

U.S. Cultural Exchange Programs in Algeria: Opportunities and Challenges ☐

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Abstract

The internationalization of the higher education sector in Algeria is one of the government's most important priorities to catch up with the contemporary trends towards fostering internationalization in higher education in the twenty-first century globalized world. The U.S. Embassy in Algeria has added a valuable support instrument in this respect through its cultural exchange programs. Ongoing programs of scholarships for students' mobility based on the strategies that aim at strengthening the universities' international dimension have been created. The U.S. Embassy in Algiers provides different types of programs which are perceived as useful and important as they create further opportunities for the learners and the institutions to open up to the increased international environment of the higher education sector. Nevertheless, there seems to be major challenges and hindrances limiting its full potential as a strong tool for sustainable development and better higher education quality. As a strategic soft power tool with long-term impact, American cultural exchange programs seek to Americanize the world via spreading the American values, principles, and ideals abroad through impressing the program participators with the American culture and ideologies. In other words, the Americans assign to themselves the role of reinforcing and supervising peace and democracy in the world. To achieve

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that, they use the various cultural and educational exchange programs as a soft power mechanism to promote and emphasize the superiority of the American system, ideology, and identity in the world. The seriousness of these programs lies in the pre-selection of the participants. They select the youth with a special focus on their abilities to affect and influence others, along with the potentials they have to be future leaders in their countries to pursue and reinforce the American interests. Ideologies are associated with power structures. Indeed, American Policymakers rely on cultural exchange programs to fashion an international atmosphere that is supportive and conducive to the U.S. interests and values worldwide.

Keywords: Algeria, Cultural Exchange Programs, Higher Education, United States.

Introduction

Algeria and the United States have witnessed a productive and strong diplomatic relationship and partnership over history. Algeria was among the very first countries to recognize the American independence, and has since worked to strengthen relations of peace and friendship with the United States. Then after, Algeria and U.S. built a strong diplomatic relationship that has improved politically, economically, and culturally. When John F. Kennedy was a senator, he spoke in support of the Algerian independence to *The New York Times* on July 2nd, 1957, and during his presidency Kennedy congratulated Algeria after it took its independence from the French colonization on July 5th, 1962 (Rakove, 2012). After the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Algeria offered its support to the US and continued to play a vital role in the international war against terrorism. It has been working since then closely with the United States to eliminate transnational terrorism.

In 2012, Algeria and the U.S. established a Strategic Dialogue, which enables the two countries to meet on a regular basis and take an in-depth look at their level of coordination over a wide array of political, economic, cultural, educational, and security issues of mutual interest. The Algeria-United States Strategic Dialogue makes a significant contribution to the advancement of Algerian-American cooperation in the economic, cultural, technical, and educational areas as well. In education, for instance, the U.S. Embassy in Algiers offers a number of cultural exchange programs that allow Algerians to visit and study in the United States. These programs include good opportunities for young Algerians, students, and professionals to develop their careers. Yet, it is important to mention that such cultural exchange programs can cause dangerous political and ideological threats.

1. English Language in Algeria

It has been noticed that there is an increasing demand for learning English language in Algeria, especially, by university students in different fields.

Algerian youth nowadays are much more interested in learning English than in any other time. This interest in the English language is natural because of the openness to the world and globalization. Since the independence of Algeria in 1962, the English language has been taught to the majority of learners from the middle level. In July 2022, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced that primary schools would start to teach English in late 2022. The president went further by saying that English should be offered as a subject earlier as it is the language of instruction at university for those studying medicine and engineering (Rouaba, 2022). This implies that English becomes highly important and crucial in Algeria. The changing economic policies and the openness to the world raises the need for English as a lingua franca and a medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge, especially in areas such as economy, science, and technology (Crystal, 2003). Thus, the Algerian government and even learners are becoming more conscious of the status of English as an international language par excellence.

2. U.S. Cultural Exchange Programs in Algeria

Foreign exchange programs provide learners with the opportunity to study in another country and environment, experiencing its history and culture, as well as meeting new friends to enrich their personal development. International exchange programs are also effective to challenge learners to develop a global perspective (Daly, 2011). Exchange programs occur when partner institutions accept and allow students from different countries to carry their studies. Exchange students live with a host family or in a designated place such as an apartment, or a student lodging. Costs for the program vary by the country and institution. Participants fund their participation via scholarships, loans, or self-funding (Jackson, 2010). Learners' exchange programs became popular after the Second World War to increase the participants' understanding and tolerance of other cultures, as well as improving their language skills and broadening their social horizons.

In the current globalized world, intercultural education seeks to boost understanding, communication, and cooperation among international learners of different cultural backgrounds (Ayano, 2006). This means that the international academic institutions not only seek education “at home,” but also use academic exchange programs as an important internationalization strategy. The U.S. Embassy in Algiers offers a number of exchange programs that allow Algerians to visit and study in the United States. These programs include opportunities for young Algerians, students, and professionals to develop themselves. Cultural exchange occurs when learners develop a deeper understanding and knowledge about another country, its culture, its customs and its day-to-day practices through person-to-person contact (Creese et al., 2006). According to the U.S. Embassy in Algeria, U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria support youth entrepreneurship and English language learning and teaching, women’s empowerment, media engagement, and cross-cultural dialogue. Every year, the U.S. embassy in Algeria offers Algerians the opportunity to engage in cultural exchange with their American peers through its diverse educational and cultural exchange programs (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

3. Goals of U.S. Cultural Exchange Programs in Algeria

Arief (2013) acknowledged that it is important for all the parties of the educational exchange programs to assess their programmatic needs and goals, and determine what joint programs and activities are appropriate. The “fit” of the proposed activities with overall institutional mission, strategy, and priorities must be considered, as well as alignment with academic needs and resource availability. According to the American Council on Education (2015), the U.S. higher education arena contains a variety of not-for-profit associations that promote the professional development of people within the field of international higher education and work to expand awareness of issues related to it, including international student recruitment, international student admissions and retention, international student services,

and comprehensive campus internationalization. This implies that the U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria aim at developing, strengthening, and sustaining constructive exchange in the fields of education and culture between the peoples of Algeria and the U.S.

According to the Algerian Youth Leadership Program (2022), the U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria aim at applying interactive approach in workshops and in a range of public and community settings. Participants are expected to better understand civic participation, the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic community through their engagements in the various activities. That is, cultural and educational exchange programs seek at enabling learners to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and those around them reinforcing their knowledge of foreign cultures and strengthening international relationships.

Despite the previously mentioned direct goals, the U.S. cultural exchange programs seem to have some other hidden goals. Dobriansky, et al. (2021) pointed out that U.S. exchange programs are one of America's most effective soft power tools when integrated into U.S. foreign policy strategy and planning. Exchanges promote the best of American values. They build U.S. influence and help spread democratic ideals around the globe, strengthen economic and trade interests, and provide a unique window into what makes the United States a singularly distinct and exceptional country.

4. Opportunities of U.S. Cultural Exchange Programs in Algeria

International colleges and universities are grappling with how best to equip their graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the globalized world of the twenty-first century, and ensure their relevance and standing in the global higher education community. According to the American Council on Education (2015), building good relationships with counterparts abroad can achieve broad and ambitious global development objectives. To this end, the universities in the United States connect with

various universities in the world, including Algeria, in many ways with the potential for new types of connections between the Algerian and the American universities. Some colleges and universities may be interested in recruiting more international students and may have funding to contribute, while others may be more interested in establishing faculty exchanges, cultural exchanges, or joint-degree programs.

Although the number of – (Algerian-U.S. alumni exchange programs is increasing every year, a recent study published in an American newspaper showed that most young Americans know little about Algerian people. The world of higher education in U.S. is very complicated and big, as it is a huge decentralized country. It includes many different kinds of universities; each has its unique way of connection with other universities in the world, including Algeria. The necessity of opening the country internationally through partnerships with foreign universities and centers of knowledge leads Algeria to set off towards the internationalization of its higher education system to shift their culture into something that students from all different backgrounds can embrace. Knight and De Wit (1999) acknowledged that internationalization of higher education is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization, and at the same time the individuality of the nation is saved, respected, and defined. That is, internationalization of higher education enables the foreign student in a new country to settle faster, making the education process more seamless and turning learning into a much more enjoyable experience. Moreover, it prepared and equipped them to engage with other people and businesses from other countries, wherever they may be, and this opens them to more opportunities (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Therefore, the international dimension of higher education provides multiple opportunities and potential benefits for individuals, institutions and society in general.

Lahmer (2021) reported that Algerian universities offer annual training opportunities for excellent students at Master and Doctorate levels to seek research collaboration opportunities abroad. It also offers annual training

chances for all academics to make progress in their doctoral research or improve the teaching quality of their classrooms. Therefore, around 1500 bilateral agreements were made in order to establish high-level scientific networks and develop joint research projects with foreign universities. Additionally, Algerian higher education and scientific research ministry sought to modernize education, strengthen institutions' management and expand offers for qualifications through multilateral cooperation with many countries. Hence, global awareness and interconnectedness through internationalization of higher education has a vital role to play in shaping the next generations of learners. Internationalization in Higher education has the potential to improve academics, ensuring quality international citizenship for students, increasing international student enrollment, spreading the students' native cultures, and facilitating brain gain.

According to Belmihoub (2015), U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria are designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the two countries. The programs allow the participants to develop leadership skills, self-confidence, and a greater understanding of American society. Moreover, the students who are engaged in cultural exchange programs have the opportunity to gain knowledge about the U.S. and its language and culture, build new friendships, take responsibility for themselves, respect differences, be effective intercultural communicators and tolerate the beliefs of others. When they return to Algeria, they can apply for small grants from the U.S. embassy to share their experience with their colleagues.

English is becoming of great importance to university students in Algeria. Hence, studying in U.S. can open new horizons to the Algerian students at many levels. For learners, studying in the United States is a wonderful experience, and a lifetime experience. Study abroad advisors and faculty members often love talking to returning students, and seeing the changes in them and their growth. Returning students can seem more sophisticated and more focused on what is important and less on the petty and the trivial (McKeown, 2009). Differently said, studying abroad involves unique

challenges, and boosts happiness and satisfaction as it opens the doors for learners to explore new places and cultures. Therefore, it changes students in ways that may affect their intellectual development.

Most language educators and students still assume that firsthand exposure to the native speech community, along with formal classroom learning, provides the best environment for enhancing learners' intercultural communicative competence (Jackson 2013, p. 2). That is, the U.S. exchange programs allow the Algerian participants to be surrounded by native speakers of the English language in the United States. This provides them with an enriching environment for learning the language along with its culture. The participants of Algerian U.S. exchange programs are exposed to the English language within the context of its culture, which helps them in developing intercultural communication skills, along with acquiring a deeper understanding of diction, word choice, and tone. According to Kinginger (2011), studying abroad provides students with the chance to see things from different perspectives, to develop empathy, and to tolerate the others who are different from them. In the same vein, Chieffo (2010) stated that studying in the country of the target language increases foreign language learners' intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge of diverse beliefs, living conditions, and traditions.

5. Challenges of U.S. Cultural Exchange Programs in Algeria

As stated on the Embassy website, there are close to 5,000 alumni of the U.S. government exchange programs throughout Algeria (U.S. Department of State, 2023). The U.S. Embassy in Algeria sponsors a variety of international exchange programs each year. Participating in the U.S. cultural programs and studying abroad, in general, can promote peace and mutual understanding and contribute to the development of Algeria and its workforce. Yet, it may also have its own set of challenges. Jenny et al. (2017) acknowledged that international students face some difficulties in host countries, such as being too far away from family, course requirements

of existing curriculum, finances, language, and cultural barriers, along with health and dietary issues. While some of these hurdles are inevitable, it is important for foreign students to learn more about these challenges so they may better prepare for them.

The traditional approach to international migration considers such exchange programs part of the ‘brain drain’ paradigm. It views skilled migrants as a source of economic and intellectual opportunities for the host country (Vidal, 1998). Algerian youth migration has become a subject of research and a major concern for Algeria because of the shortages and the challenges it creates, since most Algerian U.S. exchange programs participants are young, skilled, and brilliant students who studied in Algerian schools. Carbone (2008) stated that brain drain means loss of skills for the source country, loss of ideas and innovation, loss of the nation’s investment in education and loss of tax revenues, but most importantly, the loss of critical services in the health and education sectors. In other words, brain drain is one of the major challenges facing the Algerian government, as it harshly affects the national economy, leaving professional individuals and skilled human resources in short supply. The phenomenon of “brain drain” has become critical for Algeria, since the industrialized countries such as the U.S. are increasingly hunting skilled Algerian graduates through their educational and cultural exchange programs.

Furthermore, U.S. exchange programs are forms of cultural diplomacy, which is a set of activities undertaken directly in collaboration with diplomatic authorities of a state, which are aimed at the promotion of foreign policy interests of this state in the realm of cultural policy for fostering its cultural exchange with other foreign states (Pajtinka, 2014). Cultural diplomacy as a kind of soft power in American foreign policy was not a product of the moment; it was used in different eras, starting with the Cold War. The Americans’ strategies to spread their ideologies against the Soviet Union were mainly based upon the use soft power via media and tools of public diplomacy, education, communication, technology, acceptance of

immigrants and employment. This helped the U.S. to influence other nations and to maximize its potential at international level to be able to achieve its worldwide domination policy without depending on harsh power (Parmar & Cox, 2010).

Dobriansky et al. (2021) were asked by the Congress and the State Department to examine whether federally funded educational and cultural exchange programs advance the foreign policy objectives of the United States. As a result, they conducted over 125 interviews comprised of U.S. ambassadors and staff in embassies in more than 20 countries, as well as with exchange participants and alumni, current and former State Department leadership, and officials from non-governmental organizations. They concluded that exchange programs are among the most potent and cost-effective instruments in the U.S. foreign policy toolkit. ‘Citizen Ambassadors’ emerge from these exchanges and return to their own countries equipped with American democratic principles and the ability to advance U.S. interests.

This implies that the United States turned to work hard on how to have a new vision for employing soft power to compensate for the losses in its military interventions, as well as the failures that afflicted its policies during the second term of Bush. Militarily speaking, the Americans relied on Private Military Companies (PMCs) to undertake major sensitive tasks (Aty & Elaggoune, 2019), but soft power was much needed. Crawford (2005) asserted that the United States emphasized communication and launched a new slogan called global idealism, which aimed at actively engaging others, listening to them and without neglecting the ideal goals of the U.S. foreign policy. According to Griffiths (2021), idealism is the doctrine that seeks to create a more cosmopolitan and harmonious world order that serves the American interests. In other words, the American idealists believe that the spread of the American educational system and the American culture in other countries can empower world public opinions in ways that serve the American interests, and make it a powerful force that the national government cannot resist.

De Wit (2002) pointed out that the U.S. cultural exchange programs are a kind of soft power tool which America can use to affect international students from all over the world. The goal behind that is to obtain preferred outcomes by persuading and attracting the youth from different nationalities to serve its interests. In the same vein, Nye (2004) stated that the Boren National Security Education Act (1991) highlighted and stressed the role of American cultural and educational exchange programs in contributing to the U.S. national security, spreading the American culture and values, defending the American interests, and strengthening the economic well-being of the country. Nye (2004) discussed the link between international education and foreign policy stating that higher education, along with other forms of culture, such as government broadcasting and Hollywood products, are soft tools used to achieve the U.S. government's desire as a superpower for dominance over other countries to defend America and its interests.

Conclusion

Given that high-quality education can make a better world for all of us, universities worldwide have a huge role to play in achieving this goal. Partnerships among international universities provide the learners with many opportunities, which can help them to be successful and effective international citizens. To this end, universities in the U.S. connect with various universities in the world, including Algeria, in many ways, with potential for new types of collaboration between universities in both countries. To foster deep and plentiful partnerships between the Algerian and the American universities, the U.S. embassy in Algiers opens the doors for Algerian youth to study in American universities through the U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria. U.S. cultural exchange programs offered by the U.S. government and American non-government institutions for Algerians in the form of scholarships and professional training fully sponsored.

U.S. cultural exchange programs provide great chances for Algerians and Americans to exchange their cultures, create a good atmosphere of

mutual understanding, and foster intercultural tolerance. Proficiency in the English language is required to take part in the programs, in addition to the commitment to share the acquired experience when returning to Algeria. Nonetheless, the road is still somehow bumpy because U.S. cultural exchange programs in Algeria pose some challenges as well. The United States has long been attempting to manipulate other countries and the world order with its own values and political system in the name of promoting democracy and human rights through different tools. The U.S. government uses the cultural exchange programs as mechanisms to influence international opinions that back up their interests under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights.

Differently said, participators in the U.S. cultural exchange programs are more likely to develop a kind of long-term impact on the American cultural and political ideologies, along with a sense of belonging and appreciation for America. This would open the doors for the United States to monopolize intellectual property in the name of protection, taking advantage of the weak position of other countries. When the program participators reach high political positions that affect U.S. foreign policy, they are expected to help the Americans to walk away from international treaties and organizations, and to put its domestic law above international law to protect its interests. Therefore, the Algerian students who participate in such programs must be aware enough in order not to be used as proxies, agents, and tools for spreading American ideologies or serving American interests at the expense of their original country's sovereignty.

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