Internationalisation of Higher Education as a Soft Power: Implications and Challenges

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Abstract: This article examines the internationalisation of higher education as a major tool of soft power. It starts with Joseph Nyes idea that attraction through culture and values can shape global influence and follows this thread into the world-wide spread of universities as agents of that influence. India stands at the centre of the discussion. The article links its long history of learning with the pressures of a postcolonial order marked by bureaucracy and inequality. It looks at experiences that stretch from Nalanda to the colonial classroom and then turns to recent policy efforts such as the National Education Policy 2020 and NITI Aayogs strategy for academic outreach. The discussion also compares India with the United States, China and Canada. Each country pursues educational diplomacy in its own way and with its own mix of motives and outcomes. Along the way, the article raises ethical questions that arise from commercialisation, brain drain and growing dependence on digital systems. Education appears here as a long-term form of persuasion that outlasts trade deals or shifting political ties. The article suggests that intellectual generosity can help hold together national ambition and global responsibility. When universities work as places of curiosity and fairness, they serve as persuasive envoys of a civilisation and project influence not through command but through the quieter authority of knowledge shared in trust.

Keywords: Soft Power, Internationalisation of Higher Education, Knowledge Diplomacy, Student Mobility, Cultural Influence, Academic Collaboration, Globalisation, Education as Persuasion

Introduction

In an age where ideas travel more quickly than goods or armies, knowledge has become a principal means of influence. Nations compete not only in markets or military production but also in classrooms, libraries, and research networks. Higher education now sits within the world of diplomacy as a quiet but noticeable force. It changes how a country is seen and helps it earn goodwill. Its method is persuasion rather than pressure. It seeks to draw people in instead of conquering ground.

Joseph Nyes idea of soft power captures this move in thinking. He coined the term to describe a state's capacity to reach its goals through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power rests on three main sources: culture, political values and foreign policy. Together, they shape what others come to prefer through appeal rather than force (Joseph S. Nye Jr., 2004, as described by Esmaeili et al., 2025). Universities and international education play a vital role within this framework by helping intercultural understanding and embedding national values in global learning environments (Adoui, 2023). In this century, universities have emerged as the most visible

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intersection of these forces. They present national cultures in their most civil form—intellectual ambition combined with moral restraint.

The internationalisation of higher education, therefore, represents not merely academic globalisation but the quiet expansion of persuasion through learning. The internationalisation of higher education is more than a matter of academic globalisation. It marks a quieter spread of influence through learning. Many scholars now argue that when states open up their universities to the world through student mobility, institutional partnerships and cross-border research networks, they add to their soft power and support their foreign policy aims and cultural diplomacy (Gauttam et al., 2024).

This paper looks at the ways in which education works as a tool of soft influence, the historical roots of that role, its complicated return in India and the ethical questions that arise from its rapid growth. Its aim is to show how higher learning can help to build bridges while guarding against the distortions that follow markets and political competition.

The Meaning and Reach of Soft Power

Soft power stands in sharp contrast to the older logic of domination. Hard power rests on material force, such as armies, resources, sanctions and currencies. It pushes behaviour through fear or need. Soft power appeals instead to thought, admiration or moral example. It attracts through a sense of quality and honesty. A country gains influence when others decide that they want to share its way of thinking and living. Joseph Nyes core account of soft power stresses that it makes others want what you want through attraction rather than coercion and that it draws its strength from culture, political values and the appeal of foreign policy (Nye, 2004).

History bears out this quieter pattern. The United States rose to cultural prominence in the twentieth century not only through wealth but through the image of an open society in which talent could flourish. Cinema, literature, technology and universities all came to stand for freedom and initiative. The picture of a campus full of argument and experiment gave weight to the broader democratic promise. Studies of United States cultural diplomacy place higher education and the global movement of students at the centre of American soft power and show how they shape how foreign audiences view its values and its institutions (Cull, 2008, pp. 46–48). Regimes that rule through fear may command large armies yet rarely earn admiration.

For any country that wants to broaden its influence in a tangled global setting, education remains one of the few tools that can win both respect and a sense of attachment. A student who spends key years abroad often carries home a lasting trace of that host culture in habits of inquiry, ways of taking part in civic life and judgements about fairness. These experiences can harden into long-term sympathies even when formal alliances shift. In that sense, higher education turns into a strategic frontier of persuasion. Work on international student mobility shows that graduates of foreign universities often act as informal cultural envoys and that they shape relations between states and the feelings that endure between them (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

Education as the Architecture of Attraction

Universities influence the imagination of the world. The act of teaching expresses confidence; the act of learning expresses trust. States that invest in education export more than curriculum—they export models of thought. The American university system, especially through the Morrill Land-Grant Acts and philanthropic endowments, established a model combining research, teaching, and public service that became a cornerstone of U.S. educational soft power (Nye, 2004). The American university system, developed through land grants and philanthropy, became known for blending scientific rigour

with inventiveness. Student exchanges initially designed for technical cooperation evolved into cultural diplomacy. The Fulbright Program, created in 1946, has been widely recognised as a central pillar of U.S. cultural diplomacy and educational exchange, strengthening international goodwill and leadership influence (Bu, 1999). The Fulbright program remains among the most successful of these efforts, producing heads of government, ministers, scientists, and writers whose work carries the imprint of American intellectual openness.

European universities, though older, redefined their mission after the Second World War. Cooperation among them gave rise to the Bologna Process and later to Erasmus, which institutionalised mobility for an entire generation. The Bologna Process and Erasmus Programme have been extensively documented as key mechanisms of European higher education integration and as expressions of the EU's soft power strategy (Keeling, 2006, pp. 205–207). Through these schemes, the European Union transformed a continent once divided by war into a network of learning. Education humanised politics faster than treaties could.

The pattern is unmistakable. Wherever higher education adapts to global collaboration, it multiplies national prestige. Modern metrics such as research output, citations, or innovation indices only partly capture its meaning. Far more important is the symbolic authority that accompanies international recognition. Students choose countries not merely for facilities but for values. A university flag on a campus lawn becomes the visible emblem of a national idea.

India's Heritage of Learning

Long before Europe formed its first universities, India supported centres of learning whose reputation stretched across much of Asia. Nalanda, Taxila and Vikramshila drew monks, astronomers, physicians and philosophers. Their programmes covered logic, medicine, grammar and metaphysics. These places worked as active meeting points of cultures, and open debate carried more weight than fixed dogma. Historical and archaeological research shows that institutions such as Nalanda (5th–12th century CE) and Taxila (about the 5th century BCE to the 5th century CE) held a central place in Buddhist learning across regions and attracted students from China, Korea and Central Asia (Mookerji, 1947, pp. 32–36). Accounts by travellers such as Xuanzang describe intense exchanges of ideas that linked India with China, Korea and the Far East. Xuanzangs 7th century work, the Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, gives detailed portraits of India's monastic universities and the sophistication of their teaching (Beal, 1884, Vol. II, pp. 167–172).

These institutions grew out of a belief that knowledge is a sacred trust that can bring humanity together. Their destruction left a deep mark on cultural memory and, at the same time, set a benchmark for intellectual ambition. Whenever modern India speaks of reviving its heritage of learning, it turns back to that early cosmopolitan spirit. Scholars argue that current accounts of India's educational soft power draw quite deliberately on this legacy of ancient centres such as Nalanda as symbols of intellectual openness and intercultural dialogue (Vickers, 2010). The memory works as both a source of pride and a call to action and feeds the conviction that the country once served as an intellectual lighthouse for Asia and can take on that role again.

Post-independence India inherited that aspiration but also the heavy apparatus of colonial education. The challenge has always been to transform a system designed for compliance into one capable of creating. Recognising this tension is central to understanding how education functions as soft power today.

Colonial Legacy and Post-Independence Constraints

Colonial rule depended on a tightly managed bureaucracy trained in English law and habits

of thought. Education under the empire, therefore, turned into a tool of control. It prepared interpreters, clerks and petty officials rather than thinkers or innovators. The system rewarded rote learning. The original thought looked too close to defiance.

Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education fixed English education in place for reasons of administrative convenience and put clerical efficiency ahead of creativity (Macaulay, 1835/1972, pp. 249–253). When India became independent, the basic administrative skeleton of that system stayed in place. Policymakers who feared fragmentation in a varied country built centralised bodies that controlled syllabi, appointments and funding. Scholars of post-colonial education argue that this continuity hardened into bureaucratic rigidity and gave rise to an examination-driven system that prized obedience more than inquiry (Kumar, 2005, pp. 21–24). The arrangement brought stability but left little space for autonomy.

During the twentieth century, India produced brilliant graduates but few transformative institutions. The bureaucracy encouraged caution, not curiosity. The social purpose of education shifted from discovery to credentialism. Massive competition for scarce places—especially in the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management—created a culture of examination anxiety. Rote learning flourished because success depended on standardised tests rather than originality. Empirical research confirms that India's higher-education culture remains heavily examination-driven, with rote learning reinforced by high-stakes entrance testing and regulatory centralisation (Altbach, 2009, p. 29).

Simultaneously, structural inequalities limited access. Rural poverty, gender barriers, and linguistic divides prevented millions from reaching higher education. Regulatory agencies such as the University Grants Commission, conceived as guardians of fairness, later became instruments of constraint. Innovation required permission at every stage. The system generated graduates for employment but not for exploration.

This complex inheritance explains why India's recent reforms are emotional as well as administrative—they seek to redeem an ancient vision through modern practice.

The National Education Policy 2020 and the Pursuit of Renewal

The National Education Policy 2020 stands out as one of the boldest efforts to rethink higher education since independence. It moves away from rigid disciplinary boundaries and leans towards a wider range of ways to think and learn. The policy imagines a more holistic and multidisciplinary system that brings sciences, arts and the humanities into conversation and that allows flexible courses with space for creativity (Government of India, 2020).

In this account, universities turn into places where science, art and technology meet rather than remain sealed off from one another. The policy calls for movement across curricula so that students can pair computer science with philosophy, chemistry with history or mathematics with design. At its heart lies a simple belief that complex problems need minds that can draw on several kinds of knowledge at once.

Equally central is the call for autonomy. Scholars note that the emphasis of NEP 2020 on institutional autonomy and innovation represents a paradigm shift from previous centralised control mechanisms under the University Grants Commission. By reducing layers of bureaucratic supervision, the policy encourages institutions to shape their own academic identities. Faculty are invited to experiment with pedagogy, strengthen research, and engage with industry without waiting for ministerial approval. Accreditation processes are being redesigned to recognise innovation rather than procedural compliance.

Technology runs through every aspect of the reform. Analysts draw attention to the NEP's

digital strategy—particularly its focus on online platforms, open educational resources, and bridging the digital divide—as vital to expanding equitable access to higher education (Varghese & Malik, 2021, pp. 14–15). Digital platforms for learning and evaluation aim to reach remote populations. Access, once determined by geography, will increasingly depend on connectivity. Bridging that digital divide is therefore as urgent as constructing new campuses.

Perhaps the policy's most radical feature is its ethical outlook. It restores the idea that education should build character, not merely employability. The cultivation of critical reasoning, public responsibility, and empathy appears throughout the text. In that sense, NEP 2020 reconnects India's modern system with its ancient spirit—a fusion that, if realised, may redefine the nation's image abroad.

A reimagined university sector could once again draw students from neighbouring countries, reversing the long trend of outbound migration and establishing India as an exporter of knowledge rather than a supplier of talent alone.

Student Mobility and the Question of Brain Drain

India's outward student movement remains among the largest in the world. Liberalisation of the economy in 1991 increased affluence and exposure to global opportunities. Families viewed foreign degrees as passports to professional security. Since economic liberalisation, the number of Indian students studying abroad has increased sharply, making India one of the top sources of international students globally (Culture Times, 2012). The number of Indian students in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada has multiplied many times since the 1990s.

Such mobility brings advantages: graduates gain worldly awareness, technical training, and confidence. Yet it also drains domestic potential. Many who study abroad decide not to return, contributing instead to foreign research and industry. Billions in tuition and living expenses leave the Indian economy annually. Studies note that India experiences a persistent "brain drain," where skilled graduates contribute disproportionately to innovation and economic activity abroad rather than domestically (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012, p. 692). The emotional aspiration of global citizenship coexists with the economic reality of national loss.

NITI Aayog's 2025 report on the internationalisation of higher education notes that far more Indian students leave to study abroad than foreign students come to India. This gap points to weaknesses in policy and infrastructure that slow India's growth as an education hub (NITI Aayog, 2025). The report calls for the creation of world-class clusters within the country through steady investment, thoughtful branding and greater academic freedom. It argues that education expresses a country's stature as much as its economy or its defence. A nation that teaches well earns trust and commands confidence.

The vision is persuasive: India must become not only a supplier of talent but a destination—a place where knowledge has both global reach and local depth.

Historical Routes to Global Learning

The desire for transnational study is ancient. The medieval universities of Bologna and Paris operated in a Europe where Latin united scholars. Credentials conferred there held currency across kingdoms. Historical studies confirm that medieval universities such as Bologna (est. 1088) and Paris (est. 1150) were transnational centres of scholarship, linked by Latin as a lingua franca and by shared academic traditions (Verger, 1992, pp. 45–47). Al Azhar in Cairo performed a similar role for the Islamic world, combining theology with science. These institutions cultivated cosmopolitanism before the word existed.

Colonial expansion later reshaped global learning. European powers spread their schools and curricula worldwide. Education became a trope of civilisation and a means of control. In India, Western knowledge edged out long-standing indigenous systems. Scholars argue that colonial education regimes imposed Western ways of thinking and Western languages and that they recast learning as a tool of imperial dominance (Altbach, 1971). Church missions in Latin America and British colleges across Asia claimed to spread enlightenment and used that claim to defend the idea of empire. After the Second World War, decolonisation transformed education from dominance to development. Nations emerging from colonial rule viewed technical expertise as essential for rebuilding. Exchange programs provided them not only with skills but also with an ideological orientation.

By the 1990s, the end of ideological bipolarity produced an economic form of globalisation. The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) placed educational services within the structure of trade liberalisation. Cross-border campuses, distance learning, and franchised degrees emerged. Learning became a product moving through market channels. Jane Knight's widely cited definition clarified that internationalisation means "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11).

At this moment, theorists such as Jane Knight proposed definitions that sought to retain moral clarity. Internationalisation, she wrote, is the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into higher education's mission and delivery. A later European study expanded the aim to include a contribution to the public good. These definitions remind policymakers that education is a trust, not a commodity.

The Expanding Logic of Internationalisation

Technology and transport have made education borderless. A student in Nairobi can enrol virtually at a university in London while participating in online groups with peers from Seoul or São Paulo. Exposure to such multiplicity reshapes thinking. It creates what might be called cognitive bilingualism—the ability to interpret more than one intellectual tradition at once.

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report underscores that international and digital learning expand intercultural understanding and global citizenship by connecting students across societies (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO's long-standing assertion that education transforms lives gains empirical support from this phenomenon. Internationalisation changes not only what students know but who they become. Those who engage with unfamiliar societies develop a greater capacity for dialogue. They carry new habits of analysis into their own cultures.

States have begun to see this educational reach as a form of diplomacy in disguise. The Fulbright Program still sits at the heart of United States public diplomacy and aims to deepen mutual understanding through academic exchange (Bu, 1999). In a different register, Chinas Confucius Institutes and the European Union's Erasmus+ scheme show how education can work as soft power and can build cultural familiarity and cooperation through cross-border study and teaching (Yang, 2010, pp. 238–239). Each of these efforts turns education into a peaceful kind of persuasion.

India's regional and global engagement

India's strategy works on two connected planes. Within its own neighbourhood, it promotes academic cooperation with BIMSTEC countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. These ties keep alive a sense of cultural closeness that trade deals or security pacts cannot

produce on their own. Researchers note that India's educational diplomacy within BIMSTEC and SAARC arrangements functions as a tool for regional integration and for links between ordinary people, and that it supports rather than replaces economic and security cooperation. Shared syllabi, visiting faculty and scholarship schemes aim to renew an older sense of neighbourhood fraternity.

On the wider stage, India presents itself as a future education hub. It seeks to simplify rules for foreign collaboration, allow international campuses and modernise curricula. Policy texts such as the National Education Policy 2020 and NITI Aayog's higher education strategy set out an ambition to build a global knowledge hub that can attract foreign universities and international students (Government of India, 2020). The government imagines a group of institutions that will enter global rankings within a decade. The legal and financial hurdles are large, yet the deeper reward would lie in greater freedom of thought.

International students who spend important years in India meet a civilisation that joins long history with democratic practice. The impressions they carry away may influence diplomatic goodwill long after their degrees end. Research on international education exchanges suggests that such experiences strengthen soft power by building durable goodwill and by shaping how the world views host countries. In that light, education becomes the most enduring envoy.

Progress towards this vision demands coordination between the central and state governments. Uniform rules without a shared sense of purpose will not work. The NITI Aayog plan stresses time-bound targets and shared responsibility and seeks to turn declared intent into actual change. If the effort succeeds, India could turn its demographic surplus into a pool of intellectual strength and its universities into working ambassadors of culture.

The policies of the Union Government and the State Government of Telangana highlight the growing importance of internationalisation, with offers to permit the setting up of campuses of foreign universities within India. This is also an important decision in terms of saving foreign currency while providing international standards and exposure to knowledge to Indian students within its territory. In a similar manner, eminent Indian institutions like IIT and BITS Pilani have set up campuses abroad.

Comparative Perspectives: Other Centres of Educational Soft Power

Chinas recent path in higher education shows what steady and targeted investment can achieve. Projects 211 and 985 poured large sums into select universities in order to raise their global standing. These government initiatives, Project 211 in 1995 and Project 985 in 1998, sought to strengthen leading Chinese universities, lift the quality of research and sharpen their ability to compete internationally in higher education (Yang and Welch, 2012). The policy rested on the insight that academic strength can turn into diplomatic influence.

Today, Chinese universities draw an increasing flow of students, especially from Africa and the Arab world. Language courses and joint research open fresh lines of contact and widen China's reach. Scholars have treated the spread of Confucius Institutes and scholarship schemes as a deliberate use of soft power in Africa and Asia (Hartig, 2016, p. 122). These efforts deserve close attention in a shifting geopolitical climate in which states seek to deepen their sway within the present world order and broaden their spheres of influence.

The United States has taken a different route and has built its position through openness and philanthropy rather than tight state direction. Its universities host close to a million foreign students each year. The country remains the largest destination for international students, and education exchange forms a

central strand of United States public diplomacy and global influence (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2023). The academic atmosphere, with its emphasis on inquiry and a strong sense of personal freedom, works as a quiet advertisement for democracy. Even when political relations grow tense, the pull of American higher education tends to remain.

Canada's approach blends ethics with economy. International students contribute materially to its budget but also fill vital roles in its skilled workforce. Education thus doubles as immigration policy. This convergence of learning and livelihood raises national competitiveness while presenting a humane image of inclusion.

Together, these models illustrate that education diplomacy operates along different motives: ideological, economic, and humanitarian. What unites them is the belief that intellectual hospitality strengthens nations more effectively than isolation.

Globalisation, Technology, and the Knowledge Economy

Globalisation, which Thomas Friedman once called a flattening process, has transformed the architecture of knowledge. Friedman's influential thesis argues that globalisation has "flattened" the world by integrating markets, technologies, and information systems, fundamentally altering how knowledge and labour circulate (Friedman, 2005, p. 9). Digital connectivity has created worldwide classrooms. Universities now operate joint degrees and research clusters that belong simultaneously to several continents. Collaboration across borders becomes the new default of scholarship. Scholars note that international academic networks and cross-border research collaborations now underpin the global knowledge economy and are redefining higher education systems (Marginson, 2010).

This growing web of dependence brings chances for gain and reasons for worry. Global communication now pushes information across borders at great speed, yet it can also wear away what is particular to a place. Curricula may drift towards a single model and lose local tone and memory. The task is to keep global relevance without losing local honesty. The tension between worldwide integration and local identity, often discussed through the glonacal agency heuristic, now sits at the heart of debates on higher education internationalisation (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002, pp. 282–283).

The rapid spread of online education sharpens both access and rivalry. Massive open online courses open up low-cost learning options, yet they also unsettle traditional institutions. Their presence shows that education has moved into a kind of shared global commons. Borders that once guarded national systems have worn thin. In this digital republic of learning, reputation carries more weight than geography.

For countries such as India, the task is to take part in this change without giving up what makes their traditions distinct. The goal is not to copy Harvard or Oxford in digital form. It is to build platforms that carry indigenous thought with standards that stand up anywhere. The mix of rootedness and reach will shape the credibility of India's educational soft power.

Ethical boundaries and future challenges

The widening reach of international education brings the danger of turning learning into a commodity. Universities compete for students as if they were markets and, at times, trade away intellectual honesty. Private institutions may sell the promise of prestige through impressive buildings rather than serious scholarship. Franchise campuses appear where systems of quality control stay weak. In many parts of the world, education policy struggles to hold together commercial hunger and public duty (Altbach and Knight, 2007, p. 291).

There is also a more basic moral question. Should internationalisation aim at profit or at partnership? When market motives take over, the academic covenant starts to fray. Gaps widen between an elite set of institutions that flourish through global ties and under-resourced colleges that work mainly with local communities. Policymakers need to restate that education, even when it has economic returns, remains a humanist pursuit grounded in fairness.

Security concerns add another strain. Governments sometimes treat academic openness as a doorway to espionage or ideological influence. Tighter visa rules and a mood of suspicion have, in recent years, restricted the movement of scholars. The hard task is to defend openness without naivety to keep intellectual exchange alive while guarding legitimate national interests (Rizvi, 2011).

In the end, the strength of soft power in education rests on inclusion. Schemes that shut out poorer countries or poorer students cannot claim moral weight. The ideal lies in reciprocity through shared research, fair patterns of funding and honest, transparent evaluation. Without that, soft power hardens into one more hierarchy (Nye, 2004).

Conclusion

The internationalisation of higher education captures one of the most hopeful strands within globalisation—the trust that learning can draw people together even when politics pulls them apart. When universities reach across borders, they exchange more than information. They pass on habits of inquiry, a sense of fairness and a spirit of curiosity, and these habits support peace more steadily than weapons or trade deals ever can.

For India, education carries a double charge. It has to honour a long and celebrated history of learning and, at the same time, prepare a young population for a demanding and uncertain future. Recent reforms signal a serious start, yet the journey ahead remains long. The move from a culture of control to a culture of imagination calls for courage, patience and honesty from teachers and from those who shape policy.

If India manages to build universities that bring together scientific insight and ethical awareness, it will add to global knowledge and, at the same time, deepen its own moral standing. That meeting point of intellect and conscience lies at the heart of soft power.

Admiration no longer follows from sheer dominance. It grows instead from grace, competence and generosity of spirit. A university that opens its doors to the world on equal terms becomes one of its country's strongest ambassadors. In that sense, the seminar room, not the battlefield, may become the place where the next generation of international relations is rehearsed.

Soft power through education, therefore, calls for constant watchfulness. It cannot be allowed to fade into propaganda or into commerce dressed up as enlightenment. Its force rests on honest thought, a willingness to meet difference without fear and a steady commitment to human dignity.

When knowledge crosses borders unarmed and unafraid, it changes more than separate nations. It has the power to reshape civilisation itself. The university, when we take it seriously, can serve as the quiet centre of that change, a place where the wisdom of one people gradually becomes part of a shared inheritance.

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