

Staff Education as an Additional Indicator of Geographical Representation: Imbalance in the UN System¹

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Abstract

Based on the publicly available biographies of senior-level staff of organisations within the UN system, the article analyses information on their educational background and countries of education. The official policy of the United Nations, as well as of a number of UN programmes, funds, and specialised agencies postulates an aspiration to achieve the widest possible geographical representation of staff, i.e. to hire staff from different countries and regions of the world. At the same time, not only nationality but also the country of education can also be considered as an additional indicator of the representation of a particular country or region. The increasing internationalisation of education provides advantages to states with a significant share of the international education market and high positions in world university rankings. Using a data collection tool, the authors collected information from official UN system websites and then manually processed about two thousand biographies of senior-level staff. The collected data demonstrates a significant imbalance in terms of geographical destinations of education. The acquired data, on the one hand, reflects the objective situation and the role of individual countries and regions in the international education market over the last three decades. On the other hand, it can be used as a basis for a broader consideration of geographical representation issue in the UN system and other international organisations. The results also provide additional information for analysing national strategies aimed at attracting the most talented foreign students, forming a global ideological and intellectual space, training supranational elites, as well as increasing the number of international students.

Keywords: United Nations, geographical representation, internationalization of education, education abroad, globalization, supranational elites, international organizations, global governance, soft power

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Introduction

The United Nations and its associated programs, funds and specialized agencies² are designed to promote peacekeeping and international cooperation in various fields, based on the principle of sovereign equality of its members. Representatives of the organization itself and researchers regularly draw attention to the varying degrees of influence held by UN member states. Numerous books and scholarly publications published in the nearly 80 years since the organization's founding are devoted to the activities of the UN itself and related structures, the positions and strategies of individual states (see, for example: [Gromyko, 1985; Weiss, Daws, 2018; Mingst et. al, 2022, etc.]), as well as international organizations and their role in international relations in general. Depending on the researchers' adherence to a certain international relations theoretical paradigm, they may be reflecting on inevitable representation of the current power balance and unequal distribution of power in a international organizations (see, for example, [Mearsheimer, 1994; Gruber, 2000]); the intrinsic role, characteristics, internal dynamics or decision-making mechanisms of such organizations or the way they construct social reality [Barnett, Finnemore, 2004]; the role of ideologies in their activities [Voeten, 2021]; or, within a normative approach, the need for a more equitable representation of the interests of member states and the world community as a whole.

One aspect that has been on the radar of researchers for many years is human resources policy. In particular, the questions of what share of the UN staff is occupied by representatives of different countries, how this indicator correlates with the population of each Member State or the size of their financial contributions to the activities of certain UN structures, and finally, how countries influence staffing decisions and use them to promote national interests remain relevant.

The organization itself has repeatedly drawn attention to the principles of the distribution of posts among representatives of member states. The UN Charter postulates “the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity” in the recruitment of the Secretariat and “the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.”³ At the 11th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1957, when the number of States Parties had grown considerably⁴, a new resolution on changes in the geographical distribution of the staff of the United Nations Secretariat was adopted. It recommended to make appointments to the staff of the United Nations Secretariat giving appropriate preference be given to nationalities which form a disproportionately small part of the Secretariat [UN, 1957]. This trend has continued and it is now official UN policy, in accordance with the Charter, to employ staff “on as wide a geographical basis as possible”, with the exception of recruitment to posts in the General Service and related categories. [UN, 2023, p. 34-36]. Individual UN programs, funds and specialized agencies also adopt their own geographical distribution strategies, define quotas for staff recruitment and publish relevant statistics [Fall, Zhang, 2012]. Reports on achievements in this area are regularly published.

Nevertheless, the implementation of this principle remains a challenge. At the 75th session of the General Assembly in 2021, the issue of the need for additional efforts to achieve equal representation of countries was brought to the attention by the representative of Singapore and the representative of Guinea, who were speaking on behalf of ASEAN and the Group of 77 countries, respectively (UN, 2021). An official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed an opinion about the “pro-Western bias” of the UN's personnel policy⁵ [RIA Novosti,

² More on UN system <https://www.un.org/ru/about-us/un-system> and its structure https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/09/un_system_chart_ru.pdf.

³ Article 101 of the UN Charter <https://www.un.org/ru/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

⁴ 82 member-states in 1957 compared to 51 in 1945

⁵ RIA Novosti.. Zaharova ocenila kadrovuju politiku OON [Zakharova assessed the UN personnel policy], RIA Novosti, 20.02.2020. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20200220/1565019532.html> (accessed 20.08.2024).

2020]. The 2022 report on the issue of the Secretary-General states that, despite the priority of this policy, “overall pace towards equitable geographical distribution has been slow and at times inconsistent” [UN, 2022] [UN, 2022].

Academic community used different perspectives to address the issue of the representation of nationals of member states in the staff of the United Nations system. L. Goodrich in his 1962 article reveals the history and background of the idea of the need for a broad geographical representation of staff, noting that in the early stages of the organization's work its staff was largely composed of nationals of the United States, Canada and Western European countries [Goodrich, 1962, p.467]. The article examines the evolution of approaches to this topic as the number of UN member states increased and its own influence grew, noting the positions of the Soviet side and other states on this issue. The authors of the 1970 IMEMO RAS collective monograph on this issue wrote about the sharp disagreements between the USSR and the Western bloc. [OON. Itogi. Tendencii. Perspektivy, 1970, pp. 448-452]. However, even after the end of the Cold War, the topic of geographical representation still attracts the attention of researchers. Novosad and Werker analyze the distribution of citizens of different countries in leadership positions in the UN and its subordinate structures from 1947 to 2007 and draw conclusions about the dynamics of member states' influence in the organization. These include a disproportionately high representation of nationals from Scandinavian and some other rich countries in key positions and a relative decline in the influence of the United States over time, with an extremely low representation of China [Novosad, Werker, 2019]. Parizek and Stephen demonstrate that from 1997 to 2015 the UN Secretariat has become increasingly representative of the world's population, primarily due to a decline in the proportion of staff from the most influential countries [Parizek, Stephen, 2021a]. They also assess to what extent the proportion of staff from BRICS countries in leading international organizations, including the UN, has changed over time [Parizek, Stephen, 2021b]. Researchers also examine the composition of heads of UN peacekeeping operations [Oksamytna, Bove, Lundgren, 2020] and the reasons why certain states are more represented in international organizations [Badache, 2020; Eckhard, Steinebach, 2021]. China's efforts to promote its citizens to the UN positions are also examined [Fung C.J., Lam S-h., 2021; Lam, S.-h., Fung, C.J., 2024]. Finally, researchers pay attention to informal mechanisms through which states influence staffing decisions [Manulak, 2016; Gui 2024]. At the same time, Chinese researcher T. Gui notes the limited opportunities for quantitative analysis of such mechanisms.

The purpose of this article is to complement the above-mentioned studies and expand the subject of discussions on this issue, paying attention not only to the nationality of UN system staff, but also to the contribution of different countries to their education, and, consequently, to the indirect influence on the space of ideas and values in which UN structures function and on the formation of a new type of supranational elites.

Higher education and the formation of global ideological and political space

A notable share of contemporary academic works on the principle of geographical distribution in the United Nations, as well as most of the reports of the organization itself, focus on the citizenship of staff members and relevant statistics. Meanwhile, in the first years after the establishment of the organization, when further principles of its activities were just being developed and agreed upon, the issue was raised somewhat more broadly. A resolution of the second session of the UN General Assembly in 1947 referred to the international character of the Secretariat and the need “to avoid undue predominance of national practice”, therefore stating that the policies and administrative methods should “reflect, and profit to the highest degree from, assets of the various cultures and the technical competence of all Member nations”. [UN, 1947]. The Secretary-General's report on the subject in 1948 noted that “rightly understood, the cardinal principle of geographical

distribution is not, that nationals of a particular nation should have a specified number of posts at a particular grade or grades, or that they should receive in salary as a group a particular percentage of total” but, in the first place that the culture, experience and philosophical traditions of each Member State could make a contribution and enrich the work of Secretariat. [UN, 1948, p.2]. This commitment was also mentioned in a similar report in 1980. [UN, 1980, p. 3]. The UN Geographic Diversity Strategy 2020 refers to the desire to build on staff who represent the diversity of the world's peoples, in order to «reflect diverse viewpoints in implementing and meeting its mandates that touch upon the lives of people worldwide» [UN, 2020, p. 5].

At the same time, after the end of the Cold War, rapid transformation of international reality and the acceleration of globalization, a new type of employee of international organizations, including organizations of the UN system, was formed. The original premise of the late 1940s that each staff member represents the cultural and philosophical traditions of his or her own country or the ways of work and technical competencies inherent in different civilizations is becoming less relevant in the modern world. Today, we are talking about significantly increased international mobility; the global spread and influence of transnational companies and, consequently, their managerial and organizational principles and practices; and the unprecedented development of information and communication technologies.

In this context, it is important to reflect on the markedly accelerating process of internationalization of education. International statistics shows that more and more people receive higher education abroad: for example, in 1975 there were about 800 thousand students in higher education programs outside their own country [OECD, 2015, p. 360], and in 2021 – already about 6.4 million. At the same time, the states that belong to the category of “developed”, by definition, already have a high level of education, and, accordingly, a high potential for attracting foreign students. A significant share of the international education market in the last 30 years belongs to the English-speaking countries: the USA, Great Britain and Australia, in particular because of the English language international role, but also due to the efforts of these countries to attract foreign students, and to strengthen their influence in the world. As Table 1 shows, the share of European and North American higher education institutions (HEIs) in the international education market remains high.

Table 1. Number of foreign students by country of study, selected years, persons.

Year	1999	2000 ⁶	2013	2021
G7 countries				
Canada	32 466	36 450	151 244	312 630
France	130 952	137 085	228 639	252 856
Germany	n/a	n/a	196 619	376 359
Italy	23 496	24 929	82 450	72 284
Japan	56 552	n/a	135 803	216 241
Great Britain	232 540	222 936	416 693	600 589
USA	451 935	n/a	784 427	833 204
Other countries				
Russia	n/a	41 210	n/a	321 845
China	n/a	n/a	96 409	221 653
India	n/a	6 988	34 419	48 035
Australia	117 485	105 764	249 868	378 439
Specific Regions (according to the UN Sustainable Development goals classification)				
Europe and North America	1 409 551	1 453 501	2 722 593	3 733 873
Eastern and Southeast Asia	158 101	179 433	491 059	832 742
The World	2 040 515	2 106 939	4 256 215	6 387 487

⁶ Due to the lack of some data on countries, neighboring years were taken for clarity.

Designed on the basis of: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) data/ Education/Other policy relevant indicators/Outbound internationally mobile students by host region. URL: <http://data.uis.unesco.org>. (accessed 17.07.2024).

The trend towards globalization of education is also reflected in the emergence of world university rankings. One of the most prominent ratings by Times Higher Education for many years ranks several well-known UK and US universities among the top ten⁷. Most places in the top-100 list belong to universities from North America and Western Europe (although Chinese universities have significantly improved their positions in recent years⁸).

The discussions about the extent and scope of influence that education in a different country has on a particular person or group's values or political sympathies, or the role of higher education in international relations, deserve separate consideration and remain beyond the scope of this article. It is worth noting that these topics are not new and have been attracting researchers' attention for a long time. Themes such as the role of education in a state's foreign policy and its importance in terms of "soft power" have been extensively discussed (See, for example: [Benton, 1966, Nye, 2005; Trilokekar, 2010; Kramer 2012; Lin, Hongtao, 2017; Lomer, 2017; Antyukhova, 2019; Adoui, 2023; Gauttam et al, 2023] and others). Influential states' strategic documents also indicate the importance of attracting students from abroad to increase global influence and national "soft power" and attain foreign policy goals⁹.

Educational trajectories of specific UN system staff members, which will be discussed below, may vary significantly and the fact of receiving education abroad may be interpreted in different ways. In some cases, a citizen of one country may have lived and studied in another country for most of his or her life, and feel more closely associated with the cultural and philosophical traditions and worldview of the country of education rather than the country of citizenship. Other possible extreme could be a case of negative experiences connected to education in a foreign country and, as a result, a stronger personal commitment to one's own national and cultural identity later in life. Additional research may also take into account specific specializations – for example, it can be assumed that training in political science, international relations, security and conflict resolution, or gender studies programs may be connected to higher levels of ideological influence than medical or engineering training. At the same time, it can be reasonably assured that knowledge and opinions on issues under the UN's responsibility, which are subsequently used in management and decision-making, such as perceptions of international development concepts, social and political processes, international security issues, human rights, gender equality, climate agenda, etc., are shaped, inter alia, by specialized education. Therefore, data on education (higher and post-graduate education) received by staff members in a particular country can complement existing information on the representation of certain Member States in the UN system.

Methodology and results of the study

⁷ Times Higher Education. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2024/world-ranking (accessed 20.08.2024).

⁸ Jack P. World University Rankings 2024: China creeps closer to top 10. Times Higher Education, 27.09.2023. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/world-university-rankings-2024-china-creeps-closer-top-10> (accessed 20.08.2024).

⁹ See, for example, UK's International Education Strategy (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>), which refers to the importance of the sector for the country's "soft power" or the mission statement of the US State Department's profile structure, which emphasizes the importance of educational, cultural and scientific exchanges to achieve mutual understanding with other countries necessary to advance US foreign policy goals (<https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/bureau-of-educational-and-cultural-affairs>).

Based on the statistics presented above, the hypothesis of the study is that a significant proportion of United Nations system staff members are educated outside their own country at least at one stage of their education, many of them in Western Europe and North America. Thus, for example, it can be assumed that, when implementing the principle of recruiting the most competent staff members, as enshrined in the UN Charter, education in one of the leading, according to international ratings, world universities will be considered as an advantage – hence, the share of staff educated in one of the Western European or North American countries should presumably be relatively high. The data on the market share of international education in such states also provides a ground for this hypothesis.

In order to confirm or refute this hypothesis, the authors relied on publicly available information on education received by United Nations system staff in managerial positions in the countries where the Organization, its programs, funds and agencies carry out their programmatic activities.

It should be noted that the geographical representation of United Nations staff is usually analyzed on the basis of officially published data on the composition of the Secretariat. Also, as noted above, there are statistics of individual structures of the UN system, for example, UNESCO or ILO. However, for the purposes of this study, the authors have relied on a different set of data – namely, existing open data on the educational attainment of senior staff of the programs, funds and specialized agencies of the United Nations system working in countries where the organization is represented. This refers exclusively to country and multi-country teams implementing program activities in the field, rather than to headquarters or regional offices of individual organizations. A list of such country teams and multi-country offices is available on the official website of the UN Sustainable Development Group¹⁰. Consequently, any comparisons with official statistics on geographical representation in the Secretariat or individual entities of the UN system would be incorrect. Nevertheless, the authors believe that the selection of UN system staff in leadership positions working in the countries of operation allows to draw preliminary conclusions about the importance of foreign education in the context of global governance and the formation of the ideological space of UN activities. The heads of various UN agencies influence the determination of priorities and planning of the Organization's programs in the field and contribute to agenda-setting at the regional and global levels; they make managerial decisions, including those concerning staff recruitment, selection of partner non-profit organizations and projects for support, implementation of information and communication strategy, etc.

Information on all staff, heads of country and multi-country offices of UN agencies and institutions was collected using the WebScraper browser extension. WebScraper is an online parser, i.e., a tool for automatic collection data from similar web pages. The websites of UN country and multi-country offices have the same structure: all of them contain information about official representatives and heads of agencies and institutions in a given country under on the “Our Team” page¹¹. Using the parser, the following information was collected from 132 sites about the staff members: name, position, country of representation, organization, biography.

The result is a database of 2,425 senior-level staff members. Some employees of the UN system hold several positions simultaneously, for example, they represent their organization in three countries at once, so their biographies are presented on several sites. The cleanup process removed 448 such repetitions.

The authors then manually reviewed the remaining 1,977 biographies to determine the country of origin and place of education of the staff members. Country was determined by: direct indication of nationality, ancestry, and citizenship; indirect indications, such as work experience in the

¹⁰ The list is available at <https://unsdg.un.org/ru/un-in-action/country-level?tab=countries-listing>

¹¹ See e.g. <https://kazakhstan.un.org/en/about/our-team>. Multi-country offices bring together several countries, e.g. <https://pacific.un.org/en/about/our-team> and <https://easterncaribbean.un.org/en/about/our-team>.

country's public or military sectors. Other information, such as employment in a country's NGOs and commercial sectors, first and last name, and spouse's nationality, was not taken into account, as it did not allow for a reliable inference of nationality.

In the biographies of 719 staff members there was no information on education. Of the 1,258 employees who indicated education, 629 did not indicate country of origin.

Also, 33 employees with multiple citizenships had to be excluded from the study. In the majority of cases, they were citizens of both developed and developing countries at the same time, which does not allow conclusions relevant to this paper to be drawn. Thus, 1,225 biographies participated in the study, of which 598 contained information on origin.

When counting education, the order of obtaining diplomas and degree of education was not taken into account. All levels of programs on the basis of higher education organizations were included in the database: bachelor's, master's, PhD, MBA, etc.

For further research, the authors turned to four methods of grouping countries: UK and the USA (since these countries are leaders in education ratings and occupy the first two places in the global market of international education), Group of Seven (G7) countries, developed countries according to the UN¹², and BRICS countries.

The main hypothesis of the study – that at least at one stage of education a significant proportion of staff in UN leadership positions were educated abroad, predominantly in North American or Western European educational institutions – was confirmed.

Before turning to the conclusions, it is worth outlining the methodological limitations of the study. Firstly, the 719 senior staff members did not specify their education, and this could have distorted the statistics of the general population. The authors are aware of this limitation and aim only to outline the underlying trends. It is particularly noteworthy that there were no biographies at all in the UN country office in China, which may have affected the representation of regional trends. Secondly, some aspects of staff biographies indicate that there is a tendency to publicize only prestigious education. For example, there were many instances where information about the obtained bachelor's degree was omitted, but subsequent education was listed. Such phenomena indicate that the processed data may somewhat underestimate the share of education that can be labeled as non-prestigious. Third, the study is time-limited: the data was collected in early June 2024, and at another point in time the results may be somewhat different. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily advisable to track the dynamics regularly in this way. To further develop the topic, it would be more efficient to use internal data from UN human resources services, to which the authors do not have access at the moment. Finally, in manual data processing, despite some multiple mutual checks, human error could have led to minor deviations from reality.

The main results of the study are presented below in graphical form (Figure 1., Figure 2., Figure 3).

¹² World Economic Situation and Prospects 2024. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP_2024_Web.pdf (accessed 04.08.2024).

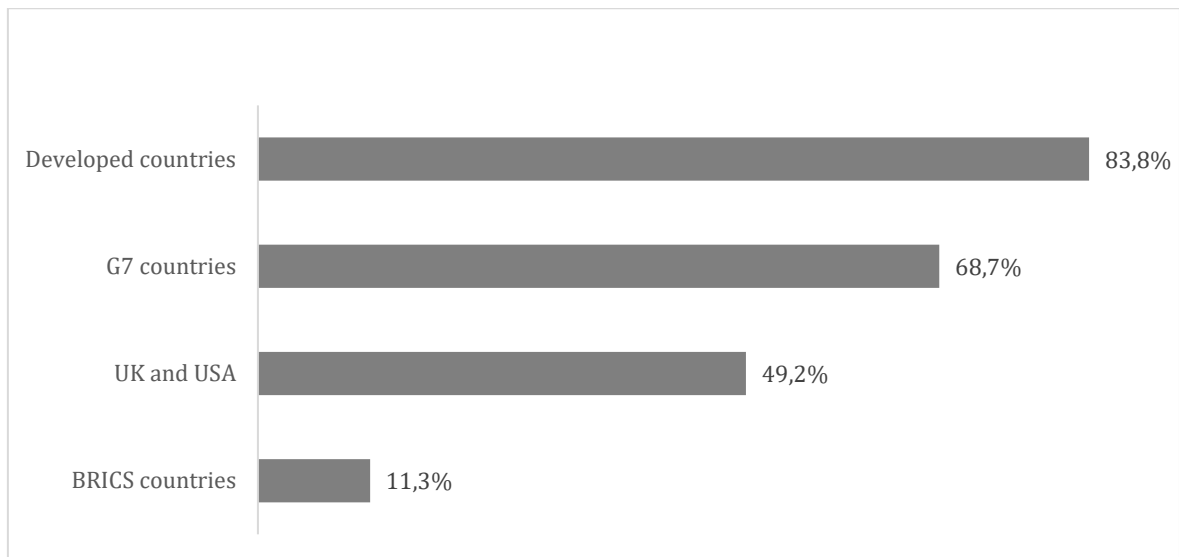


Fig.1. Share of UN agency country offices senior management who have received at least one education in one of the countries of the group.

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of 1225 biographies.

As can be seen from Figure 1, almost half of the staff at least at one stage of higher education studied in the USA and/or the UK, about 69% were educated in one of the G7 countries, 84% – in developed countries. In comparison, only 11% studied in the BRICS countries.

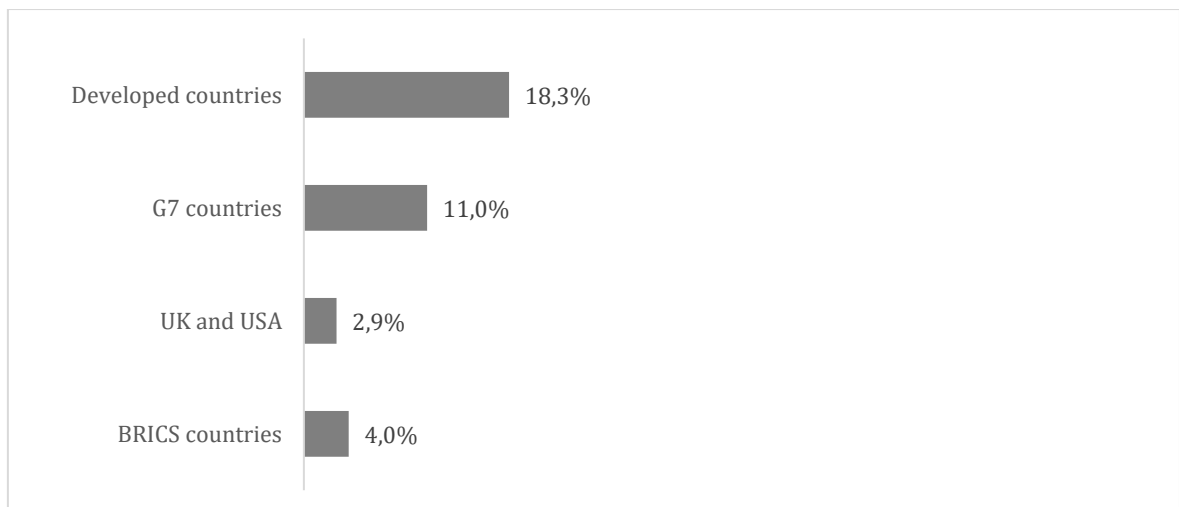


Figure 2. Share of UN agency country offices senior management by region of origin.

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of 598 biographies.

Figure 2 shows that only 11% of staff who indicated their nationality directly or indirectly are from G7 countries, while 18.3% are from developed countries. Even taking into account the sample size, the disproportion is clearly visible: only 18 out of 598 employees are from the USA and the UK, while 603 out of 1225, just under half of all senior staff members, studied at universities in these countries.

Looking at the flows of movement by country, the focus on traditionally leading destinations for education is evident. For example, of the 29 UN staff who studied in India, nine, or more than 30%, also studied in the United Kingdom and another eight, or 27%, studied in the United States.

The picture is similar for other countries: regardless of origin, a large proportion of the education received was in Western countries.

To make these processes more visible, the authors turned to a region-based analysis. The regions were divided according to the groupings used by the UN Statistics Division¹³.

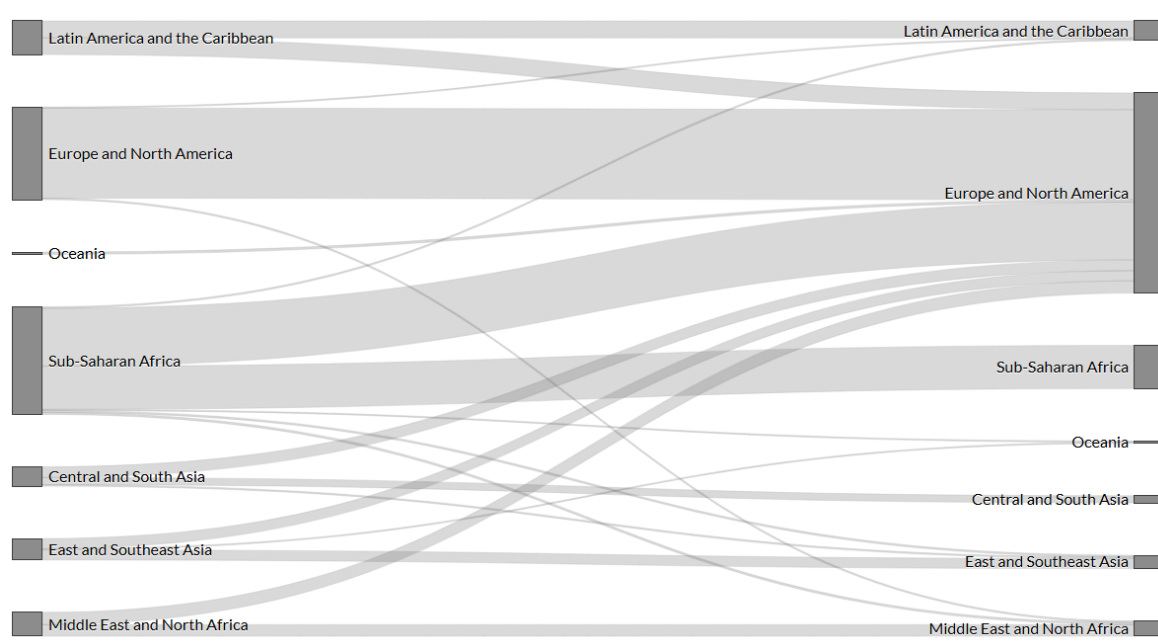


Figure 3. Heads of UN agency country offices by region of origin (left) and region of education (right)

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of 598 biographies of senior staff members who indicated nationality¹⁴.

Figure 3 clearly shows that in the category of those who indicated their country of origin in their CV, in more than half of the cases, at least one of the diplomas obtained in a European or North American country. It can also be seen that there is relatively little educational exchange between regions, and only the Europe and North America region stands out significantly in terms of the share of educated people from other regions.

Conclusions

The publicly available data on the educational attainment of senior-level staff of United Nations system programs, funds and agencies analyzed in this study show significant disparities between regions and groups of countries. The low share of staff educated in one of the BRICS countries is noteworthy, especially since today they are home to almost half of the world's population, and experts estimate that in 2024 the combined GDP of the BRICS countries will exceed that of the G7 countries¹⁵.

¹³ SDG Indicators. Regional groupings used in Report and Statistical Annex. UN Statistics Division. Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/regional-groups>

¹⁴ For clarity, the graph does not show single pairs. For example, only 1 person from Oceania was educated in Oceania. Since there is only one such case, it is not included in the graph.

¹⁵ Rossijskij jekspert: BRIKS obladaet potencialom dlja izmenenija mira posle 2030 goda. [Russian expert: BRICS has the potential to change the world after 2030]. IRNA, 01.06.2024. Available at: <https://ru.irna.ir/news/85496060/Российский-эксперт-БРИКС-обладает-потенциалом-для-изменения> (accessed 20.08.2024).

Depending on the chosen approach, one can interpret the results obtained in the framework of the quantitative research presented in this article in different ways. On the one hand, the demonstrated disproportion reflects the objective trends of recent decades, increasing globalization and the situation in terms of the international division of labor. At the same time, taking into account that the time between graduation from a higher education institution to moving to senior positions in the UN system can be 15-20 years on average. Therefore the presented data could reflect the influence of a country in the international education market in the 1990s-2000s, i.e. in the period that many researchers consider the era of “unipolarity”. In this respect, the dominance of Western education, especially education in the USA and the UK, fully corresponds to the trends of the mentioned period.

At the same time, the obtained data can also be seen as a manifestation of a deliberate policy of individual states seeking to increase their “soft power” and influence global organizations not only through the work of their own citizens, but also by shaping the agenda, values, ideas or discourse on specialized topics – including in the political and socio-economic spheres, defining and transforming perceptions of development assistance, human rights, gender equality issues and minority rights, etc. From this perspective, the most influential states could compensate the declining share of their own citizens in the structures of global governance through education, seeking in some way to influence the perceptions and values of citizens of other countries. The dominance of conditionally “Western” universities, especially British and American institutions, in this case is not just a reflection of the distribution of forces, but also a consequence of a deliberate policy to promote a “liberal world order” and the formation of a unipolar world. The above-mentioned strategic documents of individual countries speak in favor of this interpretation. From this point of view, the high positions of UK and the USA in the list of education destinations are not unexpected, but clearly demonstrate that policies and achievements in the field of international education can have a long-term effect and continue to have an impact even after two or three decades.

The data collected and analyzed in this study is certainly not definitive, as it is based on limited empirical material. At the same time, it can serve as a basis for further research, including on individual UN system organizations; specific areas of professional training, especially in the social and humanitarian sphere, and their impact on the dissemination of certain ideas and concepts; the importance of education in terms of building professional networks and interaction between staff members and, consequently, career prospects; and the reverse impact – for example, in the situation when a former UN system staff member becomes a professor at a university.

The results of the study may have predictive value, allowing for the analysis of medium- and long-term trends in training for international organizations in selected countries of the world and at the global level. They may also have practical relevance, including for further discussions on geographical representation policies in the United Nations, as well as for education policy and training at the country and regional levels. In particular, the data and trends presented in this study may be of interest in planning the training of specialists in connection with the ongoing transformation of the system of global governance and the process of formation of a more equitable, multipolar world as referred to in the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

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