

Higher Education as an Agent of Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: An Exploratory Case Study of a Private Moroccan Institution Hosting International Students

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ABSTRACT

Within a context of geopolitical reconfiguration and intensifying student mobility, higher education plays an increasing role in generating international influence. Beyond its academic mission, the university can act as an agent of cultural diplomacy by fostering intercultural understanding and contributing to soft power effects rooted in attractiveness, reputation, and trust. By mobilizing a soft power perspective, this study analyzes how a private higher education institution in Morocco, characterized by a significant proportion of international students (particularly from Sub-Saharan Africa), participates in these dynamics, explicitly or implicitly. The study is based on a theoretical framework articulating: cultural diplomacy and influence through attractiveness; the internationalization of higher education, including "internationalization at home" and push-pull mobility logics; social capital and networks; and the contact hypothesis to understand the conditions under which intercultural interactions transform perceptions, strengthen belonging, and structure lasting ties. Methodologically, the research adopts an exploratory case study combining semi-structured interviews with institutional actors and international students, documentary analysis (reception mechanisms, communication, partnerships, cultural activities), and campus-based observations. The thematic analysis aims to identify the institutional and relational mechanisms that support integration, intergroup cooperation, and the construction of transnational networks. The expected results highlight internationalization practices that promote daily cultural diplomacy, as well as potential effects on perceived image and attractiveness. Finally, this paper proposes implications for responsible internationalization and sustainable academic diplomacy.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, higher education, internationalization, international students, social capital, soft power

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education internationalization has progressively emerged as a structuring dynamic for universities, driven by the combined effects of the global knowledge economy, academic competition, and the intensification of student and scientific mobility. In a now-classic definition, internationalization is understood as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2015). This process-oriented perspective invites an analysis of internationalization not merely as a set of isolated actions (mobility, partnerships) but as a transversal orientation affecting university governance, pedagogy, research, and services.

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between internationalization and globalization: while globalization constitutes the macro-environmental context in which universities operate, internationalization refers to the institutional policies implemented to position themselves within it (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In this same logic, de Wit (2011) underscores that internationalization has become a mainstream phenomenon, a finding supported by very recent research demonstrating that it is now an essential ethno-political and strategic tool for states seeking to consolidate their regional positioning (Caliskan & Oldac, 2025).

In the contemporary context, geopolitical reconfigurations (multipolarity, regional tensions, competition for influence) accentuate the strategic value of non-coercive instruments. As demonstrated by Gauttam et al. (2024) in their systematic review, education is now officially affirmed as a fundamental resource for state soft power. Higher education thus appears as a privileged space where the circulation of elites, scientific cooperation, cultural mediation, and the production of international reputations intersect. This dimension is intimately linked to academic diplomacy, which illustrates how educational attraction serves as a direct instrument of regional influence, similar to the strategies deployed by major powers in Central Asia (Rashidov et al., 2023).

These developments contribute to repositioning universities as actors capable of influencing international relations through symbolic means. Soft power theory defines this concept as the ability to obtain desired outcomes "through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008). Applied to the university field, the hosting of international students and the density of intercultural interactions become generating mechanisms for lasting transnational networks. From this perspective, cultural diplomacy acts as the register of actions through which universities promote mutual understanding on a daily basis. Recent critical analyses emphasize the importance of rigorous methodological application to measure the transition from this informal cultural diplomacy to the effective production of institutional soft power (Zanella et al., 2024).

Consequently, the central problem of this article is as follows:

How and under what conditions can a higher education institution, through its internationalization practices, act as an agent of cultural diplomacy and contribute to soft power effects based on perceived attractiveness and credibility?

To address this problem, this research pursues four complementary objectives:

1. To characterize the internationalization practices implemented by the institution (reception, integration mechanisms, academic and social support, intercultural activities).
2. To analyze the mechanisms of cultural diplomacy operating on campuses (interaction situations, mediation, mechanisms promoting interculturality).
3. To understand the formation of bonds and networks and their role in perceptions (image, trust, recommendation).
4. To identify facilitating factors and tensions (equity, inclusion, linguistic/cultural barriers) that are likely to strengthen or weaken these dynamics.

These objectives are broken down into research questions:

1. Which internationalization practices structure the international experience within the studied institution (beyond mobility, within a logic of "internationalization at home") (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2015)?
2. How do intercultural interactions and institutional mechanisms contribute to daily cultural diplomacy?
3. To what extent do these experiences and networks translate into soft power effects (attractiveness, image, trust, intention to recommend) (Nye, 2008)?

On a scientific level, this article contributes to articulating three fields often treated separately: internationalization as institutional transformation (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2015), cultural diplomacy as a relational mechanism within educational exchanges, and soft power as an effect of influence based on attractiveness (Nye, 2008).

Like many other countries worldwide, Morocco pays particular attention to the promotion of its culture and the strengthening of its cultural diplomacy and international influence by basing its development project on culture. In this context, the Special Commission on the Development Model (CSMD) considers that culture is the foundation upon which any development project rests. It is plural in its dimensions: a global symbolic environment in which the community is rooted; a system of cultural assets, both tangible and intangible; fields requiring specific skills; the creation, in its singular and personal aspects, of artistic works; and finally, cultural and creative economies and industries. Each definition of culture implies its own policies and dedicated orientations (CSMD, 2021, as cited in Fouinna & El Ouazzani, 2024).

On a practical level, the analysis of the Moroccan case is particularly relevant. As indicated by official data from the *Higher Education in Figures 2024-2025* report (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation [MESRSI], 2025), the dynamics of incoming student mobility in Morocco are undergoing increasing structuring. Studying a private institution hosting this population sheds light, at the micro-level (campus), on how integration policies forge the Kingdom's regional reputation.

The article is organized as follows. First, the literature review and conceptual framework are presented, articulating the notions of higher education internationalization, cultural diplomacy, and soft power. Second, the adopted methodology is explained, specifying the choice of an exploratory case study as well as the data collection and analysis procedures. Subsequently, the empirical results from interviews conducted with international students and institutional representatives are presented. These are then discussed in light of the theoretical framework used to highlight the study's contributions and its operational implications. Finally, the article concludes with a synthesis of the research's main contributions while highlighting its limitations and proposing avenues for future investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of Higher Education

Higher education internationalization is generally understood as an organizational and systemic process rather than a mere juxtaposition of actions. The benchmark definition proposed by Knight (2015) describes it as the integration of an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education. In the same vein, Altbach and Knight (2007) emphasize the necessity of distinguishing between internationalization and globalization: globalization constitutes an environment of constraints and opportunities, while internationalization corresponds to institutional strategic responses (mobility, partnerships, curricula, and governance).

The literature highlights several structuring rationales (motivations) for internationalization: academic (quality, research, global competencies), economic (attractiveness and resources), political (outreach, influence, cooperation), and sociocultural (interculturality, mutual understanding). This

typology, widely utilized in Knight's work and further developed by de Wit (2011), demonstrates that internationalization can be driven by heterogeneous objectives that are sometimes complementary and sometimes in tension (for instance, market logic versus educational purposes).

At the operational level, internationalization is traditionally manifested through the international mobility (incoming and outgoing) of students and staff, joint programs, and scientific cooperation. However, research emphasizes the growing importance of "internationalization at home," which aims to develop international and intercultural learning without necessarily requiring mobility. The concept was initially formulated by Wächter (2003) and later consolidated by Beelen and Jones (2015), who define it as the intentional integration of international and intercultural dimensions into both formal and informal curricula to reach all students. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing the campus as a space for intercultural socialization (collaborative pedagogies, joint projects, student association activities, and integration services).

Intercultural and international education has become a prominent subject of discussion among educators, practitioners, and stakeholders since the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) into the educational landscape.

At the national level, in an official communication regarding the 2023–2024 academic year, the Ministry mentioned the deployment of digital platforms, including "Study in Morocco," a platform dedicated to the mobility of international students (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation [MESRSI], 2023).

Similarly, as certain Moroccan universities, such as Mohammed I University, move toward internationalization, integrating intercultural telecollaboration models into curricula is essential to prepare undergraduate and graduate students to become active intercultural actors in this digital world (Boustar, 2024).

Cultural Diplomacy and Universities

Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural, educational, and symbolic exchanges to foster mutual understanding, build lasting relationships, and enhance the image of a country or community. The foundational work of Cull (2008) on public diplomacy, as well as that of Mark (2009) on cultural diplomacy, demonstrates that culture and education constitute central instruments for international projection, extending beyond strictly state-led diplomacy. Within this framework, universities emerge as "intermediary" actors: while they do not always fall directly under diplomatic apparatuses, they produce transnational interactions, networks, and representations.

Two conceptual clarifications are essential. First, cultural diplomacy is often considered a component of public diplomacy, insofar as it mobilizes non-governmental channels and "people-to-people" relations (Cull, 2008). Second, the notion of "academic diplomacy" is employed to describe the specific contributions of higher education institutions to international cooperation: the circulation of knowledge, elite formation, scientific co-production, and intercultural mediation. From a contemporary perspective, Knight (2023) proposes the concept of "knowledge diplomacy," emphasizing cooperation based on reciprocity and co-production. This allows for avoiding a strictly instrumental reading of internationalization as a mere tool for influence.

At the micro-level, cultural diplomacy can be observed through the concrete mechanisms that structure the experience of international students: reception protocols, support services, intercultural events, and pedagogical practices that encourage interaction and cooperation. In other words, cultural diplomacy is not only conveyed through institutional discourse; it is enacted through organizational arrangements and daily interactions that facilitate mutual understanding and recognition.

In Morocco, cultural diplomacy is the responsibility of both state and non-state actors. At the state level, it is carried out by more than eighteen entities, ranging from ministries and cultural institutions to

Moroccan embassies abroad. During his speech at the 2013 Ambassadors' Conference, His Majesty underlined the importance of cultural diplomacy within the country's foreign policy (Boutabssil, 2026).

Soft Power

Soft power is defined by Nye (2004, 2008) as the ability to influence the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction rather than coercion by relying on resources such as culture, values, and the perceived legitimacy of policies. Applied to higher education, this framework leads to viewing universities as producers of attractiveness: quality of training, prestige, learning environment, safety, hospitality, degree recognition, life experience and intercultural socialization.

Soft power effects are generally understood through dimensions such as:

1. **Attractiveness** (ability to attract students, talent, and partnerships);
2. **Image and reputation** (credibility, prestige, and trust);
3. **Lasting networks** (international alumni, transnational professional ties);
4. **Cultural affinity** (proximity, favorable attitudes, and intentions for future cooperation).

From this perspective, higher education acts less as a "message" than as an experience; it is the perceived and lived quality of this experience that fuels trust and reputation. Alumni play a central role here: they extend influence over time by consolidating networks and disseminating representations (positive or negative) within their social and professional spheres.

Morocco is progressively asserting itself as an academic destination for African students. According to data from the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, approximately 14,669 international students were enrolled in Moroccan universities in 2023–2024. The vast majority of international students in Morocco come from the African continent, representing nearly 85% of the international student body.

This dynamic is part of Morocco's South–South cooperation policy, supported notably by scholarship programs from the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI), which enables several thousand African students to pursue their studies in Morocco each year. Based on these contributions, this research proposes a model articulating three levels:

Table 1

Conceptual Framework: Levels of Analysis, Dimensions, and Indicators of the Internationalization, Cultural Diplomacy, and Soft Power Model

Concept	Definition (Theoretical Anchoring)	Analytical Dimensions	Key References
Internationalization (Practices)	Internationalization is a process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the missions and functions of higher education (Knight, 2015), implemented through institutional policies and practices (Altbach & Knight, 2007). "Internationalization at home" aims to develop international/intercultural competencies without mobility by acting on the formal and informal curriculum (Wächter, 2003; Beelen & Jones, 2015).	Reception & integration; international student services; intercultural curriculum/pedagogies; campus life; linguistic support; partnerships/events.	Knight (2015); Altbach & Knight (2007); Wächter (2003); Beelen & Jones (2015)
Cultural Diplomacy (Mechanisms)	Cultural diplomacy is understood as a register of public diplomacy based on cultural/educational exchanges and interactions, and on the construction of mutual understanding (Cull, 2008). It involves symbolic and relational mechanisms (recognition, mediation, exchange) that can emerge within educational institutions (Mark, 2009).	Intercultural interactions; mediation and dialogue mechanisms; recognition/visibility of identities; cultural exchanges; climate of inclusion.	Cull (2008); Mark (2009)
Soft Power (Effects)	Soft power refers to the ability to obtain results through attraction rather than coercion, relying on intangible resources (culture, values, perceived credibility/legitimacy) (Nye, 2004, 2008). In higher education, these effects materialize through image, trust, reputation, and lasting networks (alumni).	Attractiveness; country and institutional image; trust; reputation; intention to recommend; networks/alumni and future cooperation.	Nye (2004, 2008)

Note. Created by the authors.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on an exploratory case study. This epistemological and methodological choice is in perfect alignment with the objective of understanding a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context: institutional practices, social interactions, and the perceptions of actors involved in student mobility. The case study is particularly suitable when the researcher seeks to answer "how" and "why" questions to analyze situated dynamics (Yin, 2018). Within the framework of our research, the aim is to examine how an institution's internationalization translates into cultural diplomacy mechanisms and ultimately produces soft power effects.

Study Setting

The present research is based on a case study of a private higher education institution located in the Oriental region of Morocco: the Oujda campus of the *Ecole Supérieure de Management, de Télécommunication et d'Informatique* (SupMTI). Founded in 2006 by a collective of educators, the SupMTI Group was structured to meet the increasing needs of the socio-economic sector for senior managers, particularly in the fields of software engineering, information systems, networks, and business management. Today, this academic network is firmly anchored in the Moroccan educational landscape through several training centers across three cities (Rabat, Meknes and Oujda).

The choice of the Oujda campus is particularly heuristic for our research. Indeed, the institution hosts a significant proportion of international students, predominantly from Sub-Saharan Africa. This multicultural organizational environment constitutes an ideal empirical framework for analyzing the dynamics of "internationalization at home." It allows for a concrete examination of the diplomatic scope of institutional reception mechanisms, the efficiency of administrative services, inclusion in student life, and the adaptation of pedagogical practices.

Sampling Strategy

Sampling is based on a purposive logic (purposive sampling), an approach aimed at deliberately selecting participants (students and institutional actors) based on their ability to provide rich and relevant data to shed light on the central dimensions of our conceptual framework: internationalization practices, cultural diplomacy mechanisms, and soft power effects (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two categories of actors were selected to triangulate perspectives:

International Students

A panel of 15 international students was interviewed. To ensure a representative range of academic backgrounds, this sample includes students enrolled at different stages of their degree programs. This allows for the documentation of the lived experience over time (reception, integration, intercultural interactions, and sense of belonging).

Table 2

Sociodemographic and Academic Profile of Interviewed International Students

Code	Nationality	Level of Study	Specialization (Department)	Duration in Morocco
E1	Cameroonian	Master's	Management (CCA)	2 years
E2	Guinean	1st Year (Undergraduate)	Computer Science	1 year
E3	Malian	Bachelor's	Management	3 years
E5	Cameroonian	Bachelor's	Computer Science	3 years
E6	Guinean	Master's	Management	5 years
E7	Malian	1st Year (Undergraduate)	Management	1 year

Code	Nationality	Level of Study	Specialization (Department)	Duration in Morocco
E8	Burkinabé	Master's	Computer Science	1 year
E9	Cameroonian	2nd Year (Undergraduate)	Management	2 years
E10	Guinean	Bachelor's	Computer Science	3 years
E11	Malian	Master's	Management	4 years
E12	Burkinabé	1st Year (Undergraduate)	Computer Science	1 year
E13	Comorian	Bachelor's	Management	3 years
E14	Guinean	2nd Year (Undergraduate)	Computer Science	2 years

Note. Created by the authors.

Institutional Actors

Five key actors were interviewed, namely, the General Manager, the Academic Director, the Manager, the Communications Officer, and the Registrar. The objective was to understand the strategic goals, the inclusion mechanisms implemented, and the perceived regulatory constraints.

Table 3
Profile of Interviewed Institutional Actors

Code	Role within the Institution	Level of Intervention (Strategic and Operational)
A1	General Manager	Global governance, public relations, and institutional diplomacy.
A2	Manager	Administrative, financial, and logistical management.
A3	Academic Director	Training engineering, international standards, and faculty management.
A4	Communications Officer	Academic marketing and student life.
A5	Registrar	Reception, enrollment, administrative procedures, and daily student monitoring.

Note. Created by the authors.

Data Collection

The size of the student sample was progressively adjusted until thematic saturation reached the stage where the final interviews (whose responses proved highly convergent with previous ones) no longer yielded substantially new information (Guest et al., 2006).

Data collection is based on the triangulation of sources, a classic methodological procedure that enhances the credibility and internal validity of the results by cross-referencing multiple types of information (Denzin, 1978).

- **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted using two distinct interview guides:
 - **The "Student" Guide:** Focused on the student profile (e.g., factors for choosing Morocco), the evaluation of the school's internationalization practices, perceived cultural diplomacy, and soft power effects (change in the country's image, intention to recommend).
 - **The "Institution" Guide:** Centered on the attractiveness strategy, concrete reception mechanisms, management of intercultural friction, and monitoring of alumni networks.
- **Documentary Analysis:** To contextualize the case study and measure the degree of institutionalization of this academic diplomacy, an in-depth documentary analysis was conducted. This focused on the institution's partnership agreement database. In total, 23 national and international framework cooperation agreements (involving countries such as France, Niger, Mali, Central African Republic, and Palestine) were analyzed. This crucial step allowed for a comparison between the actors' discourses and the official diplomatic acts (mobility agreements, faculty exchanges, and event co-organization) signed by the institution between 2013 and 2025.

RESULTS

Interview Results: International Students

The thematic analysis of the 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with international students (enrolled in 1st year, 2nd year, Bachelor's, and Master's programs) reveals a high degree of homogeneity in their trajectories and perceptions. The processing of these discourses identified four major analytical axes illustrating how the institution deploys whether consciously or not cultural diplomacy mechanisms.

Internationalization: Institutional Practices

The attractiveness of the Moroccan institution rests on a dual dimension. On the one hand, students justify their choice by seeking quality training that meets international standards. On the other hand, the mobility decision is heavily influenced by social capital: positive feedback from family members who have already studied in Morocco constitutes a decisive lever: *"I chose Morocco and particularly the SupMTI Oujda Institute because I could benefit from quality training that meets international standards but also because I received good feedback about Morocco in general from several members of my family who had already been there"* (Student E1).

Soft power, therefore, begins prior to arrival, driven by an informal but powerful word-of-mouth network: *"My neighbor, who was a student at SupMTI, highly recommended the school to me"* (Students E4, E12).

The reception and integration process highlights a "two-tier" functional dynamic:

Institutional Reception. Respondents emphasize the hospitality of the administrative staff, which facilitates rapid orientation and streamlines administrative procedures: *"After passing the Baccalaureate, getting the actual diploma takes quite a while in Burkina Faso; thanks to the school, I was able to obtain a registration certificate and then head to Rabat for authentication"* (Students E4, E8, E12). They also noted direct integration into classes and extracurricular activities: *"The school's administrative staff welcomed me with the greatest hospitality by orienting me very quickly and integrating me directly into classes, cultural, and extracurricular activities; I also had very warm and kind classmates who shared their course materials with me"* (Student E5). The school supports students through targeted pedagogical assistance, the Student Union (BDE), and the awarding of excellence scholarships: *"At first I had no options, then I had the opportunity to receive a scholarship granted by SupMTI"* (Student E8). Courses taught in French are based on international standards, thereby fostering formal intercultural openness.

Essential Community Support. Despite institutional efforts, logistical integration (searching for housing, administrative and consular procedures) relies heavily on diasporic networks, as illustrated by the central role of the students' home communities upon arrival. Community-based associational engagement on campus further strengthens leadership and solidarity among peers of the same nationality: *"The Association of Burkinabé Students in Morocco Oujda (AEBM) helps Burkinabé students secure housing and obtain residency permits as soon as they arrive"* (Students E4, E8, E12); *"The Association of Malian Students in Oujda (ASEM) helped me find a place to live"* (Student E7).

Cultural Diplomacy

While the institution organizes cultural events that allow for the sharing of traditions (gastronomy, history, Moroccan tailoring), *"During a cultural event organized by the institution, I was able to share my culture and discover the gastronomy, tailoring, and history of Morocco"* (Student E12), the analysis reveals certain limitations in daily social integration:

The Linguistic and Social Barrier. The use of the Moroccan Arabic dialect (*Darija*) by local students, contrasted with French-speaking international students, creates frequent misunderstandings. This often pushes international students to interact primarily with their international peers due to shared language.

Compartmentalization in Group Work. An occasional sense of exclusion emerges during collaborative tasks, as Moroccan students tend to prefer working with their fellow citizens.

However, to compensate for these limitations, students turn to their instructors for academic clarification. They emphasize receiving consistent respect and esteem from the faculty, which maintains their sense of academic belonging: *"We interact much more with the professors regarding the course; they ensure we have understood correctly and sometimes ask about our culture"* (Student E14).

Soft Power

The analysis highlights a transformation in the perception of Morocco following mobility. While initial apprehensions existed regarding integration difficulties due to language, the discovery of a largely Francophone environment allowed for rapid integration and the construction of a significantly more positive image of the country: *"Before coming, I did not have a good image of Morocco; I thought there was racism here, but now that I am here, I realize that is not the case at all"* (Student E10).

In conclusion, the recognition of accessible and high-quality education transforms these students into true ambassadors. They declare themselves ready to recommend both the institution and Morocco to their circles of friends, thereby consolidating Moroccan academic soft power: *"Yes, I recommend the country and this school to my friends, because there is a very good level of teaching, similar to my country, and the courses are very accessible. It is a school that has excellent teachers and the highest level of instruction"* (Student E9).

Interview Results: Institutional Actors

The discourse analysis of the administration, coupled with the documentary study of the institution's partnership agreements, reveals a structured internationalization strategy that aligns fully with the South–South cooperation logic characteristic of contemporary Moroccan diplomacy.

Internationalization

The institution's leadership adopts an international orientation explicitly targeting Sub-Saharan students. This attractiveness is built on a pragmatic argument combining employability and accessibility. The school offers engineering programs and Bachelor's degrees (Bac+3) aligned with labor market needs while maintaining affordable tuition fees and scholarship opportunities. Furthermore, the academic offerings are strengthened by world-renowned professional certifications (Cisco, Microsoft, Oracle), increasing the degree's value across the African continent: *"Our school, which is internationally oriented, specifically targets Sub-Saharan high school graduates. We offer engineering and Bachelor's programs adapted to the job market. Our attractiveness is based on a high-quality faculty, affordable prices, and scholarships"* (Institutional Actor A1).

The study of the agreements signed by the institution demonstrates an intensive use of networking as an institutional soft power tool. This network operates at three levels:

International (South–South and North–South). The school has established framework agreements with institutions in Niger (African Development University), Mali (Group ITMA), and the Central African Republic (WALOMBE), providing for student recruitment to Morocco, mobility, and joint research. Partnerships with France (IESIG, ILCI, EPF) also bolster its academic credibility.

National and Local. Academic anchoring is ensured through partnerships with the Mohammed First University of Oujda (UMP) and the OFPPT.

Socio-economic. Multiple agreements with companies (Sully, Novelis, SQLI, Seomaniak) aim for professional integration, directly fulfilling the promise of employability made to international students.

Cultural Diplomacy

To integrate students, the administration deploys mechanisms such as induction days, peer mentoring, and the implementation of "joint projects" to mandate pedagogical inclusion. The school also supports the Confederation of Foreign Pupils, Students, and Trainees in Morocco (CESAM) by providing facilities for student associations: *"We promote all options for cultural exchange and manage difficulties through communication and awareness-raising. Inclusion is achieved through project leadership, and the few minor cooperation issues remain easily surmountable"* (Institutional Actors A2, A3).

Soft Power

While the institution is conscious of strengthening Morocco's reputation and image as an attractive destination, *"Hosting international students reinforces the school's image and its good reputation. Absolutely, we contribute to making Morocco perceived as an attractive destination. To maintain the bond, we rely on the Alumni network through personal contact, and our main indicators of success remain satisfaction and retention"* (Institutional Actor A4) it faces institutional barriers that exceed its prerogatives.

The administration expresses a clear need for synergy with public authorities, hoping for more collaboration from the Ministry of Culture as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The request for simplified visa procedures and preferential rates shows that the private institution acts as a relay for national soft power but requires a facilitating state ecosystem to optimize its diplomacy of influence: *"Facing these challenges, we hope for more collaboration from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, particularly to simplify visas and obtain preferential pricing. Internally, we should prioritize more advertising campaigns"* (Institutional Actor A5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The cross-analysis of the interviews conducted with international students and the institution's administration highlights several convergent dynamics related to the role of higher education institutions in the processes of internationalization, cultural diplomacy, and the construction of soft power.

The results demonstrate that the studied institution participates, at various scales, in the dissemination of Morocco's academic and cultural influence through mechanisms combining academic attractiveness, intercultural interactions, and institutional networks. These observations confirm the work of Knight (2004) and Altbach and Knight (2007), according to which the internationalization of higher education currently constitutes a strategic lever in international relations and the projection of state influence.

Our study fully validates our theoretical triptych by demonstrating the interdependence of these three dimensions:

1. Internationalization as the Foundation

The process is triggered by a South–South attractiveness policy (Altbach & Knight, 2007), strongly catalyzed by social capital and word-of-mouth (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Through its network of partnerships, the private institution asserts itself as a genuine relay for educational diplomacy (Knight, 2013).

2. Cultural Diplomacy as the Process

The campus operates as a diplomatic micro-space (Cull, 2008; Mark, 2009). While linguistic frictions exist, pedagogical engineering and faculty supervision help recreate favorable conditions for intercultural contact (Allport, 1954) and ensure inclusion.

3. Soft Power as the Ultimate Goal

The student experience deconstructs initial prejudices and produces a direct attraction effect, transforming graduates into informal ambassadors (Nye, 2004). Nevertheless, logistical obstacles (visas) underscore that this private-sector soft power remains dependent on alignment with public policies (Nye, 2008).

IMPLICATIONS

This research aimed to analyze the role of private higher education institutions in the deployment of cultural diplomacy and the production of academic soft power through the lens of international student mobility. By adopting a qualitative research design based on the study of a highly internationalized Moroccan institution, we have highlighted the mechanisms through which local attractiveness strategies transform into a genuine force for regional influence projection.

The empirical results demonstrate that the studied institution deploys a multidimensional internationalization process. This process relies on a continuum ranging from initial academic attractiveness to sociocultural integration on campus. Our observations confirm that the campus acts as a diplomatic micro-space: by addressing inevitable intercultural limitations through inclusive pedagogical mechanisms, the institution fosters a climate of dialogue. Ultimately, the student experience deconstructs initial apprehensions and generates a highly positive perception of the host country, addressing our research problem: private higher education has become a leading actor in new public diplomacy.

On a theoretical level, the value added by this study lies in the articulation of three often-siloed bodies of literature: the internationalization of higher education (Knight, 2004), cultural diplomacy (Cull, 2008), and soft power (Nye, 2004). Our research proposes an integrative and dynamic theoretical model. It demonstrates that internationalization is not an end in itself but constitutes the institutional infrastructure (practices) enabling the emergence of cultural diplomacy (relational mechanisms), which in turn produces soft power (reputational effects). This theoretical continuum provides novel insights into South–South mobility dynamics.

Although this study offers robust results based on the triangulation of data from 19 actors (14 international students and 5 management members) coupled with documentary analysis, it possesses limitations inherent to its qualitative design. By focusing on a single case study (an engineering and management institution in the Oriental region), the results do not claim universal external validity. Indeed, intercultural dynamics may vary depending on the institution's status (public vs. private).

These limitations open stimulating perspectives for future research. Subsequent studies could adopt an expanded quantitative design at the national level to statistically measure the impact of student experience on the perception of Morocco's brand image.

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