

Educational Pathways of Leaders: an international comparison

Findings of a 30 Country Study of Professional Leaders

Creating effective solutions to global challenges will require a range of skills from leaders in the public and private spheres. The British Council, in partnership with Ipsos Public Affairs, conducted a study of current professional leaders with higher education qualifications¹ from 30 countries, and across sectors, to reveal:

What are the higher education pathways of professional leaders around the world?

What contribution did direct learning and other higher education experiences make to their careers?

The data show that higher education in **the humanities, social sciences and sciences, as well as non-direct learning such as networks built through extracurricular activities or an international experience, all played a vital role in the career development of professional leaders around the globe today.**

What is Leadership?

In the context of this study, where the focus is *professional leadership*, we are defining successful leaders as those who are in a position of influence within their organisation and their sectors more broadly.

What Makes a Leader?

Although leadership qualities may be part of the nature and personality of the individual, this study suggests – and many of the leaders interviewed suggest – that leadership is a skill learned through education and related experiences.

In the modern workplace, innate qualities or technical skills are no longer sufficient to lead in an increasingly complex and inter-connected world. Humanistic and social science skills, such as multicultural awareness, critical thinking, and the ability to express complex ideas clearly, are equally necessary.

“At the master’s degree level, you are given skills to read, to be analytical and to ask questions. We need creative and analytical leaders in the sense that you don’t take things for granted. In 21st century Kenya, we need leaders who also are willing to ask questions.”
**Professor Jacob Kaimenyi,
Cabinet Secretary for Education,
Kenya**

¹ The study focuses on leaders who have a higher education background in order to examine how higher education contributes to professional success.

Key Findings

There are four key findings from the study.

Finding One: the majority of leaders have degrees in the social sciences and humanities

Social sciences and humanities together make up over half of bachelor's degrees among leaders in the study, with social sciences making up the majority of these. The number of current professional leaders with a social sciences or humanities degree is significantly higher than that of the overall sample population.

"Higher education gave me a broad understanding of history, geography, and cultural knowledge within a group of highly intellectual and knowledgeable people. As a result I could think more critically and creatively, and this has been a huge contributor to my career."

Morgane Danielou, Vice President of Operations, Emerging Ag Inc, France

Across economic sectors, leaders in government are mostly drawn from an educational background in social sciences, while those in non-profits tend to favour the humanities. Leaders in Anglo Countries, Eastern Europe, and Confucian Asia are the most likely to have bachelor's degrees in the humanities. Compared to male leaders, women have a slightly higher percentage of social sciences and humanities degrees.

Over half of professional leaders studied hold an advanced degree. Of those, half hold master's degrees and almost half a doctoral degree in social sciences. However, for advanced degrees, the humanities constitute a significantly smaller proportion – less than 1 in 10 for a master's and 1 in 20 for a doctoral degree.

Research also found 79 percent of politicians studied the social sciences or humanities during their undergraduate education. While 67 percent of politicians have no advanced degree, 63 percent of civil servants

have an advanced degree (23 percent hold an MBA).

Finding Two: young professional leaders favour degrees in social sciences and humanities

While the social sciences and humanities dominate bachelor's degrees across the board, younger professional leaders – those under the age of 45 – have a higher proportion of social sciences and humanities degrees. Additionally, younger leaders tend to have a slightly higher number of master's degrees in the social sciences and humanities. Older professional leaders – those over 45 years old – are more likely to have an education background in health, mathematics, biology, physical science, military science, and engineering.

Finding Three: leaders have international educational or professional experience

A third of professional leaders surveyed have international work experience and a third have international education

"I learned more in that first year studying [abroad] than all the years afterwards. You're in a completely different environment. You have no structure to fall back on, so you really need to make sure that you're successful on your own. I strongly believe that it's a matter of taking accountability for your own success."

Jan-Willem Middelburg, Director for Education and Consulting, Pink Elephant, Netherlands

experience – 17 percent have both international work and education experience.

Of those that pursue education abroad, the likelihood of international study increases with degree level – less than one fifth of leaders have bachelor’s degrees from another country, whereas one third have advanced degrees which they received overseas.

International experience, broadly, is lowest in Anglo Countries – only a quarter of leaders have any international experience – and highest in Middle Eastern Countries, where almost three-quarters of leaders have international experience. In Anglo Countries, international work experience is more common than international education experience – possibly a function of plentiful, strong, and affordable higher education offerings at home and easier movement for work between countries.

Where leaders traveled internationally for their education, 40 percent studied in the United States followed by the United Kingdom at 17 percent. Looking at professional degrees only, 52 percent of leaders obtained theirs in the United States, and 18 percent studied for a professional degree in the United Kingdom.

“Education is not just about the skills. I would give equal weight to issues of self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence that comes with education because you interact with different people. You learn to develop yourself. Education is a journey of self-discovery that impacts who you are going forward.”
Nandita Das, Actress and Director, India

“A huge impact on my career has been the social network – the teachers, professors and faculty members as well as colleagues and students from all around the world.”
Dr. Rintaro Mori, Director of the Department of Health Policy at the National Center for Child Health and Development, Japan

Finding Four: extracurricular experiences in higher education are just as valuable as direct learning

Beyond formal training and knowledge development, leaders describe higher education as providing broader skills which equipped them for success. They attribute their ability to communicate and work with people from different backgrounds to their exposure to a multicultural environment and international experiences.

Leaders also report that many of the networks developed during their higher education have continued into their professional life.

SIDEBAR 1: Our Study

Previous studies have focused on the skills and pathways to professional leadership from the perspective of human resources or higher education itself. This study takes a different approach by observing the pathways to professional leadership from the perspective of leaders themselves.

Our study targeted professional leaders with higher education experience from 30 countries chosen to align with the GLOBE culture clusters², Targets were set by culture cluster to achieve balance on gender, age (under 45 and over 45) and the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. This non-representative yet balanced approach enabled us to obtain a large enough sample of different types of leaders in each of the main categories so that the data would tell us something about the categories themselves.

With the sample structure determined, the team collected data relating to the career and higher education of 1,709 individuals – variables such as college/university attended, country attended college, degree subject and level, time at current job, job title, number of previous positions at current organisation, headquarters of current organisation, number of previous jobs, number of countries of employment, and size of LinkedIn network. To follow-up on the quantitative piece, the team carried out in-depth interviews with 10 leaders, one from each culture cluster.

SIDEBAR 2: Courses of Study by Grouping

Study Groupings	Subjects Include
Social Sciences	Economics, International Relations, Political Science, Anthropology, Psychology, Communications, Law
Business Fields	Business, Marketing, Management
Engineering Fields	Electrical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Agricultural Engineering and Architecture
Humanities	Languages, Literature, History, Philosophy, Religion, Journalism, the Arts
Math, Biological and Physical Sciences	Math and all Sciences (including zoology and botany) except Social Sciences and those that fall under Health Fields
Computer and Information Sciences	Computer Science, Informatics, Information Technology, Programming
Health Fields	Medicine, Pharmacology, Nursing Studies, Surgery
Education	Education, English as a Second Language, Pedagogy
Military	Military Sciences and specific areas such as Ammunitions, etc.
General Studies and Other	Interior Design, Entrepreneurship, Occupational Studies

² <http://www.grovetwell.com/pub-GLOBE-intro.html>

SIDEBAR 3: Countries Included by Cluster

