

“Everything You Do Reflects On Us”: Student Leaders Serving as Informal International Diplomats for their University

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Setting

At a higher education institution in Nigeria that attracts international students from around the region, two students, Aremu and Jalani, frequently served as student ambassadors at international events. Aremu participated extensively in student innovation networks and educational communities, representing his university at national and international programs focused on technology and entrepreneurship. Jalani, a development and operations engineer and developer advocate, engaged in international conferences and partnerships that linked his university with industry sponsors and other academic institutions.

Both individuals were regarded as the public face of their universities, despite limited formal preparation for these responsibilities. Their experiences illustrate the increasing expectation for student leaders to function as

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cultural and institutional diplomats, navigating complex intersections of personal beliefs, global identity, and professional obligations. The experiences of Aremu and Jalani underscore the balance between institutional objectives and personal integrity, as well as the opportunities and risks associated with visibility in international arenas.

Case

Aremu first experienced the weight of representation when his department nominated him to lead a student technology community. What began as organizing workshops quickly became a test of diplomacy. Faculty reminded him that “everything you do reflects on us.” That message stayed with him.

When Aremu attended a national innovation summit, he realized that his institutional reputation traveled with him. Every introduction, question, and handshake carried implicit meaning. Later, when he represented his university at a European conference, he prepared thoroughly by watching videos on intercultural communication, revising his slides, and even researching local etiquette. “I wanted to be ready,” he said, “not because I was afraid to fail, but because I knew people like me rarely got a second chance.”

His preparation yielded positive outcomes. By demonstrating professionalism and humility, he established connections with scholars and policymakers who had not previously interacted with young African presenters. Aremu recognized that representation extends beyond personal achievement to challenging prevailing assumptions regarding capability and credibility.

For Jalani, institutional representation required managing the expectations of multiple stakeholders simultaneously. University leadership wanted Jalani to increase institutional visibility and potential partnerships by delivering impressive presentations. Peers and classmates wanted him to identify internships, funding, or exchange opportunities and serve as a “bridge” to external programs. Sponsors and partners wanted him to promote brand values by publicly endorsing products. All the while, Jalani also had his own personal ethics and identity that he wanted to stay true to. These pressures were persistent, though seldom explicitly acknowledged.

At one event, an international sponsor distributed materials promoting a social campaign that conflicted with his religious beliefs. Rather than avoid the issue or challenge it openly, Jalani reframed his message around respect and inclusion. “I learned that diplomacy is not silence,” he reflected. “It is finding words that build bridges instead of walls.”

He faced additional challenges when peers tried to turn a professional forum into a platform for political advocacy. Balancing solidarity and neutrality, he emphasized their collective mission and redirected discussions toward learning and collaboration. Each scenario required empathy, composure, and adherence to core values.

Both Aremu and Jalani observed that success in international contexts frequently relies on understanding implicit norms and demonstrating cultural competence. Appropriate attire, clear communication free of local colloquialisms, and recognition of others’ expertise serve as indicators of professionalism.

Their awareness also encompassed digital environments. During a virtual hackathon, a participant alleged bias by the organizing team due to not everyone receiving souvenirs by mistake. The complaint rapidly spread on social media, jeopardizing the organization's credibility. Jalani and Aremu coordinated a transparent response, clarified event procedures, and issued an apology for the oversight. This incident, which could have escalated into a public relations crisis, instead served as a lesson in digital diplomacy. Subsequently, they established communication protocols to mitigate future occurrences.

The most significant challenges arose from ethical ambiguities rather than technical issues. When Aremu's association received a limited number of corporate scholarships, he faced pressure to prioritize his home university. Instead, he implemented transparent merit-based criteria, despite potential unpopularity with his home university.

Jalani faced similar dilemmas in balancing innovation with compliance. University policy required all external communication to go through formal channels, which slowed projects but ensured accountability. When a sponsor pushed for immediate publicity, he chose to wait for approval, protecting both his team and his institution. These moments highlighted that ethical leadership in academia sometimes means delaying success to preserve trust.

Despite their dedication, both students noted limited formal recognition. The university referenced Aremu only indirectly in institutional reports, while Jalani's achievements were publicly acknowledged but seldom attributed to him. Over time, both recognized that the primary impact resided in institutional learning rather than individual visibility.

Now at the end of their studies, Jalani and Aremu look back on their experiences and feel like the university could have done a better job supporting them for their informal student ambassador role. They recommend that universities should regard student representation as structured experiential learning rather than informal goodwill. They brainstormed potential measures, including the following:

- Pre-departure workshops on intercultural communication
- Mentorship programs that pair returning students with new delegates
- Conduct post-event debriefs to capture key lessons and reflections
- A digital repository of "student diplomacy cases" for training

As Jalani put it, "If we learn from every trip and every mistake, the next one becomes a better opportunity to grow and to represent." For Aremu and Jalani, representation served as a form of leadership education. Their experiences demonstrated that students frequently act as their universities' most visible ambassadors, regardless of formal designation. Each communication and presentation contributed to the institution's reach in ways that traditional marketing cannot achieve.

They assert that universities should formally recognize this influence while enabling students to maintain authenticity. Excessive structuring may transform genuine engagement into mere performance. Institutions should instead offer guidance, ethics training, and reflective platforms that foster student agency.

Aremu summarized it best: “We were never trained to be diplomats, yet that is exactly what we became.”

Their experiences suggest that diplomacy originates in educational settings, including classrooms, conferences, and community venues, where students learn to represent broader interests. With appropriate support, students can serve as ambassadors that benefit both institutions and the students themselves.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can student leaders like Aremu and Jalani balance personal beliefs, institutional expectations, and sponsor interests when representing their universities internationally?
- What responsibilities do universities have in preparing and supporting students who act as informal diplomats in global forums?
- In what ways can cultural misunderstandings or ethical conflicts be transformed into meaningful learning experiences for both students and institutions?
- How can student experiences abroad be captured, shared, and documented to strengthen future global engagement efforts?
- Should universities formalize student representation as part of their international relations strategy, or keep it informal to preserve authenticity and flexibility?