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Navigating the Intersection of International Politics and International Education: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

International education and the process of internationalization have evolved through distinct historical phases, each characterized by shifting global political outlooks and increasing complexity. International politics and the global power hierarchy have always played a significant role in shaping the development of international education and directions of academic mobility. Since the era of ancient Greece, various periods have witnessed diverse patterns of student mobility concentrated in specific geographic regions, paralleling prevailing power structures. Currently, international education is undergoing a distinct phase in which its significance in public diplomacy and foreign policy is widely recognized. However, its use for further national interests has also been criticized for potential manipulation. This article provides a historical background and conceptual framework for understanding the intersection of international politics and international education. It examines the historical shifts and advancements in international education in relation to phases of global politics. Additionally, it explores contemporary international politics and international education, as well as the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international education and the broader process of internationalization.

Keywords: international politics, public diplomacy, international relations theories, international education, internationalization, higher education studies

While the formulation of educational policy and the administration of teaching practices predominantly occur at the national level, education itself is inherently an international phenomenon. Its cross-border dimension is evident in various forms, such as the presence of foreign nationals, refugees, and migrant students who are integrated into national educational systems worldwide. Additionally, the

movement of families and students across borders in search of better educational, social, and economic opportunities highlights the global nature of education. In the contemporary world, the forces of globalization have significantly accelerated and intensified the internationalization of education, reshaping the ways in which educational systems interact across national boundaries.

With its interconnected economies, technologies, and communications, globalization has increasingly positioned education as both a driver and a beneficiary of transnational dynamics. It has facilitated the global flow of students, teachers, ideas, and institutional collaborations, which have all contributed to the rise of international education as a vital component of global governance and diplomacy. This global exchange underscores the international nature of education, where knowledge, by its very essence, is universal and transcends geopolitical borders. Educational institutions, especially universities, have historically been at the forefront of this international exchange. Indeed, higher education has long been considered an international enterprise, as the cross-border movement of scholars and intellectuals has fostered the accumulation, diversification, and advancement of academic knowledge throughout history. In this context, universities have remained, as Knight (2006) observes, inherently international institutions. The etymology of the word "university" itself—rooted in the term "universe"—emphasizes the universal mission of these institutions to transcend national boundaries and contribute to the global pursuit of knowledge.

However, this intersection between international politics and international education is not a modern occurrence but rather one with deep historical roots. From the exchange of scholars in ancient Greece and the Islamic Golden Age to the rise of medieval European universities, international education has long been influenced by the prevailing political and power structures of the time. This relationship continues to evolve as education becomes increasingly integral to public diplomacy, foreign policy, and national soft power strategies. Currently, international education plays a crucial role in shaping geopolitical landscapes, with states leveraging educational exchanges, partnerships, and scholarships to strengthen diplomatic ties and enhance their global standing. However, this instrumentalization of education for national interests has also drawn criticism, with concerns about the potential manipulation of international education for political or economic gains.

Both a historical perspective and a contemporary analysis are needed to explore the complex relationship between international politics and international education. Examining the historical shifts that have shaped international education will help understand how educational systems have adapted to the changing dynamics of global politics. Furthermore, investigating current trends in international education, including the impact of globalization, the role of education in public diplomacy, and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the broader process of internationalization, is essential. By doing so, a deeper understanding can be gained of how education and international relations have intersected over time, shaping not only academic knowledge but also the broader contours of global political and social landscapes.

Conceptual Background and Literature

International education has long been an integral part of fostering global understanding, cooperation, and peace. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) first formally defined international education in 1974 as “the standardized national education for mutual international understanding, cooperation, and peace.” This normative definition marked the initial global effort to recognize the role of education in promoting international harmony. However, over time, the concept of international education has evolved, particularly with the introduction of “transnational” and “cross-border” elements. These terms reflect the increasingly globalized nature of educational exchanges and academic mobility, which transcend national borders and challenge traditional notions of education confined to national contexts.

François (2016) suggested that international education can be analyzed from three primary perspectives: philosophical, pedagogical, and comparative. These dimensions highlight the multifaceted nature of international education, which incorporates both theoretical and practical approaches to understanding education's role in the global sphere. Vestal and Leestma (1994) outlined six key dimensions of international education: the study of education systems in other countries, educational exchanges and study abroad programs, technical assistance for educational development, international cooperation through organizations, comparative and cross-cultural studies, and intercultural education. While all these elements are critical, educational exchanges (study abroad) and intercultural education are central to contemporary international education, with student mobility forming the core activity in this domain.

At its most fundamental level, international education refers to the movement of students across borders to pursue academic opportunities in foreign countries. International student mobility, often used as an indicator of a nation's involvement in international education, involves the movement of students or scholars across national borders for academic purposes. This aspect of international education underscores the growing importance of academic exchange as a means of fostering global knowledge transfer, cross-cultural understanding, and diplomatic engagement.

While terms such as cross-border education, transnational education, global education, and comparative education are sometimes used interchangeably, they each carry distinct meanings. Cross-border education, as defined by Knight (2006), refers to the movement of students or educational programs across national borders. In contrast, transnational education, as articulated by François (2016), encompasses educational activities that extend beyond national boundaries. While cross-border education acknowledges the presence of national borders, transnational education focuses on the growing interconnectedness of educational systems, reflecting the diminishing importance of national boundaries in shaping educational experiences.

In the contemporary context, international education has become increasingly formalized, often governed by bilateral agreements between countries and

regulated by national immigration laws. This aligns closely with the notion of cross-border education, where student mobility is facilitated through diplomatic and legal frameworks. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the transnational character of education, with the rise of online and distance learning programs transcending physical borders and enabling educational exchanges even in the absence of physical mobility.

The relationship between globalization and international education is both dynamic and reciprocal. Globalization, characterized by the spread of knowledge societies, advancements in information and communication technologies, the rise of market-based economies, and the liberalization of trade, has had a profound impact on higher education (Knight, 2006). Trends such as the diversification, expansion, and privatization of higher education systems have further amplified the role of academic institutions in international affairs (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). In this sense, education acts as both a response to and a catalyst for globalization. On the one hand, higher education institutions are tasked with preparing students for an increasingly interconnected world. On the other hand, education itself drives globalization, particularly through the commercialization of higher education and the recruitment of international students.

The cumulative effect of globalization on education is often described as "internationalization." However, scholars tend to favor the term "internationalization of education" over "globalization of education" (Knight, 1999). While globalization refers to broader economic and social trends, internationalization emphasizes the specific policies and practices implemented by academic institutions to respond to global pressures (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Importantly, internationalization differs from globalization in that it assumes the persistence of national education systems and focuses on cross-border mobility, whereas globalization envisions a future where national borders may become less relevant (Teichler, 2004).

Knight (2014) defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education." This definition highlights the multifaceted nature of internationalization, which can be applied to a wide range of activities, including teaching, research, and service to society. In this context, "purpose" refers to the mission and objectives of educational institutions, "functions" in the core activities of education, such as teaching and research, and "delivery" refers to the methods through which education is provided, whether domestically or internationally.

Mok (2007) identifies three distinct approaches to internationalization in higher education: the internationalist, translocalist, and globalist perspectives. The internationalist approach, often associated with well-established, research-intensive institutions such as British universities, emphasizes the traditional role of higher education as a global, knowledge-producing entity. In contrast, the translocalist perspective, which prioritizes national education systems, is often seen in institutions focused on nation-building, such as universities in Hong Kong. Finally, the globalist perspective advocates for an education system that promotes

intercultural understanding and cooperation between nations, exemplified by programs such as the International Baccalaureate (Chan & Dimmock, 2008).

At the intersection of international relations and international education, the concept of "soft power" plays a critical role in shaping global dynamics. Soft power, defined as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, is closely tied to the international education sector, which serves as a powerful conduit for influence across borders. It arises from a nation's culture, political ideals, and policies. Through international student mobility and cultural exchange, countries promote their national image, branding, norms, values, and ideologies, reinforcing their positions within the global order.

In the context of soft power, public diplomacy—including both cultural and educational diplomacy—is crucial to a state's strategic engagement with foreign audiences, enhancing the appeal of its culture, values, and policies to shape perceptions and garner support. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy emphasizes the organic, people-to-people exchange of ideas, art, and cultural practices, fostering direct, voluntary engagement that builds genuine connections and positive attitudes toward a nation's culture. Closely linked to cultural diplomacy, educational diplomacy promotes international education and exchange programs, including student mobility and academic partnerships, which allow citizens to study abroad while welcoming foreign students into the host country. Supported by bilateral or multilateral agreements, these exchanges create lasting, meaningful impressions that strengthen a nation's soft power. Together, these forms of diplomacy serve as essential tools within public diplomacy, shaping the international environment and reinforcing a state's soft power in alignment with its foreign policy goals.

Overall, the intersection of international politics and international education reflects the broader forces of globalization and the international affairs of states while also responding to the specific dynamics of academic mobility, cross-cultural exchange, and international cooperation and competition. The evolving conceptual frameworks surrounding international education continue to shape how states, scholars, policymakers, and institutions navigate this complex and interconnected landscape. This exploration is crucial for understanding the role of international education in fostering global cooperation, navigating power competition, and addressing contemporary challenges in an increasingly interdependent world.

The intersection of International Politics and International Education

The convergence of international politics and international education is deeply rooted in the historical trajectory of human civilization, where knowledge has been a vehicle for both diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange. The relationship between these two fields has evolved over time, shaped by the forces of political power, cultural exchange, economic imperatives, and technological advancements. As international education has become increasingly institutionalized, professionalized, and globalized, it has played a central role in shaping global politics and diplomatic relationships between nations.

From the early “itinerant scholars” of the ancient world to the modern era of globalized higher education, the interrelationship between international relations and education reflects the broader geopolitical and socioeconomic transformations that have defined the global order. This historical background provides a comprehensive look at the evolution of international education, revealing its changing nature and how it has influenced, and been influenced by, the dynamics of international politics.

The origins of international education and exchanges can be traced back to the ancient civilizations of Greece, China, and Rome, where intellectual exchange served as an early form of soft diplomacy. In Ancient Greece, the notion of “itinerant teachers” established the first form of cross-border educational mobility. Philosophers such as Pythagoras and Sophists traveled between city states, imparting knowledge and creating networks of intellectual exchange. This marked the beginning of a tradition where scholars crossed borders, carrying with them knowledge that could transcend political and cultural barriers (Gürüz, 2011). These intellectual exchanges, although rudimentary by today’s standards, laid the foundation for the internationalization of education by promoting the idea that learning and knowledge could and should be shared across territorial boundaries.

A similar form of academic mobility existed in ancient China, where scholars known as “shihs” traveled to advise rulers. Their movement across regions was a precursor to the idea of using knowledge and education to build bridges between different political entities. These early exchanges highlight how intellectual mobility and education served diplomatic functions, facilitating interactions between otherwise isolated societies.

In both ancient Greece and Rome, the common languages of intellectual discourse—Greek in the Hellenic world and later Latin in the Roman Empire—facilitated this cross-border academic exchange. Intellectual centers such as Athens, Alexandria, and Pergamum became hubs of scholarly activity, attracting scholars from across the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. These centers of learning were pivotal in fostering a cosmopolitan culture of education that transcended national or regional identities, establishing early patterns of intellectual migration and knowledge dissemination that would influence later developments in international education.

With the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, much of the classical knowledge of Greek philosophers was marginalized in Europe. However, the Muslim world, particularly during the Abbasid Caliphate, became the inheritors of this intellectual tradition. In the 8th and 9th centuries, Baghdad emerged as a major center of intellectual exchange, where scholars from diverse regions gathered to engage in scholarly pursuits. The Abbasid rulers actively invited scholars from beyond the Muslim world, promoting a rich cultural and intellectual exchange that bridged East China and West China. Arabic became the lingua franca of the Islamic world, enabling scholars from diverse backgrounds to communicate and collaborate (Said, 1978).

The Muslim world’s preservation and expansion of Hellenistic, Indian, and Chinese knowledge during this period played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of scholarly traditions that would later resurface in Europe. This cross-

cultural intellectual exchange also contributed to the eventual transmission of these ideas back to Europe during the Renaissance, illustrating the long-standing interrelationship between international relations and education.

In Europe, the rise of medieval universities in the 12th and 13th centuries marked a significant institutionalization of education. Universities such as those in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford were transnational institutions in many respects, drawing students and scholars from across the continent. Latin serves as the common language of instruction, which allows seamless academic mobility (Altbach, 2014). The Church, as a unifying authority, played a significant role in this process, using education as a tool for creating a shared European intellectual tradition.

This period also witnessed the establishment of formal diplomatic mechanisms to support international academic mobility. Foreign students were granted "letters of safeguard" by the rulers of host nations, a practice that underscored the recognition of education as an important diplomatic tool. Interestingly, in the medieval period, foreign students made up approximately 10 percent of the student population in European universities, a figure much higher than the two percent average in the 20th century. This underscores the importance of international academic exchange during this period, despite the limitations posed by transportation and communication technologies.

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods further expanded the scope of international education. The rediscovery of classical knowledge, coupled with the rise of humanism, revived interest in intellectual mobility. The figure of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) epitomizes this new wave of academic mobility. An itinerant scholar who traveled widely across Western Europe, Erasmus played a key role in shaping the intellectual landscape of his time. His contributions to the fields of theology, philosophy, and education made him a precursor to the modern concept of academic exchange programs, with the Erasmus exchange program in Europe later named in his honor in the late 20th century.

The rise of humanism and the desire to learn new languages and literature have also catalyzed academic mobility. European intellectuals sought to broaden their horizons by studying abroad, leading to the flourishing of cross-border educational exchange. At the same time, universities became increasingly nationalized, with the use of vernacular languages in education becoming more common. However, despite this trend toward nationalization, intellectuals continue to engage in transnational scholarly networks, often driven by the cosmopolitan ideals of the Enlightenment (Rothschild, 2011).

The 18th century saw the secularization of higher education, as universities began to shed their religious affiliations and embrace a more utilitarian approach to knowledge. This shift laid the groundwork for the rise of modern nation-states, each with its own distinct education system. However, education continued to serve as a tool of international diplomacy, as scholars, students, and ideas flowed across borders. The French, German, and British education models became influential across Europe and beyond, often being exported to colonial territories.

During the colonial period, international education took a new dimension, as European powers sought to extend their influence through the export of their

education systems to colonized territories. The imposition of European models of higher education in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East was a means of consolidating colonial power and control (Kireççi et al., 2016). Education was used to train colonial elites, who would serve as intermediaries between the colonizers and the colonized populations, effectively creating a class of individuals educated in the way of the colonizers but still subordinate to them.

The establishment of universities in colonized regions facilitated the dissemination of European knowledge systems, languages, and values. For example, the French higher education model was adopted in many of its colonies, whereas British colonies such as India and Nigeria followed the British model. The Spanish and Portuguese empires similarly imposed their education systems on Latin American territories. This period saw the entrenchment of Western education systems across the globe, with long-lasting impacts that continue to shape the educational and intellectual landscapes of former colonies.

The colonial export of education systems also included the movement of students from colonized regions to Europe for higher education. Many of these students later played key roles in the independence movements of their countries, using the knowledge and skills acquired in European universities to challenge colonial rule. Thus, education, while a tool of empire, also became a means of resistance and liberation, illustrating the complex ways in which international relations and education intersected during this period.

The 19th century witnessed the rise of nation-states and the establishment of national education systems. However, the rise of nationalism did not stifle international academic exchange. In contrast, intellectual mobility became even more pronounced as European powers sought to establish themselves as global leaders in science, technology, and education. Germany's Humboldtian model, which emphasized the importance of research alongside teaching, became particularly influential during this period. German universities attracted scholars from across the world, and many of the leading universities in the United States adopted elements of the Humboldtian model in their own institutions. The 19th century also saw the increasing use of education as a tool of diplomacy. Scholars and students who traveled abroad became informal ambassadors of their home countries, promoting cultural and intellectual exchange. Conferences, scientific organizations, and academic publications facilitated the creation of transnational networks that transcended national boundaries. By the early 20th century, international education had become a key aspect of diplomatic relations between nations, as evidenced by the growing number of academic exchanges, conferences, and scientific collaborations.

The displacement of scholars during World War I, and later World War II, further intensified international academic mobility. Many scholars have fled Europe for the United States, Canada, and Australia, contributing to the globalization of education. The postwar period also included the establishment of international organizations such as UNESCO, which promoted education as a tool for peace and development. Education became increasingly linked to international development efforts, with organizations such as the World Bank and the

International Monetary Fund playing key roles in shaping the educational policies of developing countries (Marginson, 2006).

The post-World War II period marked a significant turning point in the relationship between international relations and education. The establishment of global governance institutions such as the United Nations and its specialized agencies such as UNESCO reflected a growing recognition of education as a critical component of international development and diplomacy. Education was seen not only as a means of rebuilding war-torn nations but also as a tool for promoting international peace, understanding, and cooperation.

Programs such as the Fulbright Program in the United States, established in 1946, exemplified the use of education as a tool of "soft power" diplomacy. The Fulbright Program sought to promote mutual understanding between the U.S. and other countries by facilitating academic exchanges. Over the past few decades, it has become one of the most prestigious international exchange programs, with participants serving as cultural ambassadors for their countries. Similar programs, such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the British Council's scholarship schemes, followed suit, reflecting the importance of educational exchange in the Cold War context.

During the Cold War, education also became a key battleground for ideological competition between the Western and Eastern blocs. Both the United States and the Soviet Union used education as a means of projecting their influence abroad. The U.S. government, for example, provided scholarships to students from developing countries to study at American universities, hoping to create a cadre of pro-American leaders in the Global South. The Soviet Union pursued a similar strategy, offering scholarships to students from newly independent countries in Africa and Asia to study in Soviet universities. These educational exchanges were part of a broader strategy to win hearts and minds during the Cold War, using education as a form of "soft power" diplomacy.

Gürüz (2011) presents a historical perspective on international student mobility from 1968 to 2006, identifying both host and sender countries over specific intervals (Table 1). These data reveal important trends in the global flow of students, who are deeply intertwined with international relations, geopolitics, and the strategic influence of education as a tool of diplomacy. First, it reveals the dominance of Western countries as hosts, as the United States (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, and France consistently appear as leading host countries, demonstrating their dominance in attracting international students parallel to the power structure in world politics. Second, there was a trend of emergence of non-Western hosts beginning in the late 20th century. Countries such as China, Japan, and Australia emerge as notable host countries, reflecting their growing influence on international relations and the international education landscape.

Table 1.
The Main Host and Sender Countries in Depicted Years between 1968 and 2006

1968		1980		1985		2002		2004		2006	
Host	Sender	Host	Sender	Host	Sender	Host	Sender	Host	Sender	Host	Sender
USA	China	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China	USA	China
France	USA	France	Malaysia	France	Malaysia	UK	USA	UK	USA	UK	USA
Germany	Canada	USSR	Greece	Germany	Iran	Germany	India	Germany	India	Australia	India
Lebanon	Syria	Germany	China	UK	Greece	Australia	Korea	France	Korea	France	Korea
Canada	UK	UK	Nigeria	Italy	Morocco	France	Japan	Australia	Germany	Germany	Germany
UK	Germany	Lebanon	Morocco	Canada	Korea	Japan	Germany	Japan	Japan	China	Japan
USSR	Greece	Canada	USA	Lebanon	Jordan	China	Morocco	China	France	Canada	France
Egypt	Korea	Italy	Hong Kong	Belgium	Hong Kong	Russia	Greece	Russia	Turkey	Japan	Malaysia
Argentina	Italy	Egypt	Germany	Saudi Arabia	Germany	Canada	France	Canada	Morocco	Russia	Canada
Italy	Malaysia	Romania	Jordan	Australia	USA	Spain	Turkey	South Africa	Greece	Singapore	Russia

Third, sender countries reflect economic and geopolitical shifts. The sender countries in the table include both developing nations and emerging powers, such as China, India, Korea, and Malaysia, which consistently appear as major sources of international students. This reflects how students from developing nations seek education in more economically advanced countries to gain knowledge and expertise, which they can later contribute to their home countries. Additionally, the inclusion of countries such as Iran and Greece in earlier decades (e.g., 1980 and 1985) aligns with specific geopolitical contexts—such as political instability, conflicts, or economic downturns—that encourage students to seek education abroad as a means of gaining personal and professional opportunities outside their home countries.

Fourth, there is an increasing role of English-speaking countries. The internationalization of education has been strongly linked to the global status of English as the lingua franca of academia, trade, and diplomacy. The increasing demand for English-language instruction has led countries such as the USA and the UK to consistently appear as leading host nations, reinforcing their cultural and political influence globally. This trend reflects a broader global shift where proficiency in English is seen as a vital skill for academic and professional success. For many non-English-speaking nations, sending students to study in English-speaking countries has become not only an educational goal but also a strategic decision to increase their global competitiveness. The dominance of English-speaking countries underscores the central role of language in international education, whereas the emergence of new players such as China and Japan indicates shifting global power dynamics. These mobility trends also highlight how education serves as a proxy for international political influence, making it a critical point of intersection between international relations and education.

The end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization ushered in a new era for international education. Globalization facilitated the flow of information, people, and ideas across borders, transforming education into a global commodity. The neoliberal turn in economic policy, which emphasized market-based solutions and privatization, also had a profound impact on education. Universities

around the world began to adopt more market-oriented approaches, seeking to attract international students as a source of revenue.

The rapid expansion of international student mobility in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was driven by both demand and supply factors. On the demand side, students from emerging economies sought to acquire the skills and credentials necessary to compete in a globalized labor market. On the supply side, universities, particularly in Western countries, saw international students as a lucrative market. The internationalization of higher education thus became increasingly commercialized, with countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia becoming major destinations for international students.

At the same time, regional initiatives such as the Bologna Process in Europe institutionalized the internationalization of higher education, promoting student mobility and academic cooperation across borders. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, aimed to create a European higher education area (EHEA) by harmonizing degree structures and quality assurance mechanisms across Europe. This initiative facilitated the mobility of students and scholars within Europe, further strengthening the ties between international relations and education.

On the other hand, the growing commercialization and marketization of international education have raised critical concerns regarding the quality and integrity of cross-border educational initiatives. The commodification of education, driven by economic imperatives and the massification of higher education, has led to the proliferation of private and for-profit educational institutions, which often prioritize financial gain over academic rigor. This development has prompted increasing scrutiny of the potential erosion of academic standards, particularly in relation to international degree programs, transnational education, and offshore campuses. In response to these concerns, international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have introduced regulatory frameworks designed to uphold academic standards and safeguard the quality of cross-border education. These regulatory efforts aim to ensure that international educational programs adhere to rigorous academic benchmarks, protect students from substandard institutions, and promote the equitable distribution of educational opportunities.

The intersection of international education and international relations underwent a significant transformation in the 2010s, marked by a volatile and competitive global landscape. This period witnessed the consolidation of private educational institutions, which increasingly engaged in processes of financialization, becoming key economic players in their respective nations. As private educational institutions evolved into prominent businesses, they exerted influence over national governments, shaping educational policies and contributing to the formation of oligopolies within the national educational system. This internal transformation within states has significant implications for the broader international relations system, as education has become a strategic economic and political asset in the global marketplace.

At the heart of these changes is the neoliberal globalization that has permeated international education. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market-driven policies, has shaped how states and institutions approach international education, favoring competition, commodification, and benchmarking. The availability of comparative data on internationalization and academic mobility has allowed countries to engage in benchmarking exercises, evaluating their higher education systems against those of their global counterparts. This benchmarking process aligns with broader neoliberal principles, encouraging competition and enhancing the status of international education as a highly coveted economic and political resource.

As a result, the number of international students has increased dramatically over the past few decades. In 1965, the global figure represented approximately 250,000 international students, and by 1975, this number had risen to 800,000. However, by 2011, the figure had skyrocketed to 4.5 million, with projections suggesting that this number would exceed 8 million by 2025 (de Wit, 2012; Institute of International Education, 2018). This exponential growth has underscored the increasing relevance of international student mobility as a key dimension of international relations, with soft power implications, economic benefits, and political leverage.

A pivotal development during this period has been the growing importance of international rankings in reshaping the landscape of global higher education. University rankings, once a relatively peripheral concern, have become central to the competition for international students and faculty, shaping the prestige and reputation of national education systems on the global stage. Rankings such as those produced by the Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings, and Shanghai Rankings now serve as benchmarks for global competitiveness in education. This trend has far-reaching implications for the relationship between international relations and education, as rankings are often perceived as indicators of a country's capacity to deliver world-class education and research.

Countries and universities increasingly recognize that high rankings attract more international students, which in turn generates significant economic and political benefits. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2018) estimated that international students constitute six percent of the global tertiary student population, and each student contributes approximately \$40,000 annually to their host country's economy through tuition, housing, travel, and living expenses. In 2019, the global market for international education was valued at \$200 billion annually, with expectations that it would surpass \$300 billion by 2025—although this estimate did not account for the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These figures demonstrate the critical role that international education plays in the global economy, reinforcing its importance within the domain of international relations.

The influence of rankings has broader implications for state policy as well. Many national governments have invested heavily in their universities, striving to create "world-class universities" that can compete globally. This investment often involves the creation of educational hubs—regions or cities that are designed to

attract international students and academics. Governments view these hubs as strategic assets that enhance their international reputation and strengthen their soft power capabilities. For example, countries such as Singapore, Qatar, and Malaysia have developed higher education hubs that not only cater to domestic needs but also aim to attract a global pool of talent.

At the institutional level, the financialization of education has led to the emergence of oligopolistic structures, where a few dominant private institutions control significant portions of the market. These institutions often operate transnationally, aggressively competing in the international student market for revenue generation and profit maximization. As a result, education is increasingly commodified, with students viewed as consumers and educational services marketed as products. The integration of international education into the global capitalist system has positioned universities as key players in the global economy, influencing international relations through the flow of students, ideas, and resources.

This financialization also underscores the mercantilist approach that many states take toward international education. In this context, national governments view higher education institutions as crucial components of their economic and political strategies, engaging in competition with other states for international students and academic talent. The intersection of education and international relations is increasingly defined by a translocalist approach, where universities are expected to maintain strong national identities while engaging in international collaboration. This dual pressure creates a paradox: while universities must embrace internationalization to remain competitive, they are simultaneously subject to national regulations, political priorities, and diplomatic concerns that restrict their global operations (Gürüz, 2011).

One of the most notable developments in recent decades has been the shift in global student mobility patterns. Traditionally, the majority of international student flows followed a South–North trajectory, with students from the Global South seeking education in the Global North, particularly in Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. However, this pattern has been changing, with a growing trend toward South–South mobility and regionalism in international education.

Emerging economies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa are increasingly investing in their higher education systems and becoming attractive destinations for international students. Countries such as China, India, Russia, Türkiye, Malaysia, and Brazil have established themselves as regional educational hubs, offering competitive programs at a lower cost than many Western institutions do. These countries have also utilized public diplomacy channels, including scholarships and academic partnerships, to attract students from neighboring countries and beyond, thereby enhancing their soft power influence in their respective regions.

This shift toward regionalism in international education reflects broader geopolitical trends. Many emerging economies prioritize national interests in their higher education policies, aligning educational initiatives with broader political and ideological objectives. Nationalistic or translocalist perspectives often shape

the way these governments engage with international education, with an emphasis on national sovereignty and political influence. This growing regionalism also indicates the evolving role of education in global power dynamics, as nations increasingly use education as a tool for soft power competition.

As international education becomes increasingly intertwined with international relations and soft power, the concept of sharp power has emerged as a significant factor in the global education landscape. Sharp power refers to the use of manipulative tactics by authoritarian regimes to influence and control international narratives, often through coercive means (Walker, 2018). In the realm of international education, sharp power is manifested through the strategic use of educational institutions, funding, and partnerships to project influence and shape public opinion in host countries.

This phenomenon has given rise to concerns about the weaponization of education, which some scholars describe as a form of hybrid warfare. Rather than promoting mutual understanding and cooperation through knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2019), some states have used education as a tool to further their geopolitical agendas, undermining the values of openness and international collaboration that have traditionally defined academic exchange. This weaponization of education has significant implications for international relations, as it challenges the notion that education can serve as a neutral platform for fostering global understanding and peace.

The aggressive involvement of national governments in shaping the international education sector has contributed to what some scholars refer to as a post-globalization environment. In this context, the pillars of globalization—such as interdependency, cooperation, and the erosion of national borders—are no longer evident in the realm of international education. Instead, the growing emphasis on national sovereignty, political control, intimidating visa regimes and jurisdictional boundaries reflects a retreat from the ideals of global interconnectedness that characterized earlier phases of globalization.

This postglobalization landscape is characterized by increasing competition among states for soft power influence, with education playing a central role in this competition. National governments are exerting greater control over their higher education institutions, using them as instruments of national policy rather than as platforms for international cooperation. This shift raises important questions about the future of international education and its role in fostering diplomacy, peace, and mutual understanding in a world where geopolitical tensions and national interests are increasingly at odds with the ideals of global collaboration.

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-border international student mobility had been on an upward trajectory characterized by a significant increase in the establishment of international education programs and institutions operating across national boundaries. Educational institutions began to establish international campuses, aiming to attract both domestic students through initiatives promoting "internationalization at home" and foreign students by positioning themselves as providers of globally recognized, world-class education. However, within this competitive landscape, the intrinsic value of education as a public good appears to have been overshadowed, as it increasingly

serves as a strategic tool in soft power competition among nations. Consequently, the involvement of national governments in the international education sector reflects a complex power struggle within the global system. As such, international education has emerged as a vital subject of inquiry within political science and international relations in conjunction with disciplines such as educational sciences, public administration, economics, business administration, and sociology.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in February 2020, has resulted in profound changes in the operations, delivery, and policies of international education. The accelerated digitalization of teaching led educational institutions to implement mandatory online programs for their students. While discussions regarding the efficacy of online learning continue, institutions face the challenge of validating degrees in disciplines that traditionally rely on hands-on training and close interaction, such as engineering and medicine. For students, this transition to digital education has been accompanied by a range of psychological challenges, including stress disorders, digital fatigue, and mood instability, which may exacerbate existing mental health issues (Gultekin, 2020).

Interestingly, prior to the pandemic, online and distance transnational education programs existed, allowing students to obtain foreign degrees; however, these options were

Table 2.
Phases of International Education and Internationalization in the World
(Chronologically Presented)

Time Period	Overarching Theme	Characteristics
5th - 1st Century BC	Archaic Internationalization	Traveling scholars and itinerant teachers in Ancient Greece and Rome. Athens and Alexandria as intellectual hubs, fostering early scholarly exchanges.
8th - 12th Century	Islamic World Internationalization	Flourishing of intellectual activity in the Islamic world. Baghdad becomes a center of learning, attracting scholars from various regions.
13th - 14th Century	Medieval Internationalization	Latin as the lingua franca of academia; establishment of the first Christian universities, facilitating transnational scholarly exchanges.
15th - 17th Century	Nationalization of Universities	Shift to education in native languages; Christian universities become more tolerant and begin transitioning to scientific and secular studies.

Time Period	Overarching Theme	Characteristics
18th - 19th Century	Colonial Era Education	Education as a tool for exploitation in colonies. Competing European models of education emerge, such as the Napoleonic (centralized) and Humboldtian (research-focused) models.
20th Century – First Half	Traditional Internationalization	Low-level, unorganized student mobility, typically individual-based, with limited institutional coordination.
1945 – 1960s (Post-WWII)	International Development Education	Education for aid and development; emergence of modernization and human capital theories. Recolonization occurs through educational initiatives.
1970s	Foreign Policy-Making (North–South)	Expansion of national education agencies and scholarship programs by developed countries to foster international relations. Student mobility intensifies from South to North.
1980s	Neoliberal Paradigm: From Politics to Economics	Shift from political to economic imperatives, with massification, privatization, and corporatization of education. Structural adjustment plans by international organizations impact educational systems.
1990s (Post-Cold War)	Commercialization	Commodification and marketization of education; development of new markets for international education. English solidifies as the global lingua franca.
2000s	Intense Internationalization	i) Introduction of GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) principles to education ii) rise of private universities globally iii) Bologna Process and harmonization of European higher education iv) increased cross-border educational activities and student mobility v) immigration and visa reforms.
2010s – First Half	Complex Competitive Internationalization	i) Financialization and emergence of oligopolies among educational providers ii) growing influence of global university rankings iii) emphasis on quality assurance iv) formation of

Time Period	Overarching Theme	Characteristics
2010s – Second Half	Post-Globalization and Regionalization	educational hubs v) heightened government involvement in international education, driven by mercantilist objectives. i) Shift from traditional South–North mobility to multidirectional and South–South mobility ii) emergence of new regional hubs iii) growing regionalism iv) soft power competition v) involvement of sharp powers in educational diplomacy and security concerns.
2020s	Digitalization and Virtual Internationalization	i) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global education ii) widespread adoption of online and hybrid programs iii) rediscovery and expansion of distance learning models iv) growth of virtual internationalization as a mode of transnational education.

not universally available across all educational institutions and programs. The pandemic catalyzed the rediscovery of these online modalities. Currently, online and distance education programs have become ubiquitous across educational institutions, suggesting that this trend will likely continue. Institutions have significantly invested in their digital infrastructure, aiming to recoup these investments by maintaining and expanding their online offerings.

This shift toward online education is assumed to inevitably influence how institutions organize their internationalization activities, which traditionally rely on face-to-face interactions to foster intercultural competence and communication skills among students. The limitations inherent in online and distance education necessitate innovative approaches to engage international students in meaningful intercultural experiences. In response, many universities are exploring the concept of virtual internationalization, which may become a focal point for institutions soon. This approach not only seeks to adapt to the realities of digital education but also highlights the ongoing interplay between international relations and international education, as institutions strive to maintain their global engagement and competitive edge in an increasingly interconnected world.

Moreover, the implications of these developments extend beyond institutional boundaries, impacting the broader geopolitical landscape. The rise of virtual internationalization may reshape traditional paradigms of international student mobility and redefine how nations leverage educational exchanges as instruments of soft power. As governments seek to enhance their international standing through educational initiatives, the relationship between education and

international relations will continue to evolve, necessitating further scholarly examination of these dynamics in the context of contemporary global challenges.

Table 2 summarizes the major phases of international education and internationalization from antiquity to the present, emphasizing the intersection of education with international politics. Each period is marked by distinct educational practices shaped by broader geopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts, illustrating how international education has historically evolved alongside political developments and global power dynamics. Table 2 offers a comprehensive overview of how international education has evolved in response to political, economic, and cultural shifts throughout history, illustrating its deep interconnection with international relations.

Contemporarily, merging geopolitical competition between the United States and China underscores a critical dimension of the dynamics between liberal democracies and illiberal autocracies, with significant implications for international education. While the United States and its allies emphasize academic freedom and the values of open exchange, China's growing influence is characterized by strategic investments in educational initiatives that align with its geopolitical objectives. Similarities between the current era and past periods of ideological competition, such as the Cold War, include the use of educational diplomacy as a tool for shaping global narratives. However, today's competition diverges due to the global interconnectedness facilitated by technology and the shifting center of economic and intellectual gravity toward Asia. This rivalry manifests in efforts to control the international flow of students, researchers, and academic knowledge, challenging the traditional ideals of education as a neutral and universal good. As universities and institutions worldwide navigate this geopolitical landscape, questions arise about how these tensions may reshape the core principles of academic collaboration, mobility, and the pursuit of knowledge.

Conclusions

The historical trajectory of international education and its ongoing internationalization processes reveal a rich tapestry woven through centuries of cultural exchange, scholarly pursuits, and shifting geopolitical landscapes. Tracing its origins back to Ancient Greece, where itinerant teachers laid the groundwork for educational mobility, the concept of international education has transformed dramatically over the centuries. As societies evolved, so did the mechanisms and motivations behind educational exchanges, adapting to various sociopolitical contexts while embodying diverse roles, characteristics, mobility patterns, and trajectories. Today, international education is not merely a facilitator of academic knowledge; it has evolved into a complex, multifaceted enterprise that intersects with issues of identity, power, and global citizenship, prompting scholars from various disciplines—such as international relations, education policy, sociology, and economics—to engage critically with its implications.

This article presents the significant evolution of international education from its noble origins to the present-day landscape dominated by oligopolistic structures and financialization. In this contemporary context, the intrinsic value

of education as a public good is increasingly overshadowed by the commodification of knowledge and the transactional nature of educational experiences. The escalating competition among nation-states for influence within the global education arena has intensified, complicating the dynamics of international education and prompting a deeper examination of its implications for soft power in international relations. Countries are now recognizing the strategic importance of education as a tool of diplomacy, employing international education initiatives to bolster their standing in the global hierarchy and cultivate favorable perceptions of their cultural and political values.

At both the state and systemic levels, considerations of soft power have emerged as pivotal in shaping the internationalization strategies of various countries. Scholars such as Joseph Nye have articulated how soft power operates through attraction rather than coercion, emphasizing the role of culture, political values, and foreign policies in influencing others. Unfortunately, the current internationalization strategies of many countries often prioritize political objectives over the foundational principles that underpin genuine international education, such as fostering academic collaboration, promoting the global diffusion of knowledge, and enhancing intercultural competence and global citizenship. This shift raises significant concerns among scholars and practitioners alike, who critique the ways in which authentic internationalization processes within higher education institutions have been distorted and manipulated for nationalistic and economic purposes.

Particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the future trajectory of international education and its internationalization remain uncertain. The pandemic has acted as a catalyst for rapid digital transformation, compelling educational institutions to adopt online modalities of instruction. While this transition has expanded access to education for many, it has also exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly for students from underprivileged backgrounds, who may lack the resources necessary for effective participation in virtual learning environments. The interplay between politics and international relations will undoubtedly continue to influence the evolution of this sector, with potential implications for global mobility patterns, regulatory frameworks, and the very nature of educational offerings.

Numerous scholars assert that, irrespective of the overarching political landscape, the primary focus for stakeholders in international education should remain on the experiences within educational institutions—whether physical or virtual. It is imperative that all parties involved work collaboratively to ensure that international students receive enriching learning opportunities and culturally immersive experiences throughout their educational journeys. Such efforts must prioritize not only academic rigor but also the cultivation of intercultural dialog, mutual understanding, and the development of global citizenship. The role of higher education institutions as sites of diplomacy and cultural exchange cannot be overstated, as they possess the unique capacity to bridge divides and foster relationships across borders.

In conclusion, the relationship between international relations and international education is undeniably intricate and dynamic. As nations vie for

influence and prestige in the global arena, the implications for international education will be profound, affecting not only institutional practices but also broader cultural and diplomatic exchanges between countries. To uphold the values of true internationalization, it is crucial that policymakers, educational leaders, and academic institutions remain vigilant in fostering environments conducive to meaningful intercultural dialog and collaboration.

Moreover, in a world characterized by increasing polarization and nationalist sentiment, the promotion of a more inclusive and equitable framework for international education becomes essential. Educators can contribute to the development of empathetic global citizens capable of navigating the complexities of an increasingly interdependent world through prioritizing the educational experiences of international students. Ultimately, the future of international education will hinge on collective commitment to fostering a more collaborative, just, and interconnected global society—one that recognizes the transformative power of education as a tool for peace, understanding, and collective progress.

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