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ENGLISH LANGUAGE-BASED HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN EAST ASIA AS A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INSTRUMENT: A PILOT CASE STUDY OF CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

Modern public diplomacy scholarship recognises the role of exchange programmes as a public diplomacy tool for both sending and receiving countries. However, the vast majority of scholarship focuses on the exchange experiences of international students in officially or technically English-speaking countries. The internationalisation of higher education and competition in the international higher education market have led to the proliferation of English language higher education programmes in countries where English is not considered a native language. This paper is an attempt to fill the research gap by examining English-language higher education programmes in South Korea and China from a public diplomacy perspective. By conducting a series of in-depth interviews with students and professors/administrators representing English language-based programmes, the study aims to provide a preliminary understanding of whether such educational programmes function as public diplomacy for South Korea and China. The research found that, in contrast to the case of China, there was limited cooperation between Korean scholars and international scholars based in Korea. Friendships and networks with local students were not strong in either country. Overall, however, students in both South Korea and China were satisfied with their experience in the country, which may, at least in part, contribute to perceptions of the host country. The paper concludes that English language-based programmes are indeed a public diplomacy tool for South Korea and China in the selected cases. Further generalisations require additional investigations.

Key words: international higher education, English language-based higher education program, public diplomacy, South Korea, China, education diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, academic cooperation, country image, nation branding.

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Шығыс Азиядағы ағылшын тіліндегі жоғары білім беру бағдарламалары қоғамдық дипломатия құралы ретінде: Қытай мен Оңтүстік Корея мысалындағы пилоттық зерттеу

Қоғамдық дипломатиядағы заманауи зерттеулер академиялық және студенттік өзара алмасу бағдарламаларын жіберуші және қабылдаушы елдер үшін қоғамдық дипломатия құралы ретіндегі рөлін мойындайды. Алайда, зерттеулердің басым көпшілігі негізінен ағылшын тілінде сөйлейтін елдерде шетелдік студенттердің тәжірибесін қарастыруға бағытталған. Жоғары білім беруді халықаралықтандыру және халықаралық жоғары білім нарығындағы бәсекелестік ағылшын тілі негізгі тіл ретінде қолданылмайтын елдерде ағылшын тіліндегі жоғары білім беру бағдарламаларының таралуына әкелді. Бұл зерттеу жұмысы Оңтүстік Корея мен Қытайдағы ағылшын тіліндегі жоғары білім беру бағдарламаларын қоғамдық дипломатияның құралы ретіндегі рөлін зерттеу арқылы зерттеулердегі олқылықтың орнын толтыруға тырысады. Ағылшын тілді бағдарламаларды ұсынатын студенттермен және оқытушылармен/білім саласындағы басқарушы қызметкерлермен терең сұхбат жүргізу арқылы мұндай білім беру бағдарламаларының Оңтүстік Корея мен Қытайда қоғамдық дипломатия функциясын орындайтындығы туралы алдын-ала түсінік беруді мақсат етеді. Зерттеу нәтижесіне сүйенсек, Корея Республикасындағы жағдайдың Қытайдан айырмашылығы, корей ғалымдары мен Кореяда орналасқан халықаралық ғалымдар арасындағы ынтымақтастық шектеулі екенін көрсетті. Жергілікті студенттердің шетелдік студенттермен достығы мен байланысы екі елде де әлсіз жағдайда екендігі белгілі болды. Жалпы алғанда, Корея Республикасында да, Қытайда да шетелдік студенттер өздерінің елдегі тәжірибелеріне қанағаттанды, бұл кем дегенде ішінара қабылдаушы ел туралы пікірдің жақсаруына ықпал етуі мүмкін. Зерттеу жұмысында ағылшын тіліндегі бағдарламалар таңдалған

жағдайда Оңтүстік Корея мен Қытай үшін қоғамдық дипломатияның құралы болып табылады деген қорытынды жасалады. Әрі қарай жалпылау қосымша зерттеулерді қажет етеді.

Түйін сөздер: Халықаралық жоғары білім, ағылшын тіліндегі жоғары білім беру бағдарламасы, қоғамдық дипломатия, қоғамдық дипломатия, халықтық дипломатия, Оңтүстік Корея, Қытай, білім беру дипломатиясы, алмасу дипломатиясы, академиялық ынтымақтастық, елдің имиджі, ұлттық брендинг.

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Программы высшего образования на английском языке в Восточной Азии как инструмент публичной дипломатии: пилотное исследование на примере Китая и Южной Кореи

Современные исследования в области публичной дипломатии признают роль академических и студенческих программ по обмену в качестве инструмента публичной дипломатии как для отправляющих, так и для принимающих стран. Однако подавляющее большинство исследований посвящено обмену опытом иностранных студентов в преимущественно англоязычных странах. Интернационализация высшего образования и конкуренция на международном рынке высшего образования привели к распространению англоязычных программ высшего образования в странах, где английский не используется в качестве основного языка. Данная работа представляет собой попытку восполнить пробел в исследованиях, изучив англоязычные программы высшего образования в Южной Корее и Китае с точки зрения публичной дипломатии. Через проведение серии глубинных интервью со студентами и преподавателями/администраторами, представляющими англоязычные программы, исследование ставит своей целью дать предварительное представление о том, выполняют ли такие образовательные программы функцию публичной дипломатии в Южной Корее и Китае. Исследование показало, что, в отличие от Китая, сотрудничество между корейскими учеными и базирующимися в Корее международными учеными ограничено. Дружеские отношения и связи местных студентов с иностранными студентами не были крепкими ни в одной из стран. В целом, однако, иностранные студенты как в Южной Корее, так и в Китае были удовлетворены своим опытом пребывания в стране, что, по крайней мере, частично может способствовать улучшению мнения о принимающей стране. В статье делается вывод, что программы на английском языке действительно являются инструментом общественной дипломатии для Южной Кореи и Китая в выбранных случаях. Дальнейшие обобщения требуют дополнительных исследований.

Ключевые слова: международное высшее образование, англоязычная программа высшего образования, публичная дипломатия, общественная дипломатия, народная дипломатия, Южная Корея, Китай, образовательная дипломатия, дипломатия обменов, академическое сотрудничество, имидж страны, национальный брендинг.

Introduction

In the first two decades of the 21st century, we could observe the integration of international education. This process was and still is accompanied by the active migration of young people for higher education abroad (UNESCO, 2022), but also by the steady growth of transnational institutions (e.g. international campuses) (e.g., Paniagua, Villó & Escrivà-Beltran, 2022; Varpahovskis, 2021; Becker, 2010). Another element that symbolises the internationalisation of higher education is the increase in the number of programmes taught in English (e.g. UNESCO, 2019) in countries where English is not an official or widely used language.

Programmes taught in English in a non-English speaking country recruit both local and international students. Participating countries interested in the international higher education market include previously less popular players such as China, South Korea¹ and Japan (Hogan, 2023; IIE, 2021). Students wishing to study in these countries can enrol in programmes taught entirely in English.

Given that educational exchange is often seen as an instrument of public diplomacy, and that significant numbers of foreign students and graduates can help in generating soft power, the interesting question is whether English language-

¹ In this study South Korea, Korea and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are used interchangeably

based higher education programmes (ELBHEP) located in countries where English is not the dominant language are fulfilling this function. This question is relevant because students of ELBHEP face non-typical conditions in comparison to average international students studying in local language. When abroad, an English-speaking student may have limited access to local networks, cultural understanding and activities because he or she may not speak any local languages or even interact with the local population, even local students (e.g. if all classmates are international students, the main mean of communication and studying is English and the student lives on a campus with excellent facilities so does not need to leave it, thus exposure to local culture is limited).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine whether ELBHEPs in China and South Korea function as a public diplomacy tool. Although this study employs a comparative case study of China and South Korea, using in-depth interviews with students and professors/administrators representing Chinese and South Korean English-medium programs, this study does not aim to draw generalisations about all Chinese and South Korean English-medium programs, but attempts to map research paths and explore existing mechanisms that transform the educational program into a public diplomacy tool.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: literature review provides an overview of the major developments in the field of study and helps to outline the research gap; conceptual framework discusses the key theoretical and conceptual elements that underpin the given work; methodological section introduces the methods of how data were collected and analysed to address the proposed research question; analysis results section presents the main findings divided by key themes; and the concluding section provides a summary of the research as well as a discussion of the delivered results.

Literature review

Since there is no clearly established sub-field where studies focus exclusively on English-language programmes in non-English-speaking countries as public diplomacy tools, it is relevant to outline some other emerging areas that our paper touches upon.

Public diplomacy and higher education

Higher education has so far been discussed through the prism of public diplomacy in several

areas: a large part of the research has focused on assessing the effectiveness of student exchange programmes such as Fulbright in the US (e.g., Bettie, 2015), Erasmus in the EU (e.g., Fenko & Požgan, 2017), Chevening in the UK (e.g., Wilson, 2014), Colombo in Australia (e.g., Byrne, 2016) and others, when we talk about the traditional destination choices of international students for higher education. Newcomers to higher education markets such as Japan, China and South Korea have also received some attention from scholars (e.g., Metzgar, 2016; Mubah, 2019; Ayhan & Snow, 2021; Varpahovskis, 2022).

Some key findings in this area suggest that educational exchanges can help to break down stereotypes about a country that may distort its image and contribute to better understanding (De Lima, 2007), exchanges can contribute by creating opinion leaders and cultural brokers (Scott-Smith, 2020), but it is still difficult to measure the outcomes of these programmes and the effectiveness of many programmes can be based on anecdotal evidence rather than results collected thanks to systemic longitudinal analysis (Wilson, 2014).

English language-based higher education in East Asia

Receiving higher education in a language other than that of the country in which the university is located can be discussed as another area worth mentioning. The internationalisation of higher education is often associated with the adaptation of English as a medium of communication, teaching and research (De Wit, 2017). Intensive adaptation of English-based curricula and import of English-based higher education products can be observed in Japan (Le Ha, 2013), China (Huang, 2007; 2010) and South Korea (Byun & Kim, 2011).

English can be discussed in a variety of contexts, for example, Byun et al. (2011) investigated the opinions of Korean-speaking students and professors on the implementation of English-medium teaching policies in South Korea. The researchers found that the overall level of satisfaction with the policy is quite high, but there are a number of drawbacks, such as disregard for the language proficiency of professors who give lectures in English, as well as the language proficiency of students; lack of human and financial resources to support the programme; implementation of English-medium teaching for all disciplines.

Kim, Tatar and Choi (2014) found that the language of instruction could affect the level of

collaboration and participation in class among international and Korean students. Literally, the study by Kim et al. (2014) showed that Korean students tended to have a lower level of participation in classes taught in English, while International students who did not use Korean communicated with Korean peers and participated in collaborative activities to a lesser extent. Varpahovskis (2022), who studied the case of state-sponsored international students in Korea, also confirmed the importance of language proficiency as a factor influencing collaborative activities between Korean and international students.

China's efforts to internationalise and adapt English as the main medium of instruction are partly reflected in the study by Metzgar (2019), who described two Chinese universities with English programmes related to the country's public diplomacy. The programmes of Schwarzman and Yenching are becoming more and more internationalised as they build their reputation and attract more and more foreign students. The study by Kuroda (2014) focuses on the analysis of a stand-alone Chinese master-degree programme that was designed to at least partly address the demand for soft power gained through education.

Both countries, China and South Korea, have attempted to join the internationalisation trend in higher education and have established and maintained ELBHEPs through a variety of means. Although there have been attempts to view these programmes from the perspective of soft power generation, there is limited evidence on how these programmes function from the perspective of the soft power-related concept of public diplomacy. Although it has been previously discussed that importing English-language-based higher education products may pose risks to the survival of local languages and harm the cultural identity of locals (Le Ha, 2013), as well as function for the purposes of 'cultural imperialism' and be overly profit-oriented (McBurnie & Ziguas, 2009), little is understood so far how hosting foreign educational products function within a framework of soft power and public diplomacy (Varpahovskis & Kuteleva, 2023). In our study we aim to investigate whether ELBHEP can function for the purposes of public diplomacy of the host country.

Analytical framework and major working terms

For research purposes, we base our definition on the paradigm of *new public diplomacy* (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2019; Zaharna, 2008), which implies two-way communication, inclusion in the dialogue

of actors other than states. Therefore, we describe public diplomacy in the context of higher education as a way of communication with the international public through involvement in teaching, studying, research in a country other than the country of citizenship and/or in cooperation with peers representing other countries that individual's citizenship. In other words, for the given research, we propose that international students and international professors/administrators can act as target audiences of Chinese or Korean public diplomacy, but also as public diplomacy agents themselves. Even though universities can take active public diplomacy roles in our study, we describe universities as a context where interactions between potential and actual public diplomacy actors occur. Public diplomacy transforms or has potential to transform into formal or informal mutually beneficial relationships or cooperation through established communications between public diplomacy agents representing different countries.

By ELBHEP, we mean full-time educational programmes that enable a student to pursue higher education in the host country. ELBHEPs can be undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programmes based on curricula where English is the main medium of communication, instruction, research and teaching. ELBHEPs may be delivered by local institutions, with the rest of the programmes delivered in the local language. Alternatively, ELBHEPs can be delivered by universities that function as overseas branch campuses and where English is a dominant mean of communication, education and administration.

Methodology

Among major purposes of this paper is to explore how people perceive South Korea or China after having experiencing an ELBHEP in one of these countries and whether studying/working within ELBHEP contributes to relationship-building (both professional and personal) between representatives of host countries and international students/staff. As the study is exploratory, it does not aim to make extensive generalisations about compared cases, but attempts to indicate future avenues for research based on in-depth analysis of South Korean and Chinese cases.

Data Collection

Primary data collected through in-depth interviews serves as the main source of information for

the analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed a certain degree of flexibility and a broader focus on issues that emerge in the course of an interview (Bryman, 2012) and that could serve as sources for uncovering previously unrecognised phenomena.

All interviews were conducted in one-to-one online mode between February and April 2023, using Zoom or MS Teams software. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. All responses were audio-recorded with the consent of each interviewee. Further, recorded answers were transcribed for analysis purposes.

Sample

The respondents were divided into two main groups: International full-time students who are currently in China or South Korea and are part of ELBHEP. The second main group consisted of international administrators and professors working for ELBHEPs in China and South Korea.

As this is an exploratory study, we did not have particularly strict boundaries in defining ELBHEPs in China and South Korea. Some higher education institutions (HEIs) can be classified as transnational higher education institutions (THEI) (Varpahovskis, 2021), and they function more as a foreign branch campus of the university originating from an

English-speaking country. Thus, graduates of such THEIs literally receive certificates/diplomas that are identical in format and are equal to those issued by the original HEI (e.g., British or US universities). Other ELBHEPs are developed and administered by local institutions where the main medium of instruction is either Korean or Chinese. Graduates of such English-language programmes receive certificates and diplomas equivalent to those of their peers studying in Korean or Chinese.

Some universities that manage English language-based higher education programmes do not locate them on the main campus but on specially organised satellite campuses, so international students pursuing higher education through ELBHEPs may have less exposure to the local Chinese or Korean academic/student culture despite being physically located in China or Korea.

We deliberately did not interview students who came to Korea or China as part of a short-term exchange programme (e.g., exchange students visiting for one semester). Therefore, all students interviewed are full-time students at Chinese or Korean universities.

For reasons of anonymity, we do not disclose the names of the respondents or their countries of citizenship, limiting this information to regional affiliation. A summary of the respondents' profiles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Summary of respondents' distribution by major demographic criteria

Geographical location of the higher education institutions	Number of interviews	Distribution by occupation	Gender	Respondents' region of origin
South Korea	5	Professor/ Administrator: 3 Students: 2	Male: 3 Female: 2	South Asia: 2 Middle East: 1 South Europe: 1 South-East Asia: 1
China	5	Professor/ Administrator: 2 Students: 3	Male: 3 Female: 2	South-East Asia: 2 West Europe: 1 CIS: 2

Source: composed by authors.

Interviewees' profiles and data analysis

There were no questions in the interviews specifically related to public diplomacy tools and their influence, but the responses are identified in the process of analysing the interviews. To do this, the interviews were transcribed and theme-based analysis was used by grouping similar ideas in the interviews and framing the main themes. After categorising the data according to the similarities

in people's responses, numbers were assigned to each topic to make the information quicker and easier to process (Bryman, 2012). Then, we draw some conclusions about the respondents' opinions and experiences of South Korea and China. The comparative analysis method was used to compare and contrast the cases of South Korea and China, highlighting similarities and differences. The profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Interviewees’ profiles

Informant	Country of studies	Occupation	Gender	Region of origin
P1	South Korea	Professor/Administrator	Male	South Asia
P2	South Korea	Professor/Administrator	Male	South Europe
P3	South Korea	Professor/Administrator	Male	Middle East
P4	South Korea	Student	Female	South Asia
P5	South Korea	Student	Female	South-East Asia
P6	China	Professor/Administrator	Male	West Europe
P7	China	Professor/Administrator	Female	South-East Asia
P8	China	Student	Male	CIS
P9	China	Student	Male	South-East Asia
P10	China	Student	Female	CIS

Source: composed by authors.

Limitations

The research design does not allow generalisations to be made, the study is exploratory in nature and did not aim to provide information for any universal conclusions. There are certain obvious methodological limitations that do not allow for more universally applicable results. These limitations should be taken into account and addressed by scholars approaching the topic of ELBHEPs as public diplomacy tools.

Sample background

In our study, we did not control for fluency in local languages, study major (e.g., STEM¹ vs. non-STEM), location (main campus vs. satellite/international campus), programme level (bachelor, master, Ph.D.), country of origin, or cultural proximity. Some studies (e.g., Varpahovskis, 2019; 2022; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020) suggest that these factors may impact communication and relationship-building between international staff/students and local counterparts, thus igniting or hindering public diplomacy related mechanisms. Obviously, a greater variety of institutions and a larger number of interviews could provide additional perspectives to this study.

In addition, in order to have a more in-depth knowledge of whether English-language training programmes are transformed into public diplomacy tools, it is necessary to delve into the mechanisms of communication between locals and internationals. Our research focuses only on the perspectives of international students/administrators/professors, while local (Chinese and Korean) respondents were not interviewed.

¹ Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)

Language of interviews

Most of the interviews were not conducted in the interviewees’ native language. Most interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of two interviews with Russian speakers, which were conducted in Russian. The choice of interview language can have an impact on the data collected (Cortazzi, Pilcher, & Jin, 2011). For example, the use of a second language can become a barrier to accurately and thoroughly conveying respondents’ experiences and feelings.

COVID-19

As this analysis focuses on people’s most recent experiences, it is important to consider the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents mentioned their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is the period that goes beyond the normal state of affairs in a country because of lockdowns, masks, and restrictions on going to public places. Administrators or professors can compare different COVID and non-COVID periods, and their attitudes towards the country of residence can be based on a range of experiences. However, students spent less time in the country, and there are cases where students had to take only online courses and were forced to stay at home, so they may not have experienced normal daily life in South Korea/China as it was supposed to be before the quarantine measures. Therefore, additional analysis of students or alumni who were not affected by COVID at all or only partially is needed.

Analysis results

The results of the analysis are divided into several major themes around public diplomacy

and attempt to compare the results for both Korea and China. Obviously, students and professors/administrators have different opportunities, goals and levels of interaction with their peers. While professors/administrators can already act as public diplomacy agents, for example by contributing through research-oriented cooperation, international students can build formal and informal relationships with local students, which can turn into friendships, partnerships and collaborations in future (Varpahovskis, 2019). However, in addition to relationships, students may also gather impressions and knowledge about the country they are in. Students may share this collected knowledge with their friends, acquaintances, and family members, which in turn may contribute to building the country's image (e.g., Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Ayhan, Gouda & Lee, 2022; Tam & Ayhan, 2021). Findings on three main themes are presented below.

Level of administrators/professors: cooperation

The findings regarding administrator/professor collaborations can be divided into two broad areas: collaborating with locals and collaborating with international colleagues.

Despite Chinese and Korean attempts at internationalisation, we found that some professors may not feel fully integrated into the professional community for a number of reasons, so they have to choose cooperation opportunities with other international colleagues in the country or university, or cooperation opportunities with colleagues based overseas:

You try to initiate projects, or you try to get yourself involved in conversations and conferences and workshops that are international. So a lot of my research has happened with colleagues who are in the UK, Ireland, Germany, people that I knew from before I arrived in Korea, but also people that I've met while and after I moved to Korea (Respondent P2, based in Korea).

However, this does not mean that professors are excluded from professional networks/collaboration with local professors, but knowledge of the local language may be essential to avoid exclusion:

I also speak Korean. My research involves a lot of Korean sources. But I don't necessarily write in Korean that much. All of my research is published in English, maybe with very few exceptions. But I do research in Korean and I collaborate with Korean colleagues all the time (Respondent P3, based in Korea).

In the Chinese case, the situation turns out to be pro-collaborative, but this finding is probably

due to the fact that representatives of China-based THEI have English as a dominant medium of communication, teaching, interaction and research. In addition, intercultural communication is fostered by extra-curricular activities organised by staff and students where both Chinese and other cultures are presented and interacted with (respondent P6, based in China). This more positive assessment might be related to the context, namely THEI's team-building processes and internationalisation goals (Respondent P6, based in China), which implied bringing in international staff and conducting teaching, management and research in English. And even in these cases, respondent P6 mentioned language as a possible barrier to collaboration between staff at the China-based THEI.

Level of students: interaction with local students

The data on communication between Korean students and foreign students and Chinese students and foreign students were collected both from professors/administrators, who provided an outside perspective, and from students themselves, who shared their own experiences. The findings suggest that foreign students, in particular, face some difficulties in building relationships with both Chinese and Korean students outside the classroom. One of the professors shared the feedback he receives from foreign students:

Every semester I get the same complaint: "We [foreign students] came to Korea, and we were expecting to get familiar with what was going on, to broaden our horizons, to become friends with people, but the only people we can become friends with are other foreign students, not Koreans" (Respondent P2, based in Korea).

The evidence from a China-based administrator (P7) suggests that:

There was some limited communication between the USA student with other Chinese students. However, it is strictly on their group project. Did not see any social interactions among them. Similar observations on the [Name of the educational program #1 omitted] classes although there is more interaction among the students than the [Name of the educational program #2 omitted] class.

Some findings, based on collected interviews from students, suggest that Chinese students can be quite outgoing, communicative and open to meeting new people. The students interviewed all expressed a similar idea that:

People are different individuals. So we cannot generalise. There are some students who don't want

to openly socialize and prefer to stick more to the Chinese, but there are also foreigners like that, so it's very personal, I would say (Respondent P10, based in China, the original answer was translated to English from Russian).

Nevertheless, the students say that there are no particular problems with communication. One respondent (P9, based in China) linked this to the nature of his training programme:

I will say that for my program, they specifically chose people who are outgoing, and I interacted. It helps a lot when the program is in English.

However, another interviewee added that although there were no major difficulties in communicating in English, she had observed that Chinese students still preferred to go out with other Chinese students. She claimed:

I'm one hundred percent sure that Chinese students spend more time with each other because it is easier to speak the same language (Respondent P10, based in China, the original answer was translated to English from Russian).

She (P10) also expressed her opinion about the usefulness of knowing the local language:

I wouldn't say that not knowing Chinese is a very dividing factor because the university curriculum is designed in English and many Chinese students want to improve their English so they're even more comfortable communicating in English, but knowing Chinese can help make connections or make it easier to discuss some topics. (Respondent P10, based in China, the original answer was translated to English from Russian).

Despite students' positive experiences, one of the professors found out that Chinese and international students were not interacting as much as he had expected:

What we found was that many of the Chinese students didn't really interact with the international students. I don't know; I think they were just shy, or they were not confident with their English, or whatever (Respondent P6, based in China).

He shared that this situation had gone so far that some student organisations within the university ended up excluding international students because the members of the organisation did not speak English or their brochures and posters were not in English. The interviewee emphasised that university staff had to remind the student organisation that international students were an important part of the university and that they needed to be integrated. This case required special attention from the professor:

And it even got to the point in my faculty, where I said to student organisations, "Unless you are offering this in English and opening it up to international students, it doesn't have my support, I'm not going to give any money or publicity, it has to be for all students, regardless of their nationality". So, I would say that the main problem we had came from the Chinese students rather than the international students.

The issue of exclusion of international students from local organisations (clubs) aimed at various extracurricular activities has also been observed before in Korean universities (for details see Varpahovskis, 2022).

Another reason reported to be influential in terms of building relationships between international and local students in and out of class can be classified as local culture. For example, one of the Korea-based international students reported that it is problematic to follow Korean culinary and drinking culture practices for religious reasons. And although not participating in the above-mentioned practices and wearing the hijab does not make her feel alienation or hostility from locals (Respondent P5, based in Korea), it does not encourage relationship building either.

In the Chinese case, another cultural aspect was mentioned that hindered interaction and caused misunderstandings between foreign and local students, especially in the classroom:

There is an issue of knowing what you can and cannot say, so, for example, we couldn't discuss Taiwan politics and Taiwan independence [...] And I think it was easier for Chinese students because they know what they can and cannot say (Respondent P6, based in China).

So international students suddenly found themselves in a situation where they could not say certain things. It was confusing because there is no law or written guidelines that say exactly what you can and cannot say. The interviewee (P6) therefore felt that it was a more difficult cultural adjustment for international students.

Level of students: attitude towards the host country

Attitude towards the host country (or country image) is one of the concepts that overlap with the framework of public diplomacy (e.g., Wu & Wang, 2018). The case of international student experience exchange is one of them (e.g., Herrero et al., 2015). A positive image derived from personal experiences among international students is essential, as they can

spread word of mouth or electronic word of mouth and it will influence the perception of the country in the eyes of their audience (e.g., Wilkins & Huisman, 2015; Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Varpahovskis, 2017).

Students' responses indicated that their attitudes towards their host country ranged from neutral to positive in the case of China, and reached predominantly positive in the case of Korea. Moreover, in both cases, students indicated an increased level of awareness about the country, people, culture and other aspects.

However, there was one aspect that students from both countries agreed had a significant impact on students' ability to learn more about the host country and to build relationships with local students: namely, COVID-19 and pandemic-related restrictions that limited students' ability to interact with other students both offline in class and offline during extracurricular activities.

Discussion and conclusion

The pilot study, which aimed to explore and compare how ELBHEPs function as public diplomacy tools, produced several findings that can be further explored by both scholars and practitioners interested in increasing the effectiveness of public diplomacy.

The analysis suggests that these programmes have some positive effects for the host countries from a public diplomacy perspective. However, it is clear that the South Korean and Chinese cases are not exactly the same, nor are they completely different.

Three main areas were discussed in the paper: cooperation between international professors/administrators and local counterparts; interaction and relationship building between international students and local students; and the general attitude of international students towards the host country.

While some professors from South Korea experienced at least partial isolation within the university because most Korean professors preferred to conduct their research in their native language, which meant that foreign professors were automatically excluded if they could not speak Korean, this bolstered collaborations with other international colleagues, either in the same university or overseas. The Chinese case seems more optimistic because there is extensive collaboration between international and local scholars, but this result should not be generalised because of some contextual factors: namely, South Korean

universities incorporate ELBHEPs but most of the teaching (in other programs) is conducted in local language, while the Chinese university in this study is an overseas branch campus where almost 100% of interactions, teaching and research are conducted in English and where Chinese professors are not an absolute majority.

The analysis of student interaction shows that the universities in both countries experienced some difficulties. Overall, in both cases, the respondents' responses did not show any outright negativity or high levels of resentment towards the Korean/Chinese population itself or the experience in general. The findings show that in a class there are no tensions, students mix in groups, do projects together and participate in discussions, while outside the classroom it can be more difficult to make close friendships because Korean/Chinese students prefer their local friends; a lack of confidence in their English and cultural differences can be an obstacle. These findings at least partially confirm a previous study (Varpahovskis, 2022) which found that close friendships between Korean and international students are not common due to a list of barriers, including linguistic and cultural aspects.

In terms of student respondents' attitudes towards South Korea/China, our conclusion is that this aspect of public diplomacy was fairly successful. No negative experiences were reported in either country. Students had different backgrounds and expectations, some had difficulties along the way, some had it a bit easier, but in the end, students had good responses about their perception of the country and were happy to have such experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in China, was the only downside mentioned by students. According to a recent study on international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019/2020 (depending on the country), students who were in China during the pandemic were strongly affected by pandemic anxiety, loneliness, and social and academic isolation (Raja et al., 2023), echoing the findings of this study on China. However, at the end of the pandemic, students confirmed that the experience was more enjoyable when life was back to normal. As far as the case of South Korea is concerned, according to Stewart and Lowenthal, online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea hindered students' experience in terms of «communication from faculty, interaction with other students, and feedback on their work» (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2021).

It is not the intention of this research to draw any general conclusions about the comparison between South Korea and China and their ELBHEP as a tool of public diplomacy. Rather, it is an illustration and highlighting of a number of phenomena and differences which could be the subject of future research.

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