



Higher Education Policy Institute

The soft-power benefits of educating the world's leaders

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Introduction

It is often said that the number of current world leaders who chose to be educated in another country can serve as a useful, though rough and incomplete, indicator of 'soft power'. So, since 2015, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has been publishing desk research on the tertiary education of serving heads of state and heads of government.

Originally, back in 2015, the plan was for HEPI to update some research produced by the British Council, which counted how many world leaders were educated in the UK.¹ Since 2017, however, we have looked each year at how many sitting world leaders in 195 countries around the globe were educated in other countries too.

- In 2017, we found **58 leaders of 49 countries** had studied at a higher level in the UK, 57 leaders of 51 countries had been educated in the US and 34 leaders of 26 countries had studied in France.²
- In 2018, we found **57 leaders of 52 countries** had studied at a higher level in the UK, but that 58 leaders of 53 countries had been educated in the US and 40 leaders of 31 countries had studied in France.³

As all other countries were far behind, the 2017 research was published under the headline 'UK is (just) number 1 for educating the world's leaders' and the 2018 work appeared under the headline 'UK slips behind the US, which takes the number one slot, for educating the world's leaders'.

Two points do not denote a trend. But more than two may. So this paper updates the work for a third year in a row.

In 2019, we look at 337 current world leaders and find **59 leaders in 53 countries** were educated in the UK compared to 62 leaders from 55 countries who were educated in the US and 40 leaders of 32 countries had studied in France.⁴

Although the period in a question is relatively brief, the picture is clear and consistent.

The UK does well compared to nearly every other country in the world and, in 2019, there are actually more serving world leaders educated in the UK than in either 2017 or 2018. Notably, the UK has educated more world leaders than any other European country: the other EU27 countries have together educated 66 world leaders, but France alone accounts for nearly two-thirds of these. Together, the UK and France have educated almost four times as many serving world leaders educated outside of their own home country as the rest of the EU put together; or, to put it another way, 79 per cent of world leaders who were educated outside their home country but in an EU country went to the UK or France.

Yet, each year, the UK's position relative to that of the US has deteriorated. Back in 2017, the UK had educated more serving world leaders than any other country in the world. In 2018, the US slipped ahead of the UK. Now, in 2019, the US has extended its lead. With apologies to Oscar Wilde, it could be said that losing the lead was a misfortune, but falling further behind afterwards begins to look like carelessness.

Counting the education of world leaders

Creating a list of where existing world leaders were educated sounds easy but is actually quite challenging.

1. You have to decide what a 'leader' is. We define the term in a restrictive way to mean only heads of state and heads of government (such as monarchs, presidents and prime ministers). As countries typically have more than one of these (for example, a monarch and a prime minister), it is possible for a country to have more than one current leader educated in another state.

2. You have to define what a country is. We recognise this is a sensitive issue. Every possible solution is open to criticism. We opt to define countries as places that are members of, or observers at, the United Nations – currently amounting to 195 places. This means, for example, that Palestine is covered but Taiwan is not. Beyond this, each country is given equal weighting, irrespective of size, wealth or influence in the world.

3. You have to decide what types of tertiary education count. We take a broad definition so, for example, attendance at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst counts as much as being a student at the University of Oxford.

4. You have to decide whether only some qualifications or periods of study count. Again, we take a liberal view. So a year abroad in the UK counts just as much as a whole degree or a doctorate. However, we filter out individuals we know to have studied via distance learning. This is because the potential soft-power benefits of educating someone who goes on to lead their country may be lower when they have studied in their own home country. So, for example, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the President of Zimbabwe, is excluded even though he holds qualifications from the University of London, which were obtained while he was imprisoned.

5. You have to decide whether to exclude anyone because they seem unpalatable. We make no moral judgements on who should or should not be included. Any full discussion on the pros and cons of soft power should capture as many people as possible. No one is excluded, meaning some individuals that higher education institutions may be less proud to have educated are included.

Another challenge remains even after resolving all these issues: collecting robust information. The educational background of some world leaders is surprisingly opaque. Some of our sources are therefore less detailed and trustworthy than others. For example, sometimes we have come across information suggesting someone has studied in the UK but further research has then disproved this, leading them to be excluded from the UK data. Every year, we have been open about the limitations of the information we have obtained and we welcome feedback that might enable us to build a more complete and precise picture.

When interpreting the results, it is important to remember that someone can be educated in more

than one country. For example, someone who studied as an undergraduate in one foreign country and a postgraduate in another would appear in both countries' totals.

It is also important to emphasise that education in one's own home country is excluded from the data. So, for example, Boris Johnson's university education in the UK and Donald Trump's university education in the US are not included in the figures for these countries. Although Her Majesty the Queen is the head of state for many different countries, this makes no difference to the numbers because she did not attend a higher education institution.

Results

The UK's Home Office has been keen to emphasise that, despite its various crackdowns on international students, it wants 'the brightest and the best' to study in the UK.⁵ But, this year, the US has cemented its position as the most popular place of study for overseas students who later go on to lead their countries.

Where world leaders were educated

	2019	2018	2017
US	62	58	57
UK	59	57	58
France	40	40	34
Russia	10	10	9
Australia	9	9	9

Compared to 2017, the UK has increased the number of serving world leaders it has educated by one. In the same period, the US total has increased by five. The result is that the US, which overtook the UK last year, has now confirmed its position in the top spot and extended its lead from one world leader to three.

While the UK remains in second place overall, the third-placed country, France, has made greater strides than either the US or the UK since 2017. In 2019, 40 world leaders spent time being educated in France, six more than in 2017. However, all this growth came in the figures for 2018 and there has been no additional increase since then.

The US, UK and France remain some way ahead of other countries. Those that come next are Russia (10) and Australia (9) which are, in turn, some way ahead of those that come after: Switzerland (5); Canada (4); Portugal (4); Austria (4); Germany (4);

Egypt (3) Spain (3); Belgium (3); the Netherlands (3); Italy (3); and Zambia (3).

Notably, the countries with the best record are more likely to speak English (the US, the UK and Australia) and / or to have wide spheres of influence resulting from history (the UK, France and Russia). For instance, France's strong showing is, in part, a reflection of its historic presence in Africa.

It is likely that the wider picture will continue to shift, at least if overall trends in international students are any guide to the education of future world leaders. In particular, the figure for the number of world leaders educated in Australia might be expected to improve in due course as a result of the big increase in the proportion of international students who study there. In 2018, speaking about recent trends, Professor Simon Marginson from the Centre for Global Higher Education, noted:

Australian [international students] numbers are growing at 12-14 per cent a year – while the UK is standing still. Unless UK policy changes tack, the nation will continue to lose global market share.⁶

Growth in the number of people crossing borders for higher education has been so strong in recent years that any country that is not increasing its numbers significantly is falling back against its competitors in terms of global share.

As there is generally a time lag between a person studying in the UK and becoming a leader of their own home country, we might expect the UK's relative position to deteriorate further in due course, as a delayed reaction to the restrictive policies towards international students after 2010.

Conclusion

Soft power is hard to measure. Counting world leaders is a useful but imperfect way to do it. There are challenges in successfully counting how many people were educated in other countries and in evaluating the significance of the results.

HEPI has also undertaken alternative ways of measuring the impact of educating people from other countries, including looking at the net economic benefits as well as the tax payments and National Insurance Contributions of those former overseas students who stay in the UK to work.⁷ Taken together, our output seems to confirm the

old adage that international students are 'The best ambassadors a nation has'.⁸

One other way of measuring soft power is to obtain qualitative evidence. This also provides an incomplete picture but it can still be a powerful supplement to other information. For example, a piece of research published by the UK Government captured the words of someone from China who had been funded by a scholarship to attend the University of Cambridge. He said:

[You] have a friend down in China. [Cambridge UK is] my second hometown, always. When I have a negotiation with [the] Bank of England, I always go kind of emotionally bonded. I feel like there's a bridge between China and UK at my job in the [Chinese] Central Bank. When the Bank of England or other UK people visit me in my office or duty, I will [treat them] like family, quite like a kind of large family, like an old friend. Emotionally bonded.⁹

Such anecdotes are a useful reminder that the number of world leaders educated in other countries is not, on its own, a complete measure of soft power. But as a snapshot, the exercise reveals something useful about a nation's ability to attract the world's future decision makers.

If the UK's position is to hold firm, or even improve, then the approach towards international students needs to be a core part of the wider conversation about the country's future role in the world.

A number of specific proposals for attracting more of the most talented people from abroad to study in the UK have been suggested, including:

- minimising red tape and bureaucratic hoops for those seeking visas;
- forcing the Home Office to share responsibility for international students with other government departments; and
- more generous post-study work rules.

The data presented in this note may show the UK slipping back a little at a time of unprecedented uncertainty on the nation's future. But it is never too late to start conveying a warmer welcome to the world's future leaders.

Annex: World leaders educated in the UK, 2017-2019

	2019	2018	2017
Antigua and Barbuda	1	1	1
Armenia	1	1	--
Australia	--	1	1
Bahrain	2	2	2
Barbados	1	1	--
Belgium	1	1	1
Bhutan	1	1	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	--	1	1
Botswana	--	--	1
Brunei	1	1	1
Burma	1	1	2
Cameroon	1	--	--
Columbia	--	--	1
Costa Rica	1	1	--
Cyprus	1	1	1
Denmark	1	1	1
Dominica	1	1	1
Egypt	1	1	1
The Gambia	1	1	1
Ghana	1	1	1
Guyana	1	1	1
Hungary	1	1	1
Iceland	1	1	1
Iran	1	1	1
Iraq	1	1	1
Ireland	1	1	1
Italy	1	1	--
Japan	1	--	--
Jordan	1	1	1
Lesotho	1	1	1

Liechtenstein	1	1	1
Luxembourg	1	1	1
Malawi	1	1	1
Malaysia	1	1	2
Malta	2	1	1
Mauritius	1	1	2
Monaco	1	1	1
Mozambique	2	2	2
Namibia	1	1	1
Nepal	--	--	1
Nigeria	1	1	2
Norway	1	1	1
Oman	1	1	1
Pakistan	1	1	--
Palestine	1	1	1
Peru	1	1	2
Qatar	2	2	2
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1	1	1
Serbia	1	1	1
Sierra Leone	2	2	--
Singapore	1	1	1
Somalia	1	1	1
Switzerland	1	--	--
Syria	1	1	1
Tonga	1	1	1
Tuvalu	1	1	1
United Arab Emirates	2	2	2
Yemen	1	1	1
TOTAL	59	57	58

Numbers are for the moment when the research was undertaken (each summer) and not for the whole calendar year.

Endnotes

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-29361704>
- <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/08/05/uk-just-number-1-educating-worlds-leaders/> - two additional world leaders educated in the UK were found after this work was published and are included in the 2017 data for this note.
- <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/08/14/uk-slips-behind-us-takes-number-one-slot-educating-worlds-leaders/>
- A spreadsheet with the full results is available from HEPI.
- See, for example, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-student-rules-to-attract-brightest-and-best>
- <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2018/jul/uk-slipping-third-place-international-higher-education-research-shows>
- <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/01/11/new-figures-show-international-students-worth-22-7-billion-uk-cost-2-3-billion-net-gain-31-million-per-constituency-310-per-uk-resident/>; <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/03/21/just-one-cohort-of-international-students-who-stay-in-the-uk-to-work-pay-3-2-billion-in-tax-and-they-arent-taking-jobs-from-uk-citizens/>
- Gareth Williams, 'Introduction', in Gareth Williams, Martin Kenyon and Lynn Williams (eds), *Readings in Overseas Student Policy*, 1987, p.10
- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/240407/bis-13-1172-the-wider-benefits-of-international-higher-education-in-the-uk.pdf

