



Ipsos Public Affairs

The Social Research and Corporate Reputation Specialists



US Employer Perceptions of University Degrees earned in the United Kingdom

The British Council

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1. Executive Summary

Most employers in the United States (US) consider degrees earned in the United Kingdom (UK) to be the same as or better than those earned in the US. Employers are seeking candidates who are well-rounded, with a relevant degree from a reputable university or program, and they perceive these things to be generally characteristic of Americans who have studied at universities in the United Kingdom.

While most employers are favorable towards degrees earned in the UK, they are not fully knowledgeable about them. Employers' favorability is best understood in the context the "halo effect" cast by the top UK universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Since many employers lack actual knowledge of the UK higher education system, it is unsurprising that they cite a number of barriers to assessing UK degrees.

To bolster the employment prospects of alumni from universities in the UK, it will be useful for institutions to build engagement with employers around the characteristics employers perceive to be most valuable. It is therefore a very positive finding that, when presented with the characteristics of the UK higher education system, employers are extremely positive towards these attributes.

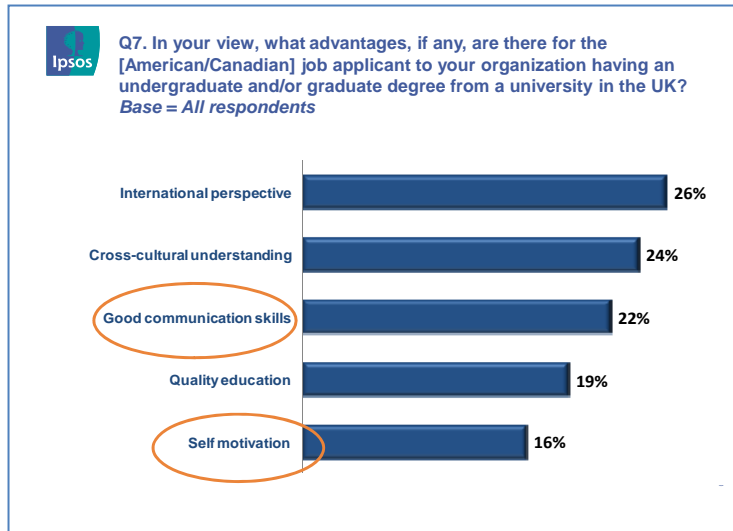
The research has highlighted a number of areas where action can be taken to communicate with employers to improve perceptions and ability to assess candidates with UK degrees:

- Communications with employers should emphasize the characteristics that make an education in the UK unique yet relevant (e.g. the tutorial system of learning, more independent study, and earlier specialization in a specific subject area).
- Employers would like universities to have a page specifically for them to utilize on their websites, which includes information about programs, accreditation and grading.
- It is critical to educate students about the importance of providing employers with additional information about their university and program.
- Students should be made aware of the advantages of tailoring the information to which they provide employers according to the industry and size of that individual business or organization to which they are applying.



2. Introduction

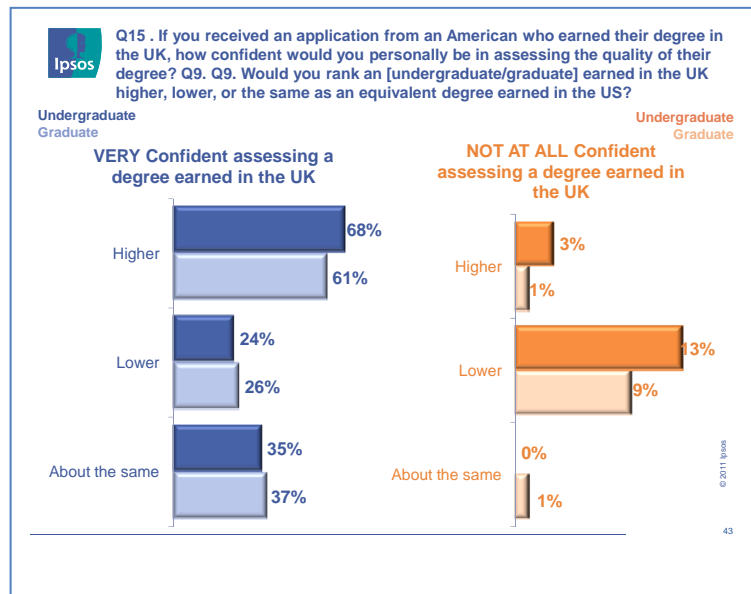
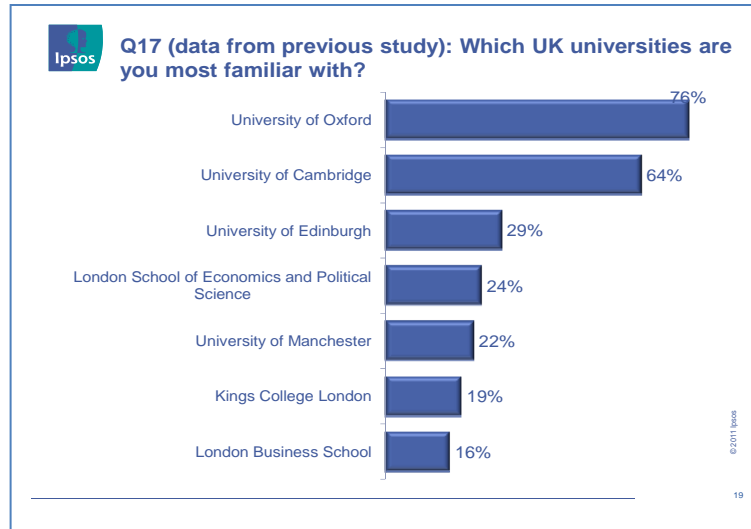
Previous research undertaken by Ipsos for the British Council highlighted that the United Kingdom (UK) higher education system is viewed favorably by employers. Indeed, three quarters (73%) said that they perceive UK-earned degrees as the same or better than those earned in the United States (US). This is, on the surface, good news for UK higher education institutions.



There is evidence that employers link what they see as important attributes in candidates to those they perceive to be acquired by studying at a university in the UK, for example “good communication skills” (22%) and “self motivation” (16%). In addition, employers cited skills such as an “international perspective” (26%) and “cross-cultural understanding” (24%) as the greatest benefits of earning a degree in the UK.

However, there is also evidence that employers do not have a great deal of knowledge about the offerings of the UK higher education system and that positivity towards UK-earned degrees is the result of a “halo effect” created by the top UK institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, with which most employers are familiar. This familiarity does not extend, however, to other UK institutions, or to the specific characteristics of UK-earned degrees. While employers were positive about degrees earned in the UK, they admitted that they found it difficult to assess their quality.

Ipsos Survey of Employers for the British Council, December 2011



In a highly competitive environment, UK universities should not rely solely on employers recognizing the “soft-skills” gained from study abroad or this “halo effect” of the top UK institutions to ensure that their alumni are assessed favorably (or on an equal footing with) their competitors in the US job market who have earned their degrees in the US.

The British Council commissioned Ipsos Public Affairs to do further research to ascertain employers’ perceptions of degrees earned by Americans in the UK, with a focus on specific attributes of the UK higher education system. The survey focused on elements of the UK



education system that differ from the US system, as well as on the communication channels through which institutions can help employers to become better informed about the universities and courses at which candidates have studied. This information should enable universities to communicate effectively about UK degrees and the potential employability of American students who return to the US to seek work.

The analysis in this report covers:

- The qualities employers look for in a job candidate.
- The qualities employers look for in job candidates' graduate and undergraduate degrees.
- US employers' knowledge about the UK higher education system and the key difficulties they face in assessing candidates who earned their degrees in the UK.
- Potential communications strategies for emphasizing the general qualities of higher education in the UK.
- Providing information to UK institutions for developing targeted communications through specific channels to inform potential employers and potential students about the qualifications of their graduates.

3. Methodology

The audience for this project was “HR decision-makers” in small, medium and large organizations in the US. These decision makers are those individuals at an organization who make direct decisions about the screening and hiring of entry-level professionals to their organization, especially those with undergraduate and graduate degrees.

A primarily quantitative approach was chosen to enable a broad understanding of employer perceptions and to establish a baseline for future studies. The survey was conducted online between October 18th and October 31st 2011. In total, the survey achieved completed interviews with 411 respondents.

A sample was drawn from a national online panel of business professionals. The sample was stratified by state, organization size and sector. A screener was included at the beginning of the survey to ensure that all respondents were part of our target audience. As there is not a uniform title or role which would easily identify “HR decision-makers,” the screener identified those who described themselves as senior HR managers and (for smaller organizations) organization directors/CEOs.

Participation in the survey was restricted to only those who worked for companies where 50% of employees have undergraduate or graduate degrees. This was to ensure that the survey population was relevant to the subject-matter and that it has experience of employing individuals with graduate and undergraduate degrees.

Following the survey, Ipsos undertook four qualitative in-depth interviews to expand upon the key themes found in the quantitative data. Four survey respondents, each of whom indicated their willingness to be re-contacted, were selected to be interviewed based on their answers survey aligning with the key themes. The respondent’s organization size and sector was also taken into account to ensure a good spread across the interviews



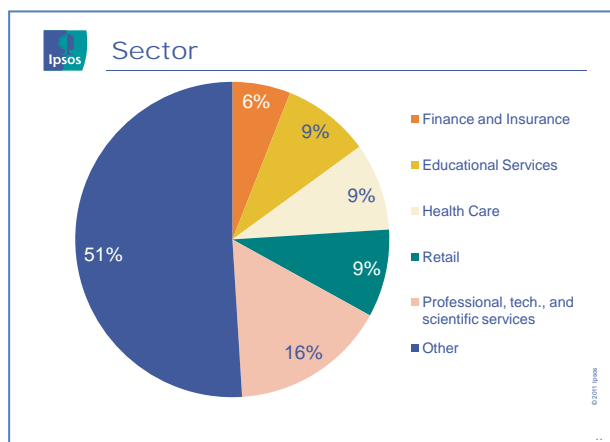
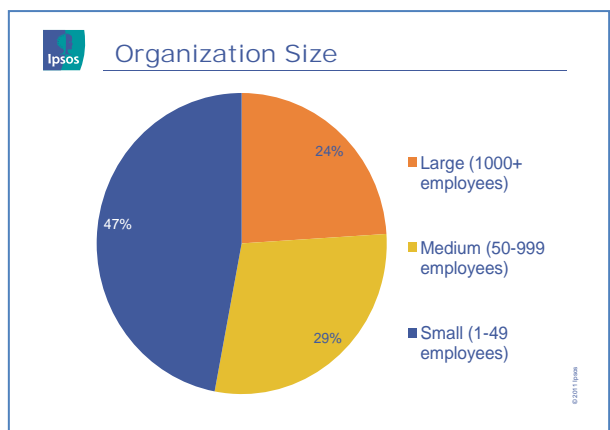
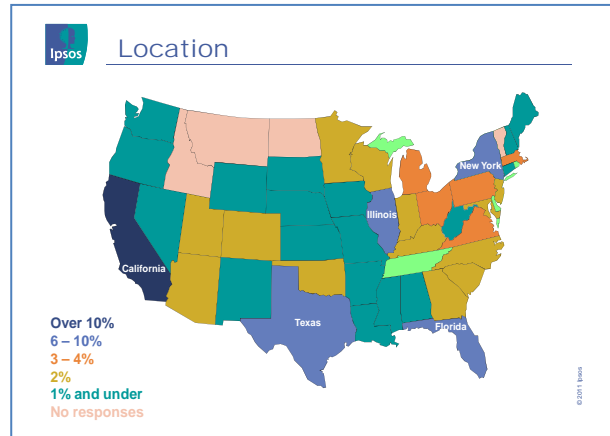
4. Respondent Profile

The **online survey** of 411 respondents achieved a broad representation of employers based on three variables:

Location: the panel was stratified by US state and the sample was drawn proportional to the number of organizations on the panel in each state. The response achieved reflects the relative size of the states on the panel, and also the largest states as per the general population.

Organization size: the survey included “HR decision-makers” from small, medium, and large organizations (based on the number of employees).

Sector type: the top sectors according to the 2006 US Business Census generally have the highest representation in the survey respondent profile¹.



¹ Statistics of US Businesses 2006, <http://www.census.gov/epcd/susb/2006/us/US--.HTM>

The **qualitative interviews** were conducted with:

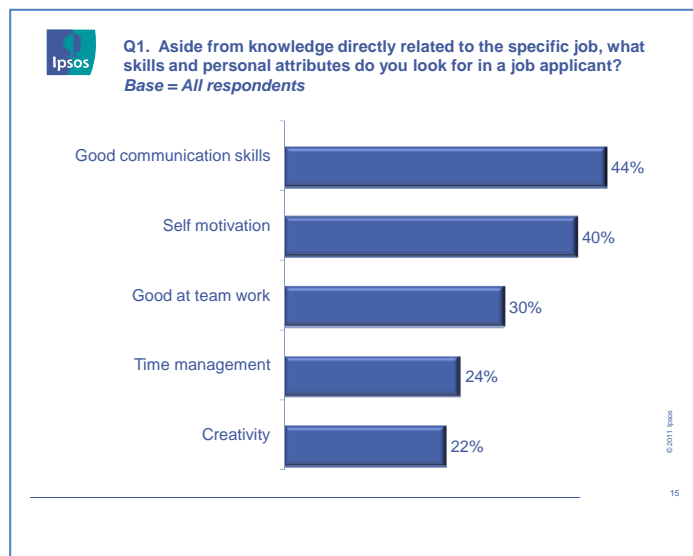
- Two large organizations, one medium organization and one small organization
- Four sectors:
 - Healthcare
 - Retail trade
 - Educational services
 - Professional, scientific, and technical services
- Four states:
 - Virginia
 - South Carolina
 - Utah
 - Michigan



5. Findings

5.1 Employers are seeking well-rounded employees

Generally speaking, employers are seeking candidates who are well-rounded, having developed a wide range of skills and had experiences that will help them to succeed in the modern workplace. Specifically, the skills most desired by employers are those that might be described as “soft-skills”, including “good communication skills” (44%), “self motivation” (40%), and “good at team work” (30%).



The research suggests that employers in small organizations are especially interested in individuals with good communication skills (52%), in comparison to employers in large organizations, who emphasize communication skills somewhat less (34%).

This could be because employers in smaller companies see communication skills as essential for a candidate to be a team player and take up general tasks within an organization. In larger organizations, employees are more likely to occupy more specialized roles which perhaps do not require the same broad skill set.

“I am looking for applicants with communication skills and an ability to work well in a team environment. We are not a huge business, so it’s important for new employees to fit into the team here.”



– Medium business, Technical services, Utah

In addition, while self motivation is key for employers in general (40%), it is particularly important for employers in the Retail sector (58%) where client relationships are paramount and significantly less important to employers in other sectors such as Finance and Insurance (27%) where many roles within the organization are not client-facing.

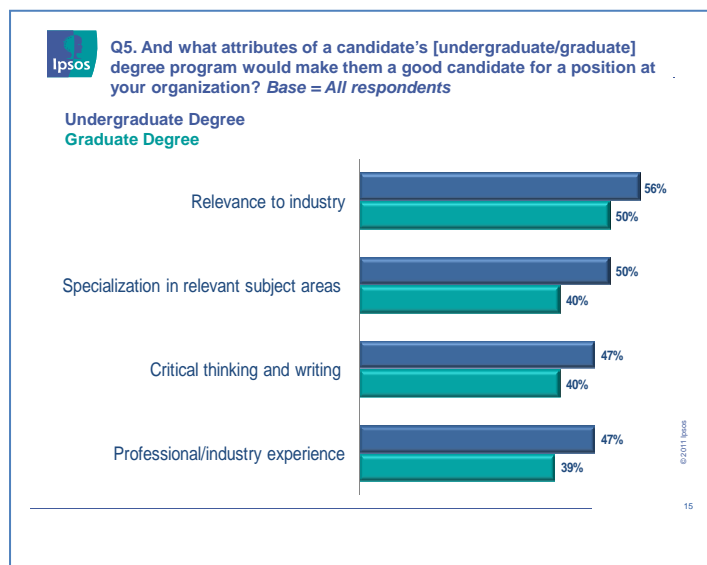
“Someone who takes it upon themselves to be professional, prompt, and represent the organization well to clients –that is important.”

-Small business, Retail, Michigan

5.2 Employers look for relevance and institution reputation in job candidates' qualifications

While employers are seeking candidates who are well-rounded, it is also imperative that a candidate's education provide them with the professional qualifications relevant to the specific sector, and that the education comes from an institution with a good reputation.

When asked what attributes of an applicant's degree program would make them a good candidate for a position at their organization, employers indicate favorability toward programs that offer “relevance to the industry”, “specialization in relevant subject areas”, and “professional/industry experience.” Employers also like to see that students have honed their critical thinking and writing skills while at university.



“Specialization is a key aspect in the sense that it creates more focused candidates who comes out with a good education.”

– Large business, Health care, Virginia

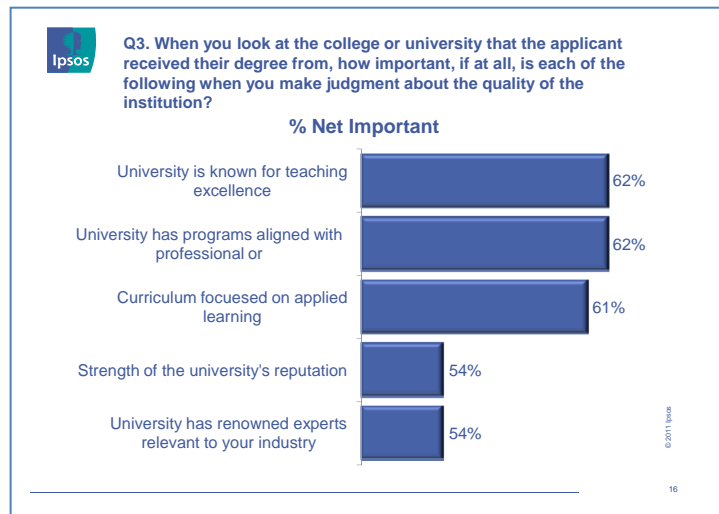
In addition to these desired program characteristics, employers in Health care and Educational services in particular place a strong emphasis on programs that help candidates prepare for and obtain their professional certifications. Professional certifications are crucial to the employability of candidates with a degree from the UK who desire to work in certain specialized sectors in the US.

“We have received applications from candidates who earned their degree abroad, but they were eliminated right away because they were not certified. If they do not have state certification, we cannot work with them.” – Large business, Educational services, South Carolina

As well as relevance to the sector, employers judge the quality of the degree achieved by an applicant based on the reputation on the university the candidate attended. More than half of employers emphasize the importance of the reputation of the university from which a candidate achieved their degree (54%).

Thinking about the attributes that comprise a university’s reputation, employers agree on the value of universities that are “known for teaching excellence” (62%), have “programs aligned with professional or business associations to help students achieve/prepare for accreditations with these associations” (62%), and include “curriculum focused on applied learning through case studies that involve real challenges faced by actual companies and organizations” (61%).

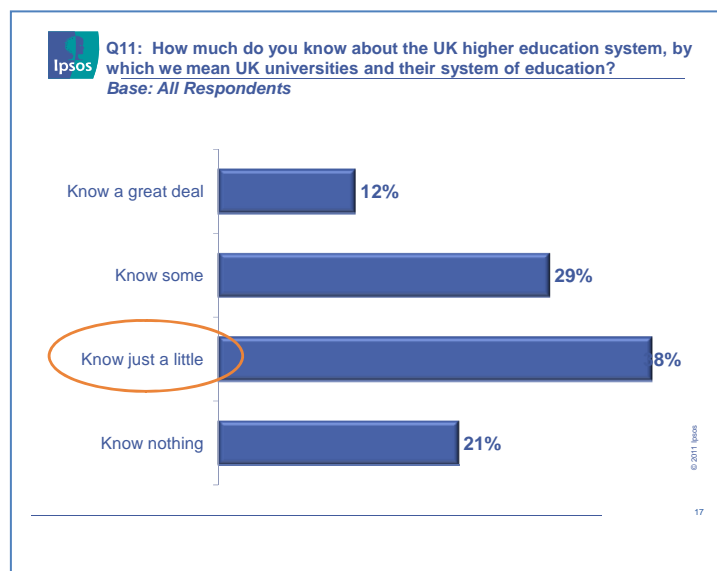




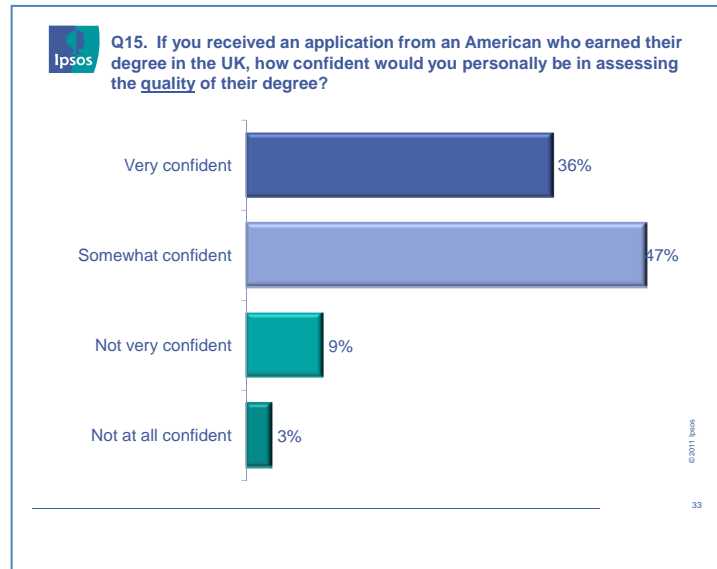
“Applied learning – whether their program has encouraged internships or work study programs – is a selling point.” – Medium business, Technical services, Utah

5.3 Employers’ limited knowledge about UK higher education creates barriers to assessing candidates with degrees earned in the UK

The notion that employers’ favorability of UK degrees stems from the fact that they think UK universities develop the skills they value may not explain the full story, however. The research shows that employers are not very knowledgeable about the UK education system and the educational experience offered by its universities.



While 72% of employers indicate that they are aware of the offerings of the UK higher education system, most employers admit knowing only “know just a little” (38%) and one in five employers say they “know nothing” about the UK higher education system (21%). This lack of knowledge can create barriers to employment for candidates with UK degrees, particularly in fields where credentials and professional qualifications are essential.



One quarter of employers indicate they have difficulty assessing the quality of education of applicants with degrees earned in the UK. Indeed, only 36% of employers are “very confident” in assessing the quality of a UK degree –a figure which is surprisingly low considering the experience of the target audience in assessing employment applications. About half of employers say that they are only “somewhat confident” in assessing the quality of degrees earned in the UK.

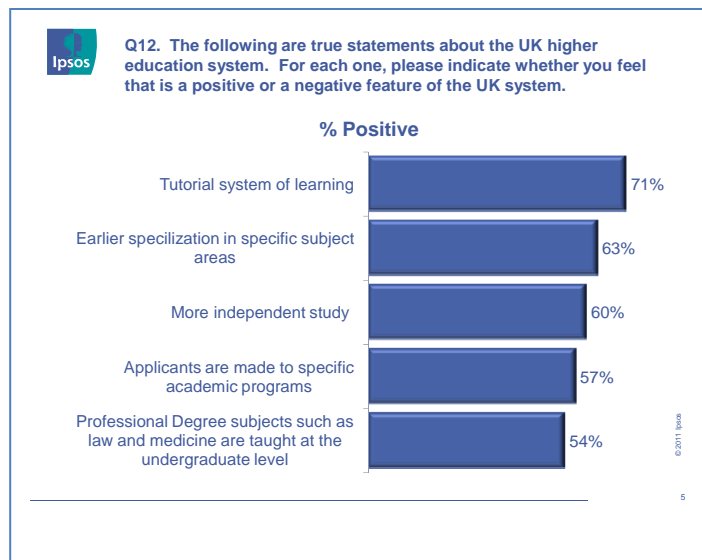
“I could see it being difficult for non-HR people to assess UK degrees and programs. I would like clear information from the applicant or the university on how their degree or program compares to the US.” – Large business, Health care, Virginia

This metric is of particular importance because it impacts strongly on employer perceptions of the value of these UK degrees. Of employers who say that they are “not at all confident” evaluating the quality of UK degrees, only 3% consider UK-earned undergraduate and graduate

degrees to be of higher quality than degrees earned in the US. Alternatively, among employers who are “very confident” assessing UK degrees, 68% rate UK undergraduate degrees higher than US degrees (61% for graduate degrees). It is likely that as UK institutions work to disseminate information about themselves and their programs to US employers, these perceptions will become more positive.

5.4 A general communications strategy should be to emphasize the characteristics of UK higher education viewed positively by employers

Despite limited knowledge of the UK higher education system, when presented with information about key aspects of the system, employers are extremely positive about the characteristics of UK graduate and undergraduate degrees.



Employers are most impressed by the “tutorial system of learning” (71%), “earlier specialization in specific subject areas” (63%), and “more independent study” (60%). The data suggests that employers perceive that these offerings of the UK system help students develop the specialized knowledge and critical thinking skills that employers consider beneficial in a candidate for their organization.

“Students in the UK seem to study things to a higher degree. They have had more experience with things that you might not find until you enter a graduate program in the US.” – Medium business, Technical services, Utah

Employers in large businesses appear to be particularly favorable toward the fact that “professional degree subjects such as law and medicine (that are usually earned at the graduate level in the US) are taught at the undergraduate level”: this was seen as favorable by 75% of employers in large businesses compared to 49% of employers in small businesses. Candidates who have developed specialized knowledge skills without the added cost and time associated with graduate education are seen to be an asset by large businesses.

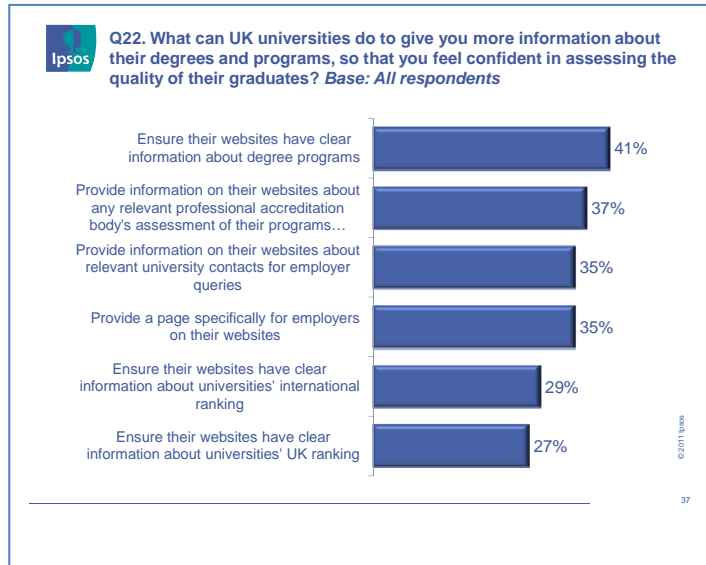
While the general reputation of the institution undoubtedly matters to employers, it is also important to distinguish this from the reputation of the specific program attended within a university, which seems to be more important.

“The university an applicant attended isn’t important in itself with regards to my assessment ...The reputation of the program is important. If a particular program is strong, that has to be taken into consideration.” – Large business, Healthcare, Virginia

Though the reputation of a university is taken into account, what employers really want to know is whether or not a candidate participated in a strong and reputable program that relates to and prepares them for work in their sector. Additional research for the British Council may perhaps explore this area of specific program reputation in comparison to institutional reputation more broadly.

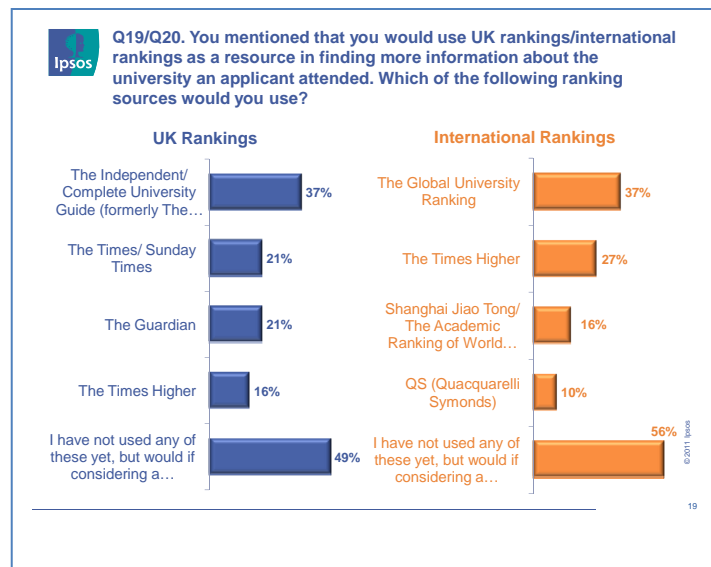
5.5 A targeted communications strategy to enable employers to access the information they need about a candidates’ qualifications

For experienced employers recruiting for highly-skilled positions, it is necessary to ensure that they have access to very specific information about universities, their programs, and their accreditation. Employers are very clear about what information they would find most helpful in assessing degrees earned in the UK.



Namely, employers are seeking an easily accessible frame of reference that will allow them to compare UK universities and degree programs (including their grading systems) with those in the US. Many employers would like for university websites to contain clear and relevant information about the university in general as well as its individual degree programs (41%).

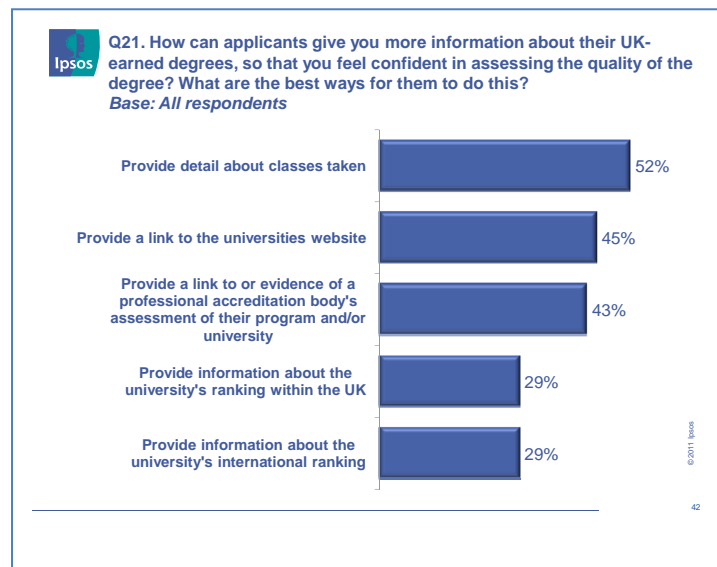
Employers would also like for university websites to contain information from “relevant professional accreditation body’s assessment of their programs” (37%) as well as information with “relevant university contacts for employer queries” (35%) should they be interested in speaking with a university representative directly to get more information.



When determining the reputation of a university, many employers turn to both UK rankings (31%) and international rankings (38%) in order to understand a university's reputation in the context of its peer institutions. For UK rankings, employers most often refer to The Independent/Complete University Guide (37%) and The Times/Sunday Times (215). For international rankings, the top sources are The Global University Ranking (37%) and The Times Higher (27%).

Universities should also encourage students to provide more information to their potential employers. As part of applications, employers would like to be provided with "detail about classes taken" (52%), for example. This is especially important to small organizations, which may be because smaller employers are more pressed for time and have less HR-expertise to draw upon than employers in larger organizations.

There is broad consensus among employers that a "link to the university's website" (45%) and "a link to or evidence of a professional accreditation body's assessment of their program and/or university" (43%) would be helpful if it were to be included in a candidate's application.



In addition to providing information about the classes taken and directing employers to their university's website for information, candidates should be ready to supplement their resumes

Ipsos Survey of Employers for the British Council, December 2011

with additional information about their university and degree program as well as relevant information regarding necessary professional qualifications.



6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study are good news for universities in the UK. Employers in the US are highly receptive to degrees earned in the UK with nearly eight in ten indicating that they view UK degrees to be the same or better than those earned in the US. Detailed knowledge of the UK higher education system, however, seems to be low among US employers, and so this favorability towards UK degrees can largely be attributed to the “halo effect” of the UK’s top institutions, and perhaps ‘Anglophilia’ more generally.

The ability of US employers to assess candidates’ UK qualifications is limited. While general communications to extend the “halo effect” of the UK’s top institutions might help to increase favorability generally, practically speaking, more information needs to be available for employers to enable them to assess the relevance and transferability of degrees earned in the UK.

In general, messaging should be tailored to highlight the fact that the skills employers seek in candidates align with the characteristics of the UK higher education offering, such as early specialization, the tutorial system of learning, and the emphasis on independent study as well as gaining the sought-after skills necessary to make a well-rounded person.

Universities should focus on updating their websites to include the information that can assist US employers in their assessment of a candidate’s employability. A webpage created and designed specifically for US (or at least non-UK) employers would be the ideal location to include the following information:

- UK and international rankings;
- assessments from accreditation bodies and organizations;
- how UK degree programs compare to US degree programs;
- professional qualifications related to the degree program; and
- contact details for employers with additional queries.

In addition to the online information, universities in the UK should help prepare their students to communicate the benefits of their degree to American employers while they are still at university. Upon graduating and beginning the job search in the US, students should be ready



to provide details of the classes they have taken as well as to connect their potential employer to their university for additional information.

Students should also be made aware of the benefits of tailoring the information they present according to the particular type of business to which they are applying. For example, should a student apply to a large business, they would want to emphasize the fact that they had studied a professional degree subject at the undergraduate level. Similarly, if applying for a position in the Educational services sector, a student should detail their plans for obtaining the necessary certifications.

In general, American students who earn degrees in the UK and return to the US to seek work are in a very strong position when it comes to employment. However, the challenges that US employers faced when assessing applicants with UK degrees would be minimized significantly if both employers and students took a few small steps to provide these employers with additional information. Students in particular need to be proactive and provide potential employers with the necessary information about their degrees. These students can be supported by their universities via both clear communications about seeking work, as well as by simple measures such as information provision on their websites.



7. Data

