International education as public diplomacy has captured the attention of governments and institutions worldwide. For example, the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US) and Canada – all leaders in the field of international education – invest heavily in their ability to attract and retain students from all over the world.

The commercial value that international education represents worldwide is significant and growing. Yet, it is the intangible soft power value that arises through the exchange, interactions and collaboration opportunities offered by international education that positions international education within the realm of diplomacy, and specifically public diplomacy today.

When leveraged successfully, international education is a prime vehicle to contribute to a nation’s foreign policy priorities and interests, including its soft power profile. Within the Australian context, international education, delivered through schools, TAFE institutes, private colleges and universities, takes many and varied forms. Overwhelmingly the literature has focused on evaluating international education through the lens of the inbound student program, however for the full public diplomacy benefits to be realised this must include outbound student mobility, transnational education, aid and development capacity building programs, research collaboration, skills development and the overall people to people linkages that are enabled through international education. Australia’s international education presents as an effective and enduring model of public diplomacy, well suited to today’s globalised and hyper-connected world (Byrne & Hall 2013).
This research digest reviews the significant global attention that international education, as public diplomacy, currently receives. It also identifies major shifts in Australia’s approach to the field, with particular emphasis on the recently launched New Colombo Plan (NCP). While significant progress has been made, international education as public diplomacy remains largely under explored, particularly in Australia. This digest brings the public diplomacy value of international education to the fore, and asserts that there is a soft power benefit in recognising international education as public diplomacy. It concludes by posing a research agenda aimed at advancing both scholarship and practice in this field.

International education as public diplomacy

Public diplomacy scholarship has evolved over recent years, adapting to the interconnected, globalised world and gaining an acceptance as an instrument through which state and non-state actors can “understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; build and manage relationships; influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values” (Gregory 2011). Scholars, including Fitzpatrick (2012), Huijgh and Byrne (2012), Cull (2009); and Riordan (2005) show that effective public diplomacy increasingly engages both international and domestic audiences as its targets, favours two-way dialogic interaction, and draws strength from credibility.

The conceptualisation of international education as public diplomacy today follows a longstanding, though previously under-explored, association with diplomacy stretching back to antiquity (Sylvester 2002, Cohen 2012). Since their earliest conceptions, both diplomacy and education have been closely tied to the structure and interests of the nation-state, and each has held aspirations for a broader international society and a common humanity. The emergence of a coherent discourse and institutionalised practices of international education, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, and a more recent agenda in diplomacy to engage global public audiences in the pursuit of foreign policy interests have revealed the interplay between international education and public diplomacy.

With an emphasis on two-way engagement and mutuality, international education enables people and institutions, networks and ultimately nation states to connect, engage, share and collaborate, at the same time keeping pace with the expanding technology platforms of the globalised world.

The emergence of “public diplomacy 2.0” (Cull 2011) suggesting the potential engagement of public audiences through social media networks, further underscores international education’s relevance as public diplomacy in the so-called global village. The effectiveness of international education as public diplomacy is sustained by its appeal to the personal and shared aspirations of individuals to cross boundaries and cultures in an effort to seek out knowledge, experience and diversity of thought. It is an appeal that leverages the fact that “wonder and thirst for knowledge are immutable parts of human nature” (McHale 2010).

Soft power potential

Public diplomacy is widely associated with the notion of soft power (Melissen 2013; Melissen 2005), a contemporary concept defined by Joseph Nye (2004) as “getting others to want what you want”, or to shape what others want by means of attraction rather than coercion. Soft power relates to the influence and attractiveness a nation can acquire and leverage when others are drawn to its culture, values and ideas. Recent scholarship, including contributions from Nye (quoted in Melissen 2013), recognise the necessary role that transnational socialisation plays in the realisation of soft power, where “the subjects matter as much as the agents”, and “attraction is codetermined and persuasion socially constructed”. Public diplomacy, as “one of soft power’s key instruments”, (Melissen 2005) enables this process.

International education continues to gain recognition by governments and education institutions as a major contributor to soft power (House of Lords 2013; Australian Senate 2007). Positive experiences from student mobility and the development of intellectual commercial and social relationships at the individual and institutional levels resonate with the contemporary soft power agenda where values, culture and ideas play an important role in determining influence on the global stage (Nye 2004).

The accumulated soft power potential of the relationships, networks and outcomes that are integral to the individual’s experience are not easily harnessed or developed as public diplomacy. Rather, a tendency remains for public diplomacy benefits to emerge organically or serendipitously – a fact that has and continues to bedevil policy-makers and scholars alike.
Key inhibitors including a lack of visible and strategic public diplomacy leadership and policy incoherence, and the dominance of short-term commercial priorities and sector fragmentation continue to undermine the soft power potential of international education (Byrne & Hall 2013). This is particularly the case for Australia.

As Snow (2009) observes, some practitioners are reluctant to impose a state-influenced public diplomacy framework around international education. For this group, international education and exchange activities reflect private people-to-people transactions that should not be attached to or contrived as the formal public diplomacy efforts of a nation. These views highlight the underlying tensions in harnessing and translating the potential of international education into soft power.

**Comparative approaches to international education as public diplomacy**

The US, the UK, Canada, and more recently China, each recognise the role and relevance of education to their national interest and overall soft power goals. While it is not the purpose of this digest to present each of these models in full, attention is given to key activities and factors in their varied approaches.

International education and exchange has been woven into the fabric of US public diplomacy over the past seven decades. The US Department of State offers a well-established structural model coordinated through the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Within this structure, the administration and management of scholarship exchanges, as well as a range of broader international educational activities resides with the Institute for International Education (IIE), an independent, not-for-profit organisation. With a global reach and mission to “advance international education and access to education worldwide” (IIE 2012) the IIE brings significant efficiencies to the administration and promotion of international education, while engaging a global network of partners, including across universities and private sector.

The US Department of State maintains a close eye on the evaluation of international education’s public diplomacy outcomes, albeit generally conducted at a program level rather than across the sector.

Even when conducted at the program level, concern remains that “most evaluations only measure the impact on the participants themselves while ignoring the potential ‘ripple effects’ on ‘indirect participants’ such as escorts, host families and program staff” (Banks 2011, Olberding & Olberding 2010). Recent concerns raised by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) about international students falling victim to overseas espionage have emerged in the debate (FBI 2014). While such concerns are low level, they nonetheless highlight a flipside to international education’s public diplomacy value and raise new considerations relevant to coordination, monitoring and evaluation.

The UK points to similarly longstanding traditions of international education. Yet a 2014 House of Lord Committee Inquiry on UK soft power and influence calls for greater and more coordinated efforts to reposition education as a soft power asset. The House of Lords (2014) recommendations focus not only on the highly valuable inbound student market but also on two way flow of scholars, global research collaboration, English language teaching, and connections with diaspora communities as major contributors to UK soft power. Importantly for Australia, the inquiry and its subsequent report highlight the intrinsic, though often neglected value of English language as means to engage with the world. The British Council (2013) supports this view asserting that the English language “... the cornerstone of our identity... keeps us in the mind of hundreds of millions of people around the world, even when they are not talking to us.”

Like the US and the UK, Canada places significant weight on international education as a key, if sometimes hidden, national branding and commercial resource (Potter 2002; Potter 2009). Canada too, continues to review and re-evaluate the soft power potential of international education beyond inbound recruitment numbers. In its 2014 action plan, Canada’s International Education Strategy: Harnessing Our Knowledge Advantage to Drive Innovation and Prosperity, the Government recognises “international education is at the very heart of our current and future prosperity” (Government of Canada 2014). Encouraging public debate beyond the commercial aspects of international education, Canada’s Governor General introduced the term ‘diplomacy of knowledge’, defined as “the process of uncovering, sharing and refining all kinds of knowledge across disciplinary boundaries and international borders” (Johnston 2013),
to Canada’s international education lexicon. Thus for Canada, as for Australia, the challenge is balancing the commercial and public diplomacy interests of international education.

While the examples given above focus on English speaking nations, international education is also identified by nations in the non-English speaking and non-Western world as a significant soft power resource. For China, the ever-expanding network of Confucius Institutes launched in 2004, provides an effective means of global engagement through language and culture promotion. With over 300 Confucius Institutes established across the globe already, the Chinese Government is on the way to meet its global target of 1000 Institutes by the year 2020 (Xinhua 2006). However, the proliferation of Confucius Institutes, while clearly identified with China’s global charm offensive, has similarly raised suspicion with some commentators suggesting they are “platforms for espionage and propaganda” (Mattis 2012).

While each case identified above presents a different model – shaped in part by national structures, foreign policy objectives and local political discourse- common themes resonate. First, the degree of discussion generated within policy and practitioner circles indicates that none of these nations is confident that they have fully harnessed the public diplomacy value of their international education activities, to most effectively optimise its soft power potential. Second, while structures of international education vary, the examples provided suggest there may be value in building a structured approach that both delivers and supports public diplomacy leadership across an otherwise fragmented international education sector. Third, and particularly for those leading international education exporters such as the US, UK, and Canada there is increasing attention placed on finding a balance between the immediate commercial and public diplomacy benefits of their global education engagement. Finally, that education as public diplomacy presents evaluation challenges that need to be addressed, particularly if nations are to fully understand and optimise international education’s long-term soft power benefits. Each of these themes holds relevance for the Australian approach.

The Australian context: from old to new

Australia’s experience of international education as public diplomacy is best understood with reference to the Colombo Plan. Launched in 1950, the Colombo Plan offered Australia a textbook approach to gain favour and acceptance in the region. Historians noted that “hosting of Colombo Plan students and their private counterparts was partly designed to ensure that Australia as a European-dominated country was seen in the best possible light by its regional neighbours” (Megarrity 2007). As well as fighting the Cold War through aid engagement, Australia was keen to use the Colombo Plan as a means of securing improved diplomatic and commercial relations with an alien Asia (Lowe 2010, Oakman 2002). Colombo Plan scholarships became one of the most highly publicised means of expressing White Australia’s commitment to friendly and mutually beneficial relations with Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. Just as international education in current times is closely linked, but not always aligned, to migration policy, Megarrity asserts that it was the evolving nature of the White Australia Policy that influenced the nature of international student policy formation between 1945 and 1972.

Australian officials placed bureaucratic emphasis on Colombo Plan scholarships because they were perceived as a means to subtly influence the values of the educated Asian elite. While evaluations of the Colombo Plan are scant, they usually rely greatly upon the high profile alumni produced by the program. However, some scholars caution that the idea that Australian-trained elites would naturally benefit our diplomatic relations with Asian countries is highly simplistic (Oakman 2010; Broinowski 2003). The Colombo Plan scholarship model proved financially unsustainable and Australia responded by moving to a commercialised, fee-paying approach from the mid 1980s. This shift has resulted in it becoming a leading provider of education in the English world today. The diverse stakeholders now operating in the sector are “cognizant that they now operate within a highly competitive domestic and international marketplace, wherein the opportunity for commercial gain, primarily through inbound student numbers is a dominant driver” (Byrne & Hall 2013).

The 2007 Senate Inquiry into the nature and conduct of Australian public diplomacy reasserted the linkage between international education and public diplomacy (Australian Senate 2007). However, it was the Indian student crisis of 2009 – including episodes of violence against Indian students, strict
migration enforcement and rule changes and the collapse of dubious provider institutes – that put international education as public diplomacy back onto the policy agenda. The crisis demonstrated that poor experiences, interactions or outcomes even at the individual level can have a damaging effect, impacting not only on the immediate commercial viability of the sector, but also on the longer term reputation of the nation (Byrne & Hall 2013; Cull 2010; Wesley 2009). As Olsen (2009) notes, the public diplomacy benefits of international education activities at this time became “conspicuous and numerous”. With other broader political factors at play, the causal relationship between the Indian student ‘crisis’ and related downturn in diplomatic relations may not be so clear-cut. Some speculate that the Rudd government decision not to sell uranium to India may well have been a significant precursor to such a vitriolic response to the student issues. Others suggest the ‘crisis’ provided the Indian media with a welcome distraction from political tensions closer to home, particularly in the Kashmir. Notwithstanding this wider political dynamic, the negative experiences of Indian students in Australia resonated with audiences throughout the region, registering sharply on Australia’s global profile.

Subsequent initiatives including the Chaney Review and the establishment of the International Education Advisory Council started to frame international education’s inherent value as public diplomacy. The Gillard Government’s Australia in the Asian Century consultative process and subsequent White Paper delivered in 2012 further confirmed broad community and policy support for this linkage. Universities Australia, the peak body representing the interests of Australian Universities, now affirms international education as a “significant driver of public diplomacy... creating a positive image for Australia and providing a means to exert influence” (Universities Australia 2012).

The Abbott Government’s recently launched NCP signals a clear policy move to leverage international education as public diplomacy. Building on the history and success of the 1950s Colombo Plan the NCP, supported by AUD100 million dollars in government funding and coordinated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), seeks to “reaffirm Australia’s commitment to improving relationships within the Indo-Pacific region while building an Asia-capable workforce” (Bishop 2013) through outbound student mobility. The emphasis on Australian students “living in the region, learning languages, forging friendships and exchanging ideas” (Bishop 2013), underscores the significance of ‘education engagement’ to Australia’s soft power positioning in the region.

The measurement of success of the NCP rests in longer-term qualitative evaluations of student experience and institutional engagement. However, the change in emphasis on student mobility as public diplomacy is welcome in the way that it both sets a clear direction for Australia’s engagement within the region while supporting the ongoing cultivation of strategic leadership skills and Asia-relevant capabilities amongst young Australians. Yet, the NCP is a program specific initiative. Gaps remain in Australia in terms of recognising international education’s broader contribution to Australian soft power and developing a coherent strategic policy approach to advance and maintain this potential across its many dimensions and modes. Key recommendations of the Chaney Review for example are yet to be addressed or implemented, and the sector itself remains fragmented and disconnected from public diplomacy leadership.

Future research priorities

The following research priorities address the gaps highlighted above, drawing from international practice and current trends. Each underscores the paucity in research relating to Australian public diplomacy practice, particularly in relation to international education.

1. **Australian framework for public diplomacy**

There is a need for a more comprehensive study and evaluation of Australia’s approach to public diplomacy. Many nations pay significant attention to the cultivation of soft power, recognising that education, research, science, skills, culture, language and broadcasting are all aspects of this. Australia’s approach to public diplomacy needs to be debated, evaluated and modernised – as is happening in the US, UK and Canada. Given the global reach of Australia’s international education sector, education must be central to this conversation. While consideration must be given to a public diplomacy leadership framework, securing international education’s public diplomacy outcomes will also require government-sector-community wide partnerships.
Furthermore, Australia’s adoption of a public diplomacy 2.0 approach with a focus on social media, social networks and informal people-to-people communications, may enable innovative ways to project Australia’s image and value to the world.

2. Evaluating outbound student mobility as public diplomacy

With the first 1,300 NCP scholars departing for study experiences in 2014–2015, it is critical that further investment be made in a longitudinal study of the program and student outcomes. Most Australian universities are now able report on quantitative measures of outbound student mobility; however there has been scant investment in qualitative outcomes. For the NCP and other outbound student mobility programs, Australia would benefit from industry standard approaches to the evaluation of student outcomes, career impacts, cross-cultural competence and ultimately, public diplomacy value.

3. Skills diplomacy

Australia’s national industry-led vocational education and training system is held in high regard in many parts of the world. Over the past 4 decades Australian vocational education and training providers and state governments (as the owners of TAFE systems) have been engaged in highly successful skills capacity building projects in Asia, Middle East and Latin America. The ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ White Paper pointed to the rise of Asia as an opportunity for Australia’s vocational education and training institutions to develop deeper connections and partnerships in the region (Australian Government 2012). Further research into the public diplomacy outcomes generated through skills development would highlight this often-overlooked component of Australia’s education engagement.

4. Alumni engagement

Educational institutions around the world invest heavily in alumni engagement strategies. With an estimated 2.5 million Australian international student alumni (UA 2013) this represents one of the largest global networks through which Australia might advance its public diplomacy interests. DFAT encourages overseas diplomatic posts to leverage alumni networks as important allies and advocates for Australia (DFAT 2011). However, more focus could be placed on shifting alumni engagement from a marketing and customer retention strategy, tightly guarded by individual institutions, into one that serves Australia more broadly.

5. Australian Education – from your home

The 2013 report of the International Education Council, Educating Globally, set a vision for Australia’s international education sector. The report proposed a significant market opportunity for Australia to continue to innovate in transnational education (TNE) and online learning. There is no doubt that with the rise in Asia’s middle class, the strong reputation of Australia’s education sector, and the appetite from institutions to operate globally, that there are still largely untapped markets for education delivery. Predictions for growth in TNE and online enrolments are conflicting. Minister Robb projected up to 10 million students may be engaged in Australian education within the next 10 years, without leaving their home (Robb 2013). Notwithstanding the growth aspirations, there are more than 80,000 student enrolments (mainly in China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Middle East) in Australian higher education courses that may never come to Australia (Australian Education International 2014). Measuring Australia’s TNE and online programs as public diplomacy would be a valuable research opportunity.

6. The value of English Language

Australia’s success in international education has been predicated significantly on our native language of instruction being English. Australia’s highly innovative and well-regarded English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector has also been at the forefront of Australia’s global education engagement. The diversity of students who come to Australia to improve their English is striking. These students may be in Australia for a stand-alone program, a tourist experience, or as a primer towards further studies. The Australia Network, Australia’s Asia-Pacific television service has made a significant contribution to English language learning through interactive video content and social media. While many nations around the world are expanding their international broadcasting services, particularly into the Asia-Pacific region, the Australia Network, faces funding withdrawal.
Conclusion

International education in its many forms and with the support of a diverse stakeholder group is considered a major contributor to Australia’s soft power profile. In a highly competitive international marketplace the ongoing commercial viability of Australia’s international education is closely linked to its recognition and implementation as an instrument of public diplomacy. Positive experiences arising from student mobility and the development of intellectual commercial and social relationships at the individual and institutional levels directly influence the uptake of Australian education offerings. These experiences can also enhance Australia’s reputation and influence in regional and global arenas. However, gaps in knowledge, research and debate about international education’s public diplomacy impacts and soft power potential present as significant limitations. This digest has proposed research areas where further cross-sectoral attention and investment will contribute to building and implementing a comprehensive, coherent strategy for international education as public diplomacy.

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Rebecca is a passionate advocate for international education and has been an active contributor to the research agenda over the past decade. She has presented, written and published on outbound student mobility, work integrated learning, internationalisation of Australia’s VET sector and education as public diplomacy.

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