

***-CBIE Briefing Note-***

**Higher education and diplomacy**

*By Jane Knight, PhD*

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*

*University of Toronto*

**Introduction**

There is no question that the forces and opportunities of globalization have impacted both international relations and higher education. While the internationalization of higher education has been studied in depth, and the changing world of diplomacy has been critically reviewed, there is much to be learned from looking at the convergence and consequences of these two important but changing phenomena. The purpose of this short briefing note is to examine the contribution that higher education can make in the new world of diplomacy and to examine the potential for knowledge diplomacy.

**New dimensions of international higher education**

The role of international higher education in international relations has traditionally been seen through the lens of cultural diplomacy. Student and faculty mobility, language learning, and cultural exchange have been the dominant modes. Yet, in the last two decades international higher education has changed dramatically and has introduced important new dimensions. It is not just students and scholars who are moving across borders, so are programs, providers, projects and policies. The landscape of higher education is characterized by international collaborative research projects, bi-national universities, multi-national expert networks, global mobility programs, regional centres of excellence, international education hubs, and worldwide circulation of higher education reform policies. Positioning higher education as an instrument of cultural and public diplomacy is important but falls short of a more comprehensive view of higher education's international engagement through such areas as science, technology and knowledge. These areas have increasing relevance and leverage in a world more oriented to knowledge, social justice, innovation and the economy.

**Changes in diplomacy – the multi-actor approach**

Diplomacy, interpreted to mean the management of international relations, has also evolved at a rapid pace. The shift from a state-based approach, typically centered on the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and professional diplomats, to a multi-actor approach is a hallmark of contemporary diplomacy. Not only have a broader spectrum of government agencies become key players in diplomatic relations, so have civil society organizations, multi-national firms, and expert networks become recognized as important agents in the management of international relations. Higher education in the form of national and regional associations, universities and colleges, students and faculty, disciplinary groups, expert networks, foundations and

governmental agencies are but a few examples of the diversity of higher education actors actively engaged in international relations.

During the past decade, academic leaders and policy analysts have been increasingly concerned with justifying international higher education's contribution to the economic development of a country and the shift to a knowledge-based economy. These debates are now broadening to include higher education as an instrument of soft power. Developed by Joseph Nye about a decade ago, the concept of soft power is popularly understood as the ability to influence others and achieve national self-interest(s) through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion, military force or economic sanctions – commonly known as hard power.

### **Emergence 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 during the last five years. Many hail it 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 -- especially students. Others interpret it as another form of neo-colonization. And 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. But, the common motivation behind soft power is self-interest 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 to serve self-interests and achieve dominance? Is the term soft power, really hegemony dressed in attractive new clothes?

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 long standing programs that are well accepted and make enormous contributions. But why do we call them instruments of 'soft power' when at their 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 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 countries/higher education and research institutions. Furthermore, it yields solutions and benefits for all players recognizing that the benefits will differ among partners.

It is recognized 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, knowledge, expertise, values, innovation, economy, technology, and culture. But why is it framed in a 'power paradigm' like soft power? Are the values of self-interest, competition or dominance going to effectively address issues of worldwide epidemics, terrorism, failed states, the bottom billion in poverty, environmental degradation and climate change? The answer is no. This is based on the reality and 'new normal' that finding solutions to worldwide challenges cannot be achieved by one country alone. But it is not a simple answer as the world of international

relations is complex and beset with histories, challenges and inequalities that would be naïve to ignore.

### **Power paradigm vs. diplomacy framework**

An alternative to the power paradigm is the framework of diplomacy. Diplomacy focuses on strategies such as negotiation, mediation, collaboration, compromise and facilitation. These are very different tactics and concepts than those attached to power- dominance, authority, command, control, supremacy. Does this suggest that diplomacy is a more appropriate structure to frame the role of higher education in international relations than a power paradigm?

The evolution from conventional to contemporary diplomacy has introduced a spectrum of theme or issue- based approaches to the practice of international engagement. Cultural diplomacy is the most well- known because it includes a broad range of areas such arts and culture, education, sport, architecture, and language. But health, science and technology, environment, and trade diplomacy are gaining momentum as effective modes of diplomacy. They are remarkably different from the more traditional, but still important issues related to national security, military, and economic diplomacy. A newer option which merits further consideration is knowledge diplomacy.

### **The potential of knowledge diplomacy**

For the past two decades there has been much discussion on the idea of a knowledge- based society. This is a post-industrial notion where knowledge is the engine for economic growth and socio-cultural development of communities and countries. The focus on knowledge highlights the important role that higher education – and education in general – play in today's world. Not only does higher education serve to prepare future citizens and workers, it generates new knowledge and diffuses it for the benefit of communities and society at large.

In this changing world of contemporary diplomacy, higher education has a significant role and contribution to make. Higher education's long tradition of scholarly collaboration and academic mobility complemented by today's innovations of research and policy networks, international education hubs, joint programs, global and bi-national universities, have a lot to contribute to building and strengthening international relations among countries and regions through the generation, diffusion, and exchange of knowledge – in short, knowledge diplomacy.

*CBIE wishes to thank Dr. Jane Knight for preparing this paper in order to initiate and enrich reflection on the theme of our 2014 Conference, The Diplomacy of Knowledge and Our Common Future. Published with her permission.*