



Valdai Papers

#08 | December 2014

Universities as actors and  
instruments in diplomacy.  
The academic soft power  
potential.

Ettore Deodato

Iwona Borkowska

**Valdai** | Discussion  
Club

[valdaiclub.com](http://valdaiclub.com)

*I would like to preface this 8th issue of “Valdai Notes” with a brief comment. In our view, the work on universities by Dr. Ettore Deodato and Dr. Iwona Borkowska is the best illustration of the Valdai Club’s striving for universal knowledge of the universal world, a striving understood as a crucial tool for human organization and self-organization. The continuous string of recent world conflicts could certainly enmesh us in routine and superficial political science discussion, but our goal is to be able to see the forest in spite of the trees, the essence of the process. Universities are participants in and tools of diplomacy because they are the basis of mankind’s intellectual and creative efforts. Universities as an institution maintain and develop our common world by educating those who will carry on the torch. The work that follows shows this brilliantly. I think, to repeat, that the crackle of rumors and superficial judgments on the unending conflicts in a turbulent human world should be balanced by the ability to see and speak the truths of the Universe. There is no place better suited for honing this ability than the university. Read it, my colleagues!*

*Andrei Bystritsky,*

*Chairman of the Board,*

*Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club*

“Battleships like those of the first decade of the 20th century” – some political leaders speak openly about the function of today’s world class universities, as indicators of national power and prestige. The difference in the average life expectancy is much in favor of the modern equivalents. Their maintenance however requires a constant upgrading of expertise and investments. It’s a serious work, education, and it is not necessary to continue speaking about it in the shipbuilding or military language. The economic or political rhetoric might be by far more adequate. The challenges the (academic) world is facing nowadays can be met and transformed into opportunities only through intensive and targeted transnational and transsectorial cooperation. Internationalization plans are built on the consideration of financial and political opportunities. They are grounded in academic and universal values, which are at the very core of the sector’s soft power. There is all the more reason for all interested parties to recognize the enormous potential that lie dormant in institutions which were so far not considered as obvious and, for whatever reason, easy partners.

European programmes are driven by instrumental logic and are used as soft power – they are modelling the preferences of partner countries and of the member countries themselves, to make them perform to the best interest of the EU. The most important achievement of EU is the culture of peace. The EU model has some limitations though: it cannot play the role of a global peace stabilizer, as the international institutions turn out not to be effective enough. Therefore, the concept of “power” is relativized against modern challenges, which no superpower can meet on its own. Universities must realize that the brand “Europe” can be more successful than “EU“, its advantage being the historical and cultural heritage of the Old Continent. In order to capitalize on it, universities on both sides should identify and address the barriers which affect genuine and proper relations between Russia and EU.

The numbers bear out that the cooperation between Russian higher education institutions and those from EU is restricted in terms of operating partnerships. When the Erasmus+ Programme was introduced, two of its attributes were particularly highlighted: increased financing and more opportunities for collaboration with countries outside of the European Union. For many institutions this was a chance to make (more) use of the contacts already established. An increased mobility was about to follow in a climate of catching up opportunities which were not easily attainable in the past. As for the cooperation with Russia, as consequence of events and conflicts in the not academic world, the new Programme’s potential could not be released to the full extent.

## *Academic Prestige*

Why does higher educational internationalize? There are many rationales at the institutional level. In national strategies, the desire to be recognized as a nation with world class universities is one of the most important ones. Academic prestige is not attainable just by some international “reputation”. “World class” means WORLD class and not “top” or “highest” and is only measurable by the international scope of an institution (attracting considerable numbers of students and scholars from abroad), and by international standards applied to the quality assurance and research. Last but not least it depends on visibility and active network and project participation. At the same time, the

national approach is seen as academically less demanding and makes an institution fall behind the competition.

Europe is determined to become an attractive partner worldwide and it has a number instruments to achieve this goal. The members of the European Higher Education Area, with several of non-EU provenience, including Russian Federation, must press ahead with the standardization processes and collaboration for relevance of research and curricula, comparability within degree structures, qualification frameworks, quality assurance, the diploma supplement, etc. If not... There is evidence, that there is (academic) life out there (everywhere) and that our developments are being observed as well as that strategies are being adequately adapted. In fact, much can be learned from the reforms and innovations worldwide: lifelong learning and quality assurance are by far not “Protected Geographical Indication” products.

## *Universities surrogating diplomacy – culture and mobility as factors in reconciliation*

International components of higher education are not new. Historians refer in this respect to medieval times or let us follow mobile students and scholars over unpaved roads on the Thirty-Years'-war-torn continent. The “infamous” war ended with a negotiated settlement, the Peace of Westphalia, was an enormous slaughter involving eight of the major future European countries, at that time as Bohemia, Bavaria, Spain, England, France and Denmark, Norway and The Netherlands. In view of the 30 years of a stalemate in the diplomatic relations (in the modern sense of the word) among these entities, it is worth noting that “Academias”, “Studia”, “Clerici vagantes (savants in mobility, students or teachers)” were steadfastly active and, contributed simultaneously as “hidden rivers”, to the reduction of multiple antagonisms in their area of influence: the community of education and culture in several regions involved in the War.

In central Germany, the Lord Abbot of Fulda, Balthasar von Bernbach, also in charge of the “Studium” of the German city was both an Inquisitor and a “magister” for Bohemians, Dutch and French savants. The Protestant Duke Heinrich Julius of Brunswick, teacher of Theology (hunted witches but the same time) travelled to Leiden, contributing to the glory of the local University, created in 1575. His presence along with the one of multinational scholars Justus Lipsius, Joseph Scaliger, Franciscus Gomarus, Hugo Grotius, Jacobus Arminius, Daniel Heinsius and Gerhard Johann Vossius, made Leiden university become in a short time a highly regarded institution that attracted students from across Europe. The majority of them were coming from other major athenaeums in Europe, including war-torn regions. In January 1632, one of the most cruel of the years of this war, the Athenaeum Illustre was founded by the municipal authorities in Amsterdam. One of the first professors was Gerardus Vossius, who, quite significantly, 3 years before had been teaching anatomy in Salamanca, exactly at the climax of the War between catholic Spaniards and protestant Dutch.

The examples for the transcultural attitude of scholars multiply in the history of Europe's conflicts and wars: After the Second World War, already in September 1945 the Universities of Tour and Heidelberg were exchanging students and teachers, addressing the future needs and threats, despite of the preceding life and death conflict between France and Germany.

Universities, in more or less explicit terms, have a long tradition of using the "moral and cultural suasion". The curiosity to exchange ideas and the deep understanding for the necessity of doing so, had the capacity to overcome barriers. Against this background it is no surprise that in the early 80s, 25 years before their accession to the EU, Warsaw Pact countries were invited to join the EU programmes TEMPUS and ERASMUS – best diplomacy is made by aid. With Erasmus Mundus also the Russian Federation and the other countries, created after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, were actively cooperating with their European partners.

The favorable condition for diplomacy made by Academia is the high awareness and an unbiased perspective on historic, political, cultural and economic issues wherein multidisciplinary teams of independent scholars and scientists are able to position themselves. Exchange of ideas, information, arts and culture on the one hand and the cascade effect of education on the other facilitate the academic soft power performance. A positive agenda for cooperation is provided in spite of policy differences or embargos, creating a neutral platform for individual contact, and serves as a flexible, universally accepted vehicle for an approach with countries with which diplomatic relations have been strained or are suspended.

Language policies are a proven tool of diplomacy and language courses a kind of a "Trojan horse", on which British Council provides us a brilliant example when it performed in its diplomatic role during considerable IR collapses. The British Council for Relations with Other Countries was founded in 1934, by the Foreign Office of the United Kingdom. It offered a new and alternative approach to the traditional conduct of foreign affairs, called "cultural propaganda" and widely interpreted as "dissemination of British ideas and beliefs in general" rather than in a strictly political form. The hopes put in cultural propaganda would not only serve the British influence and prestige abroad, but would also effectively promote the ideals of global peace and understanding. At the initial stage, the British Council focused on supporting for English education abroad and promulgation of British culture through expert lectures at schools and universities, cross-border road shows of musical troupes and art promotion and it became the world's largest English language teaching organization with 70 centers in 53 countries.

Mutatis, mutandis, the European higher education, as it is declaring a deep concern about the employability of its graduates as well as striving to offer provision of new/rare but demanded skills, should be ready for an increase in the provision of Russian language courses, supported by Russian Universities, integrated into more comprehensive educational projects, and subsidies from external sources. We have been undoubtedly witnessing a period of disinterest in the Russian language in countries, where its acquisition has been imposed in some more distant past. Considering the enormous potential of the Russian speaking labour market however and the longing for a good job and an extraordinary career path, we might expect some kind of "retrouvailles" ceremony. This is where EU universities and Russian universities, interested to increase their importance in the field of modern languages and intercultural communication, can come into play. A big potential in this

regard is available also within the Jean Monnet Actions, which offer to Russian institutions the opportunity to develop their EU dimension and relevance, accompanied by considerable progressive financing.

The diplomacy supporting role of Universities is often defined as creating a “global citizen” and various student mobility programmes were established with the hope that cognitive enhancement would be accompanied with attitudinal change: growing “global understanding”, more favorable views of the partner country, empathy with other cultures, etc. However, given the fragmented, heterogeneous and still intransigently nation-state-based nature of the “globe”, the term “global citizen” reflects rather wishful thinking, that is, alas, often present in the HE rhetoric. It is not only detached from reality, but also dangerous, to teach unconditional “tolerance for other cultures” as there are cultures supporting values “intolerable” from the perspective of academic mission. The exposure to cultures and a conscious processing of this experience is supposed to create a “better citizen” rather than a global one. Socially involved “better citizens” could have a big diplomatic potential, be it in terms of global peace building, or as a task-oriented contribution to regional conflict solution.

## *Internationalization in HE and soft diplomacy*

Opposite to the 17th-century’s more or less spontaneous flows of students, scholars and ideas, the diplomatic element in international higher education was programmatically applied within the context of colonial empires, in France and the United Kingdom, and served the purpose of educating colonial elites friendly to their imperial mentors. In modern terms: capacity building and expansion in one. Another mode of diplomacy was performed during the Cold War, and was inspired by the emerging mass higher education systems and accelerating internationalization of higher education and research: the systematic recruitment of students in Africa, Asia and Latin America by the Soviet Union and its satellites in eastern Europe.

Today’s diplomatic driver is attributed to the free-market globalization and the knowledge society. Higher Education Institutions more and more often admit the subordination of their internationalization strategies to market advantages. Also the political (and therefore military) objectives of countries and regions are becoming increasingly obvious. Expanding diplomatic influence remains only one of 7 main rationales from which national internationalization policies are based. The others are recruiting high-quality teachers and researchers, securing commercial advantages, reinforcing academic prestige, the reforms of higher education and, securing non-public (non-national) sources of funding.

The most significant change in modern diplomacy is the shift from “hard” forms to “soft” forms. This cultural diplomacy, scheduled and systematic puts at the disposal of education providers a very wide range of rationales, activities, channels as well as intellectual tools. In times of increased probability of war the mobilization of all “soft resources” is crucial. A deep perception of this threat is not very

common in societies who lived long enough in democracy – the prevailing belief that changes cannot go backwards.

## *Ivory Towers. The mission of University*

How universities work depends, in fact, on how their people work and on the management style applied. These factors depend on the internal perception of the University's mission. Of all the possible models, two seem to be of particular relevance for the political suitability of an institution: the idealistic and the instrumental one. The idealistic model is less popular in general but it is still pronounced in certain countries. In this approach the University demonstrates a shared involvement in research and education as well as in the "search for truth" – notwithstanding the direct usability or applicability of scientific truths, the political convenience or economic benefits. A university understood in this way works for the sake of society at large and not for the benefits of stakeholders or just those, who are willing to pay the university for its services. This perception of university's nature is declining in Europe, but there are still some ivory towers in Europe, institutions, detached from the needs of the economics and society. Their members claim not to be perceiving any attempt from national governments to influence university's policies and decisions, and, more surprisingly, they feel free even from any internal pressures or incentives which might influence their professional activities or choices.

The instrumental model, in turn, is being strongly promoted and it is widely represented: it implies that a university is a tool of political agendas and has the mission to solve current social and economic problems. The influence of governments and external stakeholders on the one hand and the imperative of academic entrepreneurship on the other are two drivers of this approach.

Universities cannot avoid being just a part of the big picture, with all its economic, social, demographic and political aspects, they must react to threats adequately and seize opportunities as any other major actor. Additionally, exposed to the so called Toffler's wave with all its implications, higher education institutions are more and more challenged to justify their existence. For this reason, if the instrumental approach is applied, there are, at all levels, only winners (prestige, income generation, visibility, promotion factors and other incentives).

Both models imply a strong commitment to the diplomatic performance, however their differ in its definition. The idealistic model expresses the utopic, organic evolution towards global understanding and peace, while the instrumental responds to current needs in a pragmatic and strategic way. The political effectiveness and the utility in terms of public good and institutional cohesion.

## *Institutional strategies – the international component*

The European Union is executing its external and internal policies through the management of grants, as EU programmes communicate important and clear guidelines for business collaboration and constantly help to set up priorities, just as they do for the academic international cooperation. The commitment to the latter should be guaranteed in the institutional strategy and can be focused on some of the following areas and activities:

- academic programmes (study & work mobility for students and staff, language study, innovation and internationalization of curricula, thematic study, teaching innovations, joint/double degree, cross-cultural training, virtual education, summer schools, etc.);
- research (area and theme centres, joint research and research exchange, international conferences and seminars, publications, business cooperation, networks, alliances and partnerships, etc.);
- operations and services (integration of external financing, resource allocation systems, quality assurance and communication systems, Internationalization at Home, internationalization of the HR policy, international and mobile student support services, faculty and staff training, etc.)

The reasons, why an institution wants to address international cooperation and invest in it, can be of different nature: social/cultural (national cultural identity, intercultural understanding, citizenship development, social and community development), political: foreign policy, national security, technical assistance, peace and mutual understanding, national identity, regional identity, economic: growth and competitiveness, labor market, financial incentives; academic: international dimension to research and teaching, extension of academic horizon, institution building, profile and status, enhancement of quality, international academic standards. As these rationales reveal, the potential outcomes lie clearly in the extent of the diplomatic power. Additionally, the articulation of a global view ensures that internationalization is used as an overarching management tool and that the institutional culture is constantly updated.

Strategic plans in higher education must be ahead of reality and represent a long-time horizon. Some operational objectives concerning internationalization are easily achieved, and they soon need upgrading and extension which obliges aspiring institutions to reach beyond the current comfort zone and take initiative in transnational and transsectorial collaboration.

## *Conclusion*

Given the widespread expectations for the EU-Russia initiatives, the lesson on strategic thinking has been well learned so far. The enormous attractiveness of the eastern partner doesn't escape the attention of policy makers or institutions and individual stakeholders. There is a great potential of soft power on both parts of Europe, which can still grow through synergies.

Challenges will derive from this collaboration, just as they did undermine or even discredit the efforts made even within geographically and politically less sensitive frameworks at their early stage. The political circumstances are not the only, and probably not even the most serious of all impediments to transborder cooperation. But the case of European integration demonstrates that soft power applied in and through higher education is very well suited for the middle and longtime perspective.



### *About the authors:*

**Ettore DEODATO**, Team Leader of a group of 16 people working the European Projects Office of the Policlinico and Medical School of Siena, Jean Monnet Professor, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Held various positions in the European Commission in the educational programs.

**Iwona BORKOWSKA**, Head of the Centre for International Education, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Held various positions at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland in the international education cooperation.