

## **Diplomacy and Education: A Changing Global Landscape**

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Diplomacy—the art of international relations—was once the province of heads of state or their appointed representatives. Over the last century, its parameters expanded to include the concept of “public diplomacy,” a term that covers the actions of a wide-array of actors and activities intended to promote favorable relations among nations.

In the practice of diplomacy as well as domination, countries have extended their national interests through education. It played a central role in the long history of colonialism by those wishing to influence local populations. In the postcolonial era, education still plays an important role in the advancement of national influence.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOFT POWER**

In more recent years, the role of education and academic exchange in building international relationships has been characterized by the term of “soft power.” Rather than employing force, soft power is dependent on the strength of ideas

and culture, to influence the friendship and disposition of others. Higher education is an ideal vehicle for soft power.

The Fulbright Program—sponsored by the US Department of State—is an excellent example of public diplomacy, being furthered through higher education. Its principal goal is to foster mutual understanding between people and nations, and the program has always been a mix of government and people-generated soft power. It claims the largest movement of students and scholars across the world that any nation has ever sponsored. Government officials often cite it as one of the great diplomatic assets of the United States. Citizens and leaders of other countries who have participated in Fulbright frequently proclaim a familiarity with and a fondness for the United States and its people due to their experiences—a result that generates good will for the United States abroad.

While Fulbright has not been replicated by other countries, there are other well-organized efforts to extend national diplomacy through education. The British Council is a prime example. With offices around the world, sometimes operating as an affiliate of British embassies, the British Council describes itself as the United Kingdom's international organization for educational opportunities and cultural relations. Along the Fulbright model, it offers scholarships for study in the United Kingdom and sponsors educational exchanges between higher education institutions there and in other countries.

The German Academic Exchange Service plays a similar but less extensive role; and very importantly, non-Western countries have followed with their diplomatic efforts. China emerged with an idea for its own brand of educational diplomacy, in 2004. Its Confucius Institutes are designed to promote Chinese

language and culture abroad. By 2011, there were 353 Confucius Institutes in 104 countries and regions.

### **DIPLOMACY OR HEGEMONY**

Soft power relationships, informed by enlightened self-interest, often signal unequal relationships. This issue has been raised particularly with regard to East-West and North-South cooperation. Given the demand for higher education in developing countries, they are unwilling to discourage those who wish to help either through scholarships or assistance with the formation of institutions. In the best of all possible worlds, these offers can create development for the receiving country as a way to build human capacity. However, countries that are recipients of educational diplomacy need to understand the motivations of those wishing to build relationships.

As we enter a period of accelerated global engagement, country-to-country educational diplomacy is being overtaken by institution-to-institution relationships and a broad array of actors. This makes the educational diplomacy scenario even more complicated for those on the receiving end. It also means that governments are not the prime actors. While governments may view college and university cross-border activity as an important part of their diplomatic efforts, institutions are increasingly operating beyond sovereignty, based on their own strategies and motivations.

### **BEYOND SOVEREIGNTY?**

A report on global higher education engagement from the American Council on Education depicted institutions as acting simultaneously on themes of

competition and cooperation. While it did not dispute the role of higher education in public diplomacy, the report focused more on the need for colleges and universities to develop their own engagement strategies. This can lead to direct relationships and negotiations, not just with educational institutions outside the United States, but also with governments themselves. When the presidents of American universities travel to India, China, or any number of other countries, they often meet with government officials as part of their efforts—to build educational relationships with those countries.

When agreements for academic cooperation are signed by university presidents, the setting and formalities have all the trappings of an international agreement. The signing, as with all treaties, represents significant groundwork laid by institutional representatives. The celebratory moment is not always followed by sustainable relationships, and expectations are sometimes met with deep disappointment. The result can have a negative impact on institutional as well as national relations, although the latter may be an unintended consequence.

While colleges and universities must adhere to national laws and are wise to be well-aware of local customs, they operate mainly on their own reconnaissance when agreements are signed. In this dimension, they are moving beyond sovereignty but they may still be regarded as national representatives. For this vein of public diplomacy, it is extremely important, just as in official diplomatic negotiations, so that institutions develop protocols that recognize all the details, promises, and expectations that are critical to both parties before signing. And when unexpected developments cause tensions, it will be equally important to have ways to adjudicate these issues.

## **SOUND DIPLOMACY FOR STRONG RELATIONSHIPS**

It would be safe to say that in most educational diplomacy there are mixed motives for seeking engagement. The search for fee-paying students is a leading reason for greater cross-border activity. Institutions and governments in countries with well-developed higher education are creating initiatives to receive students from many developing countries. Some universities in spite of less well-developed higher education seek relationships with other institutions they view as more prestigious to increase their chances of a higher degree in global rankings.

Countering these more narrow motivations for engagement, many institutions are developing broader internationalization strategies, to seek cooperative agreements that define themselves as global institutions. They may want to pursue a variety of goals through engagement—to enrich their academic programs, enlarge the knowledge and experience base for their students, host a more internationally diverse student body and faculty, provide more opportunities for their faculty to join international research networks, and ultimately to develop a wide spectrum of joint activity that will benefit both partners. As with all sustainable relationships, the character of the parties and the ethical framework in which they operate are all important. Countries and institutions engaging in educational diplomacy have an obligation to consider the benefits—not merely to themselves but also to their partners. This will be in the best spirit of international relations and internationalization of higher education. If done well, it will be a rising tide that lifts all ships.