

Spurring transformation and culture change for a sustainable university

The University of Essex has seen reductions in its carbon emissions over recent years, and is committed to doing more to be an environmentally sustainable institution. The University declared a climate and ecological emergency in 2020, and has an ambitious sustainability agenda with a view to making its core mission – “*Excellence in education*

and research, for the benefit of individuals, communities and society” – a truly sustainable endeavour.

The most challenging elements of this agenda are those which move beyond technical solutions into substantive changes to core business, ways of working and personal behaviours across the

student and staff community. This assignment, delivered in partnership with EAUC, brought together SUMS’ disciplines around sustainability, transformation and change management for recommendations towards making meaningful progress around these critical parts of the sustainability agenda.



“It was great working with the SUMS and EAUC team. They really understood

our challenge and what we were aiming to achieve. Their approach was very thorough from the outset and gave us confidence that they were focused on what we needed; and they had the breadth of expertise in the team to deliver recommendations that would be realistic and achievable in the context of our organisation.”



DAISY MALT
Sustainability Manager,
University of Essex



Our approach

Our approach included building a picture of the University's current status using insights from:

- Workshops with a range of staff groups
- Staff and student surveys
- Review of core documentation around the agenda
- One-to-one and small group discussions with colleagues at the University.

With these insights, our multi-disciplinary team fused expertise in sustainability, transformation and change to develop recommendations for enabling cultural change to move the dial on the most stubborn sustainability challenges. The team used frameworks including the SUMS change maturity model to ensure that recommendations were grounded in the realities of the institution.



"Many people across the University are committed to the principles of sustainability, but two things are particularly important to make a step change. Firstly, sustainability goals need to be explicitly embedded in

everyone's personal targets, or they risk falling behind the pressures to meet other priorities. Secondly, strategic objectives and targets need to be phased carefully so that the community feels the degree of change required is realistic and achievable."



PROFESSOR PAT BAILEY
EAUC - SUMS Associate Consultant



"Sustainability is a big topic and it can feel overwhelming when we are bombarded by huge, intractable problems in the news. It can also be difficult to relate these to our own situations. Understanding what we can do as organisations and in our own roles is helpful in overcoming this. Being clear about roles and contributions helps people understand what will or won't be expected of them. Sustainability teams can provide specialist expertise to work out the solutions to these challenges, but the mission needs to be owned by the whole organisation. Working as a community to chart your journey together is critical to becoming a sustainable institution."



DR THOMAS OWEN-SMITH
SUMS Consulting

The recommendations highlighted three overarching themes:

- **Building alignment:** aligning delivery of sustainability agendas as far as possible to delivery of the institutional strategy

- **Defining the change needed:** being clear about which changes would have the most material benefits, and what degree of the overall goal will need to come from technical interventions, policy changes and individual behaviour change
- **Mobilising the community:** working with the University community to harness energy and build momentum for change.

The outcomes

The University of Essex now has a framework for integrating culture change and change management into its institution-wide mission for becoming a sustainable university.

Building on the insights and recommendations from this work, the University has adapted its engagement and communications approach around sustainability, and has developed an action plan with a detailed agenda for university policy and engagement for culture change across the staff and student bodies, which will guide these activities over the coming years.



“Successful change requires a number of key components: a clear commitment from leaders; an approach that focuses on outcomes; an appropriate level of stakeholder engagement at all levels in the organisation; a simple and consistent description of success; and building skills to embed and maintain the change. Some of these are particularly challenging in an area as complex as sustainability, so the role of culture change and the behavioural dimension need particular focus in the sustainability agenda.”

DR FOLA IKPEHAI
SUMS Consulting

