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Introduction

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as a significant provider of higher education opportunities for Ghanaian students and has established itself as a major educational destination for Africans. The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation ([FOCAC](#)) has been instrumental in delivering these educational opportunities since the early 2000s, particularly in 2006 when President Hu Jintao announced a doubling of [scholarships](#) for African students. The Beijing [Action Plan](#) (2025–2027), developed at the 2024 FOCAC summit, further demonstrates China's sustained commitment to educational partnerships with African countries. China offers these scholarships in various forms: the China Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarships, provincial and municipal government scholarships, university scholarships, and other types. As a result, thousands of Ghanaians and other Africans have gained access to new study pathways, while China also reaps its gains in the form of growing influence in Ghana and across the African continent. This partnership has therefore evolved into a notable win-win engagement, bolstering Ghana's human capital development while simultaneously expanding China's soft power and diplomatic ties.

Ghana has been a significant beneficiary of China's educational opportunities. In 2019, the Chinese Ambassador to Ghana, Wang Shiting, announced that [Ghanaians](#) were one of the largest groups of Africans studying in China, numbering about 6,500. In 2023, the number was approximately 4,600, placing [Ghana](#) as the third-largest African country that year. Comprehensive statistics on China's inbound students may be scarce; however, observable trends suggest that its scholarship opportunities have made it one of the top [destinations](#) for Ghanaian students.

Scholarships as a Lifeline

Critics may ask, "What is the catch to such freebies?"; raising concerns about the potential brain drain and its related issues. While these questions may be warranted, arguments can also be made for the possible benefits that such scholarships facilitate.



It is imperative to recognize that, given the different stakeholders involved (students, Ghana, and China) and their varying interests, the potential problem of brain drain may fade in the face of the possible benefits all stakeholders stand to gain.

Often, the discussion around the unintended adverse impact of outbound talent has centered on macro factors, particularly on the benefits countries would have obtained had their talent stayed rather than departed to seek greener pastures elsewhere. While acknowledging the legitimacy of such concerns, it is also essential to embrace the subnational elements associated with an individual's pursuit of greener pastures, and in this context, accepting a scholarship to study in China. Central to China's growing success with its scholarship opportunities is the combination of pull factors in China and push factors in Ghana. Significant among the push factors in Ghana is the dearth of opportunities for those seeking to pursue tertiary education, especially those without sufficient financial support. The Ghana Scholarship

Secretariat claims its [mission](#) is to “utilize Government Funds, GETFund and donor support for the provision of scholarships to brilliant but needy students and qualified workers”; however, the agency has been beleaguered by [scandals](#) where scholarships have been awarded to undeserving recipients.

In a bid to improve educational access, Ghana’s President, John Mahama, commendably launched the [Free Tertiary Education for Persons with Disabilities initiative](#). Earlier this year, the President launched the [No-Academic-Fees](#) policy geared towards reducing the financial burden of enrolling in tertiary institutions. Under this policy, the state will cover the fees of first-year tertiary students. Commendable as these policies are, their impact is meagre considering the number of Ghanaians enrolling in undergraduate and postgraduate studies annually. Consequently, for the larger part of their studies, tertiary students will have to self-fund or seek alternative sources of funding, making international scholarships an attractive option.

Chinese scholarships, among others, have become a lifeline for students seeking to further their education but lacking the needed financial support. One of the reasons for the rising popularity of China’s scholarships is that, despite their competitiveness, most do not require applicants to take standardized tests such as GRE, GMAT, TOEFL, or IELTS. Although English is the official language of the country and the medium of instruction at all levels of education, it is perplexing that Ghanaians are required to take standardized English tests to prove their proficiency when applying for some scholarships. Unfortunately, the accompanying registration fees for some of these tests can become a financial hurdle for some applicants.

Therefore, the growing popularity of Chinese scholarships and the increasing number of Ghanaian students choosing to study in China should not be seen as an outright threat to the nation’s progress under the guise of brain drain. The question that begs answering is how many of these scholarship recipients would be able to further their education if they sought to advance their studies in Ghana, given the limited availability of scholarship opportunities locally? The brain drain issues may more aptly apply to other forms of talent emigration in which locally trained professionals leave the country to ply their trade elsewhere. A typical case of this is the mass emigration of [health workers](#).

Mutual Gains from Chinese Scholarships

For individuals awarded Chinese scholarships, it presents an opportunity to further their studies, acquiring essential skills that can improve their livelihood and, more broadly, develop Ghana’s overall human capital. The skill acquisition of these students while in China is not in doubt. Many Ghanaian students, especially those pursuing PhDs, are able to publish in top-tier academic journals, boosting their credentials and that of their universities.

In addition, part of the stipends these students receive is remitted to sustain their families back home. Furthermore, upon graduation, these individuals are at liberty to return to Ghana and contribute, in their respective ways, to the country’s progress while earning a livelihood. Despite the mixed experiences upon return, some returnees from China report improved [livelihoods](#) and are considering ways to make lasting [impacts](#) with the skills they have obtained.

The skills that Chinese universities have instilled in Ghanaian students who have pursued higher education in China have been beneficial to Ghana. Though some students do not return immediately upon graduation, but pursue careers elsewhere, citing reasons such as low [salaries](#) in Ghana, a considerable number who return are contributing to the nation’s progress through various means. A recent [study](#) found that returnees from China are significantly engaged in international knowledge transfer, disseminating the knowledge they acquired in China across the local economy.

China's strategic policies and investments in scholarships over the years have proved worthwhile. The country's soft power in Ghana has grown considerably through its educational partnership and other forms of engagement with Ghana. Students who enroll in Chinese universities are exposed to Chinese culture and return home with a deeper understanding of China, thereby extending the reach of Chinese culture. The Afrobarometer round 8 survey captured evidence of China's growing influence in Ghana; Ghanaians identified Chinese as one of the top four most important [languages](#) for the next generation to learn, with the majority opting for English as the most important. The Confucius Institutes at the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Coast, and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology provide the opportunity for language enthusiasts to learn the Chinese language and culture.

In return, scholarship recipients have made immense contributions to research in Chinese universities and institutes, culminating in China becoming a global giant in high-quality research. In 2018, China was the largest contributor (21%) to the [Scopus](#) database of global science and engineering publications. The country also became the highest contributor to research in the [Nature](#) Index group of high-quality natural-science journals in 2022. China maintained its topmost position in the 2025 Research Leaders list released by [Nature](#) Index. China's rise in global research recognition coincides with the period of its massive rollout of scholarship programs that fund local talent abroad and attract foreign talent from around the world, alongside other R&D efforts the country has carried out. A recent study found that Chinese government scholarships have been instrumental in enhancing China's [research](#) capabilities. Hence, scholarship recipients, including Ghanaians, have contributed to the nation's research ascent. It is not uncommon for Chinese universities to issue public recognition notices of their exceptional scholarship recipients' immense contributions to the institution's research. [Frederick Nii Ofei Bruce](#), [Jeffrey Dankwa Ampah](#), and [Nana Adwoa Anokye Effah](#) are among the many Ghanaians and other non-Chinese nationals who have been recognized for their research excellence.

The Way Forward

Going forward, to move from growth to sustained impact, Ghanaian and Chinese stakeholders can deepen cooperation on targeted scholarships that will build human capital in lacking areas crucial for Ghana's development. Partnerships that give professionals at Ghanaian institutes access to databases, lab equipment, and other resources that China has amassed will ensure these professionals are able to overcome the resource limitations of local institutes in conducting their professional work. For instance, while a good number of Chinese universities have subscriptions to a considerable number of journals, allowing their students and researchers to access studies published in these journals, that is not the case for Ghanaian universities. Most Ghanaian universities have limited subscriptions to journals and databases. Therefore, in most cases, a student, researcher, or professional based at a Ghanaian institute will not be able to access the resources accessible by others at Chinese institutes. This significantly limits the achievable potential of those based in Ghanaian institutes. Partnerships that mitigate this challenge can stimulate better productivity among elites based at Ghana's local institutes.

Also, policies that encourage the return of talent will be vital and promote a trend of brain circulation rather than brain drain in Ghana. China, for instance, uses its [Thousand Talents Program](#) and other talent-recruitment initiatives to entice Chinese professionals abroad to return home. These professionals are presented with hard-to-resist [offers](#) should they decide to return, and these programs have been beneficial. A study revealed that Chinese scientists who returned home through China's [Young Thousand Talents](#) program outperform their counterparts who remain overseas in publishing productivity and are also more likely to become independent researchers pursuing their own scientific agendas. Ghana could adopt such a model to entice Ghanaian talent to return home and contribute to the country's growth and

development. This will be quite instrumental since non-returnees often cite a lack of [opportunities](#) as one of the main reasons they are reluctant to return to Ghana.

Finally, international scholarships should be among the alternatives for furthering education, not the primary path. Accordingly, the government of Ghana must continue its efforts to make higher education more accessible by progressively reducing the financial requirements for enrollment in local institutions.



The government must also ensure that the Ghana Scholarship Secretariat awards scholarships to deserving applicants.

To expand local scholarship opportunities, the government can lobby corporate entities to consider various scholarship modalities as part of their corporate social responsibility.

Conclusion

China's scholarships have opened many doors for Ghanaian students: language skills, funded study, and easier entry into STEM and technical fields. These scholarships have further strengthened Ghana-China relations and stimulated mutually beneficial outcomes: Ghana gains human capital and capacity, China builds cultural familiarity, and educational influence and recognition.



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