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2012

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Lamb, Margaret, "“Honours” in the United Kingdom: More Than a Difference of Spelling in Honors Education" (2012). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 351.
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“Honours” in the United Kingdom: More Than a Difference of Spelling in Honors Education

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“. . . [T]ranslating words and phrases is the easy part. It takes years of Anglo-Amerexperience to understand the thinking behind them . . . George Bernard Shaw said it best . . . : America and Britain are two nations divided by a common language. Between us is a Great Philosophical and Cultural Divide, which is obscured by the familiar lingo.” (Walmsley 2)

The first edition of Jane Walmsley’s book *Brit-Think, Ameri-Think: A Transatlantic Survival Guide* came out in 1986. I noticed the book because she was a familiar name, a TV broadcaster, American by birth (like me), married to a Brit (like me), and had lived in England for two decades (I was well into my first decade in England). I recognized from my own experience many of the examples (often hilarious) cited by the author.

When *JNCHC* editor Ada Long issued a call for contributions to a special issue on “Honors Around the Globe,” Jane Walmsley’s book came to mind. “Honors” and “honours” are more than different in spelling, I thought; they are also quite distinct in meaning and practice. There was more food for thought as Ada’s call for contributions went on to say: “Current plans include essays on the Netherlands, Chile, Peru, Mexico, China, Australia, Qatar, and Oxford, UK.” “Oxford, UK”? Oxford was very influential on the development of U.S. honors programs, but there is “honors education” to be found in many other places across the diverse terrain of UK higher education.

Two matters before I go further.

First, what do I mean by “honours” and by “honors education”? I’ll use the British spelling whenever I refer to matters—features, designations, courses—that might be the equivalent of what NCHC members would recognize as “honors education.” Encouragement of critical thinking is at the core of “honors education,” as defined in the NCHC Monograph *Teaching*

and Learning in Honors; the most important challenge of honors education is “a challenge to the students’ previous world views and their habitual ways of developing their ideas and opinions” (West 2). Honors education is incomplete without support for the honors student in the sense of initiating the student into our own (as educators) ways of making sense of the world, especially the disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) values, perspectives, assumptions, and methods that help us derive meaning from what is around us and to shape new knowledge (West 2). Honors educational endeavors—teaching, learning, courses, activities, communities, and more—are all designed and directed toward the development of students’ “self-reflectiveness; ability to reason; ability to express themselves in speech and writing, appropriate to the discourse community while remaining, authentic to the student’s individuality; ability to integrate and contextualize information; passion for learning and sense of wonder; ability both to collaborate and to work independently; appreciation of the common humanity of all people and gratitude for human differences; capacity to commit to a position, recognize that it may change, and tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity” (West 3).

Second, what experiences have formed my perspectives on the issues and questions that I am raising? I graduated from a U.S. Ivy League college that had both departmental and college honors. I taught undergraduates in two English universities for fourteen years (1990–2004). My teaching career began (1990–1992) at a polytechnic university (Humberside Polytechnic, now the University of Lincoln). I taught for twelve years (1992–2004) at a highly rated, highly selective research university (University of Warwick). In both English universities, I taught in an honours degree program. Since 2004 I have directed an undergraduate program at the University of Connecticut, and for the past three years I have additionally served as Senior Associate Director of the Honors Program. I advise and teach both honors and non-honors students.

In this essay I will (1) place some characteristics of Oxford undergraduate education in a wider context of UK higher education, (2) describe some characteristics of honours across the UK, and (3) highlight some of the features of UK honours that readers of *JNCHC* will most likely recognize as honors education. (Nota Bene: I refer to the “UK” throughout this essay because the matters discussed are largely similar across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. However, there are differences in each region. Scottish universities have the most distinctive history and continue to have practices that are different from the others, not least a more persistent practice of “honours” requiring four years of study and an “ordinary degree” being capable of completion in three. For this reason, Scottish institutions of higher education have comparatively more students who complete ordinary degrees.)

PUTTING OXFORD IN CONTEXT

Don't get me wrong. Oxford is one of the world's greatest universities where highly accomplished, smart undergraduates get a wonderful education, indeed an honors education. Oxford is the educational institution that inspired pioneering U.S. honors educators early in the twentieth century. Frank Aydelotte, a U.S. Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, 1905–1907, sought to transplant in U.S. universities the rigors and rewards of Oxford's individualized tutorial system, its pass/honours curricular approach, and the value placed on stimulating intellectual conversation (Guzy; Rinn, "Rhodes Scholarships" and "Major Forerunners"). On his return from England, Aydelotte became a distinguished educationalist (professor at Indiana and MIT, president of Swarthmore) and over the next four decades advocated the spread and development of honors education in the U.S. (Rinn, "Rhodes Scholarships" 31–32).

It was the principles and practices of the Oxford approach to education that so attracted Aydelotte. At Oxford, he saw at work not an elitist version of higher education, but, to his way of thinking, a proper implementation of democratic principles. Rinn summarizes his position:

The word "democracy" is often used to denote equality. . . . Aydelotte . . . believed the word "democracy" was misconceived. . . . [H]e did not believe democracy to mean giving equal schooling or equal education to all. Rather, while everyone should be given an equal opportunity for education, everyone should also be given an opportunity to fulfill his or her own capabilities. . . . By being held to the same requirements as all students, the brightest students were being held back and limited in their intellectual potential. ("Rhodes Scholarships" 33)

Oxford undergraduates still have "tutorials," but they are not the same as they were in the early twentieth century (Palfreyman 19–20). Oxford tutorials today are often not quite as individualized as they were in Aydelotte's day; one, two, three, and sometimes more students may participate in a tutorial together, but they still represent a distinctive Oxford method, powerfully reflective of the intellectual values—critical thinking, support, intellectual conversation—that Aydelotte and his peers advocated as the essence of honors education. Oxford tutorials, offered in the colleges, are part of "a mixed pattern of teaching . . . a combination of tutorials, lectures, demonstrations and seminars/classes, much of which is under the control of the faculties rather than the colleges" (Palfreyman 20).

Arguably the "jewel in Oxford's crown," the tutorial system is one that few UK universities (Cambridge excepted, but in slightly different form) can

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replicate in full or in part (Palfreyman 14, 22). The “massification” of UK higher education over the past three decades (Palfreyman 22) means that very small group teaching, whether called tutorials or something else, is increasingly beyond the practical reach of most UK universities. In my teaching career at the University of Warwick, a highly selective university, I never taught an undergraduate class—even a discussion section—smaller than fourteen, and I can count on one hand the number of undergraduate independent studies that I supervised. Even Oxford faculty members worry about how long their distinctive tutorial system can be maintained in its current form (Palfreyman). The UK higher education funding regime (in general, rising tuition fees paid by students to supplement declining amounts of government funding) places growing pressure on the Oxford tutorial system: increased calls for improvements in quality from students and their advocates, demands from peer institutions to eliminate Oxford’s and Cambridge’s special funding for the tutorial system, and calls from government for Oxford to take more students (Morgan, “Rise in Number”; Patton). Time will tell whether this venerable feature of Oxford education will retain its curricular essence and prominence in the face of cost-saving and the pressure of numbers.

Oxford undergraduates continue to face the hurdles of a first public examination—preliminary exams (“prelims”) or honors moderations (“mods”)—and a second public examination (“finals”) with the results of the latter heavily determining the final degree classification. Finals typically consists of seven or eight “papers,” usually three hours each in duration, taken over a period of about a week. Unlike in the early twentieth century when graduation with honours was a minority aspiration, the honours path is now the norm. In 2011–2012, Oxford students graduating with classified honours degrees numbered 3,104; only four graduated with unclassified, ordinary degrees (Table 1).

“HONOURS” AS THE NORM ACROSS UK UNIVERSITIES

In 2010–2011, individuals graduating with first degrees from UK universities numbered 369,015. Of the total, over 90% were classified “Honours” degrees (Table 2). Determination of honours degree classification was summarized by Yorke:

In the UK (apart from Scotland) it is typically the case that full-time students have merely to pass their first year studies in order to progress to what, in some institutions, is called ‘Part 2’ of the undergraduate curriculum. The honours degree classification is usually based on results from the second and final year of academic study (i.e. Part 2). . . .

The majority of institutions in the UK uses grades in the form of (what are typically called) percentage marks. These normally map on to the honours degree classification via mean percentages as follows:

70.0% and above: first class honours

60.0 to 69.9%: upper second class honours

50.0 to 59.9%: lower second class honours

40.0 to 49.9%: third class honours.

A minority of institutions use grade-scales considerably shorter than the so-called percentage scale, and determine the classification according to the ‘profile’ of awarded grades. (678–79)

Given that honours is now the norm rather than the exception, it is unsurprising that focus has shifted to the quality of the honours classification, with students, graduate schools, potential employers, and government all being interested in how many students obtain “good” honours degrees, widely understood as a “1st (first)” or a “2i (two-one or upper second).” Arguably, a measure of upwards pressure on the number of “good” degrees creates a form of UK grade inflation (Morgan, “Rise in Numbers”). Ninety-two percent of Oxford’s most recent graduates obtained a 1st or 2i (Table 1), as did almost 60% of all UK graduates (Table 2). “Good” degrees have become a bigger share (from 57% to 61.5% over four years) of all UK undergraduate degrees (Table 3).

Table 1. Oxford University Undergraduate Degree Classifications 2011/12 (Interim Numbers)

Honours Degree Classification	Graduates	
	Number	Percentage
1st	918	29.6
2.1	1932	62.2
2.2	223	7.2
3rd	27	0.9
Other	4	0.1
Total	3104	100.0

Source: <[http://www.ox.ac.uk/about the university/facts and figures/norrington table.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/norrington_table.html)> (accessed September 2, 2012).

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An “unclassified degree” without honours has come to be understood almost everywhere as a low performance. (The assumption is less true for Scotland, where honours degrees typically require four years of study and ordinary degrees only three years.) A mere 0.1% of Oxford graduates do not receive a classified honours degree (Table 1). Across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the comparable percentages are 4.9%, 4.2%, and 3.8% respectively in 2010–2011 (Table 2).

With the focus on “good” degrees, much attention (and faculty time) is given to defining the boundaries of degree classifications: Where should the

Table 2. Class of Degree Achieved by Students Obtaining First Degree Qualifications at Higher Education Institutions in the UK by Location 2010/11

Graduate Numbers	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Total UK
First	45,050	2,830	4,035	1,300	53,215
Upper Second	141,105	9,110	11,850	4,035	166,100
Lower Second	85,020	6,550	5,535	2,105	99,210
Third/Pass	21,825	1,425	1,210	360	24,820
Unclassified	15,210	865	9,145	310	25,530
Unexplained	130	–	5	5	140
Total	308,340	20,780	31,780	8,115	369,015
Graduate Percentages	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Total UK
First	14.6%	13.6%	12.7%	16.0%	14.4%
Upper Second	45.8%	43.8%	37.3%	49.7%	45.0%
Lower Second	27.6%	31.5%	17.4%	25.9%	26.9%
Third/Pass	7.1%	6.9%	3.8%	4.4%	6.7%
Unclassified	4.9%	4.2%	28.8%	3.8%	6.9%
Unexplained	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Table 6a, Higher Education Statistics Agency, Statistical First Release 169, <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2355&Itemid=161> (downloaded July 27, 2012).

Table 3. Class of Degree Achieved by Full-Time Students Obtaining First Degree Qualifications at Higher Education Institutions in the UK 2006/07 to 2010/11

Degree Type	2006/07		2007/08		2008/09		2009/10		2010/11	
	No.	%								
First	33,030	11.7	37,435	12.6	39,345	13.3	42,750	13.7	48,755	14.7
Upper Second	127,685	45.3	136,860	46.0	137,300	46.2	145,535	46.5	154,525	46.7
Total "good" degrees	160,715	57.0	174,295	58.6	176,645	59.5	188,285	60.2	203,280	61.5
Lower Second	82,250	29.2	84,805	28.5	82,655	27.8	86,325	27.6	88,810	26.9
Third / Pass	18,280	6.5	18,980	6.4	18,865	6.4	19,165	6.1	19,585	5.9
Unclassified	20,755	7.4	19,075	6.4	18,620	6.3	18,845	6.0	18,910	5.7
Total	282,000	100.0	297,235	100.0	296,870	100.0	312,740	100.0	330,715	100.0

Source: Table 6, Higher Education Statistics Agency, Statistical First Release 169, <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2355&Itemid=161> (downloaded July 27, 2012).

line be drawn for first-class degrees? What is the numerical difference between an upper second and a lower second? Does a particular candidate deserve a pass rather than third-class honours? Do extenuating circumstances (e.g. illness or bereavement at exam time) justify deeming a particular candidate’s degree to fall in a higher classification? Several algorithms are typically adopted across UK universities to make such distinctions (Yorke et al., “Some Effects”). Some features of UK higher education are designed to help institutions make these decisions with comparability across the whole system. The external examiner system (see <<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/HowTheSystemWorks/Pages/ExternalExaminers.aspx>>) operates to ensure that multiple examiners, inside and outside the particular university, review the assessed work, the examinations, and the practices that determine degree classification. Degree-subject benchmark standards “define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject” (see <<https://qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>>). Notwithstanding the many structures and practices designed to assure system-wide comparability of standards, research studies demonstrate variation across the system in how degree classification is determined (Yorke et al., “Enigmatic Variations”); this is one reason (see Elton for others) that proposals have been made over the last three decades to replace UK degree classification with another system, perhaps U.S.-style grade point averages and transcripts, or perhaps a portfolio approach.

COMPETITIVE ADMISSIONS TO UK DEGREE COURSES

Students at the final stage of UK secondary school apply to particular universities to study particular degree “courses.” UK university places are allocated via a (largely) system-wide meritocratic sorting exercise that takes place every August. UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) provides a system for UK universities to make conditional offers to candidates, for exam results to be collated and tallied, and for degree course places to be allocated on the basis of either conditional offers being met (matching) or alternative offers being made and accepted for places not automatically filled (clearing). Students are matched with their particular university, first, if it is one of their choices, and, second, if they meet the conditions set for acceptance in an offer from the particular university. By August, students have had to decide which conditional offer they prefer and which they hold in reserve, usually a slightly less demanding conditional offer. Therefore, students who are relatively successful in their exams tend to get their first choice

or second choice, and those who are relatively less successful take their chances scurrying for open spots in “clearing.”

For the UK’s academic high-achievers, GCE A level is the most typical secondary school qualification. Therefore, the currency of admissions offers for most of the UK’s best and brightest students is GCE A-level exam results. While exam results are not the only matters considered in admissions decisions, they weigh very heavily, and, in the upper strata of UK universities at least, conditional offers are framed around A-level exam results. (Scotland has a separate system of exams known as “highers” that serve similar functions for Scottish applicants).

Many degree courses, especially in the more selective universities, require that particular subjects have been studied and a threshold level of exam performance obtained at A level (or its equivalent). In my experience, English undergraduates on any particular degree course have a more homogeneous academic background than their U.S. counterparts. The limited number of subjects studied at A level, the similarity of preparation in many degree subjects, and the comparative narrowness of UK degree course study itself explain part of what I observe, but so does an admissions system that competitively allocates spaces in the UK’s public institutions of higher education to students with comparable exam performance.

Entry standards for UK universities can be compared by calculating average examination results for entering students (one method based on UCAS tariff points is described in *The Complete University Guide*: <<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/key/>>). The entry standards index reflects the actual qualifications of entering students. The typical conditional offer is an indication of the admissions threshold. Universities that frame offers in A-level grades (e.g. A*AA or ABB in Table 4) are, in general, more selective than those that frame offers in UCAS tariff points, e.g., 240 tariff points, that may be obtained from a much wider range of qualifications.

As a generalization, students with the highest A-level results obtain places in universities with the most competitive rankings. Oxford and Cambridge attract the cohort of students with the very best results (see Table 4). Oxbridge is no different from the Ivy League in this sense: recruitment of such a highly qualified cohort with such high expectations and ambitions tends to ensure that honors education will be the norm. The interesting question is where, in the UK university league table, honors education ceases to be the norm but continues to thrive in parts of the curriculum. This question is impossible for me to answer. All I can do is point to some of the features and places that one would need to examine.

Table 4. Extracts from Entry Standards Metrics, *The Complete University Guide, 2013*

University	For the University as a whole		For Economics/Business Studies (single honours)		For History (single honours)	
	League Table Rank	Average Entry Standards (1)	Average Entry Standards (1)	Typical Conditional Offers (2)	Average Entry Standards (1)	Typical Conditional Offers (2)
Cambridge	1	593	613/unlisted	A*AA	577	A*AA
Oxford	2	572	594/unlisted	AAA	560	AAA
Warwick	7	496	551/483	A*AA/AAA	507	AAA
Edinburgh	26	470	469/442	AAA/AAA	448	AAA
Glasgow	18	459	462/436	ABB/ABB	453	ABB
York	8	450	468/388	AAA-AAB/AAB	520	AAA
Nottingham	13	435	484/408	ABB/AAB	452	AAA
Birmingham	23	433	458/424	AAA/AAB	424	AAB
Lincoln	44	315	Unlisted/301	Nr/260 tariff points	305	280 tariff points
Northumbria	57	314	Unlisted/334	Nr/ABB 320 tariff points	338	ABB 320 tariff points
East London	115	195	196/180	240 tariff points	Unlisted	240 tariff points

Notes: “Nr” Not reported. (1) Average Entry Standards are expressed as the average UCAS Tariff points of all new university students under age 21 at the particular university. It is a weighted calculation of A-level grades and other qualifications. See <http://www.ucas.com/students/ucas_tariff/>. In Tariff calculations, GCE A-level exams graded A*, A, B, C, D, E are awarded the following points respectively: 140, 120, 100, 80, 60, and 40. (2) Some universities publicize conditional offers framed around A-level examinations. Others may frame offers in UCAS Tariff points. Equivalent conditional offers will be written for students judged to have equivalent qualifications (for example, IB, Scottish Highers, non-UK exams and grades).

Sources: <<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/frankings>>. Admissions websites for each individual university.

IN SEARCH OF HONORS EDUCATION IN UK UNIVERSITIES

U.S. honors education is directed at our best and brightest students and has an undeniable, functional elitist element to it (Weiner). In general, we choose our honors students from the general population using a screening process or a competitive application process. To a great extent, “best and brightest” is defined in our particular institution’s context, but we do share some expectations about the character and capacity of our students that will tend to apply across the board. Whether we are talking about honors students in public research universities, small liberal arts colleges, or community colleges, we hope that all of our honors students will be able to meet and will choose to meet the challenges of honors education and will achieve levels of academic excellence, engagement, critical thinking, and preparation for the future that go well beyond the average achievements of their college peers. We choose our honors students for their readiness and their eagerness to meet such challenges.

In my experience, UK universities have nothing comparable to a U.S.-style honors program or honors college to offer a more challenging or engaging set of opportunities to a cross-section of the undergraduate population in particular fields or across the board. Once undergraduates have been admitted to particular degree courses, UK universities officially distinguish between students only in outcomes (including exam results and degree classifications), not (or rarely) in opportunities. (Unofficially, of course, instructors know most of their best students, and their interactions with these students may be richer and livelier, with more give and take than the norm.) Admissions materials tend to emphasize general characteristics of degree courses (e.g., opportunities for study abroad, particular topics to be studied, pre-professional preparation) and the general competitiveness of the degree (e.g., the league table rankings, the qualifications of entrants, the competitiveness and quality of graduate placement). In its undergraduate prospectus <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/order/warwick_experience.pdf>, the University of Warwick, for example, emphasizes its status as “a globally connected University” (“every student is an international student”) and its “academic excellence,” “first-class teaching,” and opportunities for “involvement in original research.” The emphasis on a common student experience is reinforced by policies designed to ensure comparability of UK higher education in general, e.g., the external examination system, and to define “threshold” and “typical” standards, e.g., subject benchmark standards. Opportunities for students who want to be more challenged than their peers are not commonly mentioned. Even in a Warwick exception to the

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general rule, prospective business students are told about extracurricular ways, not curricular ways, to enhance learning:

At Warwick there are great opportunities to extend your learning and give you valuable experience, including entering international student competitions, exploring a business project as part of your studies, completing an internship, and joining many entrepreneurial and business-related student societies. Whichever degree course you choose to study, you will leave WBS extremely well prepared for a career in a competitive business environment. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/order/course_directory.pdf>

One has to look harder to find honors education in many UK universities than would be the case in their U.S. counterparts. The clues are evident in some of the general descriptions. From the Warwick undergraduate prospectus again:

As a student at Warwick, you can share in the excitement of carrying out original research along with our academic staff. With our well-established Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme, you can get funding so that you can work as part of a research team, with training and supervision. . . .

[Y]ou may learn through:

- Lectures: the most formal way of teaching a large group of students
- Seminars: a group of around a dozen students meeting with a member of staff to consider a pre-assigned topic
- Tutorials: meetings of individuals or small groups with a tutor to check out how you're progressing or discuss a particular topic in detail
- Laboratory/language classes in specialist facilities
- Performance: Warwick has nationally recognised expertise in using theatrical performance skills to enhance learning
- Independent study: the key element of your transition to university—learning to work either by yourself or as a member of a group

(<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/order/warwick_experience.pdf>, 11, 13)

CONCLUSION

I know now that, as a Harvard undergraduate, I was immersed in honors education and so were all of my peers. I took for granted that I would be challenged in almost every class; I expected to be an engaged participant in well-informed, lively discussion; I expected to do research, to be encouraged to take risks, and to find ways to be creative in and out of class; and I expected to pursue graduate or professional education.

As an undergraduate teacher in one English university of average quality, the honors-caliber student occasionally emerged in classes where the majority of students strived to hit the “typical” benchmarks for subject knowledge and competence. For those occasional students, honors education came in the form of conversation with faculty members and encouragement to go beyond the syllabus and explore interesting areas of study. In contrast, as an undergraduate teacher in another English university of high quality, just shy of Oxbridge selectivity, the honors-caliber students were a recognizable group to be engaged in class discussions, encouraged to pursue essays and research on challenging topics, and enlisted to help motivate and assist others less able. Exceptional performance could be recognized using the open-endedness of assignments and exam questions allied with the open-endedness of the percentage marking scale with a region (70–100) available to denote all measures of excellent and outstanding.

As an administrator of undergraduates in highly selective U.S. university programs, I know that honors education can be found in the UK not only in the places where one would expect to find it, i.e., Oxford. My honors students studying abroad in a range of UK universities—admittedly in the top third of most UK league tables—find the challenges and supports equivalent to honors education in some but not all aspects of their experience. Just the fact that a course (“module”) is part of an “honours” degree (“course”) does not mean that it is necessarily honors education.

The secret for those of us looking for honors education in UK universities is to know how to look beneath the label “honours” and the various surface descriptions for its hallmarks: small class discussion, challenging assignments, room to explore beyond the “threshold” and “typical,” emphasis on research, and appreciation for originality, creativity, and unconventionality, all of which are there in most UK universities if one knows how to look for them. To understand UK honours, one has to be able to locate the challenges for the very best students and the support that facilitates student success in meeting the challenges. That’s where one finds honors education in UK universities.

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