

## ACHIEVING SOFT POWER GOALS THROUGH EDUCATION DIPLOMACY BY SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

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### Abstract

*Globalization has brought huge changes in every section of life, including education. The international relations have been impacted on by globalization as well. The students, scholars and researchers, these days, are regarded as actors in diplomacy. Education diplomacy is considered as an important tool in the conduct of international relations worldwide. The public diplomacy through provision of education opportunities, known as soft power tool, has emerged as a new trend by which countries extend their national interests and attempt to shape the preferences of others and affecting their behaviour in one's favour. International Education has proved to be a major contributor to soft power goals and has emerged as an important part of public diplomacy that has created many advantages. The countries anticipate, by means of education diplomacy, the promotion of nation's policy priorities and interests and subsequently, to contribute to country's economic development and investment. The present study aims to explore the soft power goals of the Southeast Asian Countries. It further explores the goals that are achieved by the countries through implementation of public diplomacy in education.*

**Keywords:** *Public diplomacy in education, Provision of educational opportunities, Soft power goals, Southeast Asia.*

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## Introduction

Education diplomacy is an important tool for reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between countries. The United States through its International Affairs Office, U.S. Department of Education adopts active education diplomacy for advancing its international priorities. The Department regularly participates in meetings and symposiums to review and develop declarations, resolutions and reports related to education in and out of the United States. It anticipates goodwill and ensures positive engagement with other countries (IAO, 2018).

Provision of educational opportunities to foreign students is used as an effective instrument to achieve soft power goals by many countries. Not only big powers, the small nations also believe in employing education as the public diplomacy to assist governments in achieving national interests and building image and trust among neighbours and regions (Vaxevanidou, 2018). The nations, whether economically and militarily strong or not, are employing education diplomacy to achieve short term and long-term development in socio-economic areas (Waithaka & Maluki, 2016).

Globalization has brought many changes in every section of life. Similarly, education and international relations have been impacted on by globalization as well. The students, scholars and researchers are not seen only as their actual titles suggests, they are regarded as actors in diplomacy. The main objective of the present research paper is to explore what goals are achieved by the countries in twenty first century through implementation of public diplomacy in education. Besides, the paper attempts to discover the objectives that Southeast Asian countries have achieved after introduction of the provision of educational opportunities to foreign students. The first section of the research paper introduces the topic under discussion i.e. achievement of soft power goals by provision of international education opportunities and the role of education as public diplomacy. The second section reviews the literature relevant to the topic. The

penultimate section analysis the role of education in achievement of soft power goals. Subsequently, the last section concludes the discussion and provides with the recommendation to the stakeholders.

### **Review of the Relevant Literature**

The research area under investigation is the implementation of education in public diplomacy for achieving the soft power goals by Southeast Asian nations. The role of international educational exchanges has been vastly identified by the international actors. It facilitates inter-cultural communication and flourishes cordial relationship among the states (Ferreia de Lima, 2007). After a thorough literature review relevant to the major objective of the present paper, the following terms are considered important to be discussed here.

### **Diplomacy in International Politics**

Diplomacy in International Politics is the process which governments use in conduct of their foreign relations. It is the tool that is employed by states to resolve issues or conflict among themselves. The states implement foreign policy by means of diplomacy. The ambassadors, ministers and envoys help state achieve its foreign policy goals. Diplomacy has two major goals among others; representation of state and advancing the national interests on the world forum (Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach, 2008).

### **Public Diplomacy**

A government's attempt to communicating with foreign publics 'to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies' is termed as public diplomacy (Tuch, 1990, p.3 as cited in Melissen, 2005).

Public diplomacy, though being one of the kinds of diplomacy, is somewhat different from the traditional diplomacy. In traditional diplomacy, the states carry out negotiations and bargaining through professional diplomats or politicians. On the other hand, by public diplomacy, the governments of states try to influence the world opinion and portray positive aspect of one's country to foreign publics (Ikande, 2017; Melissen, 2005). Peterson (2014) confirms that most recently, the parameters of diplomacy have been expanded to the wide array of actors. It now includes activities that help in promoting the favourable relations among nations.

### **The Public Diplomacy through Education**

The public diplomacy through education has emerged recently as a new trend by which countries extend their national interests. It is considered as 'soft power' tool in diplomacy and in international relations these days. Soft power possesses the quality of shaping the preferences of others and affecting the behaviours of others.

Public diplomacy became popular after attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001. The American identity has been shattered because of the events that followed. To reverse American image worldwide, the policy makers put more attention and efforts into spreading America's image on international forums through public diplomacy (Byrne, 2016). Thus, it attempts to justify what Joseph Nye (2004) was trying to convince that make people to want what you want or to shape others' opinion towards your own opinion by means of attraction rather than coercion (Byrne & Hall, 2014). Public diplomacy is no more a part of foreign policy, rather it has become a part of the changing fabric of international relations.

Joseph Nye, University of Harvard Professor, in his book titled *Soft Power: The Means of Success in World Politics* (2004, as quoted in Li, 2018) argues that soft power possesses the following key power resources including; culture, political values and foreign policy. On the other hand, hard power comprises of two elements; military

power and economic power. In order to achieve aims and objectives through hard power, the governments use sanctions, forces, payments, coercive diplomacy and war. Contrastingly, the states that attempt to develop its positive or soft image in the international arena, focus more on public diplomacy and bilateral and multi-lateral diplomacy rather than on coercive means. For this purpose, educational or cross-cultural aid is considered as powerful tool. The payments for this purpose are more flexible than those in hard power. These educational payments are fewer conditional payments or expect less in return.

### **Effective Soft Power Instrument: Provision of Educational Opportunities**

The relevant literature that has been reviewed, suggests that provision of educational opportunities is effective soft power instrument these days. Many a country are attracting foreign scholars, researchers and students to conduct study in their countries to disseminate their cultural values to enhance their image regionally and internationally.

Vaxevanidou (2018) has identified and defined the international education as a major tool to achieve advantages for the country. She proclaims that the 'International education as major contributor to soft power and as an important area of public diplomacy can create a lot of advantages, such as to produce commercial values, to promote a nation's policy priorities and interests and to contribute to a country's economic development and investment' (Vaxevanidou, 2018, p.55).

The countries like United States, United Kingdom and Australia have identified the provision of education opportunities as one of the effective instruments of soft power. The students on scholarships, on return to their home countries, serve on senior positions where they implement the knowledge learnt abroad during their studies. Through the Fulbright Program, Chevening Awards and Colombo

Plan Scholarships, countries have long achieved their soft power goals of introducing their culture and norms to the international public (Sheng-Kai, 2015).

The Fulbright Program offered by the United States Department, the British Council's various programmes for promoting education worldwide, and the German Academic Exchange Service are some of the examples of public diplomacy, bring furthered through higher education. China in 2004, introduced yet another idea of education diplomacy whereby she established Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture across the world. By 2011, there were around 353 such institutes in around 104 countries in various regions of the world (Peterson, 2014).

Education diplomacy 'uses the skills of diplomacy to promote effective cooperation across sectors and among diverse actors to solve education challenges and advance transform national agendas for education' (CEDL, n. d.). Education diplomacy comes under the purview of public diplomacy where states employ education as a tool for obtaining soft power goals. Public diplomacy in education, states Vaxevanidou (2018), is applied by states as a soft power agenda by means of which a country enforces its image and vital interests in the world. The students' mobility abroad helps achieve the goals of enhancing the showcase of culture, values and ideas of the state in other countries.

### **Education as Public Diplomacy: Soft Power Goals by Southeast Asian Countries**

The countries nowadays focus on people-to-people interactions developed through various mechanisms such as cultural and educational programmes, scholarships, and exchange (Bryne, 2016). The Far East Asian countries are following the international trends by introducing and implementing public diplomacy through education exchange programmes and provides scholarships to foreigners to come into study and for their own population to visit other countries

to learn new techniques through higher studies and trainings. Some of the major countries' that have adopted the trends are Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Malaysia in particular and ASEAN as an association in general. The reason for selecting these countries is their huge contribution in international higher education.

### **Brunei Darussalam's English Language Enrichment (ELP) Project**

Brunei Darussalam, an oil-rich and one of the developed states of Southeast Asia, has always supported ASEAN integration. Brunei Darussalam has always played positive role in ASEAN integration through education, in particular, English language education. The country has followed bilingual English-Malay education system and contributed towards other programmes that provide opportunities for diplomats of other South East Asian countries to learn English language (Othman & Sharbawi, 2015).

Brunei Darussalam funded US \$25 million programme for sending highly qualified instructors throughout ASEAN region that teach English to diplomats and officials of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The purpose behind such initiative is to bring ASEAN community together and build and strengthen the relationship amongst the South East Asian citizens. The joint Brunei and US *English Language Enrichment Project* was launched in 2012 in Bandar Seri Begawan by Hillary Clinton (the then Secretary of State). The joint venture is the dream of Sultanate to build cooperation and human capacity across the region (Thien, 2018). Since the launch of the project, some hundreds of participants have gone through 11-week English Language Program (ELP) bringing with them home achievement in career advancement and scholarship opportunities. The project has strengthened bilateral relationship between Brunei and United States. Besides the bilateral relationship among the two partners, it has enhanced the strong sense of unity and belonging in ASEAN.

## **Singapore Cooperation Programmes and Scholarships**

Singapore is one of the world's most competitive economies today. Singapore adopts a friendly bilateral relationship with its neighbouring countries and beyond. She has participated actively on the international platforms such as ASEAN. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore ensures full support and commitment to ASEAN; believes in promotion of good working relationship with her neighbours in all spheres; and tries to maintain peaceful environment in the Asia Pacific region in general and in Southeast Asia in particular (Sheng-Kai, 2015). In addition to maintaining its position secure in this competitive environment by means of advancement in military force and other factors of hard power, Singapore strives to expand its foreign policy space. Singapore utilizes soft power to exert great influence in all sectors including economic, political and security. In order to develop its soft image in the region and to the wider world, it has established institutions such as Civil Service College international and Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) with main purpose of offering technical assistant in the field of human resource management and development. These initiatives provide direct financial assistance to other countries (Sheng-Kai, 2015).

The Singapore scholarships are administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which was directed to spend around US\$105 million for Financial Year 2014. The aid aimed at provision of assistance to Singapore Cooperation Programme and contributions to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations; and other humanitarian aids. The Government of Singapore, from time to time, has been offering fully funded various scholarships such as Singapore International Graduate Award (SINGA) Scholarship for Year 2020/2021, and Nanyang President's Graduate Scholarships (NPGS) for international students. It shows that education diplomacy has remained a part of Singapore's overall strategy and foreign policy, which eventually boosts positive perception of the foreigners towards the country (NTU, 2019).



### **Malaysian International Scholarship (MIS)**

The education has been on forefront of Malaysia's aspirations of being a developed nation. The Malaysian International Scholarship (MIS) for international students is an initiative by the Government of Malaysia through its Ministry of Education (MOE). The Malaysian Government intends to attract *the best brain around the world* to pursue higher education in Malaysia. This programme is aimed at bringing talented international students to further their studies in selected national (public) and private universities of Malaysia at postgraduate level (Ministry of Education, n.d.). The Ministry of Higher Education established the Committee to study, review and make recommendations concerning the development and direction of higher education in Malaysia. The findings of the Committee became the founding stone for the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007 – 2020 (NHESP). One of the objectives of the NHESP was to make Malaysia an international hub of higher education excellence (Wan, Sirat & Razak, 2018).

Thus, education has remained one of the Malaysia's key growth areas or National Key Economic Areas as Malaysia considers it. These key economic areas support Malaysia's growth in transforming the country into one of the high-income nations in Southeast Asia. Malaysia has always valued its role and relations with other member states of ASEAN and has always expanded its support to other states (Nambiar, 2017).

### **ASEAN and International Higher Education**

In 27<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit held in Malaysia, the Summit adopted the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education in which the critical importance of higher education was acknowledged and it was declared as 'one of the catalysts in accelerating ASEAN's economic, political and socio-cultural development agenda' and also to 'embrace diversity and solidarity of the ASEAN Community through

enhanced intra-ASEAN mobility of students and scholars' (Mallow, 2016, p.9).

The British Council reports that higher education system in ASEAN region is becoming more open for international engagement. The report also mentions that Malaysia in particular and other ASEAN countries in general can be compared favourably with other countries in the world, in terms of the policies and infrastructure that is being provided in support of international higher education. The promotion and support provided for students' mobility is a priority set by almost all the ASEAN member countries. Cambodia's international higher education strategy is linked with its strategies focusing on socio-economic, cultural and industrial development (British Council, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

In Asia and the worldwide, several education destinations have emerged for the students who wish to study abroad. The number of countries has attracted foreign students to their countries to pursue higher studies to promote their national interests. The exposure of culture, language and traditions of the host country pave the way for host country to use education as an effective tool or instrument of soft power (Lee, 2015). This trend of achieving foreign policy goals through public diplomacy in education has emerged after realization of the fact that hard power tools are not only expensive but difficult and harmful too. The nuclear technology is not only the harm to one's enemy but harm to her own economy, society and image on the international stage (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014).

The factors that countries keep in mind while adopting the education diplomacy are but not limited to; economic development, security, conducive environment of institutions for teaching and research, quality of education provided by the host institutes to foreign students.

Besides these factors, findings of the study suggest that the countries need to prepare themselves before attracting the international students and then retaining them to continue and build a word of mouth for others. The countries that adopt the public diplomacy in education as one of their soft power goals, require exhaustive preparation and planning. Setting the goals and objectives of the public diplomacy strategy is the first and foremost step that countries need to attract international students and get an important share of education mobility in international markets. Further, findings of the paper reflecting on the past research (Vaxevanidou, 2018) conclude that the involvement and the commitment of stakeholders, selecting key educational projects and initiatives, establishing professional team to build contacts and contracts with international contemporaries, and improving education – teaching and research environment are the key factors that are prerequisite for the countries to establish and accomplish education diplomacy in the world market.

The nations engaged in education and related activities promote the international environment that is more peaceful and more meaningful. Though the education as an instrument in public diplomacy takes time to materialize but it has long lasting impact on the world as a whole and the relationship that builds on the basis of education remains for a longer period of time.

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