The Role of Higher Education in Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving role of higher education in international diplomacy, distinguishing between knowledge diplomacy, characterized by reciprocity, horizontal collaboration, mutual benefits, and soft power approaches that rely on vertical relationships and competitive advantage. Through analysis of contemporary case studies, including the Pan African University's continent-wide integration initiatives, Brown University's BIARI program in humanitarian diplomacy, etc, the research demonstrates how higher education institutions transcend traditional diplomatic channels to become engines of global engagement, cultural exchange, and sustainable development. These institutions facilitate academic mobility, joint research, and ethical leadership development while acting as conveners for cross-sectoral partnerships. The study critically assesses challenges higher education institutions face in executing knowledge diplomacy, including balancing research security with openness, navigating complex geopolitical landscapes, and managing increasing private sector involvement in academic affairs. For developing nations, particularly, the paper reveals that investing in higher education serves not merely as a strategy for national advancement but as a critical diplomatic instrument for fostering societal resilience and cross-border collaboration. The analysis concludes with recommendations for advancing international student opportunities, strengthening global educational partnerships, promoting curriculum internationalization, and embedding sustainable development principles within higher education systems, ultimately calling for a deliberate realignment of higher education with diplomatic objectives to pursue a more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable global order.

INTRODUCTION

International higher education has a long history with respect to its contribution to strengthening relations between and among countries. Its role continues to evolve as the world faces new challenges and conflicts. Knowledge diplomacy and soft power are two different approaches to the contemporary role that international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) play in international relations and development in developing nations. According to the Institute of International Education (2024), 1,126,690 international students from over 210 countries studied at U.S. higher education institutions during the 2023/2024 academic year. According to the Institute of International Education (2024), 1,126,690 international students from over 210 countries studied at U.S. higher education institutions during the 2023/2024 academic year.

Higher education has appeared as a critical player in the evolving landscape of international diplomacy, offering unique opportunities to address complex global challenges through intellectual collaboration, cultural exchange, and career building as these numbers continue to increase. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the focus on higher education as a pivotal force in diplomacy reflects its ability to transcend political and geographical divides, fostering understanding and cooperation among nations. The integration of higher education into diplomatic efforts enables universities to serve as platforms for peacebuilding, innovation, and cultural reconciliation. This role is particularly relevant amidst rising geopolitical tensions, global inequalities, and challenges such as climate change and migration that result in conflicts between and among nations. By using academic exchange, leadership training, and research collaborations, higher education institutions can contribute not only to advancing national interests but also to promoting shared global priorities like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This essay delves into the vital role of higher education in diplomacy, highlighting its contributions to fostering cross-cultural understanding, ethical leadership, and sustainable development, and examines why aligning higher education frameworks with

diplomatic goals is essential to building a more inclusive and resilient global community (Knight, J. 2022). It further examines the differences between knowledge diplomacy and soft power. The paper also shows in various case studies how higher education institutions have played this role in various parts of the world. It further critiques the roles higher education institutions play in knowledge diplomacy highlighting its challenges and the way forward.

Importance of the topic

Through international education programs, countries aim to change their image, influence, and shift the feeling and attitudes of international students towards the host country.

Developed countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany have created special programs to invite students from all over the world, further confirming this importance. Globally distinguished programs such as the American Fulbright program, the United Kingdom's Chevening Scholarship, DAAD in Germany, and the European Union's Erasmus+ aim to develop global leaders, strengthen influence, increase cultural understanding, promote bilateral cooperation and create friendships worldwide, (Byrne and Hall, 2014).

Background of the topic

In recent years, the importance of education and intellectual exchange in the development of international relations was defined by the term "soft power." Instead of using aggression, soft power relies on the strength of ideas and culture to influence peoples' interaction and attitude.

Students who studied in other nations are expected to be effective transmitters of the language and culture of their host countries, hence, can be considered as carriers of public diplomacy. For instance, the US Department of State's Fulbright Program has always been a combination of soft power generated by the government and the people, with its main objective being to promote mutual understanding between people and nations through education. Hence, higher education can be considered as an ideal vehicle of soft power as it develops essential soft power that can navigate the current world in an interconnected global community. Nye (2004) refers to the importance of education as a source of soft power. According to him, education can strengthen soft power and enable individuals to understand the nature of power better. Even though Nye included education under the "cultural" category of soft power sources; but recently, education, especially higher education, has come into its own as a stand-alone and potent soft power attribute in his study.

According to Bu (1999), after World War II, the United States simultaneously experienced fear of the Soviet threat and belief in its own system as the ultimate choice for the world. In confronting the Soviet Union, cultural relations programs were organized and designed by national security interests. George F. Kennan, the architect of the United States' containment policy, urged: "Let us by all means have the maximum cultural exchange." The mission of cultural contact, according to Kennan, was to combat the negative impressions about the United States that marked much of world opinion. The U.S. government created new cultural policies based on Cold War political concerns and relied on private resources to implement cultural diplomacy through educational exchange. It mobilized American society to achieve "total diplomacy" with political rhetoric, legislative measures, and financial support. Due to their abilities and unique roles in a democratic society, American philanthropies, professional organizations, and universities became indispensable in delivering numerous exchange programs. Historically, international education programs such as the Fulbright Program, Erasmus Mundus, and Confucius Institutes have underscored the transformative role of higher education in fostering goodwill among nations. These programs have strategically used educational exchange to strengthen international ties, as demonstrated by the Global Korea Scholarship, which shifted perceptions and created positive evaluations of the host country's culture and values (Hajdari et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW /SUMMARY OF CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

Knowledge diplomacy and soft power represent fundamentally distinct frameworks for understanding the role of international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) in shaping international relations.

Knowledge Diplomacy

Knowledge diplomacy is the process of strengthening relations between and among countries through international higher education, research, and innovation Knight, J. (2020). In today's globalized and turbulent world, there are new rationales, benefits, risks, and opportunities attached to the contribution that higher education and research make to international relations. Knowledge diplomacy involves a wide variety of state and non-state actors, including universities and colleges, think tanks, foundations, centers of excellence, civil society organizations, private sector research groups, and governmental departments, among others. Examining the role of international higher education in building relations between and among countries is not new. However, using a knowledge-diplomacy framework for analysis, rather than soft power or the traditional lens of cultural and science diplomacy, is an innovative approach. Knowledge diplomacy is a two-way process. It refers to the role that international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) play in building and strengthening international relations and, vice versa, the role that international relations play in easing and improving IHERI, (Knight, J. 2019).

Various international Higher Institutions illustrate how Higher Education plays a significant role in knowledge diplomacy.

These are highlights from the report by the British Council that presents a new perspective on knowledge diplomacy framework to emphasize collaboration, reciprocity and mutual but different benefits Knight (2018). The collaborative knowledge diplomacy approach is being explored as an alternative to the more one-sided soft power approach, and it is helpful to look at some current initiatives that could be labelled as knowledge diplomacy. The case studies below were selected because they prove many of the characteristics discussed in this paper. Furthermore, they are linked to different regions of the world, represent partnerships between higher education actors and partners from other sectors, and address a variety of global issues.

The Pan African University (PAU)

The Pan African University (PAU) was established in 2013 to set up a regional university system to serve the entire continent in key development areas. The PAU is made up of five postgraduate research institutes, hosted at leading universities in the West, North, East and Central regions of Africa. A key feature of the PAU is that graduate programs are designed to intentionally build a unified African identity beyond national differences. The Pan African University exemplifies knowledge diplomacy by promoting regional cooperation, educational excellence, homegrown innovation, and Africa-led academic influence on the global stage. It is more than just an academic institution, it is a diplomatic tool for building a self-reliant, united, and globally engaged Africa. According to African Union (2024), The Pan African University (PAU) has implemented several initiatives that align with the principles of knowledge diplomacy, aiming to foster collaboration, innovation, and integration across the African continent and beyond. While comprehensive datasets evaluating the full impact of these initiatives are limited, available information highlights key aspects of PAU's contributions to knowledge diplomacy. PAU has awarded over 2,600 scholarships to students from 51 African Union member states between 2012 and 2022, promoting cross-border academic exchange and integration. The Institute for Water and Energy Sciences (PAUWES) in Algeria has trained 660 students, with 35% female representation, from 45 AU member states. PAU had a landmark agreement with Hiroshima University in 2024 established joint supervision programs for master's and doctoral students, facilitating international research collaboration and cultural exchange. Although these initiatives demonstrate PAU's alignment with knowledge diplomacy objectives, there is a lack of comprehensive data evaluating the long-term impact of these programs on regional integration, policy influence, and sustainable development. Metrics such as graduate career tracks, contributions to national policies, and sustained international collaborations would provide deeper insights into PAU's effectiveness in promoting knowledge diplomacy.

Humanitarian relief initiatives – Brown University, USA

The Brown International Advanced Research Institutes (BIARI) program brings together academic, government and civil society actors to establish the best policies and practices in humanitarian response efforts

based on solid research and extensive consultation. The primary motivation of BIARI is to enable more relationships between the academic and applied worlds of humanitarianism to create more effective and sustainable policy and practice. BIARI programs have been held in Spain, Mexico, Kenya and the Philippines (Knight, 2019, pp. 14–16).The humanitarian relief programs and events organized by BIARI provide a good example of how knowledge diplomacy activities are mutually beneficial to all collaborating partners, while the benefits themselves may be very different. Bringing together these diverse sectors allows for knowledge-sharing and builds cross-sectoral networks and receiving mutual benefits as follows:

Academic Sector: Scholars gain access to practical field data, new research opportunities, and fresh perspectives from policymakers and practitioners, enriching both theoretical frameworks and experiential learning.

Government Sector: Partners in government benefit from exposure to the latest research methods and evidence-based practices, as well as first-hand consultation with both academic experts and frontline responders, which can inform policy innovation and improve implementation.

Civil Society: NGOs and community organizations enhance their efficacy by directly engaging with research-driven best practices, participating in intensive training, and influencing both local and international conversations.

The Institute of Women's and Gender Studies – University of Granada, Spain

The University of Granada, Spain is a global hub for scholarship on the position of women in society. The Institute was founded in 1985 by a group of scholars committed to including feminist perspectives in their teaching and research to address societal inequalities between men and women. Since its founding, the Institute has positioned itself in several European and global networks, developing joint-university degree programs and collaborative research with universities on five continents. The Institute has also developed exchange programs with universities in the USA, Colombia, South Africa, Morocco, and India. Students travel to receiving institutions for part of their degree, developing their professional network and supporting international data collection. This is a vital part of knowledge diplomacy, as early-stage researchers develop into internationally networked, skilled researchers capable of addressing global issues collaboratively. Furthermore, partner universities from the Global South receive help from the experience and ability of Institute faculty as they take part in exchanges. Through a knowledge diplomacy approach, the Institute has strengthened IHERI efforts and collaboration between countries and academics in Europe who are working to change gender inequity.

International joint universities (IJU)– the German Jordanian University (GJU)

Established in 2005, the IJU is an interesting example of knowledge diplomacy, given that it is based on a close partnership between partner country universities and governments and involves different academic programs, often jointly developed, bilateral research projects often involving other sectors, and the creation of new knowledge to help society. In many cases, the departments of both education and foreign affairs of the host and partner country are directly involved in setting the policies, regulations, and governance of an IJU, but these approaches differ from country to country. A key part of knowledge diplomacy that is seen in the GJU is developing strong ties between the university and its industry partners in Jordan and the neighboring Middle East countries. This is complemented by close alliances with German academics and their industry partners. These partnerships have served to establish mutual priorities for research and collaboration, ensuring there are mutual but different benefits according to the needs and priorities of all stakeholders. The GJU has signed seventy-five partnership agreements with German businesses, from Pharmaceuticals to Puma Athletics. Within Jordan, thirty-two partnerships have been formed, including several with major NGOs and governmental agencies. These partnerships focus on research and innovation and provide students with the opportunity to complete five- or six-month internships in Germany or Jordan and transition smoothly into the workforce. The GJU is but one example of an IJU and of knowledge diplomacy. It proves how developing joint universities can lead to closer long-term bilateral ties between two countries at many distinct levels.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)– the United Nations

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) was established by the United Nations in 2012 to mobilize global scientific and technological ability to promote practical solutions for sustainable development. The SDSN operates the university partners program, which develops and provides curriculum materials to non-affiliated higher education institutions. Through this program, institutions can take part in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) academy, which provides the findings of SDSN research in a teachable format. The curriculum is developed with the SDSN's global faculty, which includes lead experts from academia and industry worldwide. Thematic networks have also been developed to lead multi-country research projects on specific issues. In 2019 there were twelve thematic networks. These cover a range of areas related to sustainability, such as health for all, sustainable agriculture and food systems, humanitarian-development links, forests, oceans, biodiversity, and ecosystems, and redefining the role of business for sustainable development. The Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project (DDPP) is a thematic network that strengthens the ties between nations as it brings together country experts on a specific problem. The SDSN operates the university partners program, which develops and provides curriculum materials to non-affiliated higher education institutions. The DDPP is a good example of knowledge diplomacy working across countries and disciplines to address a pressing global problem. The research activities of the DDPP are led by experts at 40 academic and industry-related research institutes, found in sixteen countries which produce the largest percentage of greenhouse gas emissions. The countries include Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, the UK, and the USA. Integral to knowledge diplomacy is the mutuality of benefits between and among the various actors. SDSN works diligently to ensure that there are benefits for all actors. Furthermore, SDSN demonstrates that knowledge diplomacy is a two-way process, where IHERI helps to strengthen relations between and among countries while international co-operation and collaboration helps to strengthen IHERI.

The Australia–India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF)

Since 2006, the Australia–India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF) has strengthened relations between Australia and India by supporting scientific research in subject areas which are of mutual interest to the two nations. The fund provides money for studies that are jointly undertaken by researchers in both Australia and India. The AISRF provides grant money for scientific research that is jointly conducted by researchers in Australia and India in universities and specialized research institutes. One important example of a joint research project is biotechnology. Researchers from the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (New Delhi, India) have partnered with researchers at the Queensland University of Technology to figure out the effects of drought, salinity, and heat on specific strains of rice and cabbage. This project was jointly led by research teams at Curtin University (Australia) and the Raman Research Institute (India) and involved collaboration between hundreds of scientists working in seventeen organizations throughout Australia, India, the USA, New Zealand, and Canada. A key characteristic of knowledge diplomacy is collaborative knowledge production that both strengthens relations between countries and addresses global issues (Knight, 2019, pp. 28-29. The AISRF activities give a strong example of how governments can develop a context for knowledge diplomacy, led and furthered by higher education actors and research partners from around the world.

RENKEI – The Japan–UK Research and Education Network for Knowledge Economy Initiatives

RENKEI is an acronym for the Research and Education Network for Knowledge Economy Initiatives and is also the Japanese word for collaboration according to the British Council report. The organization RENKEI is a bilateral university research network and knowledge diplomacy initiative supported by the governments of Japan and the UK. RENKEI was founded in 2012 with the goal of strengthening relationships between the two nations by developing academic–industry research collaborations that would address major societal issues. The network includes six universities in Japan and eight universities in the UK, as well as dozens of research partners from industry, business, and civil society. Between 2012 and 2018, RENKEI's working groups addressed pertinent issues such as sustainable energy, war, slavery, aerospace engineering, renaissance entrepreneurship and living with an ageing society. RENKEI is an example of a sustainable knowledge diplomacy initiative that runs primarily on membership fees. The research activities and outputs of RENKEI are entirely driven by senior professors and early-career researchers who chair the working groups, organize

the events, and conduct the research. The binational research collaborations developed through RENKEI. For example, sustainable energy workshops were held in Southampton and Tohoku. Workshop participants, including senior researchers, graduate students, and industry partners, were placed in small groups to study and propose low carbon energy solutions for cities. Japan received help from these activities as specific attention was given to the Fukushima, and strategies were developed to address energy gaps after natural disasters. Key RENKEI goal of engaging external actors in university to-university collaboration is a central characteristic of knowledge diplomacy. Approximately ninety external organizations have taken part in RENKEI workshops as of 2018.

Challenges

The knowledge diplomacy case studies outlined above cover many global regions and involve partnerships between higher education institutions and a diverse range of other actors. They illustrate many of the characteristics discussed in this paper. First is the issue of values. As a student of international relations and diplomacy, values play a vital role in diplomacy and explain why the contribution of international higher education and research to international relations, and vice versa, is conceptualized in a diplomatic framework and not a power paradigm. Knowledge diplomacy recognizes the diversity of priorities and resources among countries, and that interests and benefits will differ among partners. However, there is the reality and risk that knowledge itself can be used as an instrument of power to enhance self-interest, competitiveness, and dominance by one country. This is why values and principles are important. Unintended consequences are always present. While foresight can help mitigate risks, it is only hindsight that tells the story of impact. The values of collaboration and mutuality that underpin knowledge diplomacy can be easily eroded. There is the risk that education, research, and innovation will be used to widen the knowledge divide among countries instead of being a bridge to address global challenges through collaboration, exchange, and trust. As the concept of knowledge diplomacy becomes more commonplace, unrealistic expectations can be made about its role and contributions. Knowledge diplomacy is not a silver bullet. Expectations of its contribution to international relations need to be managed to avoid early misunderstandings or dismissal of its value and potential.

There are many unanswered questions about the concept of knowledge diplomacy. Will politicians appreciate knowledge diplomacy as an international relations instrument that can advance the interests of some nations without limiting the prospects of others? Can knowledge diplomacy be operationalized considering competing priorities within and between countries and regions? Like in the case of joint universities mentioned above. Can the contribution and impact of knowledge diplomacy be measured? Is it possible to develop mechanisms where education, research and innovation complement each other to achieve goals that each could not carry out on their own? Will knowledge diplomacy be seen as a two-way process whereby strong relations between and among countries will help to strengthen higher education and research? These are but a few of the questions that need to be explored for further studies as we experience the new dynamics in global political and economic trends. Developing a framework, strategies and commitment to knowledge diplomacy cannot be done without facing the harsh realities of international politics and the challenges of a more competitive and turbulent world. However, we must continue to ask the question of whether we can afford to ignore the potential of knowledge diplomacy to address and contribute to the resolution of national, regional, and global challenges.

The Soft power approach

Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments. Joseph Nye, Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University from 1995 to 2004 coined the term "soft power", explained why it is becoming more important, due to globalization and the communication revolution. It arises from the country's culture, political ideas, and foreign and domestic policies, (Nye 2005)

In contrast to knowledge diplomacy approach, one of the most often cited examples of soft power in international higher education are Confucius Institutes (CI) which has some controversies as discussed later in this paper. Others include scholarships for international students, which are usually framed as goodwill deeds,

though soft power motives of self-interest are often at play. It is important to note that many IHERI activities can serve and be labeled as either soft power or knowledge diplomacy initiatives. It depends on the intention and expected outcomes of the sending country, the values and principles (collaboration, reciprocity vs. dominance, self-interests first) which underpin the activities, the strategies (collaboration vs. cooption through attraction and persuasion), and the degree of mutuality of benefits for both partners as illustrated in the chat below.

Difference started in the role of IHERI in Knowledge Diplomacy and Soft Power Approaches image as stated above.

	IHERI in a Knowledge Diplomacy Approach	IHERI in a Soft Power Approach
Self-interests	National self-interests leading to mutual benefits	National self-interests dominate
Modes	Negotiation Mediation Communication Conflict resolution Conciliation Collaboration	Attraction Persuasion Compliance Cooption
Principles	Reciprocity Mutuality Common Ground	Dominance Competitive advantage
Outcomes	Win-win with mutual but different benefits	Win-lose, zero-sum game
Nature of relationships	Horizontal Collaborative	Vertical Top Down

Chart Courtesy: Jane Knight 2018.

The Fulbright Program`

In the words of the program's founder, Senator J. William Fulbright, the program aspires to "bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs, and thereby to increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship. The program works to achieve this goal by awarding grants to individuals to sponsor time spent overseas teaching, conducting research, working, and studying. Through their time abroad, participants not only engage in a formal education exchange, but also become immersed in a foreign culture and gain valuable insight into their host country's history, people, and traditions (Starr, 2012). Since its establishment in 1946 by Congress, the Fulbright Program has given more than 400,000 students, scholars, teachers, artists, and scientists in 160 countries the opportunity to study, teach and conduct research, exchange ideas, and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns (Starr, 2012).

According to Starr, one of its achievements during the Cold War by promoting mutual understanding was valued for its ability to share the ideals and benefits of American democracy and create strong relationships between Americans and foreigners in direct competition with the Soviet Union's projection of communist ideology. This idea demonstrates how, through the lenses of leadership, multiculturalism, soft power, and public diplomacy, the Fulbright Program achieves its founding goals by maintaining healthy diplomatic relations, developing competent leadership in political and professional realms, and fostering the perspective and skillset necessary to address the multifaceted challenges that America and the international community face today.

Although, I am not on Fullbright scholarship, but I am benefiting a scholarship from United States University. This means a huge connection to the US and advocating the interest of the US in my country and any other place I live. This is one of the purposes of knowledge diplomacy and of course the Fulbright program-having a great appreciating of the American culture, tradition, and not only formal education.

Drawbacks/critiques of the program/ Fullbright program

While the program seeks to bridge cultural gaps, critics believe enforcing U.S.-centric normative standards on research and academic collaboration is one of the drawbacks. By this I mean research rules, values, and ethical requirements primarily rooted in U.S. academic traditions and regulatory frameworks, such as those regarding ethics review, human subjects research, and academic publishing. These include standardized procedures like Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, expectations for research transparency, and ethical best practices outlined by U.S. This approach limits its inclusivity and might reinforce Western academic hegemony.

Introducing these standards locally could meet headwinds. Furthermore, administrative processes associated with Fulbright can hinder applicants from developing countries like the sub-Saharan African countries and the Global South, where access to resources and guidance for application processes is limited in these areas. In contrast to its first focus on building grassroots-level exchanges, recent evaluations emphasize that Fulbright alumni connections often stay limited to professional elite networks, shrinking its broader community impact. Recent developments such as funding freezes have proved the program's exposure to political dynamics in the U.S., which can risk its long-term sustainability and stability. This unpredictability has left both scholars and administrators uncertain about future operations, underlining major operational risks.

Chevening scholarship

According to Sevinç (2023), Funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and partner organizations, Chevening Scholarships are awarded to individuals with demonstrable leadership potential and strong academic backgrounds. The scholarships offer full financial support to study for any eligible master's degree at any UK university. Additionally, Chevening scholars gain access to a wide range of exclusive academic, professional, and cultural experiences. Since the program was created in 1983, 60,000 outstanding professionals have developed in the UK through Chevening. There are more than 1,000 scholarships on offer each year, proving the UK's ongoing commitment towards developing the leaders of tomorrow. The program fosters a strong network of scholars and alumni, providing opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing. Chevening looks to support emerging leaders who can make a positive impact in their home countries. For instance, one of my former students from the AME University (Liberia) is a Chevening scholar who is making enormous contributions to the development process of Liberia and an advocate of the UK's initiatives.

The Chevening Scholarships Scheme is the UK government's largest international scholarship program aimed at creating lasting positive relationships with future leaders, influencers and decision-makers in priority countries. This includes future leaders who may contribute to the development of their home countries. As set out in the National Strategic Defense and Security Review, Chevening directly supports the UK government priorities to project global influence by administering awards for young people of high ability to study in the UK.

Drawbacks / critiques of the program

Chevening's selection criteria often focus on academic and professional/extracurricular achievements, which I think may downgrade potential candidates from non-privileged socio-economic backgrounds. The program is perceived to favor candidates who already display strong leadership potential rather than giving transformative opportunities for underprivileged individuals to develop such potential. For instance as narrated above, in 2021, a graduate (dux) of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, AME University, Liberia (the College I supervised as dean for ten years) was the only candidate that qualified for the Chevening Scholarship that year because of his extra-curricular activities with the college along with two others from other universities in Liberia with similar backgrounds.

Chevening's post-scholarship engagement is insufficient in keeping the connection between alumni, the UK government, and their home countries. This limitation may weaken the full potential of the program to ensure long-lasting influence and collaboration.

Another criticism is that Chevening is closely aligned with the UK's soft power diplomacy goals, which raises concerns about whether the program primarily serves the UK's foreign policy interests at the expense of genuine global development. While fostering positive bilateral relationships can be beneficial, the focus on UK-driven agendas may limit the program's alignment with scholars' diverse developmental goals. This critique is based on a review of practical outputs and inputs of some alumni in my country as mentioned in this paper.

Erasmus Mundus / Erasmus+ program

The Erasmus Mundus program was reorganized in 2014 and now falls under the new Erasmus+ program (which also includes the Jean Monnet Activities). The wider policies related to education are managed by the European Commission. The general objective of the Program is to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship. The attractiveness of European higher education institutions and supporting the Union's external action, including its development aims, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between the Union and partner-country higher education institutions and targeted capacity-building in partner countries is its main foundation. (Sheng-Kai, 2015). Firstly, terminology has shifted from 'third' to 'partner' country, to remove any association between 'third country' and 'third world.' Further, a 'partner country' connotes a more equal and mutually beneficial relationship. Secondly, there has been consistent emphasis on cooperation between higher education institutions within and without the EU. This cooperation is done through capacity-building and ensuring sustainable development in higher education. Thirdly, the promotion of European values has been more explicitly named over the phases. This is especially so in the latest Regulation which advocates the promotion of said European values as laid out in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union. These values include "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities…. common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" EU (2012). With these strategic aims as a frame of reference, the Erasmus Mundus program and scholarship as a soft power tool comes into clearer focus. Erasmus + Programme can be considered an instrument of soft power in countries that aspire to become EU member states. According to Lami and Myrta (2021), the core assumption is that due to people-to-people contacts, Erasmus participants are most likely to become informal ambassadors of the European Union (EU), in the sense that they become bearers of the EU's soft power, leading to changes in cultural perceptions and social. Erasmus+ plays a key role in Higher Education Institutions because it provides and finances the exchange of students, academic staff, and administration, as well as scholarships for joint Masters in the best universities of the countries taking part in the program. In 2016, Erasmus+ supported 21,000 projects among 79,000 organizations in partner countries. 725,000 people went abroad to study, train, teach, and volunteer with the support or funding provided through the Erasmus+ 2016 call.

Drawback of the Erasmus Mundus / Erasmus+ program

The Erasmus program is faced with the issue of limited accessibility to students from underprivileged backgrounds, especially within Europe. While Erasmus aims at fostering global diversity, the financial support provided may not always fully cover living costs for students from lower-income regions, particularly given the varying standards of living across different host countries in Europe taking into consideration the inequality levels across eastern and western Europe.

Confucius Institute

Since it started in 2004, the program, funded by the Chinese government and with the mission of promoting Chinese language and culture globally, has grown rapidly around the world. It now has a network of 1,086 affiliates (440 institutes and 646 classrooms) in 120 countries. Among similar cultural organizations, only the Alliance Française has more than 1,000 classrooms or institutions, and only the Alliance Française and the British Council are in more than one hundred countries. But the Francophone organization was established

more than 120 years ago, and the British Council is 80 years old. China has embarked on an ambitious and aggressive initiative to spread its cultural centers around the globe (Hubbert et al., 2014). Since 2004, China has tried to promote its image in foreign countries through government programs called Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institutes (or CIs) partner with foreign colleges and universities to teach Chinese language and culture. However, academic, and political leaders criticize the Confucius Institute for its close ties to the Chinese government, threat to academic freedom, lack of transparency, and other issues (Bush, 2018). There are multiple driving forces behind this remarkable growth, including institutional incentives and resources provided by Hanban (the Beijing-based Office of the Chinese Language Council International), a growing interest in China and the resulting need for Chinese language instruction, and its affiliate-based organizational model. In 2018, Congress restricted federal funding to schools with institutes; all the institutes have since closed. As stated by Girard, B. (2023), key reason among the closure is Confucius Institutes have been primarily driven by shifts in government policy and heightened sensitivity to possible Chinese influence or interference, especially in the United States and other Western countries.

Drawback of the CI: The Confucius Institute has received its share of criticism in host countries, as well as within China. For instance, like in my country and other countries, some critics contend that the institutes reflect the Chinese government's agenda and that their operation on university campuses interferes with academic freedom. Others find the teaching materials and pedagogy less than adequate. Domestic criticism has ranged from accusing the government of misplacing educational resources for overseas institutions rather than giving them to poor school districts in China, to questioning the use of "Confucius" as the official name of the entity, as it does not teach anything related to Confucian philosophy.

China appears of promoting the Chinese language and culture to increase its soft power in the international arena. Joseph Nye viewed the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies of a nation as an important soft power resource that a nation can wield to enhance its appeal or attraction.

Summary of the most important points relevant to the topic

According to The Centre for Higher Education Internationalization (2013), the international dimension and the position of higher education in the global arena are given greater emphasis in international, national, and institutional documents and mission statements than ever before. The scale and speed of global change challenge higher education and other national sectors to internationalize, to understand relationships of various nations, including the United States, with the rest of the world, and to realize the importance of creating those global connections through international education. International education plays a prominent role in the shaping of a new global society. However, it seems there has not been enough support from the federal government about promoting international education in the United States. Many studies touched on the role of the federal government when it comes to higher education; however, there have not been enough efforts on providing a comprehensive analysis of the United States higher education system's internationalization and the role of the internal and external factors. Little research has been available on the historical roots of the major waves of internationalization of higher education. However, Wit (2002) highlights the importance of seeing the connection between the acknowledged focus on internationalization of higher education around the world and the original roots of the university, with placing the present developments of internationalization in historical perspective. International educational exchange would promote acceptance and understanding among all people around the world leading to permanent peace.

Knowledge diplomacy refers to the use of education and academic collaboration to build international relationships and address global challenges, while soft power is the ability of a country to influence others through cultural and intellectual appeal rather than coercion. The Fulbright Program, funded by the U.S. government, and the Chevening Scholarship, funded by the UK government, are primarily designed to foster academic exchange and mutual understanding between nations, making them strong examples of knowledge diplomacy. These initiatives aim to develop global leaders who contribute to international cooperation, reinforcing the host countries' influence through intellectual and professional networks.

The Confucius Institute, however, leans more toward soft power as it focuses on promoting Chinese language and culture globally. While it does help educational exchange, its primary goal is to enhance China's

international image and foster goodwill through cultural diplomacy. Unlike Fulbright and Chevening, which emphasize academic and leadership development in diverse fields, Confucius Institutes primarily serve as platforms for promoting China's narratives, values, and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, all three programs contribute to a global influence, proving how education can be a powerful tool for both diplomatic engagement and soft power projection.

Justification of the paper

The escalation of national public private partnerships between universities as indicated in this paper has proved that higher education institutions have played a significant role in diplomacy and peace. While both soft power and knowledge diplomacy initiatives exist in higher education, they differ significantly in their motives, the nature of relationships, strategies, and underlying values. In short, there is a difference between a power framework and a diplomatic framework.

Colleges and universities play a key role in bringing nations together to foster international cooperation and peacebuilding. This proves the powerful roles Fulbright, the Chevening, the Erasmus and other exchange programs undertaken by various nations either as a soft power or knowledge or public diplomacy tools play. As Jane Knight 2018 proved, the interest of international higher education in knowledge diplomacy is national-self-interest leading to mutual benefits, the modes are negotiation, mediation, conflict resolution, conciliation, and collaboration. The principles applied are reciprocity, mutuality, and common ground, then, the outcomes are expected to be win-win with mutual but different benefits. The nature of these relationships is horizontal and collaborative as in the case of Fulbright and other joint universities that foster these ideas. On the other hand, international higher education institutions' interest in soft power is national self-interest dominates. The modes are attraction, persuasion, compliance, and cooption. The principles apply are dominance and competitive advantage, The outcomes are usually win-lose, zero sum game. Finally, the nature of relationships is vertical and top down like in the case of the Confucius Institute.

CONCLUSION

In developing nations, higher education is not only a driver of national progress but also a strategic instrument of diplomacy. By using educational diplomacy, these countries can foster stronger global partnerships, attract investments in research and innovation, and promote mutual understanding across borders. Ultimately, investing in higher education systems empowers societies, strengthens governance, and accelerates social development, making it an indispensable pillar for both national and international advancement. Education institutions contribute to social development by producing skilled professionals, promoting civic engagement, encouraging critical thinking, and addressing pressing social challenges such as poverty, inequality, and public health. Diplomatic engagement through education also brings in resources, technical ability, and institutional reforms that help national development agendas and peacebuilding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote Educational Opportunities for International Students: One of the most significant tools of the state's soft power is the supply of educational opportunities for international students. International students eventually become familiar with the host nation's scientific and cultural accomplishments and learn the language. After studying overseas, these students stand to get significant social capital. For example, I came to the United States on a scholarship as an international student. I am beginning to appreciate more the American cultural and I have become a good ambassador for the American society. This will continue even more when I return to my home country.

Promote Global Education Partnerships: This can be achieved using education as a tool for promoting diplomatic relations between countries and providing support to educational institutions in developing countries. This can include initiatives such as joint research projects, academic partnerships, collaborations between universities, and providing aid for infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. This encourages peacebuilding, especially countries pronged to conflicts, as in some of the countries in sub-Saharan

Africa and sometimes the global south. As the result of these partnerships, the sense of positivity comes into play between and among these institutions and countries.

Encourage Internationalization of Higher Education: Transnational Education can involve developing partnerships and collaborations between universities and colleges of different countries, which can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas between countries and promote cross-cultural understanding and positive relationships.

Promote Education for Sustainable Development and diplomacy in conflict zones: Education can be used to promote sustainable development and build positive relationships between countries. This can include initiatives such as developing educational programs that promote environmental awareness and responsibility and providing support for educational institutions and educators working in areas affected by climate change and other environmental challenges. This can spread to a greater level of peacebuilding initiatives.

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