Global reputation of UK universities declines ahead of Brexit

Canada and China are among nations that have seen a boost on measures of internationalisation in past year, based on latest THE ranking

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View the full THE list of the most international universities in the world 2019

Source: iStock
UK universities have continued to lose ground on their global reputations ahead of Brexit, while several other European countries, Canada and China have all improved on metrics of internationalisation, according to *Times Higher Education*’s latest rankings analysis.

Almost two-fifths (38 per cent) – or eight – of the 21 British universities that feature in the 2019 list of the world’s most international universities declined over the past year.

The list is drawn largely from the “international outlook” pillar of *the THE World University Rankings 2019*, which covers universities’ proportions of international staff, students and co-authored publications. It also includes a measure of universities’ international reputations, taken from *THE*’s annual Academic Reputation Survey.

UK universities’ decline is largely due to this last measure of global reputation; most institutions in the country received stable or higher scores on the other three metrics compared with last year, but 12 of the 16 institutions that were ranked in both years received a lower score for international reputation. This could have a knock-on effect on other internationalisation metrics in future years, given that institutions with the most prestige tend to be the most attractive to foreign students and staff.

The UK’s deteriorating performance has occurred as several other European countries – including France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands – have made progress.

Canada is also one of the success stories in the table, with five of its six representatives improving their rank since last year, and four of these receiving higher scores on all four metrics. On average, each Canadian university rose by four places.

Canada has recently experienced an international student recruitment boom, with the number of foreign students increasing by 11 per cent between autumn 2016 and autumn 2017. The number of Indian students who secured Canadian visas increased by almost 60 per cent in 2017, compared with the previous year.

Elsewhere, China’s nine representatives generally feature much lower down in this list than they do in the World University Rankings, but all of them have climbed up the international table this year. When counting the eight universities that also featured in last year’s table, they have leaped an average of 18 places. *Peking University* leads the group at 131st place, up from 140th.

Overall, the list is headed by the *University of Hong Kong*, which rose from third place last year.

Janet Ilieva, founder and director of Education Insight, a research consultancy specialising in international higher education, said that it was “disappointing” but “not a surprise” that the international competitiveness of UK universities was slipping.

“This past decade has tested the resilience of the UK higher education sector and confronted it with a series of continuous challenges, such as the global financial crisis of 2007-08, stricter rules for those applying for UK student visas, limited post-study work opportunities and the Brexit vote in 2016,” she said.
She added that the UK’s international education strategy from 2013 lapsed in 2018 and there is “not a replacement strategy in sight yet”.

Roopa Desai Trilokekar, associate professor in the faculty of education at Canada’s York University and an expert in the internationalisation of higher education, said that Canada was “benefiting a whole lot” from changes in policies under the Trump administration as well as “the UK and Australia becoming much more restrictive with their policies”.

She said that Canada was “unique” for having a consistently open immigration policy regardless of changes in government, which had helped it attract overseas students and staff.

But it hasn’t all been plain sailing for the North American country. Last year, the Saudi Arabian government ordered all its students in Canada, who number about 12,000, to return home after Canada’s foreign affairs minister sent a tweet calling on Saudi Arabia to release jailed human rights activists. There have also been concerns that souring diplomatic relations between China and Canada will harm student recruitment on Canadian campuses.

But Dr Trilokekar predicted that the China dispute would not have a dramatic impact on enrolment of Chinese students, and said that Canada’s pool of international students had become much more diverse.

However, she warned that Canadian institutions and the government “have not figured out” how the large increase in the share of foreign students on campuses will influence the day-to-day operations of universities.

“Classrooms are going to change substantially, more support will be required for students and I don’t think anybody’s digested the full impact of these changes,” she said.

Recent cuts to higher education in Ontario mean that universities in the province will “not only be more dependent on international fees but have less funds to provide support for these students”, she added. “We need to be careful that funding doesn’t drive the whole initiative.”

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**World’s most international universities 2019: the top 10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2019 rank</th>
<th>2018 rank</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Country/region</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
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<td>University of Hong Kong</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>ETH Zurich</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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<tr>
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<td>33</td>
<td>The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
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<td>Nanyang Technological University, Singapore</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** A correction to the World University Rankings table in November 2018 has resulted in big improvements in internationalisation metrics for the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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**Methodology**

All four metrics have an equal weighting in the table.

The international reputation indicator is a measure of the proportion of votes from outside the home country that the institution achieved in *THE*’s annual invitation-only Academic Reputation Survey, which asks leading scholars to name the world’s best universities for teaching and research in their field.

Only institutions that received at least 100 votes in the survey (at least 50 of which were from their home country) were eligible for inclusion.