



Bridging Asia and Africa: Indonesia's Kemitraan Negara Berkembang Scholarship and Educational Diplomacy for SDG 4

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Indonesia's Developing Countries Partnership Scholarship (KNB) as an instrument of educational diplomacy and soft power in strengthening educational cooperation with partner countries, particularly Pakistan and Malawi, while supporting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education. Using a qualitative approach, this study combines documentary research, thematic analysis, media content analysis, and bibliometric mapping to analyze official policy documents, academic literature, and public media narratives related to the implementation of the KNB Scholarship. The findings indicate that the KNB Scholarship not only functions as a financial aid program but also promotes access to education, South-South solidarity, intercultural understanding, and long-term educational cooperation, thereby strengthening Indonesia's image as a development partner through non-coercive engagement. By strengthening academic collaboration and institutional partnerships with developing countries while supporting SDG 4 through expanded access to quality higher education, this program also supports the internationalization of Indonesian higher education. The program's effectiveness also depends on adequate institutional support, including language assistance, academic adaptation, inter-institutional coordination, and systematic program evaluation. Overall, the findings suggest that the KNB Scholarship is not merely a scholarship program but also a strategic instrument of educational diplomacy that advances Indonesia's soft power and strengthens sustainable educational cooperation. By integrating soft power, the internationalization of higher education, and a human capital perspective into a single analytical framework, this study contributes to the literature on educational diplomacy. It provides policy insights to improve institutional support mechanisms. For future research, it is recommended to examine the long-term outcomes of the KNB Scholarship by conducting alumni tracking and comparative analyses involving more partner countries.

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■ INTRODUCTION

The advent of globalization has led to an augmentation in the role of educational diplomacy within a nation's soft power strategy. Education is currently regarded not only as an instrument of internal development, but also as a means of strengthening international relations. Education is regarded as a means of enhancing individual capacity and a medium for diplomacy and strategic soft power. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, scholarship programs have emerged as a pivotal domain for cross-regional educational diplomacy. In this regard, developing countries,

such as Indonesia, are strategically endeavoring to establish themselves on par with other dominant global powers in this arena (Dorigné-Thomson, 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of education as a strategic instrument of international diplomacy, equitable access to higher education remains a challenge in many developing countries. According to World Bank data reported by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Pakistan had a tertiary gross enrollment ratio (GER) of approximately 11% in 2024. In contrast, Malawi's tertiary GER reached only 3% in 2022 (World Bank, n.d.).

These figures suggest that international scholarship programs may play an important role in expanding educational opportunities and strengthening human capital development. In response to these challenges, many countries have incorporated international scholarship programs into their educational diplomacy strategies. According to UNESCO (2021) and the World Bank (2022), the quality of education is a fundamental aspect for the realization of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. This growing recognition has encouraged governments to integrate scholarship programs into broader development cooperation and foreign policy agendas. Several countries have adopted this approach by integrating scholarship programs into their educational diplomacy strategies. For example, China has strengthened its educational influence through the China Scholarship Council, while India has promoted South-South cooperation through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program (King, 2020; Li & Yang, 2021). This trend is consistent with Nye's (2021) concept of soft power, which argues that education, cultural values, and development assistance can enhance a country's international influence through attraction rather than coercion.

As part of its foreign policy strategy, Indonesia, which has adopted a South-South diplomacy approach, has been implementing the Developing Countries Partnership Program (KNB) since 1992. KNB is designed to provide academic opportunities for students from developing countries and as a medium to strengthen Indonesia's diplomatic network with Asia, Africa, and Latin America. According to data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Rena, 2023), the number of KNB recipients continues to increase. Pakistan is one of the largest recipients in South Asia, while Malawi is an important representative of Africa. KNB aligns with the principle of *South-South Cooperation*, which aims to strengthen solidarity among developing countries in the field of development. This program also has strong relevance to SDG 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, while supporting SDG 17 on global partnerships for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021). In line with Altbach & Knight (2021), international scholarships are not only academic instruments but also strategies for university internationalization and a means of state diplomacy. Thus, KNB can be understood as a medium for Indonesia to strengthen its soft power network, build a positive image, and

support the SDGs.

To understand these dynamics, the KNB program can be analyzed through the framework of *soft power theory* (Nye, 2004, 2021), *internationalization of higher education* (Altbach & Knight, 2021; Knight, 2013), and *human capital theory* (Becker, 2017). First, soft power theory emphasizes that a country's power comes not only from its military and economic capabilities, but also from its cultural appeal, values, and education system. KNB is a strategic instrument for Indonesia to project its image as a moderate, democratic country committed to global development. Second, the theory of internationalization of education explains how Indonesian universities have become part of a global network, with international students serving as agents of cultural and knowledge exchange (Altbach & Knight, 2021; Knight, 2013). Simultaneously, Becker's (2017) *human capital* theory is also used to explain education as a long-term investment, whereby the KNB Scholarship is intended to equip recipients from Pakistan and Malawi with knowledge and competencies while also supporting Indonesia's educational cooperation in their home countries, while simultaneously reinforcing Indonesia's educational cooperation with partner countries (Bloom et al., 2020).

In an empirical context, educational challenges in Pakistan are still marked by low participation rates in higher education, gender inequality, and curriculum quality issues that fail to meet the job market's needs (World Bank, 2022). Conversely, Malawi faces constraints in its educational infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and limited access for students from marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2021). The existence of international scholarship programs from friendly countries is an important means of overcoming these gaps. Dorigné-Thomson's (2023) research indicates that Indonesia is beginning to establish itself as a significant actor on the African continent by leveraging education as a diplomatic instrument. However, research on the effectiveness of KNB remains relatively rare, especially studies that highlight its specific contribution to achieving SDG 4 in partner countries.

Previous studies have examined the role of scholarships as a component of soft power strategies. King (2020) emphasizes the use of education as a tool to expand China and India's influence in Africa, while Li & Yang (2021) discuss the role of Chinese scholarships in African human resource development and the strengthening of Beijing's political position in the region. Conversely, Rahman's (2021) study

examines the experiences of international students in Indonesia, highlighting significant academic benefits despite the challenges of cultural adaptation. Altbach and Knight (2021) emphasize that the internationalization of education has the potential to enrich universities in donor countries and function as a medium for the exchange of values and the strengthening of diplomacy. The following visual depiction illustrates the centrality of these interconnected themes within the scholarly discourse, as evidenced by keyword co-occurrence analysis.

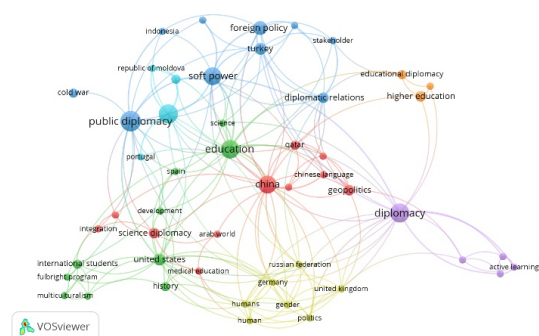


Figure 1. Network visualization

Figure 1 presents a VOSviewer co-occurrence network derived from a bibliometric analysis of the literature on educational diplomacy and soft power. The visualization reveals six distinct thematic clusters, each representing a coherent line of research. The blue cluster focuses on public diplomacy and soft power, integrating case studies of specific countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, and the Republic of Moldova. The green cluster groups together education, science, diplomacy, and the United States, along with terms such as international students, the Fulbright Program, and multiculturalism. This reflects the tradition of scholarship as diplomacy. The red cluster, which is predominantly composed of China, establishes connections among Mandarin, Qatar, the Arab world, and medical education. This observation underscores the growing body of scholarship that examines the expanding reach of Chinese education. The yellow cluster captures the geopolitical context (Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom), while the orange sub-network links higher education and educational diplomacy as an emerging conceptual node. The purple cluster isolates diplomacy from active learning, thereby revealing an emerging pedagogical dimension. The node size indicates the frequency of keyword occurrence, and the line thickness signifies the strength of co-occurrence

relationships. Collectively, these elements serve to map the intellectual architecture of the field. These thematic clusters also provide a conceptual foundation for analyzing the Indonesian KNB Scholarship, particularly in understanding its role as an instrument of educational diplomacy, soft power, and the internationalization of higher education.

The bibliometric findings depicted in Figure 1 demonstrate that the predominant themes emerging in the extant literature are closely aligned with the analytical framework used in this study. The concepts of "education," "science diplomacy," "international students," and "the Fulbright Program" collectively represent the evolution of scholarship programs as pivotal instruments of educational diplomacy across diverse international contexts. This pattern is pertinent to the present study in two ways. The KNB Scholarship can be regarded as a form of Indonesia's educational diplomacy, as it provides access to higher education for students from developing countries. Concurrently, the correlation between public diplomacy, soft power, and Indonesia signifies that education is regarded as a conduit for enhancing a nation's image and influence. In the context of this study, this cluster serves as the foundation for analyzing how Indonesia uses the KNB Scholarship as an instrument of soft power to strengthen relations with partner countries such as Pakistan and Malawi. Moreover, the correlation between higher education and educational diplomacy suggests that the internationalization of higher education is a crucial component of educational diplomacy. This cluster serves as a foundation for examining the KNB's contribution to the internationalization of Indonesian higher education institutions as well as the achievement of SDG 4 through increased access to higher education for students from developing countries.

A substantial body of research has previously examined international scholarship programs and educational diplomacy from the perspectives of public diplomacy, national image, and international student mobility. However, these studies have largely confined their analysis to a single specific perspective. In contrast to previous studies, this research integrates theories of soft power, the internationalization of higher education, and human capital into a unified analytical framework. This integration provides a comprehensive explanation of the Developing Countries Partnership Scholarship (KNB)'s contribution to educational diplomacy and to the achievement of SDG 4. Methodologically, this study combines bibliometric mapping,

document analysis, and media content analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive evaluation of educational diplomacy from both conceptual and implementation perspectives. Empirically, the present study focuses on Pakistan and Malawi as two partner countries representing the Asian and African regions, respectively, to provide a comparative analysis of the implementation and contributions of the KNB Scholarship. The temporal overlap analysis of keyword trends, presented below, indicates that themes such as educational diplomacy, geopolitics, and higher education are among the most rapidly emerging research topics in recent times, reinforcing the timeliness and relevance of this investigation. It is hypothesized that this study will offer theoretical and empirical contributions by providing a more integrated understanding of the role of the Developing Countries Partnership Scholarship (KNB) as an instrument of soft power and educational diplomacy, as well as its contribution to the internationalization of higher education, human capital development, and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

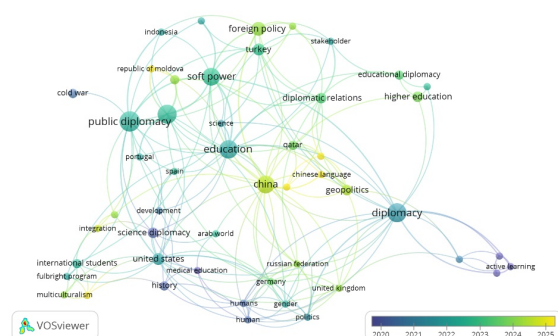


Figure 2. Overlay visualization

Figure 2 presents an overlay visualization of the co-occurrence network for the aforementioned keywords. In this figure, the node colors encode the average publication year of documents associated with each keyword. The colors range from dark blue (~2020) to yellow (~2024–2025). This temporal mapping reveals key evolutionary trajectories in this field. Earlier foundational concepts, such as medical education, history, and the humanities, indicated in dark blue, suggest that these concepts dominated the literature around 2020–2021. The medium green color indicates core nodes such as public diplomacy, soft power, education, science diplomacy, and international students, suggesting that these themes remained active and sustained as research topics throughout 2021–2023. It is noteworthy that the brightest yellow nodes,

including China, Mandarin, geopolitics, Qatar, higher education, and educational diplomacy, reflect a recent surge in scholarly attention (2023–2025), signaling a shift toward more geopolitically and institutionally nuanced analyses of educational diplomacy. This temporal trend suggests that educational diplomacy, higher education, and geopolitics have become increasingly prominent themes in current scholarly studies, underscoring a growing academic interest in understanding education as an instrument of international engagement.

These findings suggest that educational diplomacy, higher education, and geopolitics have become increasingly prominent themes in academic research in recent years. This trend underscores the importance of research that can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of scholarship programs as instruments of educational diplomacy. In light of the research gaps and emerging trends that have been identified, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do KNB Scholarships function as instruments of educational diplomacy and Indonesia's soft power in strengthening relations with partner countries, particularly Pakistan and Malawi?
2. How do KNB Scholarships contribute to the internationalization of higher education and human resource development in support of achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining *documentary research* and *media content analysis*. This design was chosen because the issues examined concern the meaning, discourse, and representation of educational diplomacy, which are contextual phenomena that require in-depth interpretation rather than numerical measurement. *Documentary research* focuses on analyzing official government documents, policy reports, and publications from international institutions to trace the objectives, implementation, and achievements of the Developing Country Partnership Scholarship/Kemitraan Negara Berkembang (KNB) within the framework of the SDGs (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2018). The document corpus was bounded by three inclusion criteria: (a) publication or issuance between 2015–2026; (b) issuing body limited to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Bappenas, and UNESCO; and (c) direct relevance to KNB

Scholarship policy, implementation, or SDG 4 reporting. Documents that did not meet these criteria, such as general higher-education policy papers unrelated to KNB, were excluded from the corpus. Meanwhile, *media content analysis* is used to study media narratives related to KNB in Pakistan and Malawi, given that the media is often an important arena in shaping public perception and the image of a policy (Krippendorff, 2019). Media and official-communication items were retrieved using the search terms “KNB Scholarship,” “Beasiswa KNB,” and “Indonesia scholarship Pakistan/Malawi” applied to the online archives of *Islamabad Post*, *Centreline*, and *DNA News Agency* (Pakistan) and *Malawi24*, *247Malawi News* (Malawi), supplemented by official announcements from the Indonesian Embassy in Islamabad, the Indonesian Embassy in Maputo, and the Honorary Consulate of Indonesia in Malawi, covering the retrieval period of 2020–2025. This process yielded a final corpus of 10 items after removing duplicates and items unrelated to KNB; three of these items report the same 2020 scholarship-cancellation announcement, as it was syndicated across separate outlets, and four originate from official diplomatic channels rather than independent editorial desks. This composition is discussed as a limitation immediately below. Through a combination of these methods, this study seeks to provide a holistic picture of KNB's role as an instrument of educational diplomacy and its contribution to human resource capacity building in partner countries.

Data Collection: Documentary and Media Sources

The data sources for this study are divided into three main categories. First, official documents from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, and the annual KNB Scholarship reports, which contain data on recipients, implementation policies, and program achievements. Additional documents include Indonesia's SDGs reports published by Bappenas and UNESCO reports related to SDG4 indicators. Second, media and official-communication sources from partner countries, namely *Islamabad Post*, *Centreline*, and *DNA News Agency* (Pakistan) and *Malawi24*, *247Malawi News*, and the Honorary Consulate of Indonesia in Malawi (Malawi), provide narratives on the impact and public perception of KNB, alongside diplomatic announcements from the Indonesian Embassies in Islamabad and Maputo. Third, the latest academic

literature (2020–2025) discusses the theories of soft power, educational diplomacy, the internationalization of education, and capacity building through education, as the basis for constructing the analytical framework of this study (Altbach & Knight, 2021; Dorigné-Thomson, 2023; F. Rahman, 2021).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, *content analysis* was used to examine how the Pakistani and Malawian media framed the KNB in the context of bilateral relations and educational development. This analysis identifies the frequency of issues, narrative patterns, and positive or critical representations of Indonesia (Krippendorff, 2019). Second, *thematic analysis* groups findings from documents, media, and literature into broad themes according to the theoretical framework. Nye's (Nye, 2021) *soft power* theory was used to analyze the KNB as an instrument of non-coercive diplomacy; Knight's (Knight, 2013) and Altbach's (Altbach & Knight, 2021) (2020) theories of education internationalization were used to understand the role of Indonesian universities in educational diplomacy, while Becker's (Becker, 2017) *human capital* theory helped interpret the contribution of KNB to human resource capacity building in Pakistan and Malawi.

Qualitative data reduction followed a three-step procedure: (1) open coding of documentary and media excerpts against the study's three theoretical lenses (soft power, internationalization, human capital); (2) axial grouping of codes into recurring sub-themes within each lens; and (3) selective integration of sub-themes into the final thematic narrative reported in the Result and Discussion section (Miles et al., 2020). Validity was addressed through source triangulation, in which findings drawn from official documents were cross-checked against independent media narratives and prior academic literature; where the three sources converged, the interpretation was treated as more robust, and where they diverged, the divergence itself was reported as a finding rather than resolved in favor of any single source. This study used a triangulated approach to analyze the data and produce valid, comprehensive, and critical findings.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The KNB Scholarship as an Instrument of Educational Diplomacy and Indonesian Soft Power

The Developing Country Partnership Scholarship/*Kemitraan Negara Berkembang* (KNB) is explicitly designed to serve as one of

Indonesia's primary instruments of educational diplomacy. An official statement from the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (2025) emphasizes that KNB serves as a "bridge for educational diplomacy," strengthening friendly relations between nations and supporting human resource development in developing countries. With participation from 46 countries across Asia, Africa, and South America, Indonesia positions the KNB Scholarship as a platform for educational cooperation within the Global South. This participation indicates that the KNB Scholarship is intended not only to provide financial support but also to facilitate knowledge exchange and long-term academic cooperation between Indonesian universities and partner countries. The continued participation of partner countries, including Pakistan and Malawi, suggests that the program remains attractive to developing countries. This pattern is consistent with Nye's concept of soft power, whereby educational opportunities may generate attraction and encourage continued educational engagement between Indonesia and partner countries. Taken together, these findings suggest that the KNB Scholarship serves as an instrument of educational diplomacy, promoting long-term educational partnerships through non-coercive engagement.

The thematic analysis of official documents, academic literature, and media content identified three dominant themes that

consistently characterize the implementation of the KNB Scholarship as an instrument of Indonesia's educational diplomacy. These themes emerged through source triangulation and reflect the recurring patterns identified across the three categories of data analyzed. To illustrate the relative thematic emphasis contributed by each data source, the findings are presented in the Sankey diagram shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 presents the relative thematic contributions of the three data sources to the themes identified through qualitative thematic analysis. Official documents showed the strongest thematic emphasis on Equality and Educational Access, reflecting the Indonesian government's policies and institutional reports' focus on expanding access to higher education, educational equity, and inclusive education. The academic literature placed the strongest emphasis on South-South Solidarity, highlighting educational diplomacy, partnerships, and cooperation among developing countries as central concepts in previous studies. Media content showed the strongest thematic emphasis on Equality and Educational Access, as reflected in the predominance of education diplomacy, scholarship promotion, scholarship administration, and public information framings identified in the analyzed corpus. Media sources also contributed to the Cultural Adaptation theme by illustrating intercultural

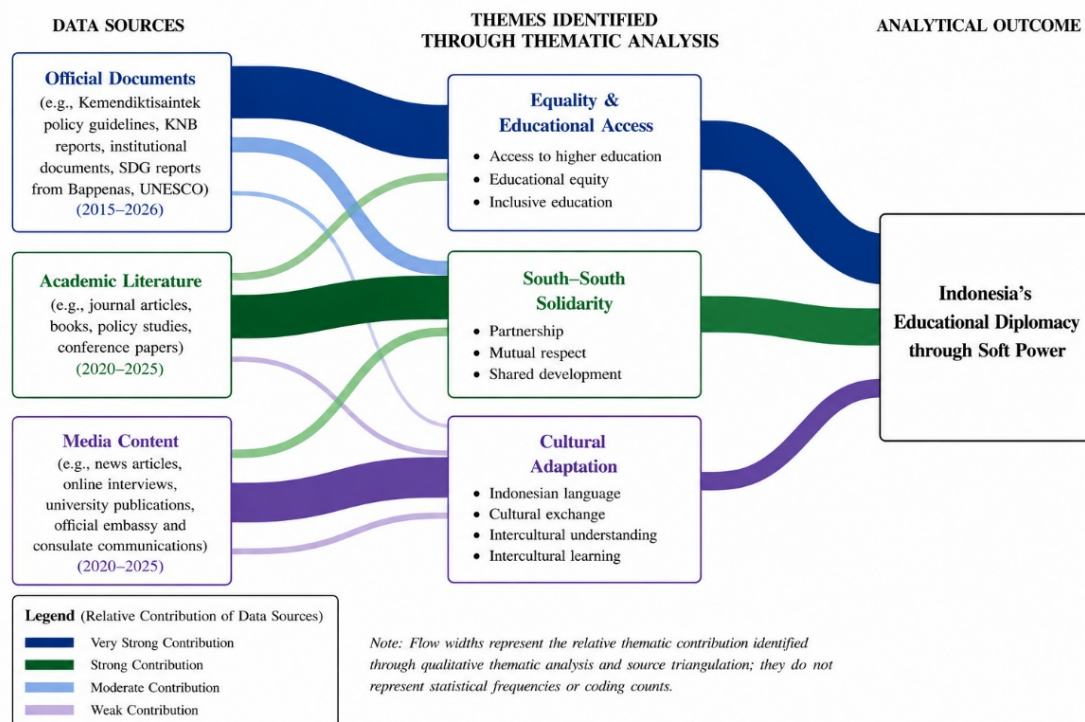


Figure 3. Sankey diagram illustrating the relative thematic contributions of data sources

learning, language adaptation, and students' educational experiences in Indonesia, although these aspects appeared less prominently than educational diplomacy.

The convergence of these three data sources indicates that the themes identified in this study do not originate from a single type of evidence but emerge through source triangulation across policy documents, academic literature, and media narratives. Although each source emphasizes different aspects of the KNB Scholarship, collectively they portray the program as an instrument that expands access to higher education, promotes South–South cooperation, and facilitates intercultural engagement. These findings, therefore, reflect the policy orientation and implementation of the KNB Scholarship as an instrument of Indonesia's educational diplomacy through soft power, rather than providing an empirical evaluation of its long-term impact on scholarship recipients.

The normative values identified above are also consistent with broader educational diplomacy practices in Asia. East Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and China have long utilized educational and training cooperation as part of their soft power and nation-branding strategies. This approach emphasizes the values of equality, mutual respect, and partnership among developing countries, which have been the primary foundation of Indonesia's foreign policy since the 1955 Asian-African Conference (Hosono, 2016). Thus, KNB can be understood as part of an Asian regional pattern that uses education to build a positive image, yet with a distinctive Indonesian character that emphasizes South-South solidarity and the principle of mutual respect, thereby distinguishing it from Western models of educational assistance. This perspective is consistent with the findings of Heryadi et al. (2024), who argue that the KNB functions as both an educational assistance initiative and a public diplomacy tool to enhance Indonesia's image among developing countries. Within these policy narratives, Indonesia is portrayed as a center for learning and development cooperation within the Global South.

The KNB Scholarship plays a significant role in promoting the cultural appeal and distinctive humanistic values of Asia and Africa. Cross-regional cooperation extends beyond trade and investment to include partnerships between communities fostered through education and cultural exchange. Through the KNB program, Indonesia enhances the academic capacity of students from African and South Asian countries while

also introducing social and cultural values such as tolerance, cooperation, and pluralism. These values reflect the ethos of Asian-African civilization, emphasizing solidarity, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence (Chaturvedi et al., 2020). Brilyanti (2021) observes that KNB participants regard cultural immersion, including the use of the Indonesian language, engagement with local customs, and appreciation of tolerance, as a central aspect of their experience. For participants from Muslim-majority countries, the program provides an opportunity to interact with a social and cultural environment that is familiar in its religious values yet distinct in its local traditions. These findings suggest that cultural interaction is not merely a supplementary element of scholarship programs but constitutes a significant source of Indonesia's soft power, as positive perceptions are cultivated through direct educational and cultural engagement.

A report from the Public Relations Office of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences at Gadjah Mada University (2025) explains that Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the KNB Scholarship is carried out through contextual learning activities run by the Indonesian Language and Culture Learning Service (INCULS). Students from countries like Pakistan and Malawi visited historical sites such as Borobudur and Prambanan to experience Indonesian culture, history, and social values directly. These activities help make language learning a means of building intercultural understanding and mutual respect. The experiences of KNB recipients also support this view. An interview published by the International Cooperation Office of Universitas Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya (2026) shows how scholarship recipients experience these values. Tariq Javaid, a KNB Scholarship recipient from Pakistan, said that Indonesia offers a supportive academic environment with friendly lecturers and a welcoming campus community. He shared that studying in Indonesia is not just about earning a degree, but also about learning about different cultures, making friends, and growing personally. These stories show that Indonesia's educational diplomacy is attractive for reasons beyond financial ones. Participants appreciate the supportive academic setting, chances for intercultural learning, and daily social interactions that shape their time in Indonesia. Overall, the findings show that KNB is more than a scholarship program. Academic support, cultural immersion, and daily interactions all help Indonesia's educational diplomacy by building trust, understanding, and long-term relationships with partner countries. This approach uses attraction, not force, to

build connections.

The KNB Scholarship contributes to the expansion of institutional and international academic networks. This is evident in the 2025 KNB Scholarship welcome program for recipients at Jakarta State University (UNJ), which included participants from 46 countries. Through this program, KNB serves as a form of educational diplomacy, facilitating collaboration among universities and strengthening international academic networks. UNJ Rector Prof. Komarudin stated that KNB students can act as “ambassadors of culture and knowledge who will bridge Indonesia’s friendly relations with the world.” The presence of students from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East also strengthens Indonesia’s position in international cooperation networks. This role will continue through the KNB alumni community in various countries (Syaifudin, 2025). Thus, activities such as this represent an early stage in the development of Indonesia’s soft power through educational diplomacy. By fostering sustained interaction among students, universities, and partner countries, the program creates opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy, expands opportunities for educational, social, and economic cooperation, and supports Indonesia’s role in multilateral engagement (Heryadi et al., 2024).

Beyond individual cultural experiences, official documents also emphasize the role expected of KNB alumni in sustaining

educational cooperation. The report on implementing KNB at Parahyangan Catholic University (2016) explains that this program “enhances cultural understanding and strengthens relations and cooperation between developing countries.” The experience of foreign students such as Nsikan Emmanuel Ekwere from Nigeria, who stated that he would become “an ambassador for Indonesia wherever he is,” illustrates how KNB alumni are portrayed as cultural ambassadors within official narratives. The program is intended to strengthen bilateral relations with partner countries such as Pakistan and Malawi. It has not only expanded into education but also into broader social and economic cooperation. KNB alums are described as potential connectors in this network, strengthening knowledge- and culture-based diplomacy that forms the foundation of Indonesia’s image on the global stage (Afolabi et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the KNB Scholarship functions not only as a scholarship program but also as a strategic instrument of Indonesia’s educational diplomacy and soft power. Through educational cooperation, cultural exchange, and people-to-people engagement, the program strengthens institutional trust and long-term partnerships with developing countries, particularly Pakistan and Malawi, illustrating how educational diplomacy operates as a form of soft power in Indonesia’s international engagement.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of media framing categories by target country

Framing Category	Pakistan (n = 6)	Malawi (n = 4)	Total (N = 10)
Education Diplomacy	3 (50%)	2 (50%)	5
Official/Diplomatic-Channel Framing ^a	2 (33%)	2 (50%)	4
Crisis Communication (COVID-19)	2 (33%)	0 (0%)	2
Alumni Success	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	2
Bilateral Cooperation	1 (17%)	1 (25%)	2
Soft Power	1 (17%)	1 (25%)	2
Scholarship Promotion	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	1
Scholarship Administration	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	1
Public Information	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	1
South–South Cooperation	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	1

Notes: Percentages are the share of each country’s items that carry the code (Pakistan, n = 6; Malawi, n = 4), and they sum to more than 100% because items can carry multiple codes. ^aCombines Embassy Communication, Official Public Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, and Official Promotion codes, all originating from government or diplomatic-mission sources rather than independent editorial judgment.

Media Framing of the KNB Scholarship in Pakistani and Malawian News Coverage

To complement the qualitative illustrations presented above, this subsection reports a systematic content analysis of the media and official communication corpus described in the Method section. The final corpus comprised 10 items published between 2020 and 2025: six items concerning Pakistan (*Islamabad Post*, *Centreline*, *DNA News Agency*, and the Indonesian Embassy in Islamabad) and four items concerning Malawi (*Malawi24*, *247Malawi News*, the Honorary Consulate of Indonesia in Malawi, and the Indonesian Embassy in Maputo). Each item was open-coded for its dominant framing(s) following the procedure described above; items could receive multiple codes. Three of the six Pakistan-related items report the same 2020 scholarship-cancellation announcement, syndicated across separate outlets, and four of the ten items overall originate from official

diplomatic channels rather than independent editorial desks. This composition is treated here as a boundary condition on the findings: outlets named in earlier drafts of this study, *The News International* and *Malawi Voice*, were not retrievable within the accessible archives at the time of coding and have been replaced below with the outlets actually retrieved; the resulting sample ($n = 10$) is reported transparently rather than as the originally projected 30 items.

Within this small corpus, Education Diplomacy is the most frequent code in both Pakistani and Malawian coverage, appearing in half of the items from each country. Framings originating from official or diplomatic channels form the second most frequent category overall, which is unsurprising given that four of the ten items are government or embassy statements rather than independently reported news; this pattern most plausibly reflects the composition of the accessible corpus rather than an independent editorial consensus, and should be

Table 2. Coded corpus of media and official-communication items, Pakistan and Malawi (2020–2025)

No.	Date	Target Country ^a	Outlet	Coded Framing
1	6 Apr 2020	Pakistan	Islamabad Post	Crisis Communication; Scholarship Administration
2	6 Apr 2020	Pakistan	Centreline	Crisis Communication; Public Information
3	2020	Pakistan	DNA News Agency	Embassy Communication; Education Diplomacy
4	2020–2021	Pakistan	Islamabad Post	Education Diplomacy; Bilateral Cooperation
5	2020–2021	Pakistan	Islamabad Post	Scholarship Promotion; Soft Power
6	2020–2025	Pakistan	Indonesian Embassy, Islamabad	Official Public Diplomacy; Education Diplomacy
7	9 Jul 2025	Malawi	Malawi24	Alumni Success; Bilateral Cooperation; Soft Power
8	2025	Malawi	247Malawi News	Alumni Success; Education Diplomacy
9	2025	Malawi	Honorary Consulate of Indonesia in Malawi	South–South Cooperation; Public Diplomacy
10	2025	Malawi	Indonesian Embassy, Maputo	Official Promotion; Education Diplomacy

Notes: ^aTarget country reflects the intended audience of the communication rather than the nationality of the issuing institution; item 10 is issued by an Indonesian diplomatic mission but concerns a Malawi-directed announcement.

read as a boundary condition rather than as evidence of uniform media agreement across outlets. Two country-specific patterns are nonetheless visible even at this small scale: Crisis Communication appears only in Pakistani coverage, tied to the 2020 pandemic-related cancellation of that year's intake, while Alumni Success and South-South Cooperation framings appear only in Malawian coverage, tied to the 2025 scholarship announcements. Given the small number of items per country, these patterns are reported descriptively and should not be generalized beyond the corpus analyzed here; a larger, more evenly distributed corpus, ideally including outlets such as *The News International*, is recommended for future research seeking a definitive cross-national comparison.

The KNB Scholarship as a Policy Instrument Supporting Higher Education Internationalization and SDG 4

KNB scholarships are an important instrument in strengthening the internationalization of higher education in Indonesia. Indonesian universities that accept KNB students from various developing countries are part of the global education network. Through this program, Indonesian higher education institutions not only enhance their international reputation and competitiveness but also contribute to the exchange of knowledge and culture, enriching the academic experience of both parties.

The Developing Country Partnership Scholarship/*Kemitraan Negara Berkembang (KNB)* is an important mechanism for promoting the internationalization of Indonesian higher education by actively engaging universities in global education networks. In line with the findings of Kayashima et al. (2017), internationalization in Southeast Asia is advancing through increased international student mobility, cross-border academic collaboration, and the formation of university networks as part of educational diplomacy strategies. In this context, international students receiving KNB Scholarships at various Indonesian universities reflect Indonesia's efforts to strengthen the internationalization of higher education by creating opportunities for research collaboration and cultural exchange. Internationalization is not only about academic mobility, but also about building trust networks and global recognition of national higher education quality (Sibawaihi et al., 2025).

The KNB Scholarship also provides opportunities for students from Pakistan and Malawi to access quality higher education in

Indonesia, which is often difficult to obtain in their home countries due to limited resources and educational infrastructure. Through this education, students are expected to acquire knowledge, academic competencies, and intercultural experience during their studies in Indonesia. The rise in KNB Scholarship recipients from Malawi reflects Indonesia's growing efforts to make quality higher education more accessible to students from African countries. Africa Brief (2025) reports that Malawi received 13 scholarships from Indonesia in 2024, the highest number given to Malawi in a single year. Still, having more scholarship recipients does not directly prove that human resource capacity has improved. The long-term outcomes of the program are expected to be reflected in graduates' skills, international experience, and subsequent contributions following their studies. However, evaluating these outcomes requires longitudinal alumni evidence that is beyond the scope of the present study.

Regarding the SDGs, official documents from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia (2025) show that the KNB Scholarship is designed to expand access to quality higher education and strengthen human resources as part of Indonesia's effort to achieve SDG 4 on Quality Education. Since 2006, the KNB Scholarship has supported 2,299 scholars and alumni from 107 countries through 47 partner universities, showing its wide reach in expanding educational access. Previous research by Gerale (2025), which draws on official reports, tracer studies, university evaluations, and alumni interviews, suggests that the KNB Scholarship helps build capacity and develop human resources in developing countries (Gerale, 2025). For example, Umar Bashir, a KNB Scholarship recipient from Pakistan, graduated with honors from the Faculty of Agriculture at Universitas Gadjah Mada (Misya, 2024). Umar Bashir's achievement is an individual example of academic success and should not be interpreted as indicative of the overall academic performance of KNB recipients, since aggregate academic performance data are not publicly available.

By providing learning opportunities for students from developing countries, the KNB Scholarship is designed to expand access to higher education while supporting Indonesia's educational diplomacy and its commitment to equitable knowledge sharing and sustainable development (Basnur, 2025). In the context of SDG 4, the program aligns to promote inclusive and equitable access to quality higher

education by offering scholarships to students from partner countries, including Pakistan and Malawi. Given the educational challenges these countries face, such as curriculum limitations, shortages of qualified teaching staff, and inadequate educational infrastructure (Asim et al., 2019; Mughal et al., 2021), the KNB Scholarship offers students opportunities to pursue higher education in Indonesia. However, the present study does not evaluate whether participation in the program leads to measurable improvements in national human resource capacity or education systems, as such outcomes require longitudinal alumni and tracer-study data, which are beyond the scope of this research.

In addition to its contribution to SDG 4, the KNB Scholarship's long-term impact is intended to be supported by developing an international alumni network that facilitates knowledge exchange and ongoing cooperation among developing countries. The KNB Scholarship aims not only to produce high-quality graduates from developing countries but also to support ongoing educational cooperation by establishing alumni networks that facilitate knowledge exchange and sustainable development in partner countries. Through their learning experiences in Indonesia, alumni are expected to develop a deeper understanding of Indonesian culture and social systems, which they then bring back to their home countries to strengthen bilateral relations. It is in line with the statement of one of the KNB scholarship recipients of the Master of Communication Science program at Atma Jaya Yogyakarta University, Afera Hassan, written in *Malawi Voice* (2025), where she stated that the opportunity to study in Indonesia was a life-changing experience and would be used to contribute to the development of her country. This statement reflects an individual perception and is presented as an illustrative example rather than as evidence of the program's overall impact. The experience of adapting to different cultural and academic environments may help participants develop broader perspectives and intercultural competencies. This knowledge has the potential to contribute to education systems, resource management, and public policy in partner countries such as Pakistan and Malawi, thereby supporting broader national development efforts. This statement suggests that participants perceive the program as providing opportunities for continued educational cooperation and people-to-people engagement. In response to global dynamics, this kind of cross-border educational cooperation can spur collaboration in economics and human

development, thereby creating opportunities for alumni to contribute to future cooperation and capacity development (Kayashima et al., 2017).

By equipping scholarship recipients with the knowledge, skills, and international networks needed to support sustainable development efforts in their home countries, the KNB program is designed as a long-term investment in human capital development. Through a sustainable alumni network, KNB is intended to facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity building, thereby supporting broader social and economic development objectives. Hutabarat & Damayanti (2022) state that Indonesia-Africa educational cooperation, including through scholarship programs, contributes to human resource development, facilitates knowledge transfer, and expands educational and economic collaboration among developing countries.

In addition, KNB alumni from various countries illustrate how interpersonal relationships formed during their studies have developed into cross-disciplinary cooperation. A KNB recipient from South Sudan, for example, stated that the KNB program not only provides academic benefits but also was perceived by the participant as serving as a bridge for bilateral diplomacy and people-to-people relations between Indonesia and KNB scholarship recipient partner countries, thereby expanding opportunities for educational and investment cooperation between the two countries (Gerales, 2025).

Although the Developing Countries Partnership Scholarship (KNB) is a strategic instrument of Indonesia's educational diplomacy, its implementation still faces several structural and operational challenges. Owen et al. (2020) identified limitations in university infrastructure, suboptimal coordination among government agencies, and a lack of language support and cultural adaptation as the main challenges. Although the program requires participants to take Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) courses before beginning their studies to facilitate language and cultural adjustment, recent findings indicate that international students in Indonesia still experience difficulties with listening comprehension, speaking anxiety, grammar proficiency, and reading academic texts. These challenges are not only linguistic but also encompass psychological and social dimensions that impact students' academic adjustment, highlighting the need for more comprehensive language support and inclusive academic services (Pratama et al., 2025). Furthermore, the lack of a comprehensive evaluation system

makes it difficult to measure the program's long-term contribution to human resource development. This situation highlights the gap between Indonesia's ambition to internationalize education and its institutional readiness to achieve it. Therefore, greater synergy among government agencies, universities, and other stakeholders is needed to strengthen academic support, cultural adaptation programs, and alumni engagement. This approach aligns with human capital theory, which emphasizes that educational investment requires a supportive ecosystem to generate sustainable development impacts (Brown, 2020). Consequently, the effectiveness of the KNB Scholarship as an instrument of educational diplomacy is likely to depend not only on expanding access to higher education but also on strengthening the institutional support system that enables scholarship recipients to contribute to human capital development and the achievement of SDG 4.

The present findings should therefore be interpreted within the scope of the available evidence. Because aggregate academic indicators and comprehensive tracer-study data for KNB recipients are not publicly available, this study focuses on analyzing policy documents, academic literature, and media narratives rather than measuring the program's long-term impact on alumni outcomes. Future studies that incorporate institutional data, aggregate academic indicators, and longitudinal alumni tracer studies would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the program's contribution to educational cooperation and human resource development.

Overall, the findings suggest that the KNB Scholarship is positioned as an instrument to support the internationalization of Indonesian higher education while promoting educational cooperation with developing countries. Across the official documents, academic literature, and media analyzed in this study, the program is consistently represented as expanding access to higher education, encouraging intercultural engagement, and strengthening educational partnerships. However, because aggregate academic performance data and tracer-study evidence are not publicly available, the present study does not evaluate the program's long-term impact on graduates' employment outcomes or on national human resource development.

■ CONCLUSION

This study highlights the KNB Scholarship's role as a key instrument in Indonesia's educational diplomacy and soft power strategy. The findings indicate that, by

promoting access to education, South-South solidarity, and intercultural understanding, the KNB Scholarship program is well positioned to strengthen educational cooperation with partner countries, particularly Pakistan and Malawi. The KNB Scholarship Program contributes to strengthening Indonesia's international image and fostering institutional trust and long-term educational partnerships through attraction rather than coercion.

Furthermore, this study shows that the KNB Scholarship supports the internationalization of Indonesian higher education by expanding learning opportunities for students from developing countries and aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on providing inclusive and quality education. However, this study does not evaluate the program's long-term impact on graduates' academic performance, alumni employment rates, or human resource capacity building in partner countries, as aggregate data on academic achievements and alumni tracer study results are not publicly available. Therefore, the findings of this study should be understood as an analysis of policy implementation and educational diplomacy practices, rather than as an empirical evaluation of the program's impact.

From a practical standpoint, this study shows that the effectiveness of the KNB Scholarship depends not only on the provision of scholarships but also on adequate institutional support, such as language assistance, academic adaptation, inter-institutional coordination, and ongoing program evaluation. Strengthening these aspects could improve program implementation while reinforcing the KNB Scholarship's role as an instrument of educational diplomacy and sustainable educational cooperation. For future research, it is recommended that the analysis be supplemented with institutional data, aggregate academic indicators, and longitudinal alumni tracer studies to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the KNB Scholarship program's long-term outcomes.

■ DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USAGE IN WRITING PROCESS

During the drafting and revision of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to help organize the discussion framework, develop discussion points, refine sentence structure, and edit academic language. DeepL was used to assist with translating and refining the English text, while Grammarly was used to check grammar, spelling, punctuation, and consistency in language use. After using these tools, the author conducted a thorough review,

verification, and revision of the entire manuscript to ensure accuracy, consistency with the research findings, and the article's originality. All scientific decisions, analyses, interpretations of results, and responsibility for the final content of the article rest entirely with the author.

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