

UNITWIN AS A PLATFORM OF ACADEMIC DIPLOMACY AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

UNITWIN KAK PLATFORMA AKADEMIK DIPLOMATIYI I MEJKULTURNOGO DIALOGA

UNITWIN AKADEMIK DIPLOMATIYA VA MADANIYATLARARO MULOQOT PLATFORMASI SIFATIDA

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Annotation. The article examines the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme as an instrument of academic diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding in the contemporary globalized world. The study aims to determine how the programme, established by UNESCO in 1992 as a mechanism of inter-university cooperation, has evolved into a channel of soft power that promotes mutual understanding, religious tolerance and a culture of peace through international academic collaboration.

The research employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology combining conceptual and documentary analysis. The theoretical framework integrates the concepts of soft power, the internationalization of higher education, intercultural sensitivity and peace research. The study also analyses UNESCO documents, the Bukhara Declaration on multi-faith dialogue and materials related to the UNESCO Chair in the Comparative Study of World Religions at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. Particular attention is given to the regional experience of Uzbekistan as an example of the practical implementation of academic diplomacy and interfaith cooperation.

The findings demonstrate that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme performs not only educational and scientific functions but also diplomatic and peacebuilding roles. UNESCO Chairs contribute to reducing cultural and religious stereotypes, strengthening interreligious dialogue, promoting global citizenship and fostering sustainable international partnerships. The article argues that universities and international academic networks can serve as non-state diplomatic actors capable of maintaining dialogue and cooperation even in periods of political tension.

The case of Uzbekistan illustrates how higher education institutions can support international peace and tolerance through comparative religious studies, intercultural

communication and participation in global UNESCO initiatives. The study concludes that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme represents an effective model of academic diplomacy that combines educational cooperation with the promotion of intercultural understanding, peaceful coexistence and international solidarity.

Keywords: academic diplomacy; soft power; intercultural dialogue; UNITWIN; UNESCO Chairs; religious tolerance; peace education; higher education internationalization; Uzbekistan.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается Программа UNITWIN/Кафедры ЮНЕСКО как инструмент академической дипломатии, межкультурного диалога и миростроительства в условиях современного глобализирующегося мира. Цель исследования заключается в определении того, каким образом программа, созданная ЮНЕСКО в 1992 году как механизм междууниверситетского сотрудничества, превратилась в канал «мягкой силы», способствующий взаимопониманию, религиозной толерантности и культуре мира посредством международного академического взаимодействия.

Исследование основано на качественной и интерпретативной методологии, сочетающей концептуальный и документальный анализ. Теоретическую основу составляют концепции мягкой силы, интернационализации высшего образования, межкультурной чувствительности и исследований мира. В статье также анализируются документы ЮНЕСКО, Бухарская декларация по межконфессиональному диалогу и материалы Кафедры ЮНЕСКО по сравнительному изучению мировых религий Международной исламской академии Узбекистана. Особое внимание уделяется опыту Узбекистана как примеру практической реализации академической дипломатии и межрелигиозного сотрудничества.

Результаты исследования показывают, что Программа UNITWIN/Кафедры ЮНЕСКО выполняет не только образовательные и научные функции, но и дипломатические и миротворческие задачи. Кафедры ЮНЕСКО способствуют снижению культурных и религиозных стереотипов, развитию межрелигиозного диалога, продвижению глобального гражданства и укреплению устойчивого международного сотрудничества. В статье делается вывод о том, что университеты и международные академические сети способны выступать важными субъектами миростроительства и межкультурного взаимопонимания в современном мире.

Ключевые слова: академическая дипломатия; мягкая сила; межкультурный диалог; UNITWIN; кафедры ЮНЕСКО; религиозная толерантность; мирное образование; Узбекистан.

Annotatsiya. Maqolada UNESCOning UNITWIN va UNESCO kafedralari dasturi zamonaviy globallashuv sharoitida akademik diplomatiya, madaniyatlararo muloqot hamda tinchlikni mustahkamlash vositasi sifatida tahlil

qilingan. *Tadqiqotning maqsadi 1992-yilda UNESCO tomonidan universitetlararo hamkorlik mexanizmi sifatida tashkil etilgan ushbu dastur qanday qilib diniy bag'rikenglik va tinchlik madaniyatini rivojlantiruvchi "yumshoq kuch" kanaliga aylanganini aniqlashdan iborat.*

Maqolada UNESCO hujjatlari, Buxoro deklaratsiyasi hamda O'zbekiston xalqaro islomshunoslik akademiyasidagi Dinshunoslik va jahon dinlarini qiyosiy o'rganish bo'yicha UNESCO kafedrası materiallari tahlil qilingan. Shuningdek, O'zbekiston tajribasi akademik diplomatiya va dinlararo hamkorlikning amaliy namunasi sifatida ko'rib chiqilgan.

Tadqiqot natijalari UNITWIN/UNESCO kafedralari dasturi nafaqat ta'lim va ilmiy faoliyat, balki diplomatik va tinchlikparvarlik vazifalarini ham bajarishini ko'rsatadi. UNESCO kafedralari dinlararo muloqotni rivojlantirish, global fuqarolikni targ'ib qilish hamda barqaror xalqaro hamkorlikni mustahkamlashga xizmat qiladi. Maqolada universitetlar va xalqaro akademik tarmoqlar zamonaviy dunyoda tinchlikni mustahkamlash hamda madaniyatlararo o'zaro tushunishni rivojlantirishning muhim subyektlari ekanligi haqida xulosa qilingan.

Kalit so'zlar: akademik diplomatiya; yumshoq kuch; madaniyatlararo muloqot; UNITWIN; YUNESKO kafedralari; diniy bag'rikenglik; tinchlik ta'limi; O'zbekiston.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has intensified the interaction between societies, cultures and knowledge systems, making dialogue across cultural boundaries a defining feature of contemporary international life. As economic, technological and migratory flows draw distant communities into closer contact, the capacity to understand and cooperate across difference has become as consequential as military or economic strength. In this context universities have acquired a role that extends well beyond teaching and research: they have become actors in international relations and cultural diplomacy, building partnerships that connect scholars and students across borders and sustaining channels of communication even where formal political relations are strained (Flomo-Kellen M., 2025).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has long held that lasting peace must be constructed in the minds of people through education, science and culture rather than through political arrangements alone. One of its principal instruments for realizing this conviction in higher education is the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme. Launched in 1992 to promote international inter-university cooperation, the programme has grown to encompass roughly 1,100 Chairs and around 50 networks across some 130 countries (UNESCO, 2025 <https://www.unesco.org/en/unitwin/about>).

The relevance of this theme has grown sharply in recent years. Rising geopolitical tension, the resurgence of identity-based conflict and the spread of online radicalization have made the cultural and educational dimensions of security increasingly visible. Where political diplomacy is interrupted by crisis, scholarly and educational ties frequently endure, providing one of the few stable bridges between estranged societies. At the same time, many states, including those of Central Asia, have begun to treat higher education explicitly as an instrument of national image and influence, investing in international partnerships, branch campuses and global rankings as expressions of openness to the world. The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme stands at the intersection of these trends, combining the universalist mission of UNESCO with the particular interests and capacities of participating states and institutions.

The problem addressed by this research is the gap between the common perception of the UNITWIN Programme as a purely academic cooperation scheme and its actual function as an instrument of diplomacy and peacebuilding. Much of the existing literature treats the programme descriptively, cataloguing Chairs and activities without theorizing their diplomatic significance, while the broader literature on soft power and knowledge diplomacy rarely examines UNESCO Chairs in detail or in non-Western settings. The aim of the study is therefore to determine how the programme operates as a mechanism of academic diplomacy that promotes intercultural and interreligious dialogue, mutual understanding and a culture of peace through international university partnerships. The article argues that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme serves not only as a framework for international academic cooperation but also as an effective instrument of soft power and intercultural dialogue, and it illustrates this argument with the regional experience of Uzbekistan.

To develop this argument the article proceeds in six analytical steps. It first sets out the theoretical foundations of academic diplomacy, drawing together the concepts of soft power, the internationalization of higher education, intercultural sensitivity and peace research. It then describes the goals and institutional framework of the UNITWIN Programme before analysing its function as a platform for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The fourth step considers the programme as a form of academic diplomacy enacted through university networks; the fifth examines the regional experience of Uzbekistan as a detailed case study; and the sixth addresses the principal challenges and future prospects facing the network. A short conclusion draws together the implications of the analysis.

METHODS

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach combining conceptual and documentary analysis. First, a conceptual analysis situates the UNITWIN Programme within four theoretical frameworks: the theory of soft power, the literature on the internationalization of higher education, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity and peace research. These frameworks were chosen because each illuminates a distinct facet of the phenomenon under study: soft power explains the strategic motivation of states, internationalization explains the institutional mechanism, intercultural sensitivity explains the individual-level outcome and peace research explains the ultimate social purpose.

Second, a documentary analysis examines primary materials, including UNESCO programme descriptions, the Bukhara Declaration on multi-faith dialogue and reports of activities conducted under the UNESCO Chair in the Comparative Study of World Religions at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. These documents were read closely to identify the stated aims of the programme, the activities through which it operates and the actors it brings together. Third, a regional case approach draws on recent scholarship concerning the internationalization of higher education and religious tolerance in Uzbekistan in order to ground the argument in a concrete national setting. The case of Uzbekistan was selected because it combines an active UNESCO Chair in a sensitive field, a recent national turn toward internationalization and a documented record of state-level engagement with interfaith diplomacy.

Sources were selected on the basis of relevance, authenticity and recency, with priority given to materials published within the last several years and to the official records of the institutions discussed. The analysis is necessarily interpretive rather than statistical: it seeks to explain how and why the programme functions as academic diplomacy rather than to measure its effects quantitatively. This limitation is acknowledged, and the conclusion accordingly frames its claims as analytical rather than causal. Where foundational theoretical works are older, they are used for their enduring conceptual contribution and are complemented by recent empirical and regional studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic diplomacy refers to the use of scholarly cooperation, exchange and institutional partnership to build understanding and trust between societies. It

belongs to the broader family of cultural and public diplomacy, in which states and non-state actors seek influence not through coercion but through attraction. The most influential articulation of this logic is Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, defined as the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than through force or payment (Nye, 2004: 5). Nye locates the sources of soft power in a country's culture, political values and policies, and he identifies universities and other institutions of civil society among its principal carriers. Higher education is therefore not incidental to soft power but one of its central instruments, generating the knowledge, relationships and reputation that make a society attractive to others. Recent studies of education diplomacy in Central Asia confirm that international student mobility and university cooperation are deliberately used by states to project influence (Ubaydullaeva D., 2024: 12).

Nye's distinction between hard and soft power is helpful but requires refinement when applied to multilateral institutions such as UNESCO. Soft power in the classic formulation belongs to a particular state and serves its national interest. The UNITWIN Programme, by contrast, generates a form of shared or institutional soft power that accrues partly to UNESCO as a global actor, partly to host states and partly to the participating universities themselves. A UNESCO Chair enhances the international standing of the institution that holds it, signals the openness of the country that hosts it and advances the universal values that UNESCO represents, all at the same time. This layering of interests is precisely what makes the programme diplomatically durable: because no single party monopolizes the benefits, cooperation can persist even when the bilateral relations of particular states deteriorate. The attractiveness of the programme thus rests on a convergence of national and universal motivations rather than on the unilateral projection of any one country's influence.

It is useful to distinguish academic diplomacy from the closely related notion of knowledge diplomacy. Whereas knowledge diplomacy emphasizes the role of research, innovation and higher education in addressing shared global problems and in development, academic diplomacy foregrounds the relational and communicative dimension: the building of trust, the management of perceptions and the maintenance of dialogue between societies. The two overlap substantially, and both stand in contrast to a narrowly instrumental view in which education is merely a commercial export or a vehicle for one-directional influence. The UNITWIN Programme is best understood as occupying the relational end of this spectrum, since its defining activities are cooperative

and reciprocal rather than transactional. Contemporary analyses of higher education in international relations stress precisely this capacity to transcend political and geographical divides and to foster cooperation among nations (Flomo-Kellen M., 2025: 1).

The mechanism by which universities exercise this influence is best understood through the literature on the internationalization of higher education. Jane Knight defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education (Knight J., 2004: 11). This definition is process-oriented, allowing internationalization to serve many rationales, from academic quality to cultural understanding. Hans de Wit and colleagues extend this framework by arguing that internationalization should be understood not as an end in itself but as a means to enhance the quality of education and research and to make a meaningful contribution to society (de Wit et al., 2015: 29). In the Uzbek context, the post-2016 reform of higher education has made internationalization an explicit national priority, though scholars note that institutions still require coherent independent strategies (Alimukhamedov U.R., 2020: 57).

If soft power explains why states value academic cooperation and internationalization explains how universities engage internationally, the human-level question of what such cooperation accomplishes is addressed by theories of intercultural learning. Milton Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity describes a progression from ethnocentric orientations, in which difference is denied or minimized, toward ethnorelative orientations, in which cultural difference is accepted, adapted to and ultimately integrated into one's experience (Bennett M., 1993: 24). Sustained intercultural contact of the kind that academic mobility and collaboration provide can move individuals along this continuum, reducing reliance on stereotypes and increasing the capacity for empathy. Academic exchange, on this view, is not merely an exchange of information but a transformation of how participants perceive difference.

Finally, the contribution of education to peace is illuminated by peace research, most notably the work of Johan Galtung. Galtung distinguishes between negative peace, the mere absence of direct violence, and positive peace, the presence of conditions such as justice, cooperation and integration that allow conflict to be addressed without violence (Galtung J., 1996: 32). He further identifies structural and cultural forms of violence embedded in institutions and belief systems. Education that fosters intercultural understanding and

dismantles prejudice contributes directly to positive peace by addressing cultural violence at its roots. Taken together, these four bodies of theory provide a coherent account of academic diplomacy: knowledge cooperation strengthens trust, academic exchange reduces stereotypes and higher education supports the international understanding on which durable peace depends.

Galtung's concept of cultural violence is especially pertinent to the work of UNESCO Chairs in the field of comparative religion. Cultural violence, in his account, consists of those aspects of culture, including religion, ideology and language, that can be used to legitimize direct or structural violence by making it appear natural or even right. Crucially, the same cultural domains can be mobilized in the opposite direction, to legitimize peace and cooperation. Comparative religious education that emphasizes shared ethical commitments and mutual respect therefore performs a peacebuilding function in Galtung's strict sense: it transforms the cultural resources of a society away from the legitimization of conflict and toward the legitimization of coexistence. This theoretical point gives precise content to the intuition that interfaith dialogue contributes to peace, and it links the activity of a single Chair to one of the central concepts of modern peace research. The four frameworks thus form a chain of explanation running from the strategic level of states, through the institutional level of universities and the individual level of learners, to the structural level of peaceful societies.

The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme was established in 1992 following a resolution adopted at the twenty-sixth session of UNESCO's General Conference. The acronym UNITWIN denotes the university twinning and networking scheme, and the programme was conceived to advance research, training and programme development in higher education by building university networks and encouraging inter-university cooperation through the transfer of knowledge across borders (UNESCO, 2025). Within this structure, a UNESCO Chair is a research and teaching unit led by a chairholder that advances knowledge and practice in a defined field, while a UNITWIN Network is a partnership among several institutions that pool their competencies around a common theme.

The programme operates across UNESCO's fields of competence, including education, the natural and social sciences, culture and communication. Chairs and networks function through collaborative research, joint conferences and seminars, the development of new curricula and the exchange of staff and students. Proposals to establish a Chair must be endorsed by

the relevant national commission for UNESCO before submission, and agreements are typically concluded for renewable four-year terms, ensuring both national ownership and institutional continuity. A defining feature of the programme is its emphasis on solidarity and equitable cooperation: UNESCO explicitly promotes North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation as strategies for strengthening institutions, often in partnership with non-governmental organizations and other actors. The network is frequently described as serving as a think tank for UNESCO and as a bridge builder between academia, civil society, local communities and policymakers.

Three features of this institutional design are especially significant for the argument of this article. The first is the requirement of national endorsement, which embeds each Chair simultaneously in a global network and in a national policy environment. This dual location is what allows a Chair to act diplomatically: it is at once an outpost of an international organization and an instrument through which a state can project an image of openness and responsibility. The second is the renewable, multi-year character of agreements, which favours the slow accumulation of trust over the short-term exchange of services. Diplomacy of any kind depends on continuity, and the four-year renewable term gives UNESCO Chairs the temporal horizon necessary to build durable relationships. The third is the explicit commitment to solidarity and to South-South cooperation, which distinguishes the programme from competitive models of internationalization driven primarily by rankings or revenue.

This design also reflects UNESCO's founding conviction, expressed in its constitution, that since wars begin in the minds of people it is in the minds of people that the defences of peace must be constructed. The UNITWIN Programme operationalizes this conviction in the higher education sector by treating universities not as neutral providers of credentials but as moral and cultural institutions with a responsibility to the wider international community. In this respect the programme aligns closely with the public purpose that recent scholarship ascribes to internationalization, namely a meaningful contribution to society rather than the mere pursuit of institutional advantage (de Wit et al., 2015: 29). The growth of the network to roughly 1,100 Chairs across some 130 countries indicates the breadth of demand for this model of cooperation (UNESCO, 2025 <https://www.unesco.org/en/unitwin/about>).

The most distinctive contribution of the UNITWIN Programme to international relations lies in its capacity to function as a platform for intercultural dialogue.

Because Chairs and networks bring together scholars and students from different cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds around shared intellectual problems, they create sustained spaces of contact in which difference can be encountered constructively rather than defensively.

Collaborative research and teaching require participants to engage seriously with one another's academic traditions, methods and assumptions. This cross-cultural learning encourages the kind of perspective-taking that Bennett (1993: 27) associates with movement toward ethnorelative orientations. As scholars co-author publications, co-design curricula and debate findings across cultural lines, they confront the limits of their own frames of reference and develop a more nuanced appreciation of others. Intercultural communication of this depth is difficult to achieve through diplomacy conducted by states alone; it is the everyday substance of academic collaboration. The joint publication of comparative scholarship by Uzbek and foreign researchers, for example, requires sustained negotiation of differing scholarly conventions and interpretive traditions, and the resulting work embodies a synthesis that neither side could have produced alone (Karimova et al., 2022).

Several UNESCO Chairs focus explicitly on comparative religion, interfaith understanding and the prevention of radicalization. By providing scholarly settings in which religious traditions can be studied with rigor and respect, such Chairs contribute to dialogue between religious communities and to the de-escalation of the cultural antagonisms that fuel extremism. This work resonates with Galtung's (1996: 196) concern with cultural violence, since education that replaces caricature with informed understanding weakens the cultural foundations of intolerance. Empirical research on Islamic education similarly shows that teaching grounded in the fundamentals of the faith can foster tolerance and respect for diversity (Aderibigbe et al., 2023: 4). In Uzbekistan, religious tolerance is treated as a basis of social stability and as a value to be cultivated among young people (Tadjibaeva D.O., 2022: 2).

Viewed as a whole, the UNITWIN Programme exemplifies how universities act as non-state diplomatic actors. Joint research projects, international conferences, collaborative publications and mobility programmes constitute a form of diplomacy that operates through intellectual partnership rather than negotiation. Such cooperation can continue even when political relations between states are tense, because it rests on professional relationships and shared scholarly purposes that are relatively insulated from immediate political

pressures. Scientific cooperation thereby keeps lines of communication open and preserves the possibility of broader reconciliation (Flomo-Kellen, 2025: 3).

This diplomatic function is consistent with Nye's (2004:11) account of soft power, in which attraction and the cultivation of shared values achieve influence that coercion cannot. It also reflects the public purpose that de Wit and colleagues (2015: 29) ascribe to internationalization. The long-term character of academic partnerships is especially significant: a Chair established for successive four-year terms builds enduring networks of trust among institutions and individuals. These durable intellectual partnerships contribute to international stability by creating constituencies with a stake in cooperation and by generating the mutual knowledge on which peaceful relations depend. The same logic informs Uzbekistan's own diplomatic initiatives, such as United Nations General Assembly Resolution 73/128 on education and religious tolerance, which the country initiated (United Nations, 2018).

The role of university networks in conflict prevention deserves particular emphasis. Extremism frequently exploits ignorance, grievance and the absence of credible alternative narratives. Education that provides accurate knowledge of other cultures and religions, that creates opportunities for direct contact across lines of difference and that equips young people with the critical faculties to resist simplistic ideologies addresses each of these vulnerabilities. Empirical work on Islamic education demonstrates that teaching grounded in the core values of a tradition can actively foster tolerance and respect for diversity rather than reinforcing exclusivity (Aderibigbe et al., 2023: 4). UNESCO Chairs that specialize in comparative religion are therefore well placed to contribute to the prevention of radicalization, not by policing belief but by deepening understanding. In this sense academic diplomacy and the prevention of violent extremism are complementary projects: both seek to replace fear of the unfamiliar with informed and respectful engagement.

The relevance of these arguments becomes clearer when examined in the context of Uzbekistan, where the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan hosts a UNESCO Chair in the Comparative Study of World Religions established within the UNITWIN network. The Chair pursues interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance and scholarly research with the explicit aim of enhancing mutual understanding and global peace, and the Academy itself was created as part of broader reforms intended to develop religious studies and to give the field an international dimension. What makes the Uzbek case instructive is the breadth of activity

through which a single Chair simultaneously performs educational, scholarly, digital, public and diplomatic functions, giving concrete substance to the theoretical claim that a UNESCO Chair operates as more than an academic unit.

On the educational side, the Chair develops pedagogical tools and academic resources in comparative religion, religious studies, interreligious dialogue and the history of world religions, producing textbooks, teaching manuals, monographs, methodological materials and multimedia resources intended to strengthen religious literacy, critical thinking and a culture of tolerance among students and early-career researchers. The scale of this output is considerable: in 2025 alone the Chair published thirty-two articles in national journals, twenty-six in international publications and four in journals indexed in Web of Science, alongside three monographs, five textbooks and three teaching manuals. This combination of national and international publication illustrates the layered soft power discussed earlier, since the same scholarship advances institutional standing, national reputation and the universal values UNESCO represents at once.

A distinctive feature of the Chair's work is its embrace of digital education. Within a project devoted to the history, teachings, sources and traditions of world religions, the Chair created a digital educational platform and mobile application (www.dinshunoslik.uz). Drawing on eleven independent monographs on the major world religions, the platform integrates multimedia materials, digital archives, visual learning resources and virtual-reality models of religious sites in Uzbekistan. By widening access to objective knowledge about religious traditions, this initiative addresses precisely the deficit of accurate information that, as noted above, extremism tends to exploit, and it introduces innovative methods into religious studies that extend the Chair's reach well beyond the classroom.

The Chair also sustains an extensive programme of scientific and public-outreach activity, regularly organising seminars, roundtables, conferences, educational campaigns and awareness programmes on religious tolerance, intercultural dialogue, the prevention of extremism and peace education. Across universities, schools, governmental institutions and local communities throughout Uzbekistan it has conducted more than 1,300 educational events, 134 roundtable discussions, 52 competitions and 1,252 educational meetings. Particular emphasis falls on youth engagement and experiential learning: more than 721 educational visits to churches, seminaries, synagogues and other religious institutions, together with 376 binary

lessons and seminars, have been organised to cultivate practical intercultural communication among young people. Such direct contact across lines of religious difference is the everyday substance of the perspective-taking that Bennett associates with movement toward ethnorelative orientations, achieved through encounter rather than instruction alone. The Chair extends this outreach through the mass media, with more than 500 appearances on television, radio, in print and on internet platforms addressing tolerance, peaceful coexistence, interreligious dialogue and the prevention of extremism.

At the international level the Chair participates in academic mobility programmes, international conferences, scientific forums and collaborative initiatives with foreign universities and organisations, with representatives taking part in educational and scientific programmes in Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Egypt and the Russian Federation devoted to intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding and contemporary religious studies. Through this combination of educational innovation, digital accessibility, scholarly contribution, youth engagement and public outreach, the Chair has established itself as a sustainable and internationally recognised platform for promoting tolerance, non-violence, social cohesion and intercultural understanding in accordance with UNESCO's principles.

The diplomatic and peacebuilding character of this work is most visible in the Chair's flagship programmes on interreligious dialogue, peace education and tolerance, developed in response to intolerance, extremism, xenophobia, religious misunderstanding and social polarisation. Central among them is the Interfaith Dialogue Club, a youth-led platform that has operated for the past two years and unites students from religious, public and private higher-education institutions across the country. Convening at least four major seminars and dialogue sessions annually in Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and other regions, the Club has involved more than 200 students and young researchers directly in its work. Its cooperation with Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Jewish and Protestant communities and educational institutions allows young people from different backgrounds to engage in practical dialogue, overcome stereotypes and build mutual understanding through direct communication—an enactment, at the level of individual learners, of the academic diplomacy this article describes.

The Chair anchors its work in a calendar of recurring national and international events. It organises an annual international scientific conference and seminar marking the International Day for Tolerance on 16 November, bringing together scholars, educators, students, religious

leaders and civil-society representatives to address tolerance, intercultural dialogue, religious literacy and the prevention of extremism, with proceedings and theses published to widen academic outreach. Around the World Interfaith Harmony Week and the International Day of Human Fraternity on 4 February, it convenes a series of scientific, cultural, educational and youth-oriented events—at least five or six major activities each year—on human fraternity, peaceful coexistence and interreligious dialogue. In 2025 the Chair's initiatives under World Interfaith Harmony Week received the First Prize of the King Abdullah II UN World Interfaith Harmony Week Award, an international recognition that reflects their measurable social impact (World Interfaith Harmony Week, 2025). The Chair also holds its annual conference “Actual Issues of Religious Studies” each April, a dialogue platform devoted to religious tolerance, intercultural understanding, peace education and the prevention of radicalisation through scholarly engagement.

Taken together, these activities treat human fraternity not as an abstract ideal but as a practical expression of social responsibility, peaceful coexistence and civic engagement among the young. Through educational interaction, interfaith cooperation and community engagement, the Chair's programmes strengthen a culture of dialogue and build ideological resilience against extremism, radicalism and xenophobia. In doing so they have advanced interreligious understanding, encouraged youth participation in peacebuilding and fostered a durable culture of tolerance and social harmony – establishing the Chair as a sustainable regional platform for non-violence, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding at both national and international levels. The Uzbek experience thus gives concrete form to the diplomatic and intercultural aspirations of the UNITWIN Programme and shows how a single Chair can serve as a node connecting local, national and global levels of cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme has become considerably more than a mechanism for academic cooperation. Through the lenses of soft power, the internationalization of higher education, intercultural sensitivity and peace research, the programme emerges as a sustained practice of academic diplomacy. Its Chairs and networks reduce cultural misunderstanding, promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, cultivate global citizenship and build the durable intellectual partnerships on which

international stability depends. In an increasingly polarized world, the capacity of universities to function as actors of peacebuilding is not a marginal benefit but a strategic asset.

The experience of Uzbekistan, and in particular the UNESCO Chair in the Comparative Study of World Religions at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, demonstrates that higher education can support global peace, tolerance and mutual understanding through international intellectual collaboration.

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