



The Educational Backgrounds of Vice Chancellors

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Key findings

School backgrounds

- Well over half (58%) of the country's vice chancellors were educated in state grammar schools, more than twice the proportion of leaders in other prestigious professions.
- Just over a fifth (20.5%) of vice chancellors were educated in independent schools, at most half the proportion of independently educated leaders in other professions.
- The proportion of vice chancellors educated in state schools increased by eight percentage points during the last decade, from 58.5% to 66.5%.

University backgrounds

- Nine out of ten university heads were awarded their first degrees in old universities, established before 1992.
- Just under one in four vice chancellors graduated from Oxbridge, around half the proportion of Oxbridge educated leaders in other professions.

University groupings

- Seven in ten new university leaders were educated in grammar schools, compared with five in ten grammar educated vice chancellors of old universities.
- 12% of vice chancellors of new universities were awarded their first degrees in new universities (when former polytechnics).
- 96% of vice chancellors of old universities were awarded their first degrees in old universities.
- One in five new university leaders went to Oxbridge, compared with one in three vice chancellors of old universities.

Other findings

- The proportion of vice chancellors educated in schools outside the UK halved during the last decade, decreasing from 16.5% to 8.6%.
- The proportion of female vice chancellors increased during the last decade, increasing from 5% to 13%, mainly driven by a rise in female leaders of new universities.

Findings

Introduction

This is the latest in a series of surveys undertaken by the Sutton Trust documenting the educational backgrounds of leading people in a number of different professions, particularly those that are prominent in public life. The surveys - covering leading lawyers, politicians, journalists, medics and businessmen - have revealed the extent of the dominance of those educated in independent schools among the country's elite¹. In law for example, the Trust revealed that almost 70% of barristers in the top chambers had attended fee-paying schools, despite these schools making up only 7% of the school population.

The Trust has raised a number of concerns about this dominance – such schools are only accessible to a small proportion of the population that can afford school fees, creating an elite in public life that is unrepresentative of the breadth of society these professions are intended to serve.

But what of the educational origins of the higher education elite - those leading our universities? This analysis investigated the school and university backgrounds of university vice chancellors who were in post ten years apart - in late 2007 and in late 1998².

Grammar school effect

The striking finding of this analysis is that university leaders come predominantly from state grammar school backgrounds - in stark contrast to the dominance of independently educated leaders in other professions such as politics, law or journalism. Moreover, the proportion of vice chancellors educated in state schools increased by eight percentage points during the last decade, rising from 58.5% to 66.5%, with the proportions from independent schools falling by over five percentage points.

The detailed figures for the school backgrounds of university heads in both 2007 and 1998 are presented in table 1 below. In table 2 meanwhile, we compare the figures for vice chancellors with those for leaders in other professions.

Table 1: School backgrounds of vice-chancellors

| | 1998 | | 2007 | |
|--------------------|--------|------------|--------|------------|
| | number | % of total | number | % of total |
| State | 56 | 58.5% | 78 | 66.5% |
| - <i>Grammar</i> | 47 | 49% | 68 | 58% |
| - <i>Comp</i> | 9 | 9.5% | 10 | 8.5% |
| Independent | 25 | 26% | 24 | 20.5% |
| Unknown | 15 | 15.5% | 15 | 13% |
| Total | 96* | 100% | 117* | 100% |

* Excludes 19 heads in 1998 and 11 heads in 2007 educated outside the UK

¹The findings can all be found at www.suttontrust.com.

² The analysis centred on heads of higher education institutions that are members of the umbrella body, Universities UK. Official sources were used to document information, as well as contacting vice chancellors directly. We would like to thank Monique Ramsay, Jonathon Walker and Laura Sparshot for compiling this information.

Table 2: How vice chancellors compare with leaders in other areas

| | Year | %Independent | %State | %State Selective | %State Comp |
|--------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| VCs | 2007 | 20.5 | 66.5 | 58 | 8.5 |
| Judges | 2007 | 70 | 30 | 28 | 2 |
| Politicians | 2007 | 38 | 62 | 27 | 36 |
| Journalists | 2006 | 54 | 46 | 33 | 14 |
| Medics | 2007 | 51 | 49 | 32 | 17 |
| CEOs | 2007 | 54 | 46 | 26 | 20 |

All figures are percentages in relation to UK educated people

While grammar schools produced over one half of university heads, they accounted for a third of leading journalists and medics for example, and under a third of high court judges and leading politicians.

Independent schools produce a quarter of higher education leaders despite making up only 7 per cent of the school population; but this over-representation is much less extreme than that observed in other areas of public life, where over half of leaders are educated privately. High court judges are most likely to be independently educated, with 70 per cent from independent schools in 2007.

It is also noteworthy that the vice-chancellors educated at independent school did not attend the highly exclusive public schools that produce so many other prominent people in public life. Rather, they were more likely to attend private day schools with more modest costs.

It is perhaps unsurprising that so many vice-chancellors attended academically selective schools, as most pursued academic careers before becoming university administrators and most were educated before the reforms of the 1970s introduced a largely comprehensive state system. But what the figures do reveal is that the higher education elite is predominantly state-educated in stark contrast to other areas of public life.

University backgrounds

Table 3 details the types of universities in which vice chancellors were awarded their first degrees, classifying institutions as old (established before 1992) or new (established in 1992 or afterwards).

Table 3: University degree backgrounds of vice chancellors

| | 1998 | | 2007 | |
|------------------------|--------|------------|--------|------------|
| | number | % of total | number | % of total |
| Old (pre 1992) | 97 | 90.5% | 106 | 90.5% |
| - <i>Oxbridge</i> | 36 | 34% | 27 | 23% |
| New (post 1992) | 4 | 4% | 8 | 7% |
| Unknown | 6 | 5.5% | 3 | 2.5% |
| Total | 107* | 100% | 117* | 100% |

* Excludes 8 heads in 1998 and 11 heads in 2007 awarded degrees outside the UK

Given the academic backgrounds and ages of most university leaders, it is perhaps unsurprising that nine out of ten university heads were awarded their first degrees in old universities, established before 1992, with a minority graduating from former polytechnics

Perhaps more surprisingly, a relatively small proportion of vice chancellors took their first degrees at Oxford or Cambridge. Just under one in four vice chancellors graduated from Oxbridge, significantly less than the proportion of Oxbridge educated leaders in other professions, as table 4 shows.

Table 4: How vice chancellors compare with leaders in other areas

| | Year | %Oxbridge |
|--------------------|-------------|------------------|
| VCs | 2007 | 23 |
| Judges | 2007 | 78 |
| Politicians | 2007 | 42 |
| Journalists | 2006 | 56 |
| Medics | 2007 | 15 |
| CEOs | 2007 | 39 |

All figures are percentages in relation to UK educated people

Changing education landscapes

In interpreting these results, it is important to recognize that the school and university backgrounds of vice chancellors reflect an educational landscape that was very different from today's school and university system.

Most vice chancellors were educated in a state school system organised into a minority of academically selective grammar schools, and the majority of non selective 'secondary moderns'. One of the enduring education debates is the strengths and weaknesses of this selective system, in which children were designated schools after taking a test at age 11. But what is clear is that grammars at that time offered those from non-privileged backgrounds, who were fortunate enough to pass the 11-plus, a launch pad to academic careers and other opportunities.

In another decade, university heads will be part of a generation who witnessed the phasing out of grammar schools. The key question then will be whether the current high proportion of state educated university heads continues..

Today's vice-chancellors are also the beneficiaries of the post war middle class expansion - examples of the upwardly mobile generation, during a time of an expanding higher education system.

Other findings

The analysis also showed that the proportion of vice chancellors educated in schools outside the UK halved during the last decade, decreasing from 16.5% to 8.6%.

Meanwhile the proportion of female vice chancellors increased during the last decade, increasing from 5% to 13%, mainly driven by a rise in female leaders of new universities.

University groupings

Do the trends outlined above differ for vice chancellors of different types of universities? The figures in tables 5 and 6 show the school and university backgrounds for the leaders of old and new universities, as well as those who are members of distinct groupings of research intensive universities, the Russell Group and the 1994 Group³.

They reveal that seven in ten new university leaders were educated in grammar schools, compared with five in ten grammar educated vice chancellors of old universities.

Meanwhile, 88% of vice chancellors of new universities were awarded their first degrees in old universities, with one in five doing so at Oxbridge. Meanwhile 96% of vice chancellors of old universities were awarded their first degrees in old universities, with one in three at Oxbridge.

Table 5: School backgrounds of vice chancellors in different types of universities

The vertical columns describe where vice-chancellors attended school; the horizontal columns describe the types of universities they currently head.

| | New | Old | 1994 Group | Russell Group |
|--------------------|------|------|------------|---------------|
| State | 74% | 61% | 66% | 60% |
| - <i>Grammar</i> | 69% | 50% | 50% | 53% |
| - <i>Comp</i> | 5% | 11% | 11% | 7% |
| Independent | 21% | 24% | 6% | 33% |
| Unknown | 5% | 15% | 28% | 7% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Excludes heads attending schools outside the UK. This high proportion of unknowns for the figures listed for the 1994 group means that these must be treated with particular caution.

Table 6: University backgrounds of vice chancellors in different types of universities

The vertical columns describe where vice-chancellors were awarded their first degrees; the horizontal columns describe the types of universities they currently head.

Columns refer to the vertical information and rows refer to the horizontal information?

| | New | Old | 1994 Group | Russell Group |
|------------------------|------|------|------------|---------------|
| Old (pre 1992) | 88% | 96% | 100% | 93% |
| - <i>Oxbridge</i> | 20% | 33% | 33% | 7% |
| New (post 1992) | 12% | 2% | 0% | 7% |
| Unknown | 0% | 2% | 0% | 0% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Excludes heads awarded degrees outside the UK. This particularly affects the figures listed for the Russell group, where 30% of vice chancellors received degrees abroad.

³See <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/>, and <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/> for lists of university members