



Cambridge slips to lowest-ever place in world university table

UK's downward trend continues as two-thirds of its ranked universities tumble

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Brexit and the financial squeeze affecting universities appear to be taking a toll on Britain's universities, with many seeing their rankings in international league tables tumbling for the third year in a row.

The latest international university league table compiled by data and research group QS downgrades two-thirds of the 84 UK universities ranked in the top 1,000, following similar declines in 2016 and 2017.

While Oxford was one of the few bright spots - rising from fifth to fourth overall - its ancient rival Cambridge slipped from sixth to seventh, its lowest-ever position, as a result of steadily declining research performance, as measured by citations per member of academic staff.

Ben Sowter, QS's director of research, said the UK's weaker performance this year was not a surprise, given the fall in the rankings seen each year since the Brexit vote and with many institutions making cuts due to financial uncertainty.

"For decades, UK higher education has been one of the country's finest exports to the world. The sector has produced outstanding research, fostered world-class teaching, forged transformational links to industry and welcomed millions of talented young people," Sowter said.

"To ensure that this privileged situation continues, it is essential that those with the power to do so redouble their efforts to improve teaching capacity so as to reduce the burden on passionate but beleaguered academics, reach a clear conclusion about the fee status of EU students post-Brexit and do their utmost to ensure that the UK remains a part of EU research collaboration frameworks into the future."

The changes mean that Cambridge has now fallen behind ETH Zurich in sixth place, making the Swiss technical university the second-highest ranked institution in Europe after Oxford, which last year overtook Cambridge for the first time.

Sowter said that Cambridge's drop is not necessarily a sign that the institution is struggling, as it reflects a rebalancing of spending away from research towards teaching.

"[This] should be perceived as a sensible strategic decision designed to ensure that Cambridge's reputation for outstanding teaching and highly employable graduates continues into the future," Sowter said.

The compilers say the main problems for the UK are an average drop of 41 places in ratings from 44,000 employers around the world and a drop of 34 places in the number of students per staff member.

Since the Brexit referendum, other EU universities have narrowed their gap with the UK by 28%. This is thanks to a slight improvement in their research performance, combined with a decline in UK performance.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) retained the top spot for the eighth year, ahead of Stanford University in second and Harvard University in third, whose ranks remained unchanged. However, their success runs counter to the US's worst-ever overall performance, with just 16% of institutions improving their rank.

Just 12 UK universities improved their position, including Oxford and UCL, which claimed eighth place. The other UK universities in the top 20 were Imperial (nine) and Edinburgh (20), both ranked lower than last year.

Outside of Europe and the US, the top two institutions were Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and National University of Singapore in joint 11th place.

China's Tsinghua University climbed to the 16th spot, exemplifying the dramatic improvements in the performance of the nation's universities in recent years. It now has 19 of the world's top 200 universities, having had just 12 in 2016.

The QS world rankings methodology is based on employer and academic reputation, class sizes, research output and international staff and students numbers. It is one of the most highly regarded international league tables, which have proliferated in recent years as universities compete globally to attract students and staff.

In the Guardian's own university league table, St Andrews climbed above Oxford into second place this year, just below Cambridge. But those tables use different metrics designed to gauge undergraduate courses, rather than research strength and global reputation.

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