

QUALITY IN UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION

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Any comparative comments on higher education in the United States as compared to the United Kingdom must begin with some definitions. First, we must remember there are 50 systems of higher education in the US, as the Constitution reserves to the states all activities not specifically assigned to the federal government. The state systems are all based on the same time-scale and have the same general structure, but there are many substantial differences.

Children start formal education (as opposed to kindergarten) at age 6, and in nearly all states the school leaving age is 18. In broad terms, the achievement level of a US high school diploma is roughly equivalent to GCSE. The term “further education” is not used in the US, so anything beyond high school appears in the statistics as “higher education”. Thus, in making comparisons, and in particular in looking at participation rates, it can be argued that we should include A-levels, Further Education and Higher Education in the UK as the equivalent of Higher Education in the US. Many US high schools offer advanced placement courses, for which universities give credit at entry. Similarly, most US universities give advancement placement credit for A-levels. For example, a UK student entering the University of California with three A-levels can complete a four year undergraduate course in well under three years.

In addition to the structural differences, the existence of private higher education in the US needs to be considered. In spite of the emphasis placed on the small number of rich east coast private universities with which the UK is currently compared, nearly 76% of those proceeding beyond secondary school in the US are in public institutions. Another 4% are attending for profit institutions, mainly not degree granting, and just over 20% are in private independent institutions, almost entirely four year degree granting. The private institutions are not uniformly distributed across the country, and outside the east coast the percentage attending public institutions will be higher.

There are no controls on the use of the term “university” in the US. There is a not very restrictive regional system of accreditation for degree-granting institutions, although there are non-accredited institutions publicly advertising their degrees, and there is no national oversight of accreditation. As in the UK, academic programmes leading to professional qualifications are separately accredited. Secondary school standards vary widely across the country, and even within states there are no mechanisms (such as statewide examinations) to provide any coordinated means for evaluating the grades awarded within individual high schools. Grade-Point-Averages can really only be compared within a single school. Within regions, local knowledge of schools is also used, as most students attending public institutions do not leave their state (primarily because of differential fee structures for out-of-state students similar to those in place for overseas students in the UK). The more selective private and public institutions use the results of scholastic aptitude tests administered by a private organization, the Educational Testing Service, as a primary admissions criterion

Within US higher education, there are virtually no externally imposed quality control mechanisms at the level of individual courses. Under the course-credit system, each course teacher will set the final examination, mark the scripts, and assign the grades, all with no outside interference. Only in exceptional cases, such as the professor in Berkeley who was found to have awarded passing marks to football players who had enrolled in but failed to attend the course, is there any external involvement. Most institutions conduct periodic reviews of academic programs, and new courses require approval. Teaching evaluations have been in use for a number of years, but are primarily concerned with helping lecturers to improve their performance. In general, quality control within institutions is mainly informal, but usually effective. Quality differences between institutions are recognized, but not formally evaluated. Entry to graduate programs is usually informed by performance on examinations set by the ETS. In the past there was an informal but well understood system of adjusting undergraduate GPA's between institutions, so as to ensure that graduates from the most selective undergraduate institutions, such as Cal Tech, would be eligible for graduate study at less selective universities. There is at present no element of the public funding of public higher education institutions which is based on assessments of teaching or research quality

There are sectors of higher education in the US where the informal quality control mechanisms are clearly effective. An excellent example is the Liberal Arts Colleges. These are small (typically around 1000 students) private institutions, offering only undergraduate programs. They have no ambition to become research universities, their mission being to provide a very high quality of undergraduate education. As a group, they are significant providers of graduate students for the large research universities, and a very high percentage of their students go on to graduate studies. In contrast, many of the large state universities have in effect abandoned concerns about undergraduate quality in order to concentrate on graduate programs. Legislative funding pressures have forced them to grow beyond the point where undergraduate programs can be properly controlled, or even cost-effective (there are diseconomies of scale when the numbers get too large). Top-level private universities have not been subject to the same growth pressures, and nearly all have operated a no-growth policy for a number of years.

Recent pressure in the UK has been focussed on very narrow definitions of quality. In addition to the quality of teaching and the quality of courses the quality of facilities and the quality of the educational experience are recognized as important in the US. There is a very wide range of institutions, catering for a very wide range of interests and abilities. There are well over 3000 post-secondary institutions belonging to the American Council on Education (the umbrella organization), of whom less than 100 are classified as Grade I research universities (Carnegie classification). What is popularly described as "mass higher education" is really a large number of different systems, aimed at providing for a large number of different individual needs.