# University rankings highlight financial and experience disparities amid rising fees



The Daily Mail has published its third annual University Guide, a comprehensive ranking tool designed to place prospective students at the centre of the university selection process. This guide increasingly focuses on students’ actual experience and outcomes, emphasising that university is often the first major financial decision made in adulthood, impacting not only students but also their families. With tuition fees having recently risen for the first time since 2017—adding £855 to the total cost of a degree—students seeking a typical three-year course now face fees amounting to £28,605. Furthermore, graduates in England are leaving university with an average debt of £53,000, a figure that could rise when combined with living costs, which the Higher Education Policy Institute estimates could add an additional £46,000 over three years. This financial burden often means students take on significant part-time work, while families supporting multiple university-going children may need to budget upwards of £138,000.

Against this backdrop of financial challenges, the university sector’s fragile economic condition has created a competitive environment for student recruitment. Nearly three-quarters of institutions are expected to operate at a deficit by the 2025-26 academic year, spurring many universities to widen their domestic intake amid a decline in international student numbers. The latest admissions data reveals a record 439,180 students were accepted last A-level results day, with the most selective universities markedly increasing their intake by 7.2% year-on-year, while the lowest-tariff institutions saw smaller growth. This dynamic has seen universities, some of which previously avoided Clearing, increasingly embrace it as a critical recruitment strategy, offering places even to students who narrowly missed initial entry requirements.

The Daily Mail’s guide relies on twelve performance indicators for its institutional rankings, including teaching quality, student support, and overall student experience, drawn notably from the National Student Survey (NSS), which gathers the opinions of over 350,000 final-year students. Graduate success measures such as employment in high-skilled roles, starting salaries, and career trajectory 15 months post-graduation also contribute. Social inclusion is another critical metric, measured through the proportion of first-generation university students. Research-led criteria, including research quality and income, academic performance, and student retention rates, round out the evaluation, making this the most multifaceted university assessment in the UK. Accompanying the guide is an online University Finder tool, which allows prospective students to filter universities by factors they consider important, from location and course reputation to accommodation costs and entry standards.

While no institution dominates every category, Imperial College London retains the top spot in overall rankings for a third consecutive year. Other large universities such as Edinburgh, Manchester, and Leeds have climbed into the top 20, each showing improvements in student satisfaction. Initiatives like Manchester’s Cosy Campus and Leeds’s student-led ‘quick win’ projects demonstrate efforts to enhance the campus experience. Smaller institutions, too, have excelled, with Lincoln Bishop scoring highest in student support and teaching excellence metrics, underscoring that some students prioritise a more personalised university experience. The University of Strathclyde, named University of the Year, exemplifies a balanced approach, combining strong entrepreneurial education, innovation, and a commitment to widening access for disadvantaged communities, all while maintaining high entry standards.

In parallel with these rankings, recent government policy developments add important context for prospective students. For the 2025/26 academic year, tuition fees in England will rise by 3.1%, increasing the maximum cap to £9,535 per year—an adjustment reflecting inflationary pressures and the sector’s financial challenges. This will be the first tuition fee increase in eight years, applying to both new and continuing students. According to government publications and media reports, the rise is intended to sustain university funding amid warnings that inflation had eroded the real value of fees, placing institutions under financial strain. Tuition fees remain capped, with loans available to cover these costs alongside maintenance loans based on individual living circumstances. Graduates begin repayments once earning £25,000 per year or more.

Together, the Daily Mail’s guide and recent tuition fee developments present a nuanced but clear message: selecting the right university is critical, not only for academic and career aspirations but also because of the significant financial commitment involved. Students and families are urged to research carefully, considering both the quality of education and the affordability of their chosen institution. While university remains a potentially transformative experience, understanding the practical and economic realities has never been more important.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying-for-university/student-loans-and-finance)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying-for-university/student-loans-and-finance)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tuition-fees-and-student-support-2025-to-2026-academic-year/changes-to-tuition-fees-2025-to-2026-academic-year), [[3]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy0gjyj4979o), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/nov/04/university-fees-in-england-to-rise-next-autumn-for-first-time-in-eight-years), [[5]](https://www.itv.com/news/2024-11-04/university-tuition-fees-set-to-rise-by-285-for-first-time-in-eight-years), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/nov/08/university-tuition-fees-england-who-does-it-affect), [[6]](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying-for-university/student-loans-and-finance)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15065729/Looking-right-course-you-Heres-starter-ten-Universities-desperate-places-pays-pick-wisely-Let-Daily-Mails-definitive-league-table-profiles-online-tools-expert-guide.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tuition-fees-and-student-support-2025-to-2026-academic-year/changes-to-tuition-fees-2025-to-2026-academic-year> - The UK government has announced that for the 2025 to 2026 academic year, maximum tuition fees for undergraduate students in England will increase by 3.1%, reaching £9,535 for standard full-time courses. This adjustment aims to address financial challenges within the university sector. The increase applies to both new and continuing students and is part of broader reforms to ensure the sustainability of higher education funding. Detailed information on the fee structure and eligibility criteria is provided in the official publication.
3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy0gjyj4979o> - In November 2024, the UK government announced an increase in university tuition fees for the 2025/26 academic year. The maximum fee for undergraduate students in England will rise to £9,535, marking the first increase in eight years. This decision follows warnings of a deepening financial crisis in the university sector, where the value of tuition fees has eroded due to inflation. The rise aims to support universities facing financial challenges and will apply to both new and continuing students.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/nov/04/university-fees-in-england-to-rise-next-autumn-for-first-time-in-eight-years> - The UK government has announced an increase in university tuition fees for the 2025/26 academic year, marking the first rise in eight years. The maximum fee for undergraduate students in England will increase to £9,535. This decision comes amid financial challenges faced by universities, with the value of tuition fees having remained capped at £9,250 since 2017. The increase aims to address these financial issues and will apply to both new and continuing students.
5. <https://www.itv.com/news/2024-11-04/university-tuition-fees-set-to-rise-by-285-for-first-time-in-eight-years> - In November 2024, the UK government announced an increase in university tuition fees for the 2025/26 academic year. The maximum fee for undergraduate students in England will rise to £9,535, marking the first increase in eight years. This decision follows warnings of a deepening financial crisis in the university sector, where the value of tuition fees has eroded due to inflation. The rise aims to support universities facing financial challenges and will apply to both new and continuing students.
6. <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying-for-university/student-loans-and-finance> - For the 2025/26 academic year, tuition fees for standard full-time courses in England are capped at £9,535 per year. Students can access loans up to this amount to cover tuition costs. Maintenance loans, which assist with living expenses, are also available, with amounts varying based on living situation and location. Repayments for these loans begin when graduates earn at least £25,000 per year. The guide provides comprehensive information on tuition fees, student loans, and financial support options for prospective students.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/nov/08/university-tuition-fees-england-who-does-it-affect> - The UK government has announced an increase in university tuition fees for the 2025/26 academic year, marking the first rise in eight years. The maximum fee for undergraduate students in England will increase to £9,535. This decision comes amid financial challenges faced by universities, with the value of tuition fees having remained capped at £9,250 since 2017. The increase aims to address these financial issues and will apply to both new and continuing students.