



EDUCATION AS A CATALYST OF REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

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As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the idea of regional connectivity is evolving beyond just roads, railways, and trade corridors. Instead, it is increasingly about building bonds between people, sharing knowledge, and shaping a shared future. It is within this broader understanding of connectivity that education, language, and youth engagement emerge as essential human dimensions, the intangible yet decisive factors that can make or break regional partnerships.

Against this backdrop, the heart of Eurasia, where ancient Silk Road traditions intersect with modern ambitions, offers enormous yet still under-explored potential. Central Asia and China, linked by geography and history, now stand at a crossroads of opportunity. With over 18,000 Central Asian students studying in China and initiatives such as the Silk Road University Alliance encompassing more than 150 universities, education is increasingly emerging as a crucial driver of regional integration. In this context, language serves as a vital cultural bridge, while youth engagement acts as the catalyst that brings these efforts to life. Together, education, language, and youth participation have the potential to shape the future of China–Central Asia relations by encouraging mutual understanding and cooperation, ultimately promoting a shared future grounded in respect and trust.

The establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian countries in 1992 marked the beginning of a new era in regional cooperation. Education quickly emerged as a key area of collaboration, with China signing bilateral education cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan between 1995 and 2000. These agreements laid the groundwork for structured partnerships, facilitating student exchanges, academic collaboration, and the mutual recognition of degrees.

Over the past 20 years, educational cooperation has dramatically changed, building on these early structures. According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of Central Asian students studying in China has increased substantially, with over 18,000 students from the region enrolled in Chinese universities in 2020 alone. This expansion reflects not only China's growing global reputation in science, engineering, medicine, and technology, but also the increased availability of scholarships and research opportunities, making Chinese higher education more accessible to Central Asian youngsters.



At the policy level, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been particularly effective in boosting educational cooperation between China and Central Asia. According to Dr. Zhao Huasheng, a leading expert on China–Central Asia relations, "the BRI has provided a new impetus to educational cooperation, with a focus on joint research centers, vocational training programs, and university networks that align educational goals with regional development needs." In addition to these initiatives, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has helped by encouraging academic exchanges, cultural activities, and scholarship schemes aimed towards the young people.

Crucially, government-sponsored scholarship programs have turned these policy frameworks into tangible opportunities. The China Scholarship Council and the SCO Scholarship Scheme have played important roles in reducing financial barriers and promoting inclusivity. Since its establishment in 2010, the SCO Scholarship initiative has sponsored over 5,000 Central Asian students, considerably increasing access to higher education and strengthening people-to-people ties across the region.

Importantly, the impact of these initiatives extends far beyond academic campuses. As Kazakh researcher Dr. Nargis Kassenova points out, "These students return home with degrees, language skills, and lived experiences that shape perceptions of China within their societies, becoming informal ambassadors of Chinese culture and values." In this sense, education serves as an effective form of people-to-people diplomacy, creating long-term regional trust and collaboration while putting human capital at the heart of China–Central Asia relations.

As educational collaboration grows, higher education has emerged as the cornerstone of this expanding partnership. Student mobility has increased profoundly with China being a popular study destination for Central Asian students. Between 2010 and 2018, the number of Central Asian students in China increased from 11,900 to 29,900, representing an average yearly growth rate of almost 12%. This trend demonstrates the growing popularity of Chinese institutions and the broadening breadth of academic collaboration.

Notably, these students are not just pursuing academic qualifications; they are also gaining language skills, career networks, & cultural familiarity that will last long even after graduation. Joint programs & dual-degree models enrich the whole experience. A significant example is the "3+2" collaborative training program between Xinjiang Medical University & Uzbekistan's partner institutions, which combines local expertise with cutting-edge facilities to generate graduates well-prepared for cross-border jobs.



In parallel, colleges are increasingly prioritizing collaborative research and innovation projects to solve common regional concerns. The China–Central Asia Industry–Education Integration Alliance supports this strategy by matching educational programs to real-world economic & industrial demands. Such initiatives support universities' roles as engines of knowledge generation & regional development.

Alongside higher education, language remains another powerful bridge connecting societies. Thousands of Central Asian students study Chinese, while Chinese learners are increasingly exploring Russian & Central Asian languages. Confucius Institutes across Central Asia now serve more than 18,000 learners, facilitating not only language acquisition but also cultural exchange & mutual empathy. As Dr. Nargis Kassenova correctly points out that, “Language is not just a tool for communication; it is a foundation for empathy, trust, and long-term people-to-people connectivity.”

At the same time, youth engagement is actively transforming China–Central Asia relations. Platforms such as the SCO youth exchange programs bring together young representatives from 35 countries, fostering personal bonds, cultural immersion, & a shared sense of regional identity. These interactions help cultivate a generation that views regional cooperation as both natural & necessary.

Moreover, digital platforms are amplifying this engagement by connecting students and young professionals in real time. Social media networks and online communities facilitate academic collaboration, cultural exchange, & professional networking across borders. Student-led initiatives, including clubs such as Young Translators & Young Economists, further promote peer-to-peer learning & skills development, extending engagement beyond formal institutional settings.

Collectively, these efforts generate significant strategic value. They contribute to human capital development, enhance research capacity, & improve labor mobility across the region. Shared educational experiences contribute to the development of common values & trust, both of which are necessary for regional stability. Economically, cross-border education enhances employability & provides access to regional markets, maintaining the relationship between learning & development. However challenges remain, Differences in qualification recognition, language obstacles, & unequal access to educational resources continue to hinder the full potential of collaboration.



Expanding digital learning platforms & bilingual curriculum can assist to close these gaps. At the same time, Dr. Alexander Cooley, Director of the Center for Global Politics at Bard College, notes that strengthening regional academic networks aligned with industrial & innovation needs would further anchor education & youth engagement at the heart of a shared China–Central Asia future.

Looking ahead, expanding scholarship programs represents a crucial step toward deepening cooperation. Increasing quotas for youth exchanges under SCO & BRI initiatives would build on the success of programs that have already supported over 5,000 Central Asian students since 2010. Such expansion would not only enhance people-to-people diplomacy but also nurture a new generation of leaders with a deep understanding of each other’s cultures and societies.

Equally important is the need to deepen collaborative research. Establishing regional research centers focused on priority areas such as sustainable development & digital learning can leverage China’s expertise while addressing shared regional challenges. These centers could serve as platforms for innovation, joint problem-solving, & long-term academic collaboration.

Strengthening language education must also remain a priority. Promoting shared language programs & multilingual curricula acknowledges the central role language plays in fostering cultural understanding & cooperation. When individuals speak each other’s languages, they build bridges of empathy & trust as essential ingredients for long-term regional stability. In parallel, supporting youth-led projects by funding research groups & cross-national study tours can further empower young people as active stakeholders in regional cooperation.

Ultimately, education, language, & youth engagement are the threads that weave together the fabric of China–Central Asia cooperation. By prioritizing human-centric approaches, the region can unlock a future in which knowledge exchange & youth participation are as critical to regional connectivity as roads and railways. As Dr. Zhao Huasheng reminds us, “The Belt & Road Initiative is not just about infrastructure; it is about people-to-people connections.” By investing in education, language, & youth engagement, China & Central Asia can build a shared future rooted in mutual respect, trust, & cooperation, one in which young people are empowered to thrive, innovate, & lead, driving economic growth, social progress, and lasting regional stability.