

Received: 25/04/2026

Accepted: 12/06/2026

Published: 30 /06/2026

International Education and Scholarship Policies in Turkey's Soft Power Strategy

Miada Bashir Mohamed ABDALLAH¹, Hayriye Nur GÖRKEMLİ²

¹ International University of Africa, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Khartoum, Sudan, e-mail: myadtbshyr@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4896-7312>

² Selcuk University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Public Relations and Promotion, Konya, Türkiye, e-mail: ngorkemli@selcuk.edu.tr, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5506-1343>

Abstract

Over the past two decades, Turkey has transformed international education from a peripheral diplomatic concern into a central pillar of its foreign policy. Through a suite of scholarship programmes most prominently the Türkiye Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları), launched under the coordination of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) Ankara has sought to cultivate a transnational network of graduates who carry favourable impressions of Turkey back to their home countries. Situated within the broader theoretical framework of soft power and public diplomacy, this article examines how Turkey leverages student mobility, exchange programmes, and language education as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Drawing on institutional data, existing scholarship, and a comparative analysis of Turkish exchange frameworks (Mevlana, Erasmus+, and Farabi), the study argues that Turkey's internationalisation drive rests on four intersecting pillars: academic development, economic solidarity, socio-cultural exchange, and the deepening of diplomatic relations. The article further assesses the programme's outcomes growing application volumes, rising enrolment figures, and shifting perceptions among scholarship recipients while acknowledging structural challenges that limit its long-term impact. The findings suggest that educational diplomacy has become one of Turkey's most effective yet underexamined soft power instruments.

Keywords: International student mobility, cultural diplomacy, curriculum, soft power, public diplomacy, Türkiye.

Introduction

The relationship between education and diplomatic influence is neither new nor accidental. From the French government's historic sponsorship of cultural institutes abroad to the United States' Fulbright Programme and the United Kingdom's Chevening Scholarships, major powers have long understood that hosting and funding foreign students is one of the most durable investments a state can make in its international standing. What distinguishes Turkey's approach in the twenty-first century is not the novelty of the idea but the scale and speed with which Ankara has pursued it, and the explicit manner in which educational outreach has been integrated into a coherent public diplomacy architecture.

Turkey's post-2002 foreign policy reorientation vision articulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, signalled a decisive shift away from an exclusively Western-oriented foreign policy toward a more multidirectional engagement with neighbouring regions, the Islamic world, and Africa. Soft power defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004) became a recurring motif in Turkish foreign policy discourse. Cultural institutions, development aid, media (most visibly through TRT World), and educational programmes were progressively aligned to project a positive image of Turkey as a stable, prosperous, and historically rooted civilisation capable of serving as a model for development.



Abdallah, M. B. M., & Gorkemli, H. Y. (2026). International education and scholarship policies in Turkey's soft power strategy. *Social Research and Education Journal*, 2(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21427532>

Within this framework, international education and scholarship policy has emerged as a particularly versatile instrument. Unlike military alliances or trade agreements, scholarship programmes generate people-to-people connections that persist long after a student returns home. A Ghanaian official who studied medicine in Istanbul, a Pakistani engineer who completed her doctorate in Ankara, or a Kyrgyz diplomat who learned Turkish in a YTB-funded language course all carry experiential knowledge of Turkey that no advertising campaign can replicate. As Ejder (2019) and Dönmez (2019) have both demonstrated through empirical work with Türkiye Scholarship recipients, students' perceptions of Turkey change substantially during their time in the country – a finding with direct implications for how Turkey is represented in dozens of capitals around the world.

This article provides a structured analysis of how Türkiye has developed its educational diplomacy infrastructure, the key components of this system, and the extent to which it contributes to the country's soft power objectives. Drawing on the theoretical literature on soft power and public diplomacy, the study examines the historical evolution of Türkiye's student mobility policies, from the exchange initiatives launched after the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the establishment and expansion of the Türkiye Scholarships programme. It further analyzes the programme's scope, institutional structure, and documented outcomes while also discussing its challenges and limitations. Finally, the article reflects on what Türkiye's experience reveals about the opportunities and constraints of educational diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy.

Theoretical Framework

Soft Power and Its Instruments

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s and subsequently refined across several major works (Nye, 2004, 2017), rests on a deceptively simple premise: states can achieve their foreign policy objectives not only by compelling others through force or buying compliance through economic incentives, but by making others want what they want. The sources of soft power are threefold in Nye's framework: a country's culture (in cases where it proves attractive to others), its political values (when those values are practised consistently at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

Education occupies an interesting position in this taxonomy. A prestigious university system functions as a cultural asset it draws students who come seeking something they perceive as valuable, and in the process of being educated, they are also socialised into the host country's language, norms, and ways of thinking. Scholarship programmes, in turn, operate as a hybrid instrument: they combine the attraction of high-quality education with deliberate state sponsorship, creating a structured mechanism through which host countries shape the pool of international students who can access their universities. When scholarship recipients become influential professionals in their home countries as diplomats, academics, engineers, or politicians the relationship with the sponsoring state takes on a qualitatively different character from ordinary bilateral diplomacy (Sevinç, 2023; Korkmaz, 2022).

Turkey's official articulation of its internationalisation goals reflects this logic directly. YTB identifies four pillars underpinning Turkey's higher education internationalisation strategy: academic development and exchange; economic development and solidarity; social and cultural interaction; and the strengthening of political and diplomatic relations (YTB, 2023). This four-part framework maps closely onto Nye's soft power taxonomy, with the added dimension of economic connectivity that distinguishes Turkey's approach from more culturally narrow predecessors.

Public Diplomacy and the Role of Education

Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that it targets foreign publics rather than foreign governments. Cull (2009) identifies five core public diplomacy practices: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. Of these, exchange diplomacy – the deliberate sponsorship of people-to-people encounters – is the most directly relevant to the present discussion. Exchange programmes are predicated on the intuition that sustained, substantive contact between citizens of different countries produces more durable understanding than any media campaign.

The academic literature has increasingly recognised educational diplomacy as a distinct sub-field within public diplomacy studies (Öztürk & Ay, 2015). Kaya (2019) defines educational diplomacy as the use of educational activities to pursue foreign policy goals, arguing that it addresses both local and global challenges through cross-sectoral cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Ntuli and Nyarambi (2015) similarly highlight how education diplomacy in international contexts shapes content preparation and mutual understanding across cultures. Proitsi (2015) examines the European Union's use of educational diplomacy as a mechanism for integration and soft influence, providing a comparative reference point against which Turkey's approach can be assessed.

What is particularly notable about Turkey's trajectory is the degree to which educational diplomacy has been institutionalised. Rather than remaining an ad hoc arrangement dependent on bilateral goodwill, Turkey's scholarship and exchange architecture is managed by dedicated state agencies with explicit mandates, independent budgets, and measurable targets. This institutionalisation reflects a broader shift in how middle powers approach soft power not as a by-product of cultural prestige but as a planned policy output (Akgün & Çelik, 2023; Yavaş & Demirel, 2026).

Historical Development of Turkey's International Student Policies

Early Frameworks: From State Scholarships to the Great Student Project

From the mid-twentieth century onward, successive Turkish governments offered what were known as "state scholarships" (*devlet bursları*) to students from a range of countries, reflecting both solidarity with developing nations and Turkey's desire to project an image as a generous and capable regional actor. These early programmes were fragmented administratively, managed across multiple ministries, and lacked a coherent strategic framework.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a significant opportunity and a corresponding impetus for reform. The emergence of newly independent Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus prompted Ankara to deepen its cultural and educational ties with Turkic-speaking populations that had been largely cut off from Turkey during the Cold War era. The Great Student Project (*Büyük Öğrenci Projesi, BÖP*), launched in 1992, was the principal vehicle for this outreach. Under BÖP, students from Turkic republics and related communities who passed a centralised examination (the *Türk Cumhuriyetleri ve Akraba Topluluklar, TSC*, exam) were eligible for fully funded scholarships at Turkish universities (Kaya, 201).

Despite its ambitions, the BÖP programme struggled to deliver consistent academic outcomes. The selection mechanism was not sufficiently rigorous to ensure that incoming students were adequately prepared for university-level study in Turkey, and the programme lacked robust support structures to help students integrate and succeed. These shortcomings were eventually acknowledged by the Council of Higher Education (*YÖK*), which discontinued the

programme and rendered the TSC examination obsolete. The closure of BÖP did not represent a retreat from educational diplomacy, however, but rather a moment of institutional rethinking that paved the way for a more comprehensive and professionally managed successor framework (Canavar, 2020).

The Establishment of YTB and the Consolidation of Scholarship Policy

The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, YTB) was established under the Prime Ministry, bringing the management of state scholarships and diaspora-related activities under a single institutional roof for the first time. YTB's mandate extends beyond scholarship management: it coordinates cultural and artistic activities, supports diaspora organisations, and serves as the Turkish state's primary interface with Turks living abroad. Within this broader mandate, however, the administration of international student scholarships has become one of YTB's most visible and strategically significant functions.

The consolidation of scholarship management under YTB enabled a level of strategic coherence that had been absent from earlier dispersed arrangements. Rather than operating through bilateral agreements managed by individual ministries, Turkey's scholarship offer could now be branded, marketed, and administered as a single programme with consistent eligibility criteria, support services, and outcome tracking. This shift from fragmented state scholarships to the unified Türkiye Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları) brand represented a qualitative leap in how Turkey conceptualised and practised educational diplomacy (Ulutaş, 2013).

Exchange Programmes: Mevlana, Erasmus+, and Farabi

Alongside the scholarship stream, Turkey has developed a parallel infrastructure of student and staff exchange programmes that operate at various levels of the education system. Three programmes are particularly significant. The Mevlana Exchange Programme, launched in 2011, was conceived explicitly as Turkey's analogue to the European Union's Erasmus scheme, but with a global rather than a European scope. Mevlana enables student and academic exchanges between Turkish higher education institutions and universities in any country worldwide, regardless of whether they are Erasmus programme participants. The programme is financed by YÖK and typically supports mobility periods of one to two semesters for students and one week to three months for academic staff. By including universities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, Mevlana extends Turkey's exchange diplomacy well beyond the geographic boundaries within which earlier programmes operated.

The Erasmus+ programme, while a European Union initiative, constitutes an important element of Turkey's international education landscape given the country's status as an associated country. Turkey has been among the most active Erasmus participating countries: in 2003–2004, only 128 Turkish students studied abroad under the programme, but by 2011–2012, this figure had risen to 11,664. In the same period, approximately 30,000 Turkish academic and administrative staff participated in teaching and training mobilities, and the cumulative total of students who completed internships abroad under Erasmus reached 125,000 (Özen, 2019). The inbound flow has been similarly substantial: whereas only 17 European students came to Turkey under Erasmus in 2003–2004, this number approached 7,000 by 2005, accompanied by 18,000

incoming staff members (Özen, 2019).

The Farabi Exchange Programme operates domestically, facilitating student and academic mobility between Turkish universities within Turkey. While it does not directly advance Turkey's international objectives, it contributes to the quality and diversity of Turkish higher education a prerequisite for attracting international students. Mobility periods under Farabi typically range from one to two semesters.

By 2021–2022, the combined effect of these programmes was visible in aggregate enrolment data: Turkey received 4,183 incoming exchange students and sent 6,645 outgoing students through the Erasmus+ and Mevlana programmes combined (YÖK, 2023). These figures represent a substantial expansion from baseline levels and attest to the growing attractiveness of Turkish universities as destinations for international exchange.

The Türkiye Scholarships Programme: Structure, Scope, and Outcomes

Programme Architecture

The Türkiye Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları) programme, formally branded under that name from 2012, is a publicly funded higher education scholarship scheme administered by YTB on behalf of the Turkish government. It offers scholarships at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels, covering tuition fees, monthly stipends, health insurance, housing in government dormitories, Turkish language instruction during a preparatory year, and return airfare. The comprehensiveness of the support package which also includes academic and cultural orientation activities throughout the study period distinguishes Türkiye Scholarships from many competing national scholarship programmes (YTB, 2023).

Applications are reviewed by the International Student Evaluation Board, which selects recipients on the basis of academic achievement, language proficiency, and alignment with Turkey's strategic priorities in terms of country of origin and field of study. The programme targets students from all regions of the world, but particular attention is given to countries with which Turkey has historical, cultural, or diplomatic ties, as well as emerging economies in Africa and Asia where Turkey has been actively expanding its diplomatic footprint (Ejder, 2019). In addition to the core scholarship scheme, the programme encompasses research scholarships for academics and public officials, and specialised modules for Turkish language education. These additional components extend the programme's reach beyond traditional student cohorts and create pathways for influence at the level of decision-makers and scholars arguably the most strategically significant recipients from a public diplomacy perspective (Sevinç, 2023).

Growth Trajectory and Geographic Reach

The growth of the Türkiye Scholarships programme over its first decade has been striking. In 2012, the programme received approximately 42,000 applications. By 2022, this figure had grown to 165,500 applications from 171 countries an almost fourfold increase that reflects both the rising international profile of Turkish universities and the programme's aggressive marketing through Turkish diplomatic missions abroad (YTB, 2023). Each year, approximately 5,000 new scholarships are awarded, and at any given time around 15,000 active

scholarship recipients are enrolled in Turkish universities.

The geographic diversity of the applicant pool is one of the programme's distinguishing features. While early iterations of Turkish scholarship policy were concentrated in Central Asia and the Balkans, the Türkiye Scholarships framework has attracted students from sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. As Langputeh (2025) demonstrates in a recent study of Thai students in Turkey, the programme's appeal in Southeast Asia is driven by a combination of academic quality perceptions, programme comprehensiveness, and Turkey's increasingly visible cultural presence in the region.

The broader context of international student mobility provides important benchmarks for evaluating Turkey's position. Globally, the number of internationally mobile students stood at approximately 800,000 in 1975 and had grown to 4.5 million by 2010. By 2023, this figure had reached 7.5 million, and projections suggest it could approach 20 million by 2030 (YTB, 2023). Turkey has positioned itself to capture a growing share of this market: the total number of international students enrolled in Turkish universities rose from 125,138 in 2016–2017 to 260,289 in 2022–2023 (YÖK, 2023), representing a 75 percent increase over less than a decade and placing Turkey among the top ten global destinations for international students.

Language Education as a Soft Power Multiplier

No examination of Turkey's educational diplomacy would be complete without attention to language policy. The Turkish language preparatory year built into the Türkiye Scholarships programme serves a dual purpose: it ensures that incoming students have adequate language proficiency to complete their studies, and it creates a cohort of Turkish-speaking graduates who can serve as cultural intermediaries in their home countries for decades after graduation.

Beyond the scholarship programme, Turkey maintains a network of Turkish language teaching centres (TÖMER, affiliated with universities) and supports the Yunus Emre Institute – a state-funded cultural organisation modelled on the British Council and the Goethe-Institut which currently operates language and culture centres in 43 countries (YÖK, 2023). The Yunus Emre Institute organises Turkish language courses, cultural events, and proficiency examinations, creating pathways for students and professionals abroad to engage with Turkish culture before they ever arrive in Turkey. An often-overlooked dimension of Turkey's language diplomacy is the role of popular culture. Turkish television dramas (dizi) have achieved remarkable global audiences, particularly in the Arab world, Latin America, and the Balkans, and have generated documented spikes in interest in the Turkish language (Canavar, 2020). This "soft power dividend" of the Turkish entertainment industry has created a self-reinforcing dynamic: cultural interest drives language learning demand, which in turn increases the pool of candidates motivated to study in Turkey.

Perceptions and Outcomes Among Scholarship Recipients

Several empirical studies have examined how participation in the Türkiye Scholarships programme affects recipients' perceptions of Turkey and their subsequent behaviour. The findings converge on a broadly positive picture, though with important qualifications.

Ejder (2019), through in-depth interviews with scholarship recipients, found that students

typically arrived in Turkey with limited and often stereotyped knowledge of the country, but that their perceptions changed substantially during their study period. Most recipients reported that the experience significantly enhanced their view of Turkey as a place of academic quality, cultural richness, and hospitality. Crucially, a large proportion of graduates believed that their Turkish degree would improve their employment prospects in their home countries a perception that reinforces the programme's appeal and ensures continued demand.

Aslan and Babacan (2019), in a qualitative study focused specifically on perception change, found that students who arrived with negative views of Turkey generally left with more positive ones, while those who already held favourable perceptions reported further strengthening of those views. Sak (2019), examining Türkiye Scholarship recipients at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, confirmed that international students were generally satisfied with their educational experience in Turkey, though a significant subset expressed a preference for pursuing postgraduate study in another country a finding that points to the limits of the programme's long-term loyalty effects. Canavar (2020), drawing on survey data from Istanbul Gelişim University, reached one of the most policy-relevant conclusions in this literature: that Turkey had reached a point where it was perceived not merely as an acceptable study destination but as a potential role model for educational and cultural development in certain regions. This finding aligns with the soft power logic underlying the Türkiye Scholarships programme, suggesting that the investment is yielding qualitative as well as quantitative returns.

Okumuş (2018) found that scholarship recipients' perceptions of Turkey's public diplomacy, organisational-public relationships, and reputation were at a moderate level — suggesting that while the programme is effective, there remains significant room to deepen its impact. Similarly, Budak and Terzi (2021) reported that all of the scholarship recipients they interviewed acknowledged the academic value of their time in Turkey and saw growing scholarship and exchange opportunities as beneficial for bilateral relations.

Challenges and Structural Limitations

Language and Integration Barriers

Despite the comprehensiveness of the Türkiye Scholarships package, international students in Turkey face persistent adaptation challenges. Uzuner (2019) found that the primary adjustment difficulties experienced by foreign students enrolled in Turkish universities cluster around three areas: language proficiency (even after the preparatory year, academic Turkish remains demanding), economic constraints, and cultural adaptation. These integration challenges affect the quality of the educational experience and, by extension, the programme's ability to generate the positive perceptions it is designed to produce.

The one-year Turkish language preparatory course built into the programme is a significant investment, but it introduces a delay before students can begin their degree programmes. For students from countries where English or French-medium instruction is the norm, this prerequisite can be perceived as a barrier rather than a benefit. Expanding English-medium degree options which Turkish universities have begun to do, but unevenly would help Turkey compete more effectively with Anglophone destinations for the most academically competitive international students.

Long-Term Diplomatic Return

One of the central assumptions of educational diplomacy is that graduates who study in the sponsoring country will, upon returning home, serve as informal ambassadors — advocating for that country's interests, maintaining business and cultural ties, and drawing on their networks and language skills to facilitate bilateral cooperation. Whether this assumption holds in the Turkish context remains a question that the existing evidence only partially addresses.

Sevinç (2023), examining the comparable Fulbright and Chevening programmes through interviews with programme administrators, noted that while officials universally affirmed the diplomatic value of investing in future leaders, they also acknowledged that not all scholarship recipients go on to occupy the positions of influence that would make their relationship with the sponsoring country strategically significant. The same caveat applies to the Türkiye Scholarships programme: the sheer volume of recipients (over 15,000 active at any one time) makes it statistically certain that many graduates will not achieve senior positions, and the programme's diplomatic return is therefore probabilistic rather than guaranteed. Korkmaz (2022), in a study specifically focused on Türkiye Scholarship alumni who have become senior bureaucrats in their home countries, offers more optimistic findings: graduates who have reached influential positions tend to maintain active professional relationships with Turkey and serve as effective intermediaries in bilateral settings. This suggests that the programme's most significant returns may be concentrated in a relatively small subset of alumni, which has implications for how YTB might refine its selection criteria and post-graduation engagement strategies.

Institutional Coherence and Policy Consistency

Turkey's public diplomacy infrastructure, of which the educational dimension is one component, is characterised by a degree of institutional pluralism that can produce coordination challenges. Multiple agencies — YTB, YÖK, the Ministry of National Education, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and the Yunus Emre Institute — operate in overlapping spaces, each with distinct mandates and funding streams. Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2017) documented how YTB and TİKA (the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) sometimes pursue complementary but inadequately coordinated activities in the Balkans, leading to duplication and missed synergies.

The Turkish Maarif Foundation, established in 2016 to take over the international schools network represents a significant expansion of Turkey's educational footprint abroad. Karahan (2022) characterises the Maarif Foundation as an active promotional instrument and one of Turkey's key soft power assets, one that effectively bridges international education at the pre-university level with Turkey's broader diplomatic objectives. Integrating the foundation's activities more systematically with the Türkiye Scholarships pipeline creating a coherent pathway from secondary education in a Maarif school to undergraduate study in Turkey under a YTB scholarship could substantially amplify the programme's reach and impact.

Discussion

Taken together, the evidence reviewed in this article supports the claim that Turkey has

developed one of the world's more comprehensive educational diplomacy frameworks among middle powers. The Türkiye Scholarships programme, the Mevlana exchange scheme, the Yunus Emre Institute's language network, and the Maarif Foundation's international schools collectively constitute a multi-layered system through which Turkey seeks to shape foreign publics' impressions of the country while simultaneously building human capital connections that serve long-term diplomatic and economic interests.

Several features of Turkey's approach stand out as analytically interesting from a comparative perspective. First, the rapid institutionalisation of the programme from fragmented state scholarships administered by multiple ministries to the consolidated, branded Türkiye Scholarships framework under YTB reflects a degree of strategic intentionality that is not always present in scholarship programmes elsewhere. This institutionalisation has enabled consistent messaging, systematic data collection, and quality control mechanisms that improve the programme's effectiveness and credibility.

Second, the geographic breadth of the programme is unusual. Unlike some national scholarship schemes that concentrate heavily on neighbouring countries or former colonial territories, Turkey has made a deliberate effort to recruit from a genuinely global pool. This universalist ambition aligns with Turkey's broader foreign policy aspiration to position itself as a global rather than merely regional actor, and it means that the network of Türkiye Scholarship alumni is spread across a remarkably diverse set of countries from Indonesia to Brazil, from Somalia to Kazakhstan. Third, the comprehensiveness of the scholarship package particularly the inclusion of Turkish language instruction reflects a long-term view of soft power that goes beyond immediate image management. By creating Turkish-speaking professionals in dozens of countries, the programme lays the groundwork for sustained cultural and economic connections that extend well beyond the duration of individual scholarships. This investment in linguistic reach is particularly significant given that Turkish is not a major international language and that the costs of language learning must therefore be substantially borne by the sponsoring state.

At the same time, the analysis reveals real constraints. The programme's diplomatic return is inherently uncertain and unevenly distributed. Integration challenges limit the quality of some students' experiences, affecting the perceptions the programme is designed to generate. Institutional coordination remains imperfect. And Turkey's broader international reputation shaped by geopolitical turbulence, questions about democratic governance, and regional conflicts creates a complex context in which the programme's image-building effects must operate. As Akgün and Çelik (2023) observe, the effectiveness of educational diplomacy as a soft power instrument is ultimately conditioned by the overall credibility and attractiveness of the state conducting it: no scholarship programme can fully compensate for a deteriorating international image.

What the Turkish case suggests is that educational diplomacy is most effective when it functions as one element within a broader, coherent soft power strategy rather than as a standalone initiative. The Türkiye Scholarships programme works best when it is reinforced by complementary instruments cultural institutes, language education, development aid through TİKA, media outreach through TRT World that create a consistent and multidimensional presence. The degree to which these instruments are effectively coordinated varies, and

strengthening that coordination remains one of the principal challenges for Turkish educational diplomacy going forward.

Conclusion

This article has traced the development of Turkey's international education and scholarship policy from its fragmented early iterations through to the sophisticated, institutionally consolidated framework that exists today. The Türkiye Scholarships programme, operating within a broader ecology of exchange programmes, language institutes, and cultural foundations, represents a significant and growing investment in educational diplomacy as an instrument of soft power. The programme's growth trajectory from 42,000 applications in 2012 to nearly 166,000 in 2022, from a handful of recipients in a few countries to 15,000 active scholars from 171 nations attests to Turkey's success in building an internationally recognised scholarship brand. Empirical research consistently finds that Türkiye Scholarship recipients leave Turkey with more positive perceptions of the country than when they arrived, and that a proportion of alumni go on to occupy influential positions in their home countries where their Turkish connections have diplomatic and economic value.

These achievements notwithstanding, the programme faces structural limitations that its architects would do well to take seriously. Integration challenges, uneven coordination among educational diplomacy institutions, the inherent uncertainty of long-term diplomatic returns, and the sensitivity of soft power to wider political context all constrain the programme's effectiveness. Addressing these limitations through more robust student support services, clearer institutional coordination mechanisms, stronger alumni engagement strategies, and a frank assessment of the programme's political context would enhance its capacity to deliver on its considerable ambitions. More broadly, Turkey's educational diplomacy story offers lessons for middle powers seeking to expand their international influence through non-coercive means. The most important lesson may be that educational diplomacy is a patient investment: its returns accumulate over years and decades as alumni build careers, form professional networks, and carry their experience of Turkey into their working lives. Governments that understand this time horizon and commit to sustained institutional investment as Turkey has done stand the best chance of converting scholarship expenditures into durable diplomatic capital.

Declarations

Acknowledgements: Not applicable.

Authors' contributions: **M.B.M.B.** conducted the literature review, analyzed, wrote and revised the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests: The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on publicly available documents and published literature and did not involve human participants, human data, or human tissue. Therefore, ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

References

- Akgün, B., & Çelik, M. (2023). Etkili bir yumuşak güç unsuru olarak uluslararası eğitimin Türk dış politikasındaki yeri. *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi*, (111), 121-150.
- Aslan, Ö., & Babacan, K. (2019). Kamu diplomasisi bağlamında algı değişimi üzerine niteliksel bir araştırma. *İletişim Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 5(2), 177-200.
- Budak, M. M. (2012). Kamu Diplomasisi Aracı Olarak Öğrenci Değişim Programları ve Türkiye Uygulamaları. *Basılmamış Uzmanlık Tezi*, YTB, Ankara.
- Budak, M. M., & Terzi, H. M. (2021). Scholarship programs as public diplomacy tool and implementations in Turkic council countries. *Bilig*, (96 (TBMM'NİN 100. YILI ÖZEL SAYISI)), 229-253.
- Canavar, M. (2020). Kamu diplomasisi aracı olarak eğitim ve Türkiye'deki yabancı öğrenciler: İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi örneği [Unpublished master's thesis]. İstanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi, İstanbul.
- Cull, N. J. (2009). *Public diplomacy: Lessons from the past* (Vol. 12). Los Angeles: Figueroa Press.
- Dönmez, E. K. (2019). Uluslararası Siyasal İletişim Faaliyetlerinin Ülkelerin İmaj ve Algıları Üzerindeki Etkisi: Türkiye Bursları ile İstanbul'da Öğrenim Gören Öğrenciler Üzerine Bir İnceleme. *Yayımlanmamış Doktora Tezi*. İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, İstanbul.
- Ejder, A. (2019). Türk kamu diplomasisi bağlamında Türkiye Bursları örneği [Unpublished master's thesis]. Yalova Üniversitesi, Yalova.
- Görkemli, H. N. (2019). Yükseköğretimde uluslararasılaşma ve kültürlerarası iletişim. *Konya, Çizgi Kitabevi*.
- Karahan, M. (2022). *Bir yumuşak güç unsuru olarak maarif vakfının Türkiye'nin uluslararası ilişkilerindeki rolü* (Master's thesis, Aksaray Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü).
- Kaya, M. (2019). Eğitim diplomasisi: Kavramsal bir çerçeve. *Türkiye Eğitim Dergisi*, 4(1), 1-12.
- Korkmaz, S. (2022). Bir yumuşak güç unsuru olarak YTB: Türkiye mezunu üst düzey bürokratlar. *Tetkik*, (2), 319-335.
- Langputeh, M. (2025). Türkiye'de Eğitim Gören Taylandlı Öğrencilerin Karar Verme Sürecinde Yumuşak Güç Etkileri. *Journal of Migration and Political Studies*, 3(1), 21-41.
- Ntuli, E., & Nyarambi, A. (2015). Learning in a global context: Education diplomacy in primary grade content preparation. *Childhood Education*, 91(2), 111-116.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2017). *Yumuşak güç* (R. İ. Aydın, Trans.). BB101 Yayınları.
- Okumuş, M. (2018). *Kamu diplomasisi ve itibar ilişkisinde ilişki yönetiminin rolü* [Doctoral dissertation]. Atatürk Üniversitesi, Erzurum.
- Öztürk, C., & Ay, Y. (2015). The effect of leadership on organizational citizenship. In *Leadership and*

- organizational outcomes: Meta-analysis of empirical studies* (pp. 97-109). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14908-0_6
- Proitsi, G. R. (2015, June). The case of Educational Diplomacy in the European Union. In *The 16th Annual Conference of the UACES Student Forum, "Ever Challenged Union: Exploring Ways Out Of The crises"*, Queen's University Belfast (pp. 29-30).
- Sak, H. D. (2019). *Türkiye'nin kamu diplomasisi faaliyetlerinde YTB burslu uluslararası öğrencilerin yeri: Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi örneği* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi, Eskişehir.
- Sevinç, Ö. (2023). *The role of scholarships in public diplomacy activities: Examples of Fulbright and Chevening scholarships* [Unpublished thesis]. Middle East Technical University (Turkey).
- Ulutaş, A. (2013). *Kamu diplomasisi, jeokültür sınırları aşan eğitim ve Türkiye'nin yabancı öğrencilere yönelik burs stratejisi* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Ankara Üniversitesi, Ankara.
- Uzuner, Y. (2019). *Türkiye'de öğrenim gören uluslararası öğrencilere yönelik uygulanan sosyal politikaların değerlendirilmesi: Kocaeli Üniversitesi örneği* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Yalova Üniversitesi, Yalova.
- Yavaş, M., & Demirel, İ. F. (2026). Kamu diplomasisi ve yumuşak güç perspektifinden Türkiye'nin faaliyetlerinin analizi: Eğitim aracılığıyla kültürel diplomasi. *Türkiyat Mecmuası*, 35(1), 333–355.
- Yılmaz, A. N., & Kılıçoğlu, G. (2017). Balkanlar'da YTB ve TİKA'nın Türk kamu diplomasisi kurumları olarak faaliyetleri ve Türkiye'nin bölgedeki yumuşak gücüne etkileri. *Finans Ekonomi ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2(2), 115-131.
- Yılmaz, D. V. (2017). Geleceğin diplomatik inşası: Kamu diplomasisi aracı olarak Türk yükseköğretimi. *Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 5(57), 138–150.
- YÖK. (2023). Değişim programlarına katılan öğrenci sayıları. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>
- YÖK. (2023). Mevlana değişim programı. <https://mevlana.yok.gov.tr/>
- YTB. (2023). Türkiye Bursları. <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/>
- YTB. (2023). Uluslararası öğrenciler. <https://ytb.gov.tr/daireler/uluslararasi-ogrenciler>