



Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI Annual Soft-Power Ranking 2020

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Introduction

The number of serving world leaders educated in another country is widely regarded as a proxy for 'soft power'. When a country has educated a relatively high number of people who go on to lead their own countries, this is thought to reflect the influence of the host country and it may bring diplomatic and trade benefits. International students have been called 'The best ambassadors a nation has'¹ and the British Council believes 'familiarity with the UK matters'.²

Each summer, the Higher Education Policy Institute tracks the tertiary education of current heads of state and heads of government and publishes the results as the HEPI Annual Soft-Power Ranking. Past iterations have featured in the Government's *International Education Strategy* (March 2019) and are regularly quoted by Ministers.³

When we started looking at the education of serving world leaders back in 2015, we looked only at how many world leaders were educated in the UK. However, since 2017, we have also looked at how many were educated in other countries too. In the first year, we found the UK had educated more world leaders than any other country, but the US overtook the UK in 2018 and extended its lead in 2019.

- In 2017, we noted the 'UK is (just) number 1 for educating the world's leaders': 58 leaders of 49 different countries had studied at a higher level in the UK – compared to 57 leaders of 51 different countries who had studied in the US.
- In 2018, we noted the 'UK slips behind the US': 57 leaders of 52 different countries had studied at a higher level in the UK – compared to 58 leaders of 53 different countries who had studied in the US.
- In 2019, we noted the 'US extends its lead over the UK': 59 leaders of 53 different countries had studied at a higher level in the UK – compared to 62 leaders of 55 different countries who had studied in the US.⁴

This year, we find the UK has fallen even further behind the US.

- In 2020, 57 leaders of 52 different countries studied at a higher level in the UK, compared to 62 leaders of 58 different countries who studied in the US.

One or two data points cannot show a trend, but more than two may do so. Taking the last four years of results together, we see a clear and consistent pattern: the UK's position has deteriorated relative to the US in each year.

However, over a quarter of countries (52 out of 195) are led by someone educated in the UK, which does well compared to every other country except the US.

Methodology

World leaders are defined as heads of state and heads of government (such as monarchs, presidents and prime ministers) and we consider 354 such positions around the world. A country can have more than one leader, such as a monarch and a prime minister. For example, Switzerland has as many as seven for the Federal Council is the collective head of state and government – though this makes limited difference to the results as most of them studied in their home country only.

Countries are defined as states that are members of, or observers at, the United Nations – currently amounting to 195 places in total. So we include Palestine and the Vatican City but neither Kosovo nor Taiwan. Each country is treated the same irrespective of size, wealth or population.

Tertiary education is defined broadly, including – for example – attendance at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. However, distance learning is excluded because the soft-power benefits are likely to be lower. This means Emmerson Mnangagwa, the President of Zimbabwe, is excluded even though he holds qualifications from the University of London, as is Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda.

No one is excluded on moral grounds. We make no moral judgements on who should or should not be included, meaning – for example – that controversial figures, such as Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar, and Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, are all included in the UK figures.

Some people have been educated in more than one foreign country and therefore count towards the total for more than one country. For example, Giuseppe Conte, the Prime Minister of Italy has apparently studied in the UK, the US, France and Austria (although his educational record is less easy to check than for some other world leaders), and the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, undertook military training in the UK and the US.

The educational background of some leaders is opaque. For example, it has been claimed in the past that George Weah, the President of Liberia, has a Bachelor's degree in Sports Management from Parkwood University in London. As this was a diploma mill with no degree-awarding powers, Weah is excluded from the figures for the UK, although he is included in the total for the US as he later studied for a degree in Business Administration at DeVry University. There have also been reports that the Marketing and Communication degree certificate from Belgium's Institute of Commercial Careers presented by Félix Tshisekedi, the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a forgery (although we have included it in the total for Belgium in our accompanying spreadsheet for now).

Education in one's own home country is excluded. So Boris Johnson's UK education and Donald Trump's US education are not included. While Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state for 16 different countries, she did not attend a higher education institution, so this makes no difference to the totals.

As a number of world leaders change every year, we can only provide a snapshot and the fieldwork for this project was completed at the end of July 2020.

Given the limitations of the available evidence, we welcome feedback that might enable us to build up a more complete picture.

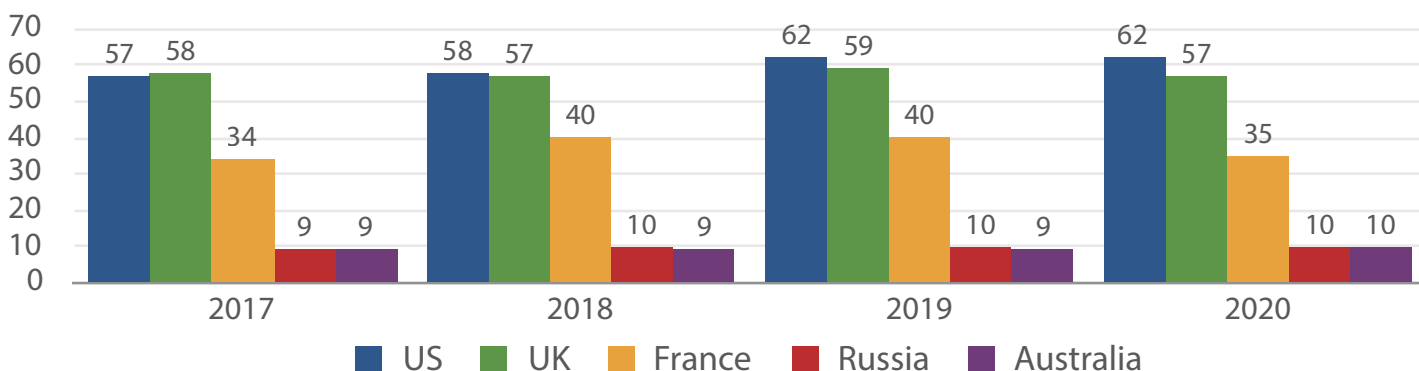
Detailed results

In 2017, the UK had educated one more serving world leader than the US. This position reversed in 2018, when the US had educated one more than the UK. In 2019, the US increased its lead to three. This year, the US lead has further increased to five.

	2017	2018	2019	2020
US	57	58 ↑	62 ↑	62 ↔
UK	58	57 ↓	59 ↑	57 ↓
France	34	40 ↑	40 ↔	35 ↓
Russia	9	10 ↑	10 ↔	10 ↔
Australia	9	9 ↔	9 ↔	10 ↑

The UK remains in second place overall but is the only high-performing country to have seen two drops since the baseline year of 2017. The US, in contrast, has seen two increases and no reduction in the same period. France remains comfortably in third place, although it has slipped back significantly this year, having educated five fewer world leaders in 2020 compared with 2019 or 2018.

Serving world leaders educated abroad

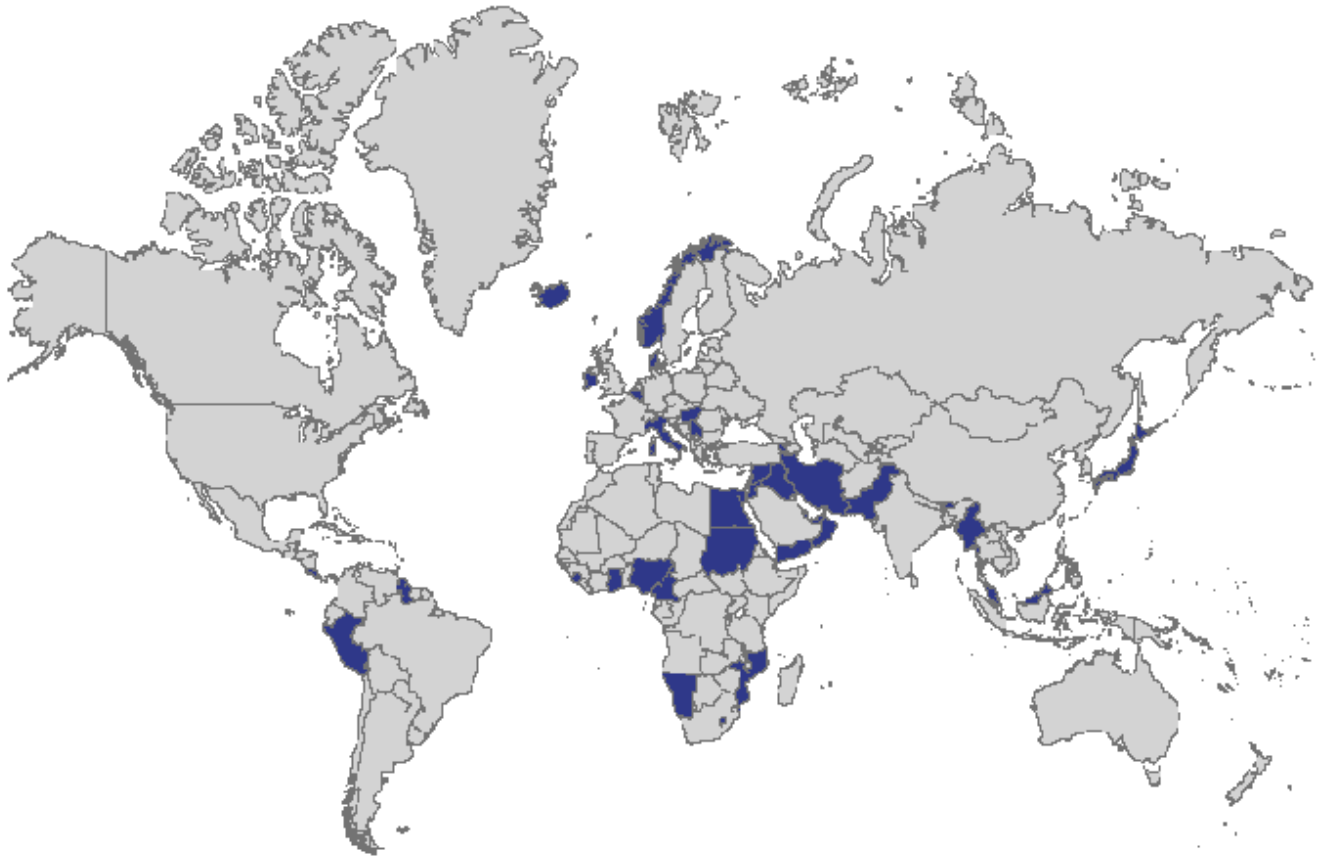


The US, UK and France remain ahead of all other countries while Russia and Australia are in fourth place, with 10 leaders apiece, due to a small increase (+1) in Australia's total. Next come Spain (5), Switzerland (4), Austria (4), Canada (4), Germany (4), Portugal (4), Egypt (3), India (3), New Zealand (3), South Africa (3) and Belgium (3).

The 27 EU countries together educated only three more (60) serving world leaders who were educated outside their own country than the UK. A majority (14) of the 27 countries in the EU have not educated any current leader of another country.

The countries with the best records do well not only because of the quality of their educational institutions but also for historic and geopolitical reasons. They are likely to have had wide spheres of influence (such as France, Russia and the UK) or to speak English: of the 188 world leaders educated abroad, nearly two-thirds (115) studied in one or more of the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand.

Countries with a leader educated in the UK tertiary sector



Countries with a leader educated in the US tertiary sector

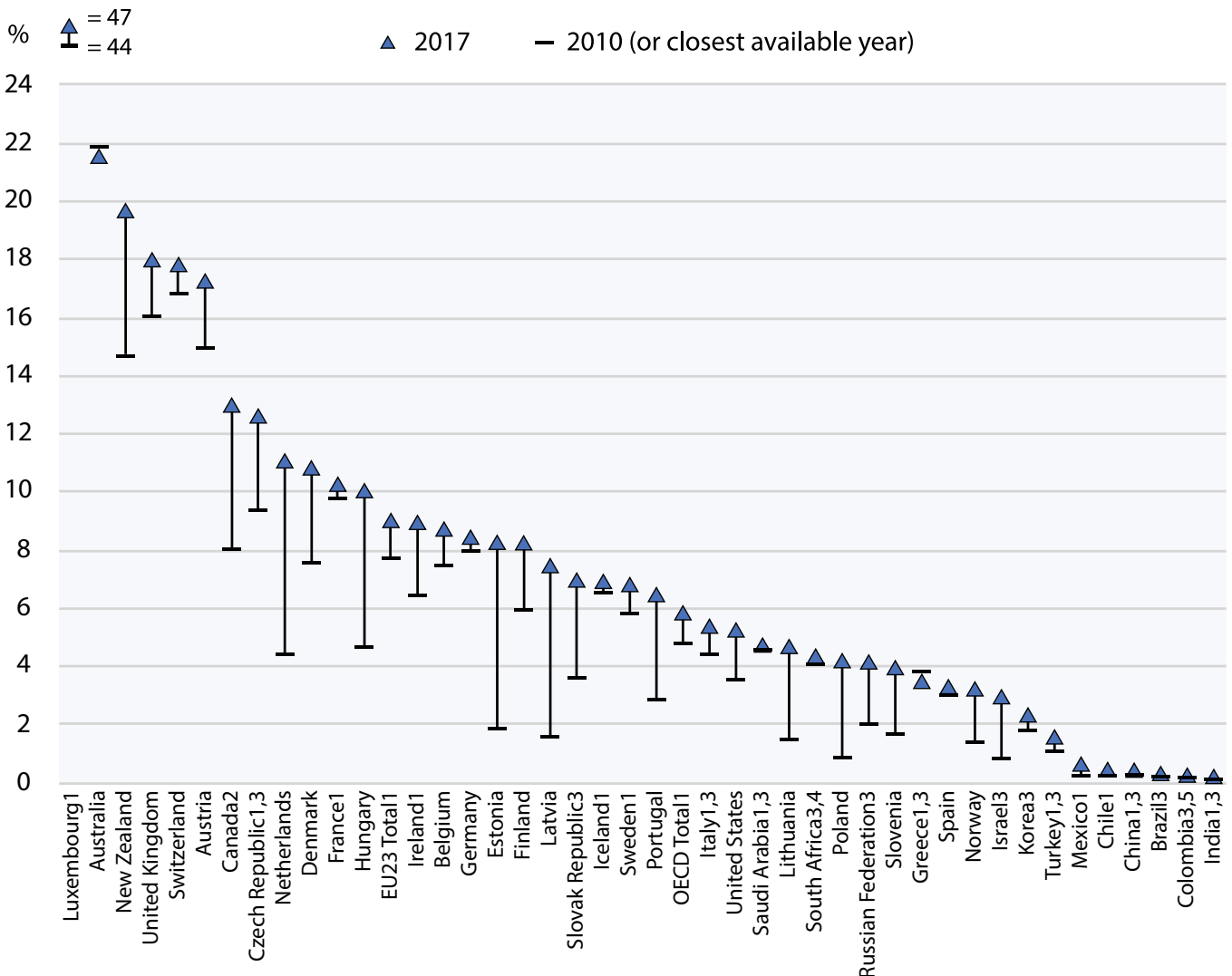


Discussion

Some of the countries that perform best have notably high tuition fees for international students. Counter-intuitively, although many people – especially those in developing countries – are clearly unable to afford the high fees often charged to international students, high fees may sometimes increase demand as they can be seen to signal high-quality education on the principle that ‘if it’s free, it can’t be any good.’⁵ Moreover, the ability to charge high fees to international students provides institutions with a clear incentive to recruit more students and more income, which can be used to cross-subsidise prestige-building activities, such as research.⁶

As there is usually a time gap between a person studying in another country and then becoming a leader of their own country, we might expect the UK’s relative position to deteriorate further in coming years, as the UK’s restrictive approach to international students since 2010 has dampened demand. Data from the OECD showing the percentage of students made up by international students also show some other countries, such as New Zealand, Canada and a number of EU states, have meanwhile seen much bigger proportionate increases in international students.

International student enrolments as a percentage of total enrolments in tertiary education⁷



Notes: 1. Years of reference 2013 and 2017; 2. Years of reference 2012 and 2017; 3. Share of foreign rather than international students; 4. Years of reference 2013 and 2016; 5. Years of reference 2014 and 2017.

Looking further ahead, nothing is inevitable. The UK Government is currently liberalising its rules on post-study work rights for international students, has recently appointed a new International Education Champion (Sir Steve Smith) and has committed to refresh its *International Education Strategy*. Meanwhile, there are increasingly loud concerns in Australia about the reliance on international students and tension between the US and some other countries, such as China, is rising. The longer-term impact of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic on international student flows is also unknown.

Conclusion

Soft power is hard to measure. Counting world leaders is a useful but imperfect way of doing it. One limitation as a guide to soft power is that it treats all countries the same, yet many of the most influential countries in the world, such as the BRIC countries (Brazil, China, India and Russia) as well as the US and UK themselves, are led by people who were educated only at home rather than abroad.

There are challenges in counting how many people were educated in other countries and in evaluating the significance of the results. But the strenuous efforts that different countries and their educational institutions make to recruit the 'brightest and best' people from other countries suggests where someone is educated is thought to matter.

In separate work, HEPI – with Kaplan International Pathways and London Economics – has measured the impact of educating people from other countries in different ways, such as looking at the net economic benefits and the tax payments and National Insurance Contributions of former overseas students who stay in the UK to work.⁸

In the 2019 HEPI Soft-Power Ranking, we noted the calls for improvements to the rules on international students in the UK, such as for less red tape, more cross-government working and improved rules on post-study work. We concluded 'it is never too late to start conveying a warmer welcome to the world's future leaders.'

Although the impact of Brexit was being hotly debated then, no one had predicted the disruption to international student flows arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Recent announcements on the rules governing international students coming to the UK to study are welcome but we now need to see them through and we may need to supplement them with further changes if the UK is to emerge from the pandemic as the destination of choice for even more talented people from around the globe.

Endnotes

- 1 Gareth Williams, 'Introduction', in Gareth Williams, Martin Kenyon and Lynn Williams (eds), *Readings in Overseas Student Policy*, 1987, p.10
- 2 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/sources-soft-power-report-perceptions-success.pdf>
- 3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799349/International_Education_Strategy_Accessible.pdf; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-sets-ambition-for-international-collaboration>
- 4 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/09/05/us-extends-its-lead-over-the-uk-in-hepis-annual-soft-power-rankings/>
- 5 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/french-bid-to-lure-students-from-uk-after-brex-it-d290bg5xr>
- 6 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Two-sides-of-the-same-coin-Brexit-and-future-student-demand.pdf>;
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/09/why-the-uk-will-miss-the-rd-targets-if-we-cut-funding-for-students/>
- 7 https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2019_f8d7880d-en#page1
- 8 <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/>

Annex: World leaders educated in the UK, 2017-2020

Numbers are for the research period (each summer), rather than the whole year.

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Antigua and Barbuda	1	1	1	1
Armenia	0	1	1	1
Australia	1	1	0	0
Bahrain	2	2	2	2
Barbados	0	1	1	1
Belgium	1	1	1	1
Bhutan	1	1	1	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	1	0	0
Botswana	1	0	0	0
Brunei	1	1	1	1
Burma	2	1	1	1
Cameroon	0	0	1	1
Columbia	1	0	0	0
Costa Rica	0	1	1	1
Cyprus	1	1	1	1
Denmark	1	1	1	1
Dominica	1	1	1	1
Egypt	1	1	1	1
The Gambia	1	1	1	1
Ghana	1	1	1	1
Guyana	1	1	1	1
Hungary	1	1	1	1
Iceland	1	1	1	1
Iran	1	1	1	1
Iraq	1	1	1	1
Ireland	1	1	1	1
Italy	0	1	1	1
Japan	0	0	1	1
Jordan	1	1	1	1
Lebanon	0	0	0	1
Lesotho	1	1	1	1
Liechtenstein	1	1	1	1
Luxembourg	1	1	1	1
Malawi	1	1	1	0
Malaysia	2	1	1	1
Malta	1	1	2	1

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Mauritius	2	1	1	2
Monaco	1	1	1	1
Mozambique	2	2	2	2
Namibia	1	1	1	1
Nepal	1	0	0	0
Nigeria	2	1	1	1
Norway	1	1	1	1
Oman	1	1	1	1
Pakistan	0	1	1	1
Palestine	1	1	1	1
Peru	2	1	1	1
Qatar	2	2	2	1
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1	1	1	1
Serbia	1	1	1	1
Sierra Leone	0	2	2	2
Singapore	1	1	1	1
Somalia	1	1	1	0
Sudan	0	0	0	1
Switzerland	0	0	1	1
Syria	1	1	1	1
Tonga	1	1	1	1
Tuvalu	1	1	1	0
United Arab Emirates	2	2	2	2
Yemen	1	1	1	1
TOTAL	58	57	59	57

The 58 countries with at least one leader educated in the United States are: Afghanistan; The Bahamas; Bahrain; Belgium; Belize; Bhutan (2); Botswana; Bulgaria; Chile; Colombia; Croatia; Dominica; Dominican Republic; Egypt; Eswatini; Fiji; Georgia; Greece; Grenada; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Guyana (2); Honduras; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Ivory Coast; Japan; Jordan (2); Kenya; Latvia; Lebanon; Lesotho; Liberia; Malawi; Marshall Islands; Micronesia; Monaco; Namibia (2); Nigeria; Pakistan; Palau; Panama; Paraguay; Peru; Poland; Qatar; Rwanda; Saint Lucia; Serbia; Sierra Leone; Singapore; Somalia; South Korea; Spain; Togo; Tonga; and Uganda.



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