

## Universities in the UK: some key general facts

Higher education is a declared priority in UK government policy, with a target set to attract 50 percent of 18- to 30-year-olds to higher education by 2010. Currently, approximately 30 percent of young people go on to higher education at age 18 years (with almost 50 percent in Scotland), and an increasing number of older or more "mature" students are studying either full-time or part-time for university degrees. It is estimated that 1.8 million students are currently in the UK higher education system.

Most undergraduate university degrees take three years to complete, with undergraduate degrees at Scottish universities lasting four years. At the graduate level, a taught master's degree normally is earned in a single year, a research master's takes two years, and a doctoral degree is completed after three years. Professional courses, such as medicine, veterinary medicine, law and teaching, are usually undertaken as five-year undergraduate degrees, but students who have already been awarded a different undergraduate degree can often take a shorter, graduate-level course.

Universities in the UK are state financed, but not state owned, and there is only one private university - the University of Buckingham - where students have to pay all their fees.

### A brief history of universities in the UK

Most universities in the UK can be classified into 4 main categories: [ancient](#), [red brick](#), [new](#) and [open](#)

#### Ancient universities

'Ancient' is a term used to describe the medieval and renaissance universities of the UK that continue to exist. An ancient university effectively means one that was founded before the 17th century. Well-known examples include Oxford, founded before the year 1167, and Cambridge founded in 1209. In Scotland, the Universities of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, Glasgow (1451), Aberdeen (1492) and Edinburgh (1583) are well-known examples of Ancient Universities.

Oxford is a unique institution. As the oldest university in the English-speaking world, it can lay claim to 900 years of continuous existence. There is no clear date of foundation, but teaching existed at Oxford in some form in 1096 and developed rapidly from 1167, when King Henry II banned English students from attending the University of Paris.

#### Red Brick universities

The term 'red brick' was first used in a publication by a professor of Spanish (Edgar Allison Peers) at the University of Liverpool to describe the six 'civic' British universities which were founded in the industrial cities of England in the Victorian era and which achieved university status before the second World War. Peer's reference was inspired by the fact that The Victoria Building at the University of Liverpool is built from a distinctive red pressed brick, with terracotta decorative dressings.

The original six civic red brick universities were: Birmingham; Bristol; Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester and Sheffield. The University of Liverpool can be argued to be the first red brick university. But with the Birmingham University Act receiving assent on 24 May 1900, the first red brick university to officially receive its Royal Charter was the University of Birmingham.

Red brick 'civic' universities were non-collegiate institutions that admitted men without specific reference to their religion or family background and which concentrated on educating their students in 'real-world' skills, often linked to engineering.

This deliberate emphasis on a practical, non-collegiate, higher education originally distinguished the red brick universities from the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge and from the newer (although still pre-Victorian) University of Durham. Ancient universities traditionally imposed religious tests on staff and students and were collegiate institutions, concentrating primarily on a more academic development in the liberal arts and divinity.

Today, the modern use of the term 'red brick' can relate to those members of the so-called Russell Group of universities, founded between 1850 and 1960. But the term is not mutually inclusive. The Russell Group is, in actuality, an association of major research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom, formed in 1994 at a meeting convened in the Hotel Russell, London. The Group is composed of the Vice-Chancellors/Principals of twenty ancient, red brick and so-called 'new' universities.

### **New Universities**

Two types of university are frequently given the name 'New Universities':

1. those created in the 1960s, sometimes called 'Plate Glass Universities', which were known as 'New Universities' when first founded; but which are now more commonly considered as a sub-group of the higher education institutions which existed prior to the changes in 1992 which allowed polytechnics to become Universities.

2. those universities created in or after 1992 from polytechnics and colleges of higher education. 'Polytechnics' were initially created in the UK towards the middle of the 1960s, when the then Government Secretary of State for Education initiated a new sector of higher education. Polytechnics were intended to complement the older, more academically orientated, universities and focus on professional and vocational programmes of study, offered on both a full-time and part-time basis.

These 'ex-polytechnics' are the institutions most commonly referred to as 'New Universities' in the present day.

### **The Open University**

Founded in 1968, the OU is Britain's only mainly distance-learning University. Study materials are provided on-line and by post to a wide range of students, many of whom are working people who wish to improve or develop their portfolio of higher education qualifications.

In the UK 'Semesterisation' took place during the 1990s and recently there has been an interest in moving back towards year long delivery and in larger module sizes. Semesters, nevertheless, appear generally to predominate, but the use of a variety of structures, as explained and described above, is becoming relatively common.

### **Further information**

#### [University of Salford](#)

The Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) maintains and develops the National Curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations, and accredits and monitors qualifications in colleges and at work. Further details can be found on the [QCA website](#).

You can find a list of all UK qualifications accredited by the QCA on the [Open Qualifications website](#).

[The Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\)](#) ensures that UK higher education is of a standard that's respected and admired across the world.