

# Knowledge Diplomacy Seminar – Knowledge Diplomacy and Crisis

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## 1. Introduction

The online Knowledge Diplomacy Seminar series is a collaboration between the Goethe Institut, British Council (France and Germany), University of London (London and Paris) and is supported by ICR Research, Queen Mary University of London and NEXTEUK project. This Knowledge Diplomacy and Cities Series is composed of online discussions and forms the second phase of the University of London's exploration of the 'knowledge diplomacy' concept. The aim of the overall series is to bring together leading experts for an exchange of ideas that will contribute to the approach of the University of London to its future work on knowledge diplomacy and international agenda.

While the focus of the Knowledge Diplomacy series in 2022 is specifically dedicated to three European cities (London, Paris and Berlin); due to the urgency of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the series diverted its geographical and subject focus to general crisis situations. This third online seminar of 2022 took place on 25 May 2022 and explored the roles of international higher education institutions and research during times of crisis. The event provided a platform for an interdisciplinary panel of experts from academia, diplomacy, and other sectors to discuss the implications for the creation, exchange and sharing of knowledge in crisis situations, specifically in the context of the war in Ukraine.

## 2. List of speakers and format of the event

Chaired by **Professor Mary Stiasny** (Pro-Vice Chancellor of International, Learning and Teaching, University of London), the panel included presentations and interventions from **Jérémy Lachal** (Executive Director of Libraries Without Borders), **Sjur Bergan** (Former Head of the Council of Europe's Education Department), **John Douglass** (Senior Research Fellow and Research Professor - Public Policy and Higher Education at the Center for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE), University of California - Berkeley), and **Minh-Hà Pham** (Counsellor for Science and Technology at the French Embassy in the UK). The webinar was one and a half hours long. Each presenter was given 10 to 15 minutes to present, followed by questions from the Chair, and then the session concluded.

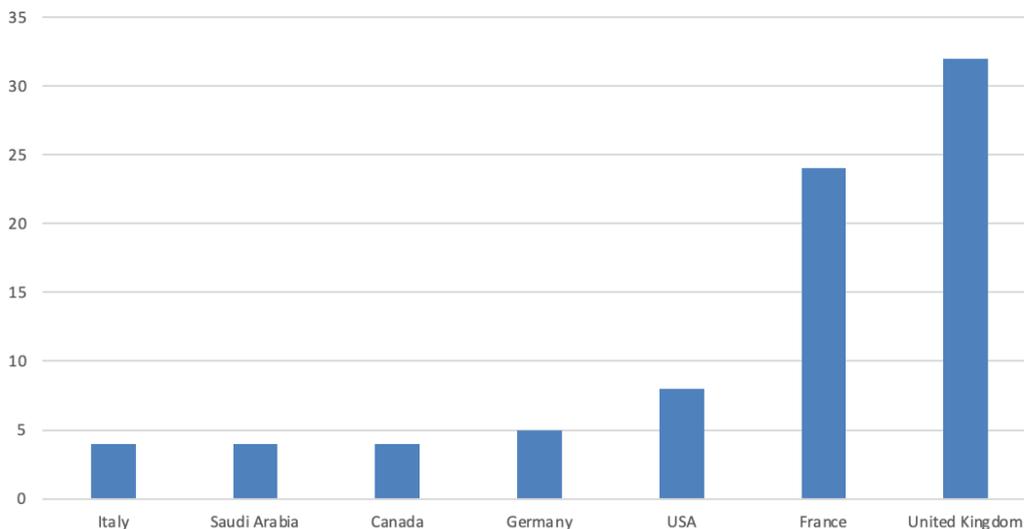
## 3. Registration and attendance

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The event received 120 registrations via Eventbrite ticketing service. Overall, the registrants were from Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Canada, China, Colombia, Congo, Croatia, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritius, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Saudi Arabia, Philippines, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, and United States of America. The top 7 countries of registrations were: the United Kingdom (32), France (24), United States of America (8), Germany (5), Canada (4), Italy (4), and Saudi Arabia (4).

### Top 7 Countries of Attendees



The online session was hosted on Zoom webinar platform and was attended by 52 unique viewers<sup>2</sup>. The maximum concurrent views of attendees were 33 attendees<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4. Panellists' presentations

The online seminar began with a short introduction by the Chair, **Mary Stiasny**, who highlighted ones of the definitions of knowledge diplomacy as “an orchestra of collaborative and negotiation processes that aim to establish consensual knowledge on various issues through formal and/or informal understanding between policy-makers and a network of professionals with recognised expertise in a particular field.”<sup>4</sup>

**Jérémy Lachal** delivered the first presentation. The panellist began by explaining the objectives of his organisation, Libraries Without Borders (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières), and its work and tools. While the organisation's activity does not officially place itself in the academic sector, it continues to provide crucial knowledge exchange services to people in vulnerable situations, specifically during times of crisis. The organisation focuses on two

<sup>2</sup> Users that used their computers to attend the webinar. The figure does not count the panellists or attendees that attended by phone.

<sup>3</sup> The maximum number of attendees at a given moment during the online seminar. The figure excludes the panellists.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/05/knowledge-diplomacy-and-the-futures-of-global-cooperation/>

primary factors when dealing with crisis situations: information security and learning societies. People in crisis situations lack access and ability to use information, thus the organisation developed an 'information security' concept to be used in humanitarian operations. For example, there appears to be a scarcity of credible information and access to this information during the Ukrainian crisis. The second principle of 'learning societies' is focused on enabling people to continue studying throughout their lives or implementing life-long learning programmes. Libraries Without Borders continue to provide digital literacy training in Colombia; the organisation is also in the process of developing long-term life-long learning programmes for those affected by the conflict in Ukraine. Libraries Without Borders has also developed mobile technologies to help implement programmes in crisis-affected areas, specifically along the Ukrainian border with Poland, Moldova, and Romania.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding collaboration with academic institutions and higher education sectors, the speaker highlighted recent projects in Burundi, stating that:

*“More broadly, at Libraries Without Borders, each time we work with this kind of population, we try to connect with higher education institutions for two kinds of things: first, to increase our social impact; then to build more knowledge.[...] For us – higher education bodies are always good partners (in order) to make more impact, to reach more people; and they are also good sources of knowledge and support to build better actions [...].”*

The next speaker, **Sjur Bergan** focused on knowledge diplomacy and crises in the context of the situation in Ukraine from the perspective of an international governmental organisation. The speaker addressed the subject of knowledge diplomacy definitions using Jane Knight's work. Reflecting on Knight's research, the speaker emphasised that a “key characteristic of knowledge diplomacy is collaborative knowledge production that both strengthens relations between countries and addresses global issues.” Knowledge diplomacy, according to the speaker, is more than soft power and academic exchange; it is also more than cultural interchange because it focuses on innovation, research, and intellectual progress. Unlike science diplomacy, knowledge diplomacy encompasses all academic disciplines rather than focusing exclusively on hard science.

The speaker raised significant issues, such as whether values are an essential component of knowledge diplomacy. Should we pursue knowledge diplomacy in order to uphold certain core values? When fundamental values appear to be at odds, should knowledge diplomacy be pursued? The panellist discussed the basic assumptions of knowledge diplomacy, such that knowledge is a public good, that access to it is desired, that cooperation is beneficial, and that the international nature of higher education and research is desirable. The panellist provided some answers to these questions by reflecting on European higher education and its fundamental values – defined in the European Higher Education Area as academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education. **Bergan** also asked the question:

*“How do we deal with systems and institutions that cannot be characterised by great commitment to one or more fundamental values?”*

The speaker emphasised the unprecedented nature of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Fortunately, the European higher education community has reacted strongly and expressed aspirations to aid Ukraine in the short and long term. The key difficulty, though, is to rebuild

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<sup>5</sup> To learn more about the work of Libraries Without Borders in response to the conflict in Ukraine, please watch the following video from the organisation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gISIFw1J3w&t=3s>

without hastening the brain drain from Ukraine. On the other hand, how should Russia and its intellectual community be treated? While it is widely acknowledged that people who oppose the current invasion should be assisted in fleeing, the extent to which those who support the conflict<sup>6</sup> or even those who seek to remain 'neutral' should be assisted remains a major question. Furthermore, accepting the assistance offered may cause problems and put the higher education staff and students in danger.

The speaker stressed that while Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe, the question remains: when and what happens if Russia comes back to knowledge diplomacy and international cooperation? The panellist stated that:

*"We need to cooperate, probably, even when conditions are difficult, but there are occasions when cooperation is impossible and the war in Ukraine and relation to Russia illustrates that point."*

The third speaker, **John Aubrey Douglass**, concurred with the previous panellist on many points. Reflecting on his recent book on *Neo-Nationalism and Universities*, **Douglass** outlined the concept of a political determinist viewpoint, that the national political environment influences greatly the vitality and robustness, or lack thereof, of knowledge diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> The speaker stated that:

*"The political environment that the universities operate in is as significant as any other environment."*

The statement can apply to a number of countries, including Turkey, Hong Kong, Hungary, and Russia, where illiberal and autocratic-leaning leaders and governments have sought to suppress civil liberties and acquire greater management control of universities. In Russia, there have been numerous dismissals of university rectors in the past three years, with security services now influencing admissions and faculty hiring, advancement, and termination. This trend worsened after the Ukrainian crisis. The speaker also noted that the Western approach of offering short-term but important temporary positions to those academics who are fleeing autocratic nation-states is not a coherent strategy due to its limited impact on the state of academic freedom and knowledge sharing in the academic's home nation.

Finally, in terms of the external environment, universities may be considered as epicentres for various forms of opposition in some circumstances. In such cases, the speaker stressed the value of knowledge diplomacy in supporting persons in crisis situations. But he also noted that knowledge diplomacy is not politically neutral – all forms of diplomacy reflect the interests of the nation-state. This is important for unpacking the motives of nations and universities, and the range of options they have for promoting knowledge diplomacy.

The final speaker, **Minh-Hà Pham**, focused on the science diplomacy element of knowledge diplomacy and stated that:

*"Science diplomacy ensures the dialogue continuity between the scientific community. It consists of fostering and facilitating the collaboration between research and university partners in two or different countries."*

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<sup>6</sup> Please see the following news item on the statement from the Russian Union of Rectors:

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220306120204111>

<sup>7</sup> Please see the news item on the panellist's latest edited book publication titled *Neo-nationalism in Universities* <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/10/01/interview-john-aubrey-douglass-neo-nationalism-and-universities-populists-autocrats>

Science diplomacy has seen several noteworthy changes. The French diplomatic network, for example, has science and technology councillors all around the world. Even in the absence of a crisis, there is significant collaboration among scholars, which is supported by a bottom-up link that feeds into the institution and then higher-level agreements. Regarding the Ukraine crisis, the speaker emphasised the UK's Researchers at Risk initiative, the British government's £3 million investment, and the Universities UK creation of a legislative framework to support professors in times of crisis. France has also helped to establish the Solidarité Ukraine hardship fund. The situation with Russia and its scientific community, on the other hand, is more difficult. Despite these challenges, the United Kingdom prefers to work with universities on an individual basis and strives to maintain partnerships with them.

Overall, the speaker emphasised that student mobility is a particularly vulnerable aspect of science diplomacy as it is highly susceptible to crises. The panellist also underlined that many forms of crises exist, such as Brexit, and that while she was positive about the situation, she also remarked that:

*“For us, it’s important to see that the British universities still claim that they are truly European universities; and on the European side there is a campaign which is called ‘Stick to Science’ for keeping the UK and Switzerland in Horizon Europe.”*

## 5. Discussion between the Chair and the panellists

**The Chair** discussed the four presentations and concluded that knowledge diplomacy as a whole is dependent on existing structures. However, if those structures change, as they undoubtedly will, does that imply the entire process must be restarted from the beginning, or is there anything constant that knowledge diplomacy can rely on? **Jérémy Lachal** reflected on his organisation's strategy in Bangladesh and responded that knowledge diplomacy appears to be temporary, it is changing with circumstances and situations that require adapted responses. **Sjur Bergan**, on the other hand, argued that the development of European education helps to strengthen long-term components of knowledge diplomacy and that civil society participation is crucial in this respect. Knowledge diplomacy processes have boundaries, according to **John Douglass**, but the politics of policymaking and self-interests involved may block the altruistic and public good elements of knowledge diplomacy. The challenge remains: how can one bypass the current systems? Despite the changes that this cooperation is subjected to, **Minh-Hà Pham** emphasised her trust in cross-border collaboration among scientists. The facilitation of intellectual interaction, whether online or in person, is a critical component of this collaboration.

The panel was questioned by **the Chair** about the perceived neutrality of knowledge diplomacy. Knowledge diplomacy, according to **John Douglass**, will always be based on some type of political goal. In times of crisis, **Sjur Bergan** responded, that it may not be useful to pursue specific knowledge development and sharing, as it may prove to be more destructive than beneficial. It's a good idea to look at a matter from various perspectives. The multi-angle approach does not mean absolute neutrality. For example, the respondent stated that while it is important to understand what led to the Holocaust, the Holocaust can never be accepted as legitimate. We, therefore, need to distinguish between understanding and acceptance. **Minh-Hà Pham** responded to the question by emphasising that there is a balance between collaboration and competition, but that the focus needs to divert to understanding the impact of new geopolitics on new collaboration, citing the interrelations between China and the United States, as well as Brexit and Ukraine as examples. The panellist emphasised that alliances between countries are shifting. Finally, knowledge diplomacy, according to **Jérémy Lachal**, cannot be impartial because people navigate how different knowledge is conveyed.

## **6. Summary, key action points/recommendations**

The four speakers' presentations, as well as the discussion with the Chair, yielded important implications for understanding knowledge diplomacy. First, there is ample opportunity for study on the role of universities in promoting international relations, especially during crisis situations.

The current situation in Ukraine was the emphasis of the interventions to a certain extent, however, crises can take many other shapes and forms. As the instance of Ukraine demonstrates, international higher education institutions may play an essential role in strengthening individual support for those affected by crises. They provide mobility and security to researchers, students, and academics in general. Knowledge diplomacy continues to operate even in the most challenging of circumstances. However, due to ethical and political issues, there are some cases where collaboration with institutions is not feasible.

Positioning knowledge diplomacy as a long-term process is problematic. Recent events have raised the question of whether knowledge diplomacy is a temporary process that will need to be renewed if significant changes occur within the domestic and international political environments. Despite this, there are structures and processes in place that allow stakeholders in knowledge diplomacy to operate on a long-term basis.