

Internationalization of Higher Education as an Instrument for Foreign Policy and International Relations

Dış Politika ve Uluslararası İlişkilerin Bir Aracı olarak Yükseköğretimin Uluslararasılaşması

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Abstract

Internationalisation of Higher Education is a phenomenon capable of influencing foreign policy of states and international relations. It functions as an important instrument for foreign policy of states in terms of being a soft power element. Within this context, the article attempts to examine internationalisation of higher education as a tool for foreign policy and international relations to an extent. It presents the conceptual framework of internationalisation of higher education and internationalisation activities and programmes. Then, it describes rationales for internationalisation whereby it provides some insight and implications into foreign policy and international relations. Finally, it discusses to HE within context of foreign policy, IR and IR theories. By that way, it indicates the relationship of internationalisation of higher education with foreign policy and international relations. Thus, it points out significant implications and insights for foreign policy and international relations within internationalisation of higher education literature.

Key Words: Higher Education, International students, IR Theories, Public Diplomacy, Soft Power

Öz

Yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşması, devletlerin dış politikasını ve uluslararası ilişkileri etkileyebilen bir olgudur. Yumuşak güç unsuru olması bakımından devletlerin dış politikası için önemli bir araç işlevi görmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu makale yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşmasını dış politika ve uluslararası ilişkiler için bir araç olarak bir ölçüde incelemeye çalışmaktadır. Yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşmasının kavramsal çerçevesini, uluslararasılaşma faaliyetlerini ve programlarını sunmaktadır. Ardından, uluslararasılaşmanın gerekçelerini açıklayarak dış politika ve uluslararası ilişkilere ilişkin bazı içgörüler ve çıkarımlar sunmaktadır. Son olarak, dış politika, uluslararası ilişkiler ve teorileri bağlamında yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşmasını tartışmaktadır. Bu şekilde, yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşmasının dış politika ve uluslararası ilişkilerle olan ilişkisini göstermektedir. Böylece, yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşması literatürde dış politika ve uluslararası ilişkiler için önemli çıkarımlar ve içgörüler ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yükseköğretim, Uluslararası öğrenciler, UA Teorileri, Kamu Diplomasisi, Yumuşak güç

Introduction

Communication has emerged as a mediating factor enabling people to understand each other, socialise and reconcile ensuring societal and inter-so-

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cietal compromise through common codes.¹ Higher Education employs and enhances communication among people from different societies. It is also capable of promoting and maintaining world peace.² Today, students and academics have also become actors in international relations and foreign policy, in a sense serving as diplomats.

Internationalisation is the process of building strategic international relations based on mutual relations between states and carrying out activities across state borders.³ The Notion of 'internationalisation' not only touches on relations between nations, but even more so on the relations between cultures and realities at the global and local levels.⁴ Internationalisation manifests itself in higher education as well as in many other fields. The role of higher education as an international or regional political actor has clearly gained ground for the last two decades.⁵ Education has substantial effects on the countries' soft power. The capability of a country to attract international students from the other countries is a prominent indicator of this.⁶ International academic relations have generally been under the purview of ministries of education, culture, and foreign affairs. Not only have national government agencies become more engaged, so have intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Bank, as well as international and regional non-governmental agencies.

Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE) is a recent, continuous, broad and varied phenomenon and strategic agenda, driven by a political, economic and socio-cultural rationale. IoHE constitutes an important research subject in social sciences for it offers potential political, economic, socio-cultural and academical benefits.⁷ It functions as an instrument for cooperation in foreign policy, public diplomacy and a means of interaction between countries and cultures ensuring global peace and providing economic gains. Internationalisation of higher education can be used as a strategy to enhance the international, global, and intercultural dimensions of teaching and learning,

- 1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The extension of man*, MIT Press, 1994, p.25
- 2 Ian M.Harris, "Peace education theory", *Journal of peace education* June, 2004, V/20, September 11, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1740020032000178276>
- 3 Jürgen Enders, "Higher education, internationalisation, and the nation-state: Recent developments and challenges to governance theory", *Higher education*, Vol. 47, No.7, 2004, p.361.
- 4 Jane Knight and Hans De Wit, "Internationalization of Higher Education: Past and Future", *International Higher Education*, Sept. Vol.11 No.3, 2018, October 17, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2018.95.10679>
- 5 Jane Knight, *Higher education in turmoil: The changing world of internationalization*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam 2008, p.6.
- 6 Osman Gültekin, "International Education and Soft Power: The Case of Turkey", Bahçeşehir University, Graduate School of Social Sciences, İstanbul 2019 (published PhD diss.), p.119.
- 7 Craciun "Systematizing internationalization policy in higher education: towards a typology, Perspectives of Innovations" *Economics and Business* Vol.15, No:1, 2015, p.44.

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research and knowledge production. Hence, governments, higher education institutions, transnational entities, international organisations, policy makers, and students organisations have taken internationalisation on their agendas. Moreover, university strategic plans, national policy statements, regionalization initiatives, international declarations, and academic articles all indicate the centrality of internationalisation in the world of higher education.⁸

IoHE can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses within Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations. From a Realism perspective, states utilize higher education as a strategic instrument to enhance national power, attract highly skilled talent, and strengthen their position in the global knowledge economy.⁹ In contrast, Liberalism emphasizes cooperation, viewing academic exchanges, joint research initiatives, and institutional partnerships as mechanisms that promote interdependence and mutual benefit.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Neoliberalism points to the increasing marketization of higher education, where universities compete globally for students, funding, and prestige.¹¹ Finally, Social Constructivism underscores the importance of shared norms, values, and identities, suggesting that internationalization fosters the diffusion of ideas and the construction of a global academic culture.¹² Basing on foreign policy goals, international relations and IR theories, present study discusses IoHE and it argues that the internationalization of higher education is a complex and multifaceted process shaped by power, cooperation, peace, identity and market forces.

Aim of this study is to examine internationalisation of higher education within the context of foreign policy, international relations and IR theories, and highlight relationships between them. Thus, research questions are “Does IoHE serve for foreign policy and international relations?”, “how does IoHE function as an instrument for foreign policy of states and international relations?” “How can IoHE be treated within IR theories?” Qualitative research method has been adopted employing document analysis as a data collection method. The work is descriptive and partly empirical study. Factual data have been collected from primary sources and official websites. Tables were created using official resources. Theoretical information has been taken from secondary sources studying articles, books, dissertations and reports. Data bases such as EBSCOHost, JSTOR, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Springer, and Web of Science have been used. The Publications years between 2000 and 2026 were prioritized and used for the

8 Knight and De Wit, *ibid*, p.3.

9 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2001, pp.29-31.

10 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1977, 24-29.

11 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 2-3.

12 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.1-7.

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framework in addition to some between 1948 and 1999. In economic rationales for IOHE, data of 2024-2025 academic term (the latest available) was presented as data of 2025-2026 have not been published, yet.

Even though the issue of internationalisation of higher education is of great importance, highly dwelt on in Educational Sciences, Public Administration, and Sociology and seems closely related to International Relations, it has not been elaborated much enough within the International Relations discipline so far. This article points out that how internationalisation of higher education affects international relations and foreign policy, hereby it can be seen IoHE is worth being research subject/being studied within International Relations discipline and underlines the relationship of IoHE with International Relations and foreign policy presenting the conceptual framework of IoHE, internationalisation activities and programmes, and rationales for internationalisation of higher education and discussing it within IR theories and foreign policy analysis.

Conceptual Framework: Internationalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation of higher education is defined as “the process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, function and delivery of higher education”¹³ or “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, to make a meaningful contribution to society”.¹⁴ In those definitions, “purpose” refers to role, mission or objectives in a national education system or an institution; “function” refers to primary elements or tasks such as teaching, research and service to society through the institutions; “delivery” refers to the offering of education courses and programmes either domestically or in other countries.¹⁵

Moreover, Internationalisation of higher education can mean “specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to support student or faculty exchanges, encourage collaborative research overseas, set up joint teaching programmes in other countries or a myriad of other initiatives.”¹⁶ Internationa

13 Knight, “Updating the Definition of Internationalization”, *International Higher Education* Vol.33 No:2, 2015, pp.2-3

14 De Wit et al. “Internationalisation of higher education: A study for the European parliament, Structural and Cohesion Policies”, European Parliament Policy Department B, Brussels 2015, p.29.

15 Knight, *ibid*, p.3.

16 Philip Albach, “Globalization and the university: Realities in an unequal world”, in *International handbook of higher education*, ed. Philip Albach and James Forest, Springer, Dordrecht 2007, p.121.

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lisation of higher education involves academic cross-border mobility actions strengthening the capacity, research and knowledge transfer of institutions.¹⁷ In addition, IoHE comprises dimensions such as institutional promotion and branding.¹⁸ It is a process including many practices and perspectives such as international exchange-mobility, research activities, curriculum and policies implemented by a relevant higher education institution.¹⁹ Its impact on regions, countries, and institutions varies according to their particular contexts.²⁰ To sum up, internationalisation of higher education can be defined as the process of carrying out comprehensive strategic work, activities and formulating necessary policies at the institutional, national, regional and global level in order to integrate global, international and intercultural dimension into the aims, duties and services of higher education by pursuing academic, economic, cultural and political objectives.

The latest description of IHE has been made by Heleta and Chasi, according to them, internationalization of higher education is an essential and comparative effort to understand the world, including its complexities, historical and current inequalities, and injustices, while exploring ways to create a fairer future for everyone. Through teaching, learning, research, and engagement, it promotes diverse ways of knowing and incorporates critical, anti-racist, and anti-hegemonic perspectives from around the globe, ultimately improving the quality and relevance of education²¹. Pashby and Andreotti interpret it that global, regional, and local inequalities, both historical and present, are reflected in university curricula and the knowledge they generate. This reality questions and challenges existing norms at institutional, national, and international levels, and can foster international collaboration grounded in solidarity, tolerance, equity, fairness, and equality.²²

Internationalisation activities and programmes

Internationalisation activities and programmes are policy instruments and the ways by which policies and strategies are implemented. They are mainly

- 17 Teichler, "Internationalisation as a challenge for higher education in Europe", *Tertiary Education and Management* V/1, 1999, pp.5-23.
- 18 Philip Albach, Liz Reisberg and Laura Rumbley, *Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution*, UNESCO Publishing, Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei, 2019, p.17.
- 19 Marvin Bartel, "Internationalization of universities: A University Culture-Based Framework", *Higher Education*, XLV/7, 2003, pp. 43-70.
- 20 Hans De Wit and Philip G. Albach, "Internationalization in higher education: global trends and recommendations for its future", *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* Vol.5, No:1, 2021, October 23, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898>, pp.28-46.
- 21 Savo Heleta and Samia Chasi, "Rethinking and Redefining Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa Using a Decolonial Lens," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, XLV/ 3, November 2022, pp. 9-10.
- 22 Karen Pashby and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, "Ethical Internationalisation in Higher Education: Interfaces with International Development and Sustainability", *Environmental Education Research*, XXII/ 6, June 2016, pp.771-87.

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grouped as “internationalisation at home” and “internationalisation abroad (crossborder higher education”. These two categories reciprocally complete each other.²³ Internationalisation at home refers to the internationalisation efforts of countries in higher education without mobility, that is, the inclusion of the intercultural dimension and international curriculum into the education of students in their own country and in their own environment, formally or informally for a specific goal. It is a hard process in which local students, faculty members, university staff and other community members undertake important roles in order to ensure the adaptation of international students and scholars to the host country, to make their lives easier, and to please them by creating a positive image on them.²⁴ Internationalisation at home consists of strategies and approaches to integrate the international dimension into the host institution, such as putting a comparative perspective into the curriculum, offering undergraduate and graduate programmes in English or other languages to recruit international students and academics.²⁵ In this context, internationalising curriculum is of great importance, namely, they should include global and international topics such as peace, tolerance, cooperation, intercultural understanding and sensitivity to global problems. Main objective here is to prepare students to be able to live in a global and multicultural environment during their education and in their future lives.

Cross border higher education encompasses mobility of people (students, scholars, staff), education programmes/curricula and providers (higher education institutions) across borders. Mobility of people include study abroad and exchange programmes. In those programmes, students go abroad to do internships and receive short or long-term education as in Erasmus programmes. Some students spend their entire undergraduate and/or graduate education abroad. These students are classified within the international student statue.²⁶ Some academics teach for a certain period of time at an educational institution abroad. Some other academics can serve in a foreign education institution for a long time. They are classified in international faculty status.²⁷ In mobility of education programmes, education is provided in the form of face-to-face or distant way. This kind of programmes and curricula include “franchising, twinning, articulation, double/joint degree, and distance

- 23 Jane Knight, “Internationalization: A Decade of Changes and Challenges”, *International Higher Education* 1/3, January 2008, p.25, March 21, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2008.50.8001>
- 24 Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit, “Global Trends in Higher Education and Academic Mobility”, *International Higher Education* 59, 2010, pp. 2–4.
- 25 Jos Beelen - Elspeth Jones, “*Redefining Internationalization at Home*” in The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies, ed. Adrian Curaj et al., Springer, 2015, pp.59–72.
- 26 Vanessa Andreotti et al. (2016). “Social cartographies as performative devices in research on higher education”. *Higher Education Research & Development*, XXXV/1, pp.84-99.
- 27 OECD, Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, 2019

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education". Mobility of providers include "branch campus, independent institution, merger/acquisition, virtual university, affiliations, and networks".²⁸ According to UNESCO and Council of Europe, transnational arrangements can be made in two main ways: in collaborative way, the programmes such as franchising, twinning, double/joint degrees or study abroad that are partly or completely provided by another partner institution; and in non-collaborative way, programmes such as branch campuses, offshore institutions and corporate or international institutions programs that are provided directly by awarding institutions.²⁹

Rationales for Internationalisation of Higher Education: Implications and Insights for Foreign Policy and International Relations

Rationales for internationalisation of higher education are described as "purpose" "justification", "motivations", "drivers", or "reason" for internationalisation of higher education. They are worth putting forward in terms that they provide significant implications and insights in relation to foreign policy, global and international relations. Within this context, political, economic, and socio-cultural rationales of IoHE will be examined.

Political rationale for internationalisation of higher education

Political rationales for internationalisation of higher education are to build and maintain peace, mutual understanding, foreign policy, national security, technical assistance, national and regional identity. The USA launched the Fulbright Scholar Programme in order to improve mutual understanding between herself and other countries in the aftermath of World World II. The USA and NATO put internationalisation of higher education on their agenda in order to strengthen national security, diplomacy, peace and mutual understanding in the Cold War.³⁰ Philip Coombs, Former Assistant Secretary of American Educational and Cultural Education Affairs, points out that educational and cultural relations compose the human aspect of foreign policy for they focus on people, their ideas, values, senses, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Hence, educational exchange programmes are an indispensable component and fourth dimension of American foreign policy.³¹ Soft power influence through international education is a solid part of the UK's foreign policy for a long time with the key assumption that visiting foreign students modify their political attitudes about the UK positively as a result of positive educational

28 Jane Knight, *Borderless, offshore, transnational and cross-border education: Definition and data dilemmas: Observatory on Borderless Higher Education*, London 2005, pp.1-27

29 Gültekin, *ibid*, p.20.

30 De Wit, *ibid*, p.11.

31 Philip Hall Coombs, "The fourth dimension of foreign policy, *Educational and cultural affairs* XVII/5, 1964, pp.6-7.

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and cultural experience.³² Political rationales for the internationalisation of higher education extend beyond the traditional focus on the United States and the United Kingdom. While these actors have historically framed international education as a tool for peacebuilding, diplomacy, and soft power, other major players have developed parallel approaches shaped by their geopolitical priorities. For instance, China has significantly expanded its internationalisation strategy through state-sponsored scholarships, institutional partnerships, and cultural diplomacy instruments such as Confucius Institutes, closely linked to its broader foreign policy vision.³³ Similarly, Germany and France emphasise internationalisation as part of cultural diplomacy and regional integration. Germany, through the DAAD, promotes academic mobility to strengthen European cooperation, while France advances its global influence through Francophonie policies.³⁴ In the Asia-Pacific, Australia integrates international education into both economic and diplomatic strategies, positioning itself as a regional hub for student mobility.³⁵ Meanwhile, Japan and South Korea have expanded international student recruitment as part of broader efforts to enhance global competitiveness and soft power projection.³⁶ Emerging actors such as Türkiye and India also increasingly utilise higher education internationalisation to strengthen regional influence and South-South cooperation.³⁷ These diverse approaches reflect Joseph Nye's concept of soft power.

Soft power in IoHE assumes one-to-one human relation and dynamic transformation or change by agents. Higher education institutions, educational systems and curriculum that incoming international students receive are owned, structured and regulated by hosting national governments. In this way, national governments have channels to influence the opinion of the incoming students depending on their capacity and attractiveness. Internationally mobile students would be exposed to interaction and all types of influence in host countries. This interaction can affect the behaviors and perceptions of the international students.³⁸ According to Nye, soft power is "the ability to shape the preferences of others by winning their hearts and minds" and is "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuad-

32 Sylvie Lomer, "Soft power as a policy rationale for international education in the UK: a critical analysis", *Higher Education*, LXXIV/3, 2017, pp.581-598.

33 Jian Yang, *China's Soft Power and Higher Education in South Asia*, Singapore, Springer, 2017, pp.45-60

34 Hans de Wit et al., *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, Brussels: European Parliament, 2015, pp.34-39.

35 OECD, *Education at a Glance 2023*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2023, pp.312-318.

36 Futao Huang, "Internationalization of Higher Education in East Asia," *Higher Education Policy* XXX/2, pp.145-160.

37 Kemal Gürüz, *Higher Education and International Student Mobility in the Global Knowledge Economy*, Albany, SUNY Press, pp.120-135.

38 Gültekin, *ibid*, pp.61-62.

ing, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes”.³⁹
⁴⁰ Thus, a nation can attract and persuade other nations and foreign nationals through soft power.⁴¹ Sources for soft power can be any assets of a nation that can potentially produce an attraction towards that nation.⁴² Government policies for soft power are conveyed through public diplomacy and active bilateral and multilateral foreign policy diplomacy.⁴³ Colin Powell, Former US’s Secretary of State, states “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.”⁴⁴ Karen P. Hughes, former secretary of the US Department of State, says “our education and exchange programmes are the most valuable instrument of public diplomacy in our hands.”⁴⁵ Charlotte Beers, former secretary in charge of US public diplomacy describes the exchange programmes as “the most profitable shopping of the government” and over 200 new and former presidents all over the world have benefitted from the programmes and supported American policies.⁴⁶ “Foundation of Institute of International Education (IIE)”⁴⁷ and “EducationUSA”⁴⁸ in the USA, “DAAD”⁴⁹ and “Goethe Institute”⁵⁰ supported by Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Germany, “Alliance Française”⁵¹ and “CampusFrance”⁵² supported by Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Europe in France, “British Council”⁵³ in UK, and “Yunus Emre Institute”⁵⁴ and “Turkish Maarif Foundation”⁵⁵ in Türkiye are political bodies to serve for public diplomacy on behalf of their states and support peace and mutual understanding around the world. Furthermore, European Union Education Programs were initiated so as to strengthen European values and create a common European sense in Europe. Thus, they ensure the development of a regional citizenship and identity.⁵⁶

- 39 Joseph S. Nye, “Soft power: the means to success in world politics”, *Public affairs*, 2004, p.17.
40 Joseph S. Nye, “The future of power”, *Public Affairs*, 2011, p.25
41 Gültekin, *ibid*, p.53.
42 Gültekin, *ibid*, p.54.
43 Joseph S. Nye, “*The information revolution and American soft power*”, In *Power in the global information age: From realism to globalization*, ed. Joseph S.Nye, Routledge, London 2004, pp.89-104.
44 Nye 2004, *ibid*, p.18
45 Owen E. Huges, *Public management and administration*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2017, p.73
46 Nye, “*Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept*”, III/1, 2017, pp.1-3.
47 Institute of International Education (IIE) “About”, April 11, 2026, <https://www.iie.org/about/>
48 EducationUSA, “Home”, April 12, 2026, <https://educationusa.state.gov/>
49 German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), “Home” April 12, 2026, <https://www.daad.de/en/>
50 Goethe-Institut, “Home”, April 12, 2026, <https://www.goethe.de/en/index.html>
51 Alliance Française, “Home”, April 12, 2026, <https://af-france.fr/en/>
52 Campus France, “Home”, April 13, 2026, <https://www.campusfrance.org/en>
53 British Council, “Home”, April 13, 2026, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/>
54 Yunus Emre Institute, “Home”, April 14, 2026, <https://www.yee.org.tr/en>
55 Turkish Maarif Foundation, “About Us”, Turkish Maarif Foundation “About Us” April 14, 2026, <https://turkiyemaarif.org/page/about-us>
56 De Wit, *ibid*, p.12.

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Economic rationale for internationalisation of higher education

Today the economic rationale of internationalisation is of great significance among the other rationales of IoHE. World wide economic competition, urgent needs of developing markets, great demand for higher education motivate governments and higher education institutions to shape their internationalisation policies with financial incentives.⁵⁷ Budget restrictions in higher education in some countries drive higher education institutions to steer for international market so as to find alternative resources and export their products and services.⁵⁸ Today's entrepreneurial university spirit, knowledge economy and commodification of knowledge are also among the economic motivations. Modern knowledge economies develop by economic expansion based on research and innovation.⁵⁹ The role of universities is evolving from the role of producing and disseminating knowledge to the role of establishing technology transfer and incubation facilities, that is, to the role of selling knowledge.⁶⁰ In order to increase their budgets, some countries strive to attract international students and academics, open international branch campuses and independent universities, and carry out joint projects with their peers.

Education has been positioned among the service sectors determined by the World Trade Organization. Higher education, as a part of education, can be seen as a good or product that is exported and imported. In other words, higher education is a "tradeable" and "commodified" sector.⁶¹ The worldwide international education market is now worth over \$200 billion each year.⁶² International students contribute to the host country's economy through tuition fees, travel and accommodation expenses, and employment in the labour market. To mention big four counties, international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$55 billion⁶³ and supported 355,736 jobs⁶⁴ to the U.S. economy in 2024-2025 academic term; UK's student income for the same academic year was £4-42 billion (\$52-54 billion).⁶⁵ According to the

57 De Wit, *ibid*, p.13.

58 Jane Knight, "Internationalization of higher education. In Quality and Internationalization in Higher Education", ed. Jane Knight and De Wit Hans. OECD, Paris 1999, p.27

59 Karine Tremblay, "Academic mobility and immigration", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, XIX/5, 2005, pp.196-228

60 De Wit, Internationalization of higher education", 14.

61 GATS, "Objectives, Coverage and Disciplines", World Trade Organisation, Geneva 2022

62 The Economic Impact of International Students, March 15, 2026, https://www.scholaro.com/db/News/the-economic-impact-of-international-students-319?utm_source=chatgpt.com

63 Institute of International Education (IIE), Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange 2024, "Economic Impact of International Students," April 10, 2026, <https://opendoorsdata.org>

64 NAFSA, Economic Value Statistics. March 21, 2026, <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/nafsa-international-student-economic-value-tool-v2>

65 The Economic Impact of International Students: Who Benefits From Global Education in 2026? April 10, 2026 https://www.scholaro.com/db/News/the-economic-impact-of-international-students-319?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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Australian Government, Department of Education, one of the largest export instruments of the country, education, created AUD 48-50 billion (nearly \$32-34 billion) income in that year⁶⁶, and provided more than 130,000 jobs.⁶⁷ In Canada, international students contributed CAD 37 billion (\$27-28 billion) to the national economy.⁶⁸ To compare the western host countries' income from international students, following table emerges:

Table 1. Contribution of International Students to Western Providers (2024-Billion US Dollar)

Country	USA	UK	Australia	Canada
Economic income	55	52-54	32-34	27-28

Sources: IIE; UUKi; Australian Government; Global Affairs Canada, 2024

As for emerging providers, in Türkiye, international students contributed \$3-5 billion to Turkish economy in 2024-2025 academic Term.⁶⁹ International students in China generated approximately \$2-4 billion in revenue.⁷⁰ International students in Malaysia contributed approximately \$3-4 billion.⁷¹ International students in India generated an estimated \$1-2 billion annually through tuition fees and living expenditures.⁷² To compare emerging host countries, following table emerges:

Table 2. Contribution of International Students to Emerging Providers (2024-Billion US Dollar)

Country	Türkiye	Malaysia	China	India
Economic income	3-5	3-4	2-4	1-2

Sources: YÖK; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China; Ministry of Education India, 2024

As seen, USA, UK, Australia, Canada dominate global international education revenue. The reason for it is that they regard internationalisation as profit generation industry besides its other political and sociocultural ben-

66 Australian Government, Department of Education, *International Education Data and Research 2024* Canberra, Australian Government, 2024.

67 Australian Government. "The value of international education to Australia", May 17, 2024, <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/researchpapers>

68 Global Affairs Canada, *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada*, Ottawa, Government of Canada, 2024.

69 Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK), 2024. Higher Education Statistics, 2024

70 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024, Statistical Report on International Students in China

71 Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2024. Malaysia Education Blueprint and International Student Mobility Reports.

72 Ministry of Education India, 2024. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)

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efits. Türkiye, Malasia, China and India appear as emerging Asian players in international education. Their priority in internationalisation are based mainly on political and socio-cultural. Reason for choosing USA, UK, Australia, Canada is that they are top four players in IoHE while Türkiye Malasia, China and India are top four emerging players.

Various governments grant scholarships to successful international students with the view that they will be in decision-making positions in their own countries in the future. In other words, these students are expected to play an intermediary role in future economic relations between the host country and their own country.⁷³

Socio-cultural rationale for internationalisation of higher education

Students and academics gain intercultural social skills through their international experiences. Universities also create an international environment and ensure mutual communication between students and provide them with socio-cultural skills. Mobility of international students and faculty (scholars) and social learning through multicultural experience are seen by many academics as the biggest justification for internationalisation.⁷⁴ According to the 4th Global Report of the International Association of Universities, the biggest benefit of internationalization is to provide students with international awareness.⁷⁵ In this aspect, it can be asserted that higher education institutions serve mutual understanding, peace and cooperation between countries by educating people who have a multicultural understanding and can live harmoniously among different cultures. Developing national and regional identity, preserving and promoting national identity can be accounted among the socio-cultural rationales for internationalisation as well. The influx of international students to a country offers a chance for the host country to introduce and represent their culture and society to outsiders en masse. Through higher education experience in the host country, international students can develop significant and meaningful emotional, emphatical and professional bounds with the host country. They are expected to promote the positive relations between their home country and the host country.⁷⁶ Some countries wish to spread their socio-cultural values to other countries through IoHE. For instance, in American and French policies, the cultural duty, that is promotion of their languages

73 De Wit, *ibid*, p.14.

74 Jane Knight, "Internationalization of higher education: A conceptual framework", in Internationalization of Higher Education in Asia Pacific Countries, ed. Jane Knight and Hans De Wit, EAIE, Amsterdam 1997, p.11

75 Egron-Polak, "Internationalization of higher education: Converging or diverging trends?" *International Higher Education*, LXXVI/3, 2014, pp.7-9

76 Jack T. Lee, "Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Emerging Education Hubs in Asia." *Comparative Education*, LI/3, 2015, p.374, August 17, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2015.1037551>

and countries, and the export of national and moral values to other nationals, are of importance.⁷⁷

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the internationalisation of higher education functions as a multidimensional instrument of foreign policy, embedded within broader International Relations (IR) strategies of states. Rather than being a purely educational or developmental initiative, it operates as a structured form of soft power and diplomatic engagement that aligns with both realist and liberal institutionalist logics.⁷⁸

From a realist perspective, states such as the United States and its NATO allies have historically utilised international education as a strategic resource to enhance national security and geopolitical influence. Programmes such as the Fulbright initiative illustrate how educational exchange is employed to cultivate elite networks, shape foreign perceptions, and reduce ideological hostility in the post-war and Cold War eras.⁷⁹ This reflects Morgenthau's understanding of power as not only military and economic, but also ideational, where cultural and educational instruments reinforce state interests.⁸⁰

From a liberal institutionalist standpoint, internationalisation promotes interdependence, cooperation, and rule-based engagement among states. As Keohane argues, institutions reduce uncertainty and foster repeated interactions that facilitate trust.⁸¹ Higher education exchanges contribute to these dynamics by embedding individuals within transnational epistemic communities, thereby supporting long-term diplomatic stability and policy convergence.

Constructivist interpretations further reveal that internationalisation operates through identity formation and norm diffusion. As Wendt's framework suggests, state interests are socially constructed through interaction.⁸² Educational mobility and academic exchange shape shared norms, values, and mutual understandings, thereby transforming how states perceive each other over time. The emphasis on cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding indicates that international education is also a mechanism for reconstructing in-

77 De Wit, *ibid*, p.15.

78 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2004.

79 United States Department of State, "Fulbright Program Overview," Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, March 10, 2026, <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/fulbright-program-overview>

80 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, 1948

81 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984

82 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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ternational identities and reducing perceived Otherness. Overall, the findings indicate that internationalisation of higher education is best understood as a hybrid foreign policy tool that simultaneously serves strategic security objectives, institutional cooperation, and normative transformation.

The economic rationale of IoHE has become increasingly central in contemporary global politics, reflecting a broader transformation of universities into strategic economic and geopolitical actors. Rather than functioning solely as public institutions for knowledge production, higher education systems are now embedded within global competition, trade regimes, and state strategies of accumulation. When situated within International Relations theory, this shift can be understood as the convergence of material power, institutional interdependence, and ideational influence, where economic imperatives intersect with foreign policy objectives and global governance structures⁸³

From a realist perspective, IoHE reflects the logic of state competition in an anarchic international system. States seek to enhance their relative power by attracting international students, generating export revenues, and strengthening national innovation systems.⁸⁴ Higher education thus becomes an instrument of economic statecraft, contributing to technological advancement and long-term strategic competitiveness. The significant income derived from international students in major destination countries illustrates how education functions as a component of national power resources rather than a neutral public good.⁸⁵ In this sense, internationalisation is not merely an academic process but a mechanism through which states pursue economic security and geopolitical advantage.

Neoliberal institutionalism offers a complementary but distinct interpretation, emphasising the role of interdependence and institutionalised cooperation. Within this framework, the expansion of international student mobility and transnational education markets reflects the growing density of global economic and institutional linkages. International education functions as a regulated global service sector, increasingly structured through multilateral agreements such as those under the World Trade Organization General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).⁸⁶ This institutionalisation enables states and universities to reduce transaction costs, expand markets, and stabilise flows of students and academic capital.

83 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed., Boston: Longman, 2012, pp.11-16.

84 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed., New York, McGraw-Hill, 1985, pp.5-15.

85 Simon Marginson, "Global Field and Global Imagining: Bourdieu and Worldwide Higher Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, XXIX/ 3, 2008, pp. 303-315.

86 World Trade Organization, General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Geneva, 1995.

Constructivist approaches provide an additional layer of explanation by focusing on the ideational and normative dimensions of IoHE. Internationalisation is not only economically driven but also socially constructed through shared beliefs about the value of global education, mobility, and knowledge exchange. States actively shape and are shaped by these norms, using higher education to project identity, legitimacy, and influence. This is most evident in the role of soft power, as articulated by Joseph Nye, where attraction rather than coercion becomes the primary mechanism of influence in global politics.⁸⁷ Through international students and academic partnerships, states cultivate long-term reputational capital and diffuse cultural and political values.

Foreign policy analysis further clarifies how IoHE operates as an instrument of state strategy. Established education powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada integrate international education into broader diplomatic and economic agendas, linking visa regimes, scholarship schemes, and institutional partnerships to foreign policy objectives.⁸⁸ At the same time, emerging actors such as Türkiye, China, Malaysia, and India increasingly deploy higher education as a means of regional influence, South-South cooperation, and geopolitical positioning. This reflects a diffusion of educational diplomacy within a multipolar international system, where states compete not only for economic gains but also for normative and strategic influence.

However, the increasing commodification of higher education also generates structural tensions. The treatment of education as a “tradeable service” has intensified market logics within universities, encouraging entrepreneurial behaviour, revenue diversification, and global recruitment strategies. While this has expanded institutional capacity and generated significant economic returns, it has also deepened inequalities within the global higher education system. As neoliberal logics become entrenched, academic priorities risk being subordinated to financial imperatives, raising concerns about mission drift, access stratification, and dependency on volatile international student markets.

In synthesis, IoHE should be understood as a hybrid phenomenon situated at the intersection of realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. It simultaneously reflects state competition for economic and technological advantage, institutionalised interdependence in global education markets, and the construction of soft power and normative influence. The economic rationale, while dominant, is inseparable from its political and ideational di-

87 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, pp.5–11.

88 Jane Knight, *Internationalization: Elements and Checkpoints*, Ottawa, Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1994, pp.7-10.

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mensions. Consequently, higher education internationalisation functions as a multidimensional instrument of global governance, where universities operate as both economic actors and foreign policy tools within an increasingly interconnected but uneven international system.

The socio-cultural dimension of the internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) highlights how universities function not merely as sites of knowledge production, but also as arenas for identity formation, norm diffusion, and intercultural engagement. The emphasis on intercultural social skills and multicultural learning reflects a constructivist understanding of international relations, where interactions among individuals shape perceptions, values, and ultimately state behaviour. As Alexander Wendt argues, identities and interests are socially constructed through social interaction, and student and academic mobility serve as key mechanisms in this process.⁸⁹ Thus, the development of intercultural competencies through international experiences contributes to fostering shared norms of tolerance, cooperation, and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, the findings of the International Association of Universities reinforce that international awareness is widely perceived as the primary benefit of internationalisation.⁹⁰ This aligns with liberal institutionalist perspectives, particularly those of Robert O. Keohane, who emphasises the importance of transnational interactions and institutions in facilitating cooperation and interdependence among states.⁹¹ Universities, by creating international environments and promoting mobility, act as platforms where such interactions occur, enabling individuals to internalise cooperative norms and practices that extend beyond national borders.

At the same time, the socio-cultural rationale also includes the preservation and promotion of national identity. The presence of international students provides host countries with opportunities to showcase their culture, values, and societal structures. In this regard, IoHE operates as an instrument of soft power, as conceptualised by Joseph S. Nye Jr., whereby countries influence others through attraction and cultural appeal rather than coercion.⁹²

89 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.21–25.

90 International Association of Universities. 4th Global Survey Report: Internationalization of Higher Education. Paris, IAU, 2014.

91 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp.89–109.

92 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2004, pp.55–56.

However, this process is not entirely neutral. From a realist perspective, as articulated by Hans Morgenthau, states ultimately pursue their national interests, even within cooperative frameworks.⁹³ Thus, the promotion of socio-cultural values through IoHE can also be interpreted as a strategic effort to expand influence and shape global perceptions. While internationalisation fosters mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue, it may simultaneously reproduce asymmetries in cultural influence, privileging dominant cultures over others.

In conclusion, the socio-cultural rationales of internationalisation reflect a complex interplay between cooperation and competition, global understanding and national interest. While IoHE promotes intercultural competence, peace, and cooperation, it also functions as a tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. This dual nature underscores that internationalisation is both an educational and a political process embedded within the broader dynamics of international relations.

Economic rationale of IoHE reveals a clear shift in how universities and governments conceptualise education-from a public good toward a market-oriented, revenue-generating sector embedded within the global knowledge economy. However, when situated within the broader frameworks of IR and foreign policy, this transformation appears not merely economic but also deeply strategic and political. Internationalisation becomes a tool through which states pursue both material interests and influence in the international system.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that IoHE operates as a multifaceted instrument of foreign policy, embedded within broader IR logics of power, cooperation, and identity construction. Across cases, political rationales consistently converge around peacebuilding, mutual understanding, national security, and the projection of influence, though the mechanisms and emphases vary by actor.

First, the results indicate that IoHE has historically functioned as a strategic diplomatic tool, particularly in the post-World War II context. Programs such as the Fulbright Program illustrate how educational exchange was institutionalised to foster mutual understanding and reduce conflict potential. During the Cold War, organisations like NATO integrated higher education internationalisation into broader security and alliance-building strategies, highlighting a realist-liberal synthesis in which knowledge exchange supported both power balancing and cooperative order

93 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948, pp.5-15.

94 Jane Knight, *Internationalization: Elements and Checkpoints*, Ottawa, Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1994, pp.7-10.

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Second, the evidence underscores the centrality of soft power in shaping IoHE policies. Consistent with the theoretical framework advanced by Joseph Nye, states utilise higher education to influence the preferences and perceptions of foreign elites. The United Kingdom's long-standing reliance on international students as vectors of favourable political socialisation, alongside the United States' emphasis on exchange programmes, reflects a constructivist logic whereby identities, norms, and attitudes are reshaped through sustained interpersonal interaction. Statements by policymakers such as Colin Powell and Karen P. Hughes further reinforce the perception of international students as future political assets, demonstrating the strategic value attributed to educational diplomacy.

Third, the results reveal the global diffusion and diversification of IoHE strategies beyond traditional Western actors. China's expansion through state-backed scholarships and the Confucius Institutes exemplifies a state-centric model of soft power projection aligned with geopolitical ambitions. Similarly, European actors such as Germany and France operationalise IoHE through institutional mechanisms like the DAAD and Alliance Française, linking academic mobility to regional integration and cultural diplomacy. These approaches reflect liberal institutionalist principles, where sustained cooperation and institutional frameworks facilitate both influence and integration.

Fourth, the Asia-Pacific and emerging actors demonstrate a hybridisation of economic and political rationales. Countries such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea integrate IoHE into strategies of global competitiveness and regional leadership, while emerging powers like Türkiye and India increasingly employ higher education to expand regional influence and South-South cooperation. Institutions such as the British Council and the Yunus Emre Institute illustrate how states institutionalise educational diplomacy to simultaneously pursue cultural, political, and strategic objectives.

The results highlight the micro-foundations of soft power embedded in IoHE. The interaction between international students and host societies-mediated through curricula, institutional structures, and cultural exposure-facilitates long-term attitudinal change. This supports a constructivist interpretation in which state preferences are not fixed but socially constructed through transnational educational experiences. Consequently, IoHE emerges not merely as a policy tool but as a dynamic arena where power is exercised through attraction, persuasion, and identity formation. Overall, the findings confirm that IoHE serves as a critical nexus between realism (security and national interest), liberalism (cooperation and institutions), and constructivism (norms and identity), with soft power acting as the central mechanism through which states translate educational engagement into geopolitical influence.



The findings indicate that the economic rationale has become a dominant driver of the internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) in the contemporary global context. Across both established and emerging education markets, internationalisation strategies are increasingly shaped by financial imperatives linked to global economic competition, rising demand for higher education, and the need for alternative revenue sources in the context of public budget constraints. In particular, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted entrepreneurial orientations, aligning with the broader shift toward a knowledge economy in which knowledge is treated as a commodifiable and tradable asset.

Overall, the results show a clear stratification in the global higher education market. The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada dominate international education revenues and treat internationalisation primarily as an economic growth strategy. By contrast, emerging providers such as Türkiye, China, Malaysia, and India appear to prioritise internationalisation for a combination of political, strategic, and socio-cultural objectives, with economic gains playing a secondary but growing role.

The data suggest that international students contribute not only through direct financial inflows—such as tuition fees, housing, and consumption—but also through broader labour market effects in host economies. Additionally, scholarship schemes indicate a long-term strategic dimension, where international students are positioned as future intermediaries who may facilitate diplomatic, economic, and institutional linkages between their home and host countries.

The findings further demonstrate that IoHE is closely linked to broader IR objectives such as mutual understanding, peace, and international cooperation. Higher education institutions are positioned as soft power instruments that cultivate individuals capable of engaging constructively across cultural boundaries. This contributes to the formation of globally oriented citizens who are able to navigate and reconcile cultural diversity, thereby supporting peaceful international relations.

Another significant result concerns the dual role of internationalisation in both promoting and preserving national and regional identities. While IoHE fosters cross-cultural engagement, it simultaneously serves as a platform for the reinforcement and external projection of national identity. Host countries benefit from the presence of international students by disseminating their cultural values, norms, and social practices at scale. In turn, international students often develop emotional, empathetic, and professional attachments to the host society, which can translate into long-term interpersonal and diplomatic linkages between home and host countries.

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Finally, the analysis reveals that some states strategically utilise IoHE as a tool of cultural diplomacy. In particular, countries such as the United States and France explicitly incorporate the promotion of national language, cultural heritage, and moral values into their international education policies. This highlights the use of higher education as an extension of soft power strategy, where socio-cultural influence becomes a deliberate component of foreign policy and international engagement.

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