

# Knowledge Diplomacy: What Are the Key Characteristics?

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## Abstract

Knowledge diplomacy is a new approach to understanding the role of international higher education, research, and innovation in strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges. This article examines the key characteristics of the knowledge diplomacy approach—collaboration, reciprocity, and mutuality—and provides examples of how higher education and research can contribute to international relations and help to address global issues.

In today's globalized and turbulent world, there are new rationales, benefits, risks, and opportunities attached to the contribution that higher education and research make to international relations. Examining the role of international higher education in building relations between and among countries is not new. However, using a knowledge-diplomacy framework for analysis, rather than soft power or the traditional lens of cultural and science diplomacy, is a new approach.

There are different drivers pushing and pulling knowledge diplomacy. For instance, global issues are now national issues and many national issues are also global issues. Challenges such as climate change, food security, migration, epidemics, refugees and migration, poverty reduction, and water security know no borders.

Knowledge diplomacy is a two-way process. It refers to the role that international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) play in building and strengthening international relations and, vice versa, the role that international relations play in facilitating and improving IHERI. There are a number of terms used to describe international higher education's role in international relations. To help clarify the confusion among the different terms, this article focuses on the key characteristics of knowledge diplomacy, especially with regard to addressing urgent global challenges.

In identifying fundamental aspects of knowledge diplomacy, there is the risk of being too narrow and discriminating or too broad and inclusive. The following list of characteristics is a start. It is not a comprehensive list, but one that identifies important and strategic dimensions of knowledge diplomacy.

*Knowledge diplomacy builds on the fundamental functions of higher education—teaching/learning, research, knowledge production and innovation, and service to society.*

## Key Characteristics of Knowledge Diplomacy

- *Focus on higher education, research, and innovation:* Knowledge diplomacy builds on the fundamental functions of higher education—teaching/learning, research, knowledge production and innovation, and service to society. The process of knowledge diplomacy involves multiple forms of IHERI as dictated by the nature and complexity of the issue being addressed. Individual IHE activities (i.e., student mobility, scholar exchange, joint conferences) are correctly labelled as internationalization activities, but when they are networked to a larger series of activities involving multiple actors and strategies, they become part of knowledge diplomacy. As individual stand-alone IHE activities, they do not necessarily constitute knowledge diplomacy.
- *Diversity of actors and partners:* Knowledge diplomacy includes a diversity of actors. While universities and colleges are key players, there is a range of other actors involved. These include national, regional, or international centres of excellence, research institutions, foundations, think tanks, professional associations, nongovernmental education organizations and governmental departments/agencies. Higher education actors also work with other sectors and/or disciplines, depending on the nature of the initiative. Common partners include industry, civil society groups, foundations, and governmental agencies. A key feature of knowledge diplomacy is therefore a diversity of higher education actors working collaboratively with partners from other sectors.
- *Recognition of different needs and collective use of resources:* Because knowledge diplomacy brings together a network of different partners from various sectors to address common issues, there are often different rationales and implications for the individual countries and actors involved. Each country and actor has different needs and brings specific resources to the partnership. These need to be respected and negotiated, to ensure that the strengths and opportunities for each partner

are optimized. This is done through a horizontal cooperative type of relationship that acknowledges the different but collective needs and resources of the partners. Leadership to recognize and collaboratively address different needs and resources is critical, but not in the form of dominance or authoritarianism (which characterize a power approach.)

- ▶ *Reciprocity—mutual, but with different benefits:* Different needs and resources of actors will result in different benefits (and potential risks) for partners. Mutuality of benefits does not mean that all actors/countries will receive the same benefits. It does mean, however, that the principle of mutuality and reciprocity of benefits will guide the process. As the collaboration unfolds, there will be both collective and context-specific benefits accrued for actors and countries. This is based on negotiation and conflict resolution and is founded on a win-win approach fundamental to knowledge diplomacy.
- ▶ *Build and strengthen relations between and among countries:* Central to the notion of knowledge diplomacy is the role of IHERI in strengthening positive and productive relations between and among countries. This builds on, but goes beyond, the contribution made by bilateral and multilateral agreements between higher education institutions. Clearly, there is a sliding scale with regard to the breadth and depth of contributions that knowledge diplomacy can make to international relations, but working toward addressing pressing global issues that impact each and every country is an important way forward.

### Examples of Knowledge Diplomacy

The Pan African University, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the Japan-UK Research and Education Network for Knowledge Economy Initiatives, and Brown University's Humanitarian Relief projects are a few of the knowledge diplomacy case studies discussed in a recent British Council report, *Knowledge Diplomacy in Action*. These initiatives are carefully chosen to illustrate the urgency and effectiveness of using a knowledge diplomacy approach and that it includes, yet goes far beyond, typical internationalization activities. Knowledge diplomacy involves a diversity of higher education actors working collaboratively with partners from other sectors to address pressing global and national issues through cooperation, negotiation, and mutuality of benefits, and not through a top-down, competitive, winner-takes-all kind of process. ▲

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