



Stressing the Importance of Science Diplomacy within EU Higher Education

Position Paper by the European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance

Introduction

The imminent unveiling of the European Commission’s “European Strategy for Higher Education” is expected to present incentives and support mechanisms for the transformation of universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) in the EU to better achieve objectives related to research, education, innovation and contributions to society; and to create and strengthen synergies between the [European Research Area](#) (ERA) and the [European Education Area](#) (EEA). While the Alliance certainly welcomes this move to bolster higher education in the EU, it is also concerned that a vital ingredient for confronting myriad global challenges, spurring innovation and facilitating international collaboration is left underutilized in the strategy: **science diplomacy**. This paper seeks to illuminate the ample space for science diplomacy in institutions of higher education in hopes that it will be an important consideration as the strategy develops.

The Global Commons of Knowledge

On one hand, the current age is defined by a long list of global challenges, from climate change to pandemics, famines to the proliferation of artificial intelligence. On the other, it is also defined by an exponential growth of knowledge about these problems. The digital revolution, coupled with globalization, has meant that this knowledge can rapidly travel into minds anywhere, circumventing previously impenetrable barriers like geography or language. Given this proliferation of knowledge, solving the plethora of global challenges should be within reach. However, knowledge overwhelmingly tends to be reserved in national spheres to bolster knowledge economies and national innovation systems. Thus, the global commons of knowledge is left underutilized in its potent capacity to mitigate great transborder challenges. There have been commendable steps taken to bolster the global commons of knowledge, such as the EU’s [open science policy](#), which includes the [European Open Science Cloud](#) (ESOC) that houses open data under the umbrella of [FAIR](#) (findability, accessibility, interoperability and reusability). Nonetheless, scientific knowledge is still trapped in a dichotomy between openness and competition.

This is where universities come in. As important centers of research, they hold the key to mobilizing the global commons of knowledge and unlocking its potential to better mitigate the array of global challenges. As the vanguards (as opposed to just the producers) of knowledge, universities would assume emboldened science diplomacy roles as they advocate on its behalf through tackling currents of anti-scientism, reducing fragmentation between highly specialized fields, impacting debates and synthesizing knowledge into policy advice.¹ The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), which harmonizes complex research into policy guidance, could serve as an effective model. However,

¹ Van Langenhove and Burgelman (2021). Viewpoint: Science diplomacy needs a refresh to meet contemporary European needs. Science Business. <https://sciencebusiness.net/viewpoint/viewpoint-science-diplomacy-needs-refresh-meet-contemporary-european-needs>



there first needs to be the incentive for universities to shift away from the national spheres and towards stewardship of open knowledge. Adjusting the rewards system in support of this shift could serve as the catalyst for change. Supporting universities and other higher education institutions to facilitate this transformation should be considered in the Strategy, as it repositions science and knowledge towards common goals, and elevates the role of the institutions as science diplomacy actors. Doing so would play a pioneering part in mobilizing science for the global commons, and thus, for the good of the world.

The Local and the Global

Science diplomacy – the nexus of foreign affairs and scientific activities – has a global scope, though implementation is often done on the local level. The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) are a good example of this: they are multilaterally devised on the international stage, but come into fruition when applied by communities. The same is true for a range of international agreements with a scientific dimension, from climate accords to conservation conventions. Consequently, the practice of science diplomacy stands to benefit when actors are engaged on both levels.

With that in mind, universities and higher education institutions provide essential science diplomacy contributions to the global, regional and local / national echelons. On the global level, universities indirectly contribute both human resources and scholarly expertise to international organizations at the helm of global governance. Moreover, they are able to facilitate direct international connections between professors, researchers and students from across the world.² Regionally, the [European Universities Initiative](#) stands to bolster these capacities further through establishing and fortifying ties across borders. Meanwhile, on the local / national level, universities can enact policies that attract bright minds from around the globe to their campuses, opening doors to facilities where the practice of science diplomacy is acted out.³ There are also numerous [case studies](#) of universities and university networks working to implement the SDGs, thus helping to locally materialize the global vision. The Strategy should therefore take into account this multifaceted role played by universities in the context of science diplomacy and aim to further empower their position as actors at the crossroad of national and global.

The Absence of Science Diplomacy Culture

As it stands, practitioners of science diplomacy tend to stumble into the practice rather than aspiring to it from a young age. Indeed, most members of the Alliance are either researchers and practitioners of international relations who appreciate the value of incorporating the scientific dimension into the field, or scientists who realize the impact that their work can have on the practice of diplomacy. Such career serendipity is not enough to ensure robust future generations of science diplomats who can navigate the barrage of issues that have both diplomatic and scientific implications, such as (inter alia) climate change, cryptocurrencies, big data and artificial intelligence.⁴ What is needed is a concerted effort to bolster the culture of science diplomacy in the EU, as that will pay dividends in the form of future torchbearers of the practice.

² Del Canto Viterale (2018). University as a global actor in the international system of the 21st Century. *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 6 (1), pp. 169-98. [https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6\(1\)-2018pp169-198](https://doi.org/10.18543/tjhe-6(1)-2018pp169-198)

³ Šime (2020). Why Active Listening is an Essential Ingredient in the EU's Science Diplomacy 'Laboratories'. *USC Public Diplomacy Magazine* 23 (3), pp. 19-22.

⁴ Mauduit & Gual Soler (2020). Building a Science Diplomacy Curriculum. *Frontiers in Education* 138 (5). Doi:10.3389/educ.2020.00138



Universities and higher education institutions hold great potential as breeding grounds for a science diplomacy culture. Science diplomacy might become a part of the narrative that is introduced to young scientists who get engaged in international cooperation networks. The Strategy should realize this and include incentives for universities to develop curricula and activities that merge the fields of international relations and science. Considering the different skill sets required by each field, such measures would be valuable in bridging the skill gap between them. Surely, as new multilateral and multi-stakeholder forums emerge, such as [Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#) of the World Economic Forum or the United Nations [Science, Technology & Innovation Forum](#) for the SDGs, fresh cohorts of science diplomats equipped with the required skills for navigating the interface of science and foreign policy will be needed; universities are key in sowing those seeds. Science diplomacy itself should also receive greater attention in university classrooms, as there are currently scant examples of it on higher education curricula (and the examples where it does exist are predominantly in American universities).

Expanding Opportunities

Needless to say, some universities and higher education institutions prioritize research, while others focus more on teaching and training. Both of these aspects are integral for the practice of science diplomacy. However, there tends to be a silo effect, where students and academics remain at the same institution for much of their career. This stymies the amalgamation of ideas and experiences that could help advance, *inter alia*, the field of science diplomacy. Concerted efforts, with the notion of science diplomacy in mind, should be made to increase mobility between higher education institutions. Encouraging students to seek research experience in an international environment in the course of their career at the same university throughout their academic career would have a similar effect. If the Strategy bolsters incentives like this, it would enrich not only the grounds for a more vibrant science diplomacy culture, but also for other disciplines and European integration as a whole. If a focus on science diplomacy forms parts of the development of institutions of higher education, the contribution of these institutions to the response to global challenges will be strengthened. The fields of activities that can be addressed through this strategic reorientation may include the integration and inclusion of disadvantaged people, the challenge to guarantee equal opportunities in higher education for everyone, a value-driven approach towards securing academic freedom and quality standards, and other aspects that are related to sustainable goals.

Concluding Thoughts

Currently, universities and higher education institutions are largely absent in both science diplomacy literature and practice. This is understandable in the sense that science diplomacy has long been a tool employed by states to advance national interests, while (western) universities have long enjoyed a degree of autonomy from the state. It also makes sense that universities may shy away from the chance to become diplomatic actors in their own right following controversies like the [Lex-Central European University](#), or the [scandal](#) at the London School of Economics that involved a questionable doctorate awarded to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. However, universities are also paramount institutions for the production of science and knowledge. They also hold the unique profile of having ties to both the national and global communities. Meanwhile, they are undoubtedly vital places for shaping the mind and skillsets of young professionals in such a way that promotes the values enshrined in the [Lisbon Treaty](#). Those factors position universities as potent science diplomacy actors, and they should be considered as the European Strategy for Higher Education moves forward.



The EU Science Diplomacy Alliance is an initiative launched in 2021 by the three Horizon 2020 projects dedicated to the study of science diplomacy: EL-CSID, S4D4C and InsSciDE. Currently consisting of 17 organisational members from across Europe, the Alliance aims to develop, maintain and organize joint research projects, capacity building and training activities pertaining to science diplomacy.

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