

Case Study

Cutting Travel Carbon Emissions for a Sustainability-Focused University



Who We Worked With

University of Reading

The Situation

With a world-leading reputation for climate research, the University of Reading has long championed environmental sustainability. It named sustainability as one of the four pillars of its new corporate strategy in 2019, and aims to be a recognised leader in global environmental sustainability and to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

These are bold ambitions, and the University recognised that in order to achieve them, a step change would be required in how the organisation operates. Travel, including business travel and commuting, represented an area the University could target to make significant improvements. The University asked SUMS to help develop a set of principles on which it could build a new Travel Policy as the first step to delivering meaningful change.



“While we’ve made great progress towards our net zero ambitions, both commuting and business travel remains a knotty problem. SUMS helped us find a route through the tangles. Our consultant’s apparently effortless ability to steer us away from the ‘whatifery’ and towards the development of clear ambitions ensured we got to the right destination.”

PROFESSOR MARK FELLOWS

PRO-VICE-CHANCELLOR (ACADEMIC PLANNING AND RESOURCES),
UNIVERSITY OF READING

What Happened

SUMS engaged a wide range of stakeholders from across the University in a series of workshops to explore the challenges and opportunities of travel in the post-pandemic world. While University leaders and the wider community are understandably prioritising environmental sustainability as a strategic imperative, they acknowledge this has to be balanced against the realities of running a multi-site, international organisation with separate campuses across Reading, as well as overseas locations in South Africa and Malaysia.

SUMS brought together research academics with expertise in sustainability, teaching staff responsible for student group travel, and relevant professional services staff with sustainability or

international responsibilities joined in discussions with Students’ Union representatives and HR staff for a series of rich discussions. Care was taken to ensure that a wide range of staff and student lived experiences were represented in the session.

SUMS also undertook a benchmarking exercise with other research intensive, internationally focused institutions and looked at broader good practice – both within and beyond the HE sector – to help inform the discussions.

The stakeholder discussions were used to shape a ‘straw person’ principles framework for consideration and refinement by a Working Group of relevant senior managers – also facilitated by SUMS. A revised draft was then tested with the wider stakeholder group before a final set of principles was agreed.



The Outcome

Demonstrating some examples of excellent practice already, Reading had a comprehensive understanding of the carbon generated by its travel – and at a granular level. While this project covered the full breadth of the University’s travel, the stark reality of the impact of flights on the carbon goal made it the priority issue to be addressed – 90% of the travel carbon emissions were generated by flying. In order to deliver against both carbon- and cost-reduction objectives, it became clear that the University needed to significantly scale back its business travel.

The benchmarking helped identify quick wins, including the need for the University to adopt a Business Travel Hierarchy approach – something increasingly seen across the sector. If travel is necessary, the hierarchy helps travellers to choose more carbon efficient modes.

Recognising the importance of its commitments to net zero carbon, stakeholders across the University chose to be bold in their approach, designing a principle that staff and students should avoid flying to mainland UK and mainland European destinations if travel could be undertaken by train within a 12-hour journey time.

While the fruits of this important work will not be evident for some years to come as the University works towards its reduced carbon targets, the stakeholder group agreed to act as carbon champions across the organisation, using their influence to encourage compliance. In this way, business change can be driven by community action far more effectively than by policy diktat.

The University’s carbon reduction targets may be ambitious, but it’s not just the University’s leadership that are determined to achieve them.

