

## Universities

by Richard Sidaway

More than a quarter of the working population of the USA has one. Cairo, Bologna, and Paris have been offering them the longest. And you can now supposedly get them by sitting at home at a computer. What am I talking about? A university education, of course. So who goes to university and what do they get out of their experience?

### Admission

Most universities don't let just anyone in. Grades in the subjects you take in the final years of secondary education are what usually count and in many countries people also have to do an entry test. While most participants in higher education are in the 18-25 age-group, some people choose to take a break from work later on in life and opt for the role of mature student, bringing experience of work and the real world to their studies.

### Which one to go to

In many countries there is a pecking order to the universities, with a few high status institutions at the top turning out an intellectual elite and attracting the best minds in teaching and research. Take a quick name check of the leading writers, politicians or scientists in the UK or the USA and you should find the majority chose to spend their student years sitting in the dining halls and libraries of Oxford and Cambridge or Harvard, Princeton and Yale. The training grounds for medicine, law or engineering in Britain tend to be the metropolitan 'redbrick' universities slightly lower down the list.

### Money

When entrance was restricted to a lucky few in Britain, the state actually paid the sons and daughters of the middle classes not only their tuition fees but also a yearly grant towards living expenses as well. These days most European and North American students are given a loan which they have to pay back to the government once they are in full-time employment, or they finance themselves by working their way through college with part-time jobs in the evenings or at weekends.

### Where to live

For the majority of students, attending a university in a town or city near to where they live is the only financially viable option, but in Britain for many years going to university meant leaving home, with all the freedom and independence that implied. Universities traditionally offer cheap and clean accommodation in halls of residence or student houses. After a year or so, many students opt to share private rented accommodation outside the university, which often pushes their culinary and hygiene skills to the limit.

### Year out

These days if you haven't taken time off between finishing school and embarking on higher education, you haven't really lived. The gap year can be devoted to working for charities in different parts of the world, or simply to travelling, but it can at least concentrate the mind and perhaps give you a few more ideas about what you should do with the rest of your life. If you want to study abroad, you can often get a year out as part of a language course, or enter a scholarship programme such as Erasmus to support you while studying at a foreign university. Business or management students often devote time away from university in the form of a work placement, to help them gain practical experience in a professional environment.

### Teaching & learning

A common feature of any university is attending lectures, which involves taking notes while a lecturer, a university teacher, is speaking to large group of students. In Britain, you are also expected to present a subject perhaps once a term and comment on it in tutorials. These are small group discussions led by a lecturer at which closer analysis of a particular area is undertaken. Science-oriented courses also involve practical lessons and field trips which enable students to get to grips with their chosen course of study in the laboratory or beyond the university walls.

**How you are doing**

As at school, progress is measured by examinations, either divided into Parts I & II, or taken at the end of the course, and known as Finals. Alternatively, it can be based on continuous assessment and coursework. An important component of most systems is the extended dissertation, a piece of writing measured by the number of words a student has to produce, say 10,000. This must be based on some original research from primary as well as secondary sources and on some sort of gathering and interpretation of data.

**Social life**

There is an old saying that 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy', and prospective students expect a rich and varied social life. Friendships forged in the student union bar or in the many and varied clubs & societies that exist at most universities may last a lifetime. In the USA fraternities & sororities encourage a similar bond.

**Life after university**

Well before the graduation ceremony, when students queue up to receive their degrees from the Chancellor of the university at a special ceremony, the careers office has been busy assessing future graduates for the kind of employment paths they should take by giving them an aptitude test, arranging interviews, company presentations and recruitment fairs. For those attracted by the academic life, there are further opportunities for study on Masters and Doctorate (PhD) programmes and on into further research and teaching.

**And what does university education all add up to?**

This was the opinion of Theodore Roosevelt, a former US American President - A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education he may steal the whole railroad.

Or is it as an American journalist, Sydney Harris, said? - The primary purpose of a liberal education is to make one's mind a pleasant place in which to spend one's time.

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