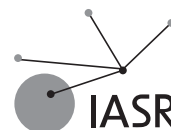




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Article

Classrooms as Corridors of Public Diplomacy: Education Exchange in India–Africa Relations

Muskaan Khanna*

PhD Researcher (SRF), University of Delhi

Abstract

Education exchange is an important yet under-theorized dimension of contemporary diplomacy between India and African countries. While India–Africa relations are often examined through trade, development cooperation, and strategic engagement, the diplomatic significance of student mobility, scholarships, and capacity-building initiatives remains insufficiently explored. This paper conceptualizes education exchange as a relational form of public diplomacy grounded in sustained interpersonal interaction, knowledge sharing, and institutional linkages rather than short-term image projection. Drawing on qualitative analysis of policy documents, scholarship programmes, digital learning initiatives, and secondary accounts of student experiences, the study examines how India deploys education as a diplomatic instrument across Africa. It argues that education exchange functions as a durable channel of diplomacy fostering normative convergence, elite socialization, and South–South solidarity, while enabling India to project itself as a developmental and accessible partner. At the same time, the paper highlights constraints including infrastructural limitations, social integration challenges faced by African students in India, and weak alumni institutionalization. The study contributes by situating education exchange within soft power and Global South debates, foregrounding African agency, and demonstrating how education diplomacy simultaneously reinforces and complicates India's partnership narrative.

Keywords

Education diplomacy, Soft Power, South–South cooperation, Student mobility, Capacity building, Global South

Corresponding author:

* Email: muskaank61099@gmail.com

Introduction

Education has long occupied a strategic yet understated position in the conduct of international relations. More than its developmental and economic worth, education acts as a medium whereby states convey values, build long-term relationships, and mold foreign public opinion. Education exchange has come to assume a critical function in contemporary diplomacy, where influence is ever increasingly achieved through attraction, credibility, and sustained engagement rather than coercion, as an instrument of public diplomacy and soft power. In the case of countries from the Global South, education diplomacy also bears normative significance, symbolizing solidarity, capacity building, and shared developmental trajectories rather than hierarchical relationships of aid.

The case of India-Africa relations is particularly instructive for examining the diplomatic potential of education exchange. Historically rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, Non-Aligned Movement politics, and South-South cooperation, India's engagement with the African states has expanded significantly in the twenty-first century. Though extant scholarship has extensively analysed trade, development assistance, energy security, and geopolitical competition as the leitmotifs in India-Africa relations (Mawdsley, 2012; Modi & Tripathi, 2021), education exchange remains comparatively under-examined. This is surprising given the scale of student mobility, scholarship programmes, and technical training initiatives that have connected India and the African continent over several decades.

Education exchange maintains a unique place in public diplomacy due to the prolonged nature of human interaction in such a space rather than epiphanic interactions. Most researchers of public diplomacy are recognizing increasingly a relational form of engagement in public diplomacy that focuses more on mutualism than short-term persuasion (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010). In this view, classrooms, school campuses, and training institutes have become focal points of diplomatic interaction wherein foreign policy interests are being indirectly pursued through the day-to-day experience of everyday interaction.

India's education diplomacy towards Africa has been institutionalised through a range of mechanisms, including government-funded scholarships, technical cooperation programmes, and digital learning platforms. Schemes such as the ICCR scholarships and the ITEC programme have enabled the training of thousands of African students and professionals in Indian institutions since the mid-twentieth century. More recently, initiatives like e-VidyaBharti and e-ArogyaBharti reflect a shift towards digitally mediated education and capacity-building, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These position India not merely as a provider but as a development partner offering skills, knowledge, and institutional support.

At the same time, education exchange is not a neutral or unproblematic diplomatic tool. Critical scholarship on international education highlights how student mobility can reproduce inequalities, generate unmet expectations, and expose participants to social exclusion and discrimination (Marginson, 2014). Against this backdrop, reports of racial discrimination and social marginalization faced by African students in India have periodically surfaced, complicating India's narrative of solidarity and shared Global South identity (Biswas, 2020). Such tensions underscore the importance of examining not only the intent but also the lived realities and outcomes of education diplomacy.

Theoretically, education exchange engages with various strands of international relations and diplomacy studies. From a soft power theory, education exchange adds value to a state by projecting its stores of knowledge, its potential as an institution, and its propensity as a culture (Nye, 2004). From a constructivist theory, education exchange plays a role in the construction of identities, the promotion of norms, and the socialization of future elites, thus shaping long-

term understandings of the international community (Wendt, 1999). From a Global South study, education exchange engages with the praxis and values of South-South cooperation, prioritizing horizontality, mutualism, and sovereignty (UNESCO, 2019).

However, despite its significance to India-Africa relations, the role of exchange in education has not always been considered a prominent or integral feature of foreign policy but more as a peripheral or secondary aspect of India-Africa relations. Most studies so far seem to either review policy discourse in relation to scholarship exchanges or discuss India's international soft power policies in general terms without linking it to public diplomacy. This gap limits our understanding of how education functions as a corridor of diplomacy, one that extends beyond state-to-state interaction and embeds diplomatic influence within everyday academic and social spaces.

This paper fills this lacuna by conceptualizing education exchange as a form of relational public diplomacy in India-Africa relations. It attends to how educational initiatives articulate India's diplomatic interests, African students and professionals lived experience of these exchanges, and the ways in which education diplomacy echoes and contests India's normative rhetoric of partnership and solidarity. Through foregrounding education as a 'long-term' diplomatic practice rather than a mere symbolic afterthought, the study aims at enriching public diplomacy scholarship while offering a Global South-centred perspective on international education.

First, the paper outlines the conceptual framework linking education exchange with public diplomacy and soft power. This is followed by an analysis of India's education diplomacy initiatives in Africa, and then a discussion of experiences and perceptions from Africa. Concluding sections reflect on digitalisation, post-pandemic shifts, and the future of more reciprocal and inclusive education exchange in India-Africa relations.

Methodology and Case Selection

This study employs a document based qualitative comparative case study design to examine education exchange as a form of public diplomacy in India-Africa relations. Given the study's focus on diplomatic practices, institutional engagement, and educational cooperation, a qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of meanings, relationships, and policy processes that are not easily captured through quantitative indicators alone. The analysis is interpretive in orientation and seeks to understand how educational initiatives function as instruments of diplomatic engagement and relationship building.

The research is based primarily on document analysis. The corpus of materials includes official policy documents, annual reports, programme reports, parliamentary statements, and publicly available data produced by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. These sources are supplemented by secondary academic literature on public diplomacy, international education, soft power, and South-South cooperation. To incorporate perspectives beyond official policy narratives, the study also draws on published media reports, scholarly discussions of African student experiences, and publicly available accounts relating to educational mobility between India and African countries.

The temporal scope of the study focuses primarily on the period from 2014 to 2024. This period captures the expansion of India-Africa educational engagement through scholarship programmes, technical training initiatives, and digital learning platforms, while also encompassing important developments such as the launch of the Study in India initiative, the expansion of digital education programmes, and the disruptions associated with the COVID-19

pandemic.

The collected material was analysed through qualitative thematic analysis. Documents were reviewed to identify recurring themes relating to education diplomacy and India-Africa relations. Four broad analytical themes guided the analysis: capacity building, relational engagement, elite socialisation, and perceptions of partnership. These themes emerged from the conceptual framework of the study and were used to organise evidence across the different empirical sections. The thematic approach enabled the identification of patterns in how educational initiatives are presented within policy discourse, how they contribute to relationship building, and how they are experienced by participants.

To enhance analytical transparency, the documents were first read inductively to identify recurring concepts relating to educational cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Initial descriptive codes included scholarship provision, institutional partnerships, capacity building, student mobility, digital education, alumni engagement, student experiences, and policy narratives of South–South cooperation. These initial codes were subsequently organised into four higher-order analytical categories i.e. institutional linkage, interpersonal interaction, professional socialisation, and reputational transmission, which form the core dimensions of the proposed “corridor of diplomacy” framework. Interpretation focused on identifying recurring patterns and convergences across policy documents, programme reports, and secondary literature, rather than measuring the frequency of themes. This iterative coding process ensured consistency in comparing the three country cases and strengthened the link between the conceptual framework and the empirical analysis.

Moreover, to strengthen the credibility of the analysis, evidence was interpreted through triangulation across multiple document types. Official government documents and programme reports were used primarily to establish the objectives, institutional design, and implementation of educational initiatives, while peer-reviewed scholarship and published studies were used to contextualise, interpret, and critically assess policy claims. Media reports and documented student experiences were incorporated to capture perspectives not fully reflected in official sources. Where numerical estimates or programme data differed across sources, the study relied on convergent trends supported by multiple datasets rather than any single estimate. This approach prioritised consistency across independent sources and reduced reliance on isolated policy statements or descriptive accounts.

The study also adopts a comparative case selection strategy through purposive sampling. Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa were selected because they represent distinct patterns of educational engagement with India and therefore provide variation across the broader landscape of India-Africa educational cooperation. Ethiopia represents a development-oriented model characterised by technical training, scholarship participation, and capacity-building cooperation. Nigeria represents a case of large-scale student mobility in which educational exchange extends beyond state-sponsored programmes and involves significant private enrolment. South Africa represents a comparatively reciprocal form of engagement characterised by research collaboration, professional training, and institutional partnerships between relatively developed higher education systems.

The comparative analysis examines each case through a common set of dimensions, including the primary mode of educational engagement, the nature of institutional cooperation, the role of educational exchange in diplomatic relationship building, and the principal challenges affecting educational diplomacy. Applying a common analytical framework across the three cases enables a systematic comparison of how education exchange operates under different political, institutional, and social conditions.

This study does not rely on primary data collection such as interviews or surveys.

Consequently, the findings are limited to evidence available through official documents, published scholarship, and secondary accounts. While this constrains direct access to participant perspectives, the document-based approach allows for a broad examination of educational diplomacy across multiple national contexts and provides a suitable foundation for analysing education exchange as a relational dimension of India-Africa public diplomacy.

Conceptual Framework

Although public diplomacy has undergone major transformations from an earlier understanding that focused primarily on the dissemination of information as well as a state-centric approach, a more complete understanding of public diplomacy now focuses primarily on relationship building, engagement, as well as interaction between different societies (Cull, 2008; Melissen, 2005). In this regard, it can be seen how educational exchanges assume great prominence in public diplomacy as it promotes interpersonal interaction that surpasses the unification period of public diplomacy. Rather than simply being viewed as cultural or developmental activities, educational exchanges are now viewed as a genuinely vital public diplomacy tool.

Education Exchange as a Corridor of Diplomacy

Education exchange can be understood as a corridor of diplomacy through which states build and sustain long-term relationships beyond formal diplomatic channels. In the context of India-Africa relations, this corridor operates through sustained interaction among students, professionals, educational institutions, and government agencies. Rather than representing a single theoretical concept, the corridor serves as an analytical framework that brings together insights from soft power theory, relational public diplomacy, constructivism, and South-South cooperation.

Soft power theory explains why education has diplomatic value. According to Nye (2004), attraction emerges from resources such as culture, values, and institutional credibility. Educational opportunities, scholarships, professional training, and academic cooperation contribute to this attractiveness by projecting a country's developmental capabilities and intellectual resources. Within this framework, education exchange serves as a source of diplomatic attraction and reputational influence.

However, attraction alone does not explain how diplomatic relationships are sustained over time. Relational public diplomacy provides this additional dimension. Rather than viewing diplomacy as a process of one-way communication, relational approaches emphasise dialogue, interaction, and long-term relationship building (Zaharna, 2010). Educational exchanges create repeated and prolonged contact between individuals and institutions, enabling trust, familiarity, and mutual understanding to develop through everyday interaction. From this perspective, classrooms, universities, and training centres become important sites of diplomatic engagement.

Constructivist approaches further explain the potential outcomes of educational exchange. Through sustained exposure to new institutional environments, professional practices, and governance experiences, students and trainees may internalise norms, ideas, and modes of cooperation that shape future professional and political interactions (Wendt, 1999). Educational exchange therefore functions not only as a channel of communication but also as a process of socialisation through which identities, preferences, and understandings are formed and negotiated.

At the same time, India's educational engagement with Africa is embedded within the broader framework of South-South cooperation. Unlike traditional donor-recipient models,

South-South cooperation emphasises mutual benefit, capacity building, and developmental partnership (UNESCO, 2019). India’s scholarship programmes, technical training initiatives, and digital learning platforms are frequently framed through this language of solidarity and shared developmental experience. This normative context shapes both the objectives and the presentation of India’s education diplomacy.

Drawing these perspectives together, the corridor of diplomacy can be understood as operating through four interconnected dimensions: institutional linkage, interpersonal interaction, professional socialisation, and reputational transmission. Institutional linkage refers to partnerships among universities, training institutes, and government agencies. Interpersonal interaction occurs through sustained contact among students, faculty members, and professionals. Professional socialisation involves the acquisition of skills, norms, and administrative practices. Reputational transmission occurs when participants communicate their experiences through alumni networks, professional communities, and broader social networks.

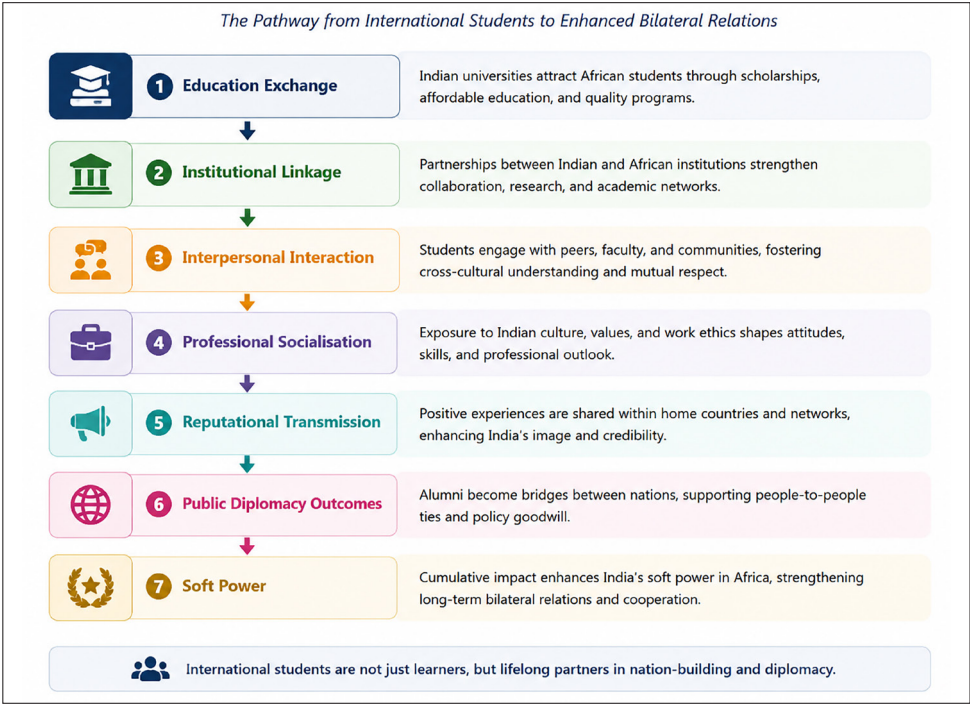


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Education Exchange as a Corridor of Diplomacy
Source: Author’s conceptualisation based on Nye (2004), Melissen (2005), Zaharna (2010), Wendt (1999), and UNESCO (2019).

This framework enables education exchange to be analysed not simply as a source of attraction, but as a relational process through which diplomatic influence is produced, experienced, and sustained. It also provides the analytical foundation for examining how educational engagement contributes to India’s broader diplomatic relationship with African countries.

India’s Education Diplomacy Architecture towards Africa

India’s education diplomacy towards Africa is cast within a broader architecture of development partnership, technical cooperation, and South-South engagement that has evolved from the early decades of independence. Distinct from the traditional donor-driven model of education assistance, India’s approach has, over the years, emphasized capacity building, transfer of skills, and institutional collaboration, positioning education as a long-term investment in the diplomatic relationship rather than a short-term instrument of aid (Mawdsley, 2012). The Ministry of External Affairs has repeatedly identified capacity building, scholarships, and training programmes as core pillars of India’s development partnership with Africa, indicating that educational cooperation is treated as an institutional component of foreign policy rather than a purely cultural initiative (MEA Annual Report 2019–20). EAM’s latest address focused on spreading education & digital literacy in Africa as a core goal of Indian foreign policy (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2025). As time has passed, it has evolved into a multilayered institutional architecture comprising scholarships, technical training, professional exchanges, and – more recently – digital education initiatives that supplement India’s larger diplomatic outreach towards the continent (MEA, 2020).

Table 1. Estimated trends in African student presence in India, 2014–2024

Year	Estimated African students in India	Source basis
2014	~22,000–25,000	Policy and academic estimates place African presence around mid-20k
2015	~50,000 (broad political estimate)	Indian leadership cited 50k Africans studying/training in India (includes short-term programmes)
2016	~25,000	Higher-education focused estimates stabilize around 25k
2017	~25,000–27,000	Growth through ICCR and self-financed enrolment
2018	~26,000–28,000	Launch of Study in India programme boosted recruitment
2019	~27,000–30,000	Gradual rise before COVID
2020	~25,000	Pandemic disruption; ~25k across 500 universities
2021	~25,000	Similar estimate reported in education cooperation forums
2022	~25,000–28,000	Recovery phase after pandemic
2023	~25,000+	Reaffirmed in India–Africa education commentary
2024	~30,000+	Enrolment growth and shift from China toward India

Source: Compiled by the author from AISHE reports, Ministry of Education publications, and policy statements referenced in secondary literature.

The trends presented in Table 1 suggest that educational engagement between India and African countries has remained relatively resilient despite fluctuations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although mobility experienced disruption during the pandemic years, student presence recovered in the subsequent period, indicating that educational exchange continues to represent an important component of India-Africa engagement. The persistence of these flows supports the argument that education functions as a long-term diplomatic channel rather than a short-term policy initiative. Government statements presented in Lok Sabha discussions on international student mobility similarly frame educational exchange as an enduring component of India’s external engagement, including its relations with African countries (Lok

Sabha Unstarred Question No. 894, answered on 26 July 2023).

At the heart of India's education diplomacy infrastructure is the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which is responsible for a variety of government-sponsored scholarships to foreign students, including a significant number meant for the African continent. These scholarships are up for grabs for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral courses in fields such as engineering, medicine, agriculture, information technology, and social sciences, among others (ICCR, 2021). In this sense, the process of enabling African students to pursue their studies in Indian universities is part of India's long-term efforts aimed at cultivating ties outside state channels, while simultaneously promoting India's human resource development capabilities to these nations. ICCR annual reports indicate that African students constitute one of the largest regional groups of scholarship recipients, underscoring the institutional importance of educational engagement within India's Africa policy (ICCR Annual Report 2020–21). Indeed, over the years, such educational ties between India and Africa have resulted in informal but long-lasting ties at the bureaucratic, administrative, and even policymaking levels in several of the latter states (Suri, 2019).

Complementing the scholarship framework is the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, launched in 1964, which provides short-term professional training and capacity-building courses for government officials, technicians, and development practitioners from partner countries. African states constitute one of the largest beneficiary groups under ITEC, which participates in training programmes on public administration, banking, entrepreneurship, information technology, renewable energy, and governance, among others (MEA, 2020). Unlike the degree-oriented education exchanges, ITEC programmes are designed to provide specific skill development related to the administrative and developmental needs of partner countries, thereby reinforcing India's image as a practical and development-oriented partner (Chaturvedi, 2016).

More recently, India's education diplomacy architecture has been expanded through digitally mediated learning initiatives, including-most prominently-the e-VidyaBharti and e-ArogyaBharti (e-VBAB) network. In cooperation with African governments, the project will link Indian universities and medical institutions to participating African countries through online degree courses, tele-education platforms, and virtual training modules. The programme reflects India's attempt to adapt its education diplomacy to technological transformation and to reach a wider set of beneficiaries beyond those able to physically travel to India. The digital turn also gained renewed significance during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions disrupted traditional forms of academic mobility and highlighted the importance of remote learning infrastructure (Mawdsley, 2018).

Institutionally speaking, the education diplomacy of India in Africa has been managed and executed by the country's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), assisted by the relevant ministries, universities, and technical institutions of the country, and the education department of the states themselves. Thus, the multi-actor system ensures the simultaneous functioning of the education initiatives launched in Africa not only as foreign policy tools but also in the spheres of economic aid and cultural engagement (Chaturvedi, 2016).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that India's education diplomacy operates through multiple channels rather than a single programme. Scholarships facilitate long-term academic mobility, technical training programmes support professional capacity building, and digital initiatives extend educational outreach beyond physical mobility. Viewed collectively, these instruments create different pathways through which educational engagement contributes to diplomatic relationship building.

The architecture of India's education diplomacy toward Africa therefore reflects a layered approach combining academic mobility, professional training, and digitally mediated learning.

Rather than relying on a single mechanism of influence, India engages different audiences through distinct educational instruments that operate at multiple levels. This multidimensional structure reinforces the argument that education exchange functions as a sustained corridor of diplomacy linking institutions, professionals, students, and policy communities across India and Africa. Viewed through the corridor of diplomacy framework, these initiatives primarily strengthen institutional linkage by creating sustained partnerships among government agencies, universities, and training institutions. At the same time, scholarship and technical cooperation programmes establish the organisational foundations upon which interpersonal interaction, professional socialisation, and, ultimately, reputational transmission can develop through continued educational engagement.

Student Mobility and Knowledge Exchange: Patterns and Practices

Student mobility constitutes one of the most visible and socially embedded dimensions of India's education diplomacy in Africa. Over the past two decades, thousands of African students have enrolled in Indian universities through government-funded scholarships, private enrolment, and institutional partnerships, creating dense networks of academic and professional exchange between the two regions (Varghese, 2015). These mobility flows are concentrated in disciplines such as medicine, engineering, information technology, pharmacy, management, and agricultural sciences fields closely aligned with the developmental priorities of many African states and with India's comparative educational strengths.

India's relative affordability as a higher education destination, combined with English-medium instruction and established scholarship frameworks, has made it an accessible option for students from a wide range of African countries (Teferra, 2014). Scholarship schemes administered through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and training opportunities under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme have played an important role in facilitating mobility, particularly for students who might otherwise face financial or visa-related barriers in Western education systems (MEA, 2020). In addition to government-sponsored students, a growing number of privately funded African students choose Indian institutions for professional degrees, further expanding the scale of educational engagement.

The trends shown in Table 2 indicate that educational mobility between India and Africa is not exclusively one-directional. Although the scale remains significantly smaller than African student mobility to India, the gradual increase in Indian students studying in African countries suggests the presence of reciprocal educational engagement. This pattern reinforces the argument that educational exchange increasingly operates through interconnected academic networks rather than purely donor-recipient relationships.

Beyond numerical mobility, educational exchange functions as a site of knowledge transfer and professional socialisation. Students trained in Indian universities often acquire not only technical skills but also exposure to administrative practices, institutional cultures, and developmental policy approaches shaped by India's own postcolonial development experience.

Scholars of international education argue that such exposure contributes to the formation of transnational professional networks and epistemic communities that can influence governance practices, professional collaboration, and policy learning in the long term (Marginson, 2014). From a constructivist perspective, these interactions are significant because they expose participants to alternative institutional environments, professional norms, and developmental experiences. Knowledge exchange therefore extends beyond technical training and may contribute to the formation of shared understandings that influence future professional cooperation.

Table 2. Estimated Indian students studying in Africa (2014–2024)

Year	Estimated number	Trend
2014	~3,500–4,000	Concentrated in professional courses
2015	~4,000	Gradual increase
2016	~4,200	Medical mobility rising
2017	~4,500	Growth in North & East Africa
2018	~4,800	Stable expansion
2019	~5,000	Pre-COVID peak
2020	~4,500	Pandemic disruption
2021	~4,300	Slow recovery
2022	~4,800	Mobility resumes
2023	~5,000–5,500	Increasing diversification
2024	~5,500+	Gradual upward trend

Source: Compiled by the author from the MEA, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 894, *Indian Students Studying Abroad* (26 July 2023); NITI Aayog, *International Student Mobility: A Global and Indian Temporal Overview* (Working Paper Series); and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* dataset.

The evidence examined in this study suggests that educational exchange creates conditions under which elite socialisation may occur, particularly through prolonged exposure to professional practices and institutional environments. However, the extent of such influence varies across contexts and cannot be assumed solely on the basis of educational participation. The relationship between educational experience and subsequent professional behaviour therefore remains contingent rather than deterministic.

Alumni returning to their home countries frequently occupy positions in public administration, healthcare systems, engineering sectors, and private industry, thereby extending the indirect developmental and diplomatic impact of education exchange.

At the same time, the everyday realities of student mobility shape how education diplomacy is perceived and experienced. Research indicates that the quality of campus infrastructure, administrative support, housing conditions, and social integration significantly influences international students’ perceptions of the host country (Lee, 2017). In the Indian context, African students often form vibrant transnational communities in university towns, engaging in cultural exchange, entrepreneurship, and peer networks that contribute to informal people-to-people diplomacy. These interactions expand the diplomatic significance of student mobility beyond formal state programmes by embedding diplomatic relationships within everyday social spaces.

However, the benefits of student mobility are accompanied by structural challenges. Differences in institutional capacity across universities, bureaucratic delays in scholarship disbursement, and occasional reports of discrimination or social exclusion can affect student experiences and, consequently, the reputational outcomes of education diplomacy (Biswas, 2020). Such issues highlight the importance of viewing student mobility not merely as a quantitative indicator of diplomatic engagement but as a qualitative relational process, where lived experiences play a decisive role in shaping long-term perceptions of partnership.

Student mobility represents one of the most tangible expressions of education diplomacy within India-Africa relations. Beyond numerical enrolment, it facilitates knowledge exchange, professional networking, institutional interaction, and people-to-people engagement. At the

same time, the effectiveness of mobility as a diplomatic resource depends heavily on participant experiences and institutional support structures. The section therefore demonstrates that educational mobility functions not merely as an indicator of educational cooperation but as a key mechanism through which the broader corridor of diplomacy operates. Within the proposed framework, student mobility represents the principal mechanism through which interpersonal interaction and professional socialisation occur. Extended contact within universities enables participants to develop professional relationships, acquire institutional norms, and build networks that may subsequently contribute to reputational transmission through alumni and professional communities.

Table 3. Main destination countries for Indian students

Country	Reason
South Africa	Business, social sciences, research programmes
Egypt	Medicine and Islamic studies
Mauritius	Cultural proximity, business & management
Uganda	Medical and private university enrolment
Kenya	Regional education hub

Source: Compiled by the author from the MEA, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 894, *Indian Students Studying Abroad* (26 July 2023); NITI Aayog, *International Student Mobility: A Global and Indian Temporal Overview* (Working Paper Series); and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* dataset.

Table 3 further illustrates the growing diversification of educational connections between India and Africa. While the overall scale remains modest, the distribution of Indian students across multiple African destinations reflects the emergence of broader educational linkages that complement official diplomatic engagement. These patterns suggest that educational exchange increasingly involves multidirectional mobility rather than exclusively African movement toward India.

African Agency and Educational Diplomacy

While educational exchange is often discussed through the policies and initiatives of states, its diplomatic significance is also shaped by the choices and actions of participants themselves. African governments, educational institutions, and students are not passive recipients of educational opportunities but active actors who influence the direction and outcomes of educational cooperation. Understanding educational diplomacy therefore requires attention not only to India's objectives but also to the ways African actors interpret, utilise, and respond to these opportunities.

The reasons for African students choosing India as an educational destination are driven by a mix of factors that include affordability, English-language education, scholarship opportunities, and the perceived relevance of Indian professional training to development needs in their home countries (Teferra, 2014). Most students perceive Indian institutions as providing functional and skill-based education in areas such as medicine, engineering, information technology, and management, which closely matches the needs of the labour market in their countries of origin. These perceptions reinforce India's image as a development-oriented partner rather than an elite

or exclusionary education hub, distinguishing it from Western destinations often associated with higher costs and restrictive migration regimes (Varghese, 2015).

Table 4. Top African countries sending students to India

Rank	Country	Key trend
1	Nigeria	Largest source; strong private medical & professional enrolment
2	Sudan	Major medical education destination; scholarship mobility
3	Ethiopia	Growing technical and engineering student flow
4	Kenya	Longstanding education cooperation; ICCR participation
5	Tanzania	Stable presence across health sciences and commerce

Source: Compiled by the author from Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) Annual Reports (various years); Ministry of External Affairs Annual Reports (various years); Lok Sabha, Unstarred Question No. 6, Country-Wise International Students Annex 1.

The growth of African student mobility to India also reflects deliberate educational choices rather than simple policy outcomes. Students select India because of a combination of affordability, English-medium instruction, professional training opportunities, and the perceived relevance of Indian educational programmes to domestic labour market needs. These decisions demonstrate that educational diplomacy operates through demand as well as supply. India’s educational attractiveness therefore depends not only on scholarship provision but also on the extent to which African students regard Indian institutions as capable of supporting their academic and professional aspirations.

However, the experiences of African students in India are also highly disparate, depending on institutional capacity and location. Research literature that documents the lived experiences of students indicates both positive engagement and social challenges. On the one hand, African students often report the benefits of peer networks, academic guidance, and engagement with the Indian cultural and linguistic diversity as positive aspects of their educational experience (Lee, 2017). On the other hand, challenges of housing insecurity, administrative transparency, and lack of support structures can negatively impact students’ feelings of inclusion and well-being.

More critically, documented experiences of racial discrimination and social exclusion illustrate how participants actively evaluate and reinterpret diplomatic narratives through their everyday experiences. For students who encounter barriers to inclusion, official rhetoric surrounding solidarity and South-South partnership may appear inconsistent with lived realities. These experiences demonstrate that educational diplomacy is not simply projected by governments but continually assessed and negotiated by participants themselves. Student perceptions therefore become an important mechanism through which diplomatic credibility is either reinforced or challenged.

Perceptions of educational outcomes are also important. Although many African graduates appreciate the technical skills they acquired in India, there have been concerns about international accreditation, the recognition of degrees, and the ability to compete in the global labour market (Marginson, 2014). These concerns impact the assessment of education exchange not only as a cultural or diplomatic experience but also as a tool of long-term professional development. If these expectations are not met, education exchange may become perceived as symbolic rather than transformative.

However, despite these difficulties, alumni networks and professional connections often

continue to foster positive linkages with India. Graduates who are placed in government, healthcare, engineering, and the private sector often continue to have professional networks with Indian institutions and individuals, which can foster ongoing knowledge exchange and diplomatic connections (Suri, 2019). These networks underscore the delayed nature of education diplomacy, where power is exercised through relationships rather than immediate policy outcomes.

Educational Exchange and Elite Socialisation

Educational exchange also has implications for elite socialisation, although these effects are often indirect and long term. Students and professionals trained in India are exposed to institutional practices, administrative procedures, and developmental experiences that may inform their future professional activities. While the available evidence does not permit direct measurement of long-term policy influence, the continued presence of graduates in sectors such as public administration, healthcare, engineering, and business suggests the potential for educational experiences to contribute to future professional and institutional linkages between India and African countries.

Normative Learning and Shared Developmental Perspectives

The findings suggest that educational exchange may facilitate forms of normative learning by exposing participants to shared discussions of development, governance, technology, and capacity building. However, such processes should not be understood as automatic or uniform. Educational experiences vary considerably across institutions and individuals. Consequently, educational diplomacy may create opportunities for normative convergence without necessarily producing identical perspectives or policy preferences among participants.

Taken together, African experiences highlight that education diplomacy is a co-produced process rather than a one-directional exercise of influence. The effectiveness of educational exchange depends not only on programme design and diplomatic intent but also on how participants interpret, experience, and utilise educational opportunities. Recognising African agency therefore strengthens our understanding of education exchange as a relational form of public diplomacy grounded in interaction, evaluation, and mutual engagement. These findings also demonstrate that the corridor of diplomacy is not driven solely by state institutions. Rather, its effectiveness depends upon how participants experience, evaluate, and reproduce educational relationships, making reputational transmission contingent upon lived experience rather than official diplomatic narratives alone.

Digital Turn and Post-Pandemic Education Diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the conditions under which educational diplomacy could be practised. Because education exchange traditionally relies on physical mobility, face-to-face interaction, and prolonged institutional engagement, travel restrictions and campus closures posed significant challenges to existing models of diplomatic outreach. In the context of India-Africa relations, these disruptions accelerated the adoption of digitally mediated educational initiatives and expanded the role of virtual platforms within India's broader education diplomacy architecture.

The Indian e-VidyaBharti and e-ArogyaBharti (e-VBAB) initiative, which had already been launched before the pandemic but has taken on fresh significance in the wake of the crisis, is one such example. This initiative links Indian universities and medical facilities with selected African countries via online degree programs, tele-education components, and telemedicine facilities (MEA, 2020). By harnessing the power of digital infrastructure, this initiative aims to increase access to Indian higher education without the need for physical mobility, thereby lowering the costs and barriers to entry for African students. In diplomatic speak, the digital platform helps India maintain educational engagement even during global disruptions, thus reinforcing the continuity of its development partnership story.

From the perspective of the corridor of diplomacy framework, digital platforms represent an extension rather than a replacement of traditional educational exchange. While they create new forms of institutional linkage and knowledge sharing, they operate differently from conventional mobility-based programmes because opportunities for interpersonal interaction and long-term socialisation may be more limited.

The digital transformation also alters the character of educational diplomacy itself. Conventional student mobility is based on immersive and physical interaction, which enables deep socialization and bonding. In contrast, online education increases accessibility but could potentially restrict the depth of interpersonal engagement that underpins long-term soft power outcomes (Nye, 2004). The digital platform helps India access a wider and more scattered audience in Africa, but it also prompts questions about the depth of relational diplomacy achieved through online learning spaces. This creates an important tension for relational public diplomacy. Digital platforms increase accessibility and geographical reach, yet they may not fully reproduce the depth of interaction typically associated with physical mobility. The diplomatic value of digital education therefore depends not only on participation rates but also on the quality of engagement that such platforms are able to sustain.

In addition, the success of digital education diplomacy is also subject to the structural inequalities of technological infrastructure. Indeed, some African states continue to experience imbalanced internet accessibility, electricity supply, and digital literacy, which could potentially impede access to online education (UNESCO, 2021). These limitations underscore the paradox of digital diplomacy: technology can promise inclusivity and scalability but also potentially reinforce existing inequalities. For India, the success of its digital education initiative is contingent upon its capacity to work with African partners in filling the infrastructural deficit rather than presuming a level playing field in terms of technological preparedness.

These limitations suggest that the effectiveness of digital education diplomacy remains closely linked to local institutional and technological conditions. Consequently, the success of digital engagement cannot be evaluated solely in terms of programme availability but must also consider the capacity of partner institutions and participants to access and utilise these resources.

Normatively, the digital extension of education exchange supports India's self-presentation as a technologically competent and innovation-oriented partner in the Global South. The Indian experience with digital public goods and massive online education platforms can serve as a springboard to present digital knowledge-sharing as a gesture of developmental solidarity (Mawdsley, 2018). This is consistent with the principles of South-South cooperation, which underscore flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and knowledge-sharing over market-oriented internationalization.

The implications of digital education diplomacy vary across the cases examined in this study. In Ethiopia, digital platforms may supplement existing capacity-building initiatives by expanding access to technical training. In Nigeria, they provide additional educational opportunities beyond physical mobility, although concerns regarding quality and engagement remain important.

In South Africa, digital cooperation increasingly complements research collaboration and professional exchanges, reflecting a more reciprocal model of educational partnership.

The post-pandemic expansion of digital education has broadened the scope of India's educational engagement with Africa while simultaneously reshaping the mechanisms through which diplomatic relationships are formed and maintained. Digital platforms increase resilience, accessibility, and scale, allowing educational cooperation to continue beyond the constraints of physical mobility. At the same time, they raise important questions regarding interaction, reciprocity, and long-term relationship building. Rather than replacing traditional educational exchange, digital initiatives increasingly complement existing mobility and training programmes, creating additional pathways through which education functions as a corridor of diplomacy. Digital education therefore expands institutional linkage by connecting universities and partner institutions across borders, although it may only partially reproduce the interpersonal interaction and professional socialisation associated with physical mobility. Its contribution to the corridor of diplomacy consequently differs from that of traditional exchange programmes.

Education Exchange and India's Soft Power in Africa

Education exchange constitutes one of the principal channels through which India seeks to generate soft power in Africa. However, the relationship between educational engagement and soft power outcomes is neither automatic nor linear. Rather, educational initiatives create opportunities for attraction, relationship building, and professional networking, the effectiveness of which depends on participant experiences, institutional quality, and the credibility of the broader partnership. Soft power, understood as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction unaided by coercion, is dependent on more than mere cultural visibility (Nye, 2004). It also requires credibility, legitimacy, and relational engagement over time. In this respect, education exchange is a mechanism that enables India to project its developmental experience, institutional capacity, and normative commitment to partnership over time.

In this context, soft power and relational public diplomacy perform distinct analytical functions. Soft power helps explain why educational opportunities may generate attraction, while relational public diplomacy explains how repeated interaction transforms initial attraction into longer-term relationships. Educational exchange therefore derives diplomatic significance not simply from its visibility but from the sustained engagement it facilitates among individuals and institutions.

Unlike cultural diplomacy initiatives, which are necessarily short-term, education exchange involves prolonged engagement. African students who study in India, or professionals who take part in technical training programs, have direct experience with Indian institutions, administrative systems, and social contexts. Such experiences are part of what constructivist scholars have termed elite socialization, where repeated exposure to a particular governance experience, policy approach, and institutional norm shapes how elites interpret international partnerships (Wendt, 1999). Such returnees, who go back to their home countries, are often in public administration, healthcare systems, engineering, and academia, and hence exert influence indirectly through professional networks and epistemic communities.

Education exchange also helps to strengthen India's development-oriented and solidaristic role in the Global South. By providing scholarships and capacity-building programs at relatively lower costs compared to many Western countries, India is able to project itself as an accessible and developmentally attuned partner to the socioeconomic realities of many African countries (Mawdsley, 2012). This helps to improve India's normative attractiveness, especially in a

scenario where educational engagement is framed not as talent drain but as skill sharing and institutional building. This approach helps to distinguish India's engagement from more market-oriented internationalization policies that are often associated with global higher education hubs (Marginson, 2014). This narrative is particularly visible in the Ethiopian case, where educational cooperation is closely connected to capacity-building objectives, and in South Africa, where educational engagement increasingly operates through collaborative rather than hierarchical institutional relationships.

India's educational diplomacy also differs from that of other major external actors in Africa, particularly China. While China's educational engagement has expanded through Confucius Institutes, large-scale scholarship programmes, and education cooperation linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, India's approach places greater emphasis on capacity building, technical training, English-medium higher education, and South–South partnership. Rather than relying primarily on state-led educational infrastructure overseas, India seeks to cultivate long-term interpersonal relationships through academic mobility, professional training, and institutional collaboration. Although both countries view education as an instrument of soft power, India's strategy is more explicitly framed around developmental partnership and knowledge sharing than geopolitical projection.

Since the relationship between education exchange and soft power is not automatic or linear. Attraction based on policy intention can easily be offset by negative experiences, bureaucratic inefficiencies, or social tensions. Cases of discrimination or institutional disregard, even if exceptional, can spread quickly through social media networks (Biswas, 2020). As relational public diplomacy studies have highlighted, credibility and trust are accumulated over time but can be easily lost if there are unmet expectations of respect and inclusion (Zaharna, 2010). Thus, education diplomacy's contribution to soft power depends significantly on the quality of student experience and institutional responsiveness. The Nigerian case illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. While large-scale student mobility creates significant opportunities for relationship building and social connection, reports of discrimination and social exclusion demonstrate how positive diplomatic outcomes can be undermined by negative lived experiences. Educational engagement therefore generates soft power potential, but the realization of that potential depends heavily on credibility, inclusion, and institutional responsiveness.

Another aspect of soft power is connected to alumni diplomacy. Alumni of Indian institutions tend to retain loose professional networks, business connections, and joint research endeavours with India. Over the long term, these networks may help build trade partnerships, diplomatic cooperation, and multilateral support. While hard to measure, these social reservoirs represent a form of embedded soft power that goes beyond formal foreign policy tools. Education exchange, in other words, represents a slow but steady diplomatic connectivity.

However, it is also important to recognize that the soft power of Indian education exists in a competitive international setting. Today, African students enjoy a range of choices, including China, Europe, and North America, each with its own set of educational attractions and migration options. In this setting, the capacity of India to retain its appeal will depend on its educational standards, student welfare, and the impact of the digital revolution.

The analysis suggests that education exchange contributes to India's soft power in Africa by creating opportunities for attraction, relationship building, professional networking, and institutional cooperation. However, these outcomes remain dependent on the quality of educational experiences, the credibility of developmental partnership narratives, and the inclusiveness of educational environments. Soft power should therefore be understood not as an automatic product of educational engagement but as a relational outcome that is continuously shaped by interaction, perception, and experience. Collectively, these findings suggest that the

four dimensions of the corridor of diplomacy operate sequentially rather than independently. Institutional partnerships facilitate interpersonal interaction, repeated engagement supports professional socialisation, and these experiences shape reputational transmission, through which educational exchange contributes to India's broader public diplomacy objectives.

Challenges, Contradictions, and Policy Gaps

Despite the expansion of India's education diplomacy architecture across Africa, several structural, institutional, and policy-related challenges continue to limit its effectiveness. Educational cooperation has undoubtedly strengthened diplomatic engagement through scholarships, capacity-building initiatives, technical training, and institutional partnerships. However, the extent to which these initiatives generate sustained public diplomacy outcomes depends not only on their scale but also on the quality of implementation, participant experiences, institutional coordination, and long-term reciprocity. Examining these limitations is essential because they reveal the conditions under which education exchange succeeds or fails as a corridor of diplomacy. The following discussion identifies five interrelated challenges that continue to shape the effectiveness of India's educational engagement in Africa.

One recurring challenge concerns institutional coordination and administrative efficiency. India's education diplomacy architecture involves multiple actors, including the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), universities, and technical training institutes. Although this multi-actor model enables flexibility and scale, it can also produce bureaucratic delays in scholarship disbursement, visa processing, accommodation arrangements, and communication with students. Development cooperation literature has long highlighted the importance of institutional coherence in ensuring that policy delivery aligns with diplomatic messaging (Mawdsley, 2012). Where administrative bottlenecks persist, they risk undermining India's image as a reliable and responsive partner. Within the corridor of diplomacy framework, weaknesses in institutional coordination primarily affect the dimension of institutional linkage. Administrative delays and fragmented governance reduce the continuity of educational partnerships and weaken the credibility upon which long-term diplomatic relationships depend.

A second set of challenges relates to social integration and student welfare. As discussed earlier, African students' everyday experiences significantly shape perceptions of India. Incidents of discrimination, housing insecurity, or limited institutional support structures can generate reputational risks that circulate transnationally through digital media networks (Biswas, 2020). From a relational public diplomacy perspective, such experiences are not peripheral but central to diplomatic outcomes, since they influence how former students narrate their engagement with India upon returning home (Zaharna, 2010). Addressing these issues requires more than rhetorical reaffirmation of solidarity; it necessitates institutional reforms, diversity training, and more structured support systems within host universities. These experiences demonstrate that interpersonal interaction alone does not automatically produce favourable diplomatic outcomes. Rather, reputational transmission depends on whether participants perceive their educational experiences as inclusive, respectful, and professionally rewarding.

Third, questions of academic quality, accreditation, and employability present longer-term policy concerns. Although India offers cost-effective education in high-demand fields, disparities in institutional standards and limited global recognition of certain degrees can affect graduates' competitiveness in international labour markets (Marginson, 2014). If educational outcomes do not translate into tangible professional advancement, the developmental credibility of education

diplomacy may be weakened. Ensuring quality assurance mechanisms and enhancing research collaboration with African institutions could mitigate these concerns. Professional socialisation is unlikely to translate into durable diplomatic influence if educational qualifications are perceived as having limited academic or labour-market value. Consequently, educational quality itself becomes an important component of public diplomacy.

The digital turn in education diplomacy also presents contradictions. While initiatives such as e-VidyaBharti expand access and reduce mobility barriers, they depend heavily on digital infrastructure that remains uneven across parts of Africa (UNESCO, 2021). Without parallel investments in technological capacity and local institutional partnerships, digital education risks reproducing inequalities rather than resolving them. Moreover, virtual platforms may not replicate the immersive relational depth that physical mobility facilitates, potentially limiting long-term soft power effects (Nye, 2004). Digital platforms successfully expand institutional linkage but only partially reproduce the interpersonal interaction and professional socialisation associated with physical mobility. Consequently, digital education should be viewed as complementing rather than replacing conventional educational exchange.

Finally, there exists a broader strategic tension between rhetoric and reciprocity. India frequently frames its education diplomacy within narratives of South–South cooperation and partnership. However, critics argue that genuine reciprocity requires deeper institutional collaboration, joint research production, and co-designed curricula rather than predominantly one-directional training flows (Chaturvedi, 2016). Moving toward more symmetrical academic partnerships would strengthen the normative coherence of India's diplomatic claims. From the perspective of the proposed framework, reciprocity strengthens all four dimensions of the corridor of diplomacy by transforming educational exchange from a one-directional transfer of knowledge into a collaborative process of mutual learning and institutional partnership.

Taken together, these challenges demonstrate that education diplomacy should not be evaluated solely in terms of programme size or student numbers. Instead, its effectiveness depends upon the interaction of institutional capacity, participant experience, educational quality, digital accessibility, and reciprocal partnership. These findings reinforce the central argument of this paper that education functions as a corridor of diplomacy only when institutional linkage, interpersonal interaction, professional socialisation, and reputational transmission operate together in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Case Studies

Ethiopia: Capacity-Building and Developmental Partnership

Educational Engagement

Ethiopia represents one of the clearest examples of education exchange functioning within a development-oriented partnership framework. Educational cooperation has primarily occurred through ICCR scholarship programmes and ITEC training initiatives, particularly in public administration, information technology, engineering, and technical fields. These sectors correspond closely with Ethiopia's long-standing emphasis on state-led development and institutional capacity building.

Diplomatic Significance

The diplomatic significance of this engagement lies less in student mobility and more in professional training and knowledge transfer. Through technical education and administrative

training, India positions itself as a provider of practical developmental expertise rather than simply an educational destination. This reinforces India's broader diplomatic narrative of partnership, capacity building, and South-South cooperation. Within the corridor of diplomacy framework, Ethiopia illustrates the predominance of institutional linkage and professional socialisation, as educational cooperation is centred on technical training and administrative capacity building.

Evidence of Relational Diplomacy

From a relational public diplomacy perspective, repeated interaction between Ethiopian officials, professionals, and Indian institutions contributes to sustained institutional linkages. Unlike short-term diplomatic exchanges, educational engagement creates opportunities for prolonged contact and professional networking. Such interactions increase familiarity with Indian institutions and may contribute to longer-term cooperation in administrative and technical sectors.

Constraints

However, evidence of long-term diplomatic impact remains difficult to systematically assess. The available literature provides limited information regarding alumni engagement and post-training institutional linkages. As a result, while educational cooperation appears substantial, the extent to which these interactions translate into durable diplomatic networks remains insufficiently documented.

Nigeria: High-Volume Mobility and Social Contestation

Educational Engagement

Nigeria represents the largest and most socially visible dimension of India-Africa educational exchange. Unlike Ethiopia, where cooperation is largely state-supported, educational mobility from Nigeria is driven by both scholarship opportunities and significant private enrolment in medicine, engineering, pharmacy, and management programmes. The prominence of Nigeria within India's educational engagement is also reflected in AISHE and MEA data, which consistently identify Nigerian students as one of the largest African student groups enrolled in Indian higher education institutions. (Ministry of Education, AISHE 2016–17)

Diplomatic Significance

The scale of Nigerian student mobility creates extensive people-to-people connections that extend beyond formal diplomacy. Educational exchanges contribute to the formation of social, professional, and commercial networks linking the two countries. This makes Nigeria a particularly important case for examining education as a channel of public diplomacy. Nigeria demonstrates how interpersonal interaction becomes the dominant dimension of the corridor of diplomacy, while simultaneously illustrating how reputational transmission may be strengthened or weakened by students' everyday experiences.

Evidence of Relational Diplomacy

Nigerian students experience prolonged exposure to Indian educational institutions, local communities, and professional environments. These experiences can facilitate relationship building and contribute to favourable perceptions of India. Alumni who subsequently enter professional sectors may also sustain informal connections with Indian institutions and businesses.

Constraints

At the same time, Nigeria demonstrates the limits of education diplomacy. Reports of discrimination, housing insecurity, and social exclusion complicate narratives of solidarity and partnership. These experiences illustrate that educational mobility does not automatically generate positive diplomatic outcomes. Instead, diplomatic influence depends significantly upon the quality of everyday interactions and institutional support structures available to students.

South Africa: Strategic Reciprocity and Institutional Parity

Educational Engagement

South Africa represents a distinct form of educational cooperation characterised by greater institutional reciprocity. Educational engagement increasingly involves professional training, research collaboration, digital learning initiatives, and specialised academic exchanges rather than large-scale scholarship dependence. Recent India–South Africa cooperation statements have increasingly emphasized research collaboration, skills development, and knowledge partnerships, reflecting a more reciprocal model of educational engagement than scholarship-driven mobility alone (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Diplomatic Significance

The South African case demonstrates how education diplomacy can operate within a relationship marked by relatively greater institutional parity. Rather than functioning primarily as a mechanism of capacity building, educational cooperation supports broader strategic engagement between two influential actors of the Global South. South Africa highlights the interaction between **institutional linkage** and **professional socialisation** through collaborative research partnerships and reciprocal academic engagement.

Evidence of Relational Diplomacy

Collaborative educational initiatives create opportunities for sustained institutional interaction between universities, research centres, and professional communities. These forms of engagement align closely with relational public diplomacy because they emphasise partnership, dialogue, and mutual exchange rather than one-directional transfer of knowledge.

Constraints

However, South Africa also illustrates the competitive environment within which education diplomacy operates. Students and institutions possess a wide range of international partnerships, including those involving Western countries and China. Consequently, India’s attractiveness

Table 5. Comparative Overview of Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa

Country	Primary Mode	Nature of Partnership	Dominant Corridor Dimension	Main Challenge
Ethiopia	ITEC/ICCR	Capacity Building	Institutional linkage & Professional socialisation	Limited alumni engagement
Nigeria	Student Mobility	Commercial/ Professional	Interpersonal interaction & Reputational transmission	Discrimination
South Africa	Research Collaboration	Reciprocal	Institutional linkage & Professional socialisation	Competition

Source: Author’s compilation based on MEA Annual Reports, ICCR Annual Reports, AISHE Reports, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and the comparative analysis presented in this study.

depends not only on historical ties but also on educational quality, innovation, and the perceived value of cooperation.

Analytical Insight

The comparison of Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa reveals that India's education diplomacy does not operate through a single model of engagement. Instead, educational exchange assumes different diplomatic functions depending upon local institutional conditions, patterns of mobility, and the nature of bilateral relations.

Together, these three cases demonstrate that India's education diplomacy in Africa operates across three distinct models: capacity-building cooperation (Ethiopia), high-volume mobility with social contestation (Nigeria), and reciprocal strategic engagement (South Africa).

These comparative findings reinforce the central argument that education exchange functions as a corridor of diplomacy through different but complementary relational pathways shaped by institutional context, participant experiences, and patterns of educational cooperation.

Conclusion

This study has argued that education exchange constitutes a strategic corridor of diplomacy through which India and African states develop sustained institutional relationships, professional networks, and people-to-people engagement. Rather than functioning merely as an instrument of educational cooperation, educational exchange operates as a long-term relational process that shapes diplomatic outcomes through repeated interaction, mutual learning, and institutional collaboration.

The conceptual section of this paper has shown that education diplomacy is a process of long-term interpersonal engagement, elite socialization, and network-building rather than short-term policy deliverables. Unlike image projection exercises, which are short-term and fleeting, education diplomacy builds influence over time through alumni networks, professional partnerships, and institutional relationships. This is why education diplomacy often persists despite changes in political leadership or economic trends. Education diplomacy is therefore a slow-burning but constant diplomatic resource.

The empirical analysis of the education diplomacy architecture in India has revealed a hybrid approach that combines scholarships managed by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, professional training offered within the framework of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation program, and digitally enabled initiatives such as e-VidyaBharti. Taken together, these approaches demonstrate India's self-understanding as a development-oriented and solidaristic partner in the Global South. By focusing on capacity building and technical expertise, India's approach diverges from more market-oriented international education and instead corresponds to the principles of South-South cooperation.

Viewed collectively, the comparative findings reinforce the proposed corridor of diplomacy framework. Ethiopia primarily illustrates institutional linkage and professional socialisation through capacity-building initiatives; Nigeria highlights the centrality of interpersonal interaction and reputational transmission shaped by student experiences; and South Africa demonstrates how reciprocal institutional partnerships can strengthen long-term diplomatic engagement. Together, these cases show that education diplomacy operates through multiple relational pathways rather than a single model of international educational cooperation.

Crucially, the findings challenge a linear understanding of soft power. Attraction cannot be assumed to be the automatic consequence of program size or policy goals. Student experience,

administrative efficacy, accreditation criteria, and social inclusion all play important mediating roles in diplomatic outcomes. Education exchange is thus a constantly dynamic and contested site where soft power is constantly negotiated, not passively accumulated.

An important finding of the study is that educational diplomacy is best understood as a co-produced process rather than a one-directional exercise of influence. African governments, institutions, and students actively shape the outcomes of educational cooperation through their choices, priorities, and lived experiences. Recognising this agency provides a more balanced understanding of how educational exchange functions within contemporary India-Africa relations.

The digital turn, spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, further complicates this landscape. While new digital platforms enhance accessibility and resilience, they may also attenuate the rich relational intensity conventionally associated with educational mobility. The future success of India's education diplomacy will depend on striking a balance between digital expansion and quality assurance, infrastructure cooperation, and sustained alumni engagement.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of the corridor of diplomacy framework, which conceptualises education exchange as a sequential relational process connecting institutional linkage, interpersonal interaction, professional socialisation, and reputational transmission. By integrating insights from soft power theory, relational public diplomacy, constructivism, and South-South cooperation, the framework provides an analytical model for understanding how educational engagement generates diplomatic influence beyond traditional state-to-state interactions. It also helps to advance a Global South-focused approach, exemplifying how rising powers use education not only for status but for development partnership and normative positioning.

Future research could test and refine the proposed framework through interviews with policymakers, university administrators, and programme participants, longitudinal alumni tracking, and comparative analyses involving other African partner countries or external factors such as China. Such studies would enable more systematic evaluation of the causal relationship between educational exchange, professional networks, and diplomatic outcomes. The corridor of diplomacy framework proposed in this study therefore offers a conceptual foundation for analysing education diplomacy beyond the India-Africa context and may be adapted to examine educational engagement in other regions and South-South partnerships.

Ultimately, the significance of education diplomacy lies not simply in the number of students who cross borders, but in the quality of the institutional relationships, professional networks, and shared experiences that emerge from educational engagement. When sustained through reciprocity, inclusion, and long-term collaboration, these interactions become an enduring corridor of diplomacy that contributes to mutual understanding, development partnership, and India's public diplomacy in Africa.

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Conflict of Interest

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