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Soft Power in Transatlantic Relations through the lens of Higher Education

The European Union's Role in Transatlantic Educational Diplomacy (1990-present)

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List of Abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
BREXIT	Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union
DG COMM	Directorate-General for Communication
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education and Culture
ECSA / EUSA	European Community Studies Association / European Union Studies Association
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EEA	European Economic Area (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein)
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EMJMD	Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees
EU	European Union
GIS	Graduate Impact Surveys
ISM	International student mobility
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NAFSA	Association of International Educators
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
SOTEU	State of the Union
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
US	United States

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα διπλωματική εργασία εξετάζει τον ρόλο της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης ως εργαλείου ήπιας ισχύος στο πλαίσιο των διατλαντικών σχέσεων. Αναλύει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο, από τη δεκαετία του 1990 και έπειτα, η Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση αξιοποίησε την εκπαίδευση προκειμένου να προωθήσει τις αξίες της και να ενισχύσει την επιρροή της στις Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, λαμβάνοντας παράλληλα υπόψη τις ευρύτερες δυναμικές της εκπαιδευτικής συνεργασίας ΕΕ–ΗΠΑ και τις πολιτικές μεταβολές που διαμόρφωσαν το περιβάλλον αυτό.

Η ανώτατη εκπαίδευση αναγνωρίζεται ολοένα και περισσότερο ως βασική πηγή διεθνούς επιρροής. Τα ισχυρά πανεπιστήμια και τα προγράμματα ακαδημαϊκών ανταλλαγών ενισχύουν τη διεθνή φήμη, προσελκύουν ταλαντούχους φοιτητές και επιστήμονες, και καλλιεργούν πολιτισμικές και πολιτικές διασυνδέσεις. Παρά τη σημασία τους, οι διαστάσεις αυτές συχνά παραβλέπονται στην έρευνα των διεθνών σχέσεων. Ωστόσο, η συμβολή της εκπαίδευσης γίνεται σαφής μέσα από το πρίσμα της ήπιας ισχύος, καθώς επιτρέπει τη διαμόρφωση προτιμήσεων και τη στερέωση συνεργασιών χωρίς μορφές καταναγκασμού. Σε αυτό το πλαίσιο, οι διαδικασίες διεθνοποίησης και ευρωπαϊκοποίησης της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης αποτελούν κεντρικό στοιχείο, αναδεικνύοντας τον τρόπο με τον οποίο τα ακαδημαϊκά συστήματα προσαρμόζονται στον παγκόσμιο ανταγωνισμό ενώ προωθούν κοινές αξίες και πρότυπα.

Η εργασία αναλύει τον τρόπο λειτουργίας της εκπαίδευσης ως μηχανισμού ήπιας ισχύος μέσω της φοιτητικής κινητικότητας, της ακαδημαϊκής συνεργασίας και των θεσμικών πλαισίων. Εστιάζει σε τρία βασικά προγράμματα: το Jean Monnet, το Erasmus Mundus και το Fulbright-Schuman. Μέσα από αυτά καταδεικνύεται πώς η Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση προώθησε τις Ευρωπαϊκές Σπουδές, δημιούργησε μακροχρόνιους ακαδημαϊκούς δεσμούς με τις Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες και αξιοποίησε την εκπαίδευση στο πλαίσιο της εξωτερικής της δράσης. Κατ' αυτόν τον τρόπο, η εκπαίδευση αναδύεται όχι μόνο ως μορφή πολιτισμικής ανταλλαγής, αλλά και ως στρατηγικός πόρος στον παγκόσμιο ανταγωνισμό για γνώση και επιρροή.

Τέλος, η εργασία εξετάζει τις πολιτικές και δομικές προκλήσεις που επηρεάζουν το μέλλον της διατλαντικής εκπαιδευτικής διπλωματίας, όπως η μείωση της ακαδημαϊκής ανοικτότητας, οι μεταβαλλόμενες προτεραιότητες εξωτερικής πολιτικής και η αναδιαμόρφωση των συνεργασιών ως συνέπεια σημαντικών γεωπολιτικών εξελίξεων. Οι τάσεις αυτές καταδεικνύουν ότι η εκπαιδευτική διπλωματία οφείλει να προσαρμόζεται διαρκώς προκειμένου να παραμένει αποτελεσματική σε ένα ταχέως μεταβαλλόμενο διεθνές περιβάλλον.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά:
Ήπια ισχύς, ανώτατη εκπαίδευση, εκπαιδευτική διπλωματία, διατλαντικές σχέσεις, Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση, Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες Αμερικής

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of higher education as a tool of soft power within transatlantic relations. It analyses how, since the 1990s, the European Union has used education to promote its values and to build influence in the United States, while also considering the broader dynamics of EU–U.S. educational cooperation and the political transformations that have shaped these relations.

Higher education is increasingly recognised as a key source of international influence. Strong universities and academic exchanges enhance reputation, attract talent, and foster cultural and political connections. However, education has often been overlooked in international relations research. Its contribution becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of soft power, as it provides a means of shaping preferences and strengthening partnerships without coercion. In this context, internationalisation and Europeanisation of higher education are central, as they show how academic systems adapt to global competition while advancing shared values and standards.

The thesis analyses how education functions in practice as an instrument of soft power through student mobility initiatives, academic cooperation schemes, and institutional frameworks. It focuses on three major programmes: the Jean Monnet Programme, Erasmus Mundus, and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme. These instruments demonstrate how the European Union has promoted European Studies, built long-term academic links with the United States, and used education as part of its external action. Thus, education emerges not merely as cultural exchange but also as a strategic resource in the global competition for knowledge and influence.

Finally, the thesis addresses the political and structural challenges affecting the future of transatlantic educational soft power, including declining openness, shifting foreign policy priorities, and the reconfiguration of academic partnerships following major geopolitical developments. These trends illustrate that educational diplomacy must continually adapt to remain effective in a rapidly changing international environment.

Keywords:
Soft power, higher education, educational diplomacy, transatlantic relations, European Union, United States

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Topic:

This study examines how the EU uses higher education as a soft power tool in transatlantic relations to achieve influence in the global arena and international politics. The topic was chosen because education is becoming increasingly significant in international relations and politics. According to Joseph Nye, soft power, or the power of attraction and persuasion, derives from culture, political values, and foreign policy. Higher education serves as an important means of promoting certain values and building and strengthening partnerships and long-term cooperation between states and societies. The European Union is a prime candidate for such research, as it has long been known for its excellent universities, both historically and today. This paper will explore the extent to which the EU uses higher education as an instrument to promote its values and increase its influence on the other side of the Atlantic.

The dissertation contributes to understanding relations between states and education policy by examining the linkages and interrelationships among higher education, foreign policy, European initiatives, and the use of soft power. While existing literature primarily addresses the economic or cultural implications of the internationalisation of higher education, fewer works focus on the geopolitical significance of academic collaboration and mobility. This thesis aims to provide a policy-oriented, structured analysis of the role of higher education within the transatlantic alliance, an increasingly important factor as the global landscape continues to evolve.

The originality of the study lies in its focus on European initiatives that have supported the EU's broader objectives since the 1990s through educational policies. The thesis examines how these tools, ranging from educational diplomacy to academic exchanges, have contributed to EU soft power.

This study focuses on the period since the early 1990s because, after the Cold War, several factors enabled greater cooperation, rebuilding, and international development. The European Union expanded its external dimension and international educational engagement more than previously. Furthermore, the projects referred to in this study, notably the Jean Monnet Programme and related actions under the Erasmus Programme, grew. Academic exchange with the U.S. suddenly became important again. In this context, the post-1990 era is a fitting choice for this study, which aims to outline and examine the emergence and rise of higher education as a manifestation of European soft power.

Literature Review:

In order to situate this study within the existing academic debate, this section reviews the relevant literature.

The existing literature on soft power and higher education provides a fragmented yet evolving framework for understanding the role of education in international relations. Foundational work by Nye (2004) conceptualises soft power as the ability to shape the

preferences of others through attraction, establishing the theoretical basis upon which subsequent analyses of education as a form of influence have been built. However, as noted by Wojciuk, Michałek and Stormowska (2015), the role of education within this framework has remained comparatively underdeveloped. Similarly, Knight (2022) expands this discussion through the concept of knowledge diplomacy, emphasising the growing relevance of higher education in international relations, while also highlighting the lack of systematic conceptualisation in this field.

There is a second strand of literature focusing on higher education as a form of international engagement, internationalisation processes, and transatlantic cooperation in higher education. For example, de Wit (2002) highlights some of the more structural dimensions of the concept, while Rumbley et al. (2018) focus on student and faculty mobility, as well as institutional partnerships. Meanwhile, Boers and Higgott (2019) argue that the effectiveness of soft power in transatlantic relations fluctuates in response to broader political developments. However, these approaches often privilege a general or US-centred perspective, without fully examining the European Union as a strategic actor.

A third strand of literature focuses specifically on European educational policy and its instruments, linking education to processes of integration and external influence. As Asderaki (2008) argues, the evolution of European cooperation in education reflects a gradual institutionalisation of policy coordination, culminating in frameworks such as the European Higher Education Area. Within this context, several studies examine individual EU initiatives, most notably Erasmus+, as tools of soft power and public diplomacy. For example, Lami and Myrta (2021) and Bobotsi (2021) show that Erasmus+ promotes European values and identity while enhancing the EU's international image through participant mobility and exchange. However, this body of work remains largely programme-specific, focusing on Erasmus+ in isolation and often within geographical or policy contexts.

However, despite the growing recognition of education as a soft power instrument, there are few academic works on the European Union as a strategic actor actively using different tools. To date, no comprehensive study investigates the interplay between the Erasmus+, Jean Monnet, and Fulbright-Schuman Programmes as a suite of instruments designed to encourage European studies and influence in the United States. This gap will be addressed in the context of transatlantic relations, where the EU's role remains underexplored compared to that of the United States. This thesis will examine these activities collectively, thereby providing a more integrated understanding of EU educational soft power.

Key Argument:

The main argument of this paper is that higher education serves as a tool for the European Union's exercise of soft power over the United States through various coordinated educational activities and policy measures designed to disseminate European values and enhance its influence. The paper also argues that the effectiveness of these soft power instruments depends on the shared political values, mutual cultural understanding, and institutional similarities between the European Union and the

United States, which determine the parameters within which European soft power can succeed.

Research Question:

The central research question of this study is as follows:

- What are the key mechanisms and institutional tools by which the European Union projects influence trough higher education in transatlantic relations from the 1990s onwards?

This is complemented by the following question:

- To what extent have recent political developments, such as populism and Brexit, affected the effectiveness of higher education as a tool of European soft power, and do these developments indicate a transformation or decline in its role?

Working Hypotheses:

- **H1.**
  This study assumes that a strategic combination of multiple educational instruments, such as academic mobility, institutional cooperation, and knowledge diffusion, generates stronger and more sustained forms of soft power influence than isolated or single-purpose initiatives.
- **H2.**
  It is further assumed that the effectiveness of higher education as a tool of soft power is shaped by the broader political and institutional environment, particularly the presence of shared values and structural similarities between actors, which may facilitate the reception and diffusion of influence in the transatlantic context.
- **H3.**
  Finally, the study assumes that recent political developments, including Brexit and the rise of populism, may affect the scope, visibility, and strategic positioning of educational initiatives, without necessarily undermining their long-term relevance as instruments of soft power.

Methodology:

The thesis is mainly qualitative. In addition, it uses some quantitative data, such as statistics and tables, to highlight important factors.

The research is interpretive, focusing on the working mechanisms of European Union education initiatives (Erasmus Mundus, Jean Monnet Programme, Fulbright-Schuman Programme) as tools of soft power. These programmes are examined as case studies. The examination is not directly comparative but takes an indirect comparative approach by analysing the different working mechanisms and ways in which the three initiatives contribute to European influence.

The study conducts this analysis by consulting relevant official policy papers and legislation, scouring extensive research databases, examining numerous existing

programme evaluations, consulting available policy reports, and conducting comprehensive literature searches through publications and other academic materials to understand policy origins and objectives. Finally, it reviews and collects quantitative data related to programme participation, national programme growth, and the increasing adoption of these initiatives across the United States. While quantitative metrics of growth or popularity cannot definitively indicate how far these initiatives have advanced social change and empowerment or the depth of their influence, they can inform us about the scale, extent, and potential impact of their social effects.

Desk research is an established method for retrieving secondary data from existing studies, rather than primary data from the field. This involves, for example, reading and interpreting European Commission communications, programme evaluations, Graduate Impact Surveys, and policy frameworks related to the topic (European Commission, 2020, 2022, 2025; Council of the European Union, 2025). Literature was selected based on its importance, relevance to EU institutions, recent publication, and connection to the case studies.

Reports on Erasmus Mundus examine how the USA is referenced, including statistics such as participation rates and mobility flows, and compare these with data from non-European countries and other regions. Data on the Jean Monnet Programme are also extracted and compiled into tables to observe project trends, participating institutions, and the programme's global reach. These descriptive quantitative statistics support the broader discussion. Regarding the Fulbright-Schuman Programme, the key aspects analysed are the structure of the programme, the number of applications received, and the groups from which applicants originated. The analysis also considers how the programme contributes to increased academic exchange between American universities and Europe, with Fulbright alumni described to provide a broader perspective on the academic and professional contexts from which participants originated and to which they were expected to go.

The case studies explored the themes of European values, influence, academic mobility, cooperation, and internationalisation. Each case study was analysed according to these themes. The study examined financial evidence by tracking how EU education funding changed over time to evaluate whether shifts in funding levels corresponded with changes in EU-wide strategy.

The work further adds to the three core case studies recent political developments in transatlantic higher education. Brexit is analysed here because of the UK's departure from the Erasmus+ programme and its replacement with the Turing Scheme. Data from parliamentary debates in Hansard is analysed to determine how Brexit occurred in relation to education policy, as well as how this policy change was debated, reasoned and implemented by British parliamentarians (Craggs, 2016; UK Parliament, 2023).

Methodologically, this qualitative content analysis draws on the analytical framework developed by Philipp Mayring (2014), specifically his work on systematic text analysis. The methodology is guided by key analytical categories: mobility, attractiveness, internationalisation, cooperation, and transatlantic dialogue, while remaining sensitive to emerging themes. It is important to state that this research does not seek to quantitatively assess the impact of higher education initiatives, but rather to identify

and understand the processes by which higher education contributes to influence projection.

The study has several limitations. First, relying solely on qualitative data and document analysis made it largely interpretative and potentially prone to bias in the selection and evaluation of sources. It also lacks direct empirical input, as no interview participants were included. Finally, measuring the lasting effects of educational exchange programmes proved challenging, as many important impacts – such as the development of international networks, networks of shared values, the formation of national elites based on international norms, and the overall positive effects of interaction among young leaders – can only be observed over much longer periods than immediately afterwards.

Nonetheless, the use of official policy documents and public evaluations ensures a certain degree of reliability, institutional relevance, and both external and internal validity. Although these limitations exist, the combined policy-oriented, case study-based qualitative content analysis is considered appropriate and sufficient as the chosen methodological approach. This enabled the study to conduct valid, theoretically grounded research by focusing on the role of higher education as a component of soft power used by countries to strengthen transatlantic ties

Structure of the Study:

This thesis comprises five chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of soft power in EU–U.S. educational relations, clarifies the relevance and originality of the study, presents the research questions, and outlines the adopted methodology.

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework of the thesis. It describes soft power, including its definition, sources, limitations, and examples, and examines the link between soft power and higher education. The chapter then defines concepts such as education diplomacy and international education, and explores the transatlantic connection through higher education policies and exchanges between the U.S. and the EU, highlighting how these have shaped diplomatic ties and cultural links over the years.

Chapter 3 examines the EU's educational policies towards the US from 1990 to the present, providing an in-depth analysis of three key programmes: the Jean Monnet Programme, the Erasmus Mundus Programme, and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme. It also analyses other educational sources of soft power, including elites and academic leadership, university networks and partnerships, and the international branding of European universities in terms of public image.

Chapter 4 addresses contemporary political and structural barriers threatening transatlantic educational soft power. It focuses on issues such as the rise of populism and nationalism, declining openness in global cooperation, the changing nature of academic ties post-Brexit, and the increasing politicisation of higher education in both the EU and the U.S.

Based on the preceding analysis, the concluding **Chapter 5** summarises the major findings and briefly considers the future prospects of educational soft power in the rapidly changing international system.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Defining Soft Power in International Relations

At the beginning of this thesis, it is useful to define the concept of soft power. This term was first introduced by Professor Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book "Bound to Lead." Nye argued that contrary to what many leaders believe, it is not always necessary to rely on "sticks" or "carrots" to influence others. Instead, soft power refers to the ability to achieve one's goals and exert influence through attraction rather than coercion or inducement (Nye, 2004). The United States has long utilised this form of power, which stems from the appeal of a country's culture, values, and policies. The main source both for this thesis and for the notion of soft power in international relations is Joseph Nye's book Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, published in 2004.

However, to define soft power, it is first necessary to examine the concept of power itself more deeply. Our first aim is to clarify the notion of power, which is often more easily experienced than defined. Power can be understood as the ability to do what one desires. Yet, how can someone achieve their desired outcomes without possessing the necessary means? Therefore, another definition views power as the possession of capabilities or resources that can influence results. There are various ways to affect the behavior of others, and these methods can differ greatly. Hard power includes practices such as coercion, threats of violence, bribery, and economic sanctions. However, as Nye notes in his book, the key is not how many soldiers you can kill, but how many allies you can gain. If you impress your interlocutor with the values you represent and convince them that your objectives are legitimate, then threats or inducements become unnecessary for achieving your goals (Nye, 2004).

The nature of power also changes, and possessing resources does not guarantee the outcomes that power previously produced. There are many historical examples of this. What worked in the past may not work today. The United States no longer exists as the sole world superpower in a unipolar system, nor as one of two world powers in the bipolar system of the Cold War era. In military and defense matters, the United States does remain the only global superpower. However, when it comes to the distribution of interstate economic power, the system is multipolar, with other significant actors such as China, Japan, and the European Union. Finally, regarding various transnational issues such as terrorism, climate change, and the spread of infectious diseases, power is widely diffused and dispersed among both state and non-state actors (Nye, 2004). [1]

To fully understand these different dimensions, it is necessary to distinguish between the various types of power. When referring to hard power, what is meant is military and economic superiority, which is usually based on inducements ("carrots") and threats ("sticks"). This coercive type of power differs from the indirect way of achieving one's goals known as soft power. Soft power relies on the attractiveness of a country's culture

[1] Non-state actors include non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, and international institutions, which collectively shape the global power landscape.

and values. It is defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others without offering any tangible reward, but purely through the force of attraction and seduction. This form of power does not belong entirely to the government; rather, it is a consequence of the everyday democratic political practices implemented by countries of the Western world, and it is associated with factors such as a likeable personality, morality, culture, and values. In addition, soft power is not the same thing as influence because it is much more than persuasion alone. Although hard power and soft power are connected, soft power does not depend entirely on hard power. As Nye notes, the Vatican possesses soft power despite Stalin's ironic question, "How many divisions does the Pope have?" Moreover, certain countries, such as Norway and Canada, have significant influence in political affairs, even though they are not among the strongest in military or economic terms. Finally, in his 2008 book The Powers to Lead, Nye discusses effective leadership, which he argues should be characterised by smart power, that is, a combination of soft and hard power (Nye, 2008).

To understand the aforementioned examples, it is essential to refer to the main sources of soft power: a country's culture, its political values, and its foreign policy. A country like the United States, by exporting a universalistic culture of both high and popular forms and by promoting values such as democracy, human rights, and cooperation, creates relationships of attraction and a sense of obligation among states that wish to adopt its culture and values. More specifically, when a government's domestic and foreign policies are shaped by legitimate values, its politics become a primary source of soft power (Nye, 2004). Effective ways to transmit a country's culture and values include student exchanges (which will be analysed in this thesis), visits, trade, and personal contacts.[2] On the other hand, the European Union presents a profile characterised by a high standard of living, high levels of literacy, humanitarian aid, and the promotion of human rights. It could therefore be said that the United States and the EU represent the two most important pillars of soft power in the modern world. This thesis will examine precisely this, through the lens of higher education, which is a significant factor of soft power.

However, it must be emphasised that the effectiveness of power is inextricably linked to the context in which it is exercised. For example, while American liberal cinema may captivate countries in Latin America, it can produce the opposite effect and reduce U.S. soft power in more conservative countries in the Middle East. Similarly, governmental policies can enhance a country's soft power, but they can also undermine it if they are perceived as arrogant, illegitimate, or hypocritical. It is well known that the use of the death penalty and the permissive gun laws in the United States diminish its soft power in Europe. An even stronger example of soft power being undermined by governmental policy is the decision by the Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003. In the years that followed, American soft power in Europe fell dramatically. However, surveys indicated that respondents distinguished between the American people and culture, and American politics.

[2] Nye consistently highlights educational and cultural exchanges as a key instrument of soft power, particularly in shaping long-term perceptions.

The examples mentioned above raise important questions regarding the limits of soft power. Soft power can be particularly effective in advancing certain goals, such as environmental protection and human rights, but it is powerless in matters of national security, such as border protection or deterring armed attacks. Additionally, the production of soft power through popular culture tends to have an impact mainly on countries with cultural similarities, rather than on those with opposing cultural values. It is also important to note that the control and generation of soft power is not solely the responsibility of governments. Universities, churches, non-governmental organisations, companies, and public figures develop their own forms of soft power. Much of what is known as the "American Dream" has been supported by Hollywood, Harvard, and prominent American artists or athletes (Nye, 2004).

Finally, it should be noted that soft power and hard power often coexist and can interact positively. However, there are also cases in which they come into conflict. A characteristic example of their interaction is the Iraq War in 2003. The United States entered the war with both hard and soft power motivations, aiming primarily to restore democracy in Iraq and combat terrorism. The debates surrounding the legitimacy of the war led weaker states, which had previously been friendly towards the U.S., to withhold their endorsement of its legitimacy through the decision of the UN Security Council. The U.S. bypassing of the United Nations made the war more costly, while America's repeated attempts to secure legitimacy highlighted the importance of soft power.[3] Indeed, after the war ended, the popularity of the United States fell dramatically, not only in Muslim countries but also in most liberal democracies. Among the various sources of soft power, higher education occupies a particularly prominent place. As the next section will demonstrate, universities and academic exchanges have long served not only as vehicles of knowledge but also as instruments of attraction, influence, and international engagement.

2.2. Higher Education as a source and tool of soft power

In this section, the concept of soft power is directly linked to the domain of higher education, highlighting the strategic value of academic excellence in global influence. A strong and internationally recognised education sector has become one of the central components of a country's soft power appeal (Nye, 2004*;* Wojciuk, Michalek, & Stormowska, 2015*;* Gauttam et al., 2024). It not only improves a country's image but also shapes perceptions and partnerships in the international arena. However, despite its growing importance, the role of education, particularly higher education, remains relatively underexplored in the mainstream literature of international relations (Ostashova, 2020).

Higher education systems have historically contributed to national prestige, innovation, and ideological influence. This has become even more evident in recent decades, as many advanced societies have shifted from industry-based economies to knowledge-

[3] The search for legitimacy through the UN illustrates the centrality of international institutions in amplifying or undermining soft power.

and innovation-driven models (Nye, 2011*;* Altbach & Peterson, 2008). Universities and academic institutions have emerged not only as engines of scientific progress but also as platforms for international cooperation and cultural exchange.

This is not particularly new, as history provides many examples where investment in education has enabled countries to advance rapidly technologically compared to other nations. Examples include Germany, France, and Japan during the nineteenth century. (Wojciuk et al., 2015*;* Knight, 2006). These countries increased their political influence and international standing not only by acquiring new wealth but also by fostering a high level of education, a development that continued in the Cold War era, when universities became linked to broader political objectives following World War II.

Although not often described in these soft-power terms, there was a significant increase in collaboration between American and European higher education institutions beginning during the Cold War, with new forms of multilateralism complementing cooperation initiated by institutions such as NATO. In 1956 the Committee of Three Wise Men[4] was appointed by the North Atlantic Council and tasked with proposing measures to improve inter-allied coordination. Their final report emphasised political and economic areas, along with cultural and educational exchange activities, that could enhance a common Atlantic outlook. To build and strengthen a sense of common destiny among North Americans and Western Europeans, the Committee proposed scholarships, student visits, teaching posts (including visiting professorships), and the establishment of chairs in Atlantic Studies. The university sector was used as a geopolitical resource for fostering ideological consensus, friendship, and partnership, thereby facilitating the broader aim of Cold War solidarity. (Asderaki, 2008, pp. 161–163).

At the same time, the Council of Europe played a significant role in strengthening educational cooperation at the European level. Founded in 1949, it provided an institutional framework for cultural and educational collaboration before education became a more organised policy area within the European Communities. The European Cultural Convention of 1954 established a legal basis for cooperation in education, culture and research, while the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education, first convened in The Hague in 1959, formalised regular dialogue on education policy. This process also involved the academic community, notably through the creation of structures for higher education and research. In this way, the Council of Europe contributed to the gradual institutionalisation of higher education cooperation in Europe (Asderaki, 2008, pp. 163–164).

These early developments demonstrate that higher education has long served as a tool of influence and cooperation, even before the emergence of contemporary soft power strategies.

This can still be seen today. The enduring prestige of leading universities in the United Kingdom and the United States, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and MIT, is still

[4] NATO (1956), *Report of the Committee of Three on Non-Military Cooperation in NATO*, Brussels.

apparent (Ostashova, 2020). There is continued attraction for international students from around the world. These institutions offer not only outstanding teaching but also important connections with leaders in business, politics, and other areas of global governance, further internationalising networks of students, business, and politics. They can develop influential alumni, friends, or connections for life, thereby shaping global norms, diffusing knowledge, building bridges between countries, and promoting long-term bonds between citizens. Thus, education can not only support the development of emerging economies but also serve as a vital tool of soft power, both historically and today.

The rise of higher education as a form of soft power should be analysed in the context in which it operates. Cultural resources, such as religion or political ideologies, are difficult for people outside that culture to adopt. Education, by contrast, is not bound by national frontiers. It is understood and valued worldwide; its universal appeal explains why countries naturally rely on their universities and colleges to project their soft power globally. (Nye, 2004*;* Gauttam et al., 2024). In a time when well-being is measured largely by prosperity, knowledge and opportunity, the quality and accessibility of education are important symbolic factors and practical necessities. In the European Union, higher education is part of its international soft power effort, promoting student mobility, cooperation, academic openness and recognition. (Wojciuk et al., 2015).

Soft power is not fixed or static but ebbs and flows depending on time and place. What people value changes and is socially and politically constructed. (Nye, 2011*;* Lomer, 2017). Educational systems are increasingly recognised as having a significant impact on human development and future wealth. Therefore, education is a national asset, and even a global one. The rise in education's soft power influence is due to two interconnected shifts in the basis of political legitimacy. Traditionally, legitimacy was derived from a state's military strength or its ability to maintain order. Today, legitimacy comes from a state's success in delivering benefits to its population, including social welfare, economic growth, and promoting prosperity for its citizens. In this changing reality, education serves as both a driver of economic growth necessary for state prosperity and a reflection of responsible governance that offers citizens a better future. It is, therefore, an increasingly prominent soft power asset. (Ostashova, 2020).

Even within this soft power debate, some scholars argue that the idea of "universal values" that are inherently attractive does not exist; rather, people are drawn to a particular version of how things work, based on a dominance relationship between one place and another. (Wojciuk et al., 2015*;* Gauttam et al., 2024). Nonetheless, education still holds an unusual position as a tool of soft power. It is not about promoting a culture for its own sake, but about fostering empowerment and increasing social mobility outcomes that most people would support and a common aspiration in a globalised environment.

However, education as a soft power tool has undeniable limitations. Educational outcomes are never linearly predictable nor guaranteed; education is only one among many long-term determinants. Rather, education functions as a single component, not

a decisive factor, within the constellation of conditions that foster national long-term advancement. Because education exists for future generations and has the capacity to improve individual opportunities and the general conditions of society, it essentially lays the groundwork that enables people to develop their competencies, foster creativity, and participate in both the economic system and political debate. Nonetheless, such outcomes are far from immediate. Education should be understood as what philosophers term an INUS condition, an insufficient but necessary part of a broader combination of factors that together can lead to development and influence[5]. Education in itself neither guarantees wealth nor influence; its absence will almost certainly render both unattainable, though how effectively it works clearly depends on the society and political economy in which it is situated.

Additionally, education not only schools the young but also generates a shared body of values, culture, and common discourse within a society, shaping minds without coercion. In this sense, it is a form of soft power, as its roots lie in social settings, public narratives, and the general environment in which social activity occurs. (Ostashova, 2020*;* Gauttam et al., 2024). Such factors remain difficult to grasp, constantly evolve, and are hard to measure, yet they play key roles in establishing and maintaining international power.

The cultural and symbolic dimension of soft power is increasingly intertwined with issues of economic efficiency and national strength. In a globalised and multipolar era, higher education has emerged as a space for both intercultural dialogue and geopolitical competition. (Nye, 2011*;* Altbach & Peterson, 2008). States' abilities to provide world-class, internationally accredited degree programmes are now part of a broader effort to enhance their influence in the global arena.

In the first decades of the 21st century, political and economic models engaged in intense global competition. In this context, hegemonic global leadership is linked to the ability to develop knowledge and invest in human resources to build an advanced industrial economy. Over the past 20 years, large developing nations such as China and Russia have sought to improve and modernise their education systems, making them more internationally competitive and attractive to talented foreigners, encouraging them to relocate to China or Russia to further the country's development. (Wojciuk et al., 2015*;* Gauttam et al., 2024).

This internationalised, outward-looking education system has, since the beginning of the 21st century, increasingly been regarded as a new pillar of national competitiveness and economic performance. It will fulfil this role if it meets these complex demands:

- address the fundamental needs of a modern, innovative economy,
- align with the expectations of the high-tech global labour market,
- participate actively in international academic and scientific collaboration,

[5] The concept of INUS condition—an "Insufficient but Necessary part of an Unnecessary but Sufficient condition"—was introduced by philosopher J. L. Mackie (1974). It means that a single factor (like education) cannot by itself produce an outcome (such as prosperity or soft power), but is indispensable as part of a larger set of conditions that together are sufficient to generate the outcome.

- and contribute effectively to the global competition for “minds” by attracting highly skilled and motivated individuals.

Meeting these conditions increases this country's prospects for human development and enhances its global appeal. Over the past thirty years, higher education institutions have become central actors in soft power strategies worldwide (Nye, 2011*;* Gauttam et al., 2024). This reflects the growing importance of education in shaping international influence.

In an increasingly global and competitive marketplace, many nations are actively competing for students. As numerous countries and institutions seek to attract student numbers and enhance perceived academic quality, the recruitment market for both students and institutions remains challenging. Institutional reputation is one of the main drivers of student mobility, particularly in how that reputation is reflected in international university rankings. (Wojciuk et al., 2015*;* Knight, 2006). These rankings provide the necessary credentials for students seeking international university qualifications and research capacity.

However, there is more than just reputation involved in attracting students. There are quantitative measures, such as government investment in higher education and scientific research. The allocation of university funds and the student population also indicate the university's academic strength. (Ostashova, 2020*;* Gauttam et al., 2024).

At the same time, beyond academic considerations, student motivation is influenced by external factors such as cost of living, visa regulations for studying or remaining after graduation, the likelihood of staying or obtaining citizenship, and the climate of social integration or xenophobia. Together, these factors affect the overall attractiveness of a place, beyond its perceived educational excellence. As Joseph Nye has pointed out, in the information age, “the country that tells the better story wins.” (Nye, 2011).

In this context, education should be regarded as a multi-functional soft power asset. As noted by Greek scholar M. Vaxevanidou, it can generate significant commercial value and promote foreign policy objectives (Vaxevanidou, 2018). It also enhances economic attractiveness by drawing in talent and investment. For these reasons, the educational sector plays a central role in many national soft power strategies, serving simultaneously as an economic, political, and cultural resource.

A sound understanding of how higher education fosters soft power requires careful analysis of specific variables that determine its perceived attractiveness within the international community. Current trends reveal four key clusters. Firstly, academic and institutional attributes: reputation and ranking, published research and scientific output, curricula and teaching methods, international partnerships and collaborations. Secondly, systemic indicators: investment in higher education and research, allocation of national funding for higher education, student and teacher population numbers and diversity, opportunities for academic exchanges and student mobility, presence or absence of racism and xenophobia in the host country, and societal tolerance. Additionally, whether students feel safe and whether there is a vibrant culture. Thirdly, the cultural milieu: a general atmosphere of tolerance and inclusiveness in the destination country, and the overall sense of safety and stability regarding public order

or political security. Lastly, tangible factors: simplicity or complexity of immigration processes, academic registration and matriculation, fees, average cost of food, lodging and transportation, prospects for employment after graduation or for legal long-term residence. (Ostashova, 2020).

These factors, working together, give an impression to international observers, the rest of the world, and aspiring students concerning a country's strengths and what its universities might offer them. Together, they allow countries to advance the soft power benefits of higher education.

2.3 Transatlantic Relations through Higher Education

Given the overarching importance of educational soft power, the significance of the higher education partnership between Europe and the U.S. should be analysed in a more historically specific manner, within the context of the Atlantic alliance. The transatlantic relationship has been a crucial channel for rebuilding trust in the post-war period, promoting democratic ideals, and enhancing understanding of mutual commonalities (Higgott & Boers, 2019). Consequently, higher education has been shaped by both strong similarities and significant disjunctures. On the one hand, shared values such as freedom of teaching and learning, and democratic principles underpinning governance structures, have established common ground. On the other hand, disagreements over whether higher education is fundamentally a private or a public good, and over the distributional issues arising from its financing, constitute profound disjunctures (Rumbley et al., 2019). Meanwhile, nationalist politics on both sides of the Atlantic appear to pose significant threats to openness and inclusivity. These dynamics are also closely linked to the processes of internationalisation and Europeanisation, which will be examined in the following sections.

Nevertheless, the durability of transatlantic academic cooperation continues to place it on privileged ground. In recent years, calls for renewed knowledge diplomacy have underlined the importance of safeguarding these ties as a means of sustaining dialogue, ensuring mutual enrichment, and addressing common global challenges Higgott & Boers, 2019). To understand the depth of this relationship, it is necessary to look back at its historical evolution. The transatlantic academic relationship has roots that extend far beyond the twentieth century, drawing on the intellectual heritage of the medieval universities of Paris and Bologna, the Oxbridge model in England, and the Humboldtian research university in Germany. In the nineteenth century, many American students travelled to Europe, particularly to Germany, bringing back the concept of the PhD, which catalysed the rise of U.S. research universities and laid the foundations for the country’s modern higher education system (Rumbley et al., 2019). In the decades that followed, both Europe and the United States experienced the massification of higher education, expanding access to broader social groups and increasingly aligning education with labour market demands. The student movements of the 1960s and 1970s further reshaped the academic landscape on both sides of the Atlantic, challenging

curricula and institutional governance and reinforcing the idea that higher education was not merely for elites but a driver of social and cultural change.

The upheavals of the interwar years and the devastation of the Second World War gave renewed urgency to transatlantic academic cooperation. Facing political persecution and the threat of conflict, many European academics emigrated to the United States, where they significantly strengthened the intellectual foundations of American universities while preserving ties with their European counterparts. After 1945, the United States, having escaped much of the physical destruction of the war, was well placed to integrate education into its broader foreign aid strategy. The Marshall Plan, launched in 1947, channeled substantial resources into the reconstruction of Europe, including investments in public research and higher education through academic exchanges and institutional cooperation (Hogan, 1987; de Wit, 2002). At the same time, the creation of NATO in 1949 reinforced Western solidarity and was complemented by closer educational and cultural collaboration (Kaplan, 2004; Lagadec, 2012). International organisations such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) and NAFSA in the United States, along with the British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Europe, further institutionalised academic ties. Particularly influential was the Salzburg Seminar, established in 1947 and often described as the "Marshall Plan for the Mind," which promoted a deeper understanding of the United States among European scholars and laid the groundwork for the founding of the European Association for American Studies (EAAS) in 1954.

Building on these foundations, several flagship initiatives were introduced in the following decades to consolidate and expand transatlantic academic cooperation. Among the most influential was the Fulbright Program, proposed in 1945 and enacted in 1946, which has since become the largest and longest-running binational exchange programme in the world, engaging over 370,000 participants to date. In Europe, this initiative was later complemented by the Fulbright-Schuman Programme, an EU-wide scheme designed to strengthen cooperation in areas at the intersection of policy and technology. Academic institutions also played a crucial role in this process. The establishment of the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in Berlin in 1963 and the founding of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University in 1968 reflected the growing importance of institutional engagement in transatlantic dialogue. The creation of the European Union Studies Association (EUSA) in the United States further facilitated scholarly cooperation on EU–U.S. relations. By the late twentieth century, initiatives such as the Erasmus Programme, launched in 1987 and later expanded into Erasmus+, provided a European model for academic mobility that soon extended beyond Europe, making both Europe and the United States the most attractive destinations for internationally mobile students and scholars. Collectively, these developments illustrate how higher education evolved into a key pillar of transatlantic soft power, combining cultural diplomacy, institutional collaboration, and the internationalisation agenda to sustain a privileged partnership.

In the contemporary era, transatlantic higher education remains one of the most deeply integrated global partnerships. Economically, the United States and Europe are unparalleled in their interdependence, together accounting for nearly half of global GDP and supporting millions of jobs on both sides of the Atlantic (Center for

Transatlantic Relations, 2018). In education, both regions consistently rank above the global average in tertiary attainment. By 2016, 40% of the EU population and 36% of the U.S. population had earned at least a bachelor's degree (Eurostat, 2016; NCES, 2016). These figures highlight not only the breadth of access but also the symbolic role of higher education in supporting prosperity and social development.

Nonetheless, there are significant structural differences between European and American universities. For example, European universities are generally publicly funded and have relatively low tuition fees, whereas the top-ranked universities in the United States are predominantly private and compete intensely for students, professors, research funding, and institutional prestige. (Spencer, 2014). European higher education institutions usually encourage early specialisation at the undergraduate level, while the typical US Bachelor's programme gives students much more flexibility in their coursework before they must decide on graduate specialisation. In recent decades, major European universities have increasingly sought to match their American peers in research output, international reputation, and overall competitiveness.

Mobility patterns further illustrate the complementarity of the two systems. Europe remains the most popular destination for American students pursuing study abroad, whether for full degrees or shorter programmes. By contrast, fewer Europeans study in the United States, only around 8.6% of the international student population there, largely due to higher costs (Institute of International Education, 2017). Nonetheless, supported by EU-funded schemes and national initiatives, a growing number of European graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty undertake research visits to the U.S. The Fulbright-Schuman Programme is a particularly significant mechanism, facilitating exchanges centred on EU–U.S. relations and European institutions (European Commission, 2018). Beyond individual mobility, numerous institutional partnerships continue to flourish. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France are among the most frequent partners for U.S. universities (Helms & Brajkovic, 2017), while previous programmes such as the EU–U.S. Atlantis initiative and more recent agreements in research and innovation have expanded collaboration beyond traditional exchange formats (European Commission, 2016). These developments show that despite bureaucratic challenges, the transatlantic partnership remains anchored in shared principles such as academic freedom, scientific excellence, and ethical research standards (de Wit et al., 2015).

At the same time, recent years have brought significant challenges that threaten to complicate this traditionally close partnership. The United Kingdom's departure from the EU has excluded British universities from Erasmus+, severing one of the most extensive mobility networks and limiting opportunities for cooperation with both EU and U.S. partners (European Commission, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these difficulties: mobility restrictions, uncoordinated responses, and the cancellation of academic events curtailed collaboration and added to the funding challenges faced by higher education institutions on both sides of the Atlantic (Marinoni, van't Land, & Jensen, 2020; Rumbley, 2020).

The historical and current trajectories discussed in the previous section reveal two contradictory points. Firstly, the U.S. and EU remain close partners in higher education overall, through well-established channels of mobility, networks, and institutional partnerships. These are supported by shared scientific values, even though other social

or political values are becoming less aligned. Secondly, however, these differences, along with recent changes, also highlight how vulnerable such cooperation can be in the face of shifting political priorities, social tensions, and the global pandemic. As outlined in the following chapters, these concerns now include the rise of nationalism, Brexit, the global competition to attract students and talent to universities, and ongoing debates.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Soft Power Instruments in Higher Education

Introduction

This section builds on the theoretical and historical insights from the previous chapter and examines how the EU uses the instruments of its educational soft power, focusing mainly on the promotion of EU Studies in the United States from 1990 to the present. Academics recognise higher education as an important instrument in cultural diplomacy and the exercise of soft power globally. Consequently, to enhance its global presence, the EU has increasingly targeted academic mobility, institutional collaboration, and transatlantic dialogue through higher education.

The Jean Monnet Programme, Erasmus Mundus, and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme are among the most notable instruments through which these objectives are carried out. Although different in purpose and approach, they jointly aim to promote EU values and its normative power worldwide. Erasmus Mundus is one of Europe's principal programmes for international mobility and cooperation in higher education; Jean Monnet centres aim to reinforce the teaching and research of EU studies; and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme is an EU-US partnership initiative aimed at promoting academic and policy dialogue between Europe and the United States.

They are the longest-running programmes at the core of the EU's educational diplomacy, serving as permanent mechanisms for engaging with partner countries and enhancing the EU's global appeal. In this field, the new European Universities Initiative and European Degree Package complement these programmes by increasing institutional cooperation between universities across Europe and enabling the creation of joint European degree qualifications, which contribute to the convergence of higher education across Europe and increase the EU's influence globally.

At the heart of this strategy lies the belief that academic exchange does not merely foster knowledge but also shapes perceptions, nurtures relationships, and instils values. By supporting global educational cooperation, the EU seeks to present itself as a credible, inclusive, and value-driven actor on the world stage. The following sections will delve into each of these programmes, exploring their roles in shaping the EU's international educational strategy.

3.1 Internationalisation and Europeanisation of Higher Education: Setting the Context

Having illustrated the connection between US-Europe cooperation in academia and the importance of education for international affairs, the term 'internationalisation of higher education' must now be understood conceptually and clarified regarding its contribution to development and performance. This phrase has been widely used and discussed over the past 30 years, during which its scope has steadily broadened and deepened in parallel with changing understandings of the role of higher education, globalisation, and interconnected higher education systems. Various academics suggest that the internationalisation of higher education has become an established element in institutional strategy and policy, as well as a structural response to global forces. (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2020).

In this context, the definition proposed by Jane Knight has become widely accepted as the foundational reference within the field. According to her seminal formulation:

“Internationalisation at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). This definition highlights the systemic and multidimensional nature of internationalisation. Rather than representing a single initiative or discrete set of activities, internationalisation constitutes a continuous, long-term and institution-wide process embedded across the core missions of higher education, teaching, research, and service to society. It is therefore not confined to mobility programmes alone, but extends to curriculum development, international partnerships, research collaboration, transnational education, and intercultural learning environments (Knight, 2004).

Motivations for internationalisation are diverse and often interrelated. They include academic drivers (enhancing quality, innovation and research capacity), economic and labour market considerations (competitiveness and talent attraction), political rationales (diplomatic influence and cross-border cooperation), and social objectives such as fostering mutual understanding and intercultural competencies (Knight, 2004). As de According to Wit, who wrote about this in 1995 and 2000, all these reasons together help to make stronger. institutional performance and global standing, reinforcing the perception that internationalisation is a strategic asset for higher education institutions seeking to enhance their visibility, reputation and societal impact.

Building on this conceptual foundation and having clarified both the meaning and motivations behind internationalisation, the next step is to consider how higher education institutions operationalise this agenda in practice. This requires moving from general strategic intent to the concrete organisational processes that shape institutional transformation. In this regard, the theory of comprehensive internationalisation, first developed by John K. Hudzik, offers a crucial analytical bridge between internationalisation as a strategic aspiration and its implementation as a systemic institutional process (Hudzik, 2011, 2015; Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012).

Hudzik provides a widely cited definition that captures the holistic and action-oriented character of the concept:

"Comprehensive internationalization is a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise. It is essential that it be embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units. It is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility" (Hudzik, 2011, p. 6).

This definition emphasises that comprehensive internationalisation is systemic, embedded, and institution-wide. It is not a peripheral initiative, or a collection of isolated actions driven by individual actors, but a deliberate transformation affecting the entire academic ecosystem. In this context, the effectiveness of internationalisation depends on governance commitment, resource allocation, organisational coordination, and broad stakeholder engagement.

The implementation of comprehensive internationalisation requires internal alignment across institutional structures and actors, ensuring that strategic goals are translated into tangible outcomes. Key areas of operational activity typically include action designed to:

- Increase student mobility (incoming and outgoing),
- Expand language learning and multilingual competencies,
- Develop international internship and practical training opportunities,
- Participate in international research collaboration,
- Integrate international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum,
- Translate global engagement into local societal benefit (Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012; Hudzik & Stohl, 2012),

and, as functional outcomes of international partnership engagement:

- Enhance faculty development and international professional experience,
- Increase diversity among students and academic staff,
- Innovate in curriculum design and teaching delivery,
- Improve institutional competitiveness, research output, and ranking performance (Hudzik, 2011).

Because many of these outcomes depend directly on engagement beyond the national system, the successful implementation of comprehensive internationalisation requires robust international partnerships and multi-level collaboration (Sandström & Weimer, 2016). Concrete partnership formats that enable higher education institutions to realise comprehensive internationalisation objectives include, among others:

- Staff and student exchange agreements,
- International internship, practicum and service-learning programmes,

- Collaborative and joint degree programmes,
- Joint research agreements and cross-border academic consortia,
- Curriculum development partnerships and capacity-building initiatives,
- Virtual exchange and online collaborative learning models (Hoseth & Thampapillai, 2018; Sandström & Weimer, 2016).

Internationalisation is therefore not only about student or staff mobility or the pursuit of prestige, but also involves a coherent process aimed at improving the quality and attractiveness of higher education institutions, enhancing their innovation, promoting openness, and boosting their standing in global competition. The systematic and increasingly organised form of internationalisation is why regional frameworks such as the European Higher Education Area, and specific projects such as Jean Monnet, Erasmus Mundus, or Fulbright-Schuman, should be considered instruments of soft power in transatlantic educational relations.

The discussion of comprehensive internationalisation helps illuminate how higher education institutions internalise global engagement within their strategic and operational structures. However, the implementation of internationalisation within higher education institutions cannot be fully understood if considered separately from the global context in which universities operate. The internal developments discussed occur within a highly competitive global higher education sector, characterised by increasing interdependence between states and universities, growing flows of people and knowledge across borders, and the widespread diffusion of similar institutional models and standards across countries. In this regard, internationalisation is both a response to and a factor contributing to the globalisation of higher education, and is shaped by structural global pressures that extend far beyond individual institutions or even national systems.

The globalisation of higher education refers to the growing interdependence of academic systems and the expanding circulation of knowledge, people and institutional models across borders. It has transformed universities from nationally oriented institutions into actors embedded within a competitive international environment, where collaboration, benchmarking and reputation have become central elements of strategy, policy and governance (Vaira, 2004). As cross-border mobility and international competition intensify, universities increasingly adopt global standards and practices to enhance their visibility and legitimacy in the international arena. Scholars often describe this process as a form of policy borrowing or policy copying, through which non-Western systems emulate Anglo-American approaches in university governance, research evaluation and quality assurance. In this sense, globalisation contributes not only to the diffusion of knowledge but also to the consolidation of common academic norms largely shaped by the Western tradition.

Altbach's centre–periphery model[6] offers a conceptual framework for understanding the enduring asymmetries of the global higher education system. According to this

[6] The centre–periphery model, first formulated by Altbach (1987), conceptualises the global hierarchy of higher education, where Anglo-American institutions occupy the centre of knowledge production and dissemination, while universities in the developing world remain largely dependent on them. This

model, the academic world operates through a hierarchical structure in which Anglo-American universities occupy the centre and institutions in developing regions remain on the periphery (Altbach, 1987). Altbach identifies five key elements sustaining this imbalance. First, the modern university originated within Europe and North America, and its structures continue to define global norms of academic organisation. Second, the dominance of English as the principal language of research and publication reinforces Western epistemological frameworks and limits the visibility of other traditions. Third, research resources and infrastructure are unevenly distributed, with the most advanced laboratories and funding concentrated in the global North. Fourth, Western institutions exercise control over primary channels of knowledge dissemination, leading journals, editorial boards, major conferences and citation indexes, determining which ideas gain international legitimacy. Fifth, the continuous outflow of highly skilled researchers and academics from developing regions to prestigious Western universities, commonly described as brain drain, perpetuates dependence and weakens local academic ecosystems.

From this perspective, global education creates opportunities for innovation as well as barriers. It may provide cross-border support, travel, and new technology; however, it also perpetuates inequality and the unfair advantages of certain places over others. Rather than being forceful, the ongoing reference to Western standards and criteria demonstrates how globalisation operates more subtly through influence, encouraging some reforms and imitation.

Taken together, these dynamics show that internationalisation and globalisation have transformed the international higher education system into one where power is exercised through attraction, competition, and normative alignment. International higher education systems, in turn, create a space in which universities act as agents of soft power and serve as the principal fields in which it is exercised, operating within global hierarchies that favour institutional compliance with established international norms. It is within this complex environment, marked by pressures for visibility, mobility, and excellence, that regional frameworks have emerged as strategic responses designed to enhance competitiveness and strengthen collective capacity. In Europe, this response has taken the form of the Europeanisation of higher education, most prominently articulated through the Bologna Process, the creation of the European Higher Education Area, and the consolidation of shared policies and instruments intended to reinforce Europe’s presence in the global academic arena. The following paragraphs examine how Europeanisation has reshaped higher education within Europe and established the structural foundations for the EU’s external educational influence.

Europeanisation plays a crucial role as the European Union's strategic response to the pressures of globalisation. The Europeanisation of higher education refers to the development of shared governance structures and policy instruments designed to integrate higher education systems across Europe. It aims not only to enhance

framework remains central to understanding contemporary inequalities in global academia (Altbach, 1987).

cooperation within the EU but also to project Europe's educational values globally. Europeanisation has progressed incrementally since the early European Treaties, but its most significant push came after the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, when education was officially recognised as a pillar for competitiveness, innovation and cohesion (European Commission, 2025).

As Risse et al. (2001) define it, Europeanisation is the "emergence and the development at the European level of distinct structures of governance, that is, of political, legal, and social institutions, which formalise interactions among actors and policy networks." This governance framework has allowed for increasing coordination among EU Member States, EU institutions, and transnational networks, creating a collaborative space where policy goals are aligned and shared. While internationalisation focuses on individual institutions' strategies to engage globally, Europeanisation represents a collective approach to creating shared norms and standards, aligning European higher education with both global expectations and regional needs.

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC)[7] has been the primary tool for the governance of European higher education. Through voluntary cooperation and mutual learning, the OMC allows Member States to align their national policies with broader European objectives while maintaining their autonomy (Trubek & Trubek, 2005). The implementation of the Bologna Process (1999), followed by the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)[8], exemplifies this approach. The EHEA has provided a platform for harmonising educational systems, facilitating student and staff mobility, and establishing common academic standards across Europe. However, despite these efforts, the European higher education system remains fragmented due to the diversity of national systems, each with its own institutional and policy frameworks.

The European Universities Initiative represents a significant step forward in overcoming this fragmentation. It encourages universities to form strategic alliances, fostering deeper collaboration and enhancing Europe's competitive position within the global education market (European Commission, 2023). These alliances are not merely academic networks but are designed to institutionalise cross-border cooperation, reduce

[7] The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a form of soft law within the European Union, designed for intergovernmental policymaking that does not result in binding legislative measures. It allows EU countries to cooperate voluntarily by setting common objectives, benchmarks, and performance indicators, while maintaining their national autonomy. The OMC was introduced in the 1990s and initially focused on employment policy, later expanding to other sectors such as education, social protection, and vocational training. It primarily relies on peer pressure, with the European Commission overseeing the process without the involvement of the European Parliament or Court of Justice. (EUR-Lex, "Open method of coordination," https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/open-method-of-coordination.html)

[8] The Bologna Process is a major European initiative aimed at creating a more coherent and compatible system of higher education across Europe. It established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to facilitate mobility, improve access to higher education, and increase the global competitiveness of European universities. The Bologna Process includes the adoption of a three-cycle system (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees), mutual recognition of qualifications, and the establishment of quality assurance systems across participating countries. It has also served as a platform for dialogue with non-EU countries, offering a forum for educational diplomacy and cross-border academic cooperation. (European Education Area (European Commission), "The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area," https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process)

the structural fragmentation of European higher education, and align Europe more closely with global standards of academic excellence. Through the European Degree Package (2024), Europe seeks to overcome the legal barriers that hinder the creation of joint degrees, enabling universities to offer truly European qualifications that reflect the collective values and academic standards of the region (European Commission, 2025).

Furthermore, Europeanisation also enhances the EU's soft power in the global educational arena. By promoting European values such as inclusiveness, openness, and quality research on the global stage, Europeanisation appeals to other regions by funding various educational partnerships, study programmes, and scholar exchanges. Through mechanisms such as the Jean Monnet programme, the Erasmus Mundus programme, and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme, Europe strengthens both its internal cohesion and its influence through its educational model, which helps to build bridges and establish partnerships between European and non-European higher education institutions, academics, and students. Therefore, in the second half of this study, special attention will be given to programmes such as Jean Monnet and Erasmus Mundus as mechanisms underpinning this European strategic approach and as instruments of European educational diplomacy.

3.2. Promoting European Studies Abroad: The Jean Monnet Programme in the U.S.

3.2.1. The Jean Monnet Programme: Origins, Evolution, Strategic Framing and types of Actions

The Jean Monnet Programme, launched in 1989 by the European Commission, has supported research and teaching on European integration. The initiative was initially open to scholars from European Union member states but was soon extended to scholars from candidate countries and gradually to other institutions worldwide. An important aspect in its early years was that the European Commission Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) administered the initiative, indicating that the programme had broader aims than education alone; it also played a role in external policy, strategic influence, and public relations.

A major leap forward occurred when control of the programme was transferred to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) in the latter half of the 1990s. There was also a significant shift in geographical scope: in 2001, the Jean Monnet programme was opened to institutions worldwide. With this expansion, the Jean Monnet activity was also launched in countries such as the United States.

From 2014 onward, Jean Monnet Activities have been integrated into the framework of the Erasmus+ programme. While the objectives remain the same, the programme's restructuring provides new opportunities for involvement, especially for younger and emerging researchers. For the first time, the programme description also includes

fostering dialogue between academia and policymakers, reinforcing its role in academic development as well as in policymaking and supporting the European Union.

Despite its relatively modest scale, the Jean Monnet Programme is one of the EU's most successful initiatives for cooperation in higher education among universities, with many institutions regularly competing for funding. The programme is long-standing, and universities remain keenly interested in participating. Jean Monnet promotes the accumulation of academic knowledge about the EU and enhances the Union's values internationally.

In 2024, the European Commission published a review celebrating the 25th anniversary of the inclusion of Jean Monnet Chairs in Erasmus+. The report is mainly descriptive but also highlights the programme's strengths in promoting the EU's brand globally. Through examples and testimonies from participants, it is clear how Jean Monnet has contributed to educational diplomacy and the projection of the EU's soft power. Jean Monnet Chairs have been instrumental in creating, strengthening, and expanding the field of European Studies worldwide, shaping academic debates and discourse on European values both domestically and internationally.

The programme includes various instruments designed to enhance the study of the EU worldwide. Although they differ in scale, scope and purpose, these actions share a common objective: to promote the EU as a player, a subject of study, and a point of reference beyond the Union.

The **Jean Monnet Chair** is awarded to a university professor or lecturer with recognised expertise in the field of EU studies. This award supports teaching, research, and outreach projects devoted to issues relating to the European Union. A permanent chair provides a long-term incentive and contributes to the institutional embedding of EU studies in host universities.

Jean Monnet Modules are short duration teaching programmes that form part of existing courses. The Modules can be single subjects or multidisciplinary and are offered at bachelor or postgraduate level. Unlike centres and chairs, Modules are more limited in duration but still provide an easy and cost-effective way to introduce EU-related subjects to a wide range of institutions and students worldwide.

Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence bring together academic, research and documentary resources within one or a network of higher education institutions. Their purpose is to create a focal point of knowledge on European integration issues in one or more universities. Centres of Excellence encourage cooperation among experts, increase the visibility of European integration knowledge, and promote outreach activities. They foster synergy and pool efforts to enhance global visibility in the field of EU studies.

Jean Monnet Networks aim to encourage cooperation among various higher education actors, such as Centres of Excellence, university departments, research teams, or individual academics. These partnerships have a transnational character and seek to

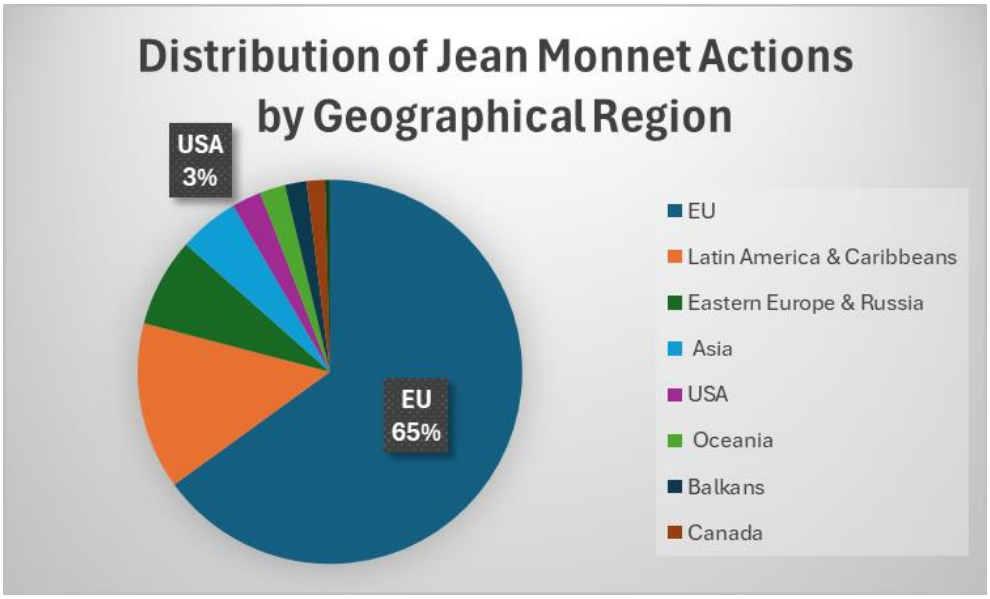
establish collaboration on joint projects, increase mobility, and promote intellectual exchange. They contribute to building a critical mass of EU scholars worldwide and support the EU's increasing role in the world.

Finally, **Jean Monnet Projects** aim to support innovative methods for EU-related teaching and outreach, often on an experimental basis. They are intended to disseminate EU content through new methods, new target groups, or new topics in teaching and research on EU themes. These projects often stimulate bottom-up, locally rooted initiatives around EU themes.

3.2.2 Quantitative Analysis: Jean Monnet Actions in the U.S. (2001–2023)

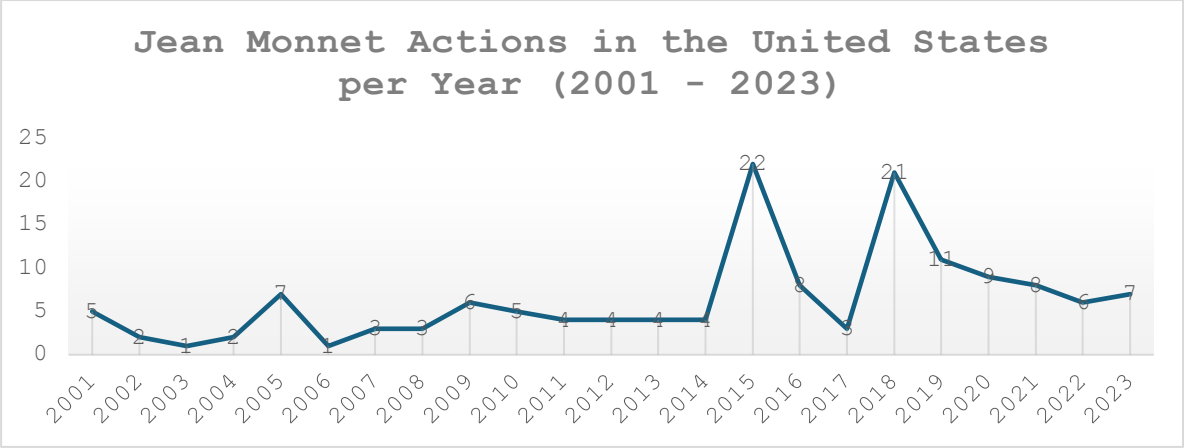
The role of the programme as a tool for European soft power in the United States was assessed by examining the complete history of Jean Monnet actions implemented from 1990 to 2023, based on available data from the European Commission.

The United States joined the programme in 2001, when Jean Monnet activities were formally opened to non-European countries. The United States' overall contribution accounted for slightly more than 3% of the total number of global Jean Monnet actions completed between 1990 and 2023 (146 out of 5,884 actions). However, this share should not be considered insignificant. Jean Monnet action projects have run continuously for over 20 years, suggesting a stable relationship between universities and US institutions. The graph on this page shows that these projects make up 3 per cent of the global strategy to engage US academia.

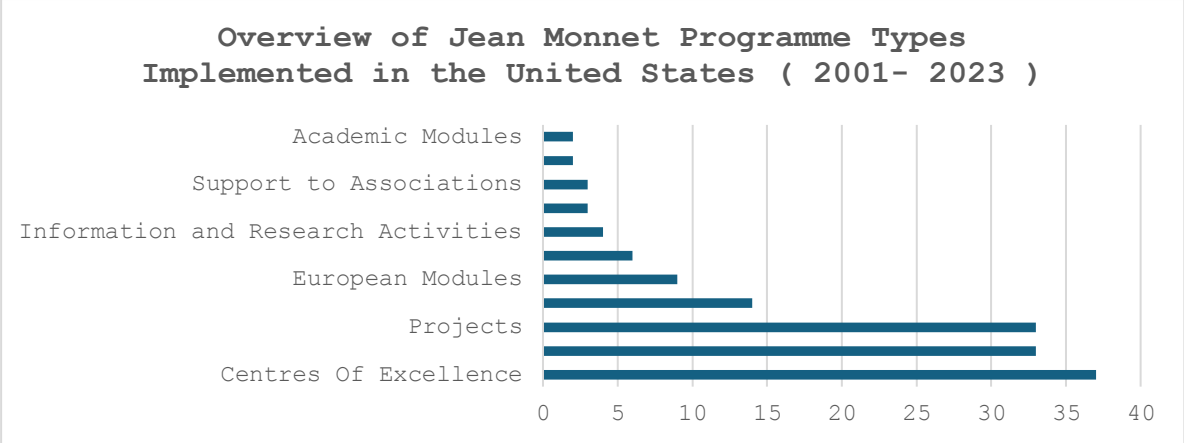


The chart below tracks the progress of Jean Monnet activities in the US from 2001 (when the Programme was opened to countries outside the EU) up to 2023. Certain years, such as 2015 and 2018, saw a significant increase in these activities, possibly due to broader political or institutional developments, such as a renewed emphasis on EU-

US relations under the Obama administration or progress in the TTIP negotiations[9], for example. Each of these annual interventions has further enabled the EU to maintain ongoing links with universities in the US, raising awareness of the EU's values, perspectives, debates, and study opportunities at leading academic institutions across the country (see graph below).



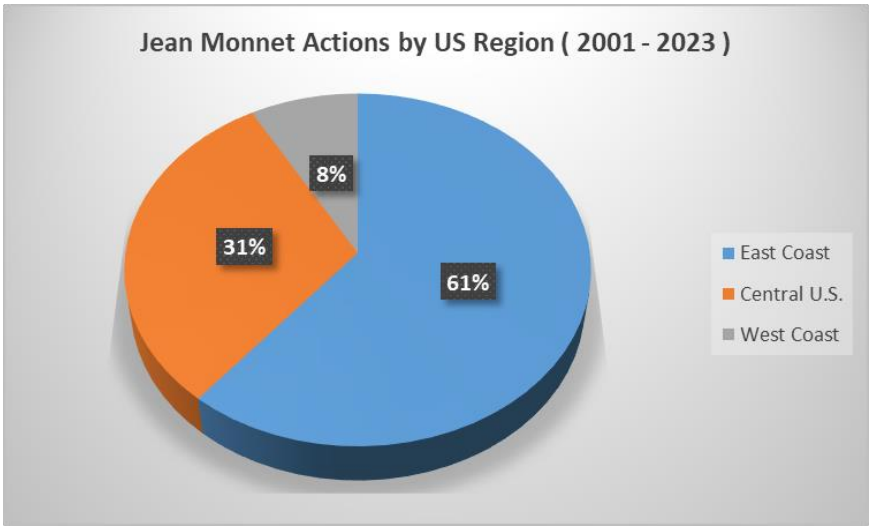
The types of Jean Monnet actions undertaken indicate not only how the US is engaged with the EU, but also the extent of this engagement during the selected period. According to the available official data, there were 37 Centres of Excellence, 33 Jean Monnet Chairs, 33 Jean Monnet Projects, 14 Modules, and 9 European Modules hosted in the United States during the 2021-2023 period (see Figure below). This shows that more resources are allocated to Centres of Excellence and Chairs compared to the other initiatives (see graph below).



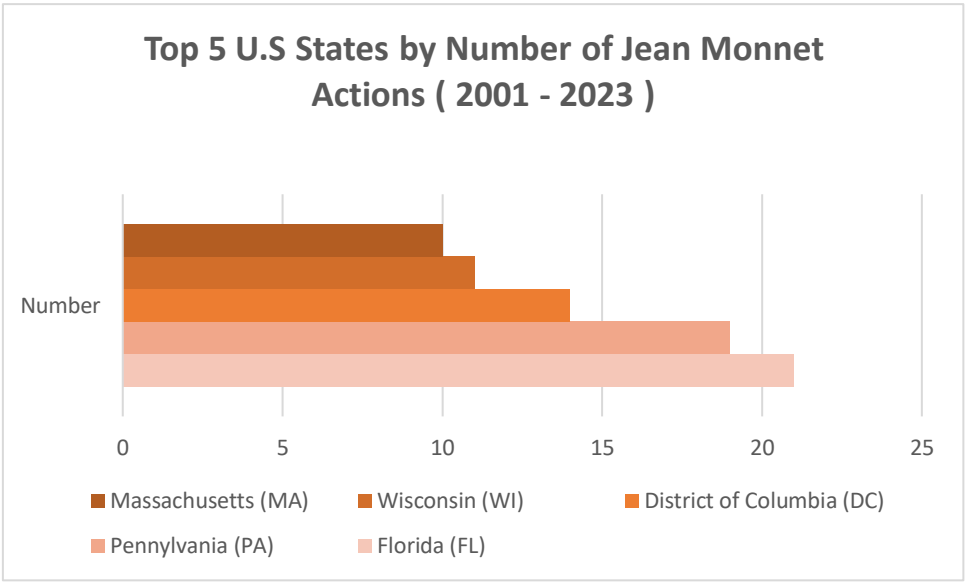
The geography of the Jean Monnet actions carried out in the USA is concentrated on the East Coast, where 89 out of a total of 146 actions are registered. There are fewer actions in the Central U.S., with 45, and only 12 on the West Coast. This appears to be a deliberate strategy, exerting influence where there is academic prestige, where the

[9] TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) refers to the proposed trade agreement between the European Union and the United States, launched in 2013 and concluded without agreement in 2016. In April 2019, the Council of the EU declared the negotiating directives obsolete. (European Commission, “EU negotiating texts in TTIP”).

USA has a high degree of participation, and where there is potential for impact on decision-making (see graph below).



In the US, the locations with the most Jean Monnet actions are, in descending order, Florida (21), Pennsylvania (19), District of Columbia (14), Wisconsin (11), and Massachusetts (10) (see figure below). These states have several major universities and many research universities located together, or at least policy think tanks. This is unsurprising. Cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington have strong academic reputations and active transatlantic research programmes, which explains why the EU chooses to be present there.



3.2.3. Strategic Relevance of the U.S. as a Target Country

The U.S. accounts for only about 3 percent of all Jean Monnet actions granted worldwide. In relative terms, this share may seem modest, but the United States is strategic for the EU's soft power because its universities are globally unique in international knowledge production. Eastern Seaboard institutions have long served as reference centres in policy debate, for educating the most influential political elites of the Atlantic world, and as hosts of the most important forums for dialogue on both sides of the Atlantic. Ensuring that EU integration continues to be taught, studied, discussed, and debated there allows the Union to remain connected to global networks.

In addition, a subtler way to target the EU within the U.S. academic world involves influencing the new generation of scholars and practitioners, those who have never had direct contact with the Union or only to a limited extent. The Jean Monnet Programme can do more than simply raise awareness about Europe. Through this programme, the EU is not merely a subject of research; it is also studied and understood as a global actor. Given the increased interest among American scholars in recent decades in the EU model as a distinct form of Western political cooperation and as an actor in global governance – where the EU was previously viewed almost exclusively in economic terms and associated with its crises – the Programme helps the new generation of scholars develop a deeper understanding of how the Union operates internally and what the logic of its external agenda implies.

With all this evidence, the EU's financial support for Jean Monnet activity seems anything but accidental, using the programme to project its values. These initiatives aim to expand the EU's soft power influence globally, including in the United States. Overall, these activities represent a long-term investment in building lasting partnerships and influence in the United States. Although small, Jean Monnet activity indicates that soft power is more a matter of carefully chosen locations than of scale.

3.2.4. Limitations and Opportunities

The Jean Monnet Programme has maintained a steady presence in the US and has been consistent and transparent. However, compared with the American higher education landscape, there have been few initiatives over the past 20 years, 146 actions in total across 4,000 universities and colleges in the U.S. This has resulted in limited penetration into the American higher education system, with so few actions relative to the size of the system. One reason for this limited reach is the nature of the U.S. academic system, which is competitive, closed, and, in many cases, self-referential.

Another challenge is how to sustain that influence. While Centres of Excellence and Chairs are intended to ensure continuity, most Jean Monnet actions are funded for a limited period. When the funding ends, there is no guarantee that EU-related teaching or research will continue, unless it is integrated into departmental curricula or receives funding from other sources. Therefore, it is necessary to question the legacy of the programme in the United States – whether it will result in lasting change in higher education, where, in general, external funding is required to maintain the teaching or research of international content, and whether EU Studies will remain confined to a

small group of staff and a few courses rather than being embedded more broadly in higher education.

However, there are also opportunities. Although the programme cannot sponsor chairs or full professorships, and its grant amounts have not always kept pace with academic inflation in the U.S., the EU has instead been able to support programmes at top-tier policy schools, think tanks, and research institutions. With an increasingly challenging international environment on issues ranging from climate change and security to trade and digital regulation, the U.S. academic and student population needs a stronger understanding of Europe's stance and rationales. Jean Monnet has excellent, though understated, potential to succeed in these areas. If it can grow, diversify its funding streams, and increase its visibility efforts and partnerships beyond its current level, it may continue to function effectively and discreetly within American higher education, an institution deeply influential far beyond its own campuses.

3.3. European Academic Mobility as Soft Power: The Erasmus Mundus Programme

3.3.1 Erasmus Mundus in Context: Origins, Expansion and Strategic Framing

Erasmus Mundus is the largest international project in higher education and international cooperation led by the European Union. Launched in 2004, the programme was designed as a strategic instrument to promote academic excellence, foster intercultural dialogue, and enhance the global visibility of European universities (European Commission, 2023a). While Erasmus+ broadly covers higher education mobility within Europe[10], Erasmus Mundus has always aimed to attract third-country nationals to pursue international master's degrees awarded in equal partnership by groups of European universities. The programme operates through highly competitive, fully funded joint degrees that require students to study in at least two different European countries, often in collaboration with non-European partner institutions. This structure ensures a transnational academic experience and exposes participants to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe (European Commission, 2023a).

It was restructured in 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, exclusively focusing on the master's level. Erasmus Mundus has followed the European Union's and the wider European agenda priorities for higher education while promoting intra-European cooperation and attractiveness of the EU's higher education, opening it to the rest of the world through cooperation with external partners based on reciprocal terms. From EUR 430 million (2004-2008) to over EUR 1 billion (2021-2027), Erasmus Mundus was thus solidified

[10] The Erasmus programme, established in 1987, is the EU's flagship student mobility initiative, originally focused on intra-European exchanges and progressively expanded into Erasmus+ to include broader international cooperation. – European Commission. (2017). *30 years of Erasmus: Building a more united, stronger and more open Europe.* Publications Office of the European Union. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/

and began its rise into one of the EU's leading education diplomacy tools, which will become clear throughout the next steps.

Building on these early strategic objectives, the Erasmus Mundus programme was formally adopted in December 2003 and launched in 2004, in a context shaped by increasing intra-European cooperation through Erasmus (since 1987) and the Bologna Process (1998–1999)[11], alongside the EU's Lisbon Strategy[12] (2000). Designed to enhance the global attractiveness of European higher education, it sought to strengthen convergence in degree structures, promote cross-border quality assurance, and advance the development of the European Higher Education Area [13](European Parliament and Council, 2003; European Commission, 2003, 2004).

The two initial aims of Erasmus Mundus were, first, to enhance the quality of higher education in Europe through cooperation with other European and third-country institutions, and second, to increase the attractiveness and visibility of European higher education worldwide. In addition, the programme sought to provide distinctly European added value, enabling highly qualified graduates and scholars from across the globe to obtain qualifications in the EU, while fostering structured cooperation between EU and third-country institutions and boosting outgoing mobility[14] (European Commission, 2013a). These aims were operationalised through four distinct actions during its first period (2004–2008). At its core were Erasmus Mundus Masters' Courses (Action 1), joint master's programmes requiring mobility across at least two European institutions, which were complemented by a scholarship scheme for non-EU graduate students and scholars (Action 2). Partnerships with non-EU universities (Action 3) expanded the programme's global reach, while Action 4 explicitly sought to enhance the profile, visibility, and accessibility of European higher education, directly serving the EU's ambition to increase its global attractiveness (European Commission, 2013a).

With the launch of Erasmus+ in 2014, Erasmus Mundus was integrated into the programme's international actions, complementing credit mobility with degree mobility. This "international opening" allowed students and staff to engage in mobility

[11] The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental initiative launched in 1999 to create a coherent European Higher Education Area (EHEA), aimed at ensuring comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications across Europe. – European Higher Education Area. (1999). *The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999.* Bologna Process Secretariat. https://www.ehea.info

[12] The Lisbon Strategy, adopted by the European Council in 2000, set the objective for the European Union to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, with a strong focus on education, research, and innovation. – European Council. (2000). *Lisbon European Council: Presidency conclusions, 23–24 March 2000.* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

[13] The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), officially launched in 2010, was the outcome of the Bologna Process and aims to ensure more comparable, compatible, and coherent systems of higher education across Europe (EHEA Ministerial Conference, 2010).

[14] As noted by Augusto González, then Head of Unit for Higher Education International Cooperation at DG EAC, Erasmus Mundus provided a novel combination: a framework for a genuinely European higher educational offer through joint and double degrees, alongside scholarships for non-EU students. Its added value lay in accelerating degree structure convergence, improving the quality of academic offers and student services, and providing the EU with a public diplomacy tool that reinforced its global outreach (European Commission, 2023a).

beyond Europe[15], while reinforcing cooperation in curriculum development, student-centred education, joint teaching and supervision, quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications (European Commission, 2023a).

Beyond Europe, Erasmus Mundus has engaged institutions from 108 non-associated countries, accounting for nearly 3,000 instances of institutional participation across 378 Master's programmes, with many serving as full partners or coordinators. This extensive outreach underscores the programme's role as a key vehicle of European higher education diplomacy (European Commission, 2023a). By 2023, institutions from 140 countries had participated in Erasmus Mundus Master's programmes, reflecting the programme's truly global reach (European Commission, 2023a).

3.3.2. The Transatlantic Dimension of Erasmus Mundus: U.S. Engagement and Strategic Significance

After expanding its international presence, Erasmus Mundus has played a unique role in fostering ties across the Atlantic. In terms of soft power, its approach has successfully created lasting bonds between influential individuals in other countries and European academia (European Commission, 2023a). By engaging with norms and standards in the European Union, while also absorbing values such as openness, cooperation, and pluralism, these individuals have learned to respect and embrace the European project and its aims. The Erasmus Mundus impact on students and alumni is a positive outcome to note. By 2024, it had provided full Erasmus Mundus scholarships for 34,195 students from 179 countries, facilitating more than 111,000 mobility stays in consortium universities worldwide. Graduate follow-up surveys show an increase in their intercultural competence (78%), career opportunities (69%), personal development (66%) and more positive perceptions of Europe and the EU (62%) and are satisfied with their Erasmus Mundus program (90%).

Alumni from North America valued the cross-cultural experience of their studies, while financial support ranked as a less decisive factor compared to other regions (Jühlke et al., 2022). Recent Graduate Impact Surveys (GIS) [16] reaffirm that North American alumni primarily perceived the development of intercultural competencies as the most significant impact of their Erasmus Mundus experience, in contrast to other regions where career advancement ranked higher. Non-EU alumni, particularly from North America and Oceania, also reported stronger positive attitudes towards Europe and the EU after their studies, with many indicating they would recommend studying in Europe

[15] The Erasmus+ Regulation distinguishes between associated countries—EU Member States, EFTA countries in the EEA (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein), and candidate or potential candidate countries such as North Macedonia, Türkiye, and Serbia—and non-associated countries, encompassing all other third countries. These categories determine the extent of participation in Erasmus+ actions (European Commission, 2023a).

[16] The Graduate Impact Surveys (GIS) are large-scale longitudinal surveys commissioned by the European Commission to assess the outcomes of Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus+ participants. Conducted at regular intervals, they evaluate the programme's effects on intercultural competencies, career development, personal growth, and attitudes towards the EU, thereby providing evidence of its impact as a soft power instrument (Jühlke et al., 2022; Jühlke et al., 2024 forthcoming).

and favouring more countries cooperating in EU-like ways (Jühlke et al., 2022; Jühlke et al., 2024). Many reported stronger identification with European values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, reinforcing the programme's role in shaping favourable perceptions of the EU beyond its borders (Lami & Myrta, 2021).

Also, according to a 2020 poll among students outside of the EU, over 90% said that their exchange was a positive experience and they now have a stronger connection to the EU and the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Some stated they came to better understand the importance of tolerance, cultural diversity and intercultural competencies (Lami & Myrta, 2021).

Beyond these survey findings, the actual participation of US students and institutions in Erasmus Mundus shows the programme's influence. Between 2014 and 2017, almost 200 Americans received Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (EMJMD) scholarships (3.5 percent of all successful bids), and proposals to Erasmus Mundus involving US universities increased from 12 to 30. During this period, there was only one successful bid in 2014, rising to a dozen in 2017, marking a clear increase. This indicates strong efforts to foster US-EU links and growing interest among US academic professionals in the value of academic and intercultural connections (European Commission, 2018; Baker, 2019).

In parallel with these student-focused outcomes, the programme has also generated substantial institutional effects. European universities report that participation has been instrumental in attracting top-tier international students, forging durable partnerships, and enhancing their reputation and visibility. The United States, while representing a modest share of overall mobility compared to Asia or Latin America, has emerged as a strategically significant partner. Between 2021 and 2024, 264 American students received Erasmus Mundus scholarships, while 154 U.S. institutions took part as associated partners in 96 Joint Master's programmes (European Commission, 2024). In total, U.S. universities have been involved in more than 300 projects across the four programme periods, placing them among the most engaged non-associated partners alongside Brazil, China, and India (European Commission, 2023a).

Although the United States has neither had a full co-ordinator nor an awarding partner, American universities are routinely accepted as associate partners, thus creating long-lasting academic bridges. The asymmetrical partnership can be considered as the EU's intention to link the US to its most important higher education programme and increase the awareness and visibility of European-US links. (European Commission, 2024).

From a public diplomacy perspective, Erasmus Mundus has increasingly been conceptualised as a strategic instrument of soft power. As Lami and Myrta (2021) argue, participants often become informal ambassadors of the EU, transmitting its values and contributing to favourable perceptions within their home societies. Similarly, Chia Sheng-Kai (2015) notes that mobility programmes such as Erasmus Mundus diffuse norms not by coercion but through attraction, in line with Nye's (2004) notion of soft power. This dimension is particularly relevant in the U.S. context, where alumni frequently advocate for studying in Europe and for greater EU–U.S. academic cooperation (European Commission, 2023a).

The symbolism of the cooperation was significant, given previous efforts. There is already such a precedent: the Atlantis Programme, which was a joint initiative between the US Department of Education and the European Commission until 2011[17]. The difference with Erasmus Mundus is that Erasmus Mundus is primarily funded by the European Commission, and US universities are then invited to form partnerships based on those established by European institutions. Along with the Fulbright-Schuman programme, this illustrates how the EU is seeking not only to internationalise but also, in its pursuit of greater influence in the transatlantic area, to position itself educationally and culturally in support of its soft power objectives. (Baker, 2019).

3.3.3. Challenges and Future Perspectives

Erasmus Mundus is a clear example of how the European Union has used education as a tool of soft power over time. By offering scholarships to excellent students worldwide for master's courses that promote multilingualism, cross-cultural understanding, and European values (European Commission 2023.a), the EU aims to change attitudes towards the West and establish itself as a more visible and significant higher education power.

A notable aspect of its impact is the tendency of nearly one third of graduates, particularly from outside the EU, to remain in one of their host countries immediately after graduation. While this contributes to brain circulation[18] and strengthens EU–partner ties, longitudinal surveys suggest that many alumni eventually return to their home countries within a decade, illustrating the dual effect of temporary retention and longer-term global dissemination of European-trained expertise (Jühlke et al., 2022). These dynamics reflect both the opportunities and the tensions inherent in balancing the EU's attractiveness with concerns over equitable benefits for sending and receiving societies.

The brain drain[19] versus brain circulation debate has featured prominently in assessments of Erasmus Mundus. As Lami and Myrta (2021) and Bobotsi (2021) underline, the risk of talent loss remains, particularly in regions with limited inbound mobility. In the Western Balkans, for example, Erasmus+ is explicitly framed as a tool to combat youth emigration, while also contributing to reconciliation and identity-building in post-conflict contexts. Such cases highlight the need for balanced mobility flows and stronger integration of Erasmus+ with EU neighborhood and enlargement

[17] The Atlantis Programme (2006–2011) was a joint EU–U.S. initiative supporting transatlantic cooperation in higher education. It provided funding for consortia of European and American universities to develop joint or double degrees, promote student and staff mobility, and enhance mutual recognition of qualifications. The programme was discontinued in 2011 following budgetary realignments in both the EU and the U.S. (European Commission, 2012).

[18] "Brain circulation" is used to describe the return or circular mobility of skilled graduates, which can mitigate the effects of brain drain by ensuring that knowledge and expertise are shared across borders rather than lost permanently (Gaillard & Gaillard, 1997).

[19] The concept of "brain drain" refers to the emigration of highly skilled individuals from their home countries, often leading to a loss of talent and human capital in the sending societies (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

policies. Bobotsi (2021) further argues that Erasmus+ remains under-embedded in broader EU external strategies, despite its clear potential as a diplomatic instrument.

At the policy level, the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ programme period has reinforced the geopolitical role of higher education, explicitly identifying education cooperation as a soft power instrument within the EU's external relations agenda (European Commission, 2020). Subsequent frameworks have consolidated this approach. The 2020 Communication *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*[20] identified higher education as a central pillar of the EU's geopolitical role. The 2022 *European Strategy for Universities*[21] positioned higher education institutions as global actors, committed to supporting Erasmus Mundus consortia in addressing global challenges and promoting European values (European Commission, 2022). Most recently, the 2024 *Blueprint for a European Degree*[22], explicitly inspired by Erasmus Mundus, sought to remove barriers to transnational cooperation, facilitate the award of joint degrees, and consolidate the European Higher Education Area (European Commission, 2024a). Collectively, these documents demonstrate how Erasmus Mundus has been firmly embedded in the EU's strategic vision for higher education.

Inclusivity and sustainability have also been prioritised. The programme's transition from Key Action 1 ("Learning mobility of individuals") to Key Action 2 ("Cooperation among organisations and institutions") was designed to reinforce institutional collaboration and ensure lasting internationalisation[23] (European Commission, 2017). As Filip Van Depoele, Head of Unit for International Cooperation at DG EAC, observed, Erasmus Mundus remains a frontrunner in establishing joint degrees and continues to boost Europe's attractiveness as a study destination, though the challenge now lies in ensuring its continued relevance, innovation, and transformative impact over the coming decades (European Commission, 2023a).

The broader geopolitical context further underscores the significance of Erasmus Mundus as a soft power tool. As Baker (2019) notes, initiatives like Erasmus Mundus enhance academic cooperation while strengthening Europe's normative influence at a time of intensifying global competition for educational and cultural leadership. The programme's transatlantic dimension may be viewed as part of a collective Western

[20] European Commission. (2020). Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025. COM (2020) 625 final. Brussels: European Commission. This document outlines the EU's vision to establish the European Education Area by 2025, with higher education identified as a pillar of the Union's geopolitical role.

[21] European Commission. (2022). A European strategy for universities. COM (2022) 16 final. Brussels: European Commission. This strategy positions universities as global actors, reinforcing Europe's influence through international cooperation.

[22] European Commission. (2024a). Blueprint for a European Degree. Brussels: European Commission. This policy initiative, inspired by Erasmus Mundus, aims to facilitate the creation of joint European degrees and deepen the European Higher Education Area.

[23] Key Action 1 (KA1) refers to Erasmus+ actions supporting the learning mobility of individuals, including students, staff, and trainees. Key Action 2 (KA2) refers to Erasmus+ actions promoting cooperation among organisations and institutions, with a focus on innovation, partnerships, and capacity-building (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2021–2027).

response to alternative models of global engagement, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative[24], which advances connectivity without liberal-democratic foundations.

Looking ahead, Erasmus Mundus demonstrates both the opportunities and limitations of Europe's educational diplomacy. It has consolidated the EU's visibility and normative influence worldwide, yet challenges remain: participation rates remain asymmetrical, cooperation is often concentrated among elite institutions, and the risk of reinforcing one-sided brain circulation persists. Addressing these concerns will be crucial for sustaining its credibility as both a transformative educational initiative and a strategic instrument of EU soft power (Lami & Myrta, 2021).

Ultimately, while its transatlantic impact remains modest in scale and largely symbolic, Erasmus Mundus has laid important groundwork for reinforcing the EU's presence in U.S.–EU academic dialogue. To understand how this outreach is complemented by more targeted instruments, the next section turns to the Fulbright-Schuman Programme, which has played a distinctive role in structuring transatlantic educational ties and reinforcing long-term knowledge diplomacy.

3.4. The Fulbright Programme: Advancing Transatlantic Educational Collaboration

3.4.1 From Fulbright to Fulbright-Schuman: A Historical Overview of the Programme's Evolutions

The Fulbright Program stands as the United States' flagship educational exchange initiative, originally founded in 1946 with the goal of fostering mutual understanding and peaceful relations between the U.S. and other nations worldwide. In contrast to the Jean Monnet and Erasmus Mundus programmes, which were explored in previous chapters, the Fulbright Program is not only the oldest of the three initiatives but also one that came as a proposal from the other side of the Atlantic. Established by U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright, the programme's primary aim was to offer a platform for cultural diplomacy, bringing together academics, scholars, and students from diverse backgrounds to collaborate and exchange knowledge. To promote international goodwill and mutual understanding, President Harry S. Truman signed the Fulbright Act into law on August 1, 1946, launching the framework for the Fulbright Program.

Initially introduced as an amendment to the Surplus Property Act of 1944[25], the Fulbright Act allowed wartime allies to repay war debts in their own currency rather

[24] China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is a global infrastructure and investment strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Often interpreted as an alternative to liberal-democratic models of globalisation, it advances China's global influence through bilateral agreements, infrastructure financing, and educational/cultural exchanges (Fallon, 2015; Tonchev, 2021).

[25] The Surplus Property Act of 1944 was a U.S. federal law enacted by the 78th United States Congress to manage and dispose of surplus government property after World War II. Its aim was to assist the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy. The act established a Surplus Property Board and

than in U.S. dollars. This was done by establishing a fund to cover travel costs to the United States for academics, graduate students, and teachers who were citizens of the partner nations (Garner & Kirkby, 2019; Xu, 2019). This early version of the programme led to the creation of binational agreements, facilitating the exchange of students, scholars, and teachers between the United States and its partner countries (Xu, 2019). Historians often refer to the post-World War II era (1945–1960) as a "golden era" of U.S. cultural diplomacy, during which the Fulbright Program laid the foundations for a more formalized international educational strategy (Trilokekar, 2021).

The program is funded through an annual appropriation by the U. S. Congress to the U. S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. In addition, governments, educational institutions, corporations, foundations and Fulbright alumni in both the United States and the participating countries help fund the program directly and indirectly.

The Fulbright Program is administered in 49 countries by independent binational Fulbright Commissions. In partnership with governments of host countries that provide joint funding for operations, these Commissions are responsible for managing Fulbright educational exchange activities, recruiting and selecting participants for programs, securing host university placements for participants, assisting newly arriving U. S. Fulbright scholars and students in adapting to academic life abroad, working with Fulbright alumni, supporting arriving scholars and students in host countries, undertaking local fundraising for operations and facilitating all aspects of the exchange process. When Fulbright Commissions do not exist, U. S. Embassies oversee the program, in cooperation with their host governments. Notably, in most European Union countries, Fulbright Commissions operate effectively, making these regions central to the programme's activities. These commissions and embassy partnerships serve as vital hubs, fostering U.S.-EU educational exchange and strengthening diplomatic ties.

However, as the title of the chapter suggests, when considering the EU-U.S. Fulbright relations, one specific initiative stands out: the Fulbright-Schuman Programme. While the original Fulbright Program has been operational in many countries since the 1940s, the Fulbright-Schuman Programme has more recent origins, tracing its roots back to February 1990. During this period, Dr. William Glade, the Associate Director for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Information Agency, visited Belgium. He met with the Fulbright Commission in Brussels and European Communities officials to lay the groundwork for what would later become the Fulbright-Schuman Programme. In a series of meetings, Dr. Glade and his European counterparts developed the framework for the exchange programme, which aimed to strengthen educational ties between the United States and the European Union.

In October 1990, a symposium on "EC/US Cooperation in Education" was held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., where the details of the programme were formally discussed and refined. This marked the beginning of a new academic exchange initiative. The programme officially launched during the 1991–1992 academic year as a pilot project. The Fulbright Commission in

authorized the distribution of surplus government property for various purposes, including educational exchanges (Pub. L. 78–457).

Brussels was tasked with administering the initiative, supported by the U.S. Mission to the European Communities and the Task Force on Human Resources, Education and Youth (now the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture). In its first year, the programme received an initial investment of $130,000, which facilitated exchanges between the U.S. and the European Union, allowing four American scholars and two European Commission officials to engage in educational exchanges (Fulbright-Schuman Program, 2023).

The Fulbright-Schuman Programme today, administered by the Fulbright Commission in Brussels and jointly financed by the U.S. Department of State and the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) of the European Commission, provides grants for citizens of EU Member States to conduct research in the United States and for American citizens to conduct research in the European Union. This initiative continues to serve as a key tool for strengthening transatlantic relations, particularly in academic and policy-oriented fields.

In 2016, the Fulbright Commission launched a new series of Innovation Grants. These grants, created in collaboration with the U.S. Mission to the European Union, aim to support transatlantic research at the intersection of policy and technology. Since their introduction, these grants have become a cornerstone of the programme, attracting significant applications each year, with approximately 120 applications reviewed annually**.** By 2020, the programme had funded over 400 study and research projects in the United States and the European Union, further solidifying its role as a vital component of U.S.-EU academic exchange and cooperation.

To be eligible for the Fulbright-Schuman Programme, the research topic must have a significant EU component. Awards are available for individuals conducting research or delivering lectures on subjects pertinent to U.S.-EU relations**,** EU affairs and policy, or EU institutions, with an emphasis on topics that demonstrate relevance to at least two EU Member States. For example :

- Doctoral or postdoctoral research focused on issues such as the understanding of NATO and the advancement of discussions concerning peace, security, and defense-related matters.
- Innovation grants that support research aimed at deepening transatlantic understanding of key issues in the U.S.-EU relationship, particularly at the intersection of policy and technology**.**

Research conducted by international education professionals at European universities, seeking to explore matters related to international higher education and best practices in the field, specifically through research conducted at U.S. institution, etc.

3.4.2 The Strategic Impact of Fulbright Alumni: Bridging Relations and a Tradition of Excellence

The Fulbright Program has long been associated with excellence, producing a network of alumni who have become leaders in various sectors, including business, government, academia, and the arts. Fulbright alumni often return to their home countries with

valuable expertise, and many achieve prominent roles in fields such as politics, diplomacy, and economics. For example, Milton Friedman, one of the most influential American economists of the twentieth century, made a significant impact as a Fulbrighter. Known for his advocacy of free-market economics, Friedman brought his ideas to the United Kingdom as a Fulbright Scholar. Early in his career, he worked at the National Resources Committee on a consumer budget study during the Great Depression. Later, during World War II, he worked for the U.S. Treasury Department on tax policy. These experiences shaped his influential views on consumerism and monetary policy. Even today, Fulbrighters return to their home countries and achieve prominent positions, ranging from academics to ministers and entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it is significant to note that Fulbright alumni have been recipients of various prestigious awards, such as 82 MacArthur Fellows[26], 62 Nobel Prize winners[27], 93 Pulitzer Prize recipients[28], 8 Fields Medal or Abel Award winners in mathematics[29], and 51 National Book Award winners.

These recognitions reflect the programme's broader impact in shaping intellectual and professional leadership, not only in the U.S. but also globally. The continued contributions of Fulbright alumni to their respective fields underline the programme's enduring legacy and influence in advancing knowledge, creativity, and diplomacy.

3.4.3 Limitations and Future Opportunities of the Fulbright Programme

In June 2025, the Fulbright Program faced a major crisis when the Fulbright Board resigned due to concerns over political interference. The board members accused political appointees at the State Department of unlawfully cancelling scholarships for nearly 200 American professors and researchers. These scholars had been selected after

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[26] The MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the "genius grant," is one of the nation's most prestigious awards for intellectual and artistic achievement. Established in 1981, it recognizes individuals who demonstrate exceptional creativity and the potential for future impact on their fields and communities (Fulbright official page, 2025).

[27] The Nobel Prize honors individuals for their groundbreaking contributions in fields such as physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, economics, and peace. Since 1952, 62 Fulbright alumni have been recognized, with Linus Pauling making history as one of only four people to win two Nobel Prizes (Fulbright official page, 2025).

[28] The Pulitzer Prize, established in 1917, recognizes excellence in journalism, literature, music, and drama, with 22 categories celebrating outstanding achievements. 93 Fulbright alumni have won a total of 98 Pulitzer Prizes, with four alumni, including Edward Albee, receiving multiple awards (Fulbright official page, 2025).

[29] The Fields Medal and the Abel Award are two of the most prestigious honors in mathematics. The Fields Medal, often referred to as the "Nobel of Mathematics," is awarded every four years to early-career mathematicians for exceptional contributions to the field. The Abel Award, established by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, recognizes outstanding achievements in mathematics. A total of 8 Fulbright alumni have received one or both of these prestigious awards, with notable recipients including John Willard Milnor, Jean-Pierre Serre, Michael Atiyah, and Terence Tao (Fulbright official page, 2025).

a rigorous year-long process, but their research topics, ranging from climate change and environmental resilience to migration**,** gender studies, and race and ethnicity, were reportedly seen as politically sensitive, leading to their rejection. The board expressed concern that these actions violated the programme's founding principles, undermining its integrity and the independence of its selection process. In addition, the board raised alarms over proposed budget cuts to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which could severely limit the programme's ability to support future academic exchanges. The resignation highlighted broader concerns about the influence of political agendas on educational diplomacy, an issue that poses challenges to the long-standing mission of the Fulbright Programme (Wong, 2025).

Chapter 4: Political and Structural Challenges to Transatlantic Educational Soft Power

4.1. Brexit and the Reconfiguration of Transatlantic Academic Links

The previous chapters examined how educational programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, the Jean Monnet Programme and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme have contributed to strengthening transatlantic cooperation and promoting the European Union's soft power through higher education. However, the institutional and political context within which these initiatives operate has undergone significant changes in recent years. Among these developments, Brexit represents one of the most consequential political events affecting the landscape of European and transatlantic academic relations. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union has not only reshaped EU–UK relations but has also had broader implications for academic mobility, institutional cooperation and the structure of transatlantic educational networks.

Throughout the history of the United Kingdom's relationship with Europe, the former has often been labelled an "awkward partner» because of the long-standing scepticism held in Britain towards European integration, which has roots partly due to the geographical location of the UK and in large measure due to its historical and political identity with regions outside of Europe. There has developed a specific tradition in the United Kingdom of Euroskepticism[30], a strain in which the UK is positioned in such a way as if the process of European unification prevents it from being a major force in world politics, this was a sentiment that led to Brexit (Daddow, 2013, Oliver, 2015, Oliver, 2016). This is all part of a wider picture of political fragmentation of the nation along lines described in the intro. This resulted in the 2016 referendum vote for the United Kingdom to leave the EU, the process lasted years and culminated with Britain's actual departure in 2021, long after the referendum result in 2016 (Hobolt, 2016, Inglehart and Norris, 2016, Marginson, 2017).

These dynamics formed part of the broader political and societal context that culminated in the 2016 referendum, in which a majority of voters supported the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. The formal process of Brexit unfolded over several years and involved complex negotiations and political transitions within the British government, following the referendum decision in 2016 and culminating in the United Kingdom's official withdrawal from the European Union at the beginning of 2021 (Hobolt, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Marginson, 2017).

Following the referendum, debates about the potential consequences of Brexit quickly intensified, with scholars and policymakers exploring different possible scenarios for managing the transition and redefining the United Kingdom's relationship with European institutions (Petersen & Puliga, 2017). Early analyses suggested that Brexit

[30] Euroskepticism, European political doctrine that advocates disengagement from the European Union (EU). Political parties that espouse a Euroskeptic viewpoint tend to be broadly populist and generally support tighter immigration controls in addition to the dismantling or streamlining of the EU bureaucratic structure (Britannica,2026).

would likely generate a range of challenges for multiple sectors, including higher education, research cooperation and student mobility. At the same time, the immediate post-referendum period was characterised by significant uncertainty regarding the future institutional arrangements governing academic collaboration between the United Kingdom and the European Union (Marginson, Papatsiba & Xu, 2020). Because membership in the European Union involves deep integration across economic, diplomatic, social and educational dimensions, Brexit required the United Kingdom to restructure its external relationships not only with the European Union but also with partners such as the United States and other global actors (Hobolt, 2016; Kunz, 2020; Mayhew, 2017).

In response to the changing political environment, the United Kingdom introduced a number of policy initiatives aimed at maintaining its attractiveness to international students and highly skilled researchers. These included new immigration pathways such as the Global Talent visa, designed to facilitate the recruitment of highly qualified individuals in research and innovation sectors [31](Torjesen, 2020). Nevertheless, these measures have been interpreted by some scholars as partial attempts to compensate for the loss of the EU's freedom of movement framework, which had previously facilitated relatively frictionless academic mobility between the United Kingdom and EU member states. New restrictions on mobility between the United Kingdom and the European Union have complicated institutional cooperation in higher education, particularly in areas requiring the movement of students, researchers and administrative staff between universities (Hobolt, 2016; Marginson, 2017).

Britain has also had consequences for how academic collaboration worked in Europe before Brexit. Because it is no longer in the European Union, the United Kingdom can no longer use the Erasmus+ programme to apply for funding, form new partnerships or extend existing ones (European Commission, 2021). These arrangements previously had supported thousands of university and HEI partnerships as well as providing funding, support and infrastructure to many students and academics who wanted to visit other European countries for study or research and whose ability to achieve these ambitions may have become more difficult as a result (European Commission, 2020, Mayhew, 2017).

Furthermore, these developments have implications beyond Europe. Because several universities in the United States participate in Erasmus+ as partner institutions, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the programme also indirectly affects certain transatlantic academic collaborations involving EU, UK and US universities (European Commission, 2020; Marginson, 2017; Mayhew, 2017). Consequently, Brexit has introduced new barriers to the operation of higher education partnerships and mobility networks that previously linked institutions across the United Kingdom, the European Union and the United States. For this reason, Brexit can be understood not only as a major political and institutional transformation within Europe, but also as a

[31] The Global Talent visa is a UK immigration route designed to attract highly skilled individuals in fields such as science, engineering, humanities and research, requiring endorsement by recognised bodies (e.g. the British Academy, Royal Society or UKRI) and offering flexible conditions, including no requirement for employer sponsorship and an accelerated pathway to settlement (UK Home Office, *Global Talent visa overview*, British Academy guidance, 2026).

development with wider implications for transatlantic academic cooperation and educational diplomacy.

Within this broader context, the development of new educational mobility initiatives such as the Turing Scheme, introduced by the United Kingdom after leaving the Erasmus+ programme, reflects attempts to redefine international academic engagement in the post-Brexit era. The emergence of this programme illustrates how educational policy has become intertwined with wider political debates about sovereignty, international cooperation and the future orientation of the United Kingdom within global academic networks.

Another important dimension that affected the writing of the Turing Scheme was the long period of uncertainty that existed following the vote. Immediately after the 2016 referendum, there was a lengthy discussion about the UK's role in Erasmus, a valued aspect of UK higher education. Scholars report that "uncertainty around international mobility became a primary issue of concern" in the immediate period after the referendum vote (Allen, 2018, p. 4) "for UK universities recruiting international students, recruiting staff from abroad and the ability of UK students to go on exchange programmes" (Mayhew, 2022, p. 5). This uncertainty was not merely institutional but also reflected broader anxieties within academic communities regarding the future direction of international collaboration.

During this transitional period, political actors repeatedly emphasised the importance of maintaining international exchange opportunities, even in the absence of continued participation in Erasmus+. For instance, early parliamentary discussions highlighted the recognition of Erasmus+ as a valuable instrument for educational cooperation, while simultaneously framing its future as contingent upon broader negotiations with the European Union. As one government representative noted at the time, participation in Erasmus+ would ultimately depend on post-exit arrangements, while reaffirming the importance of sustaining international educational engagement in the long term (Hansard, 2016)[32]. This dual approach, acknowledging the value of Erasmus+ while preparing for alternative arrangements, illustrates the transitional logic that shaped early post-referendum policy discussions.

The decision to withdraw from Erasmus+ was also influenced by practical and financial considerations, particularly in relation to uncertainties surrounding the 2021–2027 programme cycle and the costs associated with continued participation. At the same time, it reflected a deeper shift in the underlying rationale of international student mobility. The Erasmus programme had long been associated with broader political and civic objectives, including the promotion of European identity and the strengthening of a shared European consciousness through intercultural exchange (Papatsiba, 2005). In contrast, the post-Brexit approach signalled a move toward a more nationally oriented

[32] Hansard is the official record of parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom, providing publicly accessible transcripts of discussions in both Houses of Parliament. It is widely used as a primary source for analysing policy development and political discourse, including debates on Brexit, international student mobility and the establishment of the Turing Scheme (UK Parliament, Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 30 December 2020, Vol. 686, Col. 649).

framework, in which mobility is increasingly aligned with domestic priorities and global strategic positioning.

In this sense, the introduction of the Turing Scheme can be read as part of a much broader ideological and political reorientation. Brexit has been described as a pivotal moment in the redefinition of British identity and international orientation, comparable in its structural significance to earlier periods of major reform in higher education (Beech, 2019). Seen against this background, the concept of "Global Britain" takes on particular importance, as it expresses the ambition to redefine the United Kingdom's place in the world while loosening the strong European emphasis that had previously shaped much of its international outlook (Saunders, 2020). The Turing Scheme is explicitly aligned with this vision, as one of its stated objectives is to support a more globally oriented approach to international engagement (Turing Scheme, 2023).

This development should also be understood in relation to the wider language of sovereignty and national autonomy that became so prominent during the Brexit period. In particular, it reflects the logic of the "take back control" narrative that characterised the referendum campaign (Islentyeva & Abdel Kafi, 2021). Within this framework, the European Union is at times constructed as a constraint on national ambition, while Brexit is presented as an opportunity to redefine the United Kingdom's global role (Daddow, 2019). From this perspective, it becomes easier to understand why the Turing Scheme was not promoted simply as a practical replacement for Erasmus+, but rather as a programme with its own political meaning and strategic purpose.

Indeed, political discourse surrounding the introduction of the Turing Scheme frequently emphasised its global scope as a key advantage. Rather than being tied mainly to European mobility, the programme was presented as opening up a wider map of opportunities for students and institutions alike. As highlighted in parliamentary debate, the shift away from Erasmus+ was framed as an opportunity to move beyond a "narrow European focus" and adopt a more global perspective on educational exchange (Hansard, 2020). In this way, the Turing Scheme was portrayed as more flexible, more outward-looking, and better suited to the post-Brexit vision of the United Kingdom's international role.

At the same time, it is important to note that, despite political divisions surrounding Brexit, there has been a relatively consistent recognition across the political spectrum of the value of international student mobility. Parliamentary discussions indicate a broad consensus regarding the importance of enabling students to study abroad, regardless of the specific institutional framework through which this is achieved (Hansard, 2020). This point matters, because it shows that the debate was not about whether international mobility should continue, but rather about the political and institutional form it should take. Although the mechanisms of mobility have changed, the broader belief in its contribution to skills development, employability and international engagement has remained largely in place

In this context, Brexit can be understood as a significant turning point in the configuration of transatlantic educational soft power. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union has altered not only the institutional frameworks underpinning academic cooperation, but also the strategic orientation through which

international education is conceptualised and implemented. The transition from Erasmus+ to the Turing Scheme reflects a broader shift from a model grounded in regional integration and shared European identity toward a more nationally driven and globally oriented approach. Recent policy developments confirm that the Turing Scheme continues to operate as the United Kingdom's primary mobility instrument, funded by the government and enabling education providers across sectors to support study and work placements worldwide (UK Government, 2026).

However, this model also reveals important structural differences when compared to Erasmus+, particularly in its emphasis on outbound mobility and institution-led funding mechanisms, which reshape the nature of academic exchange and limit reciprocity. While the scheme demonstrates the continued importance of international student mobility as a policy priority, it also highlights how mobility is increasingly embedded within national strategies, geopolitical repositioning and evolving foreign-policy priorities. As a result, educational cooperation between the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States is no longer structured within a single integrated framework but instead operates within a more fragmented and strategically reoriented landscape. These developments underline both the adaptability and the constraints of higher education as a tool of soft power, suggesting that its effectiveness depends not only on institutional programmes but also on the broader political and strategic environment within which they are embedded.

Despite this, recent developments suggest that this fragmentation may not be entirely permanent. According to a European Commission press release (15 April 2026)[33], the European Union and the United Kingdom have taken a decisive step towards the UK's association with the Erasmus+ programme as of 2027. This development is expected to place UK students, academic staff and institutions on an equal footing with those in EU Member States and other associated countries, thereby restoring opportunities for large-scale academic mobility and exchange. More broadly, it signals a renewed emphasis on people-to-people connections and the strategic value of educational cooperation within the EU–UK relationship (European Commission, 2026). While this development may indicate a shift away from the post-Brexit "Global Britain" approach of the Turing Scheme and towards renewed participation in European frameworks, it remains uncertain at the time of writing whether this change will be fully implemented in practice. As such, EU–UK educational cooperation continues to evolve, reflecting both earlier policy choices and the potential for renewed alignment.

4.2. Populism, Nationalism and Shifting Foreign-Policy Priorities

In recent years, the rise of populism and nationalism has significantly reshaped the political environment within which international higher education operates. These developments have introduced new forms of uncertainty and have influenced both policy priorities and institutional practices. Research suggests that increasing political

[33] European Commission (2026), *The UK and Erasmus+*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/the-uk-and-erasmus

instability and constraints on academic freedom may encourage students to pursue education abroad, thereby affecting patterns of international student mobility (Demirci, 2023). At the same time, broader geopolitical developments have contributed to a gradual shift in how mobility is conceptualised, moving away from a model centred on openness and cooperation towards one increasingly shaped by migration management and national strategic interests.

Contemporary scholarship conceptualises populism as a "thin-centred" ideology, primarily defined by its core characteristics of anti-elitism and anti-pluralism (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Rather than constituting a fully developed ideological system, populism typically operates in conjunction with broader "thick" ideologies such as nationalism, socialism or religious frameworks, which shape its specific political manifestations. This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of populism across different political and geographical contexts, highlighting both its common features and its variability (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). Within the field of international relations, populism has attracted increasing scholarly attention due to its potential implications for foreign policy and global governance. While earlier interpretations associated populist leadership with unpredictability and disengagement from multilateral institutions, more recent analyses suggest a more complex picture, whereby populist governments tend to reinforce existing trends rather than fundamentally alter foreign policy orientations (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

A key feature of populist approaches to international engagement is the emphasis on sovereignty and the prioritisation of immediate national interests. This orientation is often accompanied by scepticism towards international institutions, which may be perceived as distant and technocratic structures disconnected from the "will of the people" (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). At the same time, populist leadership tends to favour more centralised and personalised forms of decision-making, reducing the role of institutionalised processes and multilateral coordination mechanisms. Nevertheless, populist governments do not adopt uniform foreign policy positions. Their external behaviour is shaped by the interaction between populism and broader ideological and structural factors, often leading to a reconfiguration—rather than a withdrawal—of international engagement, including efforts to diversify partnerships and redefine strategic priorities (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

These changes do not exclusively affect foreign policy; they also have significant implications for intergovernmental cooperation on issues such as higher education. International student mobility, academic research collaborations, and university-wide education partnerships all exist within specific political and institutional contexts and are therefore susceptible to the influence of government structures, foreign policy direction, and domestic political climates. The recent rise of populism has not ended such cooperation; it has merely reframed or reimagined the environment in which it now operates.

Higher education itself constitutes a central instrument of soft power, through which states seek to project a positive international image and influence global perceptions. Academic exchanges, scholarship programmes and research cooperation have

historically been embedded within broader strategies of cultural diplomacy, particularly in the transatlantic context (Higgott & Malbasic, 2008; Parmar, 2008). Importantly, higher education does not operate independently from its broader political environment, but is closely intertwined with the dynamics of international relations. Changes in geopolitical priorities and foreign policy orientations are often reflected in the structure and functioning of academic cooperation, shaping mobility patterns, institutional partnerships and knowledge exchange (Higgott & Malbasic, 2008). While educational cooperation played a strategic role during the Cold War as part of efforts to "win hearts and minds", its relevance as a soft power tool remains significant in the contemporary era, albeit within a more complex and increasingly contested geopolitical environment (Higgott & Malbasic, 2008; Parmar, 2008).

At the same time, education policies are increasingly subject to politicisation, especially during periods of economic and institutional crisis. In Europe, higher education policy reforms have been driven by major political divisions, for example, as the region has split between pro-Europeanism and Euroscepticism regarding how states should respond to the global financial crisis and austerity programmes. (Asderaki, 2021). These developments highlight how higher education can function as a field of political contestation, where competing ideological agendas shape policy choices and reform trajectories. The emergence of new political cleavages, particularly along pro- versus anti-European lines, has contributed to the restructuring of higher education governance and reinforced the link between domestic political priorities and education policy outcomes (Asderaki, 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

In this sense, higher education reforms can be understood as embedded within broader political transformations, including the rise of populist and Eurosceptic movements across Europe. Such developments demonstrate that shifts in political discourse and governance models may directly influence the organisation of academic systems and their capacity to participate in international cooperation and mobility frameworks (Asderaki, 2021; Zeitlin et al., 2019). As a result, international higher education—particularly within the transatlantic space—operates within an increasingly complex environment shaped by the interaction between soft power strategiσes, geopolitical developments and evolving domestic political dynamics.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of higher education as a tool of soft power in transatlantic relations has been thoroughly examined, with particular focus on how EU educational initiatives can serve as instruments of soft power. Higher education has therefore been considered not only as a public policy area or a field of international cooperation, but as a strategic sector through which values and norms are generated. In a global environment increasingly characterised by competition, interdependence, and political instability, educational cooperation has become one of the most significant non-coercive channels through which international actors seek to enhance their credibility and extend their influence. Among these actors are the EU and the USA.

The central argument of this study is that higher education remains as an essential instrument of transatlantic soft power, but its effectiveness relies on stable institutional frameworks and geopolitical developments. This is significant in the field of education, as influence is not directly political but is instead forged through academic training, mobility programmes, research collaborations, and strong institutional links. While knowledge is exchanged, these processes shape perceptions and may provide a path for future leaders or intellectuals to rise within societies and, in time, offer support for transatlantic ideals. Moreover, the study concludes that the power of education is conditional; it is a strong resource, but not automatic. Education may bring influence through various factors, depending to some extent on political transparency and openness, the quality and prestige of its institutions, and whether the promoting actor is recognised for possessing these characteristics, all of which contribute to the legitimacy of its offer.

The transatlantic space therefore serves as a useful case study for this. Europe's academic co-operation with the U.S. was important for rebuilding trust after the Cold War, promoting democracy, and strengthening alliances. In the post-war period, educational exchange became a crucial mechanism for achieving these aims. Among the most successful examples is the Fulbright Program. Established in 1946 following the signing of the Fulbright Act by President Harry S. Truman on 1 August 1946, this programme represented the institutionalisation of the idea that academic exchange could lead to peace and is still associated with academic elites. Subsequently, the European side developed its own means of academic influence, including Erasmus in 1987, the Bologna Process in 1998–1999, the Jean Monnet Programme in 1989, and Erasmus Mundus in 2004.

Today, this role has not disappeared but operates through more complex and differentiated institutional mechanisms. In higher education, scholarship programmes, joint degrees, research consortia, and exchanges have been successfully integrated. All these findings lead to the central research question. It is therefore demonstrated that the most important mechanisms through which influence is projected are mobility, institutional anchoring, curriculum development, and joint teaching and research. The EU has developed three programmes for these: the Jean Monnet Programme, Erasmus

Mundus, and the Fulbright-Schuman Programme. Each represents a different but complementary way of exerting influence.

The Jean Monnet Programme, it is a clear example of how the European Union seeks to promote knowledge of European integration beyond its borders. Launched in 1989 and extended worldwide in 2001, it has provided a structured means of integrating EU-related teaching and research in universities globally. Between 2001 and 2023, 146 Jean Monnet actions were implemented in US institutions, representing just over 3% of the 5,884 actions recorded worldwide, a relatively small number. However, the composition of these actions is highly significant: 37 Centres of Excellence, 33 Chairs, and 33 Projects, compared to only 14 Units and 9 European Units. This demonstrates that the EU's approach to the US was not based on short-term visibility but on establishing resilient academic foundations.

A closer examination of geographical distribution reinforces this logic. Of the 146 actions, 89 focused on the East Coast, compared to 45 in Central America and 12 on the West Coast. The leading states were Florida, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts. The Jean Monnet Programme thus appears to serve as an instrument of educational diplomacy: small-scale but strategically designed to shape dialogue, promote recognition of the EU, and establish European Studies in influential academic environments.

Erasmus Mundus takes a different approach. Adopted by the European Commission in 2003 and launched the following year, Erasmus Mundus has served as a programme aimed at attracting talent and prestige to the European education sector by providing fully funded joint master's courses. Participants must be admitted to, and spend part of their degree at, at least two European universities. Over time, its funding has increased significantly. Its budget increased from €430 million for 2004–2008 to almost €1 billion for 2021–2027. By 2023, it had involved institutions from 140 countries and included participation from 108 non-associated countries in 378 joint master's programmes. More than 34,000 scholarship holders from 179 countries have participated, creating over 111,000 mobility stays. These figures demonstrate not only the wide geographical reach but also the capacity to create long-term academic and cultural networks extending far beyond the EU.

Furthermore, Erasmus Mundus best illustrates how learning mobility can shape perceptions. The research findings reported in this thesis show that 78% of participants report improved intercultural competences, 69% improved career prospects, and 66% personal development, while 62% develop more positive attitudes towards Europe and the European Union. More than 90% express strong overall satisfaction. Outside the EU, for example in North America, graduates often report a stronger identification with values associated with Europe, such as democracy and Western values. This directly relates to the second working hypothesis of the paper.

The transatlantic dimension of Erasmus Mundus, though more limited, remains significant. Between 2014 and 2017, around 200 American students received Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, according for about 3.5% of all scholarships. From 2021 to 2024, 264 US students benefited from the programme, while 154 US institutions

participated as associated partners in 96 joint master's degree programmes. US universities have taken part in more than 300 Erasmus Mundus projects in total. Although no US institution acts as a full coordinator, this ongoing participation reflects a substantial and structured transatlantic engagement with European higher education.

It is therefore understandable that Erasmus remains one of the most important and successful initiatives of the European Union. Recent developments regarding its future framework indicate that the next programme period will be incorporated into the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period after 2027[34], which will define the EU's long-term budgetary priorities. In this context, the European Commission has proposed a new Erasmus+ programme for the 2028–2034 period, with a budget of €40.8 billion and a merger with the European Solidarity Corps, positioning it as a key instrument for building the "Union of Skills"[35] and advancing the European Education Area. However, as this remains a legislative proposal, its final adoption and implementation are still pending.[36]

The Fulbright-Schuman Programme operates at the intersection of academia and policy. While the broader Fulbright Programme dates to 1946, the Fulbright-Schuman Programme arosed from discussions in 1990 and was formally launched as a pilot in the 1991–1992 academic year with an initial budget of $130,000. Administered by the Fulbright Commission in Brussels and jointly financed by the U.S. Department of State and the European Commission, it has become a specialised instrument for advancing EU–U.S. policy-oriented academic exchange. By 2020, it had supported more than 400 study and research projects, while the Innovation Grants introduced in 2016 attract approximately 120 applications annually. Unlike Erasmus Mundus or Jean Monnet, Fulbright-Schuman is particularly valuable because it targets individuals working on EU governance, NATO, transatlantic security, regulatory cooperation, and related policy areas.

The programme contributes not only to academic understanding but also to the formation of transatlantic policy communities. More broadly, the Fulbright tradition demonstrates the long-term multiplier effect of exchange diplomacy. The alumni network associated with the programme includes 62 Nobel Prize winners, 93 Pulitzer Prize recipients, 82 MacArthur Fellows, and several Fields Medal and Abel Prize laureates. These figures show how educational exchange can translate into influence through leadership development and elite networking.

[34] European Commission (2025), *The 2028–2034 EU budget for a stronger Europe (Multiannual Financial Framework).* The proposed MFF, amounting to nearly €2 trillion (1.26% of EU GNI), is designed to provide a long-term investment framework supporting the EU's strategic objectives, including economic prosperity, security, and global competitiveness.

[35] European Commission (2025), *Union of Skills: Investing in people for a competitive European Union*. The initiative seeks to enhance education, training and lifelong learning in order to address skills shortages and strengthen EU competitiveness. It aims to improve both basic and advanced skills, support continuous upskilling, facilitate labour mobility, and attract talent, while responding to structural challenges such as low literacy levels, underperformance in core skills among young people, and difficulties faced by businesses in recruiting qualified workers.

[36] Council of the European Union. (2025). *Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Erasmus+ programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/817 and (EU) 2021/888: Progress report*.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Europe has relied most heavily on institutionalised, long-term, and rules-based instruments of educational influence. Jean Monnet works through the embedding of EU knowledge in strategically selected academic environments. Erasmus Mundus works through large-scale, high-quality mobility and participant socialisation. Fulbright-Schuman works through policy-oriented elite exchange. These instruments are strong precisely because they are structured, cumulative, and embedded in institutional frameworks. However, they are not immune to disruption. Their resilience depends on continued funding, institutional continuity, reciprocity, and a stable political environment. In this sense, the findings show that Europe has developed sophisticated and credible mechanisms for projecting influence via education, while these mechanisms remain vulnerable to fragmentation, politicisation, and broader geopolitical shifts.

In relation to the impact of recent political developments, including populism and Brexit, the evidence presented in this thesis strongly suggests that political developments have had a significant impact, not by eliminating educational soft power, but by complicating and reconfiguring it. Brexit has perhaps been the most vivid and striking example. Since the 2016 referendum and the United Kingdom's exit from the EU in 2021, one of Europe's academic centres of global connectivity has been cut off from its established cooperative ties to the European Union network. This affects not only the future of EU-UK academia, but also transatlantic networks, as it previously played a connecting role between Europe and American institutions.

A major consequence of Brexit for British higher education was that the UK's participation in the Erasmus+ programme ended after 2021. This was more than simply withdrawing from a scheme with an associated funding budget. Erasmus+ embodied a multilateral academic exchange system based on reciprocity, interdependence, and a sense of shared cultural and European identity. The Turing Scheme has replaced Erasmus+. It reflects the "Global Britain" approach, which prioritises outbound travel rather than the multilateral exchange arrangement institutionalised in Erasmus+. This indicates a shift from Europeanisation to more nationally focused policies. The Turing Scheme demonstrates that the UK still regards international mobility as important; however, the shift to a national programme indicates that mobility is now integrated into a national strategy rather than being maintained through shared EU arrangements. The impact extends beyond Europe. As universities in the U.S. also participated in Erasmus+ schemes with both the EU and the UK, this change has disrupted existing trilateral exchanges, adding complexity and obstacles to future collaboration and partnerships.

The advent of Brexit has been the most dramatic result, but it also reflects the outcome of a growing number of populist and nationalistic movements over the past ten years in the EU and North America. Populism has increased, accompanied by rhetoric about sovereignty, the nation state, and distrust of multilateralism. Under these pressures, commitment to free academic exchange, openness to students from diverse backgrounds, and the promotion of international dialogue and cultural understanding have been eroded, becoming less important or reinterpreted through the lens of immigration, state strategy, or economic utility, if not outright hostility. Educational

cooperation has not disappeared but has been reshaped and reoriented towards national strategic goals, making higher education a more political domain for nation states.

These findings are also highly relevant to the question of whether recent developments constitute a transformation or an educational decline; the thesis contends that they represent a transformation rather than a straightforward decline. Soft power remains firmly rooted in higher education, and initiatives such as the Erasmus Mundus programme, Jean Monnet activities, and the Fulbright-Schuman programme continue to operate, attract participants, foster connections, and influence public opinion. Therefore, it cannot be said that the political influence of soft power through education has disappeared, as it clearly persists. Rather, the landscape of higher education is changing, transatlantic higher education no longer embodies the shared optimism, the degree of institutional cooperation, or the stability of norms and ideas that characterised previous decades.

Instead, educational soft power currently operates within a fragmented, competitive, and contested context. Globalisation has increased academic competition, while structural inequalities continue to dominate the landscape. According to Altbach's centre-periphery theory, the global higher education system remains hierarchical, with Anglo-American powers continuing to dictate standards of excellence, control global publication structures, attract vast talent, and claim significant funding. As a result, institutions such as Harvard, MIT, and Oxford remain centres of academic power.

At the same time, the European Union established a form of Europeanisation by strengthening internal cooperation and visibility within Europe through the Bologna Process, the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the establishment of a network of European universities, and the launch of a European Degree Package. This approach remains incomplete, as national systems are still sufficiently independent of central authorities in Europe, and Europe continues to present a fragmented image.

In this context, a reconfiguration of educational soft power is examined. Firstly, the prevailing assumption of open communication will probably give way to a more deliberate and ultimately more selective educational engagement strategy. Secondly, students moving between countries will soon be chosen not out of a universalist faith in the benign power of international cooperation, but based on considerations of geography, strategic talent, and national interests. Thirdly, the attractiveness of university education will become increasingly dependent on political circumstances. Lastly, soft power will no longer exist within the context of the transatlantic cultural alliance that supported it for so many decades. Instead, there will be a more diffuse and argumentative framework in which nations will either compete or cooperate with one another, unite in some instances, and fragment in others. Thus, it has not become irrelevant; it has entered a new era of international relations.

The working hypotheses of the thesis can be addressed by the findings presented here. Higher education appears to be best understood as soft power, not through individual programmes but as a more integrated whole, involving a package of different programmes such as those focused on mobility, teaching and training, or cooperation

and partnership-building, along with others broadly concerned with sharing knowledge between the host university and its foreign peers.

Additionally, evidence from the study highlights the importance of the transatlantic region's political and institutional framework for the reach and effectiveness of European educational soft power. Europe and the US share common values and a similar institutional environment, which seem to enhance Europe's soft power appeal.

The analysis further suggests that while recent events such as Brexit and the rise of populism have altered the extent and nature of educational partnerships, they have not diminished their relevance; they have simply changed them within a more fractured global and competitive international environment.

Nonetheless, there are certain limitations to this dissertation. Firstly, its focus has been limited to the EU–U.S. Transatlantic region. This means that the findings cannot be automatically generalised to other regions, as specific political conditions, systems of higher education, and relevant public institutions are likely to vary from country to country and region to region. Secondly, it should be noted that the research has been largely qualitative, leaning towards policy analysis by incorporating conceptual debate with empirical programme analysis. While this approach may allow for a thorough examination of the topic, claims regarding a range of factors – including long-term impacts such as changing attitudes among graduates and the influence these alumni have in their own societies – are based mainly on programmes' readily available reports and survey data, rather than fully comparable longitudinal data sets. Finally, evidence has been mixed across the various instruments studied. For example, with greater statistical and analytical rigour, there is more readily available and comprehensive material on the Jean Monnet programme, making it easier to find extensive reports than for other programmes mentioned here. These weaknesses do not invalidate the broader arguments presented in this dissertation; however, they highlight areas that warrant greater attention in future research.

Future research could include non-Western examples, assessing the educational soft power of actors such as China, the post-Brexit United Kingdom, and emerging regional players.

In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated that higher education remains a credible form of soft power. Although it requires time and does not create spectacles or offer immediate gratification, it is effective in building knowledge, trust, reputation, and legitimate relationships. Through programmes such as Jean Monnet, Erasmus Mundus, and Fulbright-Schuman, both the European Union and the United States have fostered alliances, shaped minds, and promoted goodwill through the education sector. However, as evidence shows, educational soft power does not operate automatically, nor is it invulnerable. It depends on political stability, legitimate governance, and the maintenance of open academic standards and credible outcomes. In this new era, characterised by fragmentation, great power competition, and conflicting narratives, EU-US cooperation on education must ensure reciprocity, trust, and openness. In this

context, recent EU policy priorities, as reflected in the State of the Union Address[37], emphasise competitiveness, skills development, and a more globally engaged Europe, highlighting the importance of education as a supporting pillar of the Union's external action and long-term influence. Along with moves towards simplification and consolidation of programmes, such as the proposed merger of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, this appears to indicate the future direction of EU education and related external relations activities.

[37] European Commission (2025), *State of the Union Address*, priorities on competitiveness, skills and global engagement.

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