Oxford overtakes Cambridge for first time in QS world rankings

Of 76 UK universities in 2019 rankings 41 have improved in best ever performance

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British universities put in a sterling performance in the latest edition of a prestigious international league table, with Oxford overtaking its old rival Cambridge for the first time to be named the UK's highest-rated university.

Of the 76 UK universities included in the 2019 QS world university rankings, which rates 1,000 leading institutions, 41 improved their position compared with last year,
while 14 remained in the same place – the best ever performance, thanks to higher rates of publications and increased citations of research by other academics.

But the table’s compilers warned that rising class sizes and the UK’s falling popularity among overseas students could harm the higher education sector in the future, especially with Brexit looming.

“Keeping pace is one thing but staying ahead of the curve is a testament to the innovation, insight, capacity for collaboration, and thought-leadership present at UK universities,” said Ben Sowter, QS’s research director.

“However, the challenges for the UK’s sector remain, and are perhaps more evident than in previous years. The drops in faculty/student ratio, combined with low contact hours, will lead to increasing scrutiny about the extent to which students are receiving value for money.

“Additionally, the results indicate that the sector is still struggling to convince international students of the country’s desirability in the first post-Brexit years.”

Prof Louise Richardson, Oxford’s vice-chancellor, said her university’s improved ranking was the result of having talented and committed staff, but she also signalled concerns over post-Brexit sustainability.

“We are particularly proud to have secured the top spot in Europe and very much hope that we will be able to maintain this position as the UK withdraws from the European Union,” Richardson said.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) remained at the top of the table for the seventh year in a row, ahead of three other US powerhouses in Stanford, Harvard and California Institute of Technology, whose ranks were also unchanged.

Oxford broke into the top five by leapfrogging Cambridge, which fell back into sixth place. Imperial College London remained at seventh overall. University College London remained in the top 10 but was overtaken by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago.

Oxford’s rise was fuelled by an improvement in citations, although the London School of Economics was the national leader in that measure of research impact.

Outside of Europe and the US, the highest-ranked universities were in Singapore and China. The National University of Singapore sits 11th, and Nanyang Technological University a place behind in 12th. China’s Tsinghua University rose to 17th, well ahead of its fierce rival Peking University in 30th.

The QS world rankings are generally regarded as the most methodologically sound of the various international league tables, which have proliferated in recent years as competition to attract students and staff has intensified.