



Universities

Challenged

Whose website is where
in the league table?

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How to create a winning website for your University

The removal of the student numbers cap. Increased course fees. These are just two factors behind a more competitive university battleground.

Winners can enjoy spectacular growth, while conversely, losers face income challenges.

As a result, levels of marketing expenditure are soaring in the HE sector, as undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment become even more important.

Mobile addiction

Against all this, we learn that the eyes of the 16-24 age group are firmly fixed on their smart phones. This mobile addiction has caused 43% of young people to walk into something (ouch!) and 60% to drop a phone on their face while lying down (ouch again!), according to National Awareness Accident Week.

This growing phone fixation has created another challenge. According to our research, many universities are failing to engage with their audience through poor Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). They are simply not fully meeting the needs of search engines such as Google or Bing.

Digital brand values matter

Young people value their own 'digital brand' and what it says about them. They create their profile through likes, follows and shares. They value the opinion of their peers and will be likely to share the site of the universities they're considering. So do website design and content matter? Hell yes.

And it's not just about students

Key influencers – such as parents and teachers – are also now 'digital' by default. Don't believe this? Nissan have found that trips to dealers have fallen from an average of 7 to 1.5 according to their 'Steering a path to the new digital consumer' report. It backs up the belief that our research is done and decision made before we come face to face with a dealer. So why should the HE sector be any different?

Which websites are winning?

Given how important websites are in all our decision making, we decided to find out just how well Britain's universities are adapting to this new landscape. Just how well are they using the digital opportunity to rise up the HE rankings? We've created a table that sorts out the high flyers from the could do betters. And for each individual university, a separate report is available that explains how to improve website visibility to search engines and overall design – a sample report is at the end of this document.

To access the report for your university please contact Alan Thorpe by email at athorpe@brayleino.co.uk or call 07710 404382.

The 2016 university website rankings

We have analysed the website of each of the universities listed in The Complete University Guide against a series of metrics to create our own bespoke benchmark website performance report. Specifically, we looked at **How likely a website is to be found by target audiences using search engines. Factors within our Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) rankings are:**

Authority

1. The authority of a website relates to how relevant and authoritative Google considers it to be for a given search query.
2. Improving authority can require a combination of Search Engine Optimisation strategies. We can audit each site to understand what opportunities exist to make improvements, before putting these into action via an optimisation plan.

Links

1. Link score looks at both the quality as well as the quantity of the inbound links that come into a website. Links mean that other people are rating your content as a good source of expertise and knowledge.
2. Increasing the quality and quantity of inbound links into a website can be achieved via the creation of engaging and informative content that people want to link to, relating to subjects for which you have a particularly compelling offer, or areas of particular importance to your target audience.

3. Bray Leino Yucca's sister agency Speed Communications specialises in content strategies for universities. Kelly Pepworth, Managing Partner, comments: "To appeal to future students, and the people who influence their choice of where to study, a university's online content has to be immediately engaging, relevant, timely and, perhaps most importantly, brave. Great content – written copy, film or photography – provides the opportunity to differentiate you from other universities that may be being considered, so what you say has to be inspiring and unique. Don't be shy; the aim is to demonstrate your personality and why you are the right choice."

Visibility

1. Visibility relates to the organic rankings that a site is achieving. The higher the rankings, the higher the visibility score. This metric includes both desktop and mobile visibility.
2. Rankings are improved via a combination of providing Google with everything they need to understand what a site is about, alongside the production of great content that provides users with the information that they need. Specifically, in relation to mobile visibility, a plan to improve mobile user experience to meet Google's mobile-friendly requirements can deliver significant improvements – which matters hugely when trying to attract a young, HE, audience.

continued overleaf

The 2016 university website rankings

continued

Speed

1. Speed measures the page load times of a website. We've got used to instant results and page loadings. A consequence of this is that tiny delays can see significant audience degradation. Pages with large file sizes can also significantly soak up the often limited data volumes that go with the mobile packages parents buy for their 16-18 year olds.
2. There are many ways that site speed can be improved, such as: optimising large images, enabling compression and compacting HTML code. A site audit will flag areas for improvement and set out an implementation plan to deliver increased performance.

Security

1. This metric indicates whether or not a site is sending only secure indicators to Google – any traces of non-secure attributes will result in a site being classified as insecure.
2. Having a https domain is a big step towards a secure site, but it is still possible to send insecure signals to Google via legacy 302 redirects, tags etc.; work can be done to easily find and correct these instances.

Authority



- Some of the top universities have SEO authority levels to match.
- However, some punch well above their weight (Anglia Ruskin, Salford & Plymouth) and some well below (Durham, Lancaster & Loughborough).

Links



- Only 28% of the university websites analysed had an above average score for the quantity and quality of their inbound links.

Visibility



- 58% of the 126 universities in our study have lower levels of visibility on mobile devices than desktop computers.
- Only 3 of the top 20 ranked universities have mobile visibility levels that match desktop search (Sheffield, Imperial College & Leicester).

Speed



- Speed could be improved for many of the websites we looked at as part of our study
 - 57% had page load times that could hinder organic rankings.

Security



- Only 8% of websites analysed are free from insecure indicators in the eyes of Google.

The top 10 UK universities by Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) ranking

Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
1	Oxford	www.ox.ac.uk	1	2	1
2	Cambridge	www.cam.ac.uk	2	1	-1
3	University College London	www.ucl.ac.uk	3	10	7
4	Manchester	www.manchester.ac.uk	4	25	21
5	Birmingham	www.birmingham.ac.uk	5	15	10
6	Glasgow	www.gla.ac.uk	6	29	23
7	Leeds	www.leeds.ac.uk	7	16	9
8	Kent	www.kent.ac.uk	8	23	15
9	Edinburgh	www.ed.ac.uk	9	19	10
10	Sheffield	www.sheffield.ac.uk	10	27	17

This table shows an alternative top 10 UK universities, ranked by the performance of their website.

With the exceptions of Oxford, Cambridge and University College London, the top 10 CUG ranked universities are being chased down by more digitally savvy competitors. Only one of these top 10 SEO high performers has seen their CUG ranking decline over the last 12 months.

The top 5 Digital Performers versus Complete University Guide (CUG) ranking positions

Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	Positive Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
1	London Metropolitan	www.londonmet.ac.uk	48	127	79
2	Leeds Beckett	www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk	51	114	63
3	Salford	www.salford.ac.uk	41	95	54
4	Anglia Ruskin	www.anglia.ac.uk	57	110	53
5	Plymouth	www.plymouth.ac.uk	38	84	46

This table shows the universities with the most positive SEO ranking versus CUG ranking positions. Over the last year all but one of these universities has seen their CUG ranking improve.

The bottom 5 Digital Performers versus Complete University Guide (CUG) ranking positions

Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	Negative Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
122	Harper Adams	www.harper-adams.ac.uk	121	46	-75
123	St George's, University of London	www.sgul.ac.uk	115	44	-71
124	Royal Holloway, University of London	www.royalholloway.ac.uk	100	37	-63
125	Buckingham	www.buckingham.ac.uk	117	55	-62
126	University for the Creative Arts	www.uca.ac.uk	113	59	-54

This table shows the universities with the biggest negative SEO rankings versus CUG ranking positions. Over the last year three out of the five have seen their CUG rankings decline.

University website Digital Rankings – the complete list

1 of 6

Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
1	Oxford	www.ox.ac.uk	1	2	1
2	Cambridge	www.cam.ac.uk	2	1	-1
3	University College London	www.ucl.ac.uk	3	10	7
4	Manchester	www.manchester.ac.uk	4	25	21
5	Birmingham	www.birmingham.ac.uk	5	15	10
6	Glasgow	www.gla.ac.uk	6	29	23
7	Leeds	www.leeds.ac.uk	7	16	9
8	Kent	www.kent.ac.uk	8	23	15
9	Edinburgh	www.ed.ac.uk	9	19	10
10	Sheffield	www.sheffield.ac.uk	10	27	17
11	Nottingham	www.nottingham.ac.uk	11	21	10
12	Imperial College London	www.imperial.ac.uk	12	4	-8
13	York	www.york.ac.uk	13	20	7
14	London School of Economics	www.lse.ac.uk	14	3	-11
15	King's College London	www.kcl.ac.uk	15	21	6
16	Southampton	www.southampton.ac.uk	16	17	1
17	Bristol	www.bristol.ac.uk	17	24	7
18	Leicester	www.le.ac.uk	18	32	14
19	Exeter	www.exeter.ac.uk	19	13	-6
20	Warwick	www2.warwick.ac.uk	20	8	-12
21	Heriot-Watt	www.hw.ac.uk	21	34	13

University website Digital Rankings

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Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
22	Sussex	www.sussex.ac.uk	22	18	-4
23	Liverpool	www.liv.ac.uk	23	38	15
24	Cardiff	www.cardiff.ac.uk	24	35	11
25	Durham	www.dur.ac.uk	25	6	-19
26	Reading	www.reading.ac.uk	26	27	1
27	Queen Mary, University of London	www.qmul.ac.uk	27	31	4
28	Newcastle	www.ncl.ac.uk	28	25	-3
29	University of the Arts, London	www.arts.ac.uk	29	59	30
30	Bath	www.bath.ac.uk	30	11	-19
31	St Andrews	www.st-andrews.ac.uk	31	5	-26
32	City	www.city.ac.uk	32	40	8
33	Aberdeen	www.abdn.ac.uk	33	42	9
34	Portsmouth	www.port.ac.uk	34	61	27
35	Lancaster	www.lancaster.ac.uk	35	9	-26
36	Goldsmiths, University of London	www.gold.ac.uk	36	51	15
37	Loughborough	www.lboro.ac.uk	37	7	-30
38	Plymouth	www.plymouth.ac.uk	38	84	46
39	Sheffield Hallam	www.shu.ac.uk	39	72	33
40	Dundee	www.dundee.ac.uk	40	35	-5
41	Salford	www.salford.ac.uk	41	95	54
42	Surrey	www.surrey.ac.uk	42	11	-31

University website Digital Rankings

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Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
43	Swansea	www.swansea.ac.uk	43	45	2
44	West of England, Bristol	www.uwe.ac.uk	44	67	23
45	East Anglia	www.uea.ac.uk	45	14	-31
46	Essex	www.essex.ac.uk	46	41	-5
47	Manchester Metropolitan	www2.mmu.ac.uk	47	57	10
48	London Metropolitan	www.londonmet.ac.uk	48	127	79
49	Bangor	www.bangor.ac.uk	49	62	13
50	SOAS, University of London	www.soas.ac.uk	50	43	-7
51	Leeds Beckett	www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk	51	114	63
52	Brunel University London	www.brunel.ac.uk	52	52	0
53	Birmingham City	www.bcu.ac.uk	53	95	42
54	Strathclyde	www.strath.ac.uk	54	48	-6
55	Aberystwyth	www.aber.ac.uk/en	55	87	32
56	Queen's, Belfast	www.qub.ac.uk	56	33	-23
57	Anglia Ruskin	www.anglia.ac.uk	57	110	53
58	Westminster	www.westminster.ac.uk	58	102	44
59	Hertfordshire	www.herts.ac.uk	59	79	20
60	Brighton	www.brighton.ac.uk	60	90	30
61	Aston	www.aston.ac.uk	61	30	-31
62	Stirling	www.stir.ac.uk	62	39	-23
63	Hull	www2.hull.ac.uk	63	68	5

University website Digital Rankings

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Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
64	Nottingham Trent	www.ntu.ac.u	64	63	-1
65	Ulster	www.ulster.ac.uk	65	70	5
66	Bournemouth	www1.bournemouth.ac.uk	66	56	-10
67	Kingston	www.kingston.ac.uk	67	109	42
68	Central Lancashire	www.uclan.ac.uk	68	99	31
69	Coventry	www.coventry.ac.uk	69	50	-19
70	Derby	www.derby.ac.uk	70	91	21
71	Robert Gordon	www.rgu.ac.uk	71	64	-7
72	De Montfort	www.dmu.ac.uk	72	54	-18
73	Keele	www.keele.ac.uk	73	46	-27
74	Huddersfield	www.hud.ac.uk	74	81	7
75	Edinburgh Napier	www.napier.ac.uk	75	92	17
76	Bedfordshire	www.beds.ac.uk	76	120	44
77	Lincoln	www.lincoln.ac.uk	77	49	-28
78	Oxford Brookes	www.brookes.ac.uk	78	65	-13
79	Middlesex	www.mdx.ac.uk	79	78	-1
80	Sunderland	www.sunderland.ac.uk	80	103	23
81	Northampton	www.northampton.ac.uk	81	87	6
82	Liverpool John Moores	www.ljmu.ac.uk	82	74	-8
83	Staffordshire	www.staffs.ac.uk	83	101	18
84	East London	www.uel.ac.uk	84	126	42

University website Digital Rankings

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Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
85	Greenwich	www2.gre.ac.uk	85	98	13
86	London South Bank	www.lsbu.ac.uk	86	115	29
87	Edge Hill	www.edgehill.ac.uk	87	71	-16
88	Bradford	www.bradford.ac.uk	88	53	-35
89	Canterbury Christ Church	www.canterbury.ac.uk	89	112	23
90	Glasgow Caledonian	www.gcu.ac.uk	90	82	18
91	Worcester	www.worcester.ac.uk	91	97	6
92	Roehampton	www.roehampton.ac.uk	92	69	-23
93	Chester	www.chester.ac.uk	93	94	1
94	Gloucestershire	www.glos.ac.uk	94	89	-5
95	Teesside	www.tees.ac.uk	95	107	12
96	Falmouth	www.falmouth.ac.uk	96	58	-38
97	Abertay	www.abertay.ac.uk	97	86	-11
98	South Wales	www.southwales.ac.uk	98	99	1
99	Queen Margaret	www.qmu.ac.uk	99	93	-6
100	Royal Holloway, University of London	www.royalholloway.ac.uk	100	37	-63
101	Northumbria	www.northumbria.ac.uk	101	59	-42
102	Winchester	www.winchester.ac.uk	102	74	-28
103	Cardiff Metropolitan	www.cardiffmet.ac.uk	103	72	-31
104	Bath Spa	www.bathspa.ac.uk	104	76	-28
105	Bolton	www.bolton.ac.uk	105	122	17

University website Digital Rankings

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Position	University	URL	Digital (SEO) Ranking	2017 Complete University Guide (CUG) Ranking	+/- Digital Ranking vs CUG Ranking
106	West London	www.uwl.ac.uk	106	106	0
107	Southampton Solent	www.solent.ac.uk	107	115	8
108	Glyndwr	www.glyndwr.ac.uk	108	125	17
109	Cumbria	www.cumbria.ac.uk	109	121	12
110	York St John	www.yorks.j.ac.uk	110	107	-3
111	Chichester	www.chi.ac.uk	111	80	-31
112	Buckinghamshire New	www.bucks.ac.uk	112	113	1
113	University for the Creative Arts	www.uca.ac.uk	113	59	-54
114	West of Scotland	www.uws.ac.uk	114	110	-4
115	St George's, University of London	www.sgul.ac.uk	115	44	-71
116	Liverpool Hope	www.hope.ac.uk	116	83	-33
117	Buckingham	www.buckingham.ac.uk	117	55	-62
118	Bishop Grosseteste	www.bishopg.ac.uk	118	119	1
119	St Mary's, Twickenham	www.stmarys.ac.uk	119	118	-1
120	Trinity Saint David	www.uwtsd.ac.uk	120	123	3
121	Harper Adams	www.harper-adams.ac.uk	121	46	-75
122	Royal Agricultural University	www.rau.ac.uk	122	103	-19
123	Arts University Bournemouth	aub.ac.uk	123	76	-47
124	St Mark and St John	www.marjon.ac.uk	124	124	0
125	Newman	www.newman.ac.uk	125	117	-8
126	Leeds Trinity	www.leedstrinity.ac.uk	126	103	-23

Sample report for an individual university

Your score card

University name

Website university URL

Authority	70	68	56	45-85
Backlinks	10	39	83	1-486
Visibility	8,002	11,107	61	302-79682
Speed	74	64	34	6-94
Security	No	N/A	N/A	N - 110, Y - 16
Responsive	Yes	N/A	N/A	N - 25, Y - 101

Your visual design score (out of 30)

18/30	20	8-28
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Visual design

3 x 18-year-old students from Winterbourne Academy reviewed and scored every website on their 'first impression' of the visual design of the home page. It takes only 1/10th of a second to form a first impression about a person, and websites are no different. This first impression depends on many factors: structure, colours, spacing, symmetry, amount of text, fonts, and more, which make up the look and feel of the website.

Authority

The authority of a website relates to how relevant and authoritative Google considers it to be for a given search query.

Backlinks

Your backlink score looks at both the quality as well as the quantity of the inbound links that come into a website.

Visibility

Visibility relates to the organic ranking that a site is achieving. The higher the ranking, the higher the visibility score. This metric includes both desktop and mobile visibility.

Speed

Speed measures the page load times of a website. The slower the site speed – the more frustrating it is for the user and more likely they'll go somewhere else.

Security

This metric indicates whether or not a site is sending only secure indicators to Google – any traces of non-secure attributes will result in a site being classified as insecure.

SEO/site performance score

The SEO score is a weighted scoring model built by BLY which takes into account the performance of a given site across the five indicators of Authority, Links, Visibility, Speed and Security.

Our recommendations for X university website:

To improve your overall site and SEO performance an analysis of your on-site (design and UX) and off-site (authority and links) will help to highlight what short and long term strategy is best to implement. In particular, we recommend conducting a backlink audit and competitor inbound link profile analysis. Search engines like Google and Bing still rate quality and relevant inbound links from authoritative 3rd party sites as a main ranking/authority signal.

An SEO audit will not only provide information to support your site, but can also be used to contribute to your overall Marketing and Content Strategy – both on and offline.

About Bray Leino Yucca

Bray Leino Yucca is a leading direct and digital customer engagement agency. We work with several HE institutions across brand design and visual identity; undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment (prospectus design – direct and digital marketing strategy and execution).

HE institutions chose us because of our understanding of their sector allied to a proven ability to deliver effective and measurable marketing strategies.

To access the report for your university please contact Alan Thorpe by email at athorpe@brayleino.co.uk or call 07710 404382.

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