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Report: Knowledge diplomacy - the role of international higher education in a new geopolitical era

Wednesday 19 – Friday 21 June 2024

In partnership with

the University of Nottingham, the Russell Group, Universities UK International, the Royal Society, UK Research and Innovation, the University of Glasgow and the University of London

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This report focuses on the role of knowledge diplomacy in helping universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) navigate an increasingly turbulent world during a time of considerable geopolitical change. Knowledge diplomacy has been defined as “the process of building and strengthening relations between and among countries through international higher education, research and innovation”.ⁱ

The dialogue on this topic, summarised in this report, sought to explore this concept amid a rapidly changing global landscape, highlight how HEIs and similar stakeholders are adopting it, and outline recommendations for future collaboration so that together they can use it to help shape a future where international relations, higher education and research are most effectively optimised to address the critical global challenges facing the world today. It brought together 40 leaders from 16 different countries from sectors including higher education, research funders, government, diplomacy, industry, national scientific academies, and other organisations to discuss these and related issues in what is intended to be the beginning of an ongoing conversation. Key objectives of this continuing discussion will be to enhance the international impact and influence of participating institutions through sharing their approaches to dealing with the heightened risks and challenges of, and realising the opportunities provided by, a rapidly changing world.

ⁱ Jane Knight, *Knowledge Diplomacy in International Relations and Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 103.

Executive Summary

The theory and practice of knowledge diplomacy

Knowledge diplomacy is an umbrella term which covers a wide range of research, education, cultural and scientific collaborations that also serve a diplomatic purpose. The activities it describes and the broad conceptual framework which brings them together can help universities, HEIs and other key stakeholders collaboratively address the global and geopolitical challenges of today, as well as the particular challenges of their sector. It can play a vital role in bringing universities, governments, and industry together and in navigating political change. However, its uses are value-neutral, and it can be used for malign purposes, such as to promote conflict and polarisation, as well as to counter them. It is also not the same thing as soft power (see definitions below).

“Knowledge diplomacy is a tool that can be used for good and bad.”

Science diplomacy and cultural diplomacy are critical components of knowledge diplomacy. Utilised correctly, cultural diplomacy can help to increase understanding between peoples as well as counter threats such as increasing nationalism, populism and geopolitical tension. Conversely, science diplomacy can help interlocutors to work around sensitive political disputes by focusing on scientific or technological questions and cooperation. Like other diplomacies however, both are a tool for gaining national influence and advantage, and they too can be used for good or ill.

Challenges and opportunities

There are a number of daunting and growing challenges impacting international higher education. Firstly, the world is arguably more dangerous than it has been for some time. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Gaza conflict, increasing tensions between China and the US, shifting alliances in the wake of these realignments and their knock-on

effects in domestic politics could be more accurately characterised as the start of a new geopolitical era rather than a series of disconnected crises. There is also an increasingly polarised political climate around the world. These developments have led to the curtailment of much research collaboration between Russia and the West following the imposition of sanctions; to the growing political prominence of the need to safeguard the security of research from hostile and authoritarian states, many of whom are putting up barriers against research collaboration which range from informal discouragement to actively making it illegal; to student protests on campuses across the world; and a rejection in some cases of science, evidence and expertise. Meanwhile global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and vulnerability to pandemics continue to become ever more acute.

At the same time, the rapidly evolving global higher education and research landscape offers a number of opportunities. These include a much more evenly distributed global balance of research excellence, the considerable and increasing international influence of universities as diplomatic actors in their own right, and the fundamental importance of education and research in tackling global challenges.

Universities and foreign policy

Views diverge as to whether or not universities can or should have an independent ‘foreign policy’ of their own.

The levels of autonomy they enjoy from, and their relationships with the states that fund them, vary considerably. Some argue that even the most independent universities can never be fully separated from their home countries, their national interests and the societies they represent, even if their interests do not always align, and that such a policy could conflict with academic freedom. Others counter that such a policy is essential in order to ensure that universities can strategically

“Research has no borders, but researchers have national borders”

navigate geopolitical turbulence rather than be passively impacted by it.

Regardless of the above, universities do need an internationalisation strategy, underpinned by robust principles and guidelines, to provide resilience against the rapidly changing dynamics of an ever more dangerous world.

The prospects for collaboration

“I practice science diplomacy, but I don’t have diplomatic immunity”

Many individual HEI leaders and researchers are rapidly adapting to these changing dynamics in novel and innovative ways yet have not always been easily able to share best practice, learn from or support each other.

There is a real imperative and appetite for stakeholders operating in this space to collaborate further in an informal “Knowledge Diplomacy Forum” to address shared challenges and opportunities. Further dialogue on the topic among those who participated and key stakeholders from their communities will continue, with an initial focus on convening, networking, information sharing and best practice.

Understanding Knowledge Diplomacy

Key definitions

- The guiding definition and conceptual framework that underpinned this dialogue on knowledge diplomacy was sourced from higher education internationalisation expert Jane Knight’s “Knowledge Diplomacy in International Relations and Higher Education” (see first paragraph above).
- There is a clear difference between knowledge diplomacy and the concept of ‘soft power’. Knowledge diplomacy is best understood as international higher education, research and innovation (IHERI) playing a mutually beneficial and cooperative role, compared to the more self-serving and dominating role IHERI can play in ‘soft power,’ defined as

“diplomacy is something that becomes important in times of difficulty, essential in times of crises, but can often be sidelined when it is most needed.”

“the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment”.

- Knowledge diplomacy can be understood as international research or educational collaboration that also serves a positive diplomatic purpose, particularly during times of political tension.
- Knowledge diplomacy activities, whether deployed by higher education and research institutions or the countries that fund them, can strengthen alliances, foster new relationships and promote positive dialogue.
- Knowledge diplomacy is a broad term which encompasses other important and related aspects of diplomacy such as cultural diplomacy and science diplomacy.
- The latter concept has gained relatively common currency in the global scientific community since the publication of a landmark report on the topic by the Royal Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 2010ⁱⁱ.
- Cultural diplomacy has a longer history as a concept, although both it and science diplomacy have been widely practiced throughout history, and it has recently become instrumental in Ukrainian universities’ knowledge diplomacy efforts during a time of war (see below).

Knowledge Diplomacy in Practice

There are many innovative examples of international cooperation and influencing by universities and related stakeholders, which demonstrate their roles as important diplomatic actors and can be summarised in the cross-cutting themes below. These points capture the discussions around the various ways knowledge diplomacy can employ IHERI in a

ⁱⁱ Royal Society / American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) 2010. *New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy*

beneficial and cooperative manner to build and strengthen relations and achieve wider strategic objectives.

International partnerships

Overseas campuses: Many universities have strengthened their international presence by establishing campuses overseas. These branch campuses frequently provide a wide range of benefits to their students, such as good graduate employment opportunities, and preparing their students to be fully engaged global citizens. They also help to achieve various strategic objectives for their home institutions, including strengthening their international reputations, enhancing their internationalisation strategies, and helping to strengthen wider bilateral relationships (see below) – although their impact in terms of income generation has been mixed. There are a number of different models for these arrangements, ranging from outposts which are entirely owned by the parent institution to joint ventures with the host country.

Bilateral agreements: Bilateral agreements on higher education and research, whether initiated between institutions or at the level of their governments, and underpinned by mutuality of intent, can help to strengthen wider bilateral relationships. These can take the form of town or city twinning schemes, bilateral trade deals, or through reciprocal donations in times of need.

Cross-cultural exchanges: International relationships between universities can lead to valuable exchanges that can counter domestic skill shortages, address unemployment, provide exposure for cross-cultural and language exchange, as well as develop programmes that can have positive local and community impact on all sides of the arrangement.

Equitable partnerships: Many universities in the Global South have a long and successful track record of practising knowledge diplomacy. African universities in particular played a pivotal role in independence movements across the continent. Today African HEIs and their counterparts elsewhere in the Global South are increasingly realising the benefits of knowledge diplomacy as active funders, equal participants, and promoters of its practices within their emerging leadership – although there is much work to do to ensure that more of these collaborations are underpinned by equitable partnerships.

Cross-sector partnerships: Other universities play a critical role in stimulating collaboration between their institutions, the private sector and government. This was particularly notable during the effort to deliver a vaccine against COVID-19, building on preexisting collaborations on malaria for example. Governments funded and politically backed such efforts, universities conducted much of the basic research, and industry was instrumental in the production and distribution of the vaccines around the world.

International mobility and recruitment

South-South mobility: A number of innovative methods to promote South-South student mobility are being developed. In Africa, these include paid internships, virtual platforms and other mechanisms which support students to experience other countries in the region and around the world, paving the way for deeper cooperation on critical sustainability challenges. These are becoming particularly important in contrast with a crisis of confidence in migration and globalisation in many Western countries.

Counter-trends to student mobility: The uses of knowledge diplomacy very much depend on the degree of independence and autonomy that universities have from their national governments. Where such independence is limited, and universities are more closely tied to their home country's

foreign policy, knowledge diplomacy can serve to further entrench nationalist political movements, limiting the potential for international partnerships. Some countries are seeing a growing generational divide manifesting itself as an increasingly strident ‘generational patriotism’ with younger generations becoming less receptive to international study. Instances were cited whereby international learning is being provided through the hiring of overseas experts to teach students in their home country rather than incentivising study abroad.

Innovative student recruitment: A risk was highlighted of universities ‘instrumentalising’ students as financial assets, both for the higher profile they give to universities and the increase in ranking their education and research efforts can bring to their university. This can potentially conflict with their duty of care to students, particularly those who are vulnerable or from at-risk backgrounds. There are also huge disparities in student flows in some areas (e.g. ten times as many Mexican students go to Spain than vice versa). Innovative student recruitment which prioritises outreach to disadvantaged or underrepresented groups could help counter these trends and pay dividends in terms of attracting international talent.

“When thinking about food [in the context of cultural diplomacy], your first thought should not be food security but cuisine; there needs to be a change in thinking”.

International reputation

Cultural diplomacy: The importance of cultural diplomacy is best illustrated by its increasing importance to Ukrainian universities undergoing conflict. With the country suffering a ‘brain drain’ as students flee for safer environments, some of its universities are actively engaging the growing diaspora community through online courses on Ukrainian culture. These are designed to maintain links with their home country and to prepare the diaspora for potential roles in post-war reconstruction. They also serve to counter the hostile narratives Ukraine is currently subject to from its adversaries and promote wider awareness of its heritage and relation to other cultures.

Wartime innovation: There is also a school of thought that wartime accelerates the development of some aspects of innovation, science and technology. Proponents of this view point to the technologies developed or widely adopted in response to the urgent needs of society in World War II (e.g. radar, penicillin, code-breaking) and suggest that there is much that civilian research elsewhere could learn from innovations currently being developed in Ukraine.

International influence: A considerable international footprint, whether through overseas campuses or a long track record of welcoming students from particular countries or regions, can provide universities with significant international influence. This often sees Rectors or Vice-Chancellors of leading international universities having prominent roles in high level national delegations alongside, and in some cases ahead of, national political leaders.

Risk management

The practice of knowledge diplomacy does not already run smoothly and entails a number of different kinds of risks: The practice of knowledge diplomacy in the above and other areas does not always run smoothly and entails a number of different kinds of risks. The management of these risks should be a fundamental component of internationalisation strategies. Some of these risks are described below.

“Research is often the first and the last thing we talk about”

Academic freedom and institutional independence: Higher education and research institutions have to manage a difficult trade-off in their internationalisation activities, which involves staying broadly in line with their national government’s legal framework and foreign policy and not getting ahead of either, whilst simultaneously not being seen as instruments of the state. Universities also have to be sensitive to the views of donors, some of whom have been particularly influential in the US in responding to campus protests. Institutions are also increasingly required to conduct

international collaborations with ‘eyes wide open’ in order to ensure the security of their research, whilst also safeguarding academic freedom. In some authoritarian countries in which institutions have less autonomy, increasing ‘generational patriotism’ (see above) may serve to put off potential international collaborators and/or international students from engagement.

Commercialisation and commercial sensitivity:

Universities and similar institutions also need to ensure they are financially robust and sustainable, which is also key in maintaining institutional autonomy. They need to be able to reap the benefits of commercialising their research, which may be challenging when collaborating internationally in an open scientific system, yet also when collaborating with partners in industry who have more stringent measures relating to intellectual property. A geographically diverse range of international students and collaborations also reduces the volatility of a dependence on students from particular countries or regions, which may be at risk from changing geopolitical dynamics or government measures in response to them.

A ‘safe space’ for sharing best practice: While the risks above cannot be mitigated entirely, they can be managed in ways that are proportional and effective. There is a need to bring together higher education and research institutes grappling with these issues in settings which enable full and frank discussion of these risks, horizon scanning and scenario planning to assess and monitor potential future risks and consider possible responses, as well as wider challenges and opportunities for the sector (see below).

Challenges and Opportunities for Knowledge Diplomacy

A number of challenges and opportunities facing higher education and research institutions were highlighted, to which knowledge diplomacy has a crucial role to play in response.

These include the following:

Challenges

“the biggest change in research and innovation policy in the last ten years has been the rise of the security perspective”.

The prioritisation of research security is a defining feature of the present time. While it is not always clear which aspect of research is being secured – its economic benefits from theft, or its malign applications from authoritarian states – it leaves higher education and research stakeholders and their leaders with a difficult trade-off. On the one hand they need to convince their governments that they are not naïve about the nature of authoritarian states and their interest in such research – a task made harder by the inability or reluctance on the part of some academics to see beyond their individual research collaborator to the state institutions which are backing them. On the other, an overly risk-averse approach deployed by some countries and institutions could see them miss out on international scientific collaborations on critical issues. One possible future scenario suggested is the risk of large international research collaborations being discouraged from a security perspective if they include one perceived ‘weak link’ in a country or institution which might conduct excellent research but is judged not to have sufficiently sophisticated research security protections. This could lead to the nation with the most stringent security missing out on the benefits of the collaboration.

Industry and the private sector are becoming increasingly influential and encroaching on the traditional roles of universities, such as the provision of degrees and the funding of basic research. For example, in the US, the private sector now funds almost as great a proportion of basic research as the federal government.ⁱⁱⁱ

While no group is completely homogenous, there is in many cases a ‘generation gap’ between the students who form the majority of customers of higher education, and those who lead HEIs and similar stakeholders and those who make policy relating to them. This gap frequently manifests itself in differences in outlook, expectations, politics and attitudes. In some countries, rising nationalism among highly educated younger people was cited. In others, including a number of Western countries, their counterparts are often increasingly critical of the countries they come from or study in and their foreign policies – as exemplified by the student protests against Israel’s actions in Gaza taking place on campuses across the West. It is also a factor in so-called ‘culture wars’ which are often characterised by highly polarised political debates around aspects of identity.

All of this takes place against a backdrop of a growing crisis of trust in institutions and increasing political polarisation, exacerbated by recently developed and newly emerging technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence, whose business models in many cases help to drive such polarisation. This requires higher education and research institutions to engage with an increasingly disaffected wider world outside the campus.

Yet these trends hide many nuances. While large swathes of populations in the world have turned against globalisation, as seen in the rise of some nationalist political movements, in some other parts of the world including parts of South and South-East Asia, globalisation and the opportunities it promises to bring continue to be welcomed.

Opportunities

New geographical alignments are changing the face of higher education and research. An increasingly multipolar world brings with it more leading and emerging scientific nations from the Global South, whose collaborations with each other are increasing, and who understandably expect more equitable research partnerships with those from the Global North. It also brings with it new multilateral power blocs such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) and the G20.

Universities have considerable geopolitical influence and are major diplomatic actors in their own right. They have considerable expertise in international influencing, exercising soft power and collaborating despite political tension. This is not always shared across the sector and therefore there is a clear need for more convening to compare experiences, learn from each other and develop best practice. Together they can help shape the international landscape through a bold vision for knowledge diplomacy which combines transnational education, research and diplomacy.

Recommendations

Higher education, research and geopolitics

Higher education and research institutions can no longer neglect, assume they stand apart from, or remain neutral in the face of, the increasingly turbulent geopolitics of today. The events of recent years have shown that, in general and despite some examples of good practice, many are ill-equipped to deal with these rapid changes and their consequences, from the challenges of research security to the student protest movement. There is a real sense that they are very often grappling with these challenges and the wider strategic questions they pose in isolation.

ⁱⁱⁱ *US holds off China challenge in global R&D spending race.* [Science Business, 14 March 2024.](#)

There is a need to strengthen the institutional capacity of universities to respond to geopolitical crises. On a practical note, universities should seriously consider embedding geopolitics into STEM PhDs, as the practice of these subjects can no longer be considered in isolation from the wider world in which they operate.

The response of the global higher education, research and innovation communities to support Ukrainian students, researchers and universities in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion provides a good model of how to respond to future geopolitical crises. While much of it was developed rapidly, often in isolation, and there is a need for a more systematic evaluation of which efforts were most impactful and why, it demonstrates what can be achieved when institutions and their governments collaborate to address urgent geopolitical issues and is an excellent example of knowledge diplomacy in action.

There should be a recognition that knowledge diplomacy is wider than internationalisation and is a two-way process which seeks to influence geopolitics and how it impacts universities rather than to simply respond to it. Cultural diplomacy and science diplomacy, as well as older concepts of ‘soft power’, should be fully integrated into knowledge diplomacy strategies. They must also recognise the very different geopolitical roles and perspectives of different countries and regions, the variety in terms of autonomy and status of their key institutions, and the political polarisations of their societies, from ‘generational patriotism’ to ‘culture wars’.

Cross-sector collaboration

Effective knowledge diplomacy requires collaboration between different sectors involved in the production and exchange of knowledge.

Arguably the most important of these are universities, governments and industry (with civil society also cited as an increasingly important sector). Such collaboration can help create and nurture an ecosystem in which governments invest in and support knowledge diplomacy to meet national objectives of prosperity and growth, universities lead in both producing the knowledge and practising the diplomacy that brings the stakeholders together, and industry provides the development which brings the end products to a global marketplace.

we need a mechanism for] “turning “islands of excellence into archipelagos of impact”.

The various scientific treaty organisations such as CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) or SKA (Square Kilometre Array) provide additional good

examples of well defined, high impact international research collaborations, often involving scientific institutions and national governments with clear objectives, delineated roles and responsibilities, and shared infrastructure which in turn lead to greater efficiency and economies of scale across disciplines and borders.

Towards a ‘Knowledge Diplomacy Forum’

A forum should be established to continue this dialogue and to exchange ideas, information and best practice.

This should be a confidential ‘safe space’ in order to bring out examples of individual expertise and allow discussion of sensitive issues in an age where social media and political polarisation make it difficult to have nuanced conversations in public. These include, for example:

- whether universities should take active positions on global issues, or provide a platform for their academics to do so individually;

- how to ensure vital research collaboration continues with leading scientific nations which are also authoritarian states on critical global challenges such as climate change, whilst at the same time understanding and mitigating the risks posed to the security of that research;
- how to reach a compromise across the generational and educational divides by listening to, empathising with and where appropriate, acting upon legitimate grievances about the shortcomings of HEIs and the societies in which they operate, whilst rejecting the extremes of some aspects of their very polarised politics;
- and rethinking the entire value proposition of higher education institutions when confidence in the worth of a university degree is falling, and there is increasing competition in the provision of higher education and research from industry.

Such a forum should be set up as an informal network to begin with. In doing so, it is critical to have ‘the right people in the room’, both in terms of stakeholders (and here developing a stakeholder map may be beneficial) but also in terms of geographic perspectives. It could take on a physical or virtual format and evolve as circumstances dictate.

Broad guidelines, shared values and principles of knowledge diplomacy should be developed into a clear ‘declaration of intent’. There is a need to agree clear guidelines and priorities for this work beyond the definitions highlighted in this report, and to communicate the utility and importance of knowledge diplomacy as a concept, while being action-oriented and not getting excessively caught up in theoretical definitions. These shared values include:

- utilising the considerable international influence of universities to improve international relations;
- the importance of speaking up for knowledge, truth and evidence in a world where they are increasingly under threat;

- the recognition of the importance of geographic positionality and different perspectives on critical challenges, which may vary considerably between the Global North and South;
- and the fundamental importance of international research collaboration to tackle sustainability challenges that encompass the entire globe.

They have the potential to form the basis of a major global leadership effort by universities, related stakeholders and their allies to meet the considerable demands of the present moment.

Beyond this, participating stakeholders have two key roles to play: firstly, to articulate, underline and promote their public policies on national and multilateral engagement, in order to facilitate greater understanding and collaboration with their counterparts around the world; and secondly to share internal policies around critical issues (e.g. on broad topics such as crisis management and risk assessment as well as specifics such as research security and student unrest).

In the medium to longer term, the Knowledge Diplomacy Forum suggested above and its principles could serve as the basis for a more formal “Knowledge Diplomacy Commission”, or a think tank with a mandate to consider longer term engagement (e.g. over the next 15-20 years), along with exercises in modelling and scenario planning, which could provide the basis for ‘Knowledge Diplomacy Goals’ along similar lines to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Forum should have clear strategic objectives, be organised from the bottom up, and have the principle of equitable partnership at its heart.

Next Steps

The University of London Institute in Paris, with the British Council as one of the partners, will continue leading a major “Knowledge Diplomacy Project” which seeks to analyse the role of international HEIs; promote research, innovation and knowledge exchange; and build and strengthen transnational cooperation through a series of events, publications, networking activities and a book of case studies from various knowledge diplomacy practitioners.

In February 2025, the Royal Society and American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) will publish a report on “Science diplomacy – 15 years on”, updating their landmark 2010 joint report on the topic for the very different world of today.

The Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator (GESDA) will continue to, in the words of their strapline, “use the future to build the present”, by seeking to further embed science diplomacy in the multilateral system and to pre-emptively assess the future impact of emerging technologies.

Other commitments were made for further convening and to explore the possibility of financial support by various government, university and research stakeholders participating in the dialogue.

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