

What counts as a 'good' university if I want to be a solicitor?

One of the most common threads that comes up on internet message-boards related to law is something along the lines of: “*Firm X says applicants should have a 2:1 from a good university? What do they mean by 'good'?*” Or, in a similar vein: “*I have offers to study at University A and the University of B. Which one is better if I want to be a lawyer?*”

To answer this question, we have done some number-crunching for you. As you'll probably know, to write our True Picture features on 120 law firms, we interview hundreds of trainees each year. We always ask what university they went to, so we have a MASSIVE amount of data on what universities successful training contract applicants come from.

Below are some graphs showing our findings.

But first, some big disclaimers!

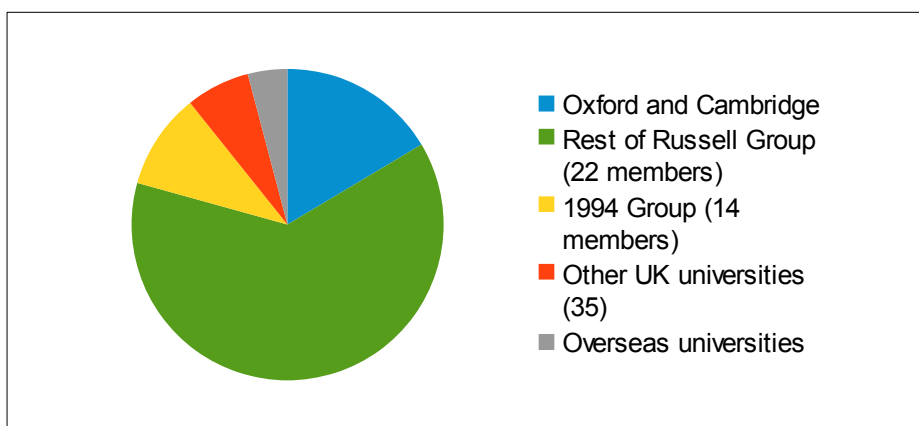
- ⤴ First off, you'll notice a lack of actual numbers on the graphs. This is deliberate, and done to avoid people playing around with the stats to jump to daft conclusions. What we will tell you is that more than 2,000 trainees were questioned over three years. This is not an insignificant sample size.
- ⤴ While we interview many hundreds of trainees in each research period, we haven't interviewed ALL of them. Just because (for example), the University of East London is not mentioned anywhere below doesn't mean that there are no trainees who studied there, only that we didn't come across any in the course of our research. Of course, that does point to a larger truth that UEL grads get fewer training contracts than Oxbridge ones, so our table is useful in that respect. But it **doesn't** mean that if you are a UEL grad you might as well give up.
- ⤴ This survey doesn't include high-street firms. We're certain that if it did the results would be quite different. The survey was of trainees who ended up at the best commercial firms (ie ones that are *Chambers*-ranked and we deemed worthy of inclusion in the True Picture in the last three years).
- ⤴ The charts don't take into account the subject that was studied, which can influence how a university appears. For example, Leicester runs a very well-regarded law degree, and so has a strong showing. Imperial College, meanwhile, concentrates heavily on science and technology subjects and so naturally features less prominently. But that doesn't mean, say, an Imperial chemistry graduate would be less likely to get a training contract than a Leicester media studies graduate.
- ⤴ The charts also don't take into account that firms within the same category can differ in their approaches. For example, we've noticed a few American firms that recruit almost solely from Oxbridge – but this is certainly not true of many other US firms.
- ⤴ Our definitions of what counts as 'medium-to-small London firm', or what firms are 'national' and so on are rough and ready, and entirely our own.
- ⤴ Going to a university higher up on these charts will not help you much if you are deficient in other ways.
- ⤴ While those higher up the chart might be viewed as the 'best' universities, it doesn't mean they are right for YOU. **The things that law firms value in a university might not match your own priorities.** You might want to live close to home for any number of reasons, or you might need to live somewhere where the cost of living is relatively cheap.
- ⤴ In short, what we're saying is: ignore this survey almost entirely, and **choose the university where you think you will be happiest.**

More about our methodology

- ⤴ We interview a random selection of trainees at 125 law firms. How many we interview depends on the size of the firm – we might talk to every trainee a smaller firm has, and maybe as many as 20 in the magic circle firms.
- ⤴ The data below is drawn from the entirety of our research in the years 2010, 2011 and 2012. It is the university background of over 2,000 trainees.
- ⤴ We have only looked at undergraduate degrees for the purposes of this study.

Our findings

- ⤴ In our survey of trainees we came across graduates of 73 different UK universities.
- ⤴ 16.4% of those surveyed attended Oxbridge
- ⤴ 79.3% had attended a Russell Group university*
- ⤴ 4.1% had attended an overseas institution



You may immediately jump to the conclusion that the top law firms are biased towards the Russell Group. There may well be some truth to this, but do remember that this isn't the whole story. It's fair to assume that, for example, more Oxford students *want* to become top commercial lawyers than their peers at, say, Keele.

* The **Russell Group** is a group of leading UK research universities. Its members are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Imperial, King's, Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen Mary, Queen's University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL, Warwick and York

The **1994 Group** is a group of top "smaller research-intensive universities." Its members are: Bath, Birkbeck, UEA, Essex, Goldsmiths, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Reading, Royal Holloway, SOAS, St Andrews, Surrey, Sussex and the University of London Institute of Education. We came across graduates of all except the last in our survey.

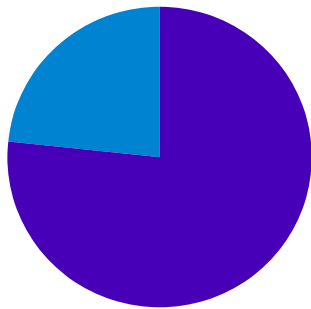
London v the regions

Depending on the region and the type of firm, university backgrounds varied dramatically

The largest legal hub in the UK, London naturally attracts many of the brightest and most ambitious students. It's no surprise, therefore to find that Oxbridge graduates accounted for nearly a quarter of the trainees we surveyed in the capital. By contrast, just 5% of trainees surveyed at national and regional firms had studied at Oxbridge.

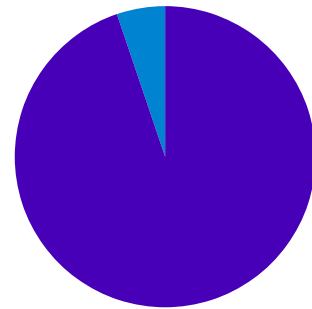
Oxbridge graduates: London firms

■ Oxbridge ■ Non-Oxbridge

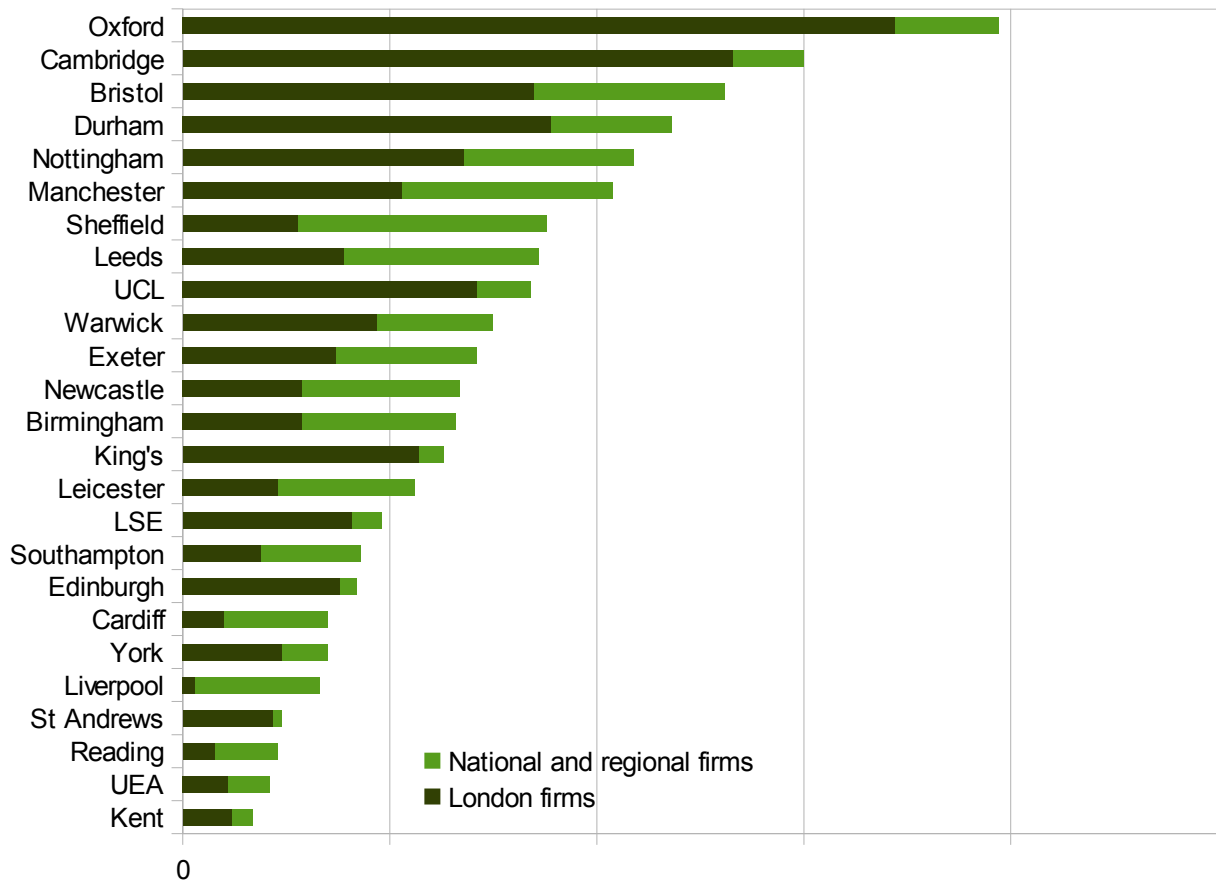


Oxbridge graduates: regional firms

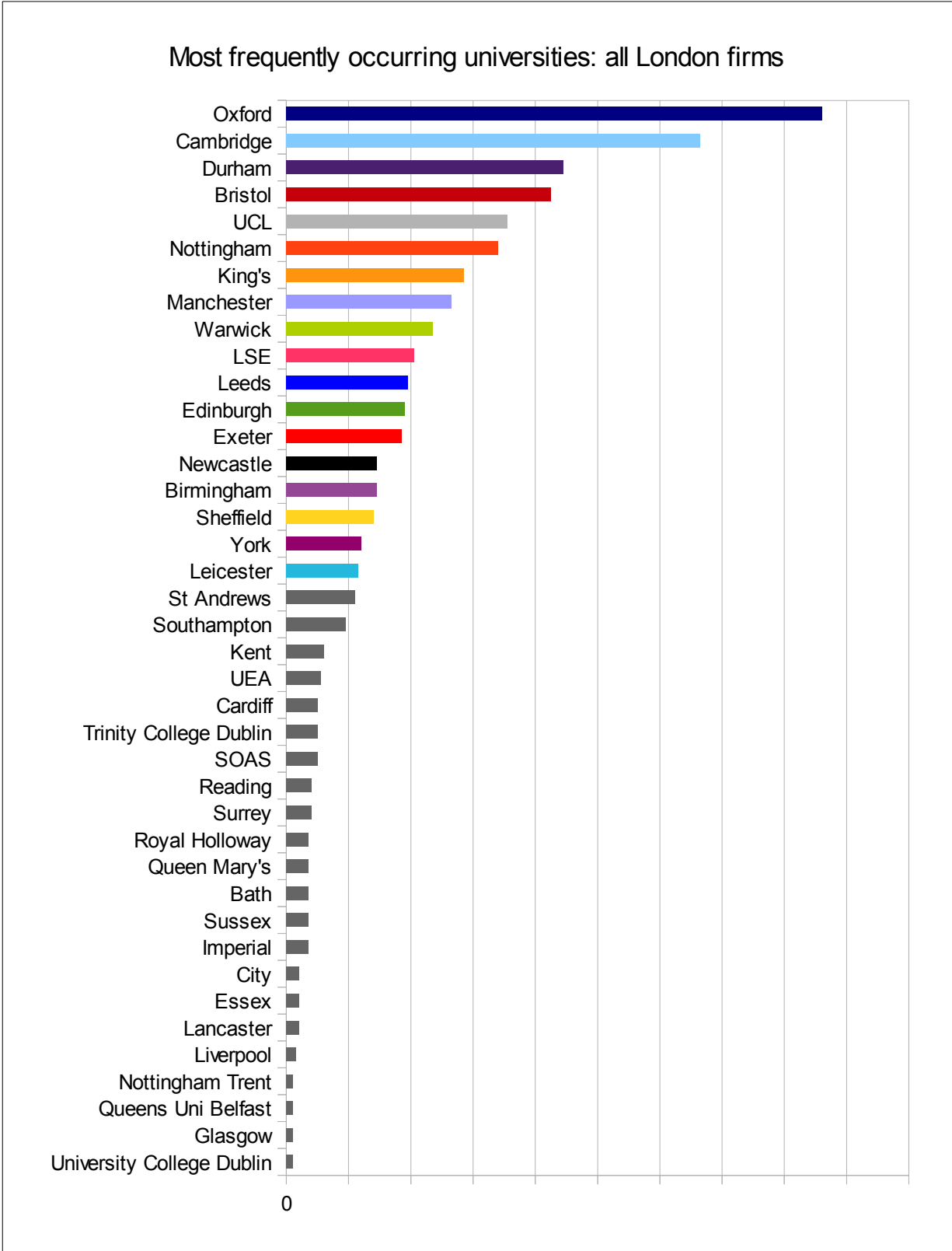
■ Oxbridge ■ Non-Oxbridge



Destinations of graduates of some different universities



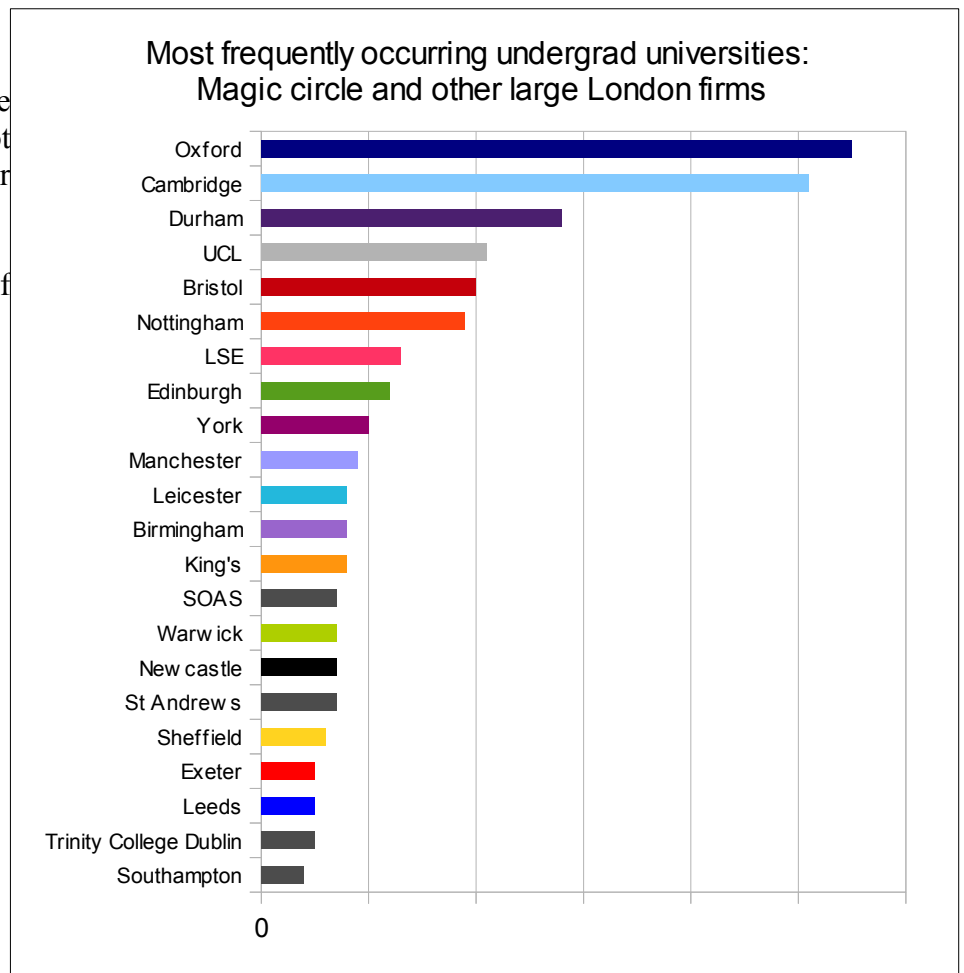
Trainees at London firms



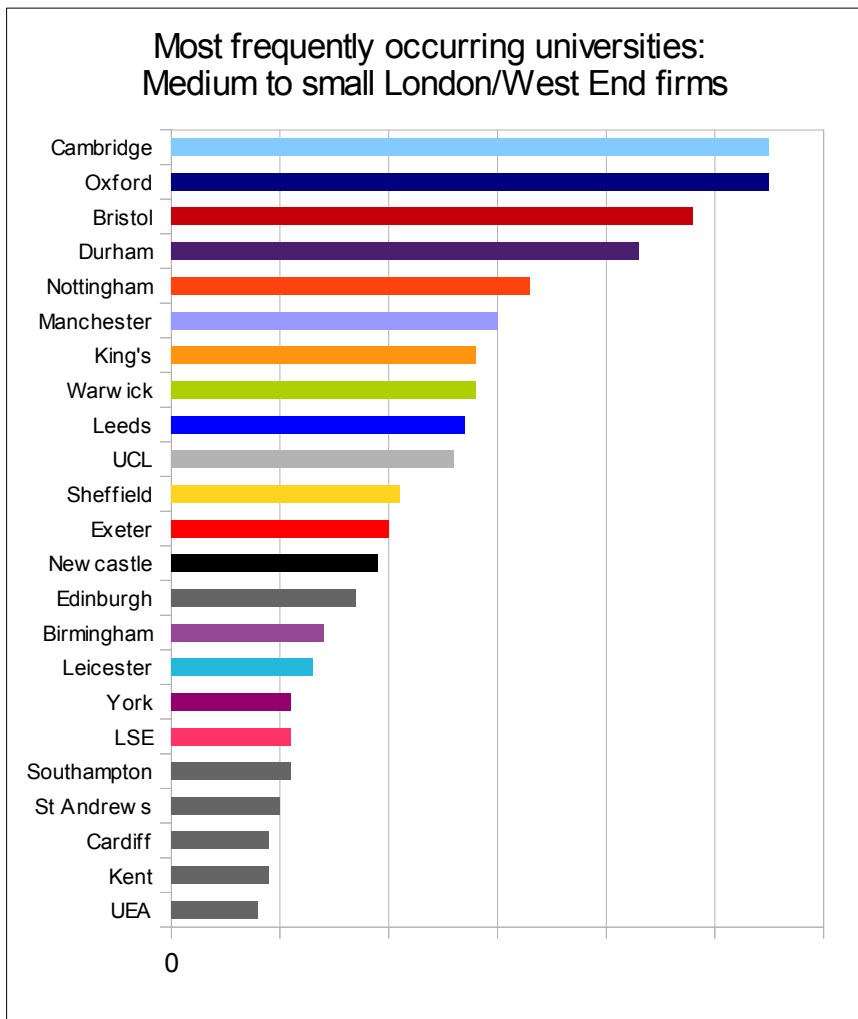
Trainees at the largest London firms

As the chart to the right shows, while the largest London firms certainly take a lot of Oxbridge graduates, plenty of other universities have a strong showing.

At these firms, we spoke to graduates of 39 different UK universities.



Trainees at medium and small London firms



Among the smaller London firms, Oxford and Cambridge still provide the most graduates, but the gap between those two universities and Durham and Bristol is smaller, and the likes of Sheffield, Leeds and Exeter feature more prominently.

At these firms, we spoke to graduates of 45 different UK universities.

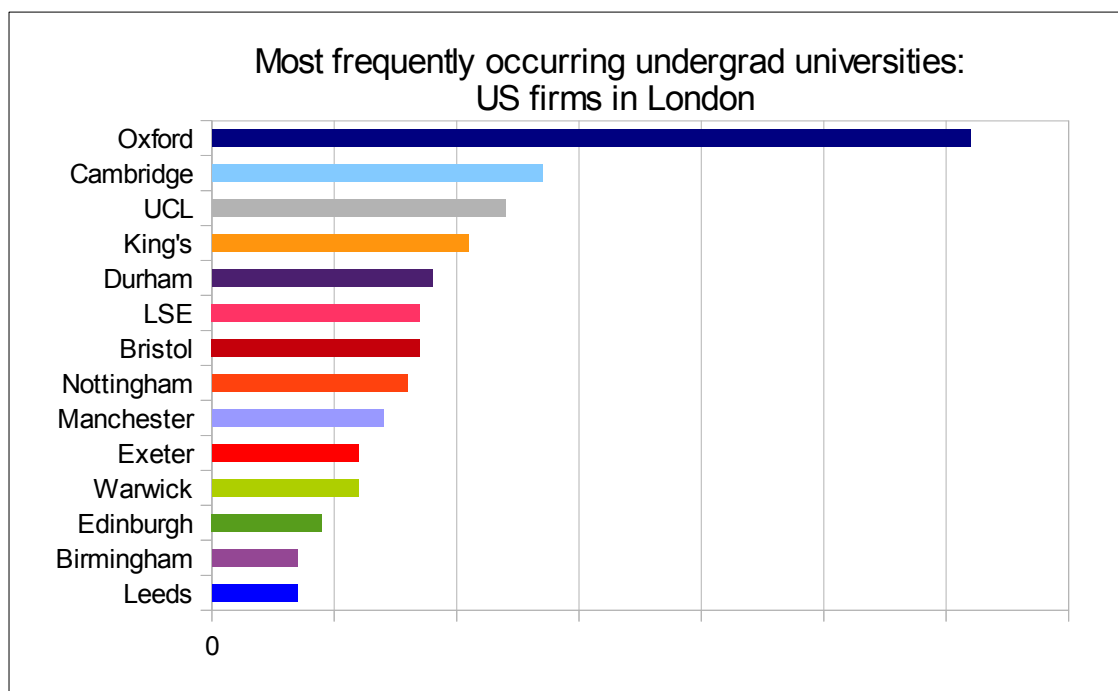
Trainees at US firms in London

US firms take far more candidates from Oxford and Cambridge (especially Oxford) and the colleges of the University of London. Note how UCL, King's and LSE push up into third, fourth and sixth position in the chart below.

Possible reasons:

- ⤴ US firms have smaller intakes, therefore don't need to spend their budget on visiting far-flung law fairs in Durham and Bristol. They stick to Oxbridge and London, where their office is.
- ⤴ US firms are less established in the UK and so are more obsessed with recruiting graduates from prestigious names to prove their quality.

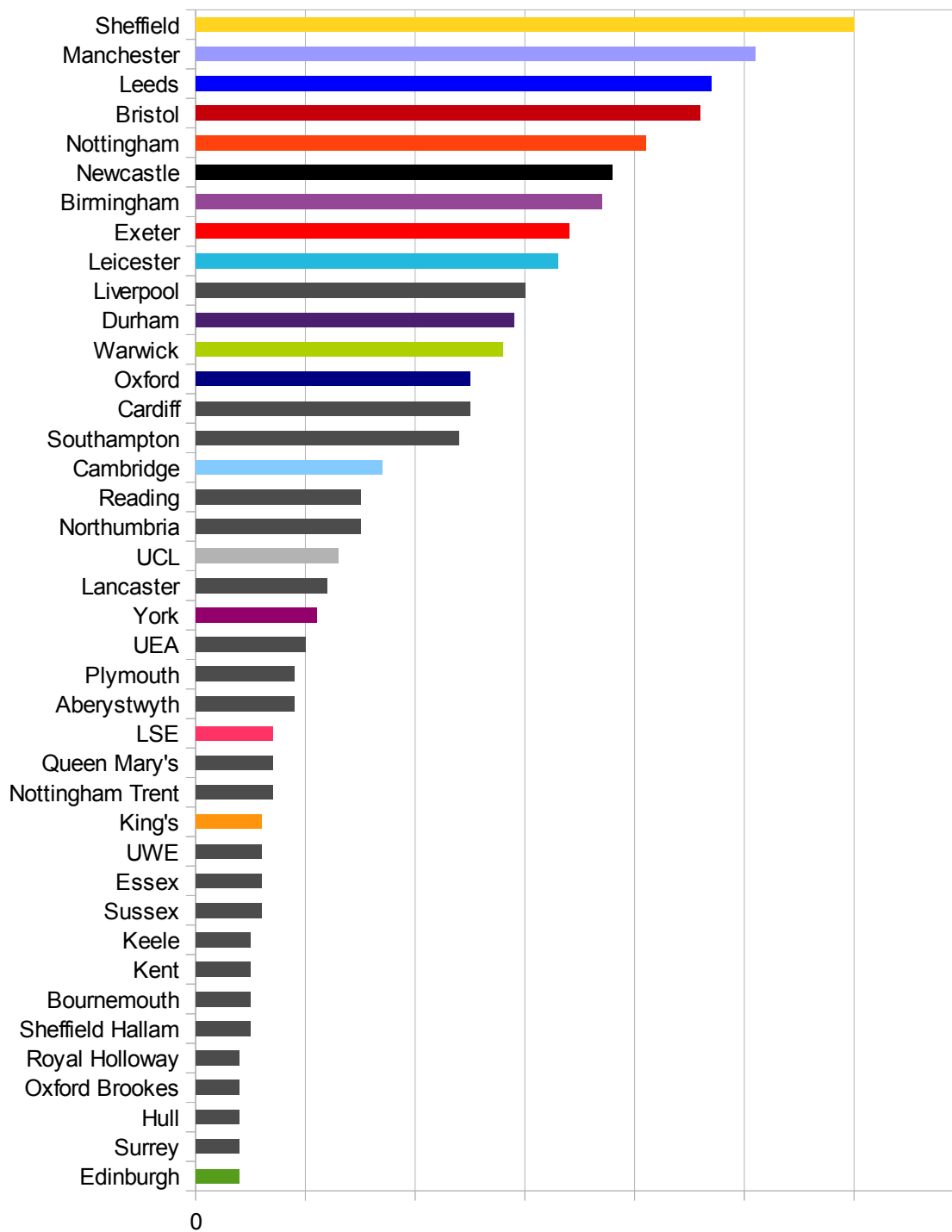
Nevertheless, we spoke to graduates of 38 different UK universities at American firms in London.



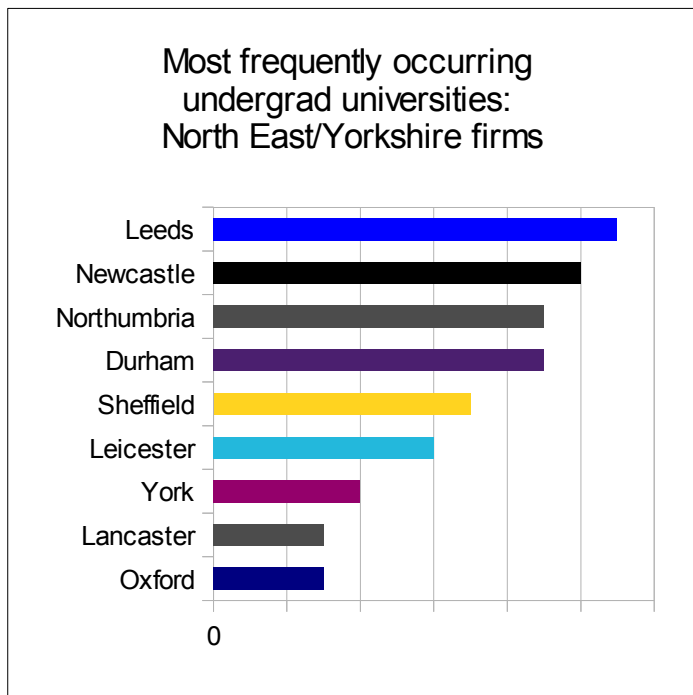
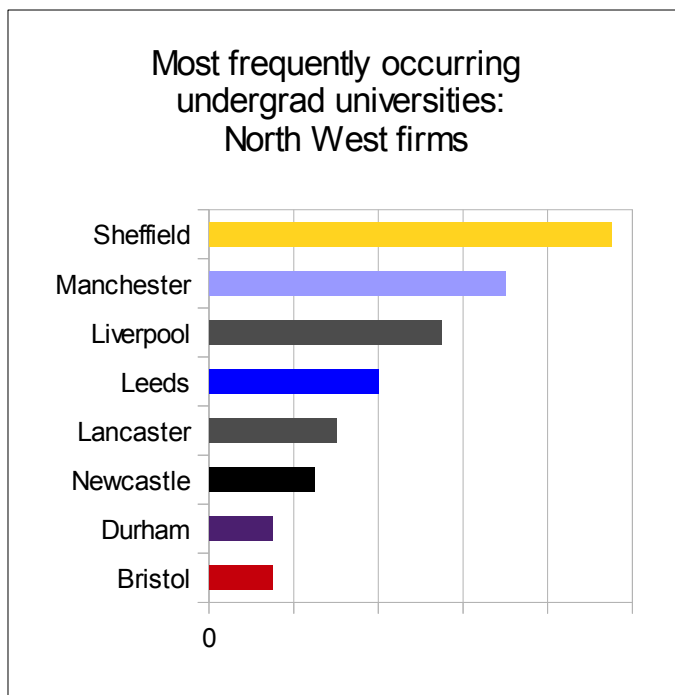
Trainees at regional and national firms

At firms outside London, things are a bit different. Oxford and Cambridge cease to be the main providers of trainees.

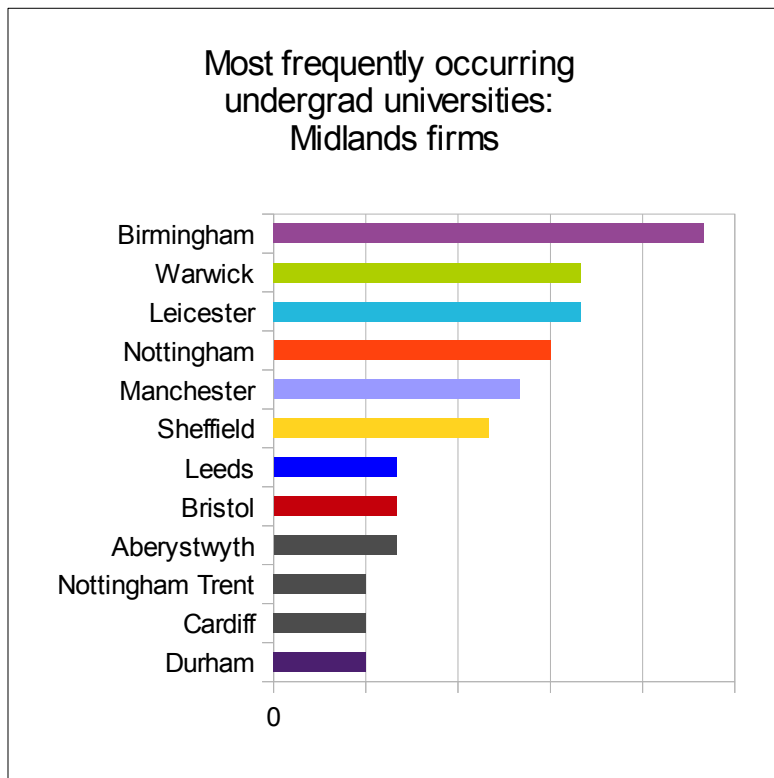
Most frequently occurring undergrad universities:
all national and regional firms



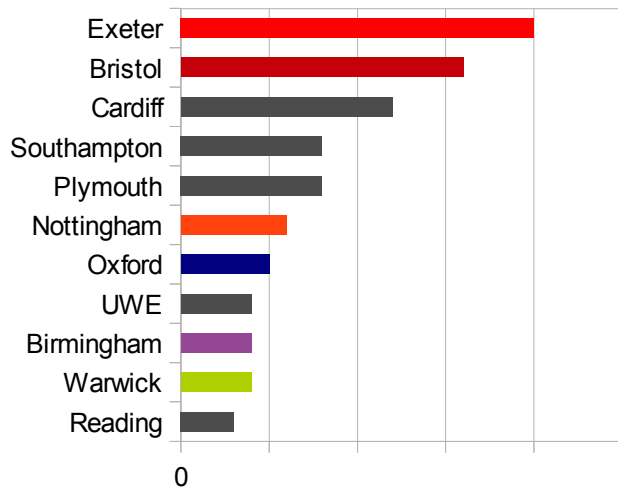
Unsurprisingly, the provincial Russell Group universities provide a lot of trainees to their local area. Manchester and Liverpool are prominent in the North West; Leeds, Durham and Newcastle in the North East; Sheffield does well in both regions.



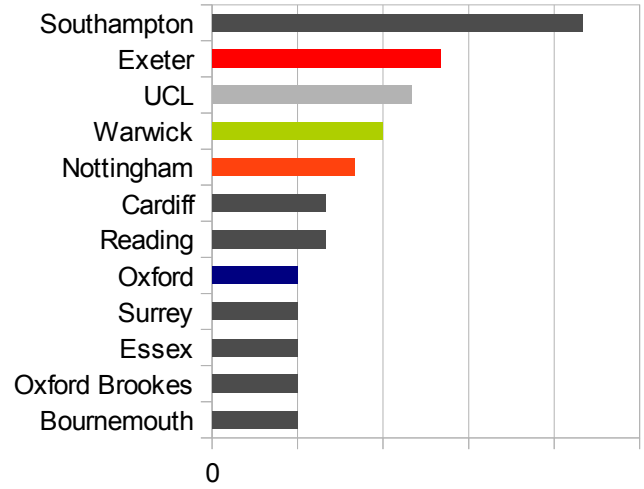
However, many non-Russell Group institutions also do well: Lancaster and Northumbria in the North, Warwick and Nottingham Trent in the Midlands; Reading and Plymouth in the South, to name just a few.



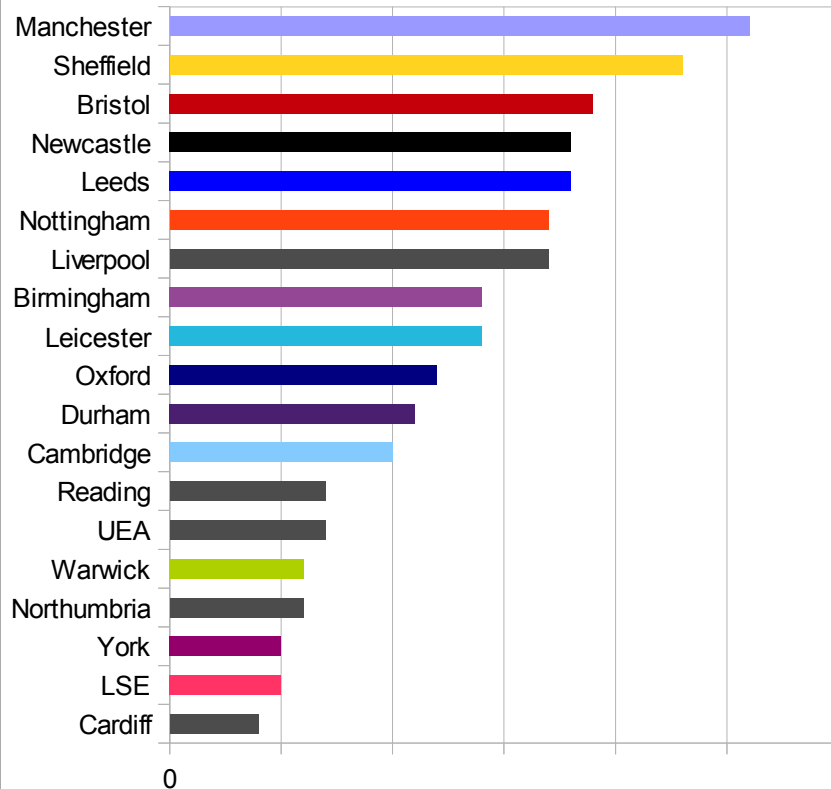
Most frequently occurring
undergrad universities:
South West firms



Most frequently occurring
undergrad universities:
South and Thames Valley firms

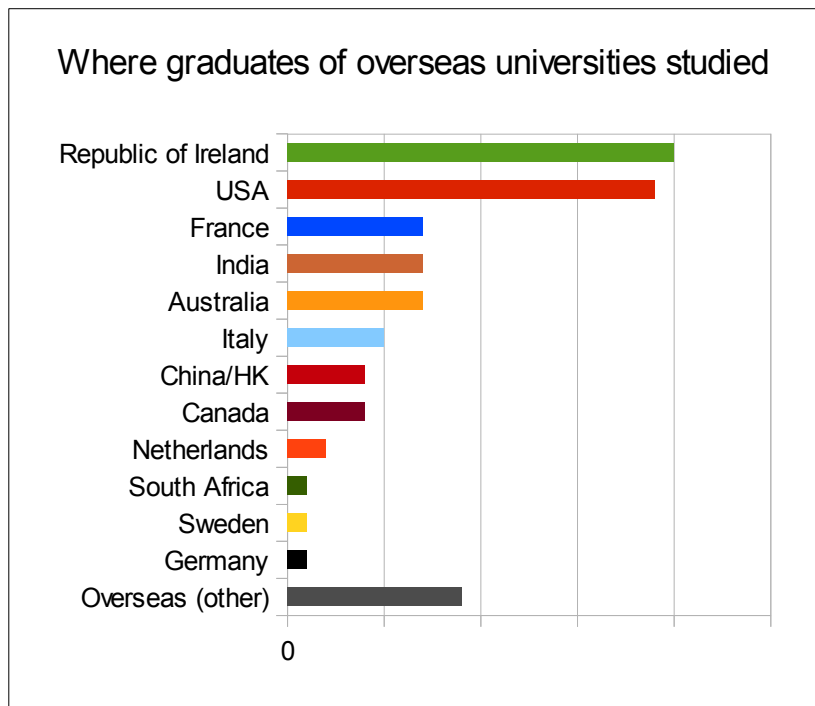


Most frequently occurring undergrad universities:
National firms (firms with offices across the UK)



Trainees who studied abroad

We encountered a fair few trainees who had studied abroad. Some of them were UK citizens and some weren't – we make no distinction in the graph below. The most frequently mentioned non-UK university was Trinity College Dublin (to put it in context, it got about as many mentions as the likes of SOAS, Essex and Royal Holloway).



In conclusion...

We've bombarded you with lots of graphs and cautions not to take them too much to heart. That done, we're going to stick our necks out and give you a list of 20 universities that provide the most trainees to the top commercial firms. If you attended one of these, you may proceed with confidence – law firms know these universities very well – though of course that doesn't guarantee you personally will wow them.

Birmingham	Exeter	Manchester	Southampton
Bristol	King's	Newcastle	St Andrews
Cambridge	Leeds	Nottingham	UCL
Durham	Leicester	Oxford	Warwick
Edinburgh	LSE	Sheffield	York

Note, by the way, that two of the above universities, Leicester and St Andrews, are not members of the Russell Group.

The following universities also provide a fair number of trainees to the top commercial firms, although in smaller numbers than those in the first group. If you attended one of these, you can feel confident that you've got a well-known and reputable name on your CV as far as many law firms are concerned.

Cardiff	Reading
Kent	Royal Holloway
Lancaster	SOAS
Liverpool	Surrey
Northumbria	Sussex
Queen Mary's	East Anglia (UEA)

The next group of universities appeared a significant number of times in our survey but it would be wrong to suggest they provide a lot of trainees to the top commercial firms. Some don't produce the type of student who would typically go into law (like Imperial and Bath), while others have a better reputation in their home regions than nationally and provide trainees primarily to nearby firms (Plymouth and UWE, for instance).

Aberystwyth	Imperial
Bath	Keele
Bournemouth	Nottingham Trent
City	Oxford Brookes
Essex	Plymouth
Glasgow	Sheffield Hallam
Hull	UWE

And what of the universities we haven't mentioned at all? Well, we also came across trainees who'd studied at Aberdeen, Anglia Ruskin, Bedfordshire, Birkbeck, Birmingham City University, Bradford, Brunel, De Montfort, Derby, Dundee, Glamorgan, Goldsmiths, Hertfordshire, Kingston, Lincoln, Liverpool John Moores, Loughborough, Manchester Met, Northampton, the Open University, Queen's University Belfast, Staffordshire, Swansea, UCLan, Westminster, Winchester and Wolverhampton.

But graduates of those 27 universities combined only accounted for a total of 2.3% of those surveyed.

And finally...

We spoke to an Oxford Brookes graduate at a magic circle firm this year. The sole Northampton and Bedfordshire graduates we encountered were at large City firms. The Liverpool John Moores graduate we found at a small South East firm had a very interesting back-story for how he'd ended up there, as did the graduate of a Thai university who'd ended up at a small Manchester practice.

What we're saying is that yes, there are certainly a group of universities that are popular with law firms, but there are always exceptions. If you're at an institution that isn't one of the best-regarded, it's not the end of the world – make sure you concentrate on getting the best degree result possible and work on enhancing your CV in other ways. And if you're studying at one of the 'big names' don't get complacent – yes you're well-placed to succeed, but these days simply having a Russell Group uni on your CV is not enough.