

Geraint Rees

For generations, families choosing universities have relied on a familiar checklist: rankings, reputation and selectivity. The logic was straightforward: if an institution ranked higher, it was assumed to offer better preparation for the future. But the economy that today's students will navigate is different from the one their parents prepared for.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming industries and reshaping the skills people will need. In this new landscape, the real question is no longer "Which university is the best?" but "Which university will prepare me for a future that's still taking shape?" When choosing institutions, rankings appear to offer clarity in a crowded world. But this can be misleading.

Rankings can capture useful information about research strength and reputation, but they don't tell you how students actually learn or how well they adapt once they leave. A university can score highly on both and still run lecture-heavy courses with little room for independent inquiry.

According to the World Economic Forum, nearly 44% of workers' core skills will change by 2027. AI can already analyse datasets in seconds, generate code, summarise documents and automate tasks that once required years of training. But what machines still struggle with are the human skills of curiosity, creativity and judgment; defining new problems, bridging



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# Look beyond rankings

## Three questions student should ask before choosing a university

university rewards questioning or mastery of received wisdom. To assess this, read actual course syllabuses from the department you wish to join. Does the programme require a research project, ideally with an external partner or real-world brief? Are students encouraged to collaborate across fields, rather than remaining confined to a single subject?

**Finally, what surrounds the university?**

Learning does not happen only inside lecture halls but also through engagement with industry, research organisations and communities. This too can be assessed before you apply. Look at whether the university has a technology transfer office with a documented track record of spin-out companies. Check whether faculty members appear on government advisory panels or in policy consultations. Consider the city or re-

gion: a university situated within an active technology or biomedical cluster will routinely connect students to live problems in ways that an isolated campus cannot, regardless of where both rank.

Universities that best prepare students for the future are embedded in vibrant innovation ecosystems: start-ups, research institutes, public agencies, creative industries. These partnerships give students the chance to work on real problems, not hypothetical ones, long before graduation. These experiences also cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit. Entrepreneurial spirit, in this sense, is not about business. It is

an orientation: intellectual ownership rather than deference to authority, comfort with ambiguity rather than dependence on instruction, bias toward action rather than waiting for permission.

### First filter

However, rankings are not worthless. They are a reasonable first filter and a way to identify institutions with research strength and global standing. But they should be the starting point, not the destination. Students who look at what graduates actually do, who read actual syllabi rather than summary descriptions, and who map the ecosystem around a un-

iversity before accepting an offer are better placed before they even arrive.

The task is not to find the institution with the highest rank but to find the environment that will stretch students intellectually, expose them to diverse ways of thinking, and challenge them to engage with real-world issues. In the decades ahead, the universities that matter most will not simply be those with strong reputations but those that prepare students to not only navigate change but to drive it.

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disciplines and making decisions with incomplete information. These depend on how students are educated, not just what they are taught. When evaluating universities today, three questions can help:

**First, what do graduates actually go on to do?** A university's true value is shown not just in the job they land at 21, but who they go on to become. Look beyond the university's own showcased alumni. Search LinkedIn for 10 recent graduates from the specific department or discipline you are considering, not the institution as a whole. Track where they are five years after graduation.

All this information is publicly available. Alumni networks, professional

platforms such as LinkedIn and independent reports on graduate outcomes often reveal more about a university's influence than any marketing brochure. A pattern of adaptive, initiative-driven careers is a stronger signal than a list of famous names from decades past.

**Second, what does the institution believe education is for?** Some universities still treat education as a one-way transfer of knowledge within neatly defined boundaries. Others view it as developing thinkers who can navigate ambiguity, cross-disciplinary borders, and connect ideas. In an AI-driven world, the second approach is far more valuable.

Therefore, consider if a

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