

**Academic Diplomacy and Intercultural Dialogue in the Age of Globalization:
The Role of the University as a Cultural Mediator**

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Abstract

In a world characterized by intensified globalization and the simultaneous reassertion of cultural and symbolic borders, intercultural dialogue has become a critical societal and educational challenge. This article examines the role of universities as cultural mediators through the lens of academic diplomacy, understood as a values-driven form of international engagement grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and knowledge exchange. Drawing on contemporary theoretical frameworks and empirical insights from the International Association of Universities' 6th Global Survey on the Internationalization of Higher Education, the paper explores how internationalization can foster intercultural understanding while acknowledging its uneven effects across regions.

Using the Free International University of Moldova (ULIM) as an institutional case study, the article analyzes three complementary dimensions of academic diplomacy: intercultural virtual exchange, language-based cultural diplomacy, and cross-border academic cooperation within international consortia. These initiatives illustrate how universities create spaces for dialogue, promote intercultural competencies, and contribute to social cohesion in contexts shaped by migration, digital transformation, and geopolitical tension.

The findings suggest that internationalization does not automatically generate intercultural understanding; rather, its societal value depends on intentional, inclusive, and values-based strategies. By acting as cultural mediators, universities play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable intercultural networks and supporting peaceful coexistence in a re-bordered global landscape.

Keywords: Academic diplomacy; intercultural dialogue; internationalization of higher education; cultural mediation; virtual exchange; global citizenship

Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has profoundly reshaped the ways cultures interact, communicate, and coexist. Advances in digital technologies, increased mobility, and the internationalization of education have contributed to an unprecedented density of intercultural encounters. Yet, contrary to earlier assumptions about a "borderless world," contemporary societies are witnessing the reassertion of boundaries, symbolic, cultural, ideological, and informational. Migration, geopolitical tensions, digital polarization, and

identity politics have transformed intercultural communication into a field marked as much by contestation as by cooperation.

The notion of the world as a “borderless” space has been critiqued by numerous scholars (Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999), yet the lived reality is nuanced: while flows of people, information, and capital traverse national borders with increasing ease, cultural and symbolic borders remain potent. These borders are embedded within historical narratives, collective memories, and competing definitions of identity. As such, intercultural dialogue is not merely a descriptive term but a normative imperative requiring active cultivation (Byram 2008; UNESCO 2017).

In this context, intercultural dialogue can no longer be understood merely as a desirable outcome of cultural contact. It has become a critical competence for democratic citizenship and social cohesion. As UNESCO (2017) and the Council of Europe (2008) emphasize, intercultural dialogue is a public responsibility, requiring institutional commitment and long-term educational strategies. Universities, as spaces where knowledge production, identity negotiation, and cultural interaction converge, are uniquely positioned to respond to these challenges. They operate at the intersections of culture, policy, and pedagogy, enabling not only the transfer of knowledge but also the negotiation of meanings across cultural boundaries.

This article argues that higher education institutions increasingly act as cultural mediators through what can be conceptualized as academic diplomacy. This framework extends beyond traditional academic internationalization by foregrounding values such as inclusion, reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared understanding. Using the Free International University of Moldova (ULIM) as an institutional case study, the paper explores how universities foster intercultural dialogue, promote shared values, and contribute to peaceful coexistence through internationalization strategies, virtual collaboration, language and cultural diplomacy, and cross-border academic networks.

Academic Diplomacy as a Framework

The concept of diplomacy has historically been associated with state actors and formal political negotiations. Yet, the expansion of global interdependencies has seen non-state actors, including international organizations, civil society, and universities, play increasingly influential roles in international relations (Richmond 2011; Nye 2004). Within this broader milieu, academic diplomacy emerges as a distinct but complementary form of international engagement driven by educational, cultural, and research collaboration.

Academic diplomacy refers to the set of practices through which higher education institutions engage in cross-border dialogue, cooperation, and cultural exchange to foster mutual understanding, trust, and shared values. It encompasses a range of activities, from formal partnerships and collaborative research to student mobility and intercultural exchange programs, and is grounded in the belief that education and knowledge production can serve as tools for peacebuilding and social cohesion (Knight 2020; Ciumacenco 2025).

In *Universities, Education, and Diplomacy: Promoting Values and Cultural Dialogue in the Globalized World*, I argue that academic diplomacy represents a values-driven alternative to traditional state diplomacy (Ciumacenco 2025). This approach prioritizes dialogue over negotiation, reciprocity over hierarchical interests, and shared learning over unilateral influence. While states may engage in diplomatic initiatives to advance geopolitical agendas,

universities engage in knowledge-based cooperation aimed at mutual enrichment and the cultivation of global citizenship.

This perspective aligns with Jane Knight's (2020) concept of knowledge diplomacy, which emphasizes the role of education, research, and innovation in building international relationships that transcend competitive frameworks. Similarly, UNESCO's emphasis on global citizenship education situates intercultural dialogue as a central tenet of educational practice (UNESCO 2017). These frameworks place universities not merely on the periphery of international relations but at the center of community-building processes in a globalized world.

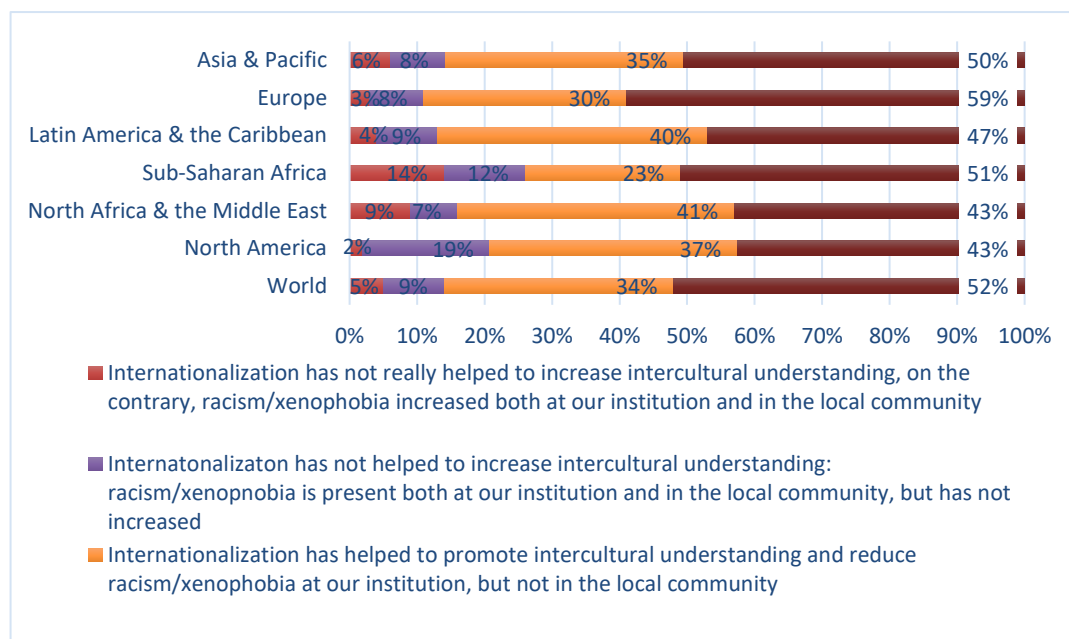
By extending diplomatic practice into the realm of education, academic diplomacy also redefines the boundaries of soft power. Joseph Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. While higher education institutions often contribute to national soft power by attracting international students and enhancing cultural visibility, academic diplomacy shifts the focus to collaborative processes that emphasize mutual respect and shared agency.

Internationalization and Intercultural Understanding: Insights from the IAU Global Survey

The assumption that internationalization inherently promotes intercultural understanding has long been embedded in higher education policy and institutional discourse. However, research increasingly suggests that this relationship is neither automatic nor uniform across contexts (IAU Horizons). Internationalization may generate meaningful intercultural learning outcomes, but only when it is intentionally designed, pedagogically grounded, and guided by explicit institutional values. The 6th Global Survey on the Internationalization of Higher Education, conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) between January and June 2023, provides valuable empirical insights into the complexity of this relationship.

According to the IAU Horizons publication *Internationalization: A Powerful Tool for Intercultural Understanding and to Fight Racism and Xenophobia* (Vol. 28, No. 2), a majority of higher education institutions worldwide recognize the development of intercultural and global competences as a primary benefit of internationalization. At the global level, 52% of responding institutions identify intercultural competences as a key outcome of internationalization, while 86% agree that internationalization contributes to reducing racism and xenophobia within institutions and their surrounding communities (Figure 1). These findings confirm that internationalization can function as a powerful mechanism for fostering intercultural understanding and social cohesion when embedded within broader educational and societal missions.

At the same time, the survey reveals significant regional variations that complicate overly optimistic narratives. In Europe, 59% of institutions report positive effects of internationalization on intercultural understanding and the reduction of racism and xenophobia at both institutional and community levels. By contrast, in Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately one quarter of respondents report negative effects, with 14% indicating an increase in racism or xenophobia. These disparities underscore a critical conclusion: internationalization does not inherently produce intercultural understanding. Its societal impact is contingent upon institutional context, power asymmetries, resource distribution, and the presence or absence of inclusive and reflexive practices.

Figure 1. Internationalization, intercultural understanding and racism/xenophobia

The survey further highlights a gap between awareness and communication. While higher education institutions across regions increasingly acknowledge the positive societal impact of internationalization, these effects are not always systematically assessed or effectively communicated. The lack of evidence-based narratives and visible success stories limits the recognition of internationalization as a tool for social transformation beyond academic environments. As a result, the intercultural and societal value of internationalization risks remaining under-articulated in public and policy debates.

ULIM's participation in the IAU Global Survey as a full member institution situates its experience within this global conversation. The survey findings reinforce the need for universities to move beyond quantitative indicators, such as mobility flows or partnership numbers, and to focus instead on the qualitative, ethical, and societal dimensions of internationalization. A values-based approach to internationalization, aligned with principles of equity, reciprocity, and social responsibility, enables institutions to position intercultural understanding not as a by-product of international engagement, but as an intentional educational outcome. In this sense, internationalization emerges as a powerful, yet contingent process, one that requires deliberate institutional strategy if it is to contribute meaningfully to intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Methodological Note: Institutional Case Study

This article adopts a qualitative institutional case study approach, using ULIM as an illustrative example of how academic diplomacy and intercultural dialogue are operationalized in practice. The analysis draws on institutional documents, program

descriptions, participation in international networks, and evidence from previously published research by the author (Ciumacenco 2024; Ciumacenco 2025).

The case study method enables an in-depth exploration of practices that are context-specific yet conceptually transferable (Yin 2018). While ULIM's experience reflects the particular socio-cultural and geopolitical context of the Republic of Moldova, a country at the crossroads of Eastern and Western European influences, the initiatives discussed here resonate with broader debates on values-based internationalization, intercultural communication, and the social role of universities.

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the aim is not to generalize statistically, but to provide an interpretive analysis that offers insights into how universities can function as cultural mediators in diverse and dynamic global contexts.

Case Study I (Core): Intercultural Virtual Exchange

One of the most significant developments in the internationalization of higher education over the past decade has been the rise of intercultural virtual exchange. This modality has gained prominence as a response to the limitations of traditional mobility-based internationalization, which often privileges students with greater financial and social resources. Intercultural virtual exchange offers a more inclusive alternative by expanding access to global engagement and intercultural learning beyond physical mobility.

At the Free International University of Moldova, intercultural virtual exchange has been implemented through collaborative projects with international partner institutions, notably a joint initiative with the University of South Florida (USA). Integrated into academic courses, this project engaged students in comparative legal research through joint online sessions, small-group discussions, and shared academic outputs. Drawing on the author's previous research (Ciumacenco 2024), this case illustrates the potential of structured virtual interaction to cultivate intercultural competence within formal educational settings.

The findings from this initiative indicate that virtual exchange fosters key intercultural competencies, including communication skills, cultural self-awareness, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. Importantly, student reflective feedback revealed a deeper understanding of human rights frameworks and diverse cultural perspectives despite the absence of physical mobility. As one participant noted in a post-project reflection, "We did not travel abroad, but we discovered another worldview."

Beyond individual learning outcomes, this case illustrates how virtual spaces function as new intercultural borderlands in which identities are negotiated, and meanings are co-constructed across geographical and cultural divides. Intercultural dialogue, in this context, does not emerge spontaneously but is the result of intentional pedagogical design, mediated by digital technologies and supported by reflective engagement. Intercultural virtual exchange thus embodies academic diplomacy in practice: it democratizes access to international learning, challenges mobility-centered hierarchies, and fosters sustained dialogue across cultural and geographical boundaries.

Case Study II: Language as Cultural Diplomacy

Language education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of intercultural communication and cultural diplomacy (Phillipson 1992; Byram 1997). ULIM's engagement with language and cultural centers, particularly the Confucius Institute and the Sejong

Korean Language and Culture Center, exemplifies how universities act as platforms for people-to-people diplomacy and shared cultural engagement.

The Confucius Institute at ULIM, established in 2009, operates not merely as a language training center but as a cultural bridge between Moldova and China. Offering academic programs, community courses, and cultural activities, the Institute has engaged over 12,000 learners and organized hundreds of cultural events. Through scholarships, competitions, and academic exchanges, students become cultural mediators, translating linguistic competence into intercultural understanding.

Similarly, the Sejong Center, founded in 2008, promotes Korean language and culture while supporting academic mobility and intercultural learning. These initiatives demonstrate how language functions not only as a communicative tool but as a medium for identity formation, reciprocal recognition, and sustained intercultural dialogue.

In both cases, language education becomes an instrument of academic diplomacy, transforming universities into spaces where cultural narratives are shared, negotiated, and humanized. This reflects broader trends in intercultural communication theory, which highlight language as a primary vector for meaning-making and relational negotiation in diverse contexts (Kramsch 1998; Piller 2011).

Case Study III: TransFrontEU and Cross-Border Resilience

ULIM's participation in the TransFrontEU Consortium further illustrates universities' role in addressing cross-border challenges through academic cooperation. TransFrontEU brings together 20 higher education institutions, including universities from Spain, Eastern Europe, and Asia, with a focus on globalization, interculturality, sustainable development, governance, and inclusion.

The consortium responds to regions marked by socio-economic disparities and historical tensions. Rather than reinforcing borders, TransFrontEU emphasizes collaboration, shared problem-solving, and academic diplomacy in practice. By fostering academic mobility, joint research, and institutional dialogue, TransFrontEU contributes to cross-border resilience and mutual understanding. In this sense, networks do not erase borders but reconfigure them as spaces of cooperation rather than division.

This case highlights how academic diplomacy operates not only at the level of individual student or faculty engagement but also at the institutional and structural levels, shaping partnerships that transcend national priorities in favor of shared values and collective action.

Discussion: Universities as Cultural Mediators

The three case studies presented illustrate complementary dimensions of academic diplomacy: virtual intercultural exchange, language-based cultural diplomacy, and cross-border institutional cooperation. Taken together, they demonstrate how universities function as cultural mediators in a re-bordered global context marked by mobility constraints, digital transformation, and renewed tensions over identity. Rather than operating solely as sites of knowledge transmission, universities emerge as spaces of dialogue where cultural meanings are negotiated and shared values are cultivated.

Academic diplomacy is increasingly shaped through transnational academic networks operating within normative European and international frameworks. Initiatives such as the

Council of Europe's Open Academic Networks (OCEAN) exemplify how universities and scholars collectively promote human rights, cultural diversity, linguistic pluralism, and shared heritage through education and research. By linking academic activity to key normative instruments, such as the European Cultural Convention and the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, these networks reinforce higher education's role as a mediator among policy frameworks, societal values, and intercultural practice. In this sense, academic diplomacy extends beyond bilateral institutional agreements to encompass value-oriented scholarly engagement embedded within multilevel governance systems.

The case discussed in this article suggests that values-based internationalization enables universities to move beyond predominantly instrumental rationales, such as competitiveness, visibility, or mobility metrics, and to contribute more substantively to intercultural understanding and social cohesion. When internationalization strategies are intentionally aligned with principles of inclusion, reciprocity, and social responsibility, universities are better positioned to respond to the challenges of globalization while actively shaping the conditions under which intercultural dialogue can thrive. As cultural mediators, universities thus play a critical role in fostering sustainable intercultural networks and supporting peaceful coexistence in increasingly complex and fragmented societies.

Conclusion

In an era marked by renewed boundaries and global uncertainty, universities play an essential role in fostering intercultural dialogue and promoting shared values. Through academic diplomacy, higher education institutions act as cultural mediators, building bridges where political and social divisions persist.

The case of ULIM demonstrates that internationalization, when guided by inclusivity and ethical commitment, can strengthen intercultural competences, support global citizenship, and contribute to peaceful coexistence. Academic diplomacy thus emerges not as an abstract concept but as a lived educational practice that positions universities at the heart of efforts to build a more just, inclusive, and interconnected world.

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