

Soft power and cultural diplomacy: emerging education hubs in Asia

Jack T. Lee

Graduate School of Education

Abstract

Several education hubs have emerged in Asia and the Middle East in recent years with a specific focus on cross-border higher education. Through considerable efforts in policy planning and generous funding, these hubs aim to transform a country or city into an eminent destination for education, research, and training. The inherent design of these hubs raises many questions about higher education's contribution to international relations as large numbers of local and foreign actors congregate. Specifically, some education hubs are leveraging cultural heritage and colonial legacy as an instrument of soft power by emphasising shared cultural identities and values. By engaging in cultural diplomacy, education hubs seek to exert influence on the international stage. However, assumptions about shared identities and values as well as the prevailing political climate of the local society present serious challenges for policy implementation. Alternatively, an education hub can also engage with international actors based on an enduring faith in the venture of science to propel the knowledge economy – another kind of norm that underpins soft power. This paper compares Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong as education hubs that engage in soft power and cultural diplomacy.

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