

Does your choice of university determine your earning potential?

It's known that employers favour certain universities. But does this translate into higher pay for their graduates? Lucy Hodges gets to grips with the latest research

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New research published yesterday shows that students who want to get a good job that pays well should apply to an institution belonging to the Russell Group or 1994 Group of universities.

This conclusion, which comes in time to affect the choices that students make about where to study next year, is in a report from the 1994 Group of small and beautiful universities such as Exeter and Sussex. It reinforces previous studies that show it pays for applicants to think tactically and apply for universities rated by employers rather than for courses that sound attractive.

Graduates of science and technology at research-intensive universities do particularly well in earning big money, according to the research. Three and a half years after leaving university, 31.7 per cent of scientists and technologists from research-intensive universities are earning £30,000 to £50,000, compared with 16 per cent from other universities.

This trend is evident in most other subjects, with the exception of education. The graduates at research-intensive universities who achieve the best salaries – earning more than £50,000 – are those who studied law, business, engineering and technology, and the physical sciences.

"Students make very well-considered choices when choosing institutions and courses, and these are decisions they don't regret further down the line," said Steve Smith, Exeter's vice-chancellor and chairman of the 1994 Group, at the launch of the report at a Policy Exchange breakfast. "There is a strong correlation between what students expect and what they get as far as employment and earnings are concerned."

Deian Hopkin, vice-chancellor of London South Bank University, objected to the findings. Graduates of his university have the sixth-highest starting salaries in the UK. In general, however, he accepted the findings.

"What is important is whether the researchers looked at the economic, gender and racial profile of universities," he says. "I think you will find that the research-intensive universities have the least diverse student body, and they score least well for widening participation. They are also less racially mixed and have the lowest proportion of part-time students.

"It could be that employers are more prone to hire white, middle-class graduates leaving university at 21 or 22 than older graduates who have worked and fitted education around their work. This research is worthless if it didn't look at such issues."

Research-intensive universities are defined as the 20 institutions in the Russell Group – including Bristol, Leeds, Oxford and Cambridge – as well as the 18 in the 1994 Group. The "other" universities with which they are contrasted are the new universities – those that became universities after 1992 – and those in the non-aligned group, which include Kent and Salford.

The study examined already-published data, notably the longitudinal survey, which logs where graduates are three and a half years after leaving university. It also looked at Opinionpanel's Higher Expectations survey, based on interviews with new full-time undergraduates.

Students at research-intensive universities put more emphasis on the reputation of the university when choosing where to go. This includes the view that their course has a good reputation with employers. They also give more weight to good teaching. And they understand that a good reputation for research has a positive effect on their experience as students, according to the study.

By contrast, students say the other institutions put more stress on whether the course offered something very specific that the student wanted to study. They also rated good learning resources such as computers and libraries, and assessment, teaching and learning methods. They valued strong links with industry and said it was important that the university was close to home, and had good bursaries and scholarships.

All students care about future employability and earnings when choosing a university. But importantly, those at research-intensive universities put the greater stress on the institution rather than the course, whereas those at new universities put more emphasis on the course.

Penny wise

The universities that will maximise your job prospects and earnings, according to the report:

1994 Group

Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, East Anglia, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary University of London, Reading, Royal Holloway, St Andrews, the School of Oriental and African Studies, Surrey, Sussex, and York.

Russell Group

Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial College, King's College London, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Queen's Belfast, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, University College London and Warwick.

Degrees of value

Dan Hooper, 22, is a postgraduate student of politics at Exeter who got a First class degree in the subject at the same university. He is on both university and Army scholarships.

"I chose the university because it has a fantastic reputation. The politics department was one of the best in the country – it still is, and is improving all the time. It has world-class research and teaching, and some of the best academics in the country. Students talk to academics about their research and feed into it. We are always learning new things. When I finish my Masters I am going to apply for the diplomatic service as well as for jobs in think tanks and research organisations in Brussels, Paris and London."

Jess Standen, 21, is studying for an undergraduate degree in maths at Exeter.

"I chose the university because it has a good name. It's well respected around the country. People have heard of it. Also what appealed to me was the number of extra-curricular activities. I play violin in the orchestra and I dance – ballet, modern, tap and street. I run Community Action, which organises student volunteering. I work and play hard. I have developed so many skills from that, which will be helpful to me in the future. Exeter is so welcoming. I love the place and I loved it when I came to visit. When I graduate I will either go into voluntary work or think about doing a PhD."

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