

An Analysis of the World's Elite Universities and their Leaders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

89

elite universities analysed

89 world's leading universities

Elite institutions · Noted at least twice in 3 major global rankings*

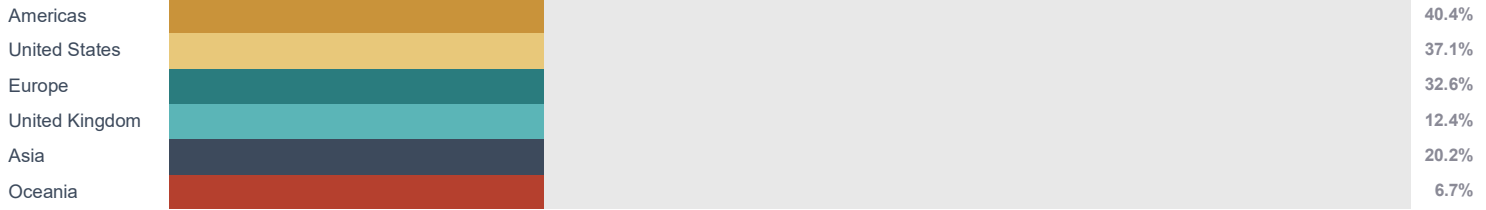
74.2% male

Leadership gender ratio — 25.8% female

30–31 years

Average career experience at appointment

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF ELITE UNIVERSITIES



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS IN ELITE UNIVERSITIES

The leadership of these institutions remains male-dominated, with 74.2% of leaders being men.

74.2% Male

25.8% Female

58–59 yrs

Avg age at appointment

30–31 yrs

Career experience

2 years

Median tenure

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

79.8% studied at one of the elite 89 universities; 37.1% at the same institution they now lead.

79.8%

Studied at one of the elite 89 universities

37.1%

Studied at the same institution they now lead

62.9%

Attended at one of the elite universities at PhD level

ACADEMIC PROFILES

Discipline split:

Science 56.2%

Arts 43.8%

Science: Medical, Biological, Engineering & Computer Science

Arts: Economics, Law, Political Science

Median Academic Output (Scopus):

86

Publications

3,648

Citations

30

H-Index

CAREER TRAJECTORIES

53.9% started their career at elite 89 universities; 19.1% started at the same institution; 28.1% started their careers at a non-elite-89 university. Most held VP/Provost roles prior to appointment (44.8%).

53.9%

Began career at one of the elite 89 universities

39.3%

Started as postdoctoral researcher

70.8%

Worked at one of the elite 89 universities prior to role

19.1%

Began career at the same institution they now lead

25.8%

Held President/Vice-Chancellor role prior

44.8%

Held VP/Provost role prior

COMPARISONS WITH PREDECESSORS

Current leaders show similar gender ratios & educational backgrounds but are more likely to have studied at their own institution and specialise in Arts. Tenure is shorter (median 2 vs 7 years).

Attribute	Current	Predecessor
Gender ratio	74/26 M/F	Similar
Median tenure	2 years	7 years
Elite 89 education	79.8%	Similar
Same inst. studied	More likely	Less likely
Arts specialism	More common	Less common

GENDER-BASED COMPARISONS

Women are significantly underrepresented in Asia (5.6%) but overrepresented in Oceania (66.7%). Female leaders: more in Arts, higher citations & H-index despite fewer publications.

5.6%

Asia

~25%

Europe

~25%

Americas

66.7%

Oceania

ADVANCED STATISTICAL INSIGHTS — THREE LEADERSHIP TYPOLOGIES (Multiple Correspondence Analysis & Latent Class Analysis)

Advanced techniques highlight patterns of institutional 'in-breeding' and identify three distinct leadership typologies:

Socially Closed & Least Diverse

- Male-dominated
- Elite-educated
- Internal promotions

Asia · Europe

Moderately Diverse

- Elite-educated
- Cross-institutional mobility
- Some gender diversity

Americas · Europe

Socially Open & Most Diverse

- Gender-diverse
- Non-elite backgrounds
- External recruitment

Oceania · Americas

Source: ESRC-funded Project "Diversifying Leadership in Elite Universities: The Development of an Empirically Grounded Recruitment Framework for the Global Higher Education Sector."

*Rankings: THE 2025, QS 2025, ARWU 2024. The 2024 version of the ARWU rankings was used to select the sample because the 2025 version was released on 15th August 2025, some months after the project began.

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