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Moroccan Government Scholarship as a Tool of Educational Public Diplomacy: An Analysis of Sub-Saharan African Students' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Morocco emerged as a key player in educational public diplomacy in Africa, using government-funded scholarships to attract Sub-Saharan African students as part of its broader foreign policy and soft power goals. Yet despite growing state investment in such programs across the Global South and North, empirical research on their effectiveness remains limited. Drawing on soft power and public diplomacy as its theoretical framework, this study examines the academic and sociocultural experiences of Sub-Saharan African students in Moroccan public universities through a mixed-methods survey of 108 students. Findings indicate moderate effectiveness, driven by high satisfaction with education quality and academic support, alongside persistent dissatisfaction with language support and sociocultural integration. Universities must address these gaps to strengthen long-term soft power outcomes

Keywords: educational public diplomacy, foreign policy, higher education, Morocco, public universities, soft power, Sub-Saharan students

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INTRODUCTION

Public diplomacy has become a central soft power and statecraft instrument for states across both the Global North and the Global South (Byrne, 2016, 2024; Nye, 2008). This is because, according to Byrne (2024), states — no matter their size or type of government — have come to recognize the importance of foreign public engagement for image and reputational creation and maintenance, both at home and abroad.

For this reason, public diplomacy strongly "aligns with the broader foreign policy design" (Byrne, 2024, p. 3) and complements and helps traditional diplomacy achieve its objectives (Byrne, 2024). Its purpose is to "sell a story" in order to inform and gain the support of foreign publics for a state's position and policies on the international stage (Byrne, 2024, p. 2). As Joseph Nye (2004) puts it, "whose story wins is sometimes more important than who wins a war" (p. 106).

Among its key objectives, public diplomacy fosters people-to-people connections through cultural and educational exchange programs, such as scholarships offered to foreign students in target countries —

a practice also known as educational public diplomacy (Byrne, 2016, 2024; Nye, 2008).

According to Nye (1990), education can be one of the most effective soft power tools countries can employ to build long-term relationships, strengthen their global image, and advance foreign policy objectives. Nye (1990) argues that soft power becomes influential when "it is perceived as valuable by target actors" (p. 166), and education is widely regarded as a highly valuable asset in today's knowledge-driven world. As a result, states — particularly those seeking to expand their regional and global influence — are investing in internationalizing their universities and offering government-funded scholarships to attract international students (Carriere, 2026; Knight & de Wit, 2018). Morocco is one of those states, strategically deploying educational public diplomacy to strengthen ties with Sub-Saharan Africa and consolidate its position as a regional leader (Adoui, 2023).

The underlying assumption of educational public diplomacy is that personal interactions and cultural immersion foster mutual respect and trust, creating informal channels of engagement, especially when official diplomacy is limited (Byrne, 2016, 2024). However, this assumption is not always borne out. International students may encounter cultural and language barriers (Aras & Mohammed, 2019; Arslan & Sezgin, 2026; Ihuoma & Bista, 2025), discrimination, and dissatisfaction with their academic and sociocultural experiences (Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020), potentially producing negative perceptions and limiting the intended outcomes. Given these potential gaps, international student satisfaction and experience are often used as an indicator of program effectiveness (Latief & Lefen, 2018) and serve as the lens through which this study examines Morocco's scholarship program.

Although interest in educational public diplomacy is growing, existing scholarship largely focuses on Global North practices. The limited literature from the Global South mainly examines major or emerging powers, leaving a gap in understanding how developing countries — particularly in Africa — use educational diplomacy as a soft power tool. Morocco represents one such understudied case.

Education has become a central pillar of Morocco's engagement with Africa (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation, 2023). Through its educational exchange program, Morocco aims to attract and train human capital from partner countries and enhance its soft power on the continent (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation, 2023). This strategic intent is clearly reflected in enrollment figures. As shown in Table 1, which presents the composition of international students across public and private Moroccan universities for the 2022–2023 academic year, Sub-Saharan African students constitute the largest group, accounting for 10,930 of the 13,588 students enrolled in public universities. This is largely because public universities serve as the primary destination for government scholarship recipients. Their significant presence in private universities, although not the focus of this study, further reinforces this pattern. Together, these figures highlight the deliberate and targeted nature of Morocco's educational diplomacy, positioning Sub-Saharan Africa as the primary focus of its international education strategy. Yet these figures reveal little about the effectiveness of this strategy.

Table 1

International Students Enrolled in Moroccan Higher Education Institutions, 2022–2023

Category	Number of students	Details
Total international students in Morocco	23,588	International students enrolled in Moroccan higher education institutions (public and private)
Public universities (12 institutions)	13,588	Host the majority of scholarship beneficiaries
Sub-Saharan African students	10,930	From 51 Sub-Saharan African countries; the largest group, reflecting Morocco's targeted educational diplomacy toward Africa
Asian students	1,829	International students from Asian countries
European students	613	International students from European countries
American students	25	International students from the Americas
Oceanian students	27	International students from Oceania
Private universities and institutions	8,634	Sub-Saharan students represent the majority

Note. Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (2023).

In Morocco's case, research on educational diplomacy and its effectiveness is relatively recent but steadily growing, with scholars examining it through different lenses, including the internationalization of higher education and Sub-Saharan student experiences (Adoui, 2023; Berriane, 2015; El Boubebkri & Saidi, 2022; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020). In these studies, universities are highlighted as key actors — the primary institutions that host international students and shape their overall experience and perception of Morocco.

Study Purpose

Building on this insight, this study examines the effectiveness of Morocco's educational diplomacy by analyzing the academic and sociocultural experiences of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan public universities. Focusing on this group is important for three reasons. First, Sub-Saharan students are the main target of Morocco's educational public diplomacy and represent the largest group of scholarship beneficiaries in Moroccan public universities; studying the largest group offers the most statistically meaningful basis for assessing the effectiveness of this diplomacy. Second, Sub-Saharan African countries are Morocco's primary foreign policy and soft power targets, so understanding how these students experience Morocco is directly relevant to assessing soft power outcomes in their specific countries. Third, upon returning home, these students may go on to occupy influential positions and become either informal ambassadors or "poisonous alumni" (Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020). Examining their academic and sociocultural experiences, and identifying areas for improvement, is therefore critical not only for enhancing student satisfaction but also for building goodwill and promoting a positive image of Morocco in Sub-Saharan Africa — ultimately benefiting the long-term returns on Morocco's educational public diplomacy investments. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to contribute to this emerging body of literature and to advance academic discussion from a Global South and African perspective, by addressing the following research question:

RQ: To what extent do the academic and sociocultural experiences of Sub-Saharan students in public universities influence the effectiveness of Morocco's educational public diplomacy?

To address this research question, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To assess the academic experiences of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan public universities.
2. To explore the sociocultural experiences of Sub-Saharan students.
3. To analyze how positive or negative academic and sociocultural experiences influence Sub-Saharan students' perceptions of Morocco.
4. To assess the extent to which student experiences translate into soft power outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two interconnected theoretical frameworks — public diplomacy and soft power — anchor this study and collectively provide the analytical lens through which the experiences of Sub-Saharan scholarship students in Morocco are examined.

Educational Public Diplomacy and Its Connection to Soft Power

Public diplomacy has become a critical instrument through which states seek to project influence, shape international perceptions, and advance their foreign policy interests (Byrne, 2016). Education has emerged as one of its most powerful pillars. According to Cull (2009), public diplomacy refers to a "government's efforts to manage the international environment by engaging foreign publics" (p. 11). Although states have long engaged in efforts to influence external audiences, the modern concept of public

diplomacy was articulated in the 1960s by Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, during a period when the United States sought to counter Soviet ideology by promoting American culture, values, and democratic institutions abroad (Melissen, 2005). Similarly, Tuch (1990) defines public diplomacy as "a government process of communicating with foreign publics to foster understanding of a nation's ideas, ideals, institutions, culture, national goals, and policies" (p. 3), highlighting both its communicative and strategic dimensions.

Soft power, popularized by Nye (1990, 2008), became integral to discussions of public diplomacy. According to Nye (2008), public diplomacy is an instrument of soft power that offers a persuasive rather than coercive approach to influencing other states. Nye (2008) defines soft power as "the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion" (p. 94). Education, widely recognized as an asset in the knowledge economy and a key element of soft power, serves as a channel through which states cultivate this attraction. Soft power, however, is effective only when it is perceived as valuable by target societies (Nye, 2008). In this regard, access to quality higher education represents such value — a highly sought-after resource that attracts students across borders and creates opportunities for states to shape attitudes, build relationships, and project a positive image.

The Cold War demonstrated the limitations of hard power alone and reinforced the strategic importance of soft power and public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 1990). Both the United States and the Soviet Union deployed distinct public diplomacy campaigns, and at the center of each were educational programs and government-sponsored scholarships (Nye, 2008). These initiatives enabled thousands of students to study in these countries, fostering familiarity, connection, and sometimes goodwill toward the host country during periods of intense ideological rivalry (Atkinson, 2010). It was within this context that Nye's articulation of soft power gained prominence, emphasizing that cultural appeal, educational exchange, and values-based engagement were essential for achieving foreign policy objectives.

Following the September 11 attacks and the "War on Terror," global perceptions of the United States, especially in Arab countries, became overwhelmingly negative (Melissen, 2005). In response, the U.S. State Department intensified public diplomacy initiatives aimed at reshaping international attitudes and promoting democratic values (Melissen, 2005, pp. 6–10). There is, accordingly, broad consensus in the literature about the central role of the United States in shaping modern public diplomacy practice.

Nye (2008) identifies three dimensions of public diplomacy: short-term communication efforts, medium-term strategic messaging, and long-term relationship-building. Educational exchanges fall squarely within the third dimension, aiming to create enduring networks and social ties that often outlast traditional diplomatic efforts.

Public diplomacy practices initially developed within the U.S. context were subsequently adopted elsewhere at different periods (Melissen, 2005). Countries in the Global South, for example, began investing in public diplomacy later than their European counterparts, owing largely to colonial histories, limited resources, and competing domestic priorities (Melissen, 2005). Yet today, public diplomacy is increasingly recognized across both the Global North and the Global South as a valuable foreign policy and soft power instrument, with states of varying capacities developing their own distinct initiatives and approaches (Byrne, 2024; Melissen, 2005).

Educational public diplomacy, particularly through scholarship programs, "aligns closely with states' broader soft power and foreign policy aspirations" (Byrne, 2016, p. 181). Whether oriented toward sending students abroad or attracting them, these initiatives enable countries to project their values, culture, and worldviews (Knight & de Wit, 2018). During the Cold War, this strategy was exemplified by the Fulbright Program in the United States and the International Lenin School in the Soviet Union, both designed to cultivate future leaders who might favor their respective ideological agendas (Atkinson, 2010). Many alumni later assumed influential political or professional roles, effectively becoming informal ambassadors for the states that trained them (Atkinson, 2010). These precedents set the foundation in the literature for the educational diplomacy strategies later adopted by other Global North and Global South countries.

In today's global context, where many states seek regional or international leadership, shaping global debates increasingly depends on "human development and knowledge production" (Waithaka & Maluki, 2016, p. 4). Education offers governments a direct channel for engaging with foreign publics, making it a powerful instrument of public diplomacy (Byrne & Hall, 2011). Its strength lies in its targeted nature: scholarship programs select individuals who may later become national elites, policymakers, or opinion leaders (Cull, 2009; Waithaka & Maluki, 2016). Yet the success of educational diplomacy depends on strategic planning, inter-agency coordination, and domestic support, which manifest in students' satisfaction with their academic and sociocultural experience (Byrne & Hall, 2011). Foreign students interact extensively with host communities across all dimensions of the host country, meaning their experiences — positive or negative — significantly shape their perceptions of that country (Byrne & Hall, 2011; Melissen, 2005). Effective educational diplomacy therefore requires collaboration among government institutions, universities, and local communities to communicate national values and foster positive engagement (Bettie, 2014; Waithaka & Maluki, 2016).

Activities in both academic and sociocultural domains can provide opportunities for engagement and "strengthen students' connection to the host country" (Waithaka & Maluki, 2016, p. 4). According to Atkinson (2010), educational diplomacy is effective when three conditions are met: international students develop extensive social ties with host communities, they experience a sense of shared identity or belonging, and they later attain influential positions upon returning home. In addition, host countries must maintain contact with their alumni after graduation if they wish to maximize the long-term benefits of educational diplomacy for foreign policy objectives (Waithaka & Maluki, 2016; Xu, 2023). After completing their studies, however, alumni may continue building their careers without maintaining contact with their host countries (Waithaka & Maluki, 2016; Xu, 2023). Proactively creating or supporting avenues for maintaining ties with former students — such as alumni associations or diplomatic missions abroad — is therefore essential (Bettie, 2014; Waithaka & Maluki, 2016; Xu, 2023). On this point, Cull observes that creating an exchange is like stretching a cable from one country to another: once built, it must be continually repaired and revisited rather than simply set and forgotten (as cited in Sevinç, 2023, p. 54). In other words, maintaining ongoing relationships with alumni is essential to sustaining the long-term benefits of educational diplomacy.

Despite its potential, educational diplomacy faces challenges. Policymakers often perceive it as producing "serendipitous" rather than strategic outcomes (Byrne & Hall, 2011, p. 5), which may translate into a lack of financial support. Additional obstacles include limited intergovernmental coordination, misalignment between foreign policy and private educational institutions in some Global North countries, bureaucratic fragmentation, insufficient funding, and limited community engagement (Bettie, 2014). The rise of non-state actors and new technologies has further complicated the landscape of public diplomacy more broadly (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005).

Nevertheless, while the soft power rationale applies broadly, the motivations behind educational diplomacy vary considerably by context, and literature increasingly reflects this diversity (Carriere, 2026). For Global North countries, educational diplomacy is often an extension of existing global influence, reinforcing post-colonial ties or countering geopolitical rivals (Atkinson, 2010; Lomer, 2017). In the Global South, motivations are more varied, positioned between the pursuit of South-South cooperation and solidarity on one hand, and each country's distinct strategic and geopolitical interests on the other (Enwere et al., 2025). This diversity of motivation is illustrated by the examples of China and Türkiye. For China, the motivation is partly reactive, driven by a desire to counter negative Western narratives that portray it as a global threat (Latief & Lefen, 2018). For Türkiye, it is linked to regional leadership ambitions and the promotion of cultural influence across Muslim-majority countries (Aras & Mohammed, 2019). For Morocco, the motivation is distinctly regional — the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI) was established in 1986 partly to maintain bilateral African ties following Morocco's withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1984, making educational diplomacy a bridge-building instrument during a period of formal multilateral diplomatic isolation (Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020).

These differences in motivation underscore the need to examine educational public diplomacy within different regional and national contexts, since the objectives pursued shape the expected outcomes — a principle that is central to this study's examination of Morocco's case. Before doing so, however, the study first situates educational public diplomacy within the broader context of Morocco's African foreign policy.

The Role of Educational Public Diplomacy in Morocco's African Foreign Policy

Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly West Africa, has long occupied an important place in Morocco's foreign policy orientation (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération Africaine et des Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger, 2022; Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation, n.d.). Historically, Morocco maintained strong relations with the region, "with successive dynasties strengthening their authority through close ties with Sub-Saharan Africa" (Baida, 2013, p. 47). Trans-Saharan trade and Islam were central links between the two regions: Islam spread through merchants, scholars, and the Moroccan dynasties that controlled major trade routes, notably the Almoravid and Saadi dynasties, whose influence reached parts of present-day Senegal and Mali (Baida, 2013).

Sub-Saharan Africa was historically home to powerful empires such as Mali, Ghana, and Songhai, and to rich resources including gold and salt, which attracted extensive trans-Saharan exchange. These interactions facilitated the movement of traders, scholars, and religious leaders, strengthening cultural and religious ties between Morocco and the region (Baida, 2013). These ties were, however, largely interrupted by continental colonization, which restricted the free movement of people (Baida, 2013).

The wave of decolonization that swept across Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s opened a new chapter in Morocco–Africa relations, as newly independent states sought continental solidarity and cooperation (Baida, 2013). Morocco, a founding member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, supported African liberation movements through the 1960s (Madani, 2020). In 1984, however, it withdrew from the organization over questions related to its territorial integrity, leading to a long period of multilateral isolation from continental institutions (Baida, 2013).

In response to its diplomatic isolation, Morocco moved to strengthen bilateral relations with selected African states. The establishment of the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI) in 1986 institutionalized cooperation across development assistance, technical training, and academic exchange. Early engagement focused on countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Niger, and Mali — states that did not recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and with which Morocco maintained strong historical ties — before gradually expanding to other partners (Bishku, 2021; Madani, 2020; Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2015). Academic cooperation through scholarships soon became a central pillar of this strategy.

One of AMCI's key objectives is to enhance Morocco's influence by promoting student mobility and training human capital from partner countries (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation, 2023; Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation, n.d.).

Official discourse highlights the strategic role of this foreign policy. Moroccan officials, including Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, frequently place Africa and its people at the center of Morocco's foreign policy and emphasize the role of educational diplomacy in the country's South–South cooperation agenda with Africa. On one occasion, the Minister was quoted as saying that "King Mohammed VI has placed Africa at the heart of Morocco's international priorities because the Sovereign believes deeply in Africa" (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération Africaine et des Marocains Résidant à l'Étranger, 2024; Zouiten, 2024). Similarly, former Minister of Higher Education Abdellatif Miraoui emphasized that human capital is central to Morocco's strategic priorities and that its partnerships align with the country's broader foreign policy vision (Simpara, 2024). This underscores that Moroccan officials frame and recognize education, and scholarships in particular, as both a foreign policy tool and a developmental initiative.

Since the accession of King Mohammed VI in 1999, Morocco's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated, and educational diplomacy has expanded beyond traditional partners to a broader range of African states. Notably, even in cases of political disagreement, public diplomacy instruments such as education, culture, and religion have remained key channels through which Morocco has sought to maintain and strengthen ties (Baida, 2013).

This broadened engagement has translated into a significant expansion of Morocco's scholarship program, with both the number of partner countries and the scale of scholarship allocations increasing considerably over the following decades. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2023), scholarship beneficiaries reached 13,588 in the 2022–2023 academic year, of whom 10,930 — representing over 80% — were from Sub-Saharan African countries. Since its inception, AMCI reports having trained more than 30,000 international students across its partner countries. To sustain and deepen engagement with this growing network, AMCI recently established the Morocco Alumni platform, designed to maintain long-term connections with former scholarship recipients (Morocco Alumni, n.d.).

After 33 years of absence, Morocco rejoined the African Union in 2017, repositioning itself as a major continental actor (Monnier, 2025). This reintegration has been accompanied by a significant expansion of Morocco's economic footprint on the continent: it is currently the leading African investor in West Africa and the second-largest investor on the continent after South Africa (Monnier, 2025). Major initiatives such as the Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline and the Atlantic Initiative reflect Morocco's ambitions to strengthen regional connectivity and geopolitical influence (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024). The success of such initiatives, however, depends not only on economic or infrastructural capacity but also on strong diplomatic alliances. It is in this context that educational diplomacy assumes particular strategic importance, as the networks of alumni and informal ambassadors cultivated through Morocco's scholarship program may represent a valuable and enduring foundation for long-term continental engagement.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

This study employed a survey design that combined Likert-scale questions with open-ended responses from 108 Sub-Saharan African students drawn exclusively from the population receiving the Moroccan government scholarship. A mixed-methods approach was adopted because closed-ended questions helped identify general trends, while open-ended responses captured more nuanced aspects of students' experiences. The survey instrument was developed based on the existing literature on international student experiences but was customized to fit the specific needs of this study. It comprised questions related to motivations for studying in the host country, quality of education, academic support, language barriers and language support, sociocultural integration and its challenges, extracurricular activities, and overall satisfaction (Arkoudis et al., 2019; King et al., 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Sampling and Data Collection

Because it was not possible to reach all beneficiaries, convenience sampling using a non-probability approach was adopted. Although this may affect the representativeness of the sample and is recognized as a limitation of the study, several strategies were used to address this challenge. Both online and paper-based surveys were distributed among Sub-Saharan African students living in different cities across Morocco. WhatsApp and student community representatives were also used to reach as many students, and as much diversity within the sample, as possible. In total, 108 responses were collected from the scholarship population, including 45 paper-based and 63 online responses.

Each survey question was available in both English and French. Although these two languages are not the only languages spoken by Sub-Saharan students, nor are they always their native languages, they

represent the most common languages shared among Sub-Saharan students, most of whom study their courses in French regardless of whether they come from Francophone countries. It is acknowledged, however, that for participants whose stronger language was neither English nor French, this may have limited their ability to fully express themselves, representing a potential source of lost nuance in their responses. Because the study was conducted in English, quantitative and qualitative responses submitted in French were first translated using Google Translate as an initial aid, then reviewed and verified by the researcher, who is fluent in both languages, to ensure accuracy and preserve the intended meaning of the original responses.

Data were collected in 2023. Although data collection took place in 2023, discussions of international students' experiences in general, and of Sub-Saharan students' experiences in Morocco in particular, have remained largely consistent, as highlighted by studies conducted over the following years (Adoui, 2023; Amini, 2024; Aras & Mohammed, 2019; Arslan & Sezgin, 2026; Berriane, 2015; Dhiman & Paliktzoglou, 2024; El Boubebkri & Saidi, 2022; Hong et al., 2020; Kafle & Wei, 2026; Mennoune, 2024; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020; Tian & Lowe, 2018; Tian et al., 2022). This consistency in the literature suggests that little has fundamentally changed in this area, which makes the study's findings still relevant to current discussions.

It is also important to note that although there were 108 participants, not all of them responded to every question. The number of responses reported for each question therefore reflects the number of respondents who answered that specific question, rather than the overall number of participants in the survey. Even so, each question received a substantial number of responses, demonstrating participants' engagement with the survey.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical procedures for research involving human subjects. Participants were informed beforehand about the purpose of the study, and their consent was requested prior to participation. All respondents were informed that they had the right to skip any question they did not wish to answer, without consequence, and that participation was entirely voluntary. They were assured that their responses would remain anonymous, that no identifiable data would be collected, and that their data would be securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

Because this study included both quantitative and qualitative data, the two types of data were analyzed separately. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, a software package designed for analyzing quantitative data in social science research, to identify patterns within the sample that may be cautiously generalizable. Qualitative data were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach: after familiarization with the data, codes were generated from recurring participant responses, then grouped into broader themes, reviewed against the dataset, and refined to capture the final themes representing the most important patterns in participants' academic and sociocultural experiences. The qualitative analysis was conducted manually. Because the qualitative responses corresponded with certain quantitative findings, they are discussed within the same thematic headings below, to contextualize participants' experiences.

Pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, etc.) were used to label qualitative survey responses. These labels were assigned independently within each survey question rather than tracked consistently across the entire survey — an approach consistent with common practice in analyzing qualitative responses from anonymous surveys. Because the analysis was conducted at the level of thematic patterns rather than by tracing individual participants' trajectories across responses, this approach does not compromise the validity of the findings.

Sample Profile

The data in Table 2 show that participants came from 24 different African countries, with one participant not disclosing their nationality; 52% originated from Anglophone countries, and 66% were from West Africa, with the remainder from Central and Eastern Africa. Regarding gender, representation was almost equal, with 56 participants (52%) identifying as male and 52 participants (48%) identifying as female. In terms of age, shown in Table 2, 89 participants (82%) were between 18 and 25 years old, 18 participants (17%) were between 26 and 30, and 1 participant (0.9%) was older than 30. Respondents were drawn from across all public universities in the cities surveyed.

Regarding level of study, 52% were pursuing undergraduate studies, 27% were enrolled in master's programs, 16% were doctoral students, and 4.6% were undertaking vocational training. All participants were full-time students, and 100% reported that their main purpose for coming to Morocco was education — an expected finding, since all scholarship recipients are issued student visas that grant residence permits based on study as their primary purpose of stay.

Table 2

Nationality and Age Distribution of Survey Participants (N = 108)

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Nationality		
The Gambia	35	32.7
Guinea (Conakry)	18	16.8
Chad	8	7.5
Zambia	9	8.4
Senegal	7	6.5
Congo (DRC)	4	3.7
Congo (Republic)	4	3.7
Comoros	2	1.9
Ghana	2	1.9
Benin	2	1.9
Sierra Leone	2	1.9
South Sudan	2	1.9
Liberia	1	0.9
Mali	1	0.9
Eritrea	1	0.9
Togo	1	0.9
Burkina Faso	1	0.9
São Tomé and Príncipe	1	0.9
Cameroon	1	0.9
Central African Republic	1	0.9
Nigeria	1	0.9
Rwanda	1	0.9
Kenya	1	0.9
Tanzania	1	0.9
Total valid	107	100.0
Missing	1	—
Age group		
18–25	89	82.4
26–30	18	16.7
30+	1	0.9
Total	108	100.0

Note. Nationality percentages are calculated as a proportion of valid responses (n = 107); one participant did not disclose nationality. Age percentages are calculated from the full sample (N = 108).

RESULTS

In line with the research objectives, this section presents the results and discussion of the study, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data across different aspects of Sub-Saharan students' experience. The themes discussed below emerged from both data sources, which are closely interconnected: the quantitative data provide an overall picture of the trends and patterns observed, while the qualitative data highlight nuanced experiences and perspectives that the quantitative data alone cannot fully capture. For clarity, not all survey questions are presented in this section; only those whose responses most accurately reflect the study's findings are included.

Motivation and Purpose of Study in Morocco

The findings indicate that the availability of a scholarship (54%) is the primary motivation for Sub-Saharan students to choose Morocco as a study destination. Secondary factors include the perceived prestige of Moroccan universities (12%), the opportunity to experience a new culture and country (11%), the chance to learn a new language (8%), and recommendations from family (7%), as shown in Table 3. Taken together, these findings suggest that while institutional reputation, family recommendation, and personal curiosity all play a role in students' decision-making, scholarships remain the most motivating factor — indicating that they constitute the central entry point into Morocco's educational diplomacy ecosystem.

Table 3

Motivation for Choosing Morocco as a Study Destination

Motivation	% of respondents
Scholarship opportunity	54
Prestige of the university	12
Opportunity to experience a new culture and country	11
Opportunity to learn a new language	8
Recommendation from a family member	7
Other (e.g., job opportunities, recommendation from a friend)	8
Total	100

Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents selecting each motivation (N = 108). The "Other" category aggregates minor response options individually reported in the underlying data.

Academic Experience

Overall, participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the quality of education provided by their universities: 68% rated it as good, 18% as excellent, 14% as fair, and 0.93% as poor. Similarly, with regard to academic support, 42% rated it good, 13% excellent, 32% fair, and a combined 13% poor or very poor (Table 4).

Table 4

Perceived Quality of Education and Level of Academic Support

Rating	Quality of education (%)	Academic support (%)
Poor	0.9	13.0
Fair	13.9	32.0
Good	67.6	42.0
Excellent	17.6	13.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Challenges to the Academic Experience

Despite this overall positive satisfaction, several challenges were identified, including with the language support provided by universities. There was general dissatisfaction with the level of language support: 46% rated it insufficient, 12% below average, 26% average, 14.4% good, and 1% highly sufficient (Table 5).

Table 5
Perceived Sufficiency of Language Support Services

Rating	% of respondents
Insufficient	46.4
Below average	12.4
Average	26
Good	14.4
Highly sufficient	1.03
Total	100

The qualitative responses also underscored the language barrier. Participants generally described language barriers as a key obstacle in their academic experience, as reflected in several responses:

"At the university, some professors prefer to speak in Darija even when sharing important information related to coursework and exams" (P1). "Some professors teach in Darija, which makes it even harder to follow" (P2). "Sure, being an Anglophone and having difficulty with the French language, language barrier was and still is a challenge in my studies" (P5). "…Also the language barrier when I was in first year" (P20).

Additional themes relating to challenges to participants' overall academic experience were also identified: financial constraints, inadequate pedagogical quality and institutional rigidity, and discriminatory treatment from faculty and peers.

Theme 1: Financial Constraints

Financial difficulties emerged as a recurring concern, with several students reporting that their stipend was insufficient to cover basic living expenses — a source of additional stress that compounded their academic challenges. Participants described their experience as follows:

"The problem of finance… as a nurse moving from one hospital to another and from school to practicals at different hospitals in different locations is a constant issue, and it is every day. I spend at least 30 dirhams a day, which is 600 dirhams a month, just on travel expenses." (P9)

"Yes, I face financial difficulties most of the time. The reason is that the AMCI stipend is not sufficient to cover all necessities, especially during the summer period and at the beginning of the academic year." (P12)

These accounts suggest that financial challenges constitute a significant but often overlooked barrier to academic success among scholarship students.

Theme 2: Inadequate Pedagogical Quality and Institutional Rigidity

Although participants were largely satisfied with the quality of education, the qualitative responses revealed challenges that are significant and should not be overlooked. Several participants raised concerns about the underpreparedness of some professors, which resulted in reading from handouts rather than in-depth teaching. The following quotes are representative:

"The difficulties are enormous; professors do not give their best, since most only come to read from

handouts, but they must understand that these are courses, not speeches" (P15). "The only challenge I encountered was adjusting to the Moroccan educational system" (P16).

Theme 3: Discriminatory Treatment from Faculty and Peers

Discrimination from professors and domestic students was highlighted as another challenge. Several students raised this issue:

"Racism — certain professors didn't like me because I am Black…" (P20). "During group work, I sometimes face exclusion" (P21).

Sociocultural Integration and Its Challenges

Although respondents reported an overall positive perception of, and satisfaction with, their academic experience — with the exception of language support — the same cannot be said of their sociocultural experience at university. A significant number of participants reported facing sociocultural challenges, including discrimination, limited social interaction, and difficulty forming friendships with Moroccan students. These challenges were often attributed to language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of extracurricular activities that could facilitate intercultural interaction.

Discrimination in Daily Life and Limited Social Interaction

A high proportion of participants reported facing discrimination: 65% reported having experienced discrimination, while 35% indicated they had never faced it (Table 6). Among those who reported such experiences, racial discrimination (54%) was the most common form, followed by language discrimination (20%) and religious discrimination (10%).

In terms of location, the university setting (28%) emerged as the most frequent place where discrimination was experienced, followed by neighborhoods (20%), public transportation (19%), markets (18%), and hospitals (8%) (Table 6). These findings suggest that discrimination represents a significant challenge in participants' daily lives, hindering their sociocultural integration, with universities being one of the most prominent spaces where such experiences occur.

Table 6

Reported Experiences of Discrimination and Where They Occurred

Variable	% of respondents
Experienced discrimination	
Yes	65
No	35
Total	100
Location of discrimination	
University	28
Neighborhoods	20
Public transportation	19
Markets	18
Hospitals	8
Other locations (e.g., student campus, supermarket)	7
Total	100

Several factors may help explain these experiences as shown in table 7. First, cultural differences (23%) may reflect limited intercultural interaction and mutual understanding between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan students. Second, stereotypes about individuals from certain regions of Africa (16%) also

contribute to discriminatory attitudes. Finally, language barriers (47%) appear to play a major role, with 79% of respondents in this study reporting little or no fluency in Darija. These challenges can undermine students' sense of belonging and create feelings of social exclusion.

Table 7
Perceived Challenges to Interaction with Moroccan Students

Challenge	% of respondents
Language barriers	47
Cultural differences	23
Stereotypes	16
Religious differences	7
Other	7
Total	100

Experiences of discrimination also appeared in the qualitative responses, where several themes emerged. Participants reported being avoided and ostracized because of their skin color, both in the university environment and in public spaces, as elaborated below.

Theme 1: Physical Avoidance Because of Skin Color in Public Spaces

Some participants indicated that Moroccans avoid them and are reluctant to interact with them because of their skin color — a recurring response that included:

"Just because of my skin color, people sometimes mistake me for a beggar, and others avoid me" (P11). "There was a time when I boarded a public bus and went to sit next to a Moroccan lady. Before I could even sit comfortably, she gave me a strange look and eventually left the seat" (P2).

These daily experiences can hinder sociocultural integration.

Theme 2: Academic and Peer Exclusion at University

Supporting the quantitative findings, universities tend to be among the places where participants face the most discrimination in their daily lives, particularly from their Moroccan peers — a recurring pattern across several responses:

"Mostly Moroccan students don't want to interact with you in groups because of race…" (P14). "When we have group projects, Moroccans usually choose to work amongst themselves, so they can communicate in Darija… so I always find it difficult to find someone willing to work with me" (P8). "Other students push you aside; through their actions they make you understand you are not one of them — they ignore you completely, as if you are not a student among them" (P16).

Friendship, Social Integration and Extracurricular Activities

The challenges described above also affect Sub-Saharan students' ability to develop friendships with Moroccan students. When asked about the number of Moroccan friends they had, 31% of respondents reported having one or two, while 33% reported having between three and five.

Although 42% of respondents indicated that they interact with Moroccan students daily, these interactions are largely confined to the classroom and academic purposes.

The survey data further indicate that 60% of respondents rarely or never participate in social activities with Moroccan students (Table 8). In addition to language (47%) and cultural barriers (23%), another likely contributing factor is the limited availability of extracurricular activities that could encourage

interaction between Sub-Saharan and Moroccan students. As a result of these limited opportunities for social engagement, many participants rely instead on country-based student associations, with 44% reporting active participation in such groups. Consequently, students often develop stronger social networks with peers from their own countries than with Moroccan students.

Table 8

Frequency of Participation in Social Activities with Moroccan Students

Frequency	% of respondents
Rarely or never	60
Sometimes, often, or always (combined)	40
Total	100

Note. Only the combined "rarely or never" figure was reported in the underlying data; the remaining response options are grouped by complement.

When asked for recommendations to improve sociocultural integration, several themes emerged from the open-ended questions: language learning as a pathway to integration, structured social and cultural engagement, and reducing stereotypes.

Theme 1: Language Learning as a Pathway to Integration

Several participants identified the language barrier as a key obstacle to sociocultural integration, noting that a high proportion of participants cannot speak Darija, the dialect most commonly spoken by Moroccans. Participants therefore suggested — a recurring response — that universities offer a Darija program so students can learn the language and interact more easily with Moroccans:

"In order to reduce language barriers and gaps, there should be a program to teach foreign students the Moroccan dialect because the majority of the Moroccan population communicates in Darija" (P1). "There should be the establishment of Darija classes in academic spaces" (P2).

Theme 2: Structured Social and Cultural Engagement

Participants also pointed to a lack of sociocultural activities as a factor hindering their integration at university, with several noting that this contributes to a barrier between them and their Moroccan peers:

"Organising more events to foster unity" (P8). "More networking platforms" (P10). "Cultural events" (P11).

Theme 3: Reducing Stereotypes and Building Tolerance

Another recurring theme was that a positive sociocultural experience requires not only that Sub-Saharan students learn about Moroccan language and culture, but that Moroccan peers do the same, in order to break down barriers on both sides:

"Tolerance of other people's cultures and religions should be encouraged." (P15)

Overall Satisfaction and Recommendation of Morocco

Regarding overall academic satisfaction, a combined 52% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their academic experience in Morocco, while 40% reported a neutral position, 7.4% were dissatisfied, and 1% were very dissatisfied.

Regarding the likelihood of recommending Morocco as a study destination to other Sub-Saharan Africans, responses were similarly mixed: 35% indicated they were likely to recommend Morocco and 8.5% highly likely, while 34% remained neutral, 17% were unlikely, and 6% were very unlikely.

Although a combined 43% of respondents expressed some likelihood of recommending Morocco — which may largely stem from positive perceptions of their academic experience, including quality of education and available academic support — a considerable number expressed neutrality or reservation. These reservations may be associated with challenges related to both academic and sociocultural experiences, which may make some students hesitant to strongly recommend Morocco as a study destination.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of Findings

In line with the research objectives, this study set out to answer the following question: How do the academic and sociocultural experiences of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan public universities influence the effectiveness of Morocco's educational public diplomacy?

The finding that most students are motivated to come to Morocco by the availability of scholarships is consistent with the broader literature on student mobility from the region. By removing the burden of tuition payments, scholarships provide considerable relief for students and their families, making programs such as the Moroccan government scholarship especially attractive to students seeking to build a better future for themselves. This finding is consistent with Berriane (2015), who similarly found that the primary motivation for Sub-Saharan students choosing Morocco is the pursuit of a better future in a context where opportunities to study abroad are otherwise limited.

Although scholarship availability is the dominant factor, other considerations also shape students' decision-making, including the appeal of studying at a prestigious university and recommendations from family and friends. Family recommendations suggest that relatives possess some prior knowledge of Morocco sufficient to recommend it to their children, possibly reinforced by Morocco's geographic proximity and shared Islamic culture with many Sub-Saharan countries, particularly in West Africa. Similarly, friends who are currently studying, or who have studied, in Morocco already serve as informal ambassadors by recommending it as a study destination — a dynamic that is essential to achieving soft power outcomes (Byrne, 2016, 2024). These factors align with existing scholarship on Sub-Saharan students in Morocco, which points to shared religion and historical ties, scholarship availability, aspirations for post-study success, and peer or family recommendations as key motivations for choosing Morocco (Berriane, 2015).

Participants also reported high satisfaction with their academic experience overall, reflecting favorable perceptions of the quality of education and academic support provided by their universities. This suggests that Moroccan public universities are perceived as offering a solid academic environment. These positive perceptions matter, as the literature indicates they are closely linked to broader perceptions of the host country (Hong et al., 2020; Kafle & Wei, 2026), which can translate into recommendations of the host country to others and generate goodwill for Morocco. However, despite this overall positive perception, some challenges remain, chief among them insufficient language support.

Non-Francophone students are offered a preparatory French-language program before beginning their specialization; however, this is a one-time course, and continuous language support is largely absent across most universities thereafter. As a result, many students report difficulty understanding lectures, engaging with academic materials, completing assignments, and writing examinations — a challenge compounded by the fact that some Moroccan professors teach portions of their courses in Darija. These findings echo those of a study on Sub-Saharan students under Turkish government scholarships, which similarly found that language barriers constitute a key academic challenge, particularly in the early years of study (Aras & Mohammed, 2019).

Although students' academic experience is largely positive, challenges in their sociocultural experience remain prevalent, with discrimination being a major factor hindering meaningful interaction

with the local population. These findings are consistent with previous studies on Sub-Saharan students' experiences in Morocco (Berriane, 2015; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020), which similarly identify discrimination as a persistent issue. This is particularly significant given Morocco's international image as a diverse and tolerant country, a gateway to Africa, and a nation with strong historical, religious, and political ties to Sub-Saharan Africa: while Morocco promotes itself globally as a space of coexistence and religious freedom, the everyday experiences of international students point to a disconnect between this image and realities on the ground.

When international students feel unwelcome because of their skin color, language, religion, or gender, it can produce negative perceptions of the host country and reduce overall satisfaction. As the public diplomacy literature suggests, foreign policy initiatives that rely on people-to-people exchange require domestic buy-in to succeed (Byrne, 2016, 2024). Raising awareness among the domestic population and fostering a culture of inclusion should therefore be prioritized, as international students may otherwise interpret the gap between discourse and practice as a lack of sincerity, risking Morocco's broader soft power goals.

Negative sociocultural experiences may also carry long-term consequences. As Ouhemmou and Mounine (2020) note, such experiences can turn international graduates into "poisonous alumni," whose unfavorable perceptions persist after they return home, thereby counteracting the intended diplomatic benefits of scholarship programs. It is therefore unsurprising that many international students turn inward, relying heavily on country-based student associations (44%) as a coping mechanism. These associations provide a sense of community, cultural familiarity, and emotional support, often liaising with stakeholders such as AMCI and national embassies — consistent with existing literature highlighting their central role in supporting Sub-Saharan students' adaptation and well-being in Morocco (Berriane, 2015; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020).

Limited interaction was also observed between participants and domestic students. Although this interaction was often daily, it was largely confined to the classroom and academic purposes; participants reported a low level of interaction with domestic students in the social settings key to building familiarity and friendship, an absence linked to a lack of structured social engagement platforms, cultural differences, stereotypes, and language barriers (Berriane, 2015; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020).

These findings carry important implications for the effectiveness of Morocco's educational public diplomacy. The public diplomacy literature emphasizes that people-to-people exchange is among the key mechanisms for sustaining meaningful interaction between international students and the domestic population and it is the most effective way of generating goodwill and attachment to the host country (Byrne, 2016, 2024). When interaction occurs only at the functional and academic level, rather than extending into social and everyday life, the depth of cultural familiarity remains shallow, and mere exposure to Morocco does not automatically translate into the affective ties and lasting goodwill that public diplomacy efforts are ultimately designed to cultivate.

Regarding overall academic satisfaction, combined 52% of participants reported being satisfied with their studies in Morocco, while 40% remained neutral and a combined 8.4% expressed dissatisfaction. While the low level of dissatisfaction suggests a degree of success, the relatively high proportion of neutral responses should not be overlooked, as this neutrality may stem from the mixed academic and sociocultural experiences discussed above.

When asked about their likelihood of recommending Morocco to other Sub-Saharan students, 35% indicated they were likely to do so and 8.5% very likely, while 34% remained neutral and a combined 24.7% indicated they were unlikely or very unlikely. This willingness to recommend Morocco signals that these students are beginning to assume the role of informal ambassadors — a key objective of Morocco's educational public diplomacy. However, just as positive experiences can produce informal ambassadors, negative experiences may produce "poisonous alumni" (Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020) who discourage others from choosing Morocco as a study destination. For Morocco to maximize the effectiveness of its educational public diplomacy, greater attention must be given to improving international students'

academic and social experiences, ensuring a more positive and fulfilling overall experience that strengthens Morocco's long-term public diplomacy and soft power objectives.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample size is relatively small compared with the overall population of Moroccan government scholarship beneficiaries. Consequently, the study does not seek to draw definitive or broadly generalizable conclusions; rather, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African scholarship students in Morocco.

Second, the use of convenience sampling constitutes another limitation. Because participants were not randomly selected, the sample may not fully represent the broader population of Sub-Saharan African scholarship students in Morocco, and the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Third, the study adopted a cross-sectional design, with data collected at a single point in time. As a result, it was not possible to capture changes in participants' academic and sociocultural experiences, or in their levels of satisfaction, over the course of their studies.

Finally, recruiting participants through student associations and existing social networks may have introduced selection bias. Students who were more socially connected and actively engaged in these networks were more likely to participate, whereas more isolated students — who may have had different experiences and perspectives — were likely underrepresented.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that Morocco's educational public diplomacy has achieved a moderate but meaningful level of effectiveness, supporting the conclusions of previous studies (Berriane, 2015; El Boubebkri & Saidi, 2022; Ouhemmou & Mounine, 2020). This is reflected in students' overall satisfaction with the quality of education and academic support, as well as the moderate proportion of participants who expressed satisfaction with their academic experience and willingness to recommend Morocco as a study destination to others in their networks. These findings indicate that Morocco is generating positive soft power outcomes that could translate into long-term goodwill and stronger ties with Sub-Saharan Africa.

However, significant challenges remain. Participants reported dissatisfaction with language preparation and language support, particularly during their early years of study. They also highlighted difficulties in their sociocultural experiences, including discrimination in public spaces and universities, as well as limited interaction with Moroccan students and the wider community. If these challenges are not adequately addressed, they may undermine Morocco's soft power objectives by fostering negative perceptions among international students. This could weaken Morocco's international image and limit its ability to cultivate a network of alumni who can serve as informal ambassadors and strengthen long-term relations with their home countries.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE STUDIES

This study carries both policy and theoretical implications.

From a policy perspective, the study contributes to the limited empirical evidence on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African scholarship students in Morocco. The findings can help universities and policymakers develop strategies to improve students' academic and sociocultural experiences. Enhancing these experiences can not only promote student success but also strengthen Morocco's educational public diplomacy, soft power, and foreign policy objectives in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on public diplomacy and soft power by examining educational diplomacy from a Global South perspective. By focusing on Morocco, an

underrepresented case in the literature, it broadens understanding of how education can serve as a soft power resource in non-Western contexts.

For future research, longitudinal studies are recommended to examine how students' experiences evolve over time. Comparative studies between Morocco and other scholarship-hosting countries, such as China, Türkiye and India, could also provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of different educational diplomacy strategies and their impact on student experiences.

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