

Knowledge Diplomacy: Findings, Misunderstandings, and Challenges

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Abstract

Knowledge diplomacy is a collaborative approach, based on values of reciprocity and mutual benefits, aimed at strengthening relations among countries through international higher education, research, and innovation. It is often confused with soft power and cultural, science, and public forms of diplomacy. This article clarifies similarities and differences among the different approaches and identifies current challenges.

There is no doubt that the landscape of international higher education (IHE) is changing, as is the world of international relations (IR). But the intersection of these two phenomena is vastly understudied. A comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of research on the role of IHE in building relations between and among countries and addressing global challenges reveals a number of important findings, misunderstandings, and challenges.

Terminology Chaos

Across the two disciplines, there are more than a dozen terms being used (and confused) to describe the relationship between IHE and IR. They include soft power, cultural relations, and many different types of diplomacy such as science, public, education, cultural, and citizen exchange, among others. Many of the terms are quite specific and do not fully capture the breadth of contemporary IHE developments or the reality that nonstate actors such as universities, research centers, and think tanks play a key role in IR. For example, the most frequently mentioned IHE activities in IR are traditional ones such as student mobility, scholarships, and bilateral institutional events and agreements. This ignores recent developments such as knowledge cities and hubs, centers of excellence, international research networks, international joint universities, education–industry partnerships, and others. A comprehensive review of the academic literature from both IHE and IR fields of study revealed that the importance of research and innovation in IHE’s role in IR has not been adequately acknowledged, except by the concept of science diplomacy, and that is most often in the context of science and technology.

Knowledge Diplomacy

Therefore, the term IHE is deliberately expanded to IHERI (international higher education, research, and innovation) to acknowledge the importance of “research” and “innovation” in strengthening IR and addressing global challenges. This leads to the introduction of the term *knowledge diplomacy* as a way to capture the breadth and importance of IHERI in IR. The proposed definition of knowledge diplomacy, “the process of strengthening relations between and among countries through international higher education, research, and innovation,” is purposely generic in order to apply to a diversity of geopolitical situations, issues, and sectors. This definition does not include rationales, activities, and values that are intentionally used in a description such as “knowledge diplomacy involves diverse state and nonstate actors involved in collaborative education, research, and innovation initiatives, which are based on mutual benefits and reciprocity and designed to build and strengthen relations between and among countries to increase mutual understanding and address global issues.”

Misunderstandings about Knowledge Diplomacy and Soft Power

The misunderstanding of the intentions, values, and outcomes of soft power vs. diplomacy, especially by the higher education sector, needs to be addressed. The term soft power is essentially understood as the use of persuasion and attraction in international relations to achieve self-interests and competitive advantage through compliance or cooption.

Countries strategically use IHERI in a soft-power approach, but it should not be portrayed as a way to build trust and mutual understanding, which many IHE leaders,

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researchers, and policy makers believe in and promote. While IHERI actors and activities may be the same in soft power and knowledge diplomacy approaches, the values, modes of operation, and outcomes are strikingly different. Diplomacy in general, and knowledge diplomacy in particular, is about finding common ground, collaboration, negotiating conflicts, ensuring mutual but different benefits for partners, while still aiming to meet national self-interests. This differs substantially from soft power. While both approaches exist in using IHERI in IR, it is important to recognize that they have very different motives, values, strategies, and outcomes.

Is Knowledge Diplomacy the Same as Cultural, Science, and Public Diplomacies?

While the difference in using IHERI in a soft power approach versus a knowledge diplomacy approach is clear, distinctions between the role of IHERI in knowledge diplomacy and related diplomacies such as cultural, science, and public diplomacy are subtler.

Cultural diplomacy is primarily oriented to international exchanges and events in all fields of the arts, education, sports, and other cultural expressions. The goal of cultural diplomacy is to enhance cross-cultural awareness, trust, and relations between and among countries. When IHE is referred to as cultural diplomacy, the most common activities cited are student/scholar exchanges, language learning, joint conferences, and cultural events. While cultural diplomacy includes a wide range of people-to-people education and cultural exchanges, it is not broad enough to include the central elements of IHERI such as research and innovation.

A frequently asked question is whether science diplomacy and knowledge diplomacy are not one and the same. This question is worthy of consideration and depends on how broadly science is defined and used. If science is broadly interpreted to mean knowledge as in the Latin word *scientia*, then there is a close relationship. But, traditionally, science diplomacy has been seen in terms of natural sciences and, more recently, it has been placed within the framework of science and technology. There is no doubt that this reflects the centrality of science and technology in today's knowledge economy and the number of global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, biodiversity, and water security, among others. However, one must ask if the focus on science and technology excludes, to a large extent, other sectors and issues. For instance, it is unlikely that science diplomacy initiatives or negotiations would include social or humanitarian issues such as migration, aging, refugees, gender, social justice, inclusion, poverty, or human rights initiatives. Thus, while full acknowledgement is given to the importance and role of science (and technology) diplomacy, it does not exclude the necessity of knowledge diplomacy, which is a more inclusive concept in terms of the production and application of knowledge to a wide range of global issues.

Public diplomacy has been described as a country's efforts to create and maintain relationships with publics in other societies to advance policies and actions. It is often linked to the idea of reputation building. This involves a wide range of state and nonstate actors and can be applied to an equally broad spectrum of issues. There is no doubt that public diplomacy can include IHERI related actors, issues, and activities, but it is a wide umbrella concept, and the term knowledge diplomacy is more focused on specific state and nonstate actors and their activities related to international higher education, research, and innovation.

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Current challenges

Knowledge in its broadest sense is a critical resource in addressing the diversity of national, regional, and global issues. But it comes with many challenges. Knowledge security, as in protection from undesirable transfer and use of sensitive knowledge and technology, including international espionage, is increasingly at risk. Another concern is the politicization of knowledge to suit self-interests by a wide range of actors including politicians, academics, and researchers. The democracy of knowledge, as in widening and respecting different types and producers of knowledge, is yet another challenge facing countries in both the Global North and South. The risk of knowledge diplomacy being seen as “social washing,” as in a disconnect between perceived commitment to issues and genuine action and reciprocity, also needs monitoring.

IHERI faces the harsh realities of the more competitive, nationalistic, and turbulent world in which we live. However, we must ask whether we can afford to ignore the potential of using a knowledge-diplomacy approach to IHERI to contribute to the resolution of national, regional, and global challenges and to strengthen relations between and among countries. ▲