

Universities spend millions on cleaning, landmark report reveals

4 months ago



A first-of-its-kind report has revealed that UK universities are spending an estimated £300million annually on cleaning academic and residential buildings.

The Cleaning Services Benchmarking Review 2025, produced by the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE) and facilities management experts [LitmusFM](#), offers the most detailed look yet at sector-wide cleaning costs.

With 72% of universities facing a financial deficit by the 2025-26 academic year^[1], and a number of institutions announcing job cuts in recent weeks, the benchmarking report aims to help universities understand how their cleaning operation compares to other establishments, make informed decisions and operate as efficiently as possible.

The report found that universities managing their cleaning in-house spend, on average, £26.67 per square metre (p/m²) on academic buildings and £23.50 p/m² on residential areas.

However, the data reveals a wide disparity in spending. For academic cleaning, four universities fall within the benchmark range, and six come in higher. The highest-spending university is investing £63.93 p/m² – a striking 139% more than the benchmark – equating to over £13.7 million annually.

For residential cleaning, the contrast is even sharper, with the university at the top end spending £81.91 p/m² – 248% more than the benchmark.

Cost is only part of the picture

John Brownless, Chief Commercial Officer at LitmusFM, said: ““Although the total spend is significant, it’s important to consider the scale of university estates. The institutions that participated in our study collectively operate 1,016 academic buildings covering more than 3.8million m², and 1,070 residential buildings with over 57,800 beds and spanning 921,000 m².

“But cost is only one piece of the puzzle. An efficient cleaning operation is influenced by factors including building structure (older universities contend with Grade 1 and Grade 2 listed buildings), frequency of use, workforce deployment, use of technology and robotics, and customer satisfaction. High-pressure periods, such as student check-ins and check-outs, or cleaning specialist academic areas such as research labs, add further complexity.

“With financial pressures mounting, this benchmarking review provides valuable insights. It helps universities benchmark their operations, identify what’s working, and uncover areas for improvement.”

Other key findings

In-House vs Outsourced

- 75% of universities manage cleaning in-house; 25% outsource or use a hybrid model
- 84% of in-house teams are seen as offering value for money, compared to 48% of outsourced services
- Satisfaction levels with the cleaning are far greater in-house as opposed to outsourced (81% vs 46%)

Technology & Digitalisation

- 92% haven’t adopted robotic cleaning tech into their cleaning solutions
- Of those that have, 75% are keen to expand usage
- Only 2% use smart sensor tech, though 34% would like to
- While 37% still audit cleaning on paper, 28% now use digital tools, with 35% using both

- 82% do not have digital time and attendance monitoring in place. Automating data collection would improve accuracy and enhance efficiency through features like real-time tracking, mobile apps, and payroll integration

Productivity

- Two thirds (65%) of cleaning staff work 8-20 hours per week. 12% work 21-25 hours per week, and 21% work 28-35 hours per week
- 43% of cleaning occurs before 7am; only 14% happens in the evening or overnight

People & Wellbeing

- University cleaning staff average 10.96 sick days per year – higher than the average, according to the ONS, of 4.4 days. Five universities reported over 20 sick days per operative
- An average of 10 operatives at each university have had health and safety training – but just 3% have received mental health and first aid training

Pathways to improvement

John Brownless added: “There are some clear ways forward for universities to consider to help streamline their cleaning – both operationally and financially.

“Digitalising audits is a game-changer for universities. Moving away from paper-based systems cuts costs, boosts efficiency, and can improve compliance rates by up to 30% in the first year alone.

“In addition, productivity levels can be improved by reducing the frequency of cleaning in administrative and back-of-house spaces or optimising waste removal in the academic areas or managing peak cleaning periods in the residential spaces.”

Jane Harrison-White, Executive Director at AUDE, said: “We all understand that no activity is off the table as we examine ideas that ensure financial sustainability. This review feels extremely sensible underpinning work in that context. Looking at every contract, every system, every way of working, is just something we are all having to do right now as we make sure we get the best value for every pound spent.”