

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION EXCHANGES AS A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INSTRUMENT

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Globalisation has had a big impact on both education and international relations. Education on one hand has brought in new dimensions; that other than just having students and scholars move across borders in search of knowledge and engaging the world in areas of concern especially in science and technology, they have now been acknowledged as actors in diplomacy. Education can be able to contribute much to the new diplomatic dispensation where there is now a new shift from the state based approach kind of diplomacy to a multi-actor approach contemporary diplomacy. Education has been known to bring on board national and regional associations, educational institutions, foundations, students and even faculty associations that can really have an impact on the conduct of international relations as practised today. Educational institutions have been used to build bridges and also trust; that in turn pay dividends in economic and also in geopolitical interests. Academic mobility and scholarly collaborations in all fields of education contribute to the strengthening of international relations among nations and even regions through the generation, diffusion and exchange of the acquired knowledge. There are broad and interrelated areas that intertwine education with diplomacy; since knowledge is known to be a driver of economic growth and socio-cultural development of countries, advancing their positions and also leverage in the conduct of international relations. Additionally, public diplomacy has widely been viewed as a systematic effort to communicate with the foreign publics; and this effort can be realised effectively through education. Moreover, both education and diplomacy have been tied closely to the structure and interest of the nation state; each of them aspiring for a broader share of the international society.

Education as a public diplomacy tool is a long term investment and it yields its returns in the long term; the results are not realized in the short run as with other public diplomacy tools like the media. The investment in international education has to be done to enhance mutual

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knowledge (for all the parties concerned) of each other's societies and complement and add onto all the knowledge that had been acquired earlier on. Unfortunately, education sector providers have short term commercial priorities; partly because they have to be competitive and post profits and partly due to the incoherent nature of most governments' policies that are deficient in their strategic public diplomacy initiatives. The education providers therefore have a challenge trying to balance the commercial and public diplomacy interests; as most nations lack clear cut policies on public diplomacy for the education providers and hence no incentives are in place for the said education providers. For education to be used as a public diplomacy tool effectively, there need to exist a real attraction for one another's programmes for the concerned parties. There also requires being a good connectivity between the concerned parties. The programs have to appeal to the personal and shared aspirations of the individuals concerned; for the individuals to be inspired to cross boundaries and cultures in an effort to seek for knowledge, experience and the diversity of thought offered.

The beauty found in the nature of education programs is that they touch on a whole style of life rather than dwelling on one particular opinion or course of behavior as happens with various other tools used for public diplomacy. Education programs touch on the market economies as well as create better connectivity in all the players' areas of life. Despite the fact that each player is driven by their own interests, there is a good measure of mutuality of solutions and benefits for all involved players; though benefits differ amongst partners. Even though governments may seem passive in some education programs, in allowing foreign students in their universities, nations build themselves a reservoir of good will, through the bonds of friendship that are established.³

However, the common motivation behind soft power as is known is self interest and dominance through attraction- whether the benefits are political, economic or reputational.⁴ It is also important to note that international relations today dictate that states have to fight for the right to determine the values that regulate the new world order. "This kind of leadership is not possible without advancing human development- the basis of the formation of the new knowledge- based economy."⁵ Governments then require to give attention to their education systems if they are ambitious in achieving this objective since the economic and social growth of a country heavily depends on its education system. International education programs are a good vehicle in which the values of a nation are positively disseminated.

Much of the public diplomacy carried out through the education channel is realized in the form of education exchanges. In these exchanges, there is a vision of a learning experience in which both parties; the learner and the provider; will benefit. Exchanges ultimately nurture favorable public opinion abroad; based on the premise that mutual understanding is important; and that a greater understanding and appreciation of other people's point of view contribute to a reduction

³ Nye, *Joseph Soft power and Higher Education* (Harvard University Press, 2005) p.41

⁴ Knight, Jane *CBIE Briefing note October 2014* p.1

⁵ Amirbek, Aidarbek and Ydyrys *Education as a Soft Power Instrument of Foreign Policy* in *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences* 143 (2014) p.502

of possible sources of conflict. Exchanges also enhance understanding and trust where a certain level of cultural affinity already exists. Whereas educational institutions would benefit from the sharing of technical expertise and knowledge and engage in comparative research and training in the academic field through educational exchanges, governments can tap in the use of these exchanges to expose foreigners learning in their countries for diplomatic purposes by engaging them meaningfully. Cultural events and important national days can be a good avenue for engaging the foreign students by inviting them to the said functions; and in return the foreign students would gain more and hopefully positive information about the host country. Once the foreign students return back to their countries, they are more likely to influence others and even their governments to have a more favourable attitude towards the nations that they studied in. Governments can also still use their nationals studying abroad for diplomatic purposes by engaging them meaningfully while in their respective countries of study abroad and even thereafter. In the foreign countries, students can be used by their governments as good will ambassadors in their host countries; to portray a good image of their motherlands.

In many parts of the modern world, education is viewed as the key to prosperity, peace and security. Both nationally and internationally, communities with an educated population are known to have fewer conflicts and are deemed to engage more peacefully and meaningfully. Education is therefore embraced by people of all cultures and backgrounds and whatever their differences are, education acts as a unifying factor both locally and abroad. If well planned for then, education can be used to pursue a wide variety of objectives that align with the relationships and linkages established through international education and exchanges; key among them being a positive image of their nation abroad.

The demand for education has been recorded to be growing exponentially; especially for tertiary education, owing to demographic trends and the increased globalization of economies and societies. The UNESCO 2009 report indicated that between 1990 and 2007, participation in tertiary education rose on a global level from 66.9 million student enrolments to 152.5 million, a 128 percent increase and that current trends suggest that international education will continue to experience growth globally.⁶ This presents enormous potential that governments can tap from in terms of yielding soft power. Though the nature of soft power is that it is intangible and that it does not necessarily resonate with traditional and pragmatic approaches to strategic international policy, it is increasingly and deliberately recognized and pursued by governments both independently from and in conjunction with hard power.⁷ However, governments require being patient with education as a public diplomacy tool as it can only be assessed in the long term. The values take time to diffuse and take root, but once they do, they remain deeply rooted for a long time.⁸

⁶ Caitlin Byrne and Rebecca H *Realizing International Education as Public Diplomacy* ; Australian Journal of International Affairs (2013) vol. 67 p. 427

⁷ Ibid Caitlin B and Rebecca H (2013)p.423

⁸ Opcit Amirbek, Aidarbek and Ydyrys Kanat (2014) p.503

Basing the argument on the constructivist theoretical framework, the most important aspect of International relations is social and not material. Core aspects of International Relations are socially constructed in this theoretical framework. Public diplomacy is founded therefore on this framework and involves building long term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies. International education really fits in well in this framework, as it is known to create lasting partnerships and relationships; a good ground for creating and implementing foreign policies. Through the use of education exchanges for example, a good platform is created for the sharing of ideas by individuals and nations alike, and lasting partnerships will be created in the long term. Additionally, through persuasion and also by reminding people again and again what their nation stands for and the values they share with the world, an enabling environment will be created for governments to roll out their foreign policies. Caitlin Byrne and Rebecca Hall in their article *International Education as Diplomacy* in the *Research Digest 3* of June 2014 concede that with an emphasis on two way engagement and mutuality, international education enables people and institutions, networks and ultimately nation states to connect, engage, share and collaborate, and at the same time keeping pace with the expanding technology platforms of a globalised world. Though slower than other public diplomacy tools used, educational programs aim at spreading a whole style of life rather than one particular opinion or course of behavior and the aims are more progressively realized and also long term. Additionally, more actors including individuals are incorporated; ranging from the students and their families, host families, escorts, program staff to those indirectly participating in the programs.

Through the bonds and links that are established by the educational exchanges, nations continue to gain goodwill from foreign students who in turn are likely to influence their governments politically in the future; as exchange programs mainly target the elites. Most international students return back to their countries with a greater appreciation of their host nations and in turn impact the same appreciation to their families and contacts. With ideas and values that are commonly shared between a nation and its guests; it is easy to co-operate as the nation is portrayed positively in the guests' country, and this would ultimately boost the host nation's chances of achieving its foreign policy and also trade objectives. Education exchanges foster real engagement from the individual to the institutional and also the community level. Negotiations are important and a key component in diplomacy. International educational exchanges also bring in the angle of negotiation; though not formally, as they engage the actors in a give and take relationship.

A good public diplomacy tool ought to be one in which all actors involved would be able to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior, build and manage relationships, influence thoughts as well as mobilize actions in a bid to advance their interests and values. This mutuality is evident in international educational exchanges as observed by Byrne and Hall thus, "international education is a vehicle that enables and fosters authentic engagement and

collaboration at the individual, institutional and community level.”⁹ It also possesses a lot of soft power potential. “The quality, content and rigour applied to education collaboration and research opportunities, alongside the accessibility of necessary social support for students, provide an authentic insight into and direct experiences of the values of a nation.”¹⁰ This process provides an opportunity to express these values, just as authors Ian Manners and Richard Whitman¹¹ observe that “public diplomacy should reflect not only what we do or want to do; but also what we are and what we stand for.”

The relationships that define educational exchanges have to exhibit mutuality for all the actors involved. This argument is also advanced by Jane Knight¹² thus: “An alternative to the power paradigm, whether it be soft or mutual is the concept of diplomacy which regards negotiation as one of its key pillars.” This results from the fact that diplomacy has undergone a lot of transformation, moving away from purely a state-centric process to include more actors as well as more issues such as health, climate and technology; not just the peace and security issues focussed on before by states. Information is also available to large publics and has made global public opinion increasingly important in today’s international relations. Through educational exchanges, there is that mutual engagement of the actors on the issues that affect their lives. Progressive and ambitious governments then have to pay attention to upgrading their education systems to meet the requirements of innovative and technologically driven economies that are relevant in the world market. They must also be in line with international education and scientific standards so as to be globally competitive and attractive to talented foreign students.¹³

Nations around the world have for decades been using educational exchange programs to foster mutual understanding between people and nations and as a consequence have generated soft power. Among them are the American Fulbright programs, the United Kingdom’s British Council Germany’s Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD) and the European Commission’s Erasmus Mundus programme which all have similar missions. Examples from Asia include China’s Confucius Institutes, and a new Malaysia-based agency established to promote educational cooperation with countries in the ASEAN region. This trend is gaining ground in many nations whether economically and militarily powerful or not. Many nations aim at strengthening their positions in the international scene, in a bid to create favorable conditions for their short term and long term socio-economic development.

⁹ Caitlin Byrne and Rebecca Hall *Realizing Australia’s International Education as Public Diplomacy*, Australian Journal of International Affairs 2013 Vol 67 P.425

¹⁰ Ibid Caitlin B and Rebecca H p. 425

¹¹ Manners, I and Whitman R *Normative Power and the Future of Public Diplomacy* in Cross, D Mai’a & Melissen, J (eds.) *European Public Diplomacy: Soft Power at Work* (2013) p. 183

¹² Knight, Jane *The Limits of Soft Power in Higher Education* University World News (31 Jan 2014) Issue 305 p.502

¹³ Amirbek, Aidarbek and Ydyrys *Education as a Soft Power Instrument of Foreign Policy* in *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences* 143 (2014) p.502

Challenges

Most of the challenges arising in the provision of the educational exchange programs as a public diplomacy tool are based on perceptions. While mutual understanding has been the public face of educational exchange programs, explicit political interests expressed by governments has surfaced many times. Where governments are seen as the main or active actors in educational exchange programs; queries over credibility are raised, whereas attention to any public diplomacy program depends on credibility. Other concerns that arise out of the exchanges are if really they enhance mutual benefit for all players or they set up unequal relationships; with the stronger nation influencing the weaker one. In most negotiations there are mixed motives for seeking engagement. For the institutions of higher learning, the search for fee-paying students is one of the leading reasons we see greater cross-border activity in global higher education. Many institutions are seeking cooperative agreements to deepen and broaden the quality of what they do and to define themselves as global institutions. They may want to pursue a variety of goals through engagement – to enrich their academic programmes, 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 all partners. However, whether encouraged by their countries or a self-designed initiative, transparency and clearly stated goals will be essential for all such engagements. As with all sustainable relationships, the character of the parties and the ethical framework in which they operate are all-important. Countries and institutions have an obligation to consider the benefits not merely to themselves but also to their partners. This will be in the best interests of achieving public diplomacy and also the internationalization of higher education. For the educational exchanges to succeed as a means to public diplomacy, it is extremely important that, just as in official diplomatic negotiations, institutions develop protocols that take into account all the details, promises, and expectations that are critical to both parties before signing any agreements. This is because modern day public diplomacy is a two way street communication in that though nations facilitating the education exchanges will have and advance its interests, the nations have also to listen to what the foreign publics say on the other hand.

Another challenge associated with international educational exchanges arises out of the global security concerns. Though ironical, while on one hand encouraging education exchanges as a public diplomacy tool; a delicate balance has to be sought as security demands a thorough scrutiny of the foreign students- a compromise of open doors with secure borders. I say this is ironical because one of the key expected outcomes of the soft power accruing to educational exchanges is that of enhanced national as well as international security; and if not scrutinized properly, provision of education through exchanges could offer fertile grounds for insecurity as many terrorists operate under the guise of other activities in foreign nations.

In conclusion, though educational exchanges can only be assessed in as far as their efficacy is concerned in the long term; they cannot be ignored in today's world order as an effective public diplomacy tool. It is an essential tool in the search for dominance in the global political and economic arena. Education is also known to facilitate the improvement of both economic and political situations of a country. Any nation that boasts of advancement and dominance today; whether economic, social or political, will only succeed through the formation and support of a knowledge based system where its nationals interact, engage and communicate with foreign nations. International education exchanges are the perfect vehicle towards this end.

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