



Original Article (Mixed)

Identifying and assessing opportunities for educational cooperation between Iran and the member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying and prioritizing Iran's educational cooperation opportunities within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, and for the first time uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in a two-level manner. In the first step, ten key themes were identified through interviews with 25 experts in the fields of education policy, management, entrepreneurship, and geography: academic exchange, digital infrastructure, educational justice, cultural diplomacy, regional knowledge production, institutional coordination, common curriculum development, economic empowerment, resource provision, and cultural and linguistic challenges. In the second step, the cause-and-effect relationships between themes were analyzed by the DEMATEL technique. The findings showed that themes (numbers in parentheses indicate their high priority in the DEMATEL analysis) such as digital infrastructure (13.76), cultural diplomacy (13.58), and common curriculum development (13.30) are among the causal and driving factors. These numbers indicate the relative importance and priority of these themes in the proposed research processes. While other themes such as educational equity (11.20), resource provision (13.15), and regional knowledge production (12.10) play more of a dependent and effected role. Cultural and linguistic challenges are also considered effective barriers to academic interactions, but solutions such as strengthening digital infrastructure (13.76), online education (13.82), and concluding multilateral agreements can be effective in reducing their effects. The results of the study emphasize the need for a systemic, forward-looking, and causal perspective in Iranian educational policymaking, and on this basis, prioritizing components such as academic exchange (12.14) and digital infrastructure (13.76) will play a key role in the success of regional scientific cooperation.

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Extended abstract

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative, which China introduced in 2013, is a global plan to develop infrastructure, cultural interactions, and educational cooperation among more than 140 countries. (Kanan et al., 2023; Irna, 2025). This initiative has strengthened China's soft power by focusing on educational diplomacy through scholarships, language institutes, and joint scientific projects. (Anand, 2024). With its privileged geopolitical and civilizational position, Iran has a high capacity to play a role in this plan. Attracting foreign students, scientific exchange, teaching Persian, and establishing joint university branches are among Iran's opportunities in this framework. (Gamage, 2024). However, lack of a coherent strategy, weak coordinating structures, and cultural and linguistic barriers have prevented the full exploitation of these capacities. Focusing on Iran's educational capacities, the present study seeks to identify opportunities and provide solutions to enhance the country's scientific and cultural position within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. In order to better understand the dimensions of the problem, it is necessary to answer the following question: What are the most important opportunities and obstacles to Iran's educational cooperation with the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative?

Theoretical Framework

The Belt and Road Initiative, the New Silk Road

The Belt and Road Initiative, introduced by China in 2013, is a comprehensive plan for the spatial development and geographical connectivity of countries through transportation infrastructure, especially in the regions of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Chiebuka et al., 2021). By creating economic corridors, this plan has highlighted Iran's role as a key node in geoeconomic routes and has also provided capacities for educational cooperation.

Granting scholarships, establishing Confucius Institutes, and attracting foreign researchers are among China's measures to increase its cultural influence and present a positive image of itself globally and in the soft power dimension (Ryskulbekova, 2023). These policies are pursued with the aim of strengthening China's "national renaissance" and enhancing its international standing. However, challenges such as the lack of credibility of Chinese qualifications in the global market, the preference for studying in the West, and cultural and political sensitivities in some countries have limited the effectiveness of China's educational soft power. In other words, with this initiative, China is trying to play a more active role in global educational governance and present an alternative narrative of the globalization of education that is based on South-South cooperation and mutual respect (Peters et al., 2020; Woo, 2023).

By expanding regional and global academic cooperation and forming alliances such as the "Silk Road Universities" and "Central Asian Universities" with the participation of hundreds of universities from dozens of countries, the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates China's efforts to institutionalize academic interactions and create South-South cooperation frameworks, strengthen educational cooperation, student exchanges, and internationalize higher education. It is an important field for academic interactions between China and countries along the route. Despite the vast opportunities, critics have warned about the long-term consequences of this trend and raised questions about its impact on academic freedom and the place of education in open societies. Therefore, China's success in educational diplomacy depends on carefully managing cultural relations, respecting local diversity, and responding to the concerns of partner countries' public opinion.



By offering extensive scholarships, the Chinese government has succeeded in attracting a large number of foreign students, and by 2017, more than 317,000 students from member countries were studying in China. This trend has made China the third largest higher education destination in the world. (Woo, 2023; Yue et al., 2022).

Despite relative success, the distribution of educational benefits is uneven, and attracting students from Arab and African countries faces challenges such as language barriers, political concerns, and a lack of recognition of the quality of Chinese universities. Academic cooperation has also expanded to include dual degree programs, joint universities, international laboratories, and faculty and student exchanges. University alliances such as the Silk Road and Central Asia have been formed to facilitate academic interactions and the transfer of academic credits. China has also strengthened its academic presence by establishing overseas campuses, such as the Xiamen University branch in Malaysia.

Opportunities, Obstacles, and Challenges of Educational Cooperation

Educational cooperation faces challenges such as differences in academic standards, cultural barriers, financial constraints, and geopolitical competition. In Iran, despite its scientific and cultural potential, few studies have examined in depth the educational opportunities and challenges within the framework of this initiative. However, the establishment of entrepreneurial universities plays an important role in the transfer of knowledge, technology, and commercialization in international higher education (Khorasani et al., 2013). The Silk Road Education Promotion Program focuses on academic exchanges and international visits in fields such as language, medical sciences, and environmental engineering; and is aligned with the economic and infrastructure goals of the initiative (Ge & Ho, 2022).

Despite differences in educational standards, language and cultural barriers, financial constraints, geopolitical competitions, and the effects of crises such as COVID-19 (Ma & Zhou, 2019); the greater challenge is the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework and localized research to analyze these issues in regional and national contexts. Existing research has focused more on China's infrastructure investments (Woo, 2022; Yu et al., 2018); while the initiative's educational and cultural diplomacy is still in the early stages of scientific investigation. Studies have mainly focused on China's cooperation with Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe; and Iran's position in these cooperation has been less analyzed.

The innovation of the present study is to focus on Iran and analyze the factors affecting educational cooperation, providing a clear picture of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that can enhance Iran's position in the Belt and Road Initiative's scientific diplomacy.

Based on the theoretical foundations and research background, our conceptual model is as follows: cultural and linguistic challenges; required infrastructure; key opportunities for educational cooperation; international policymaking and coordination; and cultural, educational, and economic consequences are a set of factors that affect the country's educational opportunities.

Research Methodology

This research aims to identify and prioritize Iran's educational cooperation opportunities within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, and uses a mixed approach; qualitative and quantitative methods. In the first stage, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 experts in the field of higher education and science diplomacy, and analyzed by the content analysis method of Brown and Clark (2006) and NVivo15 software. In this stage, 5 main areas and 15 key opportunities were extracted.

In the second stage, the findings were reviewed and refined with the participation of 25 experts in the Delphi process. Then, in the third stage, the DEMATEL technique was applied to analyze causal relationships and prioritize opportunities. This method, combining fuzzy

logic, calculates direct and indirect effects between variables and provides D+R values to determine the importance and dependence of each variable. Previous studies such as Salehian et al. (2019) were also modeled.

The DEMATEL process consists of five steps: assessment of initial relationships by experts, data normalization, calculation of complete relationships, measurement of impact and dependency, and determination of priorities. The combination of content analysis, Delphi, and DEMATEL methods allows for a comprehensive and accurate analysis of educational opportunities and is consistent with the complex and emerging nature of educational diplomacy. Educational experts, the use of specialized software, and conducting supplementary interviews ensured the validity of the tools and reliability of the data.

Research findings

The findings of this study, based on a component analysis with four key metrics including impact (D), effectiveness (R), degree of interaction (D+R), and causal or effect role (D-R), provide a clear picture of the opportunities and obstacles for Iran's educational cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The results show that some components, such as digital infrastructure, online education, cultural diplomacy, and bilateral agreements, have a positive causal role and high impact. For example, digital infrastructure, with a D value of 6.81 and a D+R of 1.52, is known as a driving component that can activate other capacities. These components play a strategic role in future policymaking by facilitating faculty-student exchange, improving the quality of education, and creating a suitable platform for scientific mobility. In contrast, components such as student scholarships, joint research centers, and faculty-student exchange, with a negative or close to zero causal roles, are dependent on underlying factors. For example, faculty-student exchange, with an impact of 7.31 and a causal role of -0.08, has limited impact without the support of driving components. Consequently, to effectively exploit the educational potential of the Belt and Road Initiative, Iran must develop a targeted strategy that focuses on strengthening positive causal components such as digital infrastructure, institutional support, and educational diplomacy. Also, removing barriers and strengthening dependent components are necessary conditions for the sustainability and effectiveness of scientific cooperation.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyze the opportunities and obstacles for Iran's educational cooperation with the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite the focus of existing sources on economic and geopolitical aspects, the results of the study are consistent with studies such as Majidi (2020), Azadi-Ahmadabadi (2020), Bharti (2024), and Rozman (2025). Opportunities such as student exchange, joint research, and curriculum development play an important role in science diplomacy. On the other hand, obstacles such as cultural and linguistic differences, weak infrastructure, and the need for financial investment are serious challenges in the path of educational cooperation, which have also been confirmed in previous studies such as: Liu et al., (2025); Riahi, Ghaneirad, and Ahmadi (2014). In response to the first sub-question about opportunities and capacities for educational cooperation, the findings indicate that components such as digital infrastructure, online education, cultural diplomacy, and bilateral agreements have the highest level of impact and causal role. In examining the second question, it was found that the components of student scholarships, joint research institutes, professor-student exchange, and development of educational centers have negative or close to zero values and are recognized as obstacles to the expansion of educational cooperation between Iran and the Belt and Road countries.