directed rail, power, construction (Ibonye, 2020).

The second issue is associated with the transfer of knowledge at large. The Chinese partners in joint learning projects have occasionally shown a propensity to control knowledge transfer in manners that restrict the intake of more technical knowledge of higher value by African partners, although the movement of more mundane operational skills is ongoing (Ado and Su 2015 and others). This is reflected as a trend in the field of education, whereby Nigerian scholarship students are allowed to access Chinese universities and training programs, but not to access some competitive curricula and strategic majors (Oyewopo, 2018,

as cited in Ibonye, 2020). This creates, in the long-term, a long-standing imbalance of the educational partnership. These dynamics highlight the main idea by Ibonye (2020) that the benefits of the educational partnership between China and other countries are not self-evident. They also depend on the strategic agency, institutional capability and intentions of the recipient country to negotiate the terms of engagement rigorously and with foresight.

## V. JAPAN'S EDUCATIONAL AID TO NIGERIA (2015–2025)

➤ *Institutional Framework: TICAD as a Vehicle for Human-Centred Development*

Japan has been engaged in educational cooperation with Nigeria in the years 2015 to 2025 and this was in the framework of the TICAD process which the successive Japanese governments have placed as a means of human-centered and quality-based development cooperation. It is an intentionally and ideologically different approach to the model of China that is heavy in infrastructure. The 2016 edition in Nairobi was the first to be hosted in Africa under the name TICAD VI. It also placed human resource development and quality infrastructure as the two pillars of Japanese engagement in Africa as the Africa engagement was focused on structural economic transformation (JICA, 2014). These commitments were intensified in TICAD VII that was held in 2019 in Yokohama. In 2022, the TICAD VIII conference in Tunis equated to US\$30 billion of public and private investments over three years, with a certain commitment of training 300,000 individuals in various professions, such as education, health, agriculture, and administration (JICA, 2022). The TICAD IX in August 2025, further promoted the role of Japan as a partner of co-creation (a term that explicitly opposes the transactional nature of the FOCAC commitments of China) and introduced new initiatives in terms of AI skills training, expanding academic networks, and facilitating the international circulation of brains between Africa and Japan (Africa Center, 2026; JICA, 2023).

➤ *The SMASSE Programme: Deepening Teacher Quality in Nigeria*

Strengthening of Mathematics and Science Education (SMASSE) programme is the most long-lived manifestation of Japanese educational collaboration in Nigeria. The SMASSE approach was introduced in Kenya in 1998 by JICA and was introduced in Nigeria in 2006. It has remained, since then, as an ongoing platform of professional growth of mathematics and science teachers working at a secondary school level (Matachi & Kosaka, 2018; JICA Nigeria, 2025). Activity-Student-Experiment-Improvisation (ASEI) and Plan-Do-See-Improve (PDSI) cycle is the basic methodology of the programme. This shifts the pedagogical practice to no longer be based on the transmission of knowledge at the beginning of the year but rather is student-centred and inquiry based. It is a strategy that has emerged over the decades of Japanese experience in science education, modified to the Nigerian curriculum setting, and implemented through a cascade model whereby master trainers play the role of

distributing the methodology in their state systems of education.

The importance of SMASSE goes beyond the instant enhanced competencies of teachers. JICA is improving the structural bottleneck that limits the pool of STEM graduates in the economy by investing in the pedagogical foundations of science education in Nigeria at the secondary school level. One of the main sources of the industrial human capital crisis in Nigeria is the country that has underperformed in STEM since graduation at secondary level. It is namely this systemic aspect which is the quality of teaching, the relevance of curricula, and the readiness of students to technical tertiary education, which the strategy of Japan is aimed at. According to the recent operations of the JICA Nigeria office, there is ongoing activities of SMASSE-related activities, strategic meetings between JICA and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) are ongoing with regards to new grant-aided projects to construct facilities and enhance teaching and learning materials in schools (JICA Nigeria, 2025).

➤ *The ABE Initiative and Private Sector Linkages*

To build on its investment in science education in the secondary schools, Japan has also extended its human resource development partnership to the business sector in its African Business Education (ABE) Initiative. The ABE Initiative was introduced at TICAD V in 2013 and maintained within the time frame under consideration, offering young African specialists, including Nigerians, the chance to study at Japanese graduate schools as well as have an internship in Japanese companies (JICA, 2023). By 2023, more than 1,600 African youths had already been taken through this program by JICA. Many of such graduates have since worked in Japanese firms or have taken up positions in between Japanese businesses in Africa.

ABE Initiative is the illustration of the rationality of the Japanese normative soft power approach. Instead of attempting to gain leverage by the magnitude of aid payments or the profile of the assets that have been built, Japan develops a pool of Africans based professionals who can intimately know the Japanese work culture, management practices, and technological requirements. These individuals are thus in good position to act as interlocutors of Japanese investment in the African private sector. The fact that Nigeria is one of four African hometown partner countries of JICA during TICAD IX also of Kisarazu in Chiba Prefecture being matched with Nigeria also shows how intensive and personal

Japan people-to-people cooperation strategy is (Africa Center, 2026).

➤ *Constraints and Limitations of Japan’s Approach*

Despite the actual institutional profundity of the Japanese education cooperation in Nigeria, its pattern does not lack any major constraints. The most basic of them is scalability. Regardless of its rigour in the pedagogical domain, SMASSE is a resource-intensive programme, which follows a step-by-step process of consensus-building with national and state education authorities, identification and training of master trainers and a continued monitoring of the quality of implementation. This slow speed, as a virtue in the eyes of institutional sustainability, implies that the scope of the programme is small compared to the size of the Nigerian educational system. The system includes over 60,000 primary and junior secondary schools and a workforce of teaching population of about 900,000 (JICA Nigeria, 2025; World Bank, 2024).

The second weakness is visibility gap. The political leadership of Nigeria is predisposed to react on the visibly, immediately provable results ribbon-cuttings, the completed buildings, the large groups of scholars. The investment of Japan in better teacher methodology and quality of the curriculum produces very little political salience and is also less efficient as a diplomatic tool. The result of this lack of visibility is not imaginary. It limits the capacity of the JICA Nigeria office to marshal the top-level government commitment of the Nigerian government to its programmes and to use educational cooperation as a platform to build bilateral relationships in a wider way. This can be contrasted with the policy of China, where TVET institutions are opening at ceremonies with university vice-chancellors, government ministers, and ambassadors present (Xinhua, 2020), which is educative in this context.

**VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA’S AND JAPAN’S EDUCATIONAL AID**

➤ *Divergent Models, Complementary Imperatives*

The period, 2015 to 2025, has been characterized by intensification of the comparison between two educational models of cooperation in Nigeria under the realms of China and Japan. To address the escalating geopolitical rivalry to gain influence on the continent, both donor countries have perfected and formalised their particular methods. The following table summarises the dimensions of this divergence.

Table 1 Comparative Overview of China's and Japan's Educational Aid Frameworks in Nigeria (2015–2025)

Dimension	China's Educational Aid (FOCAC/BRI)	Japan's Educational Aid (TICAD/JICA)
Primary Modality	In the successive FOCAC cycles, TVET structures (Luban Workshops) and Confucius institutes and high-volume government scholarships.	Small-scale, focused technical assistance, mostly by SMASSE, ABE Initiative, and JICA institutional capacity grants.
Institutional Framework	FOCAC (2015, 2018, 2021, 2024 summits) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Education Action Plan (2016).	TICAD VI (2016), TICAD VII (2019), TICAD VIII (2022), and TICAD IX (2025) are based on JICA, which acts as an implementing agency.
Effectiveness Metric	Timeliness of implementation; amount of graduates and facilities built; scholarships given.	Breadth of institutional change; impact in the long term on teacher performance, quality of curriculum and graduate employability..

Strategic Goal	Fast projection of soft power in the interests of economic and business activities; setting of standards in technology.	Soft power reinforcement with normative standards and human security as well as sustainable development.
Key Risk	Gentle reliance of Chinese technology and standards; little knowledge transfer to the locals.	Low scalability; low apparent effect; low investment in harmony with industrial competency needs.
Soft Power Type	Soft power of project visibility and technological standards.	Soft power normative standard and human security.

The divergence that is represented in Table 1, however, does not translate directly into a developmental effectiveness hierarchy. The two models are concerned with two aspects of human capital shortage in Nigeria. The model of TVET in China is concerned with the immediate need of technically trained labor force to run and maintain the infrastructure. The teacher training model in Japan deals with the upstream issue of creating the science and mathematics literate high school graduates on whom the technically competent tertiary students and professionals will come to be recruited. One cannot do with either intervention. A nation that is serious about modernization in its industries must possess the two.

➤ *Soft Power Competition and Nigeria’s Strategic Position*

The Chinese and Japanese approaches towards educational cooperations cannot be considered out of context of their overall soft power ambitions in Nigeria and Africa as a larger region. The Chinese course of action creates soft power by showing the visibility of the project. The Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja, the Confucius Institutes, and the groups of students who leave Nigeria each year to the Chinese universities all generate physical manifestations of Chinese generosity and ability which other donors find it hard to duplicate at similar price. Yuan (2022) describes the system of providing scholarship in China as part of a strategic blueprint in light of which China constructs epistemic communities that are pro-Chinese in terms of how they approach its governance model, technology standards, and business practices. This cannot be considered only as a cultural initiative.

The soft power approach by Japan is less visible but is likely to be more sustainable. Investing in the Nigerian institutions in terms of SMASSE, ABE Initiative, and the developing JICA academic network that was announced at TICAD IX, Japan would like to be the best example of quality, sustainability, and human dignity that would appeal to the Nigerian desire to have internationally recognized educational standards. According to the Africa Center (2026), the intentional focus of TICAD on the principle of co-creation as opposed to the donor-recipient dynamic is the feature that defines the Japanese and Chinese approaches differently. It fits better with the notions of African agency and ownership which are becoming more central to the discourse of own development on the continent in the framework of Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

In the case of Nigeria, its strategic dilemma is to be an object of this rivalry and not to be a deliberate participant in it. There is a danger of soft dependency, one to Chinese technological standards via the Luban Workshop model, or Japanese institutional standards via the SMASSE cascade. It needs to be proactively addressed by the type of strategic and

institutional reaction which, as Ibonye (2020) illustrates, Nigeria has so far been too lax in the development.

➤ *The Brain Drain Variable*

One of the aspects of the educational cooperation issue in Nigeria that China and Japan have not sufficiently solved is the brain drain phenomenon. The evidence that can be identified during the period in consideration is of an unquestionable harshness. Nigeria has been losing 1,500 lecturers in the past five years, 2015-2020, to other foreign universities (Tebeje, 2021). Physicians exceeding 9,000 exited the country between 2016-2021 (WHO, 2023). The larger trend of professional emigration of skilled people - informally known as the Nigerian expression of Japa Syndrome, has increased significantly in the wake of the economic shocks of 2020 and above (Adebogun et al., 2024).

The scholarship model in China and the capacity building programmes in Japan are not within the framework to deal with this challenge. The effect of the scholarships in China is the short-term investment of human capital in individual Nigerian students but does not establish a binding mechanism of returning the investment. Instead of arresting the exodus of talented Nigerians out of the national economy, they are some of the contributors. Such talent retention policies that China practices internally, including the Thousand Talents Programme, to retrieve its diaspora have not been matched by the FOCAC scholarship programmes (Lefifi & Kiala, 2021). The ABE Initiative of Japan does incorporate an internship aspect, which is directed towards facilitating the connections between graduates and the Japanese privates within Africa, which created an incentive towards professionally directed return in Africa. The magnitude of this programme, however, of around 1,600 graduates across the continent over a period of over 10 years is way too little to be considered systemic in responding to the issue of brain drain in Nigeria.

**VII. NIGERIA’S STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL AID ABSORPTION**

➤ *Institutional Weaknesses and Absorptive Capacity*

The above discussion can only be complete without an open description of the institutional constraints of the Nigerian side that bounds the developmental payoffs of both the educational partnership of China and Japan. Contrary to the information given by Ibonye (2020), I would argue that the effectiveness of knowledge transfer is not solely based on the willingness and the ability of the donor to give but is also dependent on the absorptive capacity of the recipient. This is its capability to discover pertinent knowledge, bargain on its behalf, internalise it and transfer it to fruitful purposes. In

these dimensions, Nigeria has been provably performing poorly in the entire period under review.

At the bargaining board, the Nigerian government officials have always arrived at bilateral and multilateral meetings with China and, to some subordinate extent, with Japan, lacking the thoroughness of technical instruction or the decisiveness of national ambitions of development needed to achieve successful bargaining. The fact that Nigerian delegations have been known to arrive two days prior to significant meetings with the Chinese when months of preparations are needed, as stated by Utomi, one of the quotes presented in Mthembu-Salter (2009), still has the same strength in the period of 2015-2025. The contracts achieved due to it are usually imprecise concerning crucial aspects, inadequately overseen during the process, and insufficiently spread in the circles of Nigerian professionals and experts (Oyewopo, 2018, as cited in Ibonye, 2020).

#### ➤ *Educational Policy Misalignment*

Secondly, there exists a structural impediment of the incompatibility between the domestic policy orientation of the education policy in Nigeria and the technical needs of the educational cooperation to optimise returns. The educational system in Nigeria is still not well-focused on development of skills that are related to technology. It results in graduates who are not well prepared to work productively with the STEM intensive content of the JICA SMASSE cascade or the high end vocational majors provided by the University of Abuja Luban Workshop. To some degree, this misalignment has been caused by the continued insufficiency of public spending in Nigeria on education, which has historically been far lower than the UNESCO-recommended limit of 15 to 20 percent of total government spending (World Bank, 2024). The consequence is a set of institutions where the facilities of successful assimilation of educational collaboration are wanting in themselves - schools lacking laboratories, teachers lacking training, and curriculums lacking any significant connection with industry.

In addition, the fact that Nigerian governments are always tempted to overrule the agreements established by their predecessors can undermine the continuity in the institutions needed by the process of long-term educational cooperation. The trend has been defining both military and democratic governments since the 1990s (Ibonye, 2020). The SMASSE programme of Japan which in its substance requires the long term, multi-year government investment in cascade teacher training via state education systems is especially susceptible to this tendency of policy withdrawal.

#### ➤ *The Absence of a Coherent China Policy and Japan Policy*

In Nigeria, perhaps the simplest of the institutional shortcomings in this regard is the lack of coordinated, strategic based bilateral policies on how the country relates to China and Japan. As Amuta (2011, quoted in Ibonye, 2020) claimed over ten years ago, Nigeria has never worked out the national China policy in which its industrialisation priorities become the organisational structure of its negotiation and requirements. This deficit persists. Nigeria is still, according

to Ibonye (2020), incapable of prioritizing its knowledge sharing on a regular basis and bargaining based on the foundation of well-defined national development goals. It neither has developed its negotiating cadres with the linguistic skill and technical capability to compete on a level playing field with the thorough preparation that is habitually carried with bilateral encounters by Chinese partners.

The same deficit describes the relationship of Nigeria with Japan. The possible complementarities of the institutional capacity building model of JICA and the educational reform agenda of Nigeria especially in basic science education and TVET quality assurance have not been fully utilized. Nigeria has failed to come up with the institutional equivalent systems- dedicated coordination agencies, specialised negotiating units, and mechanisms to manage and evaluate program results to facilitate its own agenda instead of being reactive to donor-approved frameworks.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

#### ➤ *Summary of Findings*

The 2015-2025 decade can be seen as the one of renewed and strategically restructured Nigerian-Asian development educational collaborations with China and Japan as the two main development partners. Educational aid is mediated by the process of FOCAC and the BRI Education Action Plan which has increased institutional sophistication and strategic integration by China. Most particularly, this is demonstrated in the creation of the Luban Workshop at the University of Abuja and increasing the number of scholarship programmes after successive FOCAC summits. The Japanese cooperation has been based on TICAD and has been performed by JICA with the aim of continuing on the qualitative, institution-building modalities scaling up its ambitions, especially on the human resource development and linkages to the privates through the ABE Initiative.

The evidence confirms the fact that the modern development assistance landscape goes far beyond the very limited question of aiding effectiveness. It has now acquired the aspect of geopolitical rivalry done with the tool of educational aid. The risk that comes with the high-velocity model of China is the possibility of creating a sort of soft dependency, whereby the industrial and educational institutions of Nigeria become attached to Chinese technology, standards and institutional norms in such a manner that these embed themselves to future strategies to make strategies independent (King, 2013). The capacity-based approach of Japan might be less visible politically, yet its institutional, systemic focus on change is more in line with the need of structural change, which will be sustainable and owned by the Nigerians, which is the very essence of the structural challenges facing the Nigerian education system.

The phenomenon of brain drain, which became acute during the period in which the process under consideration took place, is a serious failure point that both the models used by the donor currently cannot resolve sufficiently. The constraints on either side of the Nigerian side such as poor

spending by the populace on education, institutional failure in the negotiations, policy continuity between administrations, and lack of consistent bilateral strategies of engagement with both China and Japan compound the deficiency of either model of cooperation. These obstacles are a major limitation on the developmental payoffs that any of the two partnerships can result in.

#### ➤ *Policy Recommendations*

The dilemma facing Nigeria is not really between two models of development cooperation in hierarchical order but that of strategic engagement and strategic passivity. In order to maximise the contribution of foreign educational aid by both China and Japan in the next decade, the following policy imperatives are proposed.

Nigeria should urgently come up with national strategies to its educational cooperation activities with both China and Japan. Particular human capital priorities in the country, especially the availability of technically-trained labour to its industrial transformation agenda, and the reinforcement of its secondary school science education bases, should be the organising structure of negotiations and demands. Such strategies should be led by the interministerial coordination mechanisms that stop policy break during the change of the administrations and promote the management of programme results in a coherent manner across time.

Nigeria must be more aggressive in its engagement with China, whereby the Luban Workshop model should be negotiated to offer a broader scope of majors that meet the needs of the Nigerian industrial priorities as opposed to a curriculum that is adjusted more to the needs and dimensions of Chinese-built infrastructure. With these clear benchmarks and monitoring mechanisms should Nigeria at the same time insist on strong local staff training and transfer of technology conditions in any TVET agreement. This is educative using the precedent of countries such as the Djibouti who have managed to train home grown teachers and develop local technical capacity through the Luban Workshop (Modernghana, 2023). In relation to scholarships, Nigeria ought to establish an institutional analog of the Chinese haigui model, which is a systematic approach to monitoring, nurturing and exploiting the human capital stocks, as advocated by Lefifi and Kiala (2021), which are being invested into the FOCAC scholarships to turn the investment made in scholarships into more long lasting returns to the national economy.

When engaging with Japan, Nigeria must make a long-term institutional investment that SMASSE and other JICA programmes needs to leverage their potential so as not to fall prey to the notion of letting short-term political shifts interfere with long-cycle capacity building interventions. Nigeria must also proactively participate in the still emerging JICA academic network as announced during the TICAD IX and place its universities at the center of the Japan-Africa brain circulation. Lastly, Nigeria must consider the possibility of triangular cooperation triangular, or joint activities between Nigeria, China, or Japan, and other third-party assistance like the African Development Bank or a UN

agency, as a way of marshaling more resources to reform educational activities as well as de-dependence on a single donor system.

Further studies are necessary to study the long-term career patterns of Chinese scholarship beneficiaries and the institutional stability impact associated with the JICA-trained teachers, and the consequences of such divergent approaches on the cascading effects of development are desired to be completely quantified. The evidence base could be enriched further by comparing the experience of Nigeria to the other FOCAC and TICAD partner countries that are at a similar development stage and are going through the same complicated terrain of educational cooperation in the environment of heightened geopolitical competition.

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