

Why Ivy League universities are drawing the UK public school crowd like never before

Forget Oxbridge – Princeton, Yale, Harvard and MIT are where the country's brightest private school pupils are aiming for now

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From Eton to Oxford or Cambridge used to be the well-trodden path for society's most ambitious – and privileged – young men, including many UK prime ministers (Boris Johnson among them). Today, however, the country's top private schools are setting their sights further afield, amid a push to send their students to leading American universities.

With reports that Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis will attend Lambrook School following the Cambridges' predicted move to Windsor this summer, Tatler's Education Editor, Tori Cadogan, considers Berkshire's top runners and riders

Tatler reported on the trend in the April issue earlier this year, with Joseph Bullmore writing that 'the most interesting and sociable students in Britain are spurning the cloisters of Oxbridge in favour of its hallowed equivalents across the pond', drawn by 'friendliness, novelty, openness; a very un-English sense of hope and opportunity.'

Allegra Harris, a British student studying at Georgetown University in Washington, told Tatler: 'The UK social circuit is small, and everyone goes to the same universities... I didn't want to just hang out

with the same 40 kids’. Old Harrovian Sasha Sebag-Montefiore added: ‘A lot of people from Harrow apply to America now... It’s become a bit of a thing.’



The broadening of social horizons isn’t the only driving force behind the trend. The [Times](#) reports that there’s been a spike of interest in Ivy League schools, now drawing an estimated one in five UK private school pupils. This year, for example, Eton is said to be sending as much as a fifth of its leavers – over 50 pupils – to universities in the US.

Head teachers told the newspaper that part of the push came from private schools looking elsewhere in light of Oxford and Cambridge admitting more students from state schools, increasing competition for places. Both universities have ramped up their efforts to broaden the pool of pupils from which they draw their students: having risen annually over the past five years, the number of state school applicants is now at a record high. Independent school applications over the same period peaked in 2019, before decreasing in 2020 and 2021. The proportion of state school admissions to Oxbridge reached 68.6 per cent in 2020 (staying around a similar figure of 68.2 per cent the following year). Last year’s numbers set a record at Cambridge, with 72 per cent of the university’s intake coming from state schools.

Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of the Sloane Square location of the prestigious girls’ school, Francis Holland, cited ‘the increasing difficulty of gaining places at Oxbridge, in particular, from top independent schools, and the disincentive this brings’, but also identified the ‘reluctance of some universities to resume a full suite of face to face lectures and seminars’ in light of the pandemic as a contributing factor: ‘Students want more for their money now.’ She added that universities across the pond have been ‘extremely welcoming to our students’, with the success of applications continuing to drive the increase. ‘We are as well set up for US applications now as Oxbridge,’

Elphinstone told the Times: ‘this year one student has won a scholarship to Princeton... and one turned down Oxford for Stanford.’

A source at Eton told the newspaper: ‘We are seeing increasing numbers looking seriously at the States, around 75 a year, and ultimately going, around 50 a year. [The] top destinations are Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale, Columbia. Some of our very top academics are looking to the States ahead of Oxbridge... an increasing number apply only to the US.’

The source added that ‘the breadth of the study programmes’, ‘the international perspective’ and ‘their top-quality sports programmes’ were further draws, while for some Eton pupils on scholarships and bursaries (aimed at broadening access for ‘talented boys from all financial backgrounds’), there’s the chance for applicants to ‘win fully funded places to the US.’

Indeed, it’s not just society’s most privileged defecting across the pond. The Sutton Trust, an educational charity focused on improving social mobility, has helped over 500 school-leavers from modest backgrounds secure places at US institutions in the last decade, with a large proportion receiving significant scholarships. The charity’s founder, Sir Peter Lampl, told the Times: ‘America’s leading universities and colleges look to attract the most talented students, whatever country or social background they come from.’

Despite being UK based, the Sutton Trust works with the Fulbright Commission, a non-profit focused on ‘fostering cultural understanding between the USA and the UK’, to support teenagers from deprived backgrounds through the process of applying to American universities (including a week-long visit to the US). The partnership programme has worked with over 1,500 prospective students since its launch 10 years ago, with 565 successfully securing places, including at leading institutions like Princeton (39 students), Yale (25), and Harvard (24).

The students also received a total of \$155 million (£129 million) in financial aid from 84 universities and colleges to facilitate their attendance. This year alone, 51 students have enrolled at 37 US universities through the partnership, and will benefit from \$16.5 million (the combined total across students) in financial support during their four years of study.