

Private school pupils turn backs on Oxbridge to chase Ivy League places

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Private school students are turning their backs on Oxbridge, with as many as one in five now heading to Ivy League universities in the US, headteachers have told The Times.

This year Eton College is sending around a fifth of its leavers — more than 50 pupils in total — to American universities.

Other private school heads said their pupils felt disillusioned at their chances of being accepted at Oxford and Cambridge because of universities' focus on increasing the number of state school admissions.

They added that some British universities appeared to be reluctant to resume full programmes of face-to-face teaching because of the pandemic, and their pupils “want more for their money”.

Competition intensifies every year for Oxford and Cambridge, both of which are continuing to broaden their intake.

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Both the number and proportion of private schools pupils admitted to Oxford has fallen in recent years, with the number of state school applicants at a record high, having grown every year for the last five years.

However, the number of independent school applicants was lower in 2021 than in four of the five previous years, with a peak in 2019.

The proportion of state school admissions was 68.2 per cent in 2021, the second highest after the 68.6 per cent figure from 2020. At Cambridge, a record 72 per cent of its intake were from state schools last year.

Stephen Toope, the vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, said in May that private schools should accept they would inevitably get fewer pupils admitted to Oxbridge and that their “premium” would reduce over time, as more state school pupils attend the universities.

Independent heads say that the message has been absorbed by families, with growing numbers now focusing on the US as a destination.

A source at Eton said: “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, some apply to both and an increasing number apply only to the US.

“Those who go to the US are typically attracted by the breadth of the study programmes and the international perspective, their top-quality sports programmes and some of the boys on free places at Eton win fully funded places to the US.”

Lucy Elphinstone, the headmistress of Francis Holland School, in Sloane Square, said liberal arts degrees and emphasis on character were appealing but added: “Above all this, of course, is the increasing difficulty of gaining places at Oxbridge, in particular, from top independent schools, and the disincentive this brings to bright, motivated students who suspect their achievements and talents will be overlooked in favour of a different demographic.

“We have found US universities extremely welcoming to our students, and our success in recent years has led to increased numbers of applications. We are as well set up for US applications now as Oxbridge, and this year one student has

won a scholarship to Princeton. Students increasingly make dual applications for US and Russell group and one turned down Oxford for Stanford.”

She added: “Students want more for their money now. The reluctance of some universities to resume a full suite of face to face lectures and seminars has deterred many from a UK application, and I am glad that some are reconsidering the whole benefit of a university education at this stage.”

Kieran McLaughlin, the headmaster of Durham School, said: “We have seen some interest this year — one pupil is going to the US on a rowing scholarship.

“There is less of an emphasis on Oxbridge from some parents and they are aware that it is increasingly difficult to get into. Imperial, London School of Economics and University College London are more attractive and we have had some choose not to apply to Oxbridge because they felt that the course wasn’t right.”

James Dahl, the master of Wellington College, said a strong appetite for Oxbridge remained but that many families believed universities in the US could be just as fulfilling.

He said: “Many win generous scholarships which enable attendance. One this year has declined Oxford to go to Harvard.”

And David James, deputy head of Lady Eleanor Holles School in southwest London, said: “UK independent schools continue to produce some of the brightest students in the country who go on to the world’s best universities. If offers from Oxbridge are fewer in number then inevitably they will go to Ivy League universities. This would be a huge loss to our country, a new brain drain when we can least afford it.”

New figures shared with The Times by the Sutton Trust, the social mobility charity, show it has helped more than 500 school-leavers from modest backgrounds to study in the US in the last 10 years, with many receiving generous scholarships.

It runs a US programme in partnership with the Fulbright Commission, a London-based non-profit organisation that aims to foster cultural understanding between the UK and the US.

Launched 10 years ago, the programme gives teenagers from deprived backgrounds support with every aspect of applications to US universities, including a week-long trip to America.

More than 1,500 students have been through the programme in the last decade, with 856 eventually applying to US institutions and 565 successfully enrolling — including 39 at Princeton, 25 at Yale, 24 at Harvard and 11 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Between them they have received \$155 million (£129 million) in financial aid from 84 universities and colleges.

Some benefit from “100 per cent” scholarships, which pay for all fees, accommodation, travel to and from the US and some other expenses.

This year, 51 students have enrolled at 37 American universities and will share \$16.5 million in financial support over their four year courses.

Megan Deacon, who went through the programme, was accepted at Oxford but turned it down to attend Lafayette College, a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania.

“I graduated in 2021 with a BA in History. I am now living my ultimate dream by living and working in New York City,” she said.

Elle Winfield, from Doncaster, said that she applied to Duke University in North Carolina after completing the programme.

“I am happy to say that I just graduated. I had never visited Duke before I applied, and I remember arriving in August with one suitcase and \$76 in my bank account,” she said.

“Luckily, the campus was beautiful, I met some incredible friends and immediately fell in love with it. I have a lot of gratitude for my liberal arts education and all the interests it has allowed me to explore, like cyber warfare or American foreign policy. Considering I was going to do English Literature in the UK, Duke really did challenge me to explore and grow beyond imagination.”

Sir Peter Lampl, the founder of the Sutton Trust, said: “America’s leading universities and colleges look to attract the most talented students, whatever country or social background they come from.

“Our US programme is life-changing so I’m delighted that so many young people have taken it up. I hope that many more will follow in their footsteps.”

‘Being accepted by Stanford is the best thing that has ever happened to me’

American universities are often seen to be elitist but my first year at Stanford University has shown me they are quite the opposite (Romy McCarthy writes). They are becoming a popular option for British students, mainly due to their forward-thinking liberal arts curriculum, diverse socio-economic student bodies, focus on wellness, and preferable career outcomes.

But many young people are unaware of the scholarship and financial aid options US institutions are able to offer international students, including flights and spending money, most of which are needs-based.

I attended a pressurised school in London where I was badly bullied and I was looking for a university experience where I could start afresh, whilst pursuing my creative and academic aspirations in a supportive environment.

Being accepted by Stanford is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I have made friends from all backgrounds and formed unlikely friendships.

I am founding a dating app while attending pool parties, theme park trips and political speeches. For the first time, I feel anything is possible and I feel safe knowing that I can try new things and fail with a smile.

I applied to Trinity College, Cambridge to read history whilst I was applying to Stanford. I never wanted to go but felt it made sense to apply to the UK as well. I received my Stanford offer 24 hours before my Cambridge interview and honestly considered not even turning up as I knew Cambridge wasn’t for me.

I attended my interview and was pooled from Trinity College but in the end did not receive an offer. I was relieved as my heart was set on Stanford.

The liberal arts curriculum is a forward-thinking way of creating well-rounded students and there is a sense of openness surrounding mental health and a focus around spotting early signs of mental illness in students.

There is also a strong sense of start-up culture, you are never too young to start your own business and try things out as corporations are willing to take a chance on students’ ideas.

Degree rules change to put top grades in reach for all

Leading universities are changing the way they assess degrees to attempt to close the gap between white and ethnic minority students and between richer and poorer classmates.

Some are having open-book exams that allow use of reference materials, reducing reliance on high-stakes finals. They intend to make assessments less confrontational and put a greater emphasis on content rather than language.

Record numbers of disadvantaged school-leavers have applied to university this year but there is a stubborn gap in the number of top degrees awarded.

Almost 90 per cent of the most affluent students achieved a first-class or 2:1 degree last year, compared with just over 80 per cent of the most deprived.

Last year 37.6 per cent of white graduates were awarded a first compared with 31.2 per cent of Asian graduates and 19.4 per cent of black graduates.

The Office for Students has criticised some forms of “inclusive assessment”, in which universities ignore spelling or grammatical errors because they can discriminate against students from certain backgrounds.

The watchdog has threatened to take action against institutions that continue the practice this autumn, saying: “The idea that they should expect less from certain groups of students is patronising. It threatens to undermine standards as well as public confidence in the value of a degree and risks placing new graduates at a disadvantage in the labour market.”

A separate report found that, on average, the highest-achieving graduates are white, able-bodied, rich females. It said the overall rate of firsts awarded — 37.9 per cent last summer — was far higher than expected. The regulator also warned against allowing a decade of grade inflation to be “baked into” the system.