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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

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