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The 2026 Soft-Power Index: 10th anniversary edition

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SOFT POWER

About the author

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In addition to his HEPI work, he has written for a variety of think tanks and academic journals on education policy, contemporary history and modern politics.

He has experience serving as a governor of multiple educational institutions, including universities and schools.

Earlier in his career, he was a History teacher and he also spent time working on policy at the Association of British Insurers. At the 2010 general election, he was the runner-up in Cambridge.

In 2025, Nick was awarded an OBE for 'services to higher education'.

He has worked on every wave of the *Soft-Power Index* since it began.

This report has been kindly sponsored by Cambridge University Press & Assessment, which spreads knowledge, sparks curiosity and aids understanding around the world through qualifications, assessments, academic publications and original research.

The detailed desk research on which this report is based was undertaken for HEPI by an independent researcher who has compiled the results for HEPI since the Index first began. We are very grateful for this work.

The author also wishes to acknowledge that much of Chapter 3 is heavily based on a single authoritative book: *A History of Foreign Students in Britain* (2014) by Hilary Perraton. He recommends this work to anyone who wants to know more about the issues discussed herein.

Foreword

**Francesca Woodward, Global Managing Director, English
Cambridge University Press & Assessment**

Soft power, broadly defined as one country's ability to influence another through attraction rather than force, is notoriously difficult to measure. Its indicators can be subjective. Its relation to more conventional forms of power can be opaque.

For the past 10 years, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has been examining soft power through one insightful lens: counting the number of serving world leaders who pursued higher education in countries other than their own.

Educating the world's future leaders is one of the many means by which a country projects its values. By this metric, the UK punches above its weight.

This is a helpful proxy, among many other indicators, for how higher education bolsters a country's influence.

Universities contribute to knowledge through scholarship and research. They foster international collaboration and partnership. They are incubators of business and innovation.

Universities catalyse and amplify soft power in multiple ways. Policymakers intent on boosting their country's global influence should be mindful of higher education's enormous impact.

As HEPI's report demonstrates, the impact of pursuing international education is deep and enduring.

This belief in education as an enabler of success guides the work of Cambridge University Press & Assessment. We are part of a world-leading university. We are an academic publisher whose books and journals contribute to knowledge globally. We are an exam board whose

qualifications are internationally recognised. We collaborate with governments around the world to help raise standards of education. We provide English language tests that offer globally mobile students a passport to life-changing opportunities. In doing those things, we reach 100 million learners around the world. Many of those learners will one day be among the leaders that HEPI's *Soft-Power Index* has been diligently quantifying.

Cambridge is proud to support HEPI's *Soft-Power Index* in its tenth edition. If soft power relies on the ability to project values globally, the insights from this year's report tell us why thinking strategically about soft power assets – from language, culture and business to education and science – matters more than ever.

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Introduction

This is the tenth wave of the HEPI *Soft-Power Index*, which began in 2017 and has been published every year since. This year, for the first time, we are pleased to be producing the Index in conjunction with Cambridge University Press & Assessment, who have kindly provided sponsorship for the project.

We first conducted research on which world leaders had been educated at a tertiary level in the UK back in 2015 – having been heavily influenced by earlier work from the British Council, which itself had other precedents.¹

But the *Soft-Power Index* itself, which counts not only those VVIPs (Very Very Important People) from around the world who were educated in the UK but also those who were educated elsewhere, first began a decade ago.²

The *Index* has taken on a life of its own since, perhaps best illustrated by a comment made to HEPI from a special adviser inside Whitehall some years ago:

*You won't believe how much these stats are cited on the inside in soft power discussions.*³

If we did not believe it then, we certainly believe it now. The Index featured in England's *Post-16 Education and Skills* white paper (October 2025), was the first piece of evidence prayed in aid in the UK Government's *International Education Strategy* (January 2026) and has led to various official enquiries from other countries' governments.⁴ In recent times, HEPI staff have discussed the Index's importance with officials working on soft power in the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, others have sought to emulate the work.⁵ We welcome this, both as healthy competition and as a useful crosscheck for our results.

The level of engagement the Index has always enjoyed has encouraged us to keep developing it in new ways.

In 2025, for example, we looked for the first time at which institutions the individuals in question had studied at, not merely the country to which they had moved for their higher education. Harvard University, the University of Oxford and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst took the top three spots (as they do again in 2026).

This year, to mark the tenth anniversary, we have tried to contextualise the results to a much greater degree than in the past, particularly by looking back over the long sweep of history during which people have moved to the British Isles to try and better themselves through higher education. As a result, the Index is a more substantial piece of work than usual this year. In 2019 and 2020, the results appeared as a HEPI Policy Note but usually they have just been covered in a HEPI press release with no underlying report beneath, whereas this year the results are being published as a full-length HEPI Report for the first time.

This year, we are also making the full spreadsheet containing the detailed results freely available for all to see on the HEPI website.

Chapter 1: What is soft power?

The concept of soft power is sometimes defined quite fuzzily, even if most people who have considered the issue have a rough idea of what it means and how it contrasts with the hard power represented by military might.

When discussing soft power in recent times, the UK Government has put a focus on ‘global influence’ underpinned by the role of ‘culture and creative industries, sport, education and institutions’, all of which it sees as ‘a hugely important driver of UK economic growth and security.’⁶ The GREAT campaign, first launched in 2012 but still going strong, seeks to bring coherence to the perception of the UK abroad and to maximise the soft-power benefits.⁷

Soft power partly comes from the power of networks, especially perhaps the networks built up while studying at a formative part of people’s lives. While the evidence for this may be partly anecdotal, it is certainly what philanthropists, politicians and other policymakers have tended to believe.

For example, the scheme now known as Chevening Scholarships, which is overseen by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, was designed with the explicit ‘object of attracting students who will not only benefit themselves but whose study and experience here will be of advantage to this country.’⁸ Today, Government Ministers trumpet the results:

Chevening’s 60,000 alumni community includes 22 current or former heads of state or government while around 15 per cent of alumni hold prominent positions in government and 10 are currently serving as Ambassadors / High Commissioners in the UK.⁹

HEPI has been tracking the journey of one Chevening Scholar, Naimat Zafary, who was on the last British evacuation flight from Kabul as the

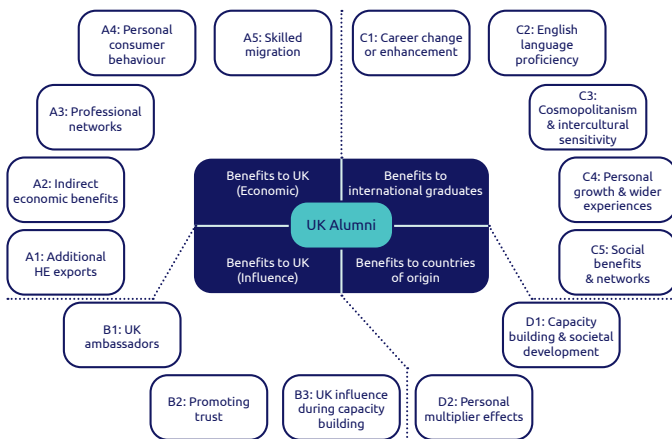
Taliban re-took control.¹⁰ He has written:

I have seen firsthand how hard power shatters lives. But the alternative soft-power of education possesses a quiet, enduring power to heal. And the healing that this may and can bring about is what is needed most in such societies and communities.

For me, that healing has come through the UK Government's recognition of this need for healing and its generosity. In August 2021, a Chevening Scholarship opened the doors of the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Sussex to me. That single opportunity transformed my life. It allowed a former child refugee to stand before you today as a Doctor of International Development, committed to serving my cherished homes: in Afghanistan, Great Britain and the wider communities worldwide.

More generally, a research paper on *The Wider Benefits of International Higher Education in the UK*, published by the Coalition Government in 2013, found 15 types of benefit, as shown below.

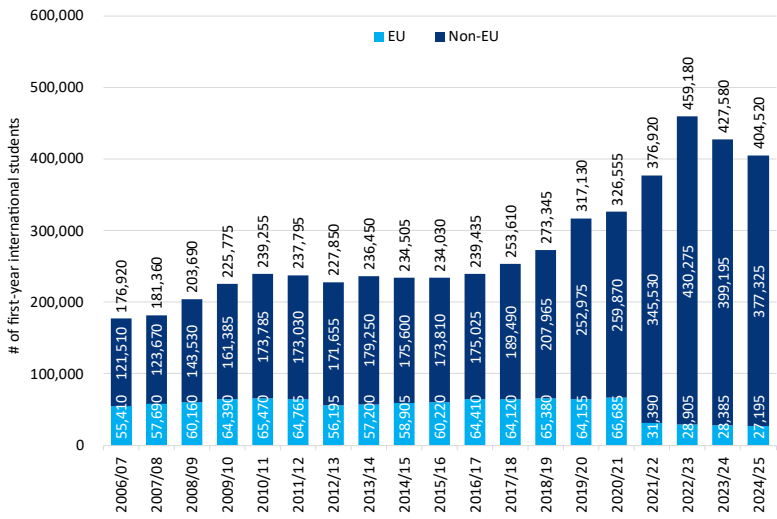
Different dimensions of UK soft power



Source: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b9bdc915d13110605ae/bis-13-1172-the-wider-benefits-of-international-higher-education-in-the-uk.pdf>

However, the *Soft-Power Index* does not claim to measure the full panoply of issues that come within broader definitions of soft power. Rather, it simply uses the educational status of world leaders as a proxy for soft power and how this changes over time. What started as a one-off and light-hearted piece of desk research quickly took on a life of its own, perhaps because hard and accessible measures of soft power are scarce and because it seemed to reveal something important about the enduring influence of education that felt intuitively correct.

International first-year students enrolled in UK higher education, 2006/07 to 2024/25



Source: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/The-benefits-and-costs-of-international-higher-education-students-to-the-UK-economy_2026_Full-Report.pdf

To some extent, the number of world leaders educated in individual countries is likely to reflect the ability of those countries to recruit aspirational students many years in the past. So it may tell us more about past recruitment successes than current behaviour. In the UK, as in many other countries, the number of international students has waxed and waned over time, reflecting policy fluctuations.

While there have been far more international students present in the UK during the twenty-first century than in any previous century, the chart to the left shows the number of international students grew when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister, stagnated under the Coalition and David Cameron's majority administration and then shot up again after the Brexit referendum, before falling back again.

Caveats to soft-power conversations

When it comes to international students, it is important not to exaggerate the soft-power benefits, which are anyway sometimes hard to quantify.

A few years ago, Jim Dickinson from Wonkhe painted a caricature of the soft-power debate as it relates to students in the following colourful terms:

*one of the things the [higher education] sector tells itself ... is that the odd international student comes into the UK, has a cup of English breakfast tea, goes to see the Queen and then takes British values back all over the world.*¹¹

This is a fair warning against rose-tinted views and simplistic metrics and, like all effective caricatures, it works because it contains a grain of truth.

On the other hand, when I recently saw an international student from Asia having her photograph taken in her graduation gown outside the red phone box in front of Big Ben, I could not help recalling the enduring relevance of the UK's cultural and political history.

Nonetheless, some international students might find the UK is not as they expected or were promised, some may like it less than they hoped and some may spend more time with their compatriots (or with those from other overseas countries) than with their peers from the UK, limiting exposure to British life. Some may have the time of their life while studying in the UK, but still not think much about the country after returning home.

A HEPI paper published in 2024 found, 'Some Chinese students feel like they are being treated as revenue sources rather than as valued members of the community.'¹² In the original fieldwork for that paper (and as captured in a previously unpublished remark), one former student from China expressed her frustration at feeling used: 'I would appreciate it if universities showed genuine concern and didn't just see us as cash cows.' Other forthcoming HEPI work considers the English-language capabilities of incoming international students, which may not always be sufficient to deliver the full hoped-for soft-power benefits.

However, some of the research discussed above intriguingly suggests soft power benefits may sometimes exist even when people have not had a great time studying in the UK:

Interestingly, their attitudes were generally more positive now than they had been immediately after graduation. Some alumni who had previously held negative views, due to particular personal experiences in the UK, had subsequently come to view these differently and now reflected positively overall.¹³

At the very least, this seems to confirm that the process of education experienced by international students while they are in the UK continues to have an enduring impact.

Chapter 2: How the Soft-Power Index is compiled

At one level, compiling the *Soft-Power Index* is relatively easy to do. We take a discrete issue – where world leaders were educated – and then fill out a spreadsheet, updating the results each year.

Yet at another level, and as explained at length in earlier iterations, the work rests on some all-important, and potentially controversial, assumptions that need to be acknowledged at the start.

- ▶ **What is a country?** We piggyback on membership of, or observer status at, the United Nations, leaving us with 195 places. This means Palestine and the Vatican City are in but Northern Cyprus and Taiwan are out.
- ▶ **What is a leader?** We generally limit ourselves to monarchs, presidents and prime ministers (meaning most countries can appear more than once). Rare exceptions are made – for example, for Switzerland, which has neither a prime minister nor a president but is instead governed by a federal council.
- ▶ **Who is included?** We assume the benefits of soft power are most likely to be found among people who have travelled overseas to study. So people who stayed in their own home country and studied online or attended a foreign institution's campus in their own home country are excluded.
- ▶ **What is tertiary education?** The Index covers higher-level learning, including the military training that takes place at Sandhurst in the UK and at the US Army Command and Staff College in Kansas. However, we do not insist a specific qualification was completed while someone was studying overseas, assuming that benefits arise from the period of study and not just from a qualification at the end.
- ▶ **Who is ineligible?** It is important to remember that the Index is a study of people who go overseas for some higher education.

So Donald Trump's education within the United States does not increase the total for that country, nor does Andy Burnham's time at the University of Cambridge affect the UK total. Moreover, as in the past, we have opted to count individuals as if they are leaders only of the one country where they spend the most time. In other words, King Charles III's role as the head of state of many Commonwealth countries and Emmanuel Macron's role in Andorra are ignored.

On all these issues, a clear judgement has to be made to enable the Index to be compiled and to allow for meaningful year-to-year comparisons. Reasonable minds might come to different endpoints on such matters. But we aim to be transparent on the decisions we have made.

While we strive for consistency from year to year, to enable a time series to be built up, we nonetheless hope readers will challenge the judgements we have made if any seem awry. Given the number of moving parts, we also hope readers will submit any new information that could affect the results and raise any errors they spot. When new information comes to light, we aim to reflect that as best we can, for example when publishing the following year's results – for this reason, it is always best to look at the most recent version of the Index, even if trying to find numbers for earlier years.

Finding information on the educational background of those who rise to the top of their country's political system is not always straightforward, especially for smaller and poorer countries. Occasionally, world leaders have even been known to dissemble when discussing their own backgrounds. Our quality-control processes include finding more than one source of information in each case wherever possible and only using Wikipedia as a check rather than a main source of information, but improvements can doubtless always be made and we aim to follow a process of continual improvement each year.

It is important to note that HEPI makes no moral judgements about the individuals as part of the work and some of those who have featured in the HEPI *Soft-Power Index* over the years have earned criticism around the world for authoritarian and anti-democratic activities.

The 2026 Index was compiled at the start of August 2026. Given that world leaders change all the time, any very recent changes are not reflected in the results.

Chapter 3: International students in the UK

In December 1979, Edward Boyle, a former Education Minister as well as the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, told the House of Lords:

*all over the world there are men and women, often in positions of influence, who have a real understanding of the United Kingdom because they spent some of their formative years of their lives being educated in this country.*¹⁴

This statement is even truer today than it was when it was made almost half a century ago.

The University of Oxford claims their first international student, Emo of Friesland, arrived ‘around 1190’ but, half a millennium ago, only around 1% of students at England’s two universities (Oxford and Cambridge) hailed from overseas.¹⁵ In contrast, around 40% of today’s Oxbridge students have come from abroad to study in the UK, as have around one-quarter of the entire student body in the country.

In between, during the past 500 years, the number of international students waxed and waned. Yet the human stories are often as illuminating as the numbers. They serve as a reminder that today’s debates on issues like whether international students should be enabled to stay in the country where they have chosen to study are nothing new. For example, Boris Godunov, Tsar of Russia at the turn of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, sent nine of his subjects to be educated abroad, including four to England. None returned home.¹⁶

On closer study, it quickly becomes obvious that almost every aspect of today’s conversations about hosting international students has some antecedents. Hilary Perraton’s comprehensive book, *A History of Foreign Students in Britain*, which heavily informs this section, shows –

for example – that many of the issues raised in the 2026 *International Education Strategy* have been under discussion for decades, if not centuries.

For example:

- ▶ **Trade benefits:** In 1933, civil servants noted ‘the export trade would receive considerable benefit if a greater number of students from overseas countries were to come to the United Kingdom’.
- ▶ **Educational benefits:** In 1936, in his memoirs the Cambridge scientist JJ Thomson recounted: ‘The advantage gained by our own students by their intercourse with men of widely different training and experience, of different points of view on political, social and scientific questions, of very different temperaments, can, I think, hardly be exaggerated.’
- ▶ **Economic benefits:** After the Overseas Students Trust was established in 1961, there was a particular focus on the economic benefits of hosting international students.¹⁷

On the other hand, other aspects of the international student experience have fluctuated wildly over time. Most notably from today’s perspective, the financial consequences of coming to the UK to study at a higher level have changed profoundly. Perraton records:

*until the late twentieth century board and lodging was likely to be the largest single item in a student’s total budget, probably followed by the cost of travel and with the cost of university fees and tuition as the smallest.*¹⁸

By 2010, however, he notes fees were taking up half of international students’ budgets.¹⁹ Many of today’s international students in the UK face fees amounting to tens of thousands of pounds a year.

International students, from the time of Queen Victoria to that of Margaret Thatcher

In the second half of the nineteenth-century, more British people went to the European mainland to study than Continental Europeans came to the UK. Nonetheless, a certain level of flexibility meant the proportion of overseas students at Oxbridge grew in the 1800s, amounting to something like 10% of the student body by the end of the century: 'Race was never a formal barrier to entry within Britain, religion fell away as one, and there were new ways round the linguistic barriers of Greek and Latin.' In 1900, there were more than 330 Indian students in the UK alone. By 1910, the total number of overseas students at Oxford was around one-quarter and the percentage was only a little lower at Edinburgh.

Under political pressure to copy the German PhD, Oxford established its DPhil in 1917. Overseas students who had studied at home no longer needed to take a second bachelor's degree and soon half of Oxford's doctoral students hailed from abroad.

Between the world wars, there were particularly large groups from India, the United States, South Africa, Egypt and Germany (often studying as refugees). But by 1976, the countries with the most students in the UK had largely changed and were in order: Malaysia, the USA, Iran, Greece, Iraq, Hong Kong, Nigeria and Canada. There were just 48 from China.

Overall, one-in-10 students was from abroad for most of the twentieth century, as the number of overseas students grew in line with the number of home students: the 1963 Robbins report, for example, noted that:

In 1961/2 overseas students accounted for 10% of all full-time students in higher education in this country. In universities they represented 7% of the undergraduates and 32% of the postgraduate students ... some 60% of overseas students come from Commonwealth countries.

The total continued to hover around the 10 per cent mark until the 1980s, when international students were first charged full fees, giving institutions a clearer financial incentive to recruit them.

The text in this box is based on Hilary Perraton, *A History of Foreign Students in Britain* (2014).

International students have sometimes been seen as an explicit tool of international diplomacy: Cecil Rhodes, for example, favoured them as a way to try to bring the United States back into the British Empire, among other goals. In the early twentieth century, a United States administrator explained that the goal of some scholarships for Chinese students to study at US universities was ‘to make China do some of the things we want’ – and even though the funding for these places had originally been paid by China itself.²⁰ Others later wanted a British education to empower independence movements in the British Empire.

The introduction of full-cost fees, and then even more, for international students in the UK

The rise in fees for international students, which began under Harold Wilson in the 1960s but which found its zenith in full-cost fees for overseas students under Margaret Thatcher, caused a scandal. As I recounted in an earlier HEPI paper published in the aftermath of Brexit, the change ‘was deeply unpopular’:

The Opposition’s education spokesman, Neil Kinnock, said the policy was ‘heartless and brainless’, accused Ministers of ‘innumeracy, insularity and insensitivity’ and condemned the policy as ‘clumsy, arbitrary, ill-advised and misinformed’. He claimed the Government’s ‘morals with regard to this policy are those of a scorpion.’ He also noted the policy had been universally condemned: ‘It is apparent that the policy has not a single friend.’²¹

Hilary Perraton notes the only two prominent supporters of the move to higher fees were Noel Annan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, and the maverick economist John Vaizey, who noted: ‘the most extraordinary thing is that every time the fees have been raised the number of students has increased.’²²

Today, the increase in fees for international students to their true cost between the 1960s and the 1980s is perhaps best thought of as a

precursor to the reintroduction and then big increases in home students' fees in England between the 1990s and 2010s. In both cases, a Labour Government started the process while the Conservatives finished the job (with a little help from the Lib Dems in the second scenario).²³

The impact of full-cost fees on demand from overseas

Perhaps appropriately, it was the London School of Economics that was the first to recognise properly the financial opportunity that existed from the early 1980s to recruit more overseas students and, while overseas students fell overall in 1981 and 1982, they grew significantly at the LSE. By 1984, all the lost ground had been made up.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office sought to limit the fallout abroad by coming up with special rules for Hong Kong, Cyprus and Malaysia, introducing Chevening Scholarships and finding extra funds for the British Council. While it took until 1989 for polytechnics and colleges, as opposed to universities, to recover their 1981 recruitment levels for overseas students, these institutions had more freedom to recruit additional home students so had different incentives. Overall, according to Hilary Perraton, 'Principled objection to differential fees fell away.'²⁴ Today, universities rely on international students to cross-subsidise most of their other activity.

From the early 1980s on, the number of international students in the UK exploded: the proportion of undergraduate students from overseas doubled from 7 per cent to 14 per cent between 1981 and 2010 while the proportion of overseas postgraduates rose from 34 per cent to 57 per cent. As a result, there were nearly as many postgraduates (178k) as undergraduates (187k) from overseas. Today, there are far more: in 2024/25, there were 297,000 international undergraduate students but 389,000 international postgraduates.

The percentage of the total overseas student cohort that hailed from the EEC / EC / EU rose from 11 per cent in 1981 to 47 per cent in 1996 but fell back to 29 per cent by 2010. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese students in the UK grew from 163 in 1981 to 67,000 in 2010 – and topped 150,000 in the early 2020s.

Yet the difference today is that international students now pay far more than their true costs while home students pay less than the actual costs of their education once again, thanks, for example, to the long-term freeze in the cap on home fees in England.²⁵ After counting tuition fees and any residual government grants (such as the Office for Students's Strategic Priorities Grant), the substantial remaining shortfalls in educating home students have to be filled by cross-subsidies from international students' fees. Students from overseas have long subsidised research; they now subsidise the education of home students too – and a similar flow of funding from international students to domestic students exists elsewhere as well, such as in Australia and New Zealand.

Scotland offers a particularly extreme example because the absence of tuition fees / loans for full-time undergraduates has ensured big funding shortfalls for home students. Meanwhile the strong historic and contemporary reputation of Scotland's universities combined with entrepreneurial leadership has made them particularly attractive to overseas students.²⁶ As a result, half of the teaching income at Scotland's universities now comes from international students.²⁷

Full fees and Brexit

When full fees for overseas students began in the 1980s, there were lively debates inside and outside government on exactly which students should pay full fees and which should be treated as home students. In the event, Common Market students were exempted from full-cost fees, as the UK accepted there was to be student mobility within the European Economic Community. This was expected to be a relatively cheap and cost-effective policy, because, as the Secretary of State for Education, Mark Carlisle, told the House of Commons in June 1980, 'we are operating on a reciprocal basis with Europe. It is the one area of the world that has more of our students than we have of theirs.'²⁸

Such arguments were a clear precursor to more recent, and still current, debates over EU students. At the time of Brexit, universities tended to favour the continued favourable treatment of EU students.²⁹ In 2019,

Angela Rayner, then Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Education, complained that:

*the very opportunities that we offer to young people from across the EU are being taken away. It is not in our interest to build walls between our world-class universities and our nearest neighbours, yet this [Conservative] Government are committed to doing exactly that.*³⁰

But EU students began to be treated the same as other international students from 2022/23. Afterwards, universities reconciled themselves to the consequences of Brexit – including the ending of any clear justification for lower fees for many Europeans – while institutions' financial positions have worsened, making lower fees for EU students financially harder to accept.³¹

As the *Sunday Times* have reported, the question of fee levels for EU students in the UK:

*is not exactly a burning question for most Europeans but for the type of people around the table in Brussels university fees are a big deal because they want their kids to study in UK, especially at the more expensive Russell Group universities.*³²

However, the Russell Group now clearly opposes any reversion to the *status quo ante* on fees:

*Granting home fee status to EU students would have a bigger impact on university finances than the proposed tax on international student income, and would come at a time when universities are already under significant financial pressure.*³³

Chapter 4: The 2026 results

Only once, in the first year of the Index back in 2017, has the UK beaten the US for the number of world leaders educated at its higher education institutions. The 2026 *Soft-Power Index* results confirm the pre-eminent position of the United States once more, though the UK continues to cement its clear second place:

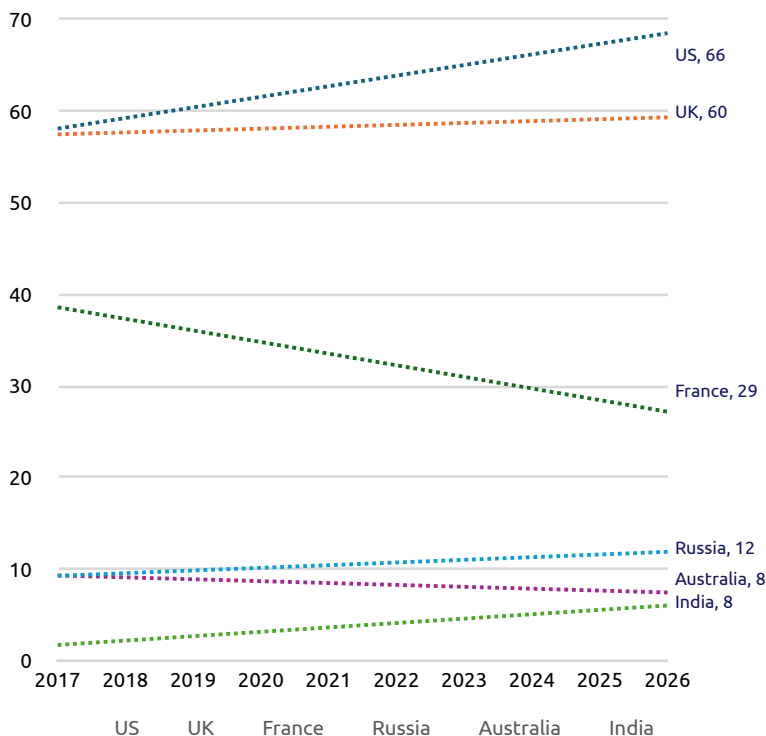
- › the 2026 result for the US, with 66 world leaders educated there, is the same as it was in 2022 and 2023 – only twice has it been higher, at 68 in 2024 and 67 in 2025;
- › the UK scores its highest ever total (jointly with 2022), with 60 world-leaders educated in the country, surpassing the 59 scored in 2019; but
- › while the gap between these two countries, standing at six world leaders, is slightly smaller in 2026 than in 2025 (7), 2024 (11) and 2022 (9) and the same as in 2023, it is larger than in the first five years of the Index.

Other countries have also largely more-or-less held their own: France remains in third place: the number of world leaders educated there recovers to 29 after a drop to 26 in 2025, though this is still lower than in other recent years.

Russia and Australia keep fourth and fifth place, having educated 12 and eight world leaders respectively, but Australia now shares fifth place with India, which scores four times as well as it did in 2019 after slow but persistent growth. The total numbers for Russia and Australia have fluctuated less than for the other strong performers but, over the past decade as a whole, Russia is a little up and Australia is a little down.

The chart to the right shows the changing total number of world leaders educated in the top six countries in each of the past 10 years. As annual fluctuations can mask the wider picture, a dotted line has been added to show the long-term trend for each country.

Soft-Power Index results, 2017 to 2026



It is impossible to know if these trends will continue over the long term – possibly not given, for example, the past scale of change and the retreat of Russia from global affairs as well as the strong performance of Australia in recruiting international students for much of this century. Currently, Australia has more international students than Russia; on the other hand, the number of international students in Australia is falling while the number in Russia is rising. China may be a country to watch in future too as, while the number of international students in the UK and the US has been falling, the number in China is up almost 100% since the pandemic.

United States	United Kingdom
1. Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain	1. Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda
2. Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Prime Minister of Bahrain	2. Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain
3. Jeffrey Bostic, President of Barbados	3. Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Prime Minister of Bahrain
4. Philippe, King of Belgium	4. Jeffrey Bostic, President of Barbados
5. Johnny Briceño, Prime Minister of Belize	5. Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados
6. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, King of Bhutan	6. Philippe, King of Belgium
7. Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of Bhutan	7. Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, King of Bhutan
8. Rodrigo Paz, President of Bolivia	8. Hassanal Bolkiah, Sultan and Prime Minister of Brunei
9. Louis Crishock, Acting High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina	9. Hun Manet, Prime Minister of Cambodia
10. Duma Boko, President of Botswana	10. Joseph Ngute, Prime Minister of Cameroon
11. Rumen Radev, Prime Minister of Bulgaria	11. Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada
12. Hun Manet, Prime Minister of Cambodia	12. Petr Pavel, President of Czech Republic
13. Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada	13. Sylvanie Burton, President of Dominica
14. Nikos Anastasiades, President of Cyprus	14. José Ramos-Horta, President of East Timor
15. Frederik X, King of Denmark	15. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, President of Egypt
16. Roosevelt Skerrit, Prime Minister of Dominica	16. Taye Atske Selassie, President of Ethiopia
17. Luis Abinader, President of the Dominican Republic	17. Sitiveni Rabuka, Prime Minister of Fiji
18. José Ramos-Horta, President of East Timor	18. Alexander Stubb, President of Finland
19. Daniel Noboa, President of Ecuador	

20. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, President of Egypt	19. Adama Barrow, President of the Gambia
21. Alexander Stubb, President of Finland	20. Irfaan Ali, President of Guyana
22. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece	21. Mark Phillips, Prime Minister of Guyana
23. Mark Phillips, Prime Minister of Guyana	22. Catherine Connolly, President of Ireland
24. Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, Acting Prime Minister of Haiti	23. Naruhito, Emperor of Japan
25. Halla Tómasdóttir, President of Iceland	24. Abdullah II, King of Jordan
26. Kristrún Frostadóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland	25. Letsie III, King of Lesotho
27. Isaac Herzog, President of Israel	26. Hereditary Prince Alois, Regent of Liechtenstein
28. Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel	27. Guillaume V, Grand Duke of Luxembourg
29. Alassane Ouattara, President of Ivory Coast	28. Luc Frieden, Prime Minister of Luxembourg
30. Abdullah II, King of Jordan	29. Peter Mutharika, President of Malawi
31. Jafar Hassan, Prime Minister of Jordan	30. Mohamed Muizzu, President of the Maldives
32. Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah, Prime Minister of Kuwait	31. Dharam Gokhool, President of Mauritius
33. Edgars Rinkēvičs, President of Latvia	32. Navin Ramgoolam, Prime Minister of Mauritius
34. Nawaf Salam, Prime Minister of Lebanon	33. Albert II, Sovereign Prince of Monaco
35. Joseph Boakai, President of Liberia	34. Nyam-Osoryn Uchral, Prime Minister of Mongolia
36. Luc Frieden, Prime Minister of Luxembourg	35. Jakov Milatović, President of Montenegro
37. Peter Mutharika, President of Malawi	36. Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, President of Namibia
38. Ibrahim Iskandar of Johor, King of Malaysia	37. Elijah Ngurare, Prime Minister of Namibia
39. Hilda Heine, President of Marshall Islands	38. Harald V, King of Norway
	39. Jonas Gahr Støre, Prime Minister of Norway

40. Wesley Simina, President of Micronesia	40. Haitham bin Tariq, Sultan and Prime Minister of Oman
41. Maia Sandu, President of Moldova	41. Asif Ali Zardari, President of Pakistan
42. Vasile Tofan, Prime Minister of Moldova	42. Bongbong Marcos, President of Philippines
43. Albert II, Sovereign Prince of Monaco	43. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emir of Qatar
44. Jakov Milatović, President of Montenegro	44. Justin Nsengiyumva, Prime Minister of Rwanda
45. Elijah Ngurare, Prime Minister of Namibia	45. Patrick Herminie, President of Seychelles
46. Bola Tinubu, President of Nigeria	46. Julius Maada Bio, President of Sierra Leone
47. Surangel Whipps Jr., President of Palau	47. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, President of Singapore
48. Mohammad Mustafa, Prime Minister of Palestine	48. Robert Fico, Prime Minister of Slovakia
49. José Raúl Mulino, President of Panama	49. Nataša Pirc Musar, President of Slovenia
50. Santiago Peña, President of Paraguay	50. Harini Amarasuriya, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka
51. Keiko Fujimori, President of Peru	51. Karin Keller-Sutter, Member of the Federal Council Switzerland
52. Bongbong Marcos, President of Philippines	52. Samia Suluhu Hassan, President of Tanzania
53. Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda	53. Tupou VI, King of Tonga
54. Terrance Drew, Prime Minister of Saint Kitts and Nevis	54. Feleti Teo, Prime Minister of Tuvalu
55. Julius Maada Bio, President of Sierra Leone	55. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of United Arab Emirates
56. David Moinina Sengeh, Chief Minister of Sierra Leone	56. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Prime Minister of United Arab Emirates
57. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, President of Singapore	57. Nikenike Vurobaravu, President of Vanuatu
58. Lawrence Wong, Prime Minister of Singapore	
59. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, President of Somalia	
60. Felipe VI, King of Spain	

61. Kamil Idris, Prime Minister of Sudan	58. Delcy Rodríguez, Acting President of Venezuela
62. Albert Rösti, Member of the Federal Council of Switzerland	59. Shaya al-Zindani, Prime Minister of Yemen
63. Anutin Charnvirakul, Prime Minister of Thailand	60. Hakainde Hichilema, President of Zambia
64. Faure Gnassingbé, President of the Council of Ministers of Togo	
65. Tupou VI, King of Tonga	
66. Sister Raffaella, Petrini President of the Governorate of Vatican City	

Russian institutions educated the President of Angola, the President and Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, the President of Ghana, the President of Kazakhstan, the Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Kyrgyzstan, the President of Laos, the Prime Minister of Mongolia, the President of Namibia, the President of Palestine, the Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe, the Chairman of the People's Council and President of Turkmenistan, while Australian institutions educated the Prime Minister of Fiji, the President of Kiribati, the President of Nauru, the O le Ao o le Malo of Samoa, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, the King of Thailand, the King of Tonga and the Prime Minister of Tuvalu.

The eight leaders who were educated at a higher level in India are the King of Bhutan, the Prime Minister of Fiji, the President of Guyana, the President of Mauritius, the Prime Minister of Nepal, the President of Somalia, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and the Prime Minister of Tonga.

Those countries that tend to do well in the *Soft-Power Index* tend either to have English as their primary language, as with the US, the UK and Australia, or a large historic sphere of influence, as with Russia and France. The top two countries in the Index clearly tick both these boxes: the UK and the US both speak English and have a large historic sphere of influence.

Some non-English-speaking countries have sought to conduct more teaching in English, in part as a way to recruit more international students, but with limited success. According to the OECD:

*The expansion of English-taught degree programmes has broadened access to non-English-speaking destinations, although it has also raised concerns about system capacity, quality and language policy, leading some countries to introduce caps or tighter regulation.*³⁴

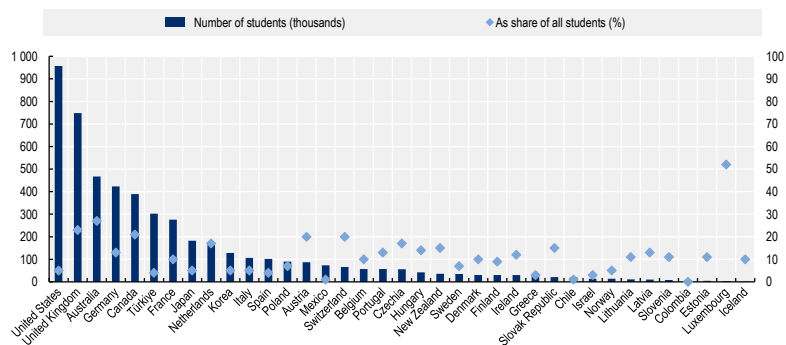
When looking at the numbers through an institutional lens, Harvard comes top, having educated 16 world leaders, but all the other top four institutions are in the UK. The University of Oxford is the only institution aside from Harvard to have educated more than 10 world leaders, though Oxford and Cambridge together, known as 'Oxbridge', have together educated one more leader than Harvard.

*List of institutions with at least five serving world leaders among their alumni*³⁵

Institution	Number of leaders
Harvard University	16
University of Oxford	11
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst	9
University of Cambridge	6
London School of Economics	5

Unsurprisingly, there is a clear correlation between the total number of international students in a country and their performance in the *Soft-Power Index*. The OECD shows that the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia are the top three recruiting countries in the OECD (which excludes Russia and India); moreover, Australia and the United Kingdom both have a disproportionately large share of international students as a percentage of the total number of students.

International students in OECD countries



Source: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2026/09/international-student-mobility_348ca530/2f807049-en.pdf

Conclusions

Soft power is real: no one really seems to doubt it, even if the concept is sometimes hard to define and even harder to quantify precisely. As a result, government-funded scholarship schemes continue even at times of austerity and when there is pressure to reduce the number of people coming to the UK more generally. The boost in a country's influence that can come from educating the leaders of tomorrow is why Ministers continue to track the *Soft-Power Index* so closely.

The environment for international students in the UK has been a changing one over time, including in the two-and-a-half decades of the twenty-first century. The first and second Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) that occurred under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown sought to bolster the UK's share of the international education market, as have the various International Education Strategies published under Coalition, Conservative and Labour Governments since 2013, very ably overseen in recent years by Professor Sir Steve Smith in his role as the UK's International Education Champion.

However, electoral and political forces have pushed strongly in the opposite direction too, including during the premierships of David Cameron and Theresa May. The 2010s were generally a time when the number of international students in the UK flatlined, albeit at a historically high level, before jumping once again from the end of the decade onwards.

This rise – known fairly or unfairly as part of the ‘Boriswave’ – in turn unleashed new fears about the total number of migrants and about their impact on public services and society more generally. Given politicians have found it much easier to control clearly-defined legal migration routes, such as coming to the UK to study, than to get a grip on other routes, such as the infamous small boats, the factors pulling international students to come and study in the UK have been trimmed back again.

The May 2025 *Migration* white paper made it clear that higher education institutions will be severely punished if they break tougher Basic Compliance Assessments (which measure metrics like visa refusal rates), that international students will be hammered by a new International Student Levy (supposedly to pay for the reintroduction of small maintenance grants for a small proportion of home students) and that the Graduate Route visa would be curtailed (thereby reducing the time most international students can stay in the UK to work without changing visa status from two years to 18 months), all of which come on top of the change implemented by Rishi Sunak's Government to stop Master's students on taught courses from bringing any dependants with them.

As a result – and despite the warm words in the *International Education Strategy* published early in 2026 – modelling by Public First suggests, 'The UK faces little prospect of being able to hit its targeted international student recruitment numbers'.³⁶ The tougher new rules, which are part of a wider migration crackdown, have even led to fears of an 'over-correction'. According to Paul Johnson, the Provost of an Oxford college and the former Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 'we could easily soon reach a point at which legal net migration goes negative'.³⁷

So the historic debates about how many overseas students there should be in the UK, what rights they should have, how much they should pay and how truly integrated society wants them to be look set to continue. Yet through it all, UK educational institutions, including boarding schools, conservatoires and military facilities as well as universities, have continued to deliver for international students. As a result, the students have tended to go home with warm feelings about their time here which, in time, can become (at least partially) quantifiable soft power.

The *Soft-Power Index* does not claim to be bigger than it is. It measures just one type of soft power by counting the people who rise to the very top of their countries' ruling structures. This is as good as any other measure; indeed, it is probably the best single measure, despite its limited scope. But it should be read alongside other information, including HEPI's other output, such as the recent paper with Kaplan and London Economics on *The benefits and costs of international higher*

education students to the UK economy, which provides numbers for every parliamentary constituency. Moreover, as the figures referred to at the start of this paper show, many Chevening scholars go on to senior governmental roles in their home countries without making it to the very top of the tree, suggesting the *Soft-Power Index* could be usefully extended out.

By measuring only those who become monarchs, presidents and prime ministers, we only capture a partial snapshot (and a minority of those we capture have reached their position via hereditary rights, rather than because of the brilliance of their education, even if they do go on to be exemplars of effective soft power).

Perhaps the time has come to broaden the Index, looking at a wider range of leaders, whether in politics, administration or business, and irrespective of whether these numbers are produced via HEPI or not.

Such a broader assessment would be harder to produce: the education of some world leaders is opaque but, generally, the backgrounds of those in charge of their countries are more transparent than just about anyone else, including business leaders. A robust study of thousands of business leaders or of a bigger cadre of politicians or of those in positions of influence more generally would be a much bigger undertaking because of the scarcity of sources as well as the number of people. Nonetheless, we would welcome attempts to do it and remain open to conversations on the idea.

Moreover, even with its current limitations, the *Soft-Power Index* has considerable resonance in Whitehall, in the corridors of power in other countries and with the world's media. It remains the most widely-quoted piece of HEPI research in official UK sources, and in terms of engagement overseas is pipped at the post only by the annual *Generative AI Survey*.

So the incomplete picture the *Soft-Power Index* paints is more than an abstract or surreal one; it is best thought of as an impressionistic one – hazy and incomplete, perhaps, but also an accurate reflection of something beautiful.

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Report

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The HEPI *Soft-Power Index*, which looks at where so-called VVIPs (Very Very Important People) were educated, began back in 2017. This HEPI Report reveals the results from the tenth wave.

For the first time, the annual results are being presented with background context, including a look back at the long and successful history of international students in the UK and their enduring influence.

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