Diplomatic Training: Options and Opportunities

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Most people would agree that a craft skill cannot be taught through an academic process; it can only be learnt on the job, or by way of apprenticeship. If diplomacy is essentially a craft, is it exempted from the above principle? A British philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, not particularly interested in diplomacy as a subject, wrote some decades back that diplomacy belongs to a class of practical knowledge that ‘exists only in practice’ and that ‘the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master’. At that time, a good number of diplomatic services did not offer any formal induction training to new entrants; but even in those days, several others operated elaborate training programs. With the passage of time, the pendulum has decidedly swung in favor of structured training, both at the entry stage, and even more important, at mid-career and senior levels. So was Oakeshott in error? Let us come back to this question at the end of this examination of the options and opportunities in diplomatic training.

The Vienna-based association of diplomatic academies, with an expanding membership of some 70 institutes, representing foreign ministries around the world, testifies to the growth in training facilities in diplomatic services. These training institutions typically cater to their own personnel, a good number of them also offer training facilities to diplomats from other countries (e.g. China, Egypt, Germany, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Switzerland, and many others). Universities and specialized institutes in a few countries (e.g. in Austria, China, Malta, Russia, UK, US) offer courses in diplomacy at MA and diploma levels that enjoy a high reputation. Small private institutions offering training to diplomats have also mushroomed, based in London, Geneva, Washington DC, and other places that hold large concentrations of diplomats; they usually work as profit-making entities; their academic and professional standards are of variable quality.

In 2004-05, Ambassador and Director of the Diplomatic Academy of Chile, Rolando Stein, carried out a survey of diplomatic training around the world; Ambassador Stein presented a summary of that exhaustive survey to a conference on foreign ministries held at Geneva on May 31-June 1, 2006. He is working on publishing that analysis.

One unusual entity in this field is the DiploFoundation, created jointly by the governments of Malta and Switzerland, a not-for-profit institution, having no 'captive' clientele unlike the academies run by foreign ministries. It draws its student-participants from all continents, on the basis of the quality and relevance of its courses, and is continually tested at the marketplace. It now offers university-recognized diploma level and MA courses. Its USP is text-based e-learning, in which it has been a pioneer. The mission of the DiploFoundation is to assist all countries, especially those with limited resources to participate more meaningfully in international relations; at the end of 2006 it had 673 alumni from 141 countries. There also exist a small number of private establishments that offer diplomatic training on a commercial basis, including teams of consultants who have established a reputation for excellence. As we see below, Canada and the US have also accumulated vast experience in e-learning at foreign service training institutes.

We must also take into account the academic institutes, located in the US, the UK and a number of European countries that offer courses focused on diplomacy, at BA, MA and diploma levels (as distinct from the very many universities that run a variety of courses on international affairs). Several foreign ministries sponsor diplomats to attend such courses, a few at the entry stage (e.g. Japan), and many more at mid-career levels; usually the positions offered are limited in number, and the courses tend to concentrate on the academic dimension, rather than craft skills. Consequently, they are not usable by foreign ministries as a mainstream training option; cost and the rather lengthy duration of the courses is another inhibiting factor.

From the perspective of a typical foreign ministry, looking to improve its overall training for diplomats, what are the available options and opportunities? One way of examining this is to consider the levels of personnel for whom training is needed, and the different kinds of courses that can be conducted, by traditional methods and e-learning.

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2 This paper is included in a book that the DiploFoundation is to publish by the end of February 2007, titled *Challenges for Foreign Ministries: Managing Diplomatic Networks and Optimizing Value*.

3 This point came across at a one-day workshop on e-learning held at the British FCO in January 2004. A second workshop sponsored by the DiploFoundation was held in Geneva in May 2006.
This narration of contemporary training practices is based on the author’s experience—35 years in the Indian Foreign Service, 11 years teaching at the Foreign Service Institute in New Delhi (involvement with training new Indian recruits, plus three or four courses each year for about 24 foreign trainees coming for eight-week programs, and special courses run for South African, Afghan, Iraqi Laotian and Palestinian trainees), plus seven years of developing courses and teaching at the DiploFoundation, besides lectures delivered in various countries.

We assume that the purpose of diplomatic training is not only to impart knowledge of international affairs, but train personnel in diplomatic craft skills. This core fact limits the degree to which academic training is of practical use for diplomatic services. A typical course in a university, focused on international affairs simply does not meet the needs for practical, hands-on training for this profession, though it may do much to develop analytical skills, and provide training in concepts and theory.

ENTRY-LEVEL TRAINING
Three training models for new service entrants can be identified.

1. **A full course at one’s own institute:** On entry to the diplomatic service, this may entail full-time training for a year or so at one’s institution—this is the model followed, among others, by Brazil, Chile, China, Germany, and India. It gives concentrated training, for an extended period. It has the virtue of a strong training focus, but also the disadvantage that the trainees cannot relate their learning with work experience, which they are yet to gain. Since typically the professional service entrants are fresh university graduates, they are usually keen to start ‘real’ work—their absorption capacity for academic learning is poor. Further, they find it hard to relate to craft skill presentations, because they simply do not have the work context to absorb this fully.

   In the late 1990s, Germany cut its entry-level training course from two years to one, in partial recognition of the need to speed up transition of new recruits into first jobs. Brazil runs a two-year course, but has recently decided to exempt this for those who hold master’s level academic degrees. In China, while a year-long entry course at the Foreign Affairs University⁴ is mandatory for new entrants, those who have graduated from this institution (usually

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⁴ This small university, with about 1500 students in BA, MA and Ph.D. programs, is a unique institution. It is run by the Foreign Ministry, and also runs special training programs for foreign diplomats. The author has had the privilege of regularly lecturing at this University.
around 30% of the intake) are exempted from this, and go straight to work in the Foreign Ministry. Most institutes that run courses of this kind have their own full-time training faculty, and also use others on a part-time basis—like retired officials and academics. Thus running such institutes involves sizable investments.

But this method has one major advantage in countries where the intake comes from very broad academic catchments, not just the graduates of international affairs or political science. It becomes essential to offer to such diverse groups a solid foundation in international affairs. No less vital is grounding in economics. Thus a ‘foundation’ course has the merit of offering this range of knowledge—as distinct from the craft skills mentioned earlier.

2. Sandwich Courses: In the countries utilizing this option, apart from an initial briefing-familiarization session that may last from two to six weeks, the new entrants are put to work at a desk job, and are pulled out from that during the first period of eight to 12 months to attend short, specific courses on the key themes. This is the practice followed by Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, UK, US and others. This method has the great merit that the class instruction and exercises are made relevant to the work experience of the new recruits, as this accumulates. Many of the courses are outsourced to specialists, either corporate trainers or to specialists who have developed material for the foreign service (the trainers are often former diplomats or those connected with the service). This means that the training entity can function as a virtual institute, essentially arranging training, but without a permanent faculty of its own; this saves on material and human resources.

Malaysia practises a variant that belongs to this category. Its new intake spends two to three years at the Foreign Ministry before going abroad on their first assignments. During this period they spend four months at the Foreign Ministry’s Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations. The skills covered are diplomatic writing, negotiations, media handling, cross culture communication, etiquette and grooming, English language, speech writing, economics, law, political issues; they also tackle a written assignment, individually or in groups. They go on a two-week assignment to a Malaysian Embassy abroad.

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5 In India we have noted continual diversification in the academic background of Foreign Service entrants; a typical ‘batch’ of 20 annual entrants now includes graduates in medicine, engineering, agriculture, and sometimes even in the veterinarian sciences. Ambassador Stein’s global study offers a similar finding.
3. **Training at foreign institutions:** This is at best a second-level alternative, since foreign agencies cannot fully cater to one’s own needs. It may be feasible to send a few to such outside courses, but sending a full year’s intake abroad is not an option used by anyone, except for Japan which uses such courses for intensive foreign language training, coupled with exposure to international affairs. Of course, for any entity, if the option of special training at an institution like ENA in France or the Fletcher School or Harvard becomes available for a small number of officials, (e.g. by way of scholarships) this is worth pursuing.

An ideal compromise is to offer academic training for two to three months, focused on international affairs, economics, and issues specific to the home country. Thereafter, training in craft skills must go hand in hand with hands-on experience, i.e. a desk job at the foreign ministry for at least one year. One would go so far as to say that it is impossible for new entrants to absorb the practical learning offered to them, until they begin to accumulate their own points of reference in relation to such training. In Delhi, we simulate diplomatic discussions so that new entrants get the hang of how to prepare a ‘record of discussion’. But even the best of simulation is good only as far as it goes. On the other hand, if one has attended real diplomatic discourse, even a routine meeting between a foreign ministry official and a foreign diplomat, one begins to grasp the real meaning of what the injunction on noting down ‘key words and phrases’; one is then able to identify these in the midst of a mass of verbiage and politesse.

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

In many services, the new inductees are required to learn at least one foreign language; English is usually not counted for this purpose, even if it is not the principal language in that country. This may mean giving special English language training to those new recruits who are weak in this knowledge (Japanese recruits are given special training to ensure that their level of English reaches world class). In the British Diplomatic Service, there is a similar requirement for all officials at the diplomatic level to master French, besides other foreign languages. Singapore has tried to ensure that its new recruits are proficient in *Bahasa*, which gives linguistic access to both Indonesia and Malaysia, but it is not able to enforce this as an obligatory requirement.

It is a mistake to think that language and area expertise is a dispensable luxury for small services. It is essential that all new recruits, regardless of the size of the diplomatic

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6 In a few countries new entrants are sent off to work in embassies abroad, barely weeks after initial orientation at the foreign ministry. They get down to real work very rapidly, but without any understanding of how their system works from its headquarters, and missing out also on the chance to absorb learning from peer exchanges.
service, learn one major language (e.g. the UN languages, plus any language relevant to one’s neighborhood). Languages are best learnt in one’s youth, and they become the platform for area specialization, which is a vital need in any diplomatic service—except perhaps the very smallest services. Language training can be given in the home country, or at the first foreign assignment; where foreign language study is obligatory, it is customary to confirm new recruits only when they pass the language exam. Additionally, some reward should be given for language re-qualification, say at five-year intervals. Re-qualification in languages is essential to keep the investment in language study operational during that official’s career.

Some argue that small services cannot always send language speakers to specific foreign countries—they are too small to permit such specialization. True, but even if for some of the time the right kind of language speaker is sent to a particular country, that will work to one’s advantage. We also see increasingly, thanks to proliferation in multilateral and regional diplomacy, that a foreign language comes in handy in unexpected places, even outside the environment where it is the main lingua franca.

Many countries now work on the principle that foreign ministry support personnel, who occupy non-diplomatic posts when sent to embassies, also receive effective training. Support staff is now called upon to perform a wider range of tasks than before, and it is essential to devote attention to their training as well. This can be done by one’s own full-scale training institute, or by a virtual institute. Here too, e-learning is a cost-effective option.

MID-CAREER AND PROFESSIONAL COURSES
Typically, such courses focus on imparting knowledge on the situation in the home country, and relation to international affairs, management, and economics. The British Foreign Office runs an on-line MBA, in partnership with an academic institution, for its diplomats. Even more vital is the need to raise the level of diplomatic skills; this means that the trainers must have practical experience. Such courses are needed at all levels. Some diplomatic services treat them as mandatory for promotions (e.g. Canada and the US).

Special attention has to be given in such training to specific skills—negotiation techniques, relationship management, investment promotion, export assistance, technical aid programs, multilateral negotiation, inter-cultural communications, culture work, administration, and the like.
Several options are feasible:

1. **In-house courses**: these may be run by one’s own professionals, specialized trainers and other home agencies. They are usually run in the home capital but could also be conducted in a regional location for personnel in neighboring embassies.

   It makes sense to offer short, sharp courses, focused on specific topics, such as negotiation, economic skills and other professional subjects. Case studies, simulations, and scenario planning are particularly appropriate. Typically, the courses have to be developed or adapted in-house, since little is available off the shelf; collaboration among MFAs in developing course material is helpful.

2. **E-learning**: this is especially cost-effective, but demands good discipline and tight management for success. A workshop held in early 2004 in London by the British FCO showed that a large number of countries are beginning to use this internet-based learning method. One variant on this (used extensively by Canada and to some extent by the US as well) are ‘self-paced’ learning courses, which may involve minimal or no faculty intervention. These are especially good on specific subjects like document security or administration, but are also being used for diplomatic skill enhancement. Here again collaboration among MFAs is useful.

   One e-learning variation is ‘just-in-time’ short courses (the term comes from modern manufacturing, where a company cuts down on stockpiles of items needed for assembly, and gets these delivered by its sub-suppliers exactly when needed, sometimes even twice or more often in one day). Courses are available to officials taking up assignments, when they need this training—e.g. those posted abroad, or going to handle new tasks in areas such as consular or economic affairs, or needing special training on emerging global issues, as these issues take shape. The course delivery may be ‘on-line’, or in blended formats.

3. **Short courses in foreign institutes**: This is a good way of supplementing one’s own training options. After some time it becomes easy to identify the ones that are best suited to one’s own needs. They are offered by many countries, and it pays to try them out. Well-chosen corporate courses or ‘executive management programs’ can be a good option for a select number of officials.
4. *Academic ‘sabbaticals’:* It is of utility to send a few officials each year to spend up to one year at places such as Harvard, the Fletcher School of Diplomacy or the London School of Economics, to pursue academic study, *provided* this blends in with the real needs of the ministry, say to study multilateral trade issues or negotiation technique. The US State Department each year sponsors about a dozen officials to obtain a Master’s degree in economics, and Singapore is another practitioner of this option. It is vital to ensure (through a contract) that the official will not quit the service after such expensive sponsored studies.

The author’s research over the past eight years shows that many diplomatic services had neglected training at the mid-career level; they are now working hard to introduce and expand such courses. One traditional view was that diplomats were trained at the start of their career, and that was sufficient; further learning would come from their work experience. Even Japan, with Thailand the most experienced diplomatic service of Asia, paid little attention to mid-career training until very recently. The new realization everywhere is that training helps to raise performance standards, and is a hallmark of the best diplomatic services.

It makes sense to open up such courses to officials of other ministries that are particularly concerned with external affairs—those from commerce, defence, finance, industry, the environment, transport and related agencies. It also makes sense to bring in representatives of business and even NGOs that have an external affairs related vocation. That helps professional diplomats to better understand the perspectives of these organizations, and indirectly helps the foreign ministry in its wider domestic outreach to its home stakeholders.7

**COURSES FOR AMBASSADORS AND SENIOR OFFICIALS**

Until some years back such courses hardly existed.8 Today they are a key training element for countries such as Canada, China, Malaysia, UK and US; many more plan to

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7 At a recent 4-day training program in Delhi, conducted by an NGO and attended mainly by mid-level officials from several ministries, a candid discussion took place on the merits of having representatives of business and other sectors at that program. A few felt that they might not be able to speak as openly as they had, in the presence of a mixed group, but the majority view was that it would be an advantage and would permit peer exchanges. Indian agencies are now opening up to such mixed training, as never before, and this too is part of a wider trend.

8 China has run such three-month courses for envoys since the 1950s, mainly on account of the fact that it had to appoint many ambassadors from the army and the provincial administration in the early years when it was establishing its diplomatic service. The US with its long tradition of non-career envoys has also long run a much shorter course of two weeks.
introduce such high level training. Often, such courses take the character of seminars, in which the participants learn from one another. Some foreign ministries balk at the notion of training their ambassadors, but it is a great mistake to imagine that these high officials are 'too senior' to attend training courses. Rapid changes in the international environment and the craft requirements make these vital. For example, public diplomacy and building the country image (or 'brand') are new skills that have emerged in the past five years, and require the foreign ministry to operate in close harmony with other domestic partners. The same is true of handling of terrorism and security issues, and the close interconnections between the home and the international actors.

Such courses can only be conducted at home, essentially run by one's own personnel. A foreign ministry should include, in the training faculty and the course participants, home administrators, academics, think-tanks scholars, business leaders and others. Typical course duration might be as little as one week, but optimal use should be made of that time. For instance, Canada begins such courses with a stark narration of the hazards of financial and other misdeeds in embassies, to awaken ambassadors to their management tasks. Special emphasis is needed on human resource management, given that people are the only real resource that a diplomatic network possesses.

OTHER OPTIONS
One e-learning option that is useful is the 'self-learning course', consisting of a set of lectures that are supported by multimedia material (animation, film clips, verbal commentary), that is available either on a CD or can be accessed via a central server that is run by the foreign ministry. Such courses may cover basics such as document security or guidance on maintenance of property, or cover craft skills such as commercial or cultural diplomacy. The special advantage offered is that such courses are self-contained, available all the time, to be completed whenever an official wishes. Canada is a pioneer in the use of such material and has developed some 70 such courses; from simple ones to a comprehensive course that deals with inter-cultural management, at a high level of sophistication and with built-in tests that permit the participant to move to the next higher level. Every member of Canada International is required to pass this particular course. The only investment is in the preparation of the course; it is thereafter available for use at any time, at zero additional cost.

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9 This was a comment by diplomats from an Arab country. Similar conservative attitudes are encountered in other traditional settings.

10 'Canada International' is the short name for its Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, a neat way of getting away from standard terminology.
A number of other points should be considered.

1. It is essential to include officials from the home administration in almost all diplomatic training courses (except perhaps those for fresh inductees). This widens mutual horizons for the civil servants and also indirectly builds better relations between the foreign ministry and home agencies. This also applies to the corporate world.

2. Non-diplomatic level officials must be included in the training courses because they provide vital support to embassies and because modern diplomatic management mandates better use of support staff. It is a weakness of the traditional systems that they underutilize their support staff.

3. One must particularly include locally engaged staff in training programs. More and more, local staff critically contribute to the performance of the system. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, UK and others increasingly use local staff to replace home-based officials at sizable cost savings; UK even deploys some of them as ‘political officers’ in very small embassies.

4. Annual conferences of ambassadors have a training value and can be developed in that direction with careful planning (e.g. as the Germans do). Not to hold such conferences on grounds of ‘economy’ is a serious miscalculation. While ambassadors can meet on a regional basis (say during a visit abroad by the foreign minister or the prime minister, or a conference held in a particular regional context), these are no substitute for the full conference of all envoys, held in the home capital.

5. All diplomats, regardless of level, should travel within the country to familiarize themselves with the changing scene and build personal contacts with chambers of commerce, corporates, thinktanks and academic institutions and others, and reach out to a range of domestic stakeholders. This action also serves the foreign ministry in improving its home outreach, which is a basic requirement in all situations today.

6. The practice of ‘in’ and ‘out’ placement of foreign ministry officials is another valuable device for building interconnections with home agencies and for widening mutual horizons among the diplomatic personnel and the home administrators. Empirical evidence shows this to be the hallmark of good systems.
A corporate dictum declares: ‘training is not a cost but an investment’. The organization must calculate its ‘ROI’ (return on investment) in this as in other areas. Under the globally-recognized ISO system, a new international training standard has emerged, ‘ISO 10015’. At least one foreign service training academy is in the process of getting itself qualified under this scientific standard—in the same way that the French Ministry of External Affairs has obtained ISO certification for its economic services and the Thailand Foreign Ministry for its consular services. This is surely a trend that will gain momentum in the years ahead.

Among the surveys that a diplomatic system might ideally carry out are the following:

- An assessment of perceived training needs in its own system, among the key departments, major embassies and also the key partner ministries.
- An assessment of all its officials who have attended training programs, many months and years after the conclusion of those programs, on the concrete value derived and the learning retained from participation in different courses. (A survey of a just concluded course is considered by experts to be of little value, since it is influenced by the ‘happiness factor’ and leads to false conclusions.)
- An assessment from its departments and embassies that have used the trainees, on their experience of the skills and knowledge that they have brought with them and the elements that are missing.

Without such surveys, the training program operates in limbo, isolated from reality. While the surveys provide the data, training policy has to depend on carefully conducted evaluation by the foreign ministry’s top management, on the current and projected requirements. In today’s complex international environment, training merits attention at the highest level.

CONCLUSION
By its nature, diplomatic training is *sui generis*, focused on specific professional skills. The training software is almost never available off-the-shelf and it is expensive to develop one’s own material. One cannot get value from training experts from other fields, including the corporate world, though general advice on pedagogy is always relevant. Published information on diplomatic training in foreign ministries is seldom available. The small size of the market makes it unattractive for commercial enterprises that specialize in corporate training.

At the same time, diplomatic services can learn a good deal from one another—this is often neglected by foreign ministries. The key is to choose the right mix of countries
for such mutual learning. Sharing course materials, simulation exercise does take place, but there is ample scope for doing more. Entities such as the EU are ahead in the learning curve on such mutual exchanges, but the notion is only slowly gaining ground in other regional cooperation bodies.

The Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, a unique training institution with its historical experience, runs an annual series of meetings of diplomatic training institutions (mentioned earlier), traditionally held in Vienna and at an overseas location in rotation. This is a fine clearing house for new ideas, though the three-day meetings among so many participants perhaps do not permit more than broad discussion of major themes.

The annual meeting of the diplomatic training academies deans established by the ‘ASEAN + 3’ group is an excellent forum, and now that the ‘East Asia Summit’ group of 16 states has emerged (the original 13 member countries plus Australia, India and New Zealand), it is surely worthwhile to include them as well, the more so as they have valid experiences to bring to this Asian entity.

Let us now come back to diplomatic training in the way Professor Oakeshott posited the issue. Baumgartner’s renowned knowledge theory identifies three categories: L1, which is factual knowledge or ‘know that’; L2, which relates to procedure knowledge or ‘know how’; and L3, which is social practice or ‘knowledge in practice’. Applied to diplomacy, knowledge of international affairs, law, IR theory and the rest is factual knowledge but this just provides the base for the professional’s expertise. The bulk of what he knows is in the category of L2, which is practical ‘know how and do how’. And when applied well, these skills become L3, knowledge in action.

Even in the days of classic diplomacy, and in the Inter-War years of the first half of the 20th century that are captured in the famous writings of Harold Nicolson and Satow, diplomats were expected to demonstrate high personal virtue, plus a wide range of professional skills. The catalogue of demands made on them has only become longer with the rising importance new activities: economic and other promotional work, dealing with the media, outreach to stakeholders outside the charmed circles of the official interlocutors, public diplomacy, domestic outreach, country image management and the like.

In one literal sense, diplomats belong to the elites in their countries—not by their class origin or academic background but simply in the fact that each of them has been chosen out of a very large number of applicants. In some countries barely one in a
thousand applicants gets into the diplomatic service. This rigorous selection imposes a large obligation on them, to live up to expectations. We should couple such expectations, from the public and those that originate from the diplomats themselves, with the challenging work environment and its new demands; we must conclude that training is more central to the foreign ministry than ever before. For the top management of the foreign ministry, training is a core function that shapes its total performance.

Therefore, while this profession depends on knowledge in practice, the pace of events is such in contemporary times that the system simply cannot depend upon the slow accumulation of learning that took place a generation and more in the past, during one’s career span, mostly under the mentorship of experienced envoys. While learning from example and mentorship remains important, the range of craft skills involved need to be put across in a structured fashion, which is possible only through organized training programs. Continual training is thus an absolute, indispensable necessity.