



ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION MONITORING AND EVALUATION

COMPARISON UNIVERSITIES REPORT

October 2022 - Jess Burchell, Research and Evaluation Officer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report is to identify a group of universities that the University of York is comparable to. Comparability will be based on the following:

- 'Prestige'
- Structure
- Local area

The aim of identifying this group is to establish how the University of York compares on key Access and Participation criteria and different initiatives being conducted across the group to address these.

A group of seven universities have been identified as comparable to the University of York:

- University of Bath
 - University of East Anglia (UEA)
 - University of Exeter
 - University of Kent
 - Lancaster University
 - Loughborough University
 - University of Surrey
-

INTRODUCTION

Within Access and Participation there is a move for universities to work more collaboratively. This could be in the form of independent evaluations, sharing what works (or doesn't), collaborating on research projects, and creating networks to support change¹.

The objective of this report is to identify a group of universities that the University of York is comparable to. This will be based on research regarding the 'prestige' and structure of universities, as well as our own criteria of 'similar local area' (the importance of which we discuss later in this report).

The aim of identifying this group is to establish how the University of York compares on key Access and Participation criteria and different initiatives being conducted across the group to address these. Based on the results of this report, we aim to establish a network with these comparable universities to support each other in our access and participation initiatives and evaluations.

The University of York is already part of the [Russell Group](#) - a group of 24 'leading universities' with a focus on research and education. Critics of the Russell Group raise concerns about the perceived 'prestige' associated with it (Cook, 2022; Coughlan, 2014; Fazackerley, 2013; Grove, 2014). As we demonstrate later in the paper, there are differences between the Russell Group universities which means they may not all be the best comparison for the University of York.

Prior to 2012, the University of York was part of the 1994 Group - "another prestigious collective of smaller, mainly campus-based universities that focused on research"². The 1994 Group was established in response to the Russell Group as smaller research-intensive universities (Boliver, 2015). The University of York left this group in 2012 and the group disbanded in 2013. Therefore, we no longer know how comparable the University of York is with this group and we do not know which other universities may have joined this group had it continued to exist.

We consider both these groups as we move forward with this work.

Notices

The data represented in this report is open source data. References and links for all open source data have been provided in the relevant places. As open source data, rounding and suppression may have been applied by the source organisations. We have not applied rounding and suppression ourselves.

RESEARCH

This project made use of two research papers which have previously conducted statistical cluster analysis to identify groups of similar universities based on different criteria.

The 'Prestige' of the University

Boliver (2015) aimed to understand if there were distinctive clusters of 'higher and lower status' universities in the UK, with a particular focus on whether the Russell Group formed an 'elite' tier. The analysis considered five dimensions of university status:

- Research activity
- Teaching quality
- Economic resources
- Academic selectivity
- Socioeconomic student mix

Each dimension had three variables considered, primarily drawn from statistics published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency ([HESA](#)). These can be found in [Appendix A](#).

The analysis was conducted on 127 UK universities. It excluded institutions which offered postgraduate courses only, highly specialist institutions, a small number of recently established for-profit institutions and the Open University. The results found four distinct clusters, seen in [Table 1](#).

¹ [Next steps in access and participation; The University of York Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 plus variation](#) - Sections 1.8 and 3.2

² [UK University Groups – A quick guide - UK Study Options](#)

Table 1: Results of Boliver (2015)
Highlighting Russell Group universities in bold and 1994 Group universities in italics

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Cambridge; Oxford	Aberdeen; Bath; Birmingham; Bristol; Cardiff; Dundee; Durham; UEA; Edinburgh; Exeter; Glasgow; Goldsmith; Heriot-Watt; Imperial; Kent; King's College; Lancaster; Leeds; Leicester; Liverpool; UCL; LSE; Loughborough; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Queen Mary; Queen's Belfast; Reading; Royal Holloway; St Andrews; SOAS; Sheffield; Southampton; Strathclyde; Surrey; Sussex; Warwick; York	Essex + 66 other universities	19 universities

According to Boliver (2015), the most noticeable difference between groups was between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3. These clusters differed significantly on all but one of the 15 variables included in the analysis - percentage of students satisfied with feedback (within the teaching quality dimension).

Notably, all of the Russell Group universities, with the exceptions of the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford, are found in the same cluster with an additional 17 other universities. This suggests, according to the variables used by Boliver (2015), that the Russell Group universities may not be distinctly recognised as 'prestigious' or 'elite'. These findings appear to align with the criticisms cited in the [introduction](#) of this report

Additionally, all but one of the 1994 Group universities included in this research are also included within Cluster 2.

The Structure of the University

Ulrichsen (2018) was commissioned by [Research England](#) to identify groups of similar universities by structural characteristics that shape a university's ability to create and exchange knowledge (i.e. a university's research capability and opportunities). The analysis considered three categories which would impact a university's knowledge exchange 'capability base':

- Existing knowledge base
- Knowledge generation
- Physical assets

Each category had a number of variables, with the primary source of data being [HESA](#). These can be found in [Appendix B](#).

This study considered 99 English universities. It excluded specialist universities and the University of London (institutes). The results found five distinct clusters, seen in [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Results of Ulrichsen (2018)
Highlighting Russell Group universities in bold and 1994 Group universities in italics

Cluster E	Cluster J	Cluster M	Cluster V	Cluster X
<i>Goldsmiths</i> + 28 other universities	17 universities	17 universities	Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; King's College; Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen Mary; Sheffield; Southampton; UCL; Warwick	<i>Bath; Birkbeck; Brunel; Durham; UEA; Essex; Exeter;</i> Hull; Keele; Kent; <i>Lancaster; Leicester; LSE; Loughborough;</i> Reading; <i>Royal Holloway; SOAS; Surrey; Sussex;</i> York

As the purpose of this paper was to identify groups of structurally similar universities as opposed to identifying tiers or which university is 'best', it is not possible to make interpretations on the differences between the groups. This is also why the clusters are labelled by random letters as opposed to sequential letters or numbers.

It is notable that the majority of the Russell Group universities are found in a different cluster to the University of York. This therefore suggests the Russell Group may not be the most suitable group for the University of York to compare itself against.

Additionally, all but two of the 1994 Group universities included in this research are included in the same cluster as the University of York.

Combining the Research

The clusters from Boliver (2015) and Ulrichsen (2018) have been combined in [Table 3](#).

*Table 3: Results of Boliver (2015) and Ulrichsen (2018) Combined
Highlighting Russell Group universities in bold and 1994 Group universities in italics*

Boliver (2015)	Ulrichsen (2018)			
	Cluster V	Cluster X	Cluster E	Not included
Cluster 1	Cambridge; Oxford			
Cluster 2	Birmingham; Bristol; Imperial; King's College; Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Queen Mary; Sheffield; Southampton; UCL; Warwick	<i>Bath; Durham; UEA; Exeter; Kent; Lancaster; Leicester; LSE; Loughborough; Reading; RHUL; SOAS; Surrey; Sussex; York</i>	<i>Goldsmiths</i>	Aberdeen; Cardiff ; Dundee; Edinburgh ; Glasgow ; Heriot-Watt; Queen's Belfast ; St Andrews; Strathclyde
Cluster 3		Brunel; Essex; Hull; Keele		
Not included		<i>Birkbeck</i>		

Within the same group as the University of York, there are 14 other universities which have been identified to be similar in terms of both 'prestige' and structure. We take this group forward as we continue to identify a group of comparable universities for the University of York.

UNIVERSITIES WITH SIMILAR LOCAL AREAS

Location is an important factor in a student's decision making on which university to attend³.

In addition, whilst a university may be the primary support for a student, the infrastructure and opportunities provided by the local area will also have an impact. These include career opportunities, finances and cultural celebrations, among others.

However, when considering university groups, such as the Russell Group or those identified in the [research](#) above, the local area is not normally considered and the focus is often on the university only.

As part of Access and Participation we consider the local area to be an important factor. For example, within the 14 universities identified in the [research](#) above, there are three which are based in London. It would not be reasonable to say that a university based in London and a university based in York offer the same opportunities and experiences for students.

Methodology

We have used two sources of data, local authority data and built-up area data, both from the 2011 census. We explain the rationale for two sources of data.

³ [Choosing a university](#) - The Complete University Guide; [Ten ways to choose a UK university](#) - UCAS

Local authorities are defined as “an organisation that is officially responsible for all the public services and facilities in a particular area”⁴. The University of York sits in the City of York Council local authority. This covers the city of York as well as towns in the surrounding area. This could be considered to be representative of the local area of the University of York. On the other hand, Durham University sits within the County Durham local authority. County Durham is a large rural area which includes the city of Durham (where the university sits). Therefore, for our purposes, to take data from the County Durham local authority would not be representative of the local area of Durham University.

Built-up areas are defined as “land that is ‘irreversibly urban in character’, meaning they are characteristic of a village, town or city”⁵. The University of York sits in the built-up area of York. This covers the city of York. This could again be considered to be representative of the local area of the University of York. On the other hand, the University of Surrey sits within the built-up area of Greater London, despite being located in the city of Guildford which is in the county of Surrey. Therefore, for our purposes, to take data from the Greater London built-up area would not be representative of the local area of the University of Surrey.

There are therefore advantages and disadvantages of both sources of data depending on the university and local area being considered.

We have made the decision to look at the geographical area of the local authority a university sits in as the deciding factor of whether to use local authority population data or built-up area population data. If the geographical area of the local authority is within 50% of the geographical area of the City of York Council local authority (where the University of York sits), then we will use the local authority population data. If it does not, then we will use the built-up area population data.

We have decided on the 50% parameter (quartile 2) as this provides a rounded criteria which encompasses half of the 14 universities being considered at this stage of the project.

- If we were to reduce the parameters to within 25% (quartile 1), then we would lose four universities considered to have a similar local area to the University of York. This would leave us with three comparable universities.
- If we were to increase the parameters to within 75% (quartile 3), then we would gain four universities considered to have a similar local area to the University of York. This would leave us with 11 comparable universities, only three less than the [research](#) above. This would also include a London-based university, which as discussed above is logically not comparable.

Taking this approach to the examples discussed, [Table 4](#) shows that Durham University requires we use the built-up area population data and the University of Surrey requires we use the local authority population data.

Universities with Similar Local Areas

The methodology discussed above is represented in [Table 4](#).

We first look at how the geographical area of the local authority that a university sits in compares to the geographical area of the City of York Council local authority (as a percentage). This in turn dictates whether we use the local authority population data or built-up area population data, both shown as a percentage of York:

- Dark blue represents where the data is greater than 50% higher
- Light blue represents where the data is less than 50% lower.

Table 4: The Geographical Area of the Local Authority of a University and the Number of Residents of the Local Authority or Built-Up Area (compared to York as a percentage)

University	Geographical Area of Local Authority	Comparison Area Used	Number of Residents in Local Authority (LA)	Number of Residents in Built-Up Area (BUA)
York	100%	LA	100%	100%
Bath	127%	LA	89%	
Durham	819%	BUA		31%
UEA	14%	BUA		139%
Exeter	17%	BUA		77%
Kent	114%	LA	76%	
Lancaster	208%	BUA		63%
Leicester	27%	BUA		331%

⁴ [Local authority definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary](#)

⁵ [2011 Census : Characteristics of Built-Up Areas](#)

University	Geographical Area of Local Authority	Comparison Area Used	Number of Residents in Local Authority (LA)	Number of Residents in Built-Up Area (BUA)
Loughborough	103%	LA	84%	
LSE	8%	BUA		6367%
Reading	15%	BUA		207%
RHUL	29%	BUA		6367%
SOAS	8%	BUA		6367%
Surrey	100%	LA	69%	
Sussex	30%	BUA		309%

The geographical area data can be found on the [local government information website](#). The number of residents data can be found in the [Usual resident population](#) section of the [Nomis](#) site (a service provided by the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS)).

Based on [Table 4](#), there are seven universities which are considered to have a comparable local area to the University of York from the original 14 identified by the [research](#):

- University of Bath
- University of East Anglia (UEA)
- University of Exeter
- University of Kent
- Lancaster University
- Loughborough University
- University of Surrey

This includes one Russell Group university and six 1994 Group universities. From here, this group shall be called the Comparison Universities.

RUSSELL GROUP VS COMPARISON UNIVERSITIES

In this section, we investigate how the Comparison Universities compare to the Russell Group in terms of size and composition of student population. This is to further demonstrate why the Comparison Universities are a better group for the [Access and Participation Monitoring and Evaluation Team](#) to begin building networks with and sharing knowledge and experience.

We understand that in some instances the Russell Group may still be the best for comparison. In future work, both groups will be considered and chosen based on their relevance as a comparable group for each evaluation project.

The 1994 Group will not be considered as a comparison group. It was interesting to note which of the 1994 Group universities fell within the different groups discussed within the [research](#) section and [universities with similar local area](#) section. However, as stated in the introduction, the University of York left this group in 2012 and the group disbanded in 2013. Therefore, we no longer know how comparable the University of York is with this group since leaving and we do not know which other universities may have joined had it continued to exist.

All of the following data is open source data from [HESA - Table 1](#) and is shown as a percentage of York:

- Dark blue represents where the data is greater than 50% higher.
- Light blue represents where the data is less than 50% lower.

*Table 5: Size and Composition of the Student Populations of the Russell Group
(compared to York as a percentage)*

University	Total Student Population	UK Student Population	Non-UK Student Population	UG Student Population	PG Student Population
York	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Birmingham	166%	167%	163%	165%	169%
Bristol	131%	129%	139%	145%	106%
Cambridge	98%	88%	124%	91%	110%
Cardiff	148%	153%	132%	157%	130%
Durham	91%	86%	106%	108%	58%

University	Total Student Population	UK Student Population	Non-UK Student Population	UG Student Population	PG Student Population
Edinburgh	167%	132%	267%	166%	168%
Exeter	133%	134%	131%	150%	101%
Glasgow	164%	142%	227%	147%	196%
Imperial	94%	60%	193%	76%	129%
King's	169%	136%	266%	144%	218%
Leeds	162%	157%	179%	182%	124%
Liverpool	129%	127%	134%	150%	89%
LSE	59%	26%	155%	38%	100%
Manchester	197%	160%	302%	195%	200%
Newcastle	122%	126%	113%	144%	82%
Nottingham	158%	167%	132%	187%	103%
Oxford	120%	108%	155%	105%	147%
Queen Mary	105%	95%	133%	109%	97%
Queen's Belfast	112%	121%	85%	118%	100%
Sheffield	135%	115%	193%	132%	141%
Southampton	94%	87%	115%	96%	90%
UCL	201%	133%	400%	146%	306%
Warwick	124%	106%	176%	127%	119%

[Table 5](#) shows the analysis of the Russell Group. Nine out of 23 universities in the Russell Group are within 50% of the University of York for student population and composition. However, the majority of universities within the Russell Group are over 50% larger than the University of York. This supports the research which showed (using statistical cluster analysis) that the majority of Russell Group universities differ from the University of York in terms of their structure.

*Table 6: Size and Composition of the Student Populations of the Comparison Universities
(compared to York as a percentage)*

University	Total Student Population	UK Student Population	Non-UK Student Population	UG Student Population	PG Student Population
York	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Bath	82%	81%	84%	91%	63%
UEA	84%	94%	52%	94%	63%
Exeter	133%	134%	131%	150%	101%
Kent	82%	89%	61%	101%	46%
Lancaster	77%	71%	94%	84%	63%
Loughborough	81%	85%	67%	97%	51%
Surrey	73%	73%	73%	87%	47%

[Table 6](#) shows the analysis of the Comparison Universities. These seven universities were identified as comparable to the University of York based on 'prestige', structure and local area and do not differ noticeably when compared using the 50% more or less comparison. The University of Kent and the University of Surrey are the only universities which differ. Both have less than 50% the size of the University of York's postgraduate population, but only by less than 5 percentage points.

WORKED EXAMPLE OF COMPARISON UNIVERSITIES

In this section, we provide a worked example of how identifying the Comparison Universities will enable us to better evaluate our work within Access and Participation and begin to share best practices across institutions. All Access and Participation data is taken from the OfS' [Access and Participation data dashboard](#).

An interesting place to start is looking at our ethnicity data within the Access section of Access and Participation. The University of York is low in its percentage of non-white students accessing higher education through our institution. We fall below the Sector average in all ethnicity groups (see [Table 7](#)).

Before we identified the Comparison Universities, our primary group to compare against was the Russell Group. And within the Russell Group, we often compared against the University of Leeds and the University of Sheffield as they fall within a similar geographic area (Yorkshire).

[Table 7](#) shows the access data for the different ethnicity groups for the Sector, the University of York, the University of Leeds and the University of Sheffield.

Table 7: Access data broken down by Ethnicity for the sector and selected Russell Group universities

University	Ethnicity, Access (2020/21)				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Other
Sector	67.8%	10.1%	14.5%	5.2%	2.5%
York	84.4%	2.6%	6.9%	5.0%	1.1%
Leeds	77.6%	3.5%	11.5%	5.7%	1.6%
Sheffield	78.8%	3.2%	10.5%	5.8%	1.6%

As demonstrated in [Table 7](#), the University of York not only has a high percentage of White students when compared against the Sector, but also when compared against the University of Leeds and the University of Sheffield. The justification often given is that Leeds and Sheffield are larger cities with a more diverse population so are more likely to attract ethnically diverse students.

We investigate these claims in [Table 8](#), which uses the [methodology](#) discussed in the [universities with similar local areas](#) section.

Table 8: The Geographical Area of the Local Authority of a University and the Number of Residents of the Local Authority or Built-Up Area (compared to York as a percentage) - selected Russell Group universities

University	Geographical Area of Local Authority	Comparison Area Used	Number of Residents in Local Authority (LA)	Number of Residents in Built-Up Area (BUA)
York	100.0%	LA	100.0%	100.0%
Leeds	202.9%	BUA		897.7%
Sheffield	135.3%	LA	279.1%	

In addition, we looked at the ethnicity of the local populations in [Table 9](#) (data can be found in the [Ethnic group](#) section of the [Nomis](#) site).

Table 9: The Ethnicity of Residents of the Local Authority or Built-Up Area - selected Russell Group universities

University	Comparison Area Used	White	Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups	Asian / Asian British	Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	Other ethnic group
York	LA	94.3%	1.2%	3.4%	0.6%	0.5%
Leeds	BUA	77.9%	2.5%	16.1%	2.5%	1.1%
Sheffield	LA	83.7%	2.4%	8.0%	3.6%	2.2%

When comparing the University of York to these two Russell Group universities, it might be fair to accept the justification for why the University of York has a high percentage of White students. Both Leeds and Sheffield are larger cities and have a larger diversity in their local population.

However, when you look at the Comparison Universities, which have been specifically chosen to be comparable to the University of York, the University of Kent and the University of Surrey do not follow the same narrative - they have a higher percentage of non-white students but have a similar local area.

[Table 10](#) shows the access data for the different ethnicity groups for the Sector, the University of York, the University of Kent and the University of Surrey.

Table 10: Access Data broken down by Ethnicity for selected Comparison Universities

University	Ethnicity, Access (2020/21)				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Other
Sector	67.8%	10.1%	14.5%	5.2%	2.5%
York	84.4%	2.6%	6.9%	5.0%	1.1%
Kent	57.1%	21.1%	12.7%	6.1%	3.0%
Surrey	66.0%	6.7%	18.5%	6.4%	2.5%

We have established that both the University of Kent and the University of Surrey have a similar local area to the University of York. In addition, we looked at the ethnicity of the local populations in [Table 11](#) (data can be found in the [Ethnic group](#) section of the [Nomis](#) site) and can see that this does not differ noticeably.

Table 11: The Ethnicity of Residents of the Local Authority or Built-Up Area - selected Comparison Universities

University	Comparison Area Used	White	Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups	Asian / Asian British	Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	Other ethnic group
York	LA	94.3%	1.2%	3.4%	0.6%	0.5%
Kent	LA	93.0%	1.7%	3.4%	1.3%	0.6%
Surrey	LA	90.9%	1.8%	4.8%	1.2%	1.2%

Therefore, the justification for the University of York having a high percentage of White students when compared to the Russell Group universities (University of Leeds and University of Sheffield) is no longer valid when compared to the Comparison Universities (University of Kent and University of Surrey).

This therefore presents the question: Why does the University of York have a high percentage of White students and what are the University of Kent and the University of Surrey doing to provide access to higher education for non-white students (noticeably Black students and Asian students, respectively)?.

CONCLUSION

We have identified a group of seven universities which are comparable to the University of York in terms of 'prestige', structure and local area:

- University of Bath
- University of East Anglia (UEA)
- University of Exeter
- University of Kent
- Lancaster University
- Loughborough University
- University of Surrey

We have also analysed how the Comparison Universities compares to the Russell Group. We have noted that in some instances Russell Group may still be the best for comparison, and that in future work both groups will be considered and chosen based on their relevance as a comparable group for each project.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Boliver (2015) Variables

Dimension	Variables
Research activity	Research income adjusted for science/arts mix and institution size
	The percentage of students who are postgraduates
	Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores
Teaching quality	The percentage of students satisfied with teaching (NSS)
	The percentage of students satisfied with feedback (NSS)
	The value-added score calculated by the compilers of the Guardian University Guide (out of 10)
Economic resources	Endowment and investment income (£000s)
	Spending on academic services per student
	Student-staff ratio
Academic selectivity	The UCAS point score of the average entrant
	The degree completion rate
	The percentage of students receiving a 'good degree'
Socioeconomic student mix	The percentage of students who are not from a low participation neighbourhood
	The percentage of students who are from more advantaged social class backgrounds
	The percentage of students who attended a private school

Return to [Boliver \(2015\) - The 'Prestige' of the University](#)

Appendix B - Ulrichsen (2018) Variables

Category	Variables
Existing knowledge base	Number of academics by function
	Portfolio of academics by discipline (proportion)
	Educational focus of institution
Knowledge generation	Scale of knowledge generation activity in different knowledge domains
	Scale of knowledge generation of different types
	Scale of international linkages in research
	Knowledge generation intensity of institution
	Knowledge generation intensity by discipline
	Knowledge generation type intensity
	Research internationalisation intensity
Physical assets	Scale of physical asset investment
	Intensity of physical asset investment

Return to [Ulrichsen \(2018\) - The Structure of the University](#)