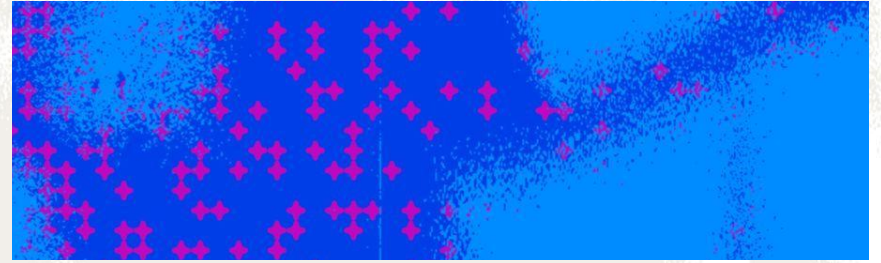


GAIN[®]



Performance

Exchange 2025 **SEO For Universities**

thisisgain.com

A little bit about me



James Vatter

Senior SEO Consultant

10+ years delivering SEO success for major brands in highly competitive sectors

Expertise across complex industries:

- Financial Services
- Travel
- Retail
- Healthcare/Pharmaceutical

MA in Literature and Philosophy - giving me a deep appreciation for the quality of content universities produce

Thrilled to explore how academic institutions can unlock their SEO potential at The Exchange

Why **visibility** matters in higher education

Universities produce world-class research and educational content — but that content is increasingly hard to find.

A growing volume of scholarly output, student interest, and web content has created a **discoverability crisis**.

The pressure is on to make high-value pages more accessible, searchable, and visible.

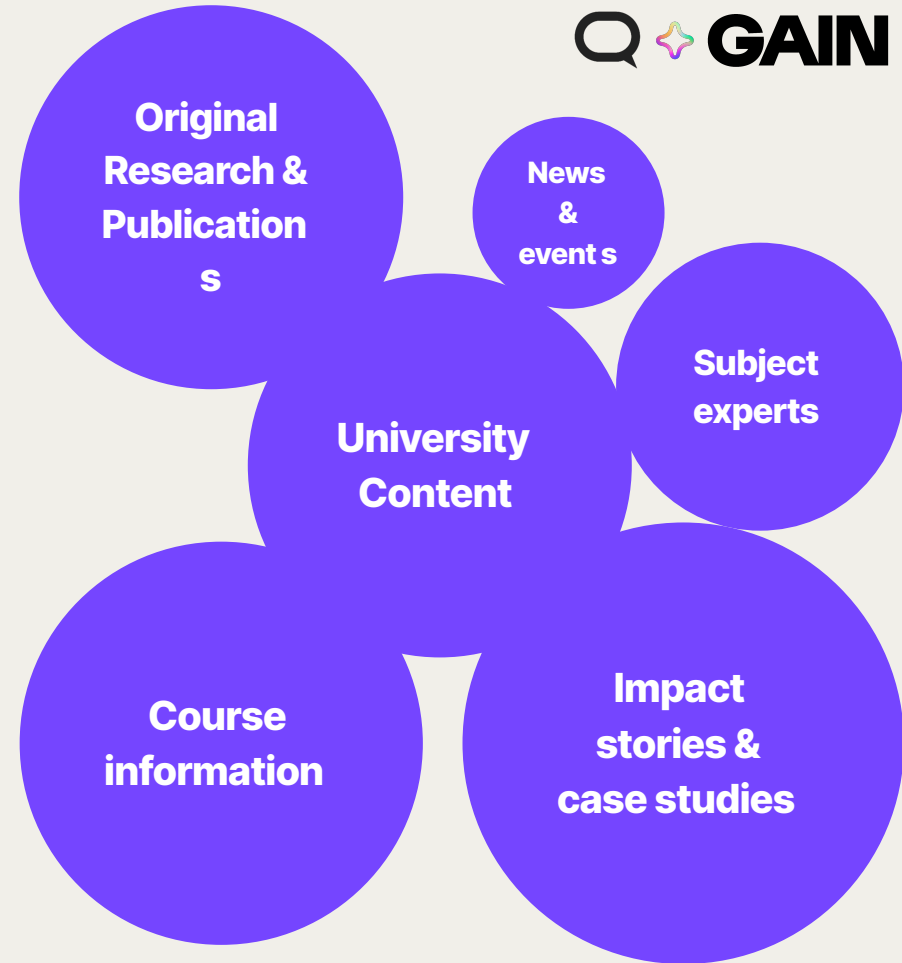
'Organic search brought in
46% of all traffic and drove
the **highest engagement**
(61%) across higher ed
websites.'

Carnegie Higher Ed SEO Benchmarks 2024

01

Strengths

Google will find your content **extremely valuable**



Experience

Subject matter experts
are the foundation of
your institutions

1

Expertise

Real teaching expertise
and research activity

2

Authority

Citations passed to the
domain

Strong external
authority

3

Trustworthines s

Academic rigor and
peer review processes

4

Highly authoritative domains

Domain Authority measures how likely a website is to rank in search results (1-100 scale)

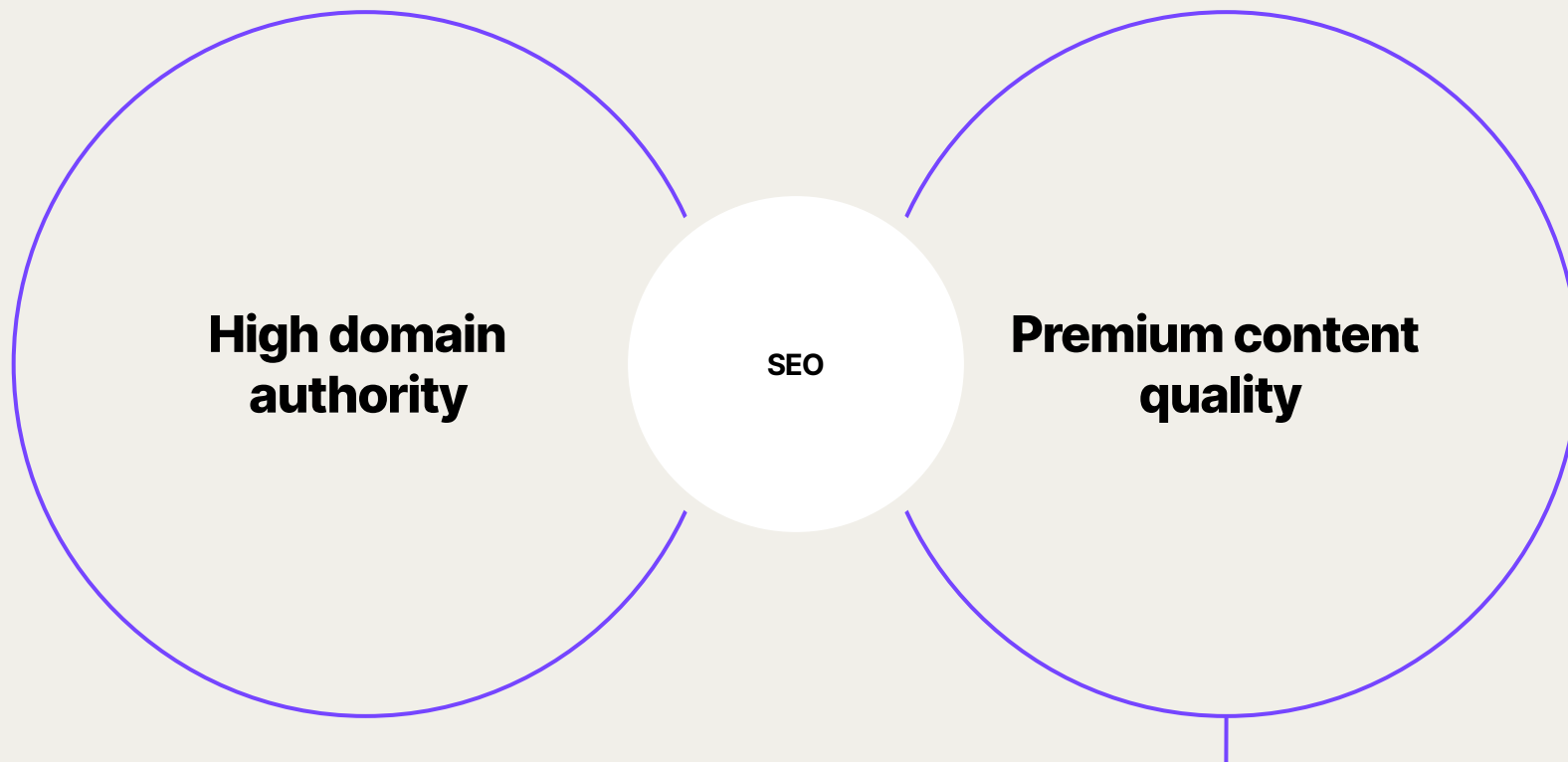
Based on backlink quality, site trust signals, and institutional credibility

Universities compete in the upper end of online authority

Your institutional authority gives every page a significant head start

Industry	Average Domain Rating
Universities	80
Online learning platforms	85
Education publishers	80
Commercial training providers	58
EdTech startups	78
Technology companies	93
Government Websites	85
Major news publications	92
Major corporations	89

**Most websites
spend years trying
to build**
what you already have



How do we get this **seen**?

How can we put this to work?

Two primary approaches

*student recruitment &
research visibility*

02 Student Recruitment

Understanding student search behaviour

Interest

Whether it's 'I want to study Marine Biology' or 'I need a Computer Science masters,' **many prospective students focus on their subject area first, rather than starting with specific institutions.**

Research

When students begin researching their options, **many turn to search engines with subject-focused queries** like 'marine biology degree UK' or 'computer science masters programs.' **This research phase could happen before students have formed preferences for specific universities.**

Discovery

For many students, **your course pages serve as their first impression of your institution.** They evaluate faculty expertise, research facilities, and academic reputation through these subject-specific pages.

Subject searches outperform university-specific searches by almost 10:1

Search volume measures how many times people search for specific terms monthly on Google. **This data reveals where universities should focus their optimisation efforts to capture students during their research phase.**

This pattern holds across all academic disciplines, creating significant opportunities for universities to **capture prospective students through optimised course pages rather than relying solely on brand awareness** and homepage traffic.'

Keyword	Keyword Category	UK Search Volume
digital marketing course	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	7,100
computer science degree	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	3,200
psychology degree	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	3,100
data science course	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	2,900
law degree	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	2,600
finance degree	Subject-First/Discovery Searches	2,400

Keyword Category	Avg. UK Search Volume
Subject-First/Discovery Searches	176
Institution-First/Decision Searches	20

How do we
leverage this?

Research

Audit

Use **Google Search Console** to **understand current performance**. Identify which course pages receive traffic, current keyword rankings, and search positions. Look for **terms with high-volume, but your URL is ranking in position 20+** to find some possible quick wins.

Demand

Research **search volumes for your subject areas** using Google Keyword Planner or another tool. Focus on '[subject] degree', '[subject] masters', and location-specific terms. **Identify high-volume searches where students research academic options.**

Competition

Analyse who ranks for your target keywords. Review competitor content structure, titles, and information provided. Look for **content gaps where competitors aren't addressing student needs**. This reveals opportunities to capture.

Identifying opportunities

The data reveals significant untapped potential: [masters degree] receives 13,000 monthly searches in the UK with the university ranking 13th - just outside page 1.

With targeted optimisation, moving from position 13 to the top 5 could capture thousands of additional prospective students.

Keyword	Volume	Estimated organic traffic	Current ranking position	Current URL
masters degree	13,000	5	13	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/masters/courses
degree courses	1,000	6	14	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/
phd degree	900	0	11	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/phd
bsl course	800	8	14	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/short-courses/language-short-courses/british-sign-language
anthropology degree	600	0	19	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/anthropology-ba
master of business administration	500	5	12	https://www.james-university.ac.uk/study/masters/courses/master-of-business-administration-mba

Analysing existing results

SERP analysis reveals your content requirements

To rank on page 1, you need:

- **Dedicated subject-specific pages**
- **Comprehensive course information**
- **Clear specialisation focus**

Commercial aggregators and specialised competitors will tend to outperform universities without a specific focus in their on-page content.

Search result

> 4 Top ads

1 > Knowledge panel

2 [Master's Study](https://www.northampton.ac.uk/postgraduate/)
<https://www.northampton.ac.uk/postgraduate/> ▼

3 > People also ask

4 [Masters degrees | Prospects.ac.uk](https://www.prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/masters-degrees)
<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/postgraduate-study/masters-degrees> ▼
> 3 Sitelinks

5 [Master's degree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master's_degree)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master's_degree ▼
> 4 Sitelinks

6 [Postgraduate study \(Master's degrees\)](https://www.london.ac.uk/study/courses/postgraduate)
<https://www.london.ac.uk/study/courses/postgraduate> ▼

7 [FindAMasters Degree Worldwide - Postgraduate MSc MA ...](https://www.findamasters.com/)
<https://www.findamasters.com/> ▼
> 3 Sitelinks

8 [Master's Courses in the UK](https://gostudyin.com/study-in-uk/study-options/postgraduate-and-masters-degree)
<https://gostudyin.com/study-in-uk/study-options/postgraduate-and-masters-degree> ▼

9 [Postgraduate Courses | Online and Distance Learning](https://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate)
<https://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate> ▼
> 4 Sitelinks

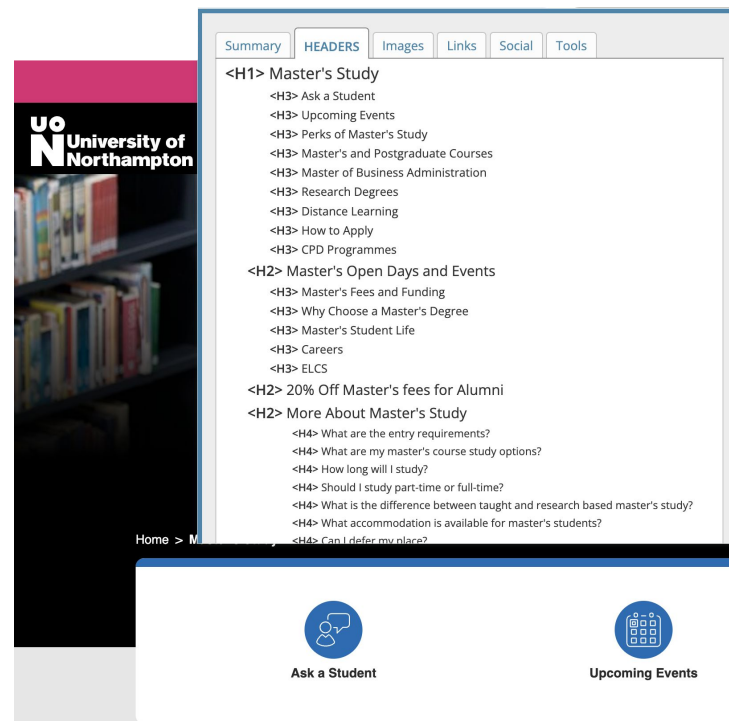
10 [Find 10000+ Masters Worldwide: all MBA, MSc., MA, LLM ...](https://www.mastersportal.com/)
<https://www.mastersportal.com/> ▼
> 4 Sitelinks

Why are these *performing well*?

What makes this page rank:

- **Comprehensive course listings** - simple, well-organised program information
- **Clear navigation structure** - logical menus over flashy design
- **User needs first** - answer 'what's available?' before 'why choose us?'
- **Effective use of keyword volume** - on-page content aligns to search behaviour
- **Structured content** - effective use of Heading tags to give Google more detail about information and hierarchy

Practical changes any university can implement.



Source: <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/postgraduate/>

✦⁺Optimise⁺

Address content gaps

Compare research findings against current content. **Identify high-volume keywords where you have no relevant pages** or where content doesn't match search intent. **Map search demand against content coverage.**

Identify resources

Evaluate requirements for each content gap. Consider faculty expertise available, content creation time, and technical needs. **Balance opportunities against internal capacity** and ongoing maintenance requirements.

Measure the impact

Once you've made changes to your pages, make sure to **measure their impact.** Measuring **Clicks, Impressions and Average Position** in Google Search Console will help you understand organic search performance. Support this with **organic referral traffic from your analytics platform.**

Structure

Based on our SERP analysis, successful course pages use **clear, descriptive page titles that lead with subject terms**.

Organise content to answer student questions first - program details, entry requirements, and career outcomes before institutional information.

Content

Use your top-level masters/degree level pages a hub of information that shows your full postgraduate or subject-area offering with **logical navigation and clear categorisation**.

Include essential information students search for: entry requirements, program duration, career prospects, and application processes.

Link strategically to individual programs and faculty expertise.

Intent

Successful pages answer 'what's available?' before 'why choose us?'

Match the search intent we identified - students researching options, not ready to choose institutions.

Focus content on program information, requirements, and outcomes rather than university selling points.

Use clear headings that mirror common search queries like [masters degree requirements] or [postgraduate course options]

03 Research Visibility

**Universities invest
significantly into
*world-class research***

But much of it is
invisible online

What's causing this?

Academic publishing typically prioritise peer review over public discovery

Faculty profiles often lack search optimisation and strategic content structure

Key research findings get buried in academic jargon and dense PDFs

Limited internal linking between researchers and their expertise areas

As a result

Research struggles to reach its intended broader audience

Research investment doesn't achieve full public engagement potential

So how can we
*improve our research
visibility?*

Expertise

Transform academic CVs into discoverable expertise showcases.

Faculty profiles should lead with **research specialisations** and **current projects** rather than just biographical information.

Use **clear, searchable titles** like 'Climate Change Research Expert' or 'AI and Machine Learning Specialist' that match how media and collaborators actually search.

Include plain-English descriptions of research impact alongside academic credentials to make expertise accessible to broader audiences.

Connections

Strategic internal linking amplifies faculty authority across your website.

Link faculty profiles to **courses they teach, research centers they lead, and recent publications** or media appearances.

Create two-way connections - course pages should highlight teaching faculty, while faculty profiles should showcase their teaching expertise.

This builds topic authority clusters that search engines recognise and prioritise in relevant searches.

Relevance

Regular updates with research updates, conference presentations, and expert commentary keep profiles fresh and relevant.

Link to **recent publications, interviews, and impact stories** to demonstrate ongoing thought leadership and research activity.

Make sure that **all teaching information** is correct each academic year, and **make necessary updates** to both Courses pages and Academic Profiles to reflect any changes.

Faculty profile optimisation *in action*

Home **Profiles** Research units Research Outputs Projects Student theses Datasets



Dr [Name]

Doctor of Philosophy [Institution] Medical School
Member, [Institution] Doctoral College

Email
[Email]@bristol.ac.uk

 Overview

Profile A

Dr [Name]

Senior Lecturer

Business-to-Business Digital Marketing, Programme Leader, Teacher, Researcher, Supervisor, Personal Tutor



My profile Impact Projects Teaching and supervision Research outputs Career history

Biography

I am a Digital Marketing Senior Lecturer, Programme Leader, Unit Leader and Researcher, with over 16 years of knowledge and experience within the Digital Marketing and Communications field. Since 2015, I have taught Digital Marketing to Undergraduate, Postgraduate and Apprenticeship students. I am also a PGT and PGR supervisor with research interests in digital marketing, specifically: B2B digital marketing; trust and ethics in digital marketing practice and; digital platform algorithms and accountability.

I am also the Postgraduate Coordinator for the Marketing, International Business and Tourism department as well as the Deputy Faculty Postgraduate Taught Lead for the Faculty of Business and Law.

Get in touch

 [Email]@mmu.ac.uk

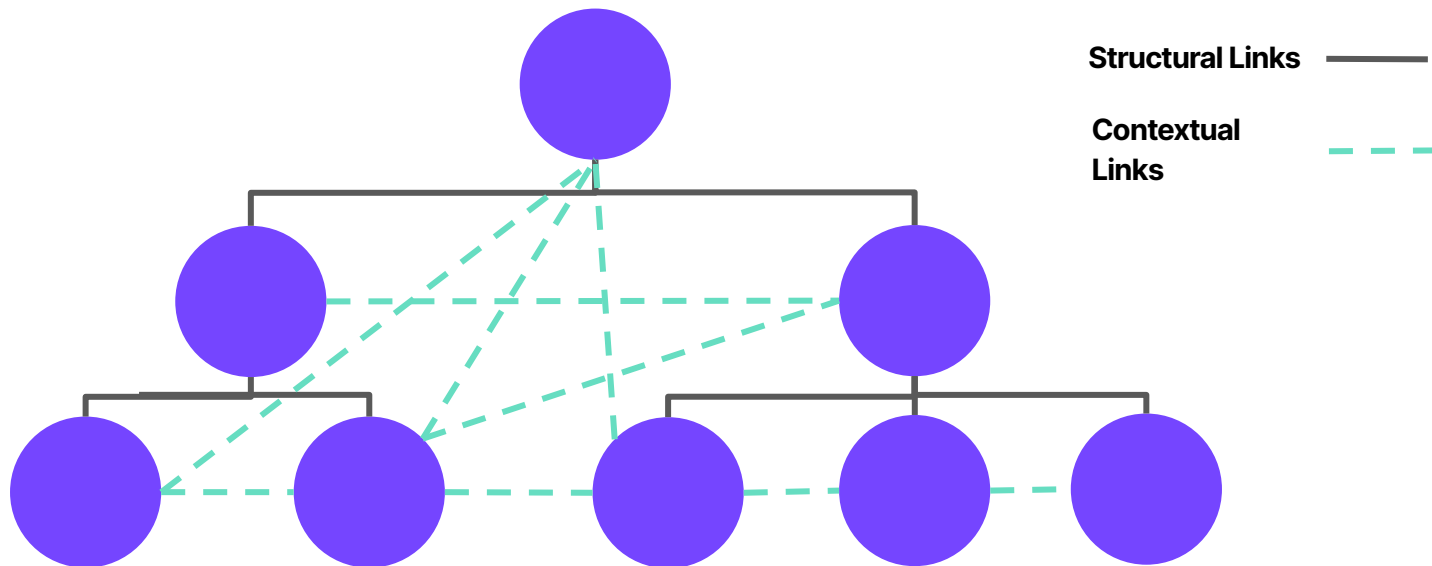
 Business School

Profile B

But profile B
could be better

It's missing one of the most powerful SEO approaches: strategic internal linking.

Internal links connect related pages within your website. Search engines use these connections to understand topic authority and expertise depth.



Strategic internal linking transforms isolated pages into powerful authority networks.

Connect faculty to courses, research to expertise, and programs to people. This creates the comprehensive knowledge web that demonstrates your university's depth and expertise to both search engines and users.

Map

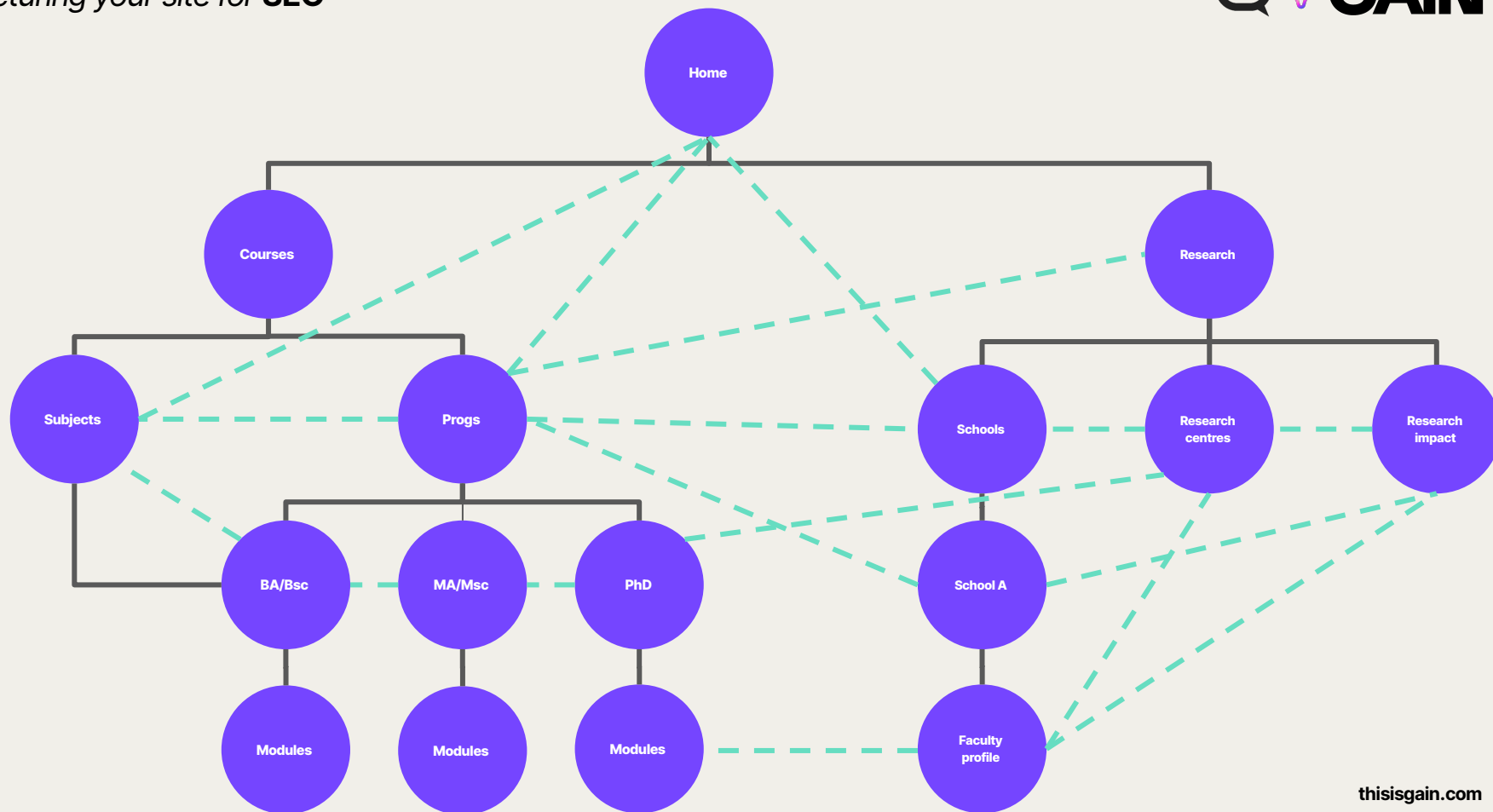
Identify content relationships across your website. Start by listing faculty profiles, course pages, research projects, and news content. Map natural connections - which faculty teach which courses, lead which research, appear in which news stories.

Connect

Create strategic links using descriptive anchor text. Link faculty profiles to courses they teach and research they lead. Connect course pages to relevant faculty and related programs. **Use natural, keyword-rich anchor text** like 'Professor of Marine Biology' rather than 'click here'

Monitor

Regularly audit and update your internal linking structure. Check for broken links quarterly and add new connections as content is created.



04

Summary

The challenge

Universities produce some of the world's best content. But without SEO, that content often goes unseen. If people can't find it, it's impact will be limited

What works

Top-ranking pages reflect how real people search. They answer questions clearly, use smart headings, and connect related topics with internal links.

What can I change?

Start with your page titles, headings, and structure. Link research to teaching. Make it easy to discover your expertise, your people, and your programmes.

What to remember

SEO isn't just technical. It's about access, visibility, and making sure your knowledge reaches the people who need it most.

How to take action right away

You don't necessarily need an SEO or digital marketing agency, you just need to know **what tools can give you the right information.**

Use Google Search Console

This is a free tool that gives you valuable insights on keywords that drive traffic to your site currently.

Start researching keywords

If the university is doing any Pay-Per Click (PPC) advertising, you will have **access to Google Keyword Planner**. Access to this will enable keyword research.

Monitor organic traffic

Find out which platform you use to monitor traffic to your sites and **start measuring and analysing traffic received from Organic/Natural Search**.

Content checklist

Page group	Element	Template	Example
Courses	Course Page Title	[Subject] [Level] Degree [University] [Location]	Psychology Masters Degree University of Manchester UK
Courses	Course Page H1	[Subject] [Level]: [Unique Selling Point]	Psychology Masters: Research-Led Program with Industry Placements
Faculty Profiles	Faculty Title	Dr [Name], [Expertise Area] Expert [University]	Dr Sarah Johnson, Climate Change Research Expert University of Bristol
Faculty Profiles	Faculty H1	[Name] - [Research Focus] [Department]	Dr Sarah Johnson - Climate Change Impact Research Environmental Sciences
Research	Research Title	[Research Topic]: [Key Finding/Benefit] [University]	AI Ethics Research: Building Trustworthy Systems Imperial College
Research	Research H1	[Research Area]: [Real-World Application]	Machine Learning Research: Transforming Healthcare Diagnostics
All	Internal Linking	Use contextual internal links to give Google a clearer picture of context	'Who teaches this course/module etc.' > Faculty profile page
All	Good Anchor Text	Descriptive, keyword-rich phrases	'Professor of Marine Biology,' 'Climate Change Research Team'
All	Avoid Anchor Text	Generic, non-descriptive phrases	'Click here,' 'Read more,' 'Learn about our staff'

If no one can find your content,
it **can't help anyone.**

***Great content deserves to be
discovered.***

GAIN[®]

We operate seamlessly,
to deliver real-world value.

GAIN Conversion

Optimising digital ecosystems, websites and experiences to turn insight into actions that fuel faster growth.

GAIN Creative Studios

We create ideas and content that people care about, to shape brands, drive impact, and fuel purposeful growth.

GAIN Customer Science

Turning customer data into actionable insights, driving smarter decisions, better customer experiences, creating scalable growth.

GAIN Experience

Engaging, scalable user-centered experiences through insight, innovative design, and technology.

GAIN Performance

Performance-led strategies and campaigns delivered with precision execution, to maximise reach, relevance and ROI.

We power some of the
world's most iconic brands



Barbour



BlackRock



FUJIFILM

Google



L'ORÉAL

KFC

Meta



TESCO



Tim Hortons



Thanks



Conversion
Creative Studios
Customer Science
Experience
Performance

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