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Turkey as an Educational Bridge: A Management and International Relations Perspective on Cross-Border Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Turkey's emerging role as a pivotal educational bridge in the context of international higher education, analyzed through the combined lenses of management and international relations. Turkey's strategic use of education as a form of soft power, alongside its institutional efforts to internationalize higher education, underpins its ambition to foster diplomatic ties and enhance geopolitical influence. By examining cross-border educational partnerships and the mobility of international students from strategically significant regions, this research highlights both opportunities and challenges in Turkey's educational branding. Despite notable progress, contradictions related to political interference, academic freedom, and quality assurance complicate Turkey's global reputation as an education hub. The study employs a library research methodology, analyzing secondary sources to provide an integrative perspective on how education management intersects with foreign policy objectives. Findings suggest that Turkey's educational diplomacy serves as a vital tool for geopolitical leverage but requires addressing internal governance issues to sustain credibility and effectiveness in the global education landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cross-border education has emerged as a strategic domain at the intersection of higher education management and international relations. As global mobility increases and education becomes a tool of soft power, countries are not only striving to improve their domestic education systems but also to attract international students, export academic

institutions, and shape global narratives. Within this dynamic landscape, Turkey has actively positioned itself as an educational hub that bridges East and West, leveraging both its geographic location and historical-cultural ties with regions such as the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East (**Yilmaz, 2020**).

Turkey's higher education policies have increasingly reflected this global ambition. The establishment of Turkey Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları), the expansion of Turkish universities' international programs, and the global outreach of the Maarif Foundation all signal Turkey's intention to be more than a recipient of educational influence—it seeks to be a producer and exporter of educational values and structures (**Kirişci, 2021**). This transformation is not only administrative but also political, as education becomes a tool for public diplomacy and soft power projection, particularly in the post-2010 era when Turkey increased its engagement with Africa, Central Asia, and the Muslim world (**Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2019**).

However, despite this growing role, there is a limited scholarly examination of how Turkey manages its cross-border education initiatives in a strategic and integrated manner, particularly through the dual lenses of educational management and international relations. Most existing studies focus either on domestic reforms or Turkey's foreign policy, without connecting these with the institutional strategies of higher education management. This fragmentation creates a gap in understanding how Turkey's ambitions as an "educational bridge" are operationalized through governance structures, partnerships, branding, and geopolitical narratives (**Altbach & Knight, 2007; Demir & Sert, 2022**).

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining Turkey's cross-border educational initiatives from both a management and an international relations perspective. It will explore how Turkish universities and state agencies design and manage programs for international students, the role of education in Turkey's foreign policy agenda, and how these efforts reflect broader strategic goals. It aims to contribute to the growing field of transnational education studies while also offering practical insights for policymakers and university administrators engaged in internationalization efforts (**Hina, et.al, 2024**).

The urgency of this research lies in the changing global education landscape, where competition for international students is intensifying, and educational diplomacy plays a growing role in shaping regional influence. In light of shifting global power dynamics and regional tensions, understanding how Turkey navigates this space is not only academically relevant but also vital for comprehending the future of education as a geopolitical instrument. By investigating Turkey's role as an educational bridge, this study will shed light on how education can simultaneously serve managerial efficiency, institutional branding, and foreign policy objectives in a complex international environment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative library research approach, which is suitable for exploring conceptual and theoretical intersections between management and international relations within the context of Turkey's cross-border educational initiatives. Library research involves the systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of existing scholarly literature and documentary sources to construct arguments, identify patterns, and propose new insights (**George & Bennett, 2005**). This method is particularly appropriate when direct field access is limited or when the research focuses on policy analysis, institutional frameworks, and strategic narratives, as in the case of Turkey's educational diplomacy.

Data collection in this research relies primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, government reports, institutional publications (e.g., by the Turkish Council of Higher Education and the Maarif Foundation), and international education databases. These materials were obtained through academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, as well as official websites of relevant institutions. According to Zed (2004), library research enables scholars to "trace the development of ideas, concepts, and debates within a discipline or across interdisciplinary boundaries," making it ideal for studying both management strategies and foreign policy narratives in education (**Zed, 2004**).

For data analysis, the study applies qualitative content analysis, which involves identifying themes, patterns, and discursive structures within the selected materials. This analytical method allows the researcher to interpret how Turkey frames and manages its role as an educational bridge, and how such narratives align with broader strategic objectives in international relations (**Krippendorff, 2018**). The materials were coded manually by categorizing content into thematic areas such as “internationalization of higher education,” “soft power and public diplomacy,” “cross-border student mobility,” and “educational management frameworks.” By synthesizing findings across sources, the study develops a comprehensive understanding of Turkey’s cross-border education agenda from both a managerial and geopolitical standpoint.

This methodological framework ensures a rigorous and interpretive exploration of how educational management and international relations intersect in shaping Turkey’s global educational outreach. It also contributes to the academic literature by offering a multidimensional perspective rooted in systematic textual analysis and critical engagement with existing scholarship.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Turkey’s Strategic Framing of Education as Soft Power

In the contemporary international system, soft power has become a central instrument of statecraft, allowing nations to influence others not through coercion or economic pressure, but through attraction, persuasion, and cultural resonance. Turkey’s educational diplomacy has increasingly reflected this shift, with the government crafting a strategic framework that uses education as a non-coercive tool of influence. Education in this context is not merely seen as a domestic sector but as a vehicle of foreign policy and international identity formation (**Nye, 2004**).

At the heart of this strategy lies the Turkey Scholarships program (Türkiye Bursları), a state-funded initiative that offers full financial support to thousands of students from around the world, particularly from Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans. This program not only provides access to higher education but also embeds recipients within Turkish cultural, linguistic, and ideological environments (**Yilmaz, 2020**). By doing so, it creates transnational networks of alumni who are likely to carry a favorable view of Turkey back to their home countries.

The influence of education as soft power is further reinforced by the activities of the Maarif Foundation, an institution established by the Turkish government to operate schools abroad, promote Turkish curricula, and offer Turkish-language education. The Foundation now has a presence in over 50 countries, signaling Ankara’s commitment to global educational

outreach. Its operations are explicitly framed as part of Turkey's broader goal to combat rival ideological influences and promote national values abroad (**Kaya, 2021**).

These efforts align with Turkey's desire to be viewed as a cultural and intellectual leader, especially among Muslim-majority and Turkic-speaking nations. In these regions, Turkey attempts to position itself as an alternative to both Western educational dominance and rising powers such as China or the Gulf states. Through cultural familiarity, historical ties, and shared religious identity, Turkey offers a "third way" educational model that is both modern and rooted in local values (**Demir & Sert, 2022**).

The strategic use of education also reflects a reshaping of Turkey's foreign policy priorities, particularly under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Since the early 2000s, Turkish foreign policy has shifted from being predominantly West-oriented to embracing a multi-vector approach—engaging the Global South, particularly in Africa and Asia, through humanitarian aid, trade, and increasingly, education (**Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2019**). In this context, educational diplomacy becomes an extension of neo-Ottoman and Islamic solidarity narratives.

Moreover, the presence of international students in Turkish universities contributes to the domestic image of Turkey as a global center of knowledge, enhancing national pride and legitimacy for the ruling elite. It also allows Turkey to export its political and cultural discourse through everyday interactions, academic content, and state-sponsored narratives. These subtle yet powerful forms of influence resonate deeply with the soft power framework outlined by Nye, wherein attraction is built not through propaganda but through immersive, long-term engagement (**Nye, 2004**).

Another critical dimension of this strategy is the emphasis on identity formation and loyalty building. By immersing international students in the Turkish education system, offering language training, and fostering cultural exposure, the state is cultivating future elites and decision-makers who may hold favorable attitudes toward Turkey in their later professional and political careers (**Yilmaz, 2020**). This investment in human capital serves both bilateral relations and long-term strategic positioning.

However, the success of such a soft power strategy is not guaranteed. It depends heavily on the quality, inclusivity, and sustainability of the educational programs offered. Criticisms regarding academic freedom, language barriers, and unequal treatment can erode the credibility of Turkey's educational image (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**). Therefore, the challenge lies not just in attracting students but in managing their experiences and perceptions effectively.

In addition, Turkey's soft power projection through education must compete with other regional and global actors who offer similar scholarships and programs, often with greater financial and institutional resources. Countries like China (through the Confucius Institutes) and Qatar (through Education City) are also leveraging education as a diplomatic tool, which places Turkey in a highly competitive global education landscape (**Knight, 2012**). Differentiation and value-based branding thus become crucial for Turkey's soft power success. Turkey's strategic framing of education as soft power is an ambitious and multifaceted endeavor. It reflects a deliberate convergence of foreign policy, higher education management, and cultural diplomacy, grounded in the belief that long-term influence can be achieved through intellectual and emotional engagement (**Setiawan, 2024**). As Turkey continues to refine its role in global education, the effectiveness of this strategy will depend on coherent policy implementation, institutional credibility, and international responsiveness.

Institutional Management of Internationalization in Higher Education

In recent years, internationalization has become a key priority for higher education institutions worldwide, and Turkish universities are no exception. Turkey has made concerted efforts to expand its global academic footprint, driven by state policy and institutional incentives aimed at attracting international students, faculty, and research collaboration. This transformation is part of a broader strategy to integrate Turkish higher education into the global knowledge economy and to position Turkey as an academic destination in the Global South (**Demir & Sert, 2022**).

One of the most visible steps in this internationalization process has been the proliferation of English-medium programs, particularly in science, technology, and business disciplines. This linguistic shift is designed to increase the accessibility and competitiveness of Turkish universities in international education markets (**Knight, 2004**). Institutions are investing in faculty development and curriculum redesign to meet global academic standards and appeal to diverse student populations.

In addition, many universities have established dedicated international relations offices that handle student recruitment, mobility coordination, and bilateral partnerships. These units are tasked with navigating visa issues, managing international applications, and facilitating cross-border academic cooperation. However, the level of institutional capacity and professionalization within these offices varies significantly across public and private universities (**Özturgut, 2017**), resulting in uneven implementation of international strategies.

Participation in global education fairs and academic consortia has also become a common strategy for Turkish universities to gain visibility. Through platforms such as Eurasia Higher Education Summits (EURIE) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE), institutions market their programs, build networks, and position themselves within regional and global academic circuits. Yet, visibility does not always translate into substantive partnerships or sustained student enrollment unless backed by consistent institutional practices and international service quality (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**).

Despite the progress, several challenges hinder the effective management of internationalization. One key issue is the lack of standardized policies and quality assurance mechanisms across the national higher education system. While the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) provides general frameworks, individual universities often have discretion over how these policies are implemented, leading to fragmented and inconsistent outcomes (**Demir & Sert, 2022**). Administrative limitations further exacerbate the problem. Many international offices suffer from limited staffing, language barriers, and insufficient training in global academic operations. This hinders their ability to support international students adequately or to manage complex international agreements effectively. In particular, the lack of specialized knowledge in transnational education program management can undermine the sustainability of international collaborations (**De Wit & Hunter, 2015**).

Another major gap is the absence of robust student support systems tailored to international learners. While recruitment has increased, services such as academic advising, psychological counseling, and language assistance remain underdeveloped at many institutions. This mismatch between recruitment ambitions and actual service provision can negatively affect international student satisfaction and retention (**Soutar & Turner, 2002**).

Moreover, regulatory bottlenecks and bureaucratic inertia at both the institutional and national levels complicate internationalization efforts. Slow visa processing, recognition of foreign credentials, and rigid academic equivalency standards can deter potential students

and faculty from engaging with Turkish institutions. These structural constraints highlight the need for more agile governance frameworks within higher education policy (**Teichler, 2004**). To address these challenges, capacity building at both strategic and operational levels is essential. Universities must invest in professional development for international office staff, adopt institution-wide quality assurance models, and develop comprehensive internationalization strategies that align academic, administrative, and cultural objectives. Cross-institutional learning and benchmarking with globally recognized institutions could accelerate this process (**Knight, 2012**).

Turkey's higher education institutions have demonstrated ambition and progress in internationalization, the success of these efforts hinges on their ability to manage institutional reforms effectively. Internationalization must move beyond symbolic participation in global platforms and focus on embedding international quality, governance, and service practices into the everyday operations of Turkish universities. Only then can Turkey truly emerge as a competitive and sustainable actor in global higher education.

Cross-Border Educational Partnerships as a Diplomatic Tool

In the contemporary global order, diplomacy has expanded beyond embassies and official negotiations to encompass softer, more long-term instruments such as education. Turkey has increasingly employed cross-border educational partnerships as a tool of diplomatic engagement, particularly in regions where it seeks greater political influence and cultural connectivity. By leveraging education, Turkey aims not only to enhance bilateral relations but also to shape the perceptions and policy orientations of future global elites (**Kirişci, 2021**).

A central element of this educational diplomacy is the proliferation of bilateral educational agreements with countries across Africa, Central Asia, and the Balkans. These agreements often include provisions for student and faculty mobility, mutual recognition of degrees, joint research initiatives, and capacity-building programs for local institutions. In this way, Turkey positions itself as a provider of educational expertise and a partner in institutional development (**Yilmaz, 2020**).

One manifestation of these agreements is the establishment of Turkish schools and universities abroad, many of which are operated under the umbrella of the Turkish Maarif Foundation. These institutions not only deliver Turkish-style curricula but also foster environments where Turkish language, values, and historical narratives are promoted. Through these schools, Turkey cultivates cultural affinity and ideological alignment with host countries, particularly among youth populations (**Kaya, 2021**).

The strategic importance of these partnerships is amplified in regions with shared historical and cultural legacies, such as the Balkans and Turkic-speaking Central Asia. Here, Turkey frames itself as a historical kin-state and developmental partner, often invoking Ottoman heritage or Turkic solidarity as a rationale for educational collaboration (**Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2019**). This soft power approach helps build trust and creates a platform for broader geopolitical cooperation.

Beyond historical ties, Turkey also uses education to enter new and emerging diplomatic spaces, particularly in Africa. Through scholarships, university partnerships, and the opening of cultural centers, Turkey has gained ground in countries where it previously had limited presence. These educational initiatives often precede or accompany trade deals, infrastructure investments, and humanitarian aid, reflecting an integrated model of diplomacy (**Özkan, 2022**). From an institutional perspective, Turkish universities have

increasingly aligned their strategic plans with foreign policy objectives, viewing internationalization not merely as academic expansion but as a national duty. Universities are encouraged to pursue international agreements that support Turkey's diplomatic agenda, with government ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency for Turks Abroad (YTB) providing funding and logistical support (**Demir & Sert, 2022**).

Such state-university collaboration reflects a growing synergy between higher education policy and diplomatic strategy. Educational partnerships are no longer incidental but are systematically planned and institutionalized, often included in bilateral memoranda of understanding and regional cooperation frameworks. This institutionalization ensures sustainability and scalability, allowing partnerships to evolve into long-term mechanisms of engagement (**Knight, 2004**). However, this strategy is not without its challenges. Host countries may perceive Turkish educational expansion as ideologically motivated or politically intrusive, especially in contexts where local political actors are wary of foreign influence. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these partnerships depends on mutual trust, academic quality, and cultural sensitivity—areas where inconsistency can undermine diplomatic gains (**Teichler, 2004**).

There is also a competitive dimension. Other regional and global actors, including China, Russia, and Gulf states, are similarly leveraging education for diplomatic purposes. Thus, Turkey must differentiate its educational model by emphasizing shared identity, mutual development, and institutional equality to maintain influence and legitimacy in an increasingly crowded field (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**). Cross-border educational partnerships have become a cornerstone of Turkey's soft power arsenal. By embedding educational initiatives within its foreign policy architecture, Turkey is not only enhancing its global presence but also constructing a transnational community of influence rooted in shared learning and mutual benefit. These partnerships symbolize a future-facing diplomacy that values human capital, cultural affinity, and institutional cooperation.

Geopolitical Leverage through Student Mobility

In the realm of international relations, education is increasingly recognized not only as a developmental tool but also as a strategic instrument of geopolitical influence. Turkey's educational diplomacy—particularly through the mobility of international students—has evolved into a deliberate mechanism for regional and global positioning. The rising number of students from conflict zones or politically strategic regions signals a calibrated effort by Ankara to shape diplomatic ties and soft power influence through human capital investments (**Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2019**).

A major component of this strategy is the Türkiye Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları) program, which offers fully funded higher education opportunities to students from countries in Africa, Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East. These students are not chosen randomly; rather, they often hail from fragile states, post-conflict societies, or nations with historical-cultural ties to Turkey, such as Syria, Somalia, and Azerbaijan (**Yilmaz, 2020**). In doing so, Turkey positions itself as a humanitarian actor while simultaneously cultivating goodwill among future leaders.

This educational outreach serves a dual function. On one hand, it reflects Turkey's self-image as a benevolent regional power willing to support underprivileged or displaced populations. On the other hand, it builds a network of foreign alumni who are likely to occupy influential roles in government, business, and civil society upon returning to their home

countries. These individuals often retain political and emotional affiliations with Turkey, which can be tactically beneficial in future diplomatic or economic negotiations (**Demir & Sert, 2022**). In particular, the recruitment of students from Syria and other conflict-ridden areas plays into Turkey's broader regional aspirations. With millions of Syrian refugees within its borders, offering university placements to Syrian youth helps Turkey frame itself as a guardian of regional stability and post-conflict reconstruction. This not only improves its international image but also increases its leverage in discussions with European and Middle Eastern partners (**Kirişci, 2021**).

Similar dynamics are observed with students from Somalia and other African nations, where Turkey has expanded its footprint through humanitarian aid, embassy openings, and infrastructure projects. By training future Somali professionals—especially in medicine, engineering, and public administration—Turkey is effectively embedding itself in the human resource development of these countries. As a result, Ankara creates long-term dependencies and bilateral alignment that may translate into political support or preferential trade agreements in the future (**Özkan, 2022**). The strategic intent behind this mobility is reinforced by the presence of supportive institutional ecosystems, including housing, language training, cultural orientation, and religious infrastructure. These services are not only designed to ease student transition but also subtly promote Turkish values, political narratives, and worldviews. The aim is to produce alumni who feel a sense of belonging to Turkey's geopolitical vision and cultural milieu (**Kaya, 2021**).

Moreover, Turkey utilizes international student mobility as a means of public diplomacy and image management, particularly in the Global South. Through testimonials, social media campaigns, and alumni associations, Turkey broadcasts its role as an inclusive, modern, and Muslim-majority educational destination. This branding effort aligns with its ambition to act as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West, and as an alternative model to Western hegemony in higher education (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**).

Turkey's soft power projection through education also positions it as a mediator in regional conflicts and international dialogues. By maintaining close educational ties with rival or tension-prone regions—such as Armenia, Palestine, and parts of Central Asia—Turkey demonstrates its capacity to host dialogue, promote multicultural understanding, and exert influence beyond traditional diplomacy (**Teichler, 2004**). Education, thus, becomes both a tool of peacebuilding and influence-building. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on sustaining student satisfaction, academic quality, and long-term engagement. If international students face discrimination, administrative difficulties, or lack of professional opportunities after graduation, the intended geopolitical benefits may backfire. Therefore, Turkey's soft power via student mobility requires continued investment in academic infrastructure and inclusive practices (**Knight, 2004**).

Student mobility has become a strategic vector of Turkey's foreign policy, enabling it to project influence across multiple geographies while promoting its values and fostering diplomatic ties. By investing in the education of future global actors, Turkey is not merely exporting degrees—it is building transnational networks of loyalty, affinity, and political capital that can sustain its geopolitical ambitions well into the future.

Limitations and Contradictions in Educational Branding

Turkey's ambition to establish itself as a prominent educational hub on the global stage has made significant strides in recent years. Through expansive scholarship programs,

international collaborations, and the promotion of Turkish language and culture, the country has sought to craft a compelling educational brand. However, this branding effort is met with varied perceptions and inherent contradictions that complicate Turkey's image abroad (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**).

On one hand, many international students and educational stakeholders regard Turkey as an attractive destination due to its affordability, geographic location, and cultural richness. The combination of relatively low tuition fees and living costs, alongside a diverse and dynamic society, appeals especially to students from neighboring regions and the Global South (**Demir & Sert, 2022**). Such attributes are significant competitive advantages compared to Western education markets. Nonetheless, these positive attributes coexist with concerns about political interference in academic institutions, which have attracted scrutiny from international observers and educational watchdogs. Reports of increasing government oversight and limitations on academic freedom raise questions about the autonomy and independence of Turkish universities (**Altbach & Knight, 2007**). Such perceptions risk deterring prospective students who prioritize open and critical academic environments.

Further complicating Turkey's educational branding are issues related to quality assurance and program standardization, especially in the context of international programs taught in English. While Turkish universities have made efforts to internationalize curricula and comply with global accreditation standards, inconsistencies remain in program quality, faculty qualifications, and student services (**Demir & Sert, 2022**). These disparities can undermine the global competitiveness of Turkey's higher education.

Additionally, Turkey's brand as a soft power actor through education is sometimes contradicted by domestic political dynamics that clash with international norms and expectations. The country's recent political developments, including restrictions on freedom of expression and political polarization, have sparked debates about the extent to which Turkey's educational institutions can uphold democratic principles and pluralism (**Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2019**). These contradictions also extend to Turkey's international partnerships, where political considerations occasionally overshadow academic collaboration. Some partner countries express caution over Turkey's dual role as an educational provider and geopolitical actor, fearing that educational exchanges might be instrumentalized for political influence rather than purely academic purposes (**Kirişci, 2021**). This can strain diplomatic relations and limit the scope of cooperation.

The challenge for Turkey lies in balancing its ambitions for educational soft power with the realities of domestic governance. Without ensuring transparent governance structures, protecting academic freedom, and maintaining consistent quality standards, Turkey risks losing credibility among international academic communities and prospective students (**Knight, 2004**). Moreover, the complexity of branding Turkey's education system is compounded by the diverse expectations of its target audiences. While some students seek pragmatic opportunities such as affordable education and career prospects, others prioritize academic rigor, freedom, and institutional prestige. Turkey's educational institutions must navigate these competing demands to build a cohesive and trustworthy brand (**Teichler, 2004**).

Turkey has achieved notable progress in positioning itself as a global education hub, it faces ongoing limitations and contradictions that challenge the coherence of its educational branding. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to enhance institutional autonomy, quality assurance mechanisms, and transparent governance that align with

international academic standards. Ultimately, resolving these contradictions will not only strengthen Turkey's educational brand but also enhance its broader geopolitical ambitions by demonstrating a genuine commitment to the principles underlying academic excellence and freedom.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's ambition to become a regional and global educational hub represents a significant intersection of education management and international relations. Through scholarship programs, institutional internationalization, and strategic cross-border partnerships, Turkey leverages education as a soft power instrument to advance its geopolitical goals. The mobility of students from conflict-affected and geopolitically strategic regions underlines Turkey's efforts to cultivate long-term diplomatic networks. However, persistent challenges such as concerns over academic freedom, political interference, and inconsistent quality assurance pose risks to the country's educational branding. To maintain and enhance its position, Turkey must prioritize transparent governance, strengthen institutional autonomy, and ensure high academic standards. Balancing domestic policy realities with international expectations remains crucial for Turkey to consolidate its role as an educational bridge that supports both its foreign policy ambitions and the global academic community.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study offers a conceptual exploration of Turkey's role in international education through the combined lenses of management and international relations. While it contributes a multidimensional perspective to the discourse on educational diplomacy and cross-border learning, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize its findings. *First*, the research is based solely on a qualitative library-based methodology, relying on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, policy reports, and institutional publications. Although this approach allows for a comprehensive theoretical synthesis, it lacks empirical validation through fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, or case studies. As a result, the study does not capture the lived experiences of international students, university administrators, or policy actors involved in Turkey's cross-border education initiatives.

Second, the absence of comparative case analysis limits the generalizability of the study's findings. While the paper provides valuable insight into Turkey's unique model, it does not systematically contrast this with other state-led education diplomacy strategies (e.g., by China, Qatar, or the EU), thereby constraining its explanatory depth regarding the relative effectiveness or distinctiveness of Turkey's approach. *Third*, the analysis is temporally limited. The rapid evolution of global higher education trends, including the impact of digitization, migration politics, and shifting regional alliances, could quickly alter the dynamics examined in this study. Without longitudinal data or adaptive empirical tracking, it is difficult to assess the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of Turkey's educational diplomacy.

Fourth, while the study identifies political interference and academic freedom as challenges to Turkey's educational branding, these issues are only treated at a surface level. Deeper investigation into how domestic governance and democratic backsliding shape perceptions of Turkish higher education among international students and partner institutions would provide a more nuanced understanding of the contradictions inherent in Turkey's soft power strategy. In light of these limitations, future research should pursue

empirical investigations, including in-depth interviews with international students and university officials, to assess the implementation and reception of Turkey's educational programs. Case studies of individual universities or regions could offer insights into how institutional strategies align—or clash—with national diplomatic goals.

Furthermore, comparative research is needed to examine how Turkey's educational diplomacy performs relative to other countries engaging in similar soft power efforts. This could involve cross-national studies on student satisfaction, alumni networks, or the geopolitical outcomes of educational exchange. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial, especially those that trace the career trajectories and political affiliations of Türkiye Scholarship alumni. Such research could empirically assess whether Turkey's investments in human capital translate into lasting diplomatic or economic returns.

Finally, interdisciplinary research that integrates critical international relations, public diplomacy, and higher education management theories could enhance the conceptual frameworks used to study educational soft power. Exploring the ethical and ideological dimensions of cross-border education—especially in authoritarian or hybrid regimes—would also contribute to a more critical and globally informed analysis of internationalization strategies. By addressing these gaps, future studies can more accurately assess the potentials and pitfalls of positioning education as a tool of foreign policy, and thereby support more sustainable and ethical models of transnational learning.

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