

United Kingdom

Introduction

According to the analysis in St Aubyn et al. (2009), the tertiary education system in the United Kingdom is one of the most efficient in the EU, together with Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and Finland. The system is at the production possibility frontier, due to excellence in both teaching and scientific production. The United Kingdom tertiary education system remains among the best performers during the two time periods and irrespective of the method or models used.¹

Indicators

The United Kingdom is a very good achiever on both education and research using a comparatively small number of resources. With below average numbers of academic staff and above average numbers of students (per academic staff), the United Kingdom's tertiary education system produces the largest numbers of graduates and publications and their quality is among the best.

Table - Summary of indicators in St. Aubyn (2009)

	Average ISI citation		Recruiter review		Peer review	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
UK	5,00	3	1,65	2	1,74	7
best performer	NL - 5,51	1	IE - 2	1	FI - 2	1
worst performer	RO - 1,63	26	CZ -1.06	16	GR - 1.02	16

	Funding rules		Staff policy		Evaluation	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
UK	5.50	7	10	1	7,7	2
best performer	PT - 7,8	1	CZ, DK, NL, AT, SK, SE,	1	HU - 8,3	1
worst performer	SK - 2,9	18	FR - 1,8	18	GR - 2,3	18

	Academic staff	Students	Graduates <i>per capita</i>	Publications	Students <i>per academic staff</i>	Graduates <i>per student</i>	Graduates <i>per student</i>
	UK	1,6	38,0	10,5	0,9	24,5	6,8
EU27	1,9	33,7	7,1	0,6	17,8	3,7	19,8

	PISA	
	Score 2000*	Rank
UK	528	2
best performer	FI - 540	1
worst performer	RO - 410	18

The United Kingdom has a large scientific production measured by the number of articles per capita. It is essentially due to a high academic staff productivity (in fact the largest productivity as measured by the number of articles per academic staff), as the academic staff is smaller than average. Moreover, the quality of research is very high, with the 3rd largest impact of scientific production (ISI citation index of 5 on an average of 3.55).

The quality of teaching is also very high. The recruiter review indicator is very high, suggesting that recruiters regard Universities in the United Kingdom as providing highly employable graduates. The score of the peer review indicator, which reflects the ranking of universities, is also high. However, a number of Member States (Finland, Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark) have a larger number of universities considered excellent by peers, relative to the United Kingdom.

¹ Other studies also find the United Kingdom a best performer. For example, Agasisti (2008) studies 8 countries and concludes that the UK has the best performance, essentially due to the high graduation rates experienced and the good results in terms of foreign students' attraction (he focuses on the teaching dimension only).

The United Kingdom stands out with a high ratio of students per academic staff. Although this could be considered as a negative feature for producing graduates, in terms of the learning experience of students, we have precisely the opposite: few academics per student are able to produce a high number of graduates and the quality of teaching is very high. This can be explained through the efficiency of academic staff, the organisation of study programmes with a large role for personal work by students and the a priori quality of students, as indicated by relatively high PISA scores. Furthermore, the United Kingdom tertiary education system attracts talented students from abroad.

Regarding the explanatory factors relevant for efficiency, the United Kingdom has the highest scores for the staff policy indicator and the evaluation indicator. These suggest the tertiary education system is characterised by large degree of autonomy and accountability. Indeed, tertiary education institutions have a high level of autonomy as regards admission requirements, course contents, staff policy, or selection of academic staff. The role of the Government is limited to set overall funding and priorities. Professional bodies participate in the external audit of institutions and they also co-operate on course content (e.g. in medicine).

The score for funding rules is somewhat lower. Funding levels are essentially proportional to levels of student recruitment, with allowances for additional cost factors such as the higher costs of recruiting and retaining students from low socio-economic backgrounds, differential costs depending on study intensity, and differential costs associated with subjects. Private sector funding plays a significant role (through student fees, industry and alumni).

Solid evaluation, guidelines for teachers and close contacts with employers contribute to ensuring teaching excellence. The tertiary education system is very attractive to students from abroad.

One of the strengths of the United Kingdom tertiary education system is that it includes many people already employed and who do not have a tertiary education qualification. This partly remedies the inequality of access between those from manual and professional backgrounds.²

The missions of teaching and research are seen as complementary, with world class research activities enabling institutions to develop and deliver high quality teaching and to attract international funding.

Arrangements on tuition fees are currently subject to an independent review that will report to Government later in 2010.

Policy developments

The most significant recent reform in England has been the introduction of variable tuition fees in England and Wales for full-time undergraduates starting in 2006, with a cap placed on the fee that can be charged. These arrangements are currently subject to an independent review of higher education funding and student finance that will report to Government later in 2010. The review will consider the student support system as well as the balance of contributions between students, employers, graduates and taxpayers.

Education and research remain a policy priority in the United Kingdom, where the use of resources is already highly efficient.

² Barr (2004) argues that access to tertiary education is unequal: in 2002, 81 per cent of children from professional backgrounds went to University, while comparable figure for children from manual backgrounds was 15 per cent.

The Government has developed agendas to strengthen science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) in higher education, and there has been a sharp increase in the number of students in STEM at every level but more markedly in MSc and PhD level.

As part of future strategic direction for universities in England, priority will be given to funding for key subjects including sciences; getting businesses more involved in designing courses, providing work placements and part-time study options for staff; and promoting relationships between businesses and universities so that course content doesn't stagnate.

An important aspect is about making sure that students have much better information before they choose courses – both about what they will be taught and employment prospects. Great progress was achieved in the numbers of people beginning a three year degree at 18 or 19 but the challenge for the next decade is to offer a wider range of study opportunities – part-time, work-based, foundation degrees and studying whilst at home – to a greater range of people.

From 2010/11, the Scottish Government will increase student support (inter alia matching the income levels of those younger and older students with the lowest incomes and introducing student support for those over 55 studying in Scotland. Scotland also examines the replacement of loans by grants.

Wales promotes close relationships between higher education institutions and employers through the Knowledge Transfer Partnerships which permits to employ recent graduates on projects of strategic importance.