

DISCUSSION PAPER

KNOWLEDGE DIPLOMACY

A bridge linking international higher education and research with international relations.

Jane Knight PHD

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Introduction

There is no doubt that we currently live in turbulent times. While globalisation is a multi-layered and complex phenomenon, and continues to be the subject of intense scrutiny, few would question that there is increased interconnectedness and interdependence among countries. Whether this is desirable or not is still being debated. Nevertheless, global issues such as climate change, epidemics, cybersecurity, migration, social justice – to name only a few – know no borders. Global challenges are now national challenges and vice versa.

Addressing worldwide issues takes resources, expertise and political will from diverse actors, sectors and countries. Few nations can address these challenges alone. It takes negotiation, compromise, mutuality and a win-win approach to find solutions that have any chance of being effective. It is true that in international relations, countries tend to present their self-interests first – it is naïve to think otherwise. But because national self-interests are closely linked to global issues, multilateral cooperation is growing in importance. History has shown us that addressing both global and national issues requires collaboration and a commitment in order to find solutions that respect the individual needs and perspectives of different countries, while at the same time finding a common path to ensure different but relevant benefits for all.

A key question facing the higher-education sector in these times of turmoil is the role that higher education/research actors play in addressing national, regional and international challenges. This discussion paper asks the question whether knowledge diplomacy is a way forward. Is it an effective bridge linking international higher education and research with international relations? First it is important to understand the characteristics, potential and limitations of the emerging concept of knowledge diplomacy.

International higher education and research is changing at an unprecedented pace with the development of innovative global research networks, education/knowledge hubs; international, joint universities; regional centres of excellence, multisector partnerships, and new modes of academic mobility among students, scholars, programmes, providers, research and policies. Contemporary diplomacy is equally dynamic with new non-governmental actors, instruments, modes, and issues. How do these changing worlds of contemporary diplomacy and international higher education and research intersect?

The purpose of this discussion paper is to look at the emerging concept of knowledge diplomacy and to ask whether it is a way forward in terms of higher education's role in strengthening relations between and among countries, and vice versa: the role that international relations play in strengthening higher education and research. This involves examining the changing landscape of international higher education, the characteristics of contemporary diplomacy, the emergence of soft power, and the concept of knowledge diplomacy and its potential role. This examination may help in gaining a deeper understanding of knowledge diplomacy and dispelling some emerging misunderstandings about the concept.

Changing Landscape of International Higher Education and Research

The international dimension of higher education has been active for centuries through exchange of scholars and knowledge around the world. The fact, that 'universe' is the root concept for university is clear evidence of its internationality. But the priorities and strategies of international higher education have twisted and turned over the years, in response to the environment in which it operates. There is little doubt that the current age of globalisation has had a profound impact, resulting in a new imperatives attached to international higher education itself.

Different rationales and opportunities have driven an unprecedented increase in international education and research by diverse actors and by means of different strategies. While internationalisation is often seen primarily as the recruitment of international students or student mobility, it is far more than this. Not only people are moving across borders; so are education programmes, providers, research projects and policy. The establishment of twinning, joint/double degrees, and exchange programs have skyrocketed in the last two decades, as has the creation of a wide range of regional and global academic networks. The development of university branch campuses in foreign countries has increased from 24 in 2002 to about 245 in 2016. International joint universities, often described as binational universities, demonstrate the close bilateral links between institutions and countries. In 2004 there were four such joint universities; in 2018 there are 22, with more under development. They differ significantly from international branch campuses, which are essentially satellite campuses located in a different country than that of the parent university. International joint universities are collaborative efforts between two or more institutions or countries.

International education hubs are a recent development and represent a wider and more strategic configuration of actors involved in international higher education and research. An education hub is a concerted and planned effort by a country, zone or city to build a critical mass of education/knowledge actors in order to exert more influence in the new education marketplace and to strengthen relations with international counterparts. The concept of an education hub is driven by a country's motivation to increase influence and linkages within the region and beyond, and become recognised as a reputed centre for higher education and knowledge production. National, regional and international students, institutions, knowledge industries, government agencies, as well as research and development centres are integral to the establishment and operation of education hubs. They serve as key actors in international relations and are a convincing example of how higher education is an innovative and critical factor in building bilateral/multilateral relationships and maximising international engagement.

There are numerous other examples where international higher education and research initiatives have a relevant role to play in strengthening bilateral relations and international engagement. These include language training, higher-education summits as part of larger political gatherings, policy networks, intercultural training and exchange programmes, global gatherings of indigenous communities, international sport, cultural, and scholarly events, worldwide scientific and research initiatives, and international development projects.

From Classical to Contemporary Diplomacy – Emergence of Soft Power

Diplomacy, interpreted to mean the 'building and management of international relations', has also evolved at a rapid pace. Contemporary diplomacy is characterised by new actors, new issues, new functions and an increasing preoccupation with soft power. The shift from a state-based approach, typically centred on the role of ministries of foreign affairs and professional diplomats, to a multi-actor approach is a hallmark of the evolution of diplomacy. Not only have a broad spectrum of government organisations – including higher education, science and technology agencies – become key players in diplomatic relations, so too have civil society organisations, multinational firms and expert networks.

In relation to international higher education and research, there are a myriad actors involved in growing and shaping bilateral and multilateral engagement. The diversity of national/regional public, private, quasi-governmental, non-governmental actors is remarkable. Colleges and universities – including students, faculty and researchers – play a pivotal role in bilateral and multilateral academic initiatives. In addition to institutions, internationally engaged higher education actors include policy makers and agents of policy mobility; funders and foundations; research and development organisations; sponsors of education programmes; regional and international networks; as well as scholarly associations and international education organisations.

The evolution from classical to contemporary diplomacy has introduced a spectrum of theme-based approaches to the practice of international engagement. Cultural diplomacy is well known because it includes a broad range of activities related to arts and culture, education, sport, architecture and language. But further instances of the theme-based approach, such as in health, science and technology, and environmental diplomacy, are gaining momentum. These approaches differ from more traditional, though still important, diplomacy issues related to national security and economic competitiveness.

An important development has been the emergence of soft power. Developed by Joseph Nye in the early nineties, the concept of soft power is popularly understood as the ability 'to influence others and achieve national self-interests through attraction and persuasion' rather than through coercion, military force or economic sanctions – commonly known as hard power.

Many see international higher education, research and knowledge as a source of power – in fact a form of soft power. When compared with hard power, there is no question that soft power is less invasive or destructive. But what is soft power? How does it differ from diplomacy? And how does it relate to international higher education and research?

During the past decade, academic leaders and policy analysts have been increasingly concerned with justifying the contribution that international higher education and research make to economic competitiveness and the shift to a knowledge-based economy and society. These debates have broadened to include higher education as an instrument of soft power.

Given higher education's current obsession with branding, rankings and competitiveness, it is strongly attracted to the concept of soft power. Witness the number of references to it in conferences, academic journals, blogs, and media articles over the past decade. Many hail soft power as a fundamental premise of today's international education engagement. Some treat soft power like a modern branding campaign, using culture and media to win over foreign publics and to raise profile, influence and dominance in the international education marketplace. Others interpret it as another form of neo-colonisation. Then there are those who see attraction and persuasion as a way to build trust, because trust can pay dividends in terms of economic and geopolitical benefits. In short, the role and use of higher education as a soft

power instrument is interpreted in many ways.

The common motivations behind soft power include self-interest, influence and dominance through attraction – whether the benefits are political, economic or reputational. This reality raises hard questions. Are the primary goals of international higher education and research to serve self-interest and achieve dominance? Table One compares the basic attributes of a diplomacy framework with a power paradigm, thus illustrating key areas of difference. The comparison cannot be seen as a case of stark black-and-white differences; there are grey zones and overlaps. The purpose of the comparison is to raise questions and stimulate debate in order to deepen the understanding of the fundamental differences between diplomacy and soft power. The first step is to examine two approaches to international relations which are not mutually exclusive: diplomacy and power.

Table One: Diplomacy Framework versus a Power Paradigm

Characteristic	Diplomacy Framework	Power Paradigm
Nature of Relationships	Horizontal	Vertical
Approach Functions	Negotiation Communication Representation Conciliation Collaboration Mediation	<i>Hard power</i> Coercion Co-optation Compulsion Control <i>Soft power</i> Attraction Persuasion
Values	Reciprocity Mutuality Compromise Understanding	Domination Authoritarianism Competition Supremacy
Outcomes	Win-win Mutual-sum game	Win-lose Zero-sum game

Author, Knight, J, 2018.

As indicated in Table One, the primary functions of diplomacy have long been identified as communication, negotiation, mediation and representation. These functions are based on values of reciprocity, mutuality, understanding and compromise. Diplomacy has not been traditionally seen as a zero-sum game of winners and losers, but one where countries bring different strengths, needs and priorities that, after negotiation and compromise, result in mutuality of benefits. It is naïve to deny that in international relations self-interests are a strong motivating factor; but a diplomatic approach recognises that self-interests have to be mediated to find areas of mutual interest and benefits for all parties/countries involved. A power approach involves a different set of values, such as dominance, competition, supremacy. When soft power tactics such as attraction and persuasion are juxtaposed with hard-power tactics such as military force or economic sanctions, the softer approach is clear; but the anticipated outcomes remain the same: control, self-interest, and self-promotion.

In both debate and scholarly literature, the most commonly referred to examples of soft power in higher education include the Fulbright Program, British Council activities, German Academic Exchange initiatives, and Erasmus Mundus projects. Clearly, these are respected and longstanding programs that are well accepted and make enormous contributions. But why are they called instruments of ‘soft power’

when at heart they promote exchange of students, faculty, culture, science, knowledge and expertise. Yes, there are self-interests, at play but there is a mutuality of interests and benefits involved for all partners. International higher education and research is not traditionally seen as a game of winners and losers, it is focused on exchange and partnerships and builds on the respective strengths of different countries' higher education and research institutions and organisations.

Most agree that in the highly interconnected and interdependent world in which we live, higher education is a channel for the cross-border flow and exchange of people, ideas, knowledge, expertise, values, innovation, economy, technology, and culture. Yet why is it framed in a 'power paradigm' like soft power? Are the values of self-interest, competition or dominance going to address issues of worldwide epidemics, terrorism, failed states, the bottom billion in poverty, environmental degradation and climate change effectively? The answer is no. This response is based on reality and the 'new normal': finding solutions to worldwide challenges cannot be achieved by one country alone. The solution is not a simple one. The world of international relations is complex and beset with histories, challenges and inequalities that would be naïve to ignore. The question at hand is: 'What is an alternative to soft power which recognises and values international higher education and research's role in international relations?' Knowledge diplomacy is proposed as one option worthy of consideration.

Understanding Knowledge Diplomacy

Knowledge diplomacy is becoming a more popular term. It is being used in a number of ways that are causing confusion and may eventually weaken its potential. For instance: Can advocacy for the benefits of international higher education and lobbying for further funding be understood as knowledge diplomacy? Does increased competition and defence of self-interests in a winner-takes-all approach constitute knowledge diplomacy? Can developing students' international and intercultural competencies through study abroad be labelled as knowledge diplomacy? These are concrete examples of how the term has been used, perhaps misused, in the last year. This confusion calls for a rigorous approach to analysing the different dimensions of knowledge diplomacy.

From an international relations perspective, diplomacy is 'the building and management of relations between and among countries'. Diplomacy is different from both foreign policy and multilateral governance. From a higher education perspective, knowledge diplomacy is not equivalent to internationalisation.

Knowledge diplomacy focuses on 'the role of international higher education and research in building and strengthening relations between and among countries'. But knowledge diplomacy need not be seen only as a one-way process. It can (and should) be understood as a two-way reciprocal process whereby 'relations between and among countries can enhance international higher education and research'. There are many examples of the latter and a growing interest in the potential of the former.

The term knowledge diplomacy is different from education, science, cultural or public diplomacy. These terms are narrower and do not do justice to the comprehensiveness of knowledge diplomacy. For example, education diplomacy does not include research and innovation, and is primarily linked to basic education. Science diplomacy most often relates to the natural sciences. Cultural diplomacy is much broader in scope and includes art, sports, food, education, architecture among others. But the common understanding of the role of education in cultural diplomacy is limited to student and scholar exchanges.

Knowledge diplomacy takes a more inclusive approach. It builds on a multidimensional approach that emphasises that the 'whole is greater than the sum of the parts'. The three major dimensions of knowledge diplomacy are, firstly, higher education and training including formal, informal and lifelong learning; secondly, research for the generation, use and sharing of knowledge, and thirdly, innovation, which includes the application of new knowledge and ideas for added value.

A noteworthy development in contemporary diplomacy is the increased interest in *issue-related* diplomacy. Examples include health diplomacy, human rights diplomacy, environmental diplomacy and refugee diplomacy. These focus on the substance of the issue. This does not apply to knowledge diplomacy. Knowledge diplomacy is not about 'the production of knowledge', nor is knowledge diplomacy 'an end unto itself'. Instead it is a 'means to an end', with one outcome being the ability to help address the pressing global issues facing our planet that cannot be addressed by using the higher education, knowledge, and innovation resources of one nation alone. International collaboration is necessary, and knowledge diplomacy by diverse higher education and research actors is one means to this end.

As noted in Table One, relationships in a soft power approach are typically described as top-down, while relationships in diplomacy are often described as horizontal. This aligns closely to the kind of networks, partnerships, and exchanges fundamental to international higher education and research. Thus knowledge diplomacy builds on the strategies of cooperation and collaboration that characterise much of the international higher education activity undertaken by research centres, universities and colleges, regional centres of excellence, education/knowledge hubs and international joint universities (to name

but a few). Furthermore, knowledge diplomacy can bring the expertise and research of the higher education sector, in partnership with actors from other sectors and disciplines, to address the global challenges that are beyond a single country's capacity.

Challenges and Unintended Consequences

The concept of knowledge diplomacy is not without its challenges. First is the issue of values. Values play a central role in diplomacy and explain why the contribution of international higher education and research to international relations and vice versa is conceptualised in a diplomatic framework and not a power paradigm.

Knowledge diplomacy recognises 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 which underpin knowledge diplomacy can be easily eroded. There is the potential 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.

Knowledge diplomacy can easily become a buzzword to camouflage national and regional ambitions to promote self-interest at the expense of mutual interests and benefits. 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 operationalised in light of competing priorities within and between countries/regions? Can the contribution and impact of knowledge diplomacy be measured? Is it feasible to develop mechanisms where education, research and innovation complement each other to achieve goals that each could not accomplish 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.

Developing a framework, strategies and commitment to knowledge diplomacy cannot be done without facing the harsh realities of international politics and the challenges of the more competitive and turbulent world in which we live. However, the question must be asked whether we can afford to ignore the potential of knowledge diplomacy to address and contribute to the resolution of national, regional and global challenges.

This paper builds on and updates previous articles by the author, including Knight, J. (2014), Higher Education and Diplomacy, Briefing Note for Canadian Bureau for International Education, Ottawa, Canada; and Knight, J. (2015), The Potential of Knowledge Diplomacy? Higher Education and International Relations in L. Weimer, A Wealth of Nations, EAIE. Amsterdam, the Netherlands, pp 37-45; and several commentary pieces published by University World News.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Knight is an adjunct professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and a visiting professor (2017-22) at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Studies on Higher Education, , University of Johannesburg.

She is the author of numerous publications on internationalisation and is the recipient of honorary doctorates from the University of Exeter in the UK and Symbiosis International University in India and recently received the Outstanding Researcher Award from the European Association for Institutional Research and the Gilbert Medal from Universitas 21 for her contribution to higher education internationalisation.

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