



THE 20TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Universities, Education, and Diplomacy: Promoting Values and Cultural Dialogue in the Globalized World

Valentina Ciumacenco¹

Abstract: In today's globalized world, universities play a growing role in educational diplomacy by fostering cultural dialogue and promoting shared global values. This paper examines how higher education institutions act as diplomatic agents, advancing international cooperation through language, cultural promotion, and academic exchanges. Special attention is given to the Confucius Institutes (China) and Sejong Institutes (South Korea), which go beyond language instruction to function as cultural ambassadors, contributing to national soft power strategies. Using the Free International University of Moldova (ULIM) as a case study - which hosts both a Confucius Institute and a Sejong Korean Language and Culture Center - the paper illustrates how universities can serve as platforms for intercultural engagement and cross-border collaboration. Insights from the 2024 World Chinese Language Conference further contextualize the growing influence of educational diplomacy in fostering mutual understanding and peaceful international relations. The paper also addresses the challenges and opportunities of using universities and language institutes as tools of soft power, notably the challenge of balancing national identity promotion with respect for cultural diversity. Ultimately, this study highlights the vital role of universities in advancing cultural dialogue, strengthening international partnerships, and supporting diplomacy through education in the 21st century.

Keywords: Educational diplomacy; intercultural dialogue; soft power; language institutes; global cooperation

1. Introduction

In today's multipolar world, universities operate in a complex landscape where both democratic and non-democratic nations engage in multilevel cooperation to address global challenges (Blake, 2023). As traditional notions of diplomacy evolve, public diplomacy has taken on new forms, with dialogue and collaboration becoming essential tools for fostering international understanding. In this transformation, universities have emerged as significant actors, contributing not only through science and cultural diplomacy but increasingly through what is now termed knowledge diplomacy.

Knowledge diplomacy, as described by Knight (2020), emphasizes education, research, and innovation as means of building international relationships. This concept extends beyond academia to include

¹ PhD, Associate Professor, Free International University of Moldova (ULIM), Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Address: Vlaicu Pârcălab Street 52, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: vciumacenco@ulim.md.



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

engagement with diverse societal groups and the collective mobilization of knowledge to address shared global needs. The growing expectations for universities to promote peacebuilding, sustainability, human rights, and strategic innovation (UN, 2022) illustrate the essential role higher education plays in shaping a more cooperative world order.

Central to knowledge diplomacy is the integration of intercultural dialogue, which moves beyond mere tolerance of difference to fostering reciprocity, mutual understanding, and shared meaning-making (Castro, Lundgren & Woodin, 2019). As the Council of Europe (2008) and Wächter (2009) argue, intercultural dialogue should be a public responsibility for universities, with intercultural literacy forming a foundational component of higher education and research. For UNESCO (2017), such dialogue is not only a cultural imperative but a cornerstone of social cohesion and peace.

In light of global shifts, universities are increasingly positioned to adopt what Marginson and Rhoades (2002) termed multi-scalar glonacal thinking - being simultaneously active at local, national, regional, and global levels. This multidimensional approach allows institutions to serve as platforms for ethical engagement and inclusive development, contributing to a more unified vision of global cooperation based on respect, ethics, and problem-solving across cultural and national boundaries.

Moreover, in an era increasingly shaped by globalization, the role of universities has expanded beyond traditional academic functions. Over recent decades, higher education institutions have evolved into agents of global diplomacy, bridging cultures, facilitating cross-border dialogue, and influencing international relations. Although diplomacy has long been the purview of state actors, non-state institutions like universities now play a vital role in promoting soft power and international understanding through what can be described as educational diplomacy.

Educational diplomacy encompasses language education, academic exchange, research partnerships, and cultural outreach. Through these means, universities support their countries' global engagement strategies while advancing universal values such as democracy, human rights, sustainability, and peaceful coexistence. This paper explores the multifaceted role of universities in educational diplomacy, focusing on how they promote cultural dialogue, foster international collaboration, and act as tools of soft power in today's interconnected world.

2. The Role of Universities in Educational Diplomacy

Universities are increasingly recognized as influential non-state actors in the realm of international diplomacy. As centers of knowledge, innovation, and intercultural exchange, they serve as dynamic platforms for fostering global understanding and cooperation. Through the mobility of students, faculty, and researchers, universities bring together individuals from diverse cultural and national backgrounds, facilitating rich intellectual and intercultural dialogue.

Higher education institutions serve not only as academic hubs but also as arenas for cultural diplomacy, where participants engage with differing worldviews, traditions, and values. In doing so, universities help build intercultural literacy, a key competence in addressing global challenges and promoting peaceful coexistence. Their role extends beyond the dissemination of academic knowledge to include the promotion of universal values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and sustainability. These values are embedded in curricula, research agendas, and institutional missions, contributing to the creation of a shared global ethos that supports long-term international collaboration.

Universities also provide practical avenues for peacebuilding through mechanisms such as student exchange programs, collaborative research projects, and cross-cultural academic initiatives. These

efforts contribute to global diplomacy by fostering networks of trust and understanding that transcend national boundaries.

Crucially, universities are instrumental in enhancing a nation's soft power - a concept defined by Joseph Nye (2004) as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. By promoting language, culture, and values in globally accessible and appealing ways, universities help shape international public opinion and project a country's cultural identity abroad. In this way, educational diplomacy becomes an essential tool for nation branding, public engagement, and strategic international relations.

2.1. Key Players in Educational Diplomacy: Cultural and Language Institutes

While universities remain at the core of educational diplomacy, they are supported and complemented by cultural and language institutes that play a vital role in advancing national interests through education and culture. Prominent examples include the Confucius Institutes (China), the Sejong Institutes (South Korea), and the British Council (United Kingdom). These institutions function as instruments of cultural diplomacy, aiming to enhance their home countries' global visibility, influence, and reputation.

Affiliated with universities around the world, these institutes facilitate language instruction, host cultural events, and promote interdisciplinary academic exchanges. Their activities go beyond language learning to encompass broader cultural engagement, showcasing literature, history, music, philosophy, and societal values. By doing so, they help cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the host country's identity and worldview, thus reducing cultural barriers and fostering international goodwill.

These institutes act as diplomatic intermediaries, strengthening bilateral and multilateral ties by offering platforms for people-to-people diplomacy. Their presence in foreign universities allows for the institutionalization of soft power strategies, embedding cultural narratives within the academic and social fabric of host communities. In this regard, language and cultural institutes are indispensable partners in the larger project of educational diplomacy, amplifying the role of universities as global cultural ambassadors.

3. Case Study: ULIM's Role in Educational Diplomacy

The Free International University of Moldova (ULIM) offers a compelling example of how universities can act as dynamic agents of educational diplomacy through sustained engagement with cultural and language institutions. ULIM's commitment to international education and intercultural dialogue is most notably exemplified by its collaboration with the Confucius Institute, which plays a central role in promoting Chinese language and culture in Moldova.

3.1. ULIM and the Confucius Institute: Bridging Cultures Through Language and Heritage

Established in September 2009, through a partnership between the Northwest Normal University Lanzhou (NWNLU) and Free International University of Moldova, the Confucius Institute at ULIM has become a key institution in Moldova for Chinese language education and cultural exchange. As of 2024, it has reached over 1,000 students across 16 study centers (5 universities, 8 schools, 3 preschools, and a children and youth center) throughout the country, including in Chisinau, Balti, and Comrat. This

partnership plays a crucial role in bridging cultural divides and fostering mutual understanding between Moldova and China.

The Institute offers comprehensive Chinese language instruction across multiple proficiency levels and supports a Bachelor's degree program in English-Chinese Translation/Interpretation within ULIM's Faculty of Foreign Languages. It administers internationally recognized Chinese language proficiency exams (HSK) and provides students with opportunities to participate in study-abroad programs, summer schools, and language immersion camps in China.

Beyond the classroom, and with the support of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of Moldova, the Institute fosters cultural engagement through a wide range of events, such as Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations, calligraphy workshops, Wushu martial arts demonstrations, traditional tea ceremonies, seminars on Chinese philosophy and history, as well as additional cultural activities.

Since its founding, the Institute has trained over 12,000 students and organized approximately 500 cultural events, attracting more than 50,000 participants. These initiatives not only deepen intercultural understanding but also contribute to China's soft power efforts in the region by promoting a nuanced and dynamic appreciation of Chinese culture.

This model of engagement reflects a broader trend wherein universities serve as cultural ambassadors, fostering long-term people-to-people diplomacy. By integrating cultural education into academic spaces, ULIM helps strengthen the educational and diplomatic ties between Moldova and China.

Recent studies further highlight the strategic relevance of these initiatives. Jing Wang (2024) underscores the importance of integrating Chinese language education into Moldova's national curriculum, emphasizing that structured implementation would significantly improve communication, cooperation, and educational diplomacy. Wang outlines policy strategies for expanding access and embedding language training into Moldova's educational framework.

Yifeng Wang (2024), director of the Confucius Institute at ULIM, expands on this by discussing how language education serves as a vehicle for understanding China's socio-political values and its approach to global governance. He argues that the Confucius Institute's work at ULIM positions the university as a regional hub for Chinese soft power, enabling deeper bilateral relations and educational influence.

Statistical evidence supports this view: by 2024, 31 Moldovan students had received scholarships to pursue studies in China, 10 students had participated in the prestigious "Chinese Bridge" language competition, and 24 students had attended summer camps in China. The Institute also plans to expand Chinese language instruction to underserved regions, with new centers proposed in Sângerei (north Moldova) and Cahul (south). This geographic diversification reflects a strategic commitment to inclusive educational outreach.

ULIM has also supported academic collaboration through the publication of research, such as a recent monograph on *medicinal plants used in Eastern Europe and traditional Chinese medicine*, and plans to establish a Moldovan-Chinese research center. Furthermore, to sustain local expertise, the Institute is developing a faculty model that aims to reach a 1:3 ratio of local to Chinese-appointed instructors by 2026.

Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how ULIM, in partnership with the Confucius Institute, serves as a model of educational diplomacy in action - leveraging language, culture, and academic collaboration to foster mutual understanding and strengthen international relations.

3.2. Incorporating Insights from the 2024 World Chinese Language Conference

The 2024 World Chinese Language Conference was held from November 15 to 17 at the China National Convention Center in Beijing, centered around the theme “Interconnection, Integration, Inheritance, Innovation.” Hosted by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the event convened over 2,000 participants from more than 160 countries and regions, including government officials, educators, scholars, and diplomatic envoys.

President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory letter to the conference, highlighting the Chinese language as a vital cultural contribution to the world and expressing hopes that the event would foster linguistic connectivity and mutual understanding among civilizations. Vice-President Han Zheng delivered the letter at the opening ceremony, reaffirming China’s commitment to supporting international Chinese language education.

A notable highlight of the conference was the exhibition titled “Extraordinary 20 Years,” commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Confucius Institute. The exhibition illustrated the remarkable global expansion of Chinese language education, with 499 Confucius Institutes and 764 Confucius Classrooms established across 161 countries and regions, serving more than 20 million students worldwide.

The conference also featured the pivotal role of volunteer Chinese language teachers in global educational diplomacy. As a participant and keynote speaker representing ULIM, I underscored the significant contributions of these educators in promoting the Chinese language and culture worldwide, functioning not only as teachers but as cultural ambassadors fostering mutual understanding. The seminar in which I participated brought together over 200 international attendees and emphasized the importance of teacher adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and cross-border dialogue in global language education.

The conference reaffirmed the essential role of institutions like the Confucius Institute in advancing China’s soft power by facilitating sustainable educational collaborations and intercultural exchange. ULIM’s active involvement in such global initiatives strengthens its position as a hub for internationalization in higher education, promoting peaceful coexistence through educational diplomacy. These insights illustrate how volunteer educators and university partnerships collectively contribute to shaping a more interconnected and harmonious global society.

Overall, the 2024 World Chinese Language Conference reinforced the significance of language as a bridge for cultural exchange and mutual learning, aligning closely with China’s broader Global Civilization Initiative aimed at promoting international cooperation and understanding.

3.3. Language, Culture, and South Korea’s Soft Power Strategy

Established in December 2008, the Sejong Korean Language and Culture Center at the Free International University of Moldova plays a pivotal role in advancing South Korea’s soft power strategy through education and cultural diplomacy. The Center offers Korean language instruction across multiple levels and supports a Bachelor’s degree in English-Korean Translation/Interpretation within ULIM’s Faculty of Foreign Languages. This academic program equips students with the linguistic and intercultural competencies necessary for careers in translation, international affairs, and global communication.

Beyond the classroom, the Center engages students and the broader community through immersive cultural events such as Hangul calligraphy workshops, Hansik (Korean traditional cuisine) cooking classes, K-pop dance sessions, Korean film screenings, and observances of Chuseok and Seollal. These activities promote a deeper understanding of Korean society, aligning with South Korea's broader goal of enhancing its international image and influence through cultural exchange.

3.4. ULIM as a Regional Node of Korean Cultural Diplomacy

The Sejong Center has positioned ULIM as a key regional hub for South Korea's cultural diplomacy in Eastern Europe. Over the past 15 years, it has developed an extensive network of institutional collaborations, facilitating cultural exchange, academic mobility, and public diplomacy.

- **Collaborations with ten South Korean universities** - including Korea University, Hanyang University, Sungkyunkwan University, GIST, and Hannam University - have resulted in the academic mobility of **over 100 ULIM students** and the participation of **more than 200 South Korean volunteers** in Korean language summer schools held across Moldova.
- Through the **Global Korea Scholarship (GKS)** and other scholarship schemes, **21 ULIM graduates** have pursued postgraduate studies in South Korea.
- The Center has hosted **over 300 participants** for the **TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean)** and organized **numerous public lectures, conferences, and forums featuring ambassadors, academics, as well as regional and international experts in fields such as Korean studies, international relations, economics, agriculture, and information technology.**

In addition to its strong bilateral ties with South Korea, the Sejong Center has cultivated a diverse network of partners across **Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine**, including:

- **Academic institutions** such as the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University, Alecu Russo State University of Bălți, Kyiv National Linguistic University, and Southern Ukrainian National Pedagogical University.
- **Local governments** from municipalities such as Stauceni, Budesti, Sangerei, and Bozieni.
- **National NGOs**, including **IDIS Viitorul**, **FIM "Calea Fericii"**, and **A.O. Clubul Sportiv Taekwondo**.
- **International organizations**, such as **KOICA**, **Better World**, **Hwarang International Youth**, **WOMAU**, and the **National Institute for International Education (NIIED)**, which oversees programs like TOPIK and GKS.

The Center also maintains ongoing cooperation with the **Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Moldova** (headquartered in Kyiv) and the **Korean Education Center in Kyiv**, both of which provide institutional support for regional programming and diplomatic outreach.

On an annual basis, the Sejong Center trains **over 300 students** and extends its impact through **promotional Korean language and culture programs** implemented in high schools and gymnasiums across the country. These initiatives contribute not only to language education but also to broader intercultural awareness, aligning with South Korea's strategic use of **soft power through cultural diplomacy**.

3.5. Impact and Regional Significance

Although comprehensive annual statistics are still being consolidated, the consistent growth in enrollment and cultural participation highlights the Center's increasing influence. The broad range of collaborations and the high demand for Korean language and culture reflect Moldova's rising interest in East Asia and affirm ULIM's strategic role as a cultural and educational bridge between Europe and Korea.

In this context, the Sejong Center functions not only as a language institute but also as a cultural ambassador, contributing meaningfully to South Korea's soft power footprint in the region. Its success mirrors similar outcomes in other global locations, confirming the role of universities like ULIM as key platforms for advancing cultural diplomacy in a globalized world.

4. Expanding Educational Diplomacy Through Virtual Exchange

In addition to traditional cultural exchange programs, ULIM is increasingly embracing intercultural virtual exchange initiatives to enhance its international outreach. In today's globalized and digitally interconnected world, virtual platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for cross-border dialogue and collaboration. As discussed in my recent article, *Internationalizing Higher Education and the Role of Intercultural Virtual Exchange* (Ciumacenco, 2024), such programs enable students to interact with peers from diverse cultural contexts without the constraints of physical mobility, making them an essential component of contemporary educational diplomacy.

ULIM actively promotes virtual exchanges by facilitating collaborative online courses, webinars, and international conferences involving partner universities worldwide. These initiatives foster cultural understanding by allowing students to discuss global challenges, share academic research, and collaborate on projects with international peers. Beyond broadening students' perspectives, virtual exchanges help develop vital skills in cross-cultural communication, skills that are increasingly important in 21st-century diplomacy.

My study argues that virtual exchange programs are effective tools for the internationalization of higher education, providing broader access to global knowledge and nurturing connections among students from varied cultural contexts. ULIM's commitment to these digital initiatives reflects a shift toward more inclusive and flexible forms of international education that complement traditional face-to-face interactions. Through these efforts, ULIM positions itself at the forefront of educational diplomacy, leveraging digital platforms to foster meaningful intercultural dialogue and participation in global academic networks.

4.1. ULIM's Broader International Partnerships

Beyond collaboration with the Confucius Institute, ULIM has developed extensive partnerships with universities across Europe, Asia, and North America. These alliances facilitate joint research projects, student exchanges, and cross-cultural academic events, further establishing ULIM as a major contributor to Moldova's global educational outreach.

A key example of this commitment is ULIM's hosting of international conferences that gather scholars, students, and diplomats from diverse countries. Such events enable participants to engage in rich cross-

cultural dialogue, exchange academic insights, and build enduring professional relationships. Through these activities, ULIM not only enhances the academic experience of its students but also bolsters Moldova's diplomatic profile on the international stage.

4.2. Impact of International Collaboration on Moldova's Diplomacy

ULIM's international collaborations serve as a critical instrument for advancing Moldova's diplomatic relations. By promoting educational and cultural exchanges, the university fosters a sense of global citizenship among its students, equipping them to engage respectfully with diverse cultures and contribute to international peace and cooperation. This reinforces Moldova's image as a country that values cultural diversity and international collaboration, aligning with broader diplomatic ambitions in the region.

The educational diplomacy efforts led by ULIM - particularly through the Confucius Institute, Se Jong Center and the integration of virtual exchange programs - are part of a larger strategy to amplify Moldova's soft power in international affairs. Incorporating Chinese language and culture into Moldova's education system, alongside partnerships with global universities and the use of digital exchange platforms, underscores the country's commitment to fostering global ties and participating actively in worldwide cultural diplomacy.

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the crucial role that universities play in advancing cultural dialogue and promoting shared global values in an increasingly interconnected world. Through educational exchanges and international collaboration, institutions such as the Free International University of Moldova serve as key facilitators of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

The presence of both the **Confucius Institute** and the **Sejong Korean Language and Culture Center** at ULIM demonstrates how higher education can transcend borders - promoting language learning, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. These centers exemplify how universities can operate not only as academic institutions but also as cultural ambassadors, fostering peaceful coexistence and constructive global engagement.

By supporting such initiatives, universities play a pivotal role in advancing educational diplomacy, fostering long-term international cooperation and collaborative progress. In doing so, they help shape a global environment where cultural diversity is valued, intercultural dialogue is promoted, and international partnerships are not only strengthened but sustainably maintained.

References

- Blake, D. (2023). Moving towards a multipolar world need to be a bad thing. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/33888a23-2cdf-4b04-bd16-8529acdc386c>.
- Castro, P., Lundgren, U., & Woodin, J. (2019). Intercultural dialogue: an educational approach. *Educational Approaches to Internationalization through Intercultural Dialogue: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 3–15.
- Ciumacenco, V. (2024). Internationalizing higher education and the role of intercultural virtual exchange. *Universitas Europaea: Towards a Knowledge-Based Society Through Europeanisation and Globalisation – International Conference Proceedings*, 1, 45–59. Chisinau: ULIM. Retrieved from https://conferinte.stiu.md/sites/default/files/evenimente/Conf_ULIM_Vol%201_UNIVERSITAS%20EUROPAEA_1.pdf.

Council of Europe (2008). *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together as Equals in Dignity*. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/white-paper-on-intercultural-dialogue-living-together-as-equals-in-di/168071f3e1>.

Knight, J. (2020). Knowledge Diplomacy: What are the key characteristics? *International Higher Education*, (100), 38–39.

Marginson, S. & Rhoades, G. (2002). Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: A glonacal agency heuristic. *Higher Education*, 43(3), 281–309.

Nye, J. S. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

The 2024 World Chinese Language Conference: Interconnection, Integration, Inheritance, Innovation https://conference2024.chinese.cn/m_meetingMaterials.

UNESCO (2017). *Intercultural Dialogue in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000257930>.

United Nations (2022). *Knowledge Diplomacy for Global Challenges*. United Nations Policy Brief. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/knowledge-diplomacy-2022>.

Wächter, B. (2009). *Intercultural dialogue on the university campus*. Bergan, S. & Restoueix, J. (ed.). *Intercultural dialogue on campus*, 133-140. France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/intercultural-dialogue-on-campus/168075ddd9>.

Wang, J. (2024). Integrating Chinese language education in Moldova: Optimizing language programs for enhanced cooperation. In Prus, E. (ed.) *Universitas Europaea: Towards a Knowledge-Based Society through Europeanisation and Globalisation – International Conference Proceedings*, 1, 60–74. Chisinau: ULIM. Retrieved from https://conferinte.stiu.md/sites/default/files/evenimente/Conf_ULIM_Vol%201_UNIVERSITAS%20EUROPAEA_1.pdf.

Wang, Y. (2024). Chinese education and its role in global governance: Insights from the Confucius Institute at ULIM. In Prus, E. (ed.) *Universitas Europaea: Towards a Knowledge-Based Society Through Europeanisation and Globalisation – International Conference Proceedings*, 1, 75–90. Chisinau: ULIM. Retrieved from https://conferinte.stiu.md/sites/default/files/evenimente/Conf_ULIM_Vol%201_UNIVERSITAS%20EUROPAEA_1.pdf.