Analysing South Africa's Soft Power in Africa through the Knowledge Diplomacy of Higher Education

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Abstract

In just 20 years of democracy, South Africa has benefitted immensely from the products of its high culture as reflected by its internationally recognized universities that have the potential to promote the country's national interests, particularly at the continental level. The role that South Africa's higher education plays as a sophisticated tool of influence in Africa's development is becoming increasingly critical to the transformation of the continent, thus strengthening its status as an important regional and global actor. Using the notion of soft power, this article provides an analysis of the significance of Pretoria's higher education for the country's international reputation and how its Higher Education Institutions could position themselves internationally for economic and geopolitical benefits. While the article shows that the increasing preference for higher education in South Africa – especially by African academics and students – is a valuable soft power platform for Pretoria to assert itself as an acceptable regional power in Africa, it argues that this has shortcomings at the continental level.

Keywords: higher education, internationalisation, knowledge diplomacy, knowledge economy, soft power, Higher Education Institutions

Résumé

En seulement 20 ans de démocratie, l'Afrique du Sud a beaucoup bénéficié de sa haute culture, comme en témoignent ses universités internationalement reconnues qui ont le potentiel de promouvoir les intérêts nationaux du pays, en particulier au niveau continental. Le rôle que joue l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain en tant qu'instrument sophistiqué d'influence

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sur le développement de l'Afrique devient de plus en plus crucial sur la transformation du continent, renforçant ainsi son statut d'acteur important aux niveaux régional et mondial. En utilisant la notion de puissance douce, cet article analyse l'importance de l'enseignement supérieur pour la réputation internationale du pays, et la manière dont ses établissements d'enseignement supérieur pourraient se positionner au niveau international pour des avantages économiques et géopolitiques. Lorsque l'article démontre que la préférence croissante pour l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud – en particulier les universitaires et les étudiants africains – est une précieuse plateforme de puissance douce pour l'affirmation de l'Afrique du Sud en tant que puissance régionale acceptable en Afrique, il soutient également que cela présente des lacunes au niveau continental.

Mots-clés : enseignement supérieur, internationalisation, diplomatie du savoir, économie du savoir, puissance douce, institutions d'enseignement supérieur

Introduction

In the past twenty years, the fabric of South African society along with its institutions and agencies has undergone remarkable transformation, attracting many immigrants. Changes within the higher education system were predicated on the need to redress the apartheid legacy as well as the imperative to incorporate higher education in the broader context of a competitive global economy (Botha 2010). As a result, higher education in South Africa has not only experienced transformation in terms of its racial composition but it has witnessed a significant increase in students and faculty from across the world (Lee and Sehoole 2015). Given these trends, using Nye's (2011) notion of soft power (the ability to influence others and achieve national self-interest(s) through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion, military force or economic sanctions – commonly referred to as hard power), we analyse the significance of Pretoria's higher education for the country's international reputation and how its Higher Education Institutions (henceforth, HEIs) can be positioned internationally for economic and geopolitical benefits.

In his book, Nye (2011) identified five critical components of soft power: Business Innovation, Culture, Government, Diplomacy and *Education* (authors' emphasis). Tomalin (2013: 1) citing Anholt (2012) also noted the value of education as a "means of enabling a country to punch above its military and political weight". According to him, education represents one of the factors that encourage interest, immigration and investment. Countries are beginning to harness these advantages as a (soft) power instrument, specifically through higher education. For instance,

countries such as Britain and the United States (US) have been very vocal in highlighting their soft power status through "English language and the quality of their higher education systems and scholarship" (See Tomalin 2013: 2). As Jones (2012: 42) stated, modern-day states conceive higher education "as a method of influencing future relations via co-option and internalized agent cooperation is being utilized as a foreign policy tool and proactive medium, in an attempt to establish long term security concerns by utilizing soft power methodologies". In essence, there is no gainsaying that great power and major powers leverage the soft power products of higher education to expand the traditional base of their power.

Emphasizing the importance of soft power and higher education, South Africa's National Development Plan (henceforth, NDP) (NPC 2012: 241) argued that, "In areas such as science, culture, *higher education*, sport and environmental protection, there is a need to showcase South Africa and promote its presence and leadership on strategic issues as part of its *soft power* in international relations…" (authors' emphasis). This statement highlights four major points. First, the NDP recognizes the role of higher education (among other soft power sources) as a tool to promote South Africa's leadership presence in the global arena. Secondly, and as a corollary of the first point, this means that, there is a seeming conviction and sense of awareness among state officials of the potency of higher education as a subtle instrument to transform South Africa's international image and reputation. Hence, the NDP takes cognizance of the strategic value and utility of South Africa's higher education as a soft power component to help achieve its foreign policy ambition of reinforcing its leadership within Africa and beyond. A third and perhaps more conspicuous point is that, the NDP recognizes South Africa's willingness to use higher education as a platform to showcase its soft power status in the international arena as part of what is often regarded as 'Knowledge Diplomacy'. While this may not necessarily or immediately translate into practical policy payoffs or outcomes, the evidence from the NDP shows that South Africa, indeed, intends to boldly and concretely mobilise its higher education as a reputational instrument based on the acknowledged value and utility that it offers for international influence.

A fourth point that could be extrapolated from the NDP statement is that the drafters of the Plan acknowledge that the traditional instruments of state diplomacy, specifically through the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) as well as professional diplomats and special envoys, are insufficient to meet the demands of contemporary international relations. Understanding that the arena of power interaction

has changed significantly in the twenty-first century, states are beginning to realize that "not all foreign policy goals can be achieved by merely wielding hard power assets" (Isike and Ogunnubi 2017: 288). More importantly, South Africa cannot afford to suffer from this illusion. Smith (2012), also emphasizes that South Africa needs to work harder at increasing its soft power influence if it seeks to compete with other emerging powers.

The NDP statement, thus, prompts a number of pertinent questions: Does South Africa's higher education produce any significant soft power resource capable of advancing the country's foreign policy interests? In what ways can HEIs in South Africa help to transform Pretoria's international image and produce moral authority and attraction as products of its soft power? How has South Africa used its higher education as a means to project its soft power and gain strategic geo-political advantage? Does South Africa's investment in higher education represent a systematically planned policy to project Pretoria's soft power regionally and perhaps globally? Since there have been few attempts to interrogate the pattern and dynamics of relations between South Africa and Africa in the context of higher education and soft power; we seek to fill this gap in the literature.

While there is little analysis of soft power, particularly in its application to African countries, there is a fledging literature on South Africa's soft power (Ogunnubi & Uzodike 2015; Smith 2012). This reflects increasing interest in the utility of soft power for South Africa's foreign relations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that until now, there has been no serious attempt to critically examine the nexus between soft power and higher education in the South Africa context. In this article, we aim at filling the gap by examining the connection between soft power and South Africa's higher education in order to determine its prospect and challenges for the future of Pretoria's international interactions.

We present the paper in five sections. We provide a brief conceptual overview of the idea of soft power in the first section while in the second section, an assessment of the nexus between soft power and higher education from the context of knowledge economy and international relations is presented. In the third section, we examine the phenomenon internationalisation of higher education in South Africa while in the fourth we provide an analysis of the connection between South Africa's higher education and soft power. In the fifth section, we draw conclusions.

Conceptualising Soft Power

In the last decade of the twentieth century when South Africa emerged from international isolation, the concept of soft power was being developed and

advanced by American Political Scientist, Joseph Nye. Since 1990 when Nye's first explanation on the concept emerged, the idea has remained on the lips of scholars, policy-makers and education leaders alike (Knight 2014). Nye (1990) espoused that there were generally three ways through which a state could influence the behavior of other states: through coercion (military force), payment by inducement and by means of persuading the people and government of a country to share the same values as oneself. It is this third component of power interaction that Nye refers to as soft power.

Since Thucydides, the notion of power has remained a common denominator of international politics and has featured constantly in discussions on international interaction (Baldwin 2012). However, Morgenthau (1948) noted the lack of agreement on the defining form, role and nature of power within the broader discourse of international relations and security studies. Traditional realist approaches to the study of power have often revolved around the orientation of the elements of a state's national power conceived purely in material and tangible terms. Power, in this sense, is conceived essentially in terms of a state's capabilities measured by military strength, economic capacity, technological capability; and natural resource endowment as well as human resource competences. However, international interactions have suggested that there are several other ways through which states are able to influence the behaviour of others (Nye 2004). While these traditional hard power components have remained relevant in the designation and hierarchy of power within the international system, there is overwhelming evidence to show that new forms of power are beginning to emerge in contemporary international politics.

Applying his analysis to the US, Nye attempts to draw a distinction between soft power and the resources mobilised to achieve it. He defined soft power as "the ability to get others to want what you want" (Nye 2002: 9). Although Nye's original definition of soft power has changed remarkably, the fundamental logic of his argument has remained fairly intact. In his book, *Bound to Lead*, Nye (1990: 95) explains that the concept of soft power "rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" and fundamentally implies getting others to willingly choose your own preference through co-option rather than coercion. In his view, it is "the ability to entice and attract" others without having to deploy hard power threats because "if I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want to do" (Nye 2002: 549). This requires the ability to determine and shape the agenda and preferences of other actors with the ultimate objective of making them see the sense in cooperation rather than confrontation – thus reducing the need for the mobilization of hard power.

Nye further identifies three rafts of sources upon which a state's soft power rests: culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and foreign policies (when they are considered legitimate and as having moral authority) (Nye 2004). Culture, on the one hand, represents the values, norms and practices that give meaning to a society in the form of literature, art, education, music, entertainment, tourism and hospitality, popular media, and indigenous products. These represent the social accomplishments, positive values and standards of a people, as they "symbolize a greater society built on personal freedom" (Hackbarth 2009: 3). On the other hand, political values are ideals such as respect for fundamental human rights, freedom of the press and popular participation in government. These values have the capacity to inspire confidence and build attraction from others (Nye 2008). Thirdly, the projection of well-designed foreign policies also serves as an important aspect of a country's soft power as a state can use its foreign policy mandates to set international moral standards for all to emulate.

Despite his useful assessment, Nye fails to make a clear distinction between the sources of soft power. For instance, his analysis of foreign policy, as different from culture and political values, appears to be logically flawed. Beyond Nye's three sources of soft power, economic and military capacity can also yield soft power results of attraction as well as reputation. We argue that sources of power are neither soft nor hard in form and nature but depend on the way and manner in which they are mobilised as well as the context in question. As Li (2010: 216) observed, "the key to whether a certain power source becomes soft power or hard power is how a state (or any other actor) uses its power". In this regard, Li's (2010: 216) assertion that soft power originates from a "state's prudent, and cautious use of power that can provide various public good for the international society, benefit other actors, and at least create win-win situations in international relations" is perhaps appropriate.

Soft Power and Higher Education: Any Nexus?

The nature and context of contemporary international relations has undergone a dramatic transformation, especially since the end of the Cold War in which "a state-centric process which focuses primarily on ministries of foreign affairs and professional diplomats is no longer adequate" (Knight 2014: 2). Several new actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational corporations, professional associations and diplomatic experts are increasingly transiting the corridors of contemporary diplomacy. South Africa's higher education is increasingly becoming one

of these critical tools for diplomatic engagement within the ambits of knowledge and cultural diplomacy where the foreign public includes not only the government but also prospective international staff, faculty and students. Among the very popular examples of soft power in higher education include the Fulbright Programme, the British Council, the German Academic Exchange Service, the Confucius Institutes (henceforth, CIs), and Erasmus Mundus among others (Knight 2014).

Scholars have offered varied perspectives on the link between soft power and higher education from a non-western position (Yang 2015, 2007; Botonero 2013). Yang, for instance, explored this connection from China's perspective by examining its CIs. Arguing that China's economic and political prominence has occurred concurrently with the rise in its soft power, he contended that the instrument of higher education was the fulcrum of China's systematically planned soft power policy (Yang 2007). According to him, although under researched, higher education, as a soft power diplomatic tool, has played an important role on how Beijing China portrays itself as a world leader and how it attempts to position itself in a multipolar, post–Cold War. Through the CIs, China has been very forceful in promoting international exchange and collaboration in education and culture, thereby using soft power diplomacy to enhance its regional and global influence.

Equally, from a European Union (henceforth, EU) context, Botonero (2013) usefully provides a nuanced assessment of the important role that European higher education played in projecting soft power within the context of globalisation, political upheavals, and economic recession. The author argued that three main instruments have foregrounded the EU's response to the phenomenon of globalisation in the field of higher education: the Tempus Programme; the influence of the Bologna Process on global higher education reform and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Botonero 2013). As a result, through these policy measures, the European higher education system is considered a model for educational reforms in other countries and regions. Thus, as its NDP affirms, the need for South Africa to continuously explore the dynamics between international relations and higher education cannot be overemphasized.

International Relations, Higher Education and Knowledge Diplomacy

Several scholars have made extensive contributions to the notion of knowledge diplomacy as an aspect of contemporary international relations that is distinct from cultural and public diplomacy (Knight 2014; Johnston

2012). Originally attributed to the works of Ryan (1998) and more recently Knight (2014; 2015), the idea of knowledge diplomacy has been used to examine the contributions of higher education as a diplomatic tool and its prospects for achieving foreign policy priorities. Knight (2014) argued that soft power must be conceived outside the constructivist and interpretive notions of soft power. In other words, knowledge diplomacy cannot be considered a form of soft power because the power paradigm must be perceived differently from a diplomatic framework. Although, the argument of whether the ideals that knowledge diplomacy represents are indeed a reflection of soft power or vice versa will continue to rage as the heated conversation between Teferra (2014), Knight (2014) and Johnston (2012) show, we argue that knowledge diplomacy is an instrument and resource through which the soft power profile of a state can be actualized.

For instance, Botonero (2012: 1) remarked that, in the current global era, "the importance of knowledge, research and innovation, the so called 'knowledge triangle', have changed forever the mission and function of the higher education sector and the social responsibility of universities, which are considered to be essential engines for knowledge development and human capacity building". Knight (2014) also argued that a major noticeable impact of the forces of globalization has been its implications for the dynamics of international relations and more importantly, higher education. She affirmed that, while there have been extensive studies within the purview of diplomacy and internationalisation of higher education, there are very few in-depth studies on the nexus between international relations and higher education. The notion of knowledge diplomacy, perhaps, provides a useful link.

Similarly, Johnston's (2012) case for knowledge diplomacy raised five critical points. The first is that in today's globalized era, the tentacles of a state's progress are inherently concatenated within the confines of knowledge diplomacy through the "ability to develop and advance knowledge". According to him, "knowledge – as opposed to military might or GDP – is gaining momentum as the new currency and passport to success" (p. 1). Secondly, the preponderance of information has prevailed to the extent that information has become easily accessible. Through knowledge diplomacy, states can open up new frontiers of relationships with people and their countries in ways that foster global harmony. Thirdly, the speed and ease of communication invoke unprecedented global experiences and change how international relations are conducted. Consequently, states are increasingly turning towards hard core evidence that informs choice and behavior. Fourth, highlighting the importance of collaboration, Johnston (p. 1)

explained that "ideas are improved when shared and tested through action". Through sharing knowledge, states can navigate their foreign relations in non-traditional ways. Finally, he argued for the need to promote further practices in science and mathematics which have historically "propelled global leaps in communications since the time of the printing press" (p, 1).

Botonero, Knight and Johnston's analyses suggest that South Africa has demonstrated sustained aplomb and eagerness to utilize its knowledge diplomacy – underscored by its higher education – to promote a soft power influence that produces strategic geo-political dividends. The visibility of South Africa in most international soft power rankings such as the Country Brand Index 2012/2013, the Institute for Government Soft Power Index and the Rapid-growth Markets (RGM) Soft Power Index 2012, serves as an example. In fact, based on these statistical surveys, South Africa unequivocally harbors the largest reservoir of soft power assets in Africa.

The Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa

While very little research has been conducted on the role of higher education in projecting South Africa's soft power per se, the trends in the internationalisation of higher education in the country do show attempts by various actors that could be implicitly associated with soft power. The notion of internationalisation has been defined differently by different people. Broadly, "internationalisation is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into purposes, functions, or delivery of higher education whether this be at national, sectoral or institutional level" (CHE 2004: 212). Altbach (2010: 6) held that "internationalisation includes specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments or institutions to cope with or exploit globalization. Internationalisation describes the voluntary and perhaps creative ways of coping". The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2004) makes a distinction between *internationalisation at home* and *cross-border or transnational higher education*. The former refers to the intercultural and international dimensions of teaching and learning on a home campus and the latter is transnational activities such as cross-border teaching.

In South Africa, the internationalisation of higher education, especially by individual universities and the activities of the International Education Association of South Africa (henceforth, IEASA) show great awareness of the need for these universities to position themselves as a conduit of Pretoria's soft power. South Africa's meaningful engagement with the internationalisation of higher education started after the 1994 democratic

dispensation as prior to this period, the country was internationally isolated due to apartheid (Botha 2010). With the advent of democracy, South Africa re-entered the international arena and became a member of several bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the Southern Africa Development Community (henceforth, SADC). This offered space for South Africa to exploit its soft power resources to attract students and staff from outside the country, especially from other African countries, and, more so, the SADC.

Since 1994, the South African higher education sector has been successful in attracting international students and staff mainly as a result of individual universities' efforts to develop internationalisation polices. For example, in exploiting South Africa's soft power, the University of Cape Town (UCT) has developed a policy on internationalisation that, apart from reflecting its own mission, draws on treaties such as the SADC Protocol on Education and the IEASA. The university outlines the following six key principles of internationalisation:

- *Excellence and mutual benefit*: that excellence is the benchmark of all internationalisation; that international students should be selected on merit and academic suitability for a particular programme; and that bilateral and multilateral agreements with institutions should be demonstrably to the benefit of all partners to the agreement.

- *Equity and institutional culture*: that internationalisation should promote equity and transformation.

- *Position in Africa*: that one aspect of internationalisation is increased linkages within the SADC region and enrolling SADC students on the same terms as locals.

- *Research and academic autonomy*: that academics have the right to develop their own individual academic links and collaborations, both formal and informal.

- *Curriculum*: benchmarking the university against international standards without losing sight of the need for course offerings to be relevant to both regional and international conditions.

- *International student numbers*: that a maximum number of international students should be set each year.

Similarly, in its policy on internationalisation, Rhodes University (RU) commits itself to internationalisation as a key element of quality in university teaching and research.

In its 2007-2016 Strategic Plan (2008), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (henceforth, UKZN) stressed that the university will encourage

the international mobility of staff and students and selected exchange programmes and promote the concept of internationalisation at home. As noted earlier, internationalisation at home hinges on the intercultural and international dimensions of teaching and learning on the home campus where, for example, learning outcomes reflect international or intercultural dimensions. The Strategic Plan (2012: 12) further states that,

> the university will promote the concept of 'internalization at home' by implementing teaching strategies that draw on the experience of incoming staff and students and incorporate African knowledge; by cultivating respect of diverse cultural experiences and perspectives through the initiation and facilitation of intercultural events and discussion fora that include our own students and staff and by integrating international students and staff into the local environment.

Apart from universities, the IEASA contributes greatly to the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa by holding conferences and calling for a national policy on internationalisation. Kishun (2007) argued that the IEASA, a non-governmental, non-profit professional association of individuals and institutions, has been pivotal in advancing the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa. In calling for a national policy on internationalisation, the IEASA envisages the harmonization of the different policies on internationalisation between the higher education sector and government departments. Its impact is evident in the fact that most universities align their internationalisation policy to its policies.

Since 1994, there has been a significant increase in the number of students from other African countries studying in South Africa. A 2014 IEASA survey found that South Africa had 39 101 full-time students from other countries in 23 contact HEIs in 2012 and 30 960 in distance modes. As the NDP statement on higher education suggests, this is perhaps a demonstration of a perceived intention to position South Africa's higher education as an instrument of global attraction. Currently, the percentage of international students in South Africa stands at 9 per cent non-Africans, 16 per cent other African and 75 per cent SADC citizens respectively (Lee and Sehoole 2015).

Lee and Sehoole conducted a survey on mobility within the Southern Africa region in 2015 to determine the factors that drive and shape educational migration to South Africa as a regional, continental and global destination. They listed three main reasons for international students' decision to study in South Africa. The first are employment and economic factors; international students foresee that the quality of education received in South Africa could enable them to secure better future employment.

Secondly, South African higher education is considered high standard. Thirdly, South African higher education seems to be more stable than in most African countries. These findings showed that South Africa could be perceived as using the attractiveness of its higher education to lure international students as a demonstration of its soft power. South African universities as well as research supporting institutions such the National Research Foundation (NRF), and Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the South African Medical Research Council among others have been able to achieve this by offering incentives such as grants, scholarships and bursaries to deserving international students and faculty while also adopting equal employment opportunities where skilled, non-South African workers are able to apply for post-doctoral and faculty positions. In line with Lee and Sehoole's (2015) assertion that South Africa is a regional, continental and global educational destination, we argue that this attraction, especially at regional level to South Africa HEIs, can be perceived as a typical illustration of the extension of the country's soft power.

We argue further that South Africa's internationalisation policy has been a major source for the cultivation of the country's soft power in the arena of higher education. In this regard, South Africa's higher education policy prescription may be regarded as a strategic action to attract the foreign public and consequently gain credibility and recognition in the eyes of the international community. Armed with its relatively strong economy, South Africa's highly developed higher education sector – regarded as the most advanced in Africa – "has become a destination of choice for most African students and scholars wanting to further their studies and career opportunities" (Botha 2010: 208). This preference is aided, in part, by the ambience and reputation of most South African universities which are ranked highly and in many cases at par with its counterparts further afield.

Another important dimension of the internationalisation agenda of South African higher education is that, this phenomenon has nonetheless engendered the Africanisation of South Africa's higher education in a manner that makes both compatible (Botha 2010). Makgoba (1997: 203) defined Africanisation as "the process or vehicle for defining, interpreting, promoting and transmitting African thoughts, philosophy, identity, and culture. It encompasses an African mind-set shift from the European to an African paradigm". Africanisation is, thus, conceived of as all aspects of the internationalisation process which enables higher education to retain its African character in order to achieve certain academic, economic, political, and cultural objectives (Botha 2010). The appeal of South African higher education to the idea of Africanisation is that not only are Africans able

to uphold African aspirations, but non-Africans are able to respect and accommodate Africa's efforts to achieve these aspirations. The rising trend of African students and staff at South African universities, thus, highlights the need to Africanize its higher education in order to align national/regional development goals with existing global agendas (Kotecha 2004: 11).

By placing emphasis on scholarship that reflects the nuances of the African people, South African higher education has played major role as a soft power instrument to facilitate the deepening of African identity and culture (Le Roux 2001). This is a unique service that higher education in South Africa renders to Africa and the international community in general by training professionals, extending the frontiers of knowledge and contributing to research that addresses the specific needs of Africa's development (Botha 2010). For example, UKZN's mission is to be "The premier university of African scholarship", acknowledging its institutional commitment to the growth of African scholarship by developing a curriculum, institutional policies and collaborations that address these issues (Zeleza 2005). In the view of its former Vice-Chancellor, Professor Malegapuru Makgoba "The African University draws its inspiration from its environment, as an indigenous tree growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in African soil" (UKZN Research Office 2005: 18). Accordingly, research conducted at UKZN prioritizes and "draws inspiration from its African identity and takes seriously its responsibilities towards the development of the African continent" (UKZN Research Office 2005: 1). This epistemic claim of African identity suggests a policy resolve by the university to present an alternative narrative about Africa and lead efforts through knowledge production towards finding solution to development problems facing the continent.

However, as Kishun (2007) observed, a national policy on internationalisation is important for South Africa to better organize itself to use its soft power to attract more international students and faculty. For instance, national immigration policies and the South African Qualifications Authority's (henceforth, SAQA) evaluation criteria sometimes have the propensity to discourage international students, faculty and staff from opting to come to South Africa. Instances where the results of SAQA evaluations and Police Clearance Certificates (PCCs) take several months to be released and situations where the spouses of highly skilled immigrants are not allowed to work must be carefully considered, particularly given that they sometimes deter prospective international students and staff (Personal Communication 12/03/2015). Reinforced by pervasive xenophobic tendencies, these ambivalences have the potential to erode the dividends and good intentions of South Africa's knowledge diplomacy (Ogunnubi & Tella 2013).

South Africa's Higher Education as an Instrument of Soft Power

South Africa provides an interesting case study of understanding how higher education serves the role as a soft power tool. In other words, how has South Africa's investment in higher education helped to advance its international image and build its reputation regionally and globally? Its unique historical and cultural context also provides an interesting backdrop to examine its specific soft power approaches. Despite the lack of a national policy on internationalisation in South Africa, we go on to examine four major themes under which South Africa has extended its soft power through higher education.

International Ranking of South African Universities

While international university rankings have their challenges, they are now a permanent feature of global higher education systems. Describing the ranking of universities, Marginson (2007: 132) wrote that "ranking exposes universities in every nation to a structured global competition that operates on terms that favour some universities and countries, and disadvantage others…" Despite the disadvantages, university rankings have, thus, become important tools to attract students and staff to study and work at particular reputable institutions. It can, thus, be argued that these rankings have become a typical representation of a country's soft power (Nye 2004).

The two major ranking systems are the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (henceforth, SJTU) rankings and the Times Higher Education Supplement (henceforth, THE-QS) rankings (Marginson & van der Wende 2007). The two systems stress different aspects. For example, the SJTU rankings emphasize research, while the THE-QS focuses on reputation. Table 1 and 2 show the indicators and weights for the SJTU.

Table 1: The SJTU ranking: Indicators and weight

Indicator	Weight %
Highly cited researchers in broad categories	20
Articles published in Nature and Science	20
Articles in Science/Social Science Citation Index	20
Faculty with Nobel Prizes/Field Medals	20
Alumni with Nobel Prizes/Field Medals	10
Research performance on 1-6 per staff member	10
Total	**100**

Source: Badat, 2010

The THE-QS ranking indicators and weight are shown below:

Table 2: The THE-QS ranking: Indicators and weight

Indicator	Weight %
Academic peer review (email questionnaire)	40
Citations per academic	20
Academic staff: student ratio	20
Proportion of international academic staff	5
Proportion of international students	5
Employer review (global online survey)	10
Total	**100**

Source: Badat 2010

The problems associated with the SJTU, on the one hand, are that it is associated with big research universities, favors Science disciplines, favors English-speaking universities as most research is written in English and prioritizes US universities where most International Scientific of Indexing (ISI) researchers reside (Marginson 2007). On the other hand, problems have been identified with the THE-QS' surveys, which are seen to "indicate the market positions of different institutions but not their merits, a distinction that the Times Higher does not make" (Marginson 2007: 134). Further, the overemphasis on reputation and internationalisation favors universities such as those in the UK and Australia that are active in cross-border degrees (Marginson 2007; Badat 2010).

Notwithstanding these problems, the international ranking of universities plays a major role in influencing students' choice of universities. Both the SJTU and the THE-QS have consistently ranked South African universities higher than most other African universities. From 2010 to 2011, only three South African universities (UCT, University of the Witwatersrand (henceforth, Wits) and Stellenbosch University (henceforth, SU)) are listed in the top 500 universities in the world of the THE-QS ranking (QS 2011). The SJTU rankings for 2014 list the following South African universities: UCT, Wits, SU and UKZN as among top 500 world universities. Other university ranking indexes such as Webometrics also rate South African universities highly compared with their African and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South African (BRICS) counterparts. This has helped to attract international students to study in the country and has consequently elevated South Africa's international reputation. The higher ranking of several South African universities by ranking agencies placed South Africa in good standing and boosts its chances of using this subtle and nuanced form of power to

position itself as a key player in Africa. By influencing the perception of the foreign public and harnessing its power of positioning through its HEIs, South Africa is able to establish strategic partnerships and alliances that facilitate the actualization of its own foreign policy priorities.

Research Output and Funding

The ability to fund and showcase research capacity contributes significantly to soft power. Teferra (2013) argued that, while many African countries have increased their education budgets (including higher education) the increases are not commensurate with the rate of expansion. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the highest growth rate in higher education occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, sub-Saharan countries are amongst the poorest countries of the world (UNESCO 2009).

The visibility of African research generally remains very poor. In fact, research output from Africa seems to have declined (Harle 2013). While public funding of education seems to have been declining in South Africa (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008), research remains better funded than in most other African countries. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2014, 7) explains the research subsidy to South African universities as follows:

> In South Africa, universities receive subsidy for weighted research outputs. Weighted research output is calculated on the basis of a set of norms (targets) per permanently-employed academic/researcher at each institution and includes subsidy units for research Masters and Doctoral graduate outputs.

This funding mechanism enables South African universities to concentrate on research, which eventually improves their reputation and rankings and contributes considerably to the country's soft power. In other words, its commitment to research demonstrates South Africa's deliberate intention to influence its African neighbors by exercising soft power through funding higher education while retaining the fundamental objectives of state policy in terms of domestic obligations. Through funding interventions such as the Knowledge Interchange and Collaboration (KIC) grant, South Africa strives towards achieving an internationally competitive science, technology and innovation system. This is similar to a conference funding instrument of the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in collaboration with the NRF aimed at supporting the hosting of international conferences in South Africa or on its behalf elsewhere focusing on cutting edge scientific research and with great socio-economic potential (NRF 2015b). Remarkably, the

funding instrument has as its objective [to] promote South Africa as a science destination; increasing the competitiveness of the South African National System of Innovation (NSI); showcase South Africa's scientific endeavours and infrastructure, and to build capacity within the NSI; enhance networking within the science system; foster international collaboration in order to improve the quality of research outputs by researchers.

Knowledge Economy

Castells (1993) noted that knowledge and information have become the new electricity of the economy and that universities continue to perform important roles as the main knowledge institution in society. According to Florida (2005), three main characteristics of knowledge economies correlate with Nye's prescription of soft power: the emphasis on innovation; the enterprise culture, and the significance of education and human resources. He noted that these are vital components of the cultural infrastructure of knowledge economies. This has become a major goal of most countries in the world and a main platform for strengthening national soft power.

What are South Africa's knowledge exports and how has higher education contributed to this? The CHE (2011: 3) report indicates "Knowledge production, accumulation, transfer and application have become major factors in socio-economic development and are increasingly at the core of national development strategies for gaining competitive advantages in the global knowledge economy". Pointing out the potential of South Africa's knowledge-based economy for its economic diplomacy, the NRF 2015 Call for Infrastructure Funding emphasized that "The development and retention of high-end scientific and technological competencies is essential for South Africa to transform into a knowledge-based economy wherein the generation of new knowledge and scientific and technological innovations can bring about economic development, job creation and an improvement in the quality of life of its citizens" (NRF 2015a). A critical aspect of South Africa's soft power in higher education has been its capacity to champion knowledge production, transfer and dissemination in Africa within the broader context of a knowledge economy. Arguably, South Africa is far ahead of its African counterparts and its higher education has played a considerable role in this regard. In this sense, South Africa has been able to use this platform to dominate the discourse on critical African issues. The country's HEIs are, thus, strategically positioned to address national, regional and continental development demands within a knowledge-based economy. South Africa has been able to use its intellectual base as a soft power advantage. In an era of the knowledge-based economy, the principal

driving force of a nation's economic development and global competitiveness rests on the society's knowledge stock and innovative capacities (WIF 2014). In more recent years, South Africa has essentially been able to fuel its economic diplomacy – witnessed, for instance, in the country's multinational companies' expansion into Africa – through its knowledge economy. There can be no doubt that much of these efforts have been sustained by the higher education's contribution in the areas of research, training, innovation and international/regional collaborations.

South Africa has been able to propagate an African development agenda by means of its contribution to the discourse on the various issues on the African Agenda and build a science and framework for Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) for African development. South Africa's contribution to the nuclear industry through peaceful use of nuclear technology in Africa is also another example of its soft power. The South African Nuclear Energy Corporation Limited (Necsa), for instance, undertakes research and development in the field of nuclear energy and radiation sciences and technology. Being the only country to develop and voluntarily dismantle its nuclear weapons, South Africa has continued to demonstrate its resolve towards the peaceful use of nuclear science and technology, particularly in Africa, through its commitment to the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (Pelindaba Treaty). Higher education has, therefore, been a delicate yet powerful instrument of hegemonic control, particularly in the regional (read: continental) context with South Africa as an active participant. For instance, in 2009, reports emerged that several medical students from Zimbabwe were absorbed into the South African university system to complete their medical training following the total collapse of teaching facilities in that country. In 2013, as part of the Nigerian government's Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP), aimed at rehabilitating former Niger-Delta militants, the Nelson Mandela University (NMU) in South Africa absorbed a significant number of the more than 14 000 ex-agitators sent across the world for both academic and vocational certified training (Abazie-Humphrey 2014).

Educational Migration

Lee and Sehoole's (2015) recent study on the global and regional mobility of students to an emerging country such as South Africa revealed that the country is absorbing a sizeable chunk of international students. South Africa's contribution in the field of higher education is perceived to address the problem of brain drain in Africa by providing reasonable and often cheaper alternatives for international students. This is critical given

that Africa is the second largest continent in the word. South Africa's contribution to the development of international human capital, especially within Africa, has been one subtle way of reinforcing its position as an active global player (Lee and Sehoole 2015). In its twenty years of post-apartheid political history, South Africa has literally thrown its doors wide open to international scholars and students from across the world and particularly from the African continent. According to Lee and Sehoole (2015: 2), South Africa attracts a fair share of African students from outside its immediate region. With 55 countries comprising the African Union, South Africa is also a major destination for many African students further north, despite them being of much closer proximity to Europe and the Middle East. The country is also a popular destination for students from outside the continent. This preference for South Africa's higher education is a clear demonstration of the country's soft power influence with the possibility of payoffs in both the medium- and long-term.

As alluded to previously, the factors that drive and shape educational migration to South Africa as a regional, continental, and global destination are not unconnected to its deliberate internationalisation and can, in fact, be regarded as sufficient proof of Pretoria's power of attraction. As more and more students opt to study within their own region as against traveling to more distant destinations, the push-pull factors that motivate a preference for South Africa overwhelmingly indicate a positive (re)orientation towards the country. Lee and Sehoole (2015: 3, 4) also noted that, "The popularity of South Africa as a leading destination of choice for SADC and other African students makes South Africa a regional and continental hub in higher education and a worthwhile case study for the phenomenon of mobility". The authors argued that international educational mobility to South Africa is mainly based on geo-political considerations that make the country appealing, especially to the rest of Africa.

Another important factor that has underscored South Africa's soft power credentials in the area of knowledge diplomacy is the export of Doctoral graduates to the continent. Today, South Africa represents a critical PhD hub for Africa (Cloete, Sheppard, Bailey & MacGregor 2015). As universities have continued to remain a critical fountain for knowledge production, the PhD has become their apex training product and South Africa's contribution in this regard remains unchallenged (Gorman 2013). As Table 3 shows, there are seventeen African countries among the top twenty countries of origin of South Africa's 2012 international PhD graduates.

Table 3: Top 20 countries of origin of 2012 international PhD graduates

No.	Country	2012	Cumulative %
1	Zimbabwe	142	22.5
2	Nigeria	76	34.6
3	Kenya	43	41.4
4	Uganda	29	46.0
5	Ethiopia	23	49.7
6	United States	23	53.3
7	Cameroon	19	56.3
8	Ghana	19	59.4
9	Tanzania	18	62.2
10	Zambia	17	64.9
11	Democratic Republic of Congo	15	67.3
12	Lesotho	15	69.75
13	Malawi	15	72.1
14	Sudan	15	74.4
15	India	13	76.5
16	Mozambique	13	78.6
17	Namibia	13	80.6
18	Germany	11	82.4
19	Botswana	10	84.0
20	Rwanda	10	85.6

Source: DHET (2013b)

Similarly, between 2000 and 2012, a total of 4 546 international PhD graduates emerged from South Africa's 22 public universities as shown on Table 4.

Making Sense of South Africa's Knowledge Diplomacy of Higher Education

In the early hours of 14 March 2015, the world awoke to the news of the first successful penile transplant surgery in the world performed at SU on 11 December 2014 (*CNN News* 2015). This academic and medical breakthrough (among several others) was a remarkable signal of South Africa's soft power in higher education. As a result, South Africa's higher education has become a significant facilitator of the African development agenda and to a reasonable degree, served to yield the important geo-strategic benefits of international acceptance and global legitimacy. Curiously, very little attention has been paid to the role of higher education in projecting South Africa's influence.

Table 4: International PhD graduates per university (2000-2012)

Institution	2000	2004	2008	2012	Total for all years from 2000-2012	Accumulative percentage
UCT	25	33	51	80	676	14.9
SU	12	17	34	75	559	27.2
UKZN	13	25	39	70	554	39.4
UP	8	38	45	68	497	50.3
UNISA	31	27	28	62	467	60.7
Wits	17	29	40	48	414	69.7
UWC	4	9	16	33	224	74.6
NMU	1	4	10	30	215	79.3
NWU	2	7	10	30	207	83.9
UFH	-	2	7	25	166	87.5
RU	7	14	10	24	142	90.7
UJ	3	4	11	23	121	93.3
TUT	-	-	4	22	97	95.4
UFS	10	12	12	14	70	97.0
CPUT	-	-	3	11	40	97.9
UniZulu	-	1	3	5	36	98.7
Central	1	2	-	3	28	99.3
UL	-	3	1	3	10	99.5
Vaal	-	-	-	2	7	99.6
DUT	-	-	-	1	6	99.8
Univ of Venda	-	1	-	1	6	99.9
WSU	-	1	-	-	4	100.0

Source: DHET (2013b)

Paradoxically, despite the apparent potential of its higher education, there is yet a holistic state policy framework that seeks to extend South Africa's global influence through its higher education. As Nye (2014: 12) argued, "Government policies can reinforce or squander a country' soft power". What this means is that South Africa's policy posture in respect to internationalisation has the tendency to enhance or undermine its soft power influence. However, South Africa has, so far, failed to move towards a national policy on internationalisation or make any serious investment in a flagship educational agency or program. As statistics show, South African higher education continues to account for an increasing

number of international students and faculty. A national framework on South Africa's higher education engagement with the rest of Africa and, of course, the world would enable a holistic assessment of areas where the country could extend the tentacles of its knowledge diplomacy. Through such plan, South Africa would be able to comprehensively address the contradictions and limitations that hinder the successful cultivation of its soft power in higher education. The country, therefore, needs to strategically develop specific higher education policies for the two most critical concentric circles of its foreign policy: Southern Africa and Africa.

Expectedly, there are several impediments to the usefulness of higher education as a soft power diplomatic tool for South Africa. The idea of knowledge diplomacy has come to challenge existing notions of higher education which is traditionally regarded as agents on nation-building and national prosperity. Scholars such as Knight (2014) and Teferra (2015) critique the relevance of higher education as an instrument of soft power. Knight's argument is that because of the mutuality of interests and benefits involved in higher education evident in the promotion of exchange among students, faculty, culture, science, knowledge and expertise, higher education must be conceived only from the context of diplomacy and not power.

Although there is little evidence to show that soft power outcome in higher education is the result of deliberate intention on the part of the South African government, our analysis shows that, the attention paid to its higher education has inadvertently increased the country's international profile and the moral authority it enjoys as African intellectual citadel. South Africa can indeed make more effective use of the potency of its higher education through increased investment in tertiary education, elevating higher education to a role of prominence as a foreign policy tool and, more importantly, by developing a clearly framed policy that outlines its international behavior in this realm.

There is also the possible tension that the dividend of soft power is likely to create. As Alden and Schoeman (2015) observe, South Africa's symbolic representivity as Africa's regional hegemon, based largely on the global preference and international reputation it enjoys has been the source of much disdain from other contending African states. As Tikly (2004: 181) stated, "whereas development had in the past been a 'natural' phenomenon, in the new hegemonic worldview, development took on a transitive meaning, that is, it became something that could be performed by one actor or region over another actor or region". In this sense, through the subtle reinforcement of its soft power in higher education, South Africa's higher education may have the tendency to contribute to national and geopolitical dividends within the region, while also having the potency to fuel hegemonic contention among rival states.

For South Africa, successful engagement in soft power diplomacy of higher education would entail the following: first, and as stated earlier, would be a national policy that specifically addresses how South Africa intends to deliberately use higher education as a diplomatic tool to further its interests. Secondly, South Africa would need to find ways to address the policy inconsistencies that negatively affects its higher education prospects. This is critical for maintaining the increasing flow of educational migrants into the country. In this regard, how the country deals with increasing spates of xenophobic and Afrophobic attitudes towards African migrants would impact greatly on the projected results of its soft power diplomacy (Tella & Ogunnubi 2014; le Pere 2014). Also, in the long-term, much of the credence of South Africa's soft power will depend on whether South African students and staff are able to compete favorably with their regional and international contemporaries. Similarly, stakeholders in the higher education sector such as IEASA and CHE, perhaps, need to do more to interact with government officials to ensure that undue restraints to visa processing are removed. This is in addition to the need to critically review debilitating internal policies of universities regarding international students' intake.

While we show that the increasing preference for higher education in South Africa – especially by African academics and students – is a valuable soft power platform for Pretoria to assert itself as an acceptable regional power in Africa, we argue that the situation equally creates brain drain in the continent. This means that South Africa could become hegemonic and increasingly become a 'big brother' of the continent. We recommend that more regional cooperations work towards developing the whole region as propounded by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (henceforth, NEPAD).

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the possibilities that soft power offers to South Africa through its higher education for Pretoria's international engagement. We have highlighted the ways in which South African HEIs have been structured as a soft power resource in a manner that demonstrates the utilities of international acceptance, attraction, and geopolitical and economic benefits. Our major argument is that the increasing preference for HEIs in South Africa – especially among African students and staff – presents valuable soft power opportunities for the country to assert itself as a regional hegemon/ power in Africa. However, we have noted that this creates brain drain in the continent, hence, we have recommended more regional cooperation towards developing the whole region as advanced in the NEPAD.

Notes

1. According to the Country Brand Index of 2012/2013, South Africa is ranked 43rd; 14th globally and 7th among the list of emerging markets by RGM. Similarly, South Africa is ranked 20th in the Institute for Government Soft Power Index. In all of the rankings, South Africa is the only African country listed.

2. Xenophobia is derived from two Greek words: 'xeno' translated to mean 'foreigner' or 'stranger' and 'phobia' meaning fear; it can be interpreted to mean hatred or dislike of foreigners (Tella and Ogunnubi 2014). Writing on the effects of xenophobia on social integration in South Africa, Dlamini (2018) observes its prevalence through visible hostility and discrimination towards strangers or foreigners.

3. The KIC instrument was set up to contribute to the following objectives: internationalising South Africa's research platform; enhancing networking within the global science system; fostering collaboration in order to improve the quality of research outputs by researchers.

4. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a knowledge economy is "an economy in which the production, distribution, and use of knowledge is the main driver of growth, wealth creation and employment across all industries".

5. This term is used to refer to the exodus of highly skilled professionals from a country in search of better opportunities elsewhere, with the consequence of negative impact on the efficient functionality of the critical sectors of the economy of that country (see Mlambo and Adetiba 2017).

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