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Higher education scholarships as a soft power tool: an analysis of its role in the EU and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The European Union and Singapore are vastly different entities, each with its own regional and global priorities and policies. Both actors employ a range of tools and instruments to aid in their foreign policy objectives, including in the projection of their soft power. It is worth analysing and comparing the specific instruments of these two actors' soft power strategies, including but not limited to their stated objectives and perceived effectiveness. This paper will compare the role of higher education and scholarships in diffusing soft power through a comparative case study of the Erasmus Mundus scholarship program and the Singapore Scholarship administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It will look at the ways in which these programs have shaped the standing of the actors in diffusing their norms and objectives in the regional and international arena. A comparative analysis of these programs will hopefully provide some insight into the proximity between foreign policy-making and higher education internationalisation. This paper will begin with an overview of the aforementioned programs and related schemes, before dissecting and comparing the intent and the policy-making processes behind these, and concludes with a discussion on the present and future role of higher education as a strategic soft power tool.

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HIGHER EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIPS AS A SOFT POWER TOOL: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS ROLE IN THE EU AND SINGAPORE

CHARLES CHIA SHENG-KAI¹

Introduction

An article last year for the online newspaper University World News raised pertinent questions about higher education internationalisation and its situation within diplomatic and soft power paradigms (Knight 2014). The author left open-ended issues about the place of higher education in public diplomacy and its framing in terms of soft power. While these questions of framing higher education are not the focus of this research paper, it opens the door for a more nuanced analysis of the current higher education landscape and its part in the soft power strategies of the European Union (EU) and Singapore. More specifically, a look at two of the scholarships offered by both actors will provide us with some insight into the strategic intent behind these programs and how they fit into the larger field of foreign policymaking and public diplomacy.

This working paper will first introduce the concept of soft power and how it relates to the field of public diplomacy. The use of scholarships and other exchange programs by other actors such as the US and UK will be briefly mentioned before the paper delves into the specifics of the EU's and Singapore's higher education programs and scholarships. For the purpose of this essay, the Erasmus Mundus and Singapore Scholarship have been chosen for comparison as they are the

preeminent scholarships available for prospective foreign students contemplating higher education in the EU and Singapore respectively. A comprehensive look at these scholarships will include an examination into their origins, strategic intent, program design, desired outcomes and overall prioritisation as a part of each actor's foreign policy. A comparative analysis will follow and the discussion thereafter shall delineate how soft power is wielded differently by the EU and Singapore in this respect.

Soft Power

The term 'soft power' was first coined by Joseph Nye (1990) in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. It was further developed when Nye (2004a) dedicated a book to explain the concept in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments", and this "arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (Nye 2004a: x). This power lies in "getting others to want the outcomes that you want... (and) the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004a: 5). When a foreign audience respects and admires a country's practices, values and ideals, soft power is taking root. Nye (2011: 84) further explains that there are three sources of soft power for countries to draw on – cultural, political and foreign policies.

The essence of soft power, however, has existed for centuries longer. Nye (2011: 81-82) cites the spread of French culture in the 18th century as having contributed to expanding its power, as well as Chinese, Prussian, British and American examples of the embodiment of those same ideas. One of the more prominent contemporary examples offered by Nye of soft power having a ripple effect is the case of Alexander Yakovlev. The late senior adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev spent a year on exchange at Columbia University in his earlier days and this apparently impacted him, eventually influencing Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost (Nye 2011: 96).

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In the most recent decade, a host of events and phenomena have seen the notion on soft power proliferate in academia, government, media and even in public discourse. Articles abound in publications like *Foreign Policy* and online media such as *gulfnews.com*, focusing particularly on American, Indian and Chinese soft power in the context of larger geopolitical shifts in economic might (Mullen & Ganguly 2012; Dinda 2015). Global affairs and lifestyle magazine *Monocle* has begun publishing an annual soft power survey in collaboration with the Institute for Government (2010) in the UK, and even public relations firm Weber Shandwick (2014) has adopted the concept as a cornerstone of its research and practice.

Changes in technologies and socio-economic structures over the past decade have enabled and accelerated the mediums through which soft power is diffused. These include the increasing ubiquity of broadband and wireless internet, the exponential growth of social media, the introduction of low-cost carriers, and a rising middle-class in a fast-developing Asia more generally. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) cited statistics from the World Tourism Organisation in its report last year stating that international trips by Chinese travellers alone had exploded “from 10 million in 2000 to 83 million in 2012” (BBC 2014). These trends indicate that there is now an unprecedented surge in the global flows of knowledge and people; new networks and platforms for knowledge exchange are being created on a regular basis and diverse people-to-people interactions are growing tremendously as a result of the tourism boom, increased migration and new media technologies. In a world more globalised than ever, competing ideas and norms are spreading faster and wider, hence ensuring that the wielding of soft power is a hotly contested one in which actors – state and non-state – are employing or at least considering all available avenues to secure their positions of influence. With this frame of reference in mind, it becomes evident that higher education, as one of those avenues, could play a significant role. This is especially so as there is a rising demand for and growing internationalisation of higher education.

Soft Power and Higher Education

The major Anglosphere countries like the United States, United Kingdom and Australia have for some time recognised the soft power potential of scholarships and other higher education initiatives in reaching out to an international public. Many of the international students on scholarships are potential leaders who eventually return to their home countries to take up senior positions in the public and private sectors where they contextualise and diffuse the knowledge learnt through their university education. The Fulbright Program, Chevening Awards and Colombo Plan Scholarships are some of the examples through which governments utilised higher education as a mode of development assistance as well as diffusing their norms through educational exchange.

Stetar et al (2010: 193) note that a country’s education system conveys norms and values not just through institutional collaborations but also by students “bringing with them the perspective of the country where they were educated” back home, and often further afield as they progress professionally. Shields and Edwards (2010: 237) observe that the “pattern of student mobility from periphery to core countries has been widely accepted as a mutually beneficial, or symbiotic, relationship”. Host countries get to realise their foreign policy objectives, tap on an added pool of skilled labour, and diversify revenue streams for the higher education institution; on the other hand, new skills and knowledge networks are gained by those from the sending countries (Altbach 1989: 127). There is therefore a general consensus that these educational exchanges provide a largely positive outcome for all the parties involved.

More attention has been paid in recent years to trends in the internationalisation of higher education and the connection this has to the contest for global influence. Higher education researchers have pointed out that building soft-power is a key strategic function in the development of education hubs around the Asia Pacific region. Some scholars focus particularly on

the “influence of high-quality human capital, local and global human network, and high-valued intellectual capacity” elements of soft power in forming “an intangible regional network and leadership position, which will extend its long-term political, cultural, and social impacts in the region and beyond” (Cheng, Cheung & Yuen 2011: 481-482). Others like Mok (2012: 226) acknowledge the development of education hubs as a vital policy tool for states to assert soft power in an ever more competitive global marketplace. Further, Deodato and Borkowska (2014: 5) argue that Universities have traditionally risen above violent and ideological conflict happening around them to offer “an unbiased perspective on historic, political, cultural and economic issues... (where an) 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.” This means that universities can serve as potentially important neutral bridges between otherwise unfriendly nations, brandishing soft power in a subtle yet profound manner.

The nexus between higher education, development assistance and foreign policy is an area that is worth exploring to see how the different objectives and goals are reconciled, and to tease out the underlying assumptions in the policy making. Bu (cited in Shields & Edwards 2010: 236) observes that “thirty-three universities with the highest foreign student enrolment (forty-two per cent of total foreign student population) were also most heavily involved in... university contracts for foreign aid”. Herein, trickier questions arise as to the appropriateness for higher educational institutions to be perceived as vehicles for a state’s political agenda. There is indeed an inherent tension in the relationship between governments and universities in that it is sometimes unclear as to who wields the ultimate authority – often unspoken and implicit – in how major, if at all, a role the institutions play within a state’s foreign policy agenda. These complex issues, unfortunately, will not be addressed in this paper but is worthy of further exploration by scholars in the field.

Singapore Scholarships

Singapore is a modern city-state with a Westminster system of unicameral parliamentary government. It is situated at the southern tip of the Malayan peninsula in South-East Asia and has a land area of 718km² with a population of 5.5 million people. With a high population density, more than 80 per cent of its residents live in high-rise public housing (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014). The country became fully independent in 1965 after an exit from the Federation of Malaya due to political disagreements. Singapore’s five decades of broad political stability facilitated rapid growth and resulted in it becoming one of the world’s most competitive economies today. The country figures highly in a variety of international rankings – the highest quality of life ranking in Asia (Mercer 2014), 14th in the Country Brand Index (FutureBrand 2013) and most liveable location in Asia (ECA International 2015).

Singapore’s foreign policy is centred on an acute sense of vulnerability and the geopolitical realities of the region it finds itself in. As a small island state, it prioritises the need to maintain friendly relations with a multitude of countries and participates actively in multilateral platforms and organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its foreign policy is realist in essence and embodies an overarching sense of pragmatism. Some of the fundamental principles of Singapore’s foreign policy as spelt out in the MFA website include:

- maintaining a credible and deterrent military defence;
- promoting and working for good relations with her neighbours in all spheres;
- fully supporting and committing to ASEAN;
- maintaining a free and open multilateral trading system;
- working to maintain a secure and peaceful environment in and around Southeast Asia and in the Asia Pacific region

In a speech at a 'Singapore Perspectives' conference recently, policy adviser and Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan (2015) stressed that "the creation and maintenance of relevance must be the over-arching strategic objective of small states"; thus for Singapore to survive and thrive, it has to continue cultivating relevance through means of economic success and credibility, including the need for an effective 'hard power' foundation through an advanced military force. With this frame of reference, it becomes evident that to maintain a competitive edge, Singapore has had to craft a niche for itself in as many fields as it competently can. As a way of preserving and extending this competitive edge, Singapore also utilises soft power to expand its foreign policy space so as to wield greater influence in areas from economic and monetary affairs to political and security dialogue.

In Singapore's public service magazine *Challenge*, Cheney (2013: 11 - 15) described the ways in which Singapore has sought to capture the hearts and minds of regional neighbours and to a wider extent, her international friends. This is done through institutions such as Civil Service College International and platforms including the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP). The SCP was set up in 1992 as "the primary platform through which Singapore offers technical assistance... in human resource development and economic development... with other countries in lieu of providing direct financial assistance" (Singapore Cooperation Programme 2015a).

The Singapore Scholarship is housed under the SCP and administered primarily by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was launched in 1998 in the immediate aftermath of the Asian financial crisis for students of ASEAN countries to pursue a full-time undergraduate degree in Singapore with the explicit expectation that scholars are to contribute to the development of their home countries upon graduation. Applicants compete on academic merit, are required to have a good command of English, and obtain the endorsement of their respective governments. The bond-free Singapore Scholarship is relatively generous – it covers full

tuition and designated accommodation fees, a living allowance and a return airfare (Singapore Cooperation Programme 2015b). Now in its 17th year, the Singapore Scholarship is a prominent display of Singaporean goodwill and showcases the priority given to the cultivating of relationships with future leaders in the ASEAN region (Leong 2007: 30). There is an absence of available data on the number of scholarships granted to date, but a 2009 news report stated that 32 scholarships were granted that year with 520 scholarships given out in total (32 Awarded Scholarships 2009: 12).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014) was projected to spend S\$105.01 million for Financial Year 2014 "for transfers, which includes technical assistance provided under the Singapore Cooperation Programme, contributions to the UN Regular Budget, Peacekeeping Operations, and humanitarian aid". This is slightly more than 20 per cent of the Ministry's total projected expenditure for 2014 and should be considered significant for a small island state. As a recurring budget item, the SCP is a mainstay of the Ministry's annual work plan, and the Singapore Scholarships is administered as part of the SCP. A number of points should be noted.

Firstly, the recurring nature of the Scholarships means that Singapore has permanently incorporated it into its annual program. As a part of the foreign ministry's agenda, it indicates that education diplomacy is and has been very much a part of its overall strategy for some time now, small and targeted as it may be. Secondly, the Scholarships are a significant outlay for the Ministry without guaranteed or readily measurable benefits to Singapore. Certainly, the selection process is stringent and would likely be targeted at students with the potential to take on leadership positions across the ASEAN region. It should not be taken for granted, however, that scholars will take a natural liking to Singapore as some may have come to expect. In that regard, Singapore – like the US or UK – is taking a long-term gamble that the Scholarships will boost a foreigner's positive perception of the country and intangible benefits will arise as a result. This may occur through future

business investments or policy decisions, a better understanding of Singapore's policies, and publicity for the country through word of mouth.

The signals are mixed, however. In 2003, the Education Workgroup of the Economic Review Committee's Services Sub-Committee submitted a substantial proposal to develop a Global Schoolhouse concept in Singapore. It recommended a comprehensive development of the international education sector in Singapore with the objective of creating a self-sustaining education ecosystem that could contribute more significantly to economic growth, address capability development and attract talent to the country. There was almost no mention of the soft power potential or strategic intent, if any, of such an endeavour, save for a line or two about attracting talent so as to "build a strong network of international alumni around the world" (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2003). It appeared therefore that the economic realities of maintaining a competitive edge overshadow any soft power narratives surrounding these undertakings.

Further, the Singapore Scholarship is but one of many others offered to international students via other agencies and government-linked corporations. These range from ASEAN Scholarships offered at the secondary and pre-university level by the Ministry of Education to the Singapore International Graduate Award jointly offered by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and three local Universities. However, a key difference is that the Singapore Scholarship is one of the rare scholarships, if not the only, that does not require scholars to work in Singapore after graduation. Considering this from a holistic perspective, the aim of most scholarships distributed is hence more linked to the competition for talents and targeted at generating a talent pool for the purposes of driving different sectors of the economy forward while supplementing an ageing workforce amidst demographic shifts.

In terms of strengthening the soft power of Singapore, the foreign ministry and other agencies undertake other activities as and when it is apt.

These range from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) efforts after the Boxing Day tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia to organising a forthcoming Singapore Festival in France to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The former was anchored by the Singapore Armed Forces while the latter sees the involvement of the National Heritage Board and Arts Council. The diversity of agencies involved in these efforts abroad speaks to the wide-ranging methods through which soft power can be projected. Taking these into account, the Singapore Scholarship is therefore a comparatively minor tool in the country's overall soft power strategy. It naturally attracts less international media focus and the resulting benefits tend to be less pronounced. As a foreign policy tool, the Singapore Scholarship is a targeted approach at projecting soft power in Singapore's regional neighbourhood.

Erasmus Mundus Scholarships

The European Union (EU) is a distinctive actor on the global stage. It is neither a state nor an international organisation per se. A cursory search for a standard explanation of what the EU is will reveal that there is no one set answer. The EU describes itself as "a unique economic and political partnership between 28 European countries" (EU 2015). Spread out over four million square kilometres, the EU has more than 500 million inhabitants and operates as a single market. Key institutions that ensure the smooth functioning of the EU include the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament.

The EU's foreign policy is often seen as a confusing mix of various interwoven aims, principles and strategies. The Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009, paving the way for the establishment of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011. The EEAS has responsibility for the EU Delegations around the world and at the same time has to coordinate and/or communicate the work of the Commission in those matters relating to external relations and has impact on its foreign affairs. While some policies are firmly under the domain of EEAS such as the Common Foreign and

Security Policy, European Neighbourhood Policy, development and humanitarian aid, there are other policies such as trade with a clear external dimension, and in this case, the central theme of this paper – education, which have bearing on perceptions of the EU as a global actor. The EU's external policies do have four key aims despite the complexity of the task – “they support stability, promote human rights and democracy, seek to spread prosperity, and support the enforcement of the rule of law and good governance” (EEAS 2015).

The Erasmus Mundus program was reorganised in 2014 and now falls under the new Erasmus+ programme (which also includes the Jean Monnet Activities). The wider policies related to education are managed by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) while the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is in charge of “the complete life-cycle management of projects” (EACEA 2015). The Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD; previously Erasmus Mundus Master Courses) typically run for between one to two years with a consortium of usually three to five higher education institutions offering different courses to students. Students graduate with joint or multiple degrees awarded by the consortium institutions which they have attended. A prospective student will first have to be accepted into their chosen Masters program before being considered by the consortium institutions for the scholarship. The bond-free scholarship covers full tuition fees, as well as a travel, relocation and subsistence allowance. As of 2013, close to 14000 European and non-European students have taken part in the Erasmus Mundus programme with more than 900 scholarships offered, the majority of which went to non-Europeans (EACEA 2014).

The Erasmus Mundus programme started slightly over a decade ago in its first phase from 2004 to 2008 and is now in its third version. Decision 2317/2003/EC (EC 2003) established the first phase of Erasmus Mundus and some of the objectives relevant to this paper are articulated in Article 3:

- to enhance the quality of European higher education by fostering cooperation with third countries in order to improve the development of human resources and to promote dialogue and understanding between peoples and cultures;
- to promote a quality offer in higher education with a distinct European added value, attractive both within the European Union and beyond its borders;
- to improve accessibility and enhance the profile and visibility of higher education in the European Union

In the second phase of the programme, Decision 1298/2008/EC (EC 2008) set out the objectives of the Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 programme in Article 3, with the relevant points as follows:

- ... to promote intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries, in accordance with EU external policy objectives in order to contribute to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of higher education;
- to improve accessibility and enhance the profile and visibility of European Union higher education in the world as well as its attractiveness for third-country and European nationals

Finally, in the latest phase, Erasmus Mundus was incorporated under an overarching Erasmus+ programme and brand. In this instance, there were no Erasmus Mundus-specific objectives clearly delineated. However, parts of Article 4 and 5 of Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (EC 2013) establishing Erasmus+ outline some of the objectives that are relevant:

- the sustainable development of partner countries in the field of higher education;
- the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union;
- to enhance the international dimension of education and training... by increasing the attractiveness of European higher

education institutions and supporting the Union's external action, including its development objectives, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between the Union and partner-country higher education institutions and targeted capacity-building in partner countries

An analysis of these objectives over the lifespan of the Erasmus Mundus programme and its constituent scholarship reveals some interesting observations. Firstly, terminology has shifted from 'third' to 'partner' country, possibly to remove any association between 'third country' and 'third world'. Further, a 'partner country' connotes a more equal and mutually beneficial relationship. Secondly, there has been consistent emphasis on cooperation between higher education institutions within and without the EU. This cooperation is done mainly through capacity-building and ensuring sustainable development in higher education. Thirdly, the promotion of European values has been more explicitly identified over the phases. This is especially so in the latest Regulation which advocates the promotion of said European values as laid out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. These values include "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities... common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" (EU 2012).

With these strategic objectives as a frame of reference, the Erasmus Mundus programme and scholarship as a soft power tool comes into clearer focus. There is a pronounced effort to utilise the programme and scholarship as a way of bridging inequalities in educational opportunities. More importantly, there is an underlying drive to enhance the attractiveness and appeal of European higher education as well as Europe in general. This use of higher education institutes to attract international students to Europe is certainly one that is appealing to many, as can be seen from the statistics. What is more interesting is the sense that

international students would quite naturally be able to identify with 'European' norms and values – a concept that the EU has indeed been attempting to craft over the past decades. This idea is appealing from a distance because the Erasmus Mundus study scheme and scholarship allows students to live the experience of these 'European values'. As evidenced in the synthesis report on the first generation Erasmus Mundus program by EACEA (2013), the objectives mentioned for the program were to "contribute to the European higher education convergence process" and "increasing the worldwide attractiveness of European universities". The projection of soft power is not as explicitly stated in this case, but the latter objective matches what was just discussed.

Rasmussen (2009: 19-20) argues that the EU efforts to "influence foreign discourses is diffuse in nature and therefore more difficult to pin down", citing the Erasmus Mundus as an initiative which does not force a change but rather facilitates the environment necessary for outsiders to perceive and experience its norms and values from within. He further acknowledges the programme as "a public diplomacy effort aimed at improving the understanding of the EU's values" (Rasmussen 2009, p. 20). Manners and Whitman (2013: 192) assert that the Erasmus Mundus program promotes "transference diffusion (which) facilitates a deeper sharing of minds than almost any other form of Public Diplomacy", suggesting also that there are several modes of diffusion in a normative approach to public diplomacy which the EU has practiced through its various programmes. Botonero (2013: 5) explored the role of other EU higher education programs such as Tempus in diffusing soft power and likewise concludes that the EU does consider higher education to be "an effective source of soft power... able to influence the global political agenda".

As discussed, the Erasmus Mundus program offers the EU an avenue for asserting its normative power as a global actor. It is but one of the many instruments it taps upon within the education agenda to pursue a varied number of objectives ranging from higher education convergence within

and in its neighbourhood, the promotion of European values and the sustainable development of higher education in partner (or 'third') countries. The scholarship adds value and impetus to the program by ensuring an equality of opportunity amongst applicants of all means, as well as maintaining a broad geographic representation of students to foster diversity. These considerations make the scholarship program one that is open and diverse, ensuring broad impact across a large field of disciplines and areas. The Erasmus Mundus Graduate Impact Survey further offers us some insight into the ultimate impact of the program on students. In the latest survey, about one in four graduates state that the greatest impact of the program was on their attitude towards Europe and the EU (EMA 2014: 18). While it does not ascertain if this impact leans toward the positive or negative, the results highlight that the program does influence some of the views on the EU.

A Comparative Analysis

Similarities and differences abound in the manner with which the EU and Singapore utilise scholarships as a soft power strategy. The key similarity is that both scholarships are bond-free. This is the norm across similar scholarships provided by the US or UK governments, in which scholars are encouraged to return to their home country to contribute to the country's development and inter-state relations. However, this latter point is not as overtly emphasised in the Erasmus Mundus scholarship. The similarities seem to end here upon closer analysis, and the differences are outlined in the table below.

Scholarship Type	Erasmus Mundus	Singapore
Agency/Ministry -in-charge	DG Education & Culture and EACEA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Launched	2004	1998
Objectives (key phrases as publicly available)	Promote European values; increase EU appeal; support cooperation and mobility	Contribute to the development of home countries

Eligibility	Unrestricted	Restricted to non-Singaporean ASEAN nationals endorsed by their respective governments
Coverage	Tuition fees €1000 per month €1000 - €4000 per year for travel and relocation costs	Tuition fees S\$4300 per Academic Year One return airfare Accommodation allowance
Study Restrictions	Any discipline as offered by higher education consortiums	Any discipline as offered by 3 local Universities except Medicine, Dentistry, Architecture and Law
Target Group	Any nationality with some benchmarks for geographical diversity	ASEAN citizens
Education Level	Postgraduate	Undergraduate
Course Length	1 – 2 years	3 – 4 years
Mobility requirements	Transnational study in at least 2 European countries	Further overseas exchange/ attachments permitted but not covered

Clear differences arise once the two scholarship programs are placed side by side. The Singapore Scholarship format could be described as more targeted in its approach and simpler in a broad sense, while the Erasmus Mundus program caters to a wider range and is inherently more multifaceted in course delivery and choice. There appears to be a greater prominence of the Erasmus Mundus scholarship as well, owing to its more international and diverse nature. A cursory analysis of online media coverage of both scholarships reveals that the Erasmus Mundus program receives much greater prominence on wider platforms than the Singapore Scholarship. The latter is framed through an economic / development lens with the consequent benefits of the program writ large emphasised while the former is framed under narratives of student mobility, intercultural understanding and values promotion. With that said, the intent behind the Singapore Scholarship is

arguably more economic in the overall scheme of analysis.

In terms of projecting soft power, the EU is more overt and official than Singapore in terms of elucidating its objectives, for example through legal EU decisions, regulations and so forth. The foreign policy of the EU, however, is one that is highly complex and still evolving. It is a recent but active global actor with diverse aims requiring the considerable political will of 28 Member States to move forward in unity. A recent policy review (EU 2014) suggested the need for the EU to “become a more flexible foreign policy player that operates with a clear strategic narrative, but can adapt to rapidly evolving global contexts.” The soft power projection of the EU is thus well and alive but requires a more coherent and consistent approach.

On the other hand, Singapore tends to expound its positions and wield its influence in a more subtle manner. For example, the Minister for Foreign Affairs explained the philosophy behind the Singapore Cooperation Programme – of which the Singapore Scholarship is a part of – in a keynote speech at the programme’s twentieth anniversary celebrations. These are namely to give back to the international community after having received technical assistance in its developing years, to further Singapore’s enlightened self-interest through mutual benefit, and to build goodwill and trust with other countries which would help it in international and regional fora (Shanmugam 2012).

The differing intent and approaches with which the EU and Singapore adopt scholarships and higher education programs as a vehicle for soft power projection in effect reflects the competing policy priorities within its institutions. It is often said that the plethora of other higher education initiatives promulgated by the EU serve to establish and reinforce a common European identity, and this same identity is further diffused internationally through programs such as Erasmus Mundus. This does not seem to be the case in Singapore, where higher education scholarships tend not to enunciate the need to foster an enhanced foreign understanding of Singaporean history or identity.

Instead, there is a strong initial focus on talent development and retention for the purpose of workforce augmentation. The deployment of soft power to attract talent hence appears to be more of an afterthought rather than a multi-pronged strategy.

Conclusion

Monocle (2014) has ranked Singapore in the top 20–30 bracket for soft power strength over a five year period. It has tumbled overall, however, from a high of 13th in 2010 to 23rd in the 2014/15 survey. While the metrics used by Monocle could be debated, it does offer us a good estimate of Singapore’s influence in the world. In that regard, it raises the question of the EU’s place in such surveys were it to be included. There are unsurprisingly a significant number of European countries in the top rankings, but it would be a difficult task to rank the EU as a whole. It remains to be seen if the EU can forge an internationally recognised identity not solely reliant on its legal and political foundations. The cultivation of a common European identity based on shared values is tenuous at best, as we witness the re-nationalisation of politics and the rise of far right parties creeping out of the fringe and moving into the mainstream of politics.

This research paper has discussed the nature of soft power, its connection to higher education, and the roles scholarships have played in how the EU and Singapore project themselves to the world. The EU and Singapore are not the only ones turning to scholarships or internationalising higher education as an avenue to promote their values or foster goodwill, as China has aggressively pursued similar paths to achieve its objectives as well. It is still too early for the effect of these scholarships to be felt as graduates need time to rise in seniority and take on leadership roles in public and private sectors. Further, we have seen the differing intent, at least publicly, behind the scholarships discussed and narratives surrounding them.

There is certainly a dearth in literature focusing on the interaction and flows between higher

education and soft power in the EU and Asia, as well as comparative studies in the field. It is hoped that this paper will trigger more research into these areas. Future research could involve longitudinal studies as a method of investigating and measuring correlations between the internationalisation of higher education (and scholarships) and its efficacy as a soft power strategy. Stetar et al (2010: 201) notes that “nations and groups will likely continue to cooperate, but also use higher education to compete with their perceived rivals; it seems inevitable that nations will use universities as a primary means to project their soft power and gain strategic political advantage.” It remains to be seen if this holds true in an era of diversified information mediums.

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