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UK Universities: Choosing the Right Partner

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Abstract

This paper offers an overview of British universities from the perspective of a prospective international student or educational manager looking for international collaboration. The authors explain criteria used to rank UK universities in University League Table 2015. They give an overview of specific terminology and jargon associated with British higher education explaining terms such as Oxbridge, Russell Group universities, Red brick universities, Scottish MA etc.

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1. Introduction

If one is planning to study in the UK or develop a collaboration link with a UK university, it is important to make the right choice. Glossy brochures that universities offer to their prospective students and partners can be misleading: whilst a particular British higher education institution may be good at marketing itself to the world, its actual performance could be disappointing. It is important to be able to make an intelligent choice when choosing a university for partnership or study, and understanding various systems of assessing British universities' performance can help with this. It is also useful to familiarize oneself with terminology and jargon used in various discussions about higher education institutions in Britain.

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2. Oxbridge: easier route to undergraduate study

The term “Oxbridge” is used by those in the know. As a noun, it means “University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge” or “University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge”. Used as an adjective, it describes characteristics that set Oxford and Cambridge aside from other universities in Britain, emphasising the superior social and intellectual status of Oxford and Cambridge (*Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed.).

Oxford and Cambridge are the most prestigious British universities and if you can be associated with either of them as a student, graduate student or even as conference attendee, you would be wise to take up this opportunity. If you are a prospective student and your subject is any of these subjects, you have a good chance of being accepted: Geography, History, Archaeology, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Music, Modern Languages and Linguistics / Modern Languages, Modern and Medieval Languages. For example, in 2014 the acceptance rate for Theology and Religious Studies was 48 per cent in the University of Cambridge and 33 per cent in the University of Oxford (The Telegraph, 7/09/2015). This compares with 15 per cent acceptance rate in 2014 for Philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) (Oxford) and 14 per cent for Human sciences (Oxford). Having received 1433 applications to study Medicine in 2014, University of Oxford accepted 11 per cent of the candidates (The Telegraph, 7/09/2015). Medicine was beaten by Economics and Management, where the acceptance rate in 2014 was only seven per cent in Oxford. Oxbridge forums are a good place to find up-to-date information for those who are considering study at Oxford or Cambridge (The student room, 2015).

3. Ancient universities: Master of Arts degrees explained

Oxford and Cambridge belong to the group of universities known as “ancient universities”. Others are University of St Andrews, University of Glasgow, University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh and University of Dublin.

Ancient universities follow different (archaic) rules and traditions that set them apart from other (less prestigious) universities. Ancient universities award the Master of Arts (MA) as an undergraduate academic degree, not Bachelor of Arts as other universities. The undergraduate Master of Arts (MA) degrees are referred to as the Oxbridge MA or the Scottish MA.

This can cause confusion. It is important to understand that Oxbridge MA and the Scottish MA are undergraduate degrees equivalent to the degree of Bachelor of Arts (BA), not postgraduate degrees. Scottish ancient universities award the MA degree at graduation whilst the University of Oxford awards the Bachelor of Arts degree at graduation and only after three years awards the MA if the graduate has been conducting himself or herself properly during that period. (Tradition of Oxbridge 'free' Masters degrees under fire.)

4. The Russell Group universities

Oxford and Cambridge are members of another prestigious group of universities - the Russell Group representing leading UK universities. There are 24 universities in the Russell group: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen Mary University of London, Queen's University Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, University of Warwick, University of York (Russell group, 2015).

Although the entry criteria are very high with “[t]he average entry score for Russell Group universities [being] 480 UCAS tariff points (equivalent to four A grades at A-level) compared with 335 (equivalent to slightly better than one A grade and two B grades) for other universities in the UK”, Russell Group universities claim a high proportion of international students: “The UK is the second most popular destination in the world for international students, and there are currently over 155,000 students from outside the UK studying at Russell Group universities. Our

communities include students and staff from Chile to South Korea, New Zealand to Morocco, Finland to Botswana” (Profile of the Russell Group of Universities, 2015).

Moreover, financial assistance makes the study in a Russell group university possible for international students. For example, the University of York offers scholarships for overseas students (University of York, 2015).

If you are commencing study of any subject in the University of York, you can apply for a Scholarship for Overseas Students (SOS) and receive a sum equivalent to a 25 % of the overseas tuition fee. However, the decision to grant the award depends on the student’s academic merit. The university will also consider your financial circumstances and decide whether or not you need financial help.

There is also Overseas Research Scholarship (ORS) for postgraduate research students who plan to commence PhD study. In order to qualify for the award one must be an outstanding scientist and one’s chosen department at the University of York must support them in their application.

Overseas Continuation Scholarship (OCS) is a special scheme reserved for current University of York Masters students who are progressing to doctoral studies at the University of York. In 2015 successful applicants received £5000.

5. Red brick universities

Six Russell group universities are also members of another, less prestigious group - Red brick universities, chartered at the beginning of the 20th century. These are University of Birmingham, University of Manchester, University of Liverpool, University of Leeds, University of Sheffield, University of Bristol. The term Red Brick University derives from the colour and building material of university buildings (Feingold, 2006). Initially this term was meant to be derogatory, distinguishing newer universities from ancient ones, which are still more prestigious than newer ones.

6. Plate glass universities

Plate glass universities are those that were chartered after 1966. The name of this group reflects the modern building materials used for their construction - plate glass in concrete or steel frames (Beloff, 1968).

The list of Plate glass universities includes Aston University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Kent, Lancaster University, University of Sussex, University of Warwick, University of York, University of Bath, University of Bradford, Brunel University, City University London, Heriot-Watt University, Keele University, Loughborough University, University of Salford, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde, University of Surrey, Ulster University.

7. New universities

It is not desirable to be associated with many of the new universities – institutions that gained the university status after 1991. A researcher’s association with some of the new universities can seriously undermine his or her prospects of employment in the UK.

The list of new universities: Napier University, Anglia Ruskin University, Birmingham City University, Bournemouth University, University of Brighton, University of Central Lancashire, De Montfort University, Coventry University, University of Derby, University of East London, University of Glamorgan, University of Greenwich, University of Hertfordshire, University of Huddersfield, Kingston University, Leeds Beckett University, University of Lincoln, Liverpool John Moores University, London South Bank University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Middlesex University, Northumbria University, Nottingham Trent University, Oxford Brookes University, University of the West of Scotland, University of Plymouth, University of Portsmouth, The Robert Gordon University, Sheffield Hallam University, Staffordshire University, University of Sunderland, Teesside University, University of West London, University of Westminster, University of the West of England, University of Wolverhampton, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Abertay Dundee, University of Gloucestershire, University of Wales, Newport, London Metropolitan University, University of Bolton, University of the Arts London, Cardiff University,

Roehampton University, Bath Spa University, Canterbury Christ Church University, University of Chester, University of Chichester, University of Winchester, Liverpool Hope University, Southampton Solent University, University of Worcester, University of Northampton, University of Bedfordshire, Edge Hill University, York St John University, Queen Margaret University, Buckinghamshire New University, University Campus Suffolk, University of Cumbria, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Swansea University, Trinity University College, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Swansea Metropolitan University, Glyndwr University, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, University of the Highlands and Islands, Norwich University of the Arts, Newman University, Birmingham, BPP University.

The emergence of a large number of new universities was due to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (Legislation.gov., 1992) which allowed polytechnics to obtain the status of independent university and award degrees.

8. University League Table 2015

University League Table 2015 lists 123 universities and their number increases every year. The UK University League Table 2015 (University League Table 2015) ranks British universities using ten criteria: entry standards, student satisfaction, research quality, graduate prospects, student-staff ratio, academic services spend, facilities spend, good honours, degree completion, green score.

Entry Standards reflects entry levels required by a given university. A high average score is over 400. Some universities have an access policy of accepting students with low grades, and this affects their entry standards.

Student Satisfaction criterion reflects students' view of the quality of the teaching at a given university, and the maximum score that a university can achieve here is 5.

Research Assessment measures the quality of the research. The maximum score here is 4, and data for this is collected every four years.

Research Intensity with the maximum score of 1 measures the proportion of the university staff undertaking research.

Graduate Prospects (with the maximum score of 100) considers the employability of a given university's graduates. This figure takes into account only jobs that require graduates and would not include low-level jobs.

Student–Staff Ratio tells you how many students are there per one member of staff. Academic Services Spend is how much a university spends on academic services per student. Facilities Spend shows how much a given university spends on staff and student facilities per student (this can include sports and health facilities, careers and counselling services). Good Honours is the percentage of students graduating with a first or upper second-class honours degree. The maximum score can be 100. Degree class is the most important measure of a graduate's achievement in the UK and is the main factor that affects employment prospects. Degree Completion, with the maximum score of 100, shows the ratio of successful degree completions measured against the expected result.

Green score is calculated by People & Planet University League (People & Planet University League, 2015) that takes into account the University's Environmental Policy, Human Resources for Sustainability, Environmental Auditing & Management Systems, Ethical Investment, Carbon Management, Workers Rights, Sustainable Food, Staff and Student Engagement, Education for Sustainable Development, Key Sustainability Impacts. Green score is not used in total calculations, however.

9. Cambridge in University League Table 2015: number one

Cambridge scored 1000 points in University League Table 2015 and is officially the first top university in the UK. Its entry standards scored 614 compared to 580 scored by its historical rival the University of Oxford. Student Satisfaction score is 4.24 out of 5 and Research Quality 2.98 out of 4. Graduate Prospects score is 84.7 out of 100 and there are 11.6 students per member of staff. Academic Services Spend is 2,401, and Facilities Spend is 747. Good Honours score is 88.6 and Degree Completion is 98.9 out of 100. Green Score, however, is not as high as other universities: 27.5 compared with 59 achieved by Plymouth University and 57.5 achieved by University of Worcester.

10. London Metropolitan University: at the bottom of the League Table

London Metropolitan University is officially at the bottom of University League Table 2015 taking the last, 123rd place in the table, with its overall score of 329 out of 1000. Its Entry Standards score 232. This university does not require its prospective students to demonstrate a high level of competence: students are only expected to have GCSE grade C in English Language or key skills qualification level 3 or equivalent and GCSE grade C in Maths as required. (London Metropolitan University, 2015). This means that students are expected to be able to read and write, possibly with mistakes, as GCSE grade C in English Language would roughly correspond to a satisfactory mark (three) awarded to a 15-year-old school leaver in Russia. This minimum requirement is progress in comparison to the situation before.

London Metropolitan University's Research Quality score of 1.84 out of 4 is not the lowest in the table and indicates that its members of staff undertake considerable research. Graduate Prospects are not high here: 44.6 out of possible 100: not many employers would recruit these graduates to do qualified jobs. There are 21.5 students per member of staff, one of the worst results in the country, and Academic Services Spend of 412 is by far the worst. The spend on facilities is 206, which is amongst the lowest in the country, and so is the score of 51.3 for Good Honours. However, 70.5 per cent of students complete their degrees, which is not a bad result, and their Green Score of 29.5 is higher than at Cambridge.

11. Research Quality score

If your objective is to find partners for collaboration such as a joint research program or in order to apply for research grants, then you will be specifically interested in universities Research Quality score. If we sort universities according to this criterion, we will get a different picture compared to the overall grading. Table 1 demonstrates these differences:

Table 1. Top ten UK universities in 2015 (overall score versus research quality score).

<i>Top ten UK universities (overall score)</i>		<i>Top ten UK universities (research quality score)</i>	
1	Cambridge		Cambridge
2	Oxford		Oxford
3	London School of Economics		London School of Economics
4	St Andrews		Imperial College London
5	Durham		University College London
6	Imperial College London		Manchester
7	Warwick		Warwick
8	Bath		York
9	University College London		Essex
10	Exeter		Edinburgh

12. The 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF)

A university research quality score is calculated using data collected within the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. REF is the system that measures the quality of research in British universities. The funding bodies that conducted the assessment in 2014 were:

- the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- the Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
- the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL). (Research Excellence Framework, 2014)

As stated in the REF report for 2014, altogether there were 1,911 submissions produced by 52,061 FTE academic staff (FTE means “full time equivalent”). There were 191,150 research outputs. As the report states, “outputs” are the product of any form of research, published between January 2008 and December 2013. They include publications such as journal articles, monographs and chapters in books, as well as outputs disseminated in other ways such as designs, performances and exhibitions.” (Research Excellence Framework, 2014)

13. Subject specific excellence

The overall ranking is not a sufficient source of information when it comes to selecting a university that performs best in a particular subject. Table 2 demonstrates the top 10 UK universities for various subjects.

Table 2. Top 10 UK universities for various subjects in 2014.

	Russian & East European Languages	Economics	Mathematics	Communication & Media Studies	Mechanical Engineering
1	Oxford	Cambridge	Cambridge	Warwick	Cambridge
2	Durham	London School of Economics	Oxford	Sheffield	Imperial College London
3	Cambridge	Oxford	Imperial College London	Leeds	Bristol
4	Bristol	Warwick	Warwick	Lancaster	Sheffield
5	Exeter	University College London	Durham	Newcastle	Leeds
6	Bath	Nottingham	Bath	East Anglia	Bath
7	Queen Mary	Bristol	St Andrews	Cardiff	Surrey
8	Manchester	Bath	University College London	Leicester	Nottingham
9	Edinburgh	Durham	Bristol	Southampton	Southampton
10	University College London	Exeter	London School of Economics	Lincoln	Strathclyde

14. University finances

Before deciding which prospective partner university to choose, you may be interested in considering their financial health. The website listing financial information about UK universities is available here: (University financial health check 2015 URL: <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/sites/default/files/Attachments/2015/04/27/k/g/p/institutions-finances-compared-2013-2014-300415.pdf> Data check 10/08/2015).

This document lists, amongst other criteria, funding information about every university in the UK for 2013-14. You can see, for example, that University of Aberdeen received £66,045,000 in total research grants and contracts whilst for Abertay University this figure amounts to amere £1,245,000. This figure was highest for Oxford with £478,300,000.

Top ten universities by income are University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, University College London, University of Manchester, Imperial College London, University of Edinburgh, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Nottingham, University of Birmingham.

15. Conclusion

Those who seek partnership between Russia and the UK may find it useful to learn about Sir Martyn Poliakoff's experience (On UK-Russia scientific cooperation, 2015).

Poliakoff is a British scientist of a mixed Russian/British heritage. He works in the University of Nottingham specialising in Green Chemistry. Poliakoff also works for the UK Academy of Sciences and is working on strengthening Russian – British connections.

It is inspiring to see academic connections develop between Russia and Britain, and the trend is likely to continue. Thus, it is important to learn about the higher education structures and traditions of both countries in order to make decisions based on sufficient information.

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