Soft Power and International Scholarships: Conceptual Critiques and Evidence

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

'Soft power' is often cited as a beneficial outcome of international scholarship programmes, yet there is little in the way of tangible evidence demonstrating these outcomes occur. The root of this issue is an uncritical application of the concept of soft power within the international scholarships space which implies macro-level 'political influence' outcomes that are difficult to measure or attribute to the scholarship experience. A more nuanced framing of soft power which incorporates relevant critiques of the concept instead suggests that international scholarships do provide tangible and measurable soft power outcomes at the micro-level. Specifically, the creation and enhancement of interpersonal relationships and networks, and increased intercultural familiarity and experience. This is supported by data that has been collected by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, which shows notable and sustained increases in interpersonal relationships between Commonwealth Scholarship recipients and contacts in the United Kingdom, and positive gains in intercultural understanding.

Full paper

The contribution of international scholarships to soft power is one that has frequently been claimed, but has been difficult to evidence (Mawer, 2018; Enfield, 2019). This scarceness of evidence contrasts with the frequent use of soft power outcomes as one of the benefits of (and justifications for) international scholarship programmes in official discourse (House of Lords, 2014; Lomer, 2017). It has been suggested that one of the reasons for this lack of evidence is that soft power outcomes are often talked about at the macro-level (i.e. political influence), whereas actual outcomes occur at the micro-level through 'the interactions of individuals and small groups, and the networks they form' (Enfield, 2019). However this approach to soft power is not reflected in official discourse on international scholarships, which is still oriented towards the macro-level outcomes suggested by Joseph Nye Jr.'s original conception of soft power, which is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' and can be achieved via a country's 'culture, political ideology and policies' (Nye, 2004; Zaharna, 2007). And while there has been a great deal of critical engagement with the concept of soft power since 1990, Nye's original definition still underpins the official discourse on soft power and international scholarships (Lomer, 2017).

Rather than being tethered to this definition, the discussion of soft power and international scholarships would benefit from the use of a more nuanced conceptualisation that integrates some of the relevant critiques that have been made of the concept. One such critique is the inherent 'fuzziness' of the

mechanisms or processes by which soft power operates: there has been no causal chain established between the 'soft power assets' of values and culture and the alleged outcome of political influence (Zahran and Ramos, 2010; Lock, 2010; Layne, 2010). A second critique is that soft power is often portrayed as operating in a one-way fashion, neglecting both the agency of the individual subjects upon which it is theoretically acting, as well as the potential soft power benefits that might accrue to the home country of scholarship recipients (Lock, 2010; Kearn, 2011; Lomer, 2017). Another issue is that soft power is also often attributed exclusively to the state, without consideration for the role and soft power of non-state actors such corporations, universities, non-governmental organisations, multilateral organisations, and even individuals. Finally, it is important to recognise that soft power is not only gained but can also be lost through negative experiences with actors (Kearn, 2011; Zahran and Ramos, 2010). These criticisms can be addressed by using an updated framing of soft power, which defines the soft power of an actor as: the volume and quality of relationships that exist between the actor and others; the level of familiarity with that actor among others; and, the disposition towards that actor among others.

Coming back to international scholarships, this framing suggests mechanisms by which international scholarships can lead to soft power outcomes through the development of interpersonal and institutional relationships and positive inter-cultural experiences. By way of example, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK provides scholarships to citizens of other Commonwealth countries to study in the United Kingdom. Through these scholarships, recipients create new relationships and networks in the UK, and gain a greater familiarity with the UK through positive experiences during their studies. This creates soft power outcomes for both the UK and the recipient's home country through increased bilateral interpersonal relationships, and greater intercultural familiarity and positive interactions between people from both countries.

These are the types of micro-level interaction alluded to earlier, with clear causal chains and outcomes that can be evidenced. The CSC collects data on interpersonal relationships between alumni and various interpersonal networks in the UK, with notable increases observed from pre- to post-scholarship in the areas of academic, professional, and personal contacts in the UK, with professional and personal networks sustaining these increases even 10 years post-scholarship. Data is also collected on alumni opinions of elements of UK society, which indicate strong positive opinions about the higher education sector, government, and general public in the UK, as well as a strong positive sentiment towards the UK in general. This suggests that rather than there being a lack of evidence on the impact of international scholarships on soft power, there instead needs to be a change in how soft power is framed which can be effectively measured.

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