Touchwork

CASE STUDY

How the University of Reading turned student feedback into a commercial growth strategy

WHEN BETTER STUDENT EXPERIENCE DRIVES BETTER FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Across UK higher education, catering teams are under increasing pressure to generate commercial income while delivering an outstanding student experience. Rising food costs, changing student expectations and increased competition mean universities can no longer rely on traditional dining models.

The University of Reading took a different approach.

Rather than viewing catering as simply a service, the University reimagined it as a strategic part of campus life, creating a flexible meal plan supported by continuous student feedback. The result has been stronger student engagement, more diners, better operational decisions and significant revenue growth.

THE GOAL

Like many UK universities, Reading recognised that students wanted more than a traditional catered hall experience. They were looking for:

- Greater flexibility over where and when they ate
- Better value for money
- Easier budgeting throughout the academic year
- Healthier options and more choice
- A dining experience that reflected modern student lifestyles

At the same time, the catering operation needed to become more commercially sustainable and make better use of its campus facilities.

THE STRATEGY

Reading replaced its traditional dining hall model with the Clever Cuisine Meal Plan, allowing students to use their meal entitlement across multiple cafés, restaurants and retail outlets throughout campus.

Unlike many meal plans, Clever Cuisine wasn't designed simply as a payment mechanism. It was built to encourage students to dine on campus more frequently while giving them genuine flexibility and choice.

The University paired the meal plan with two complementary sources of insight:

- TxtTapScan&Tell for continuous, real-time feedback collected across dining locations.
- The NACUFS Student Satisfaction Survey for annual benchmarking and strategic planning.

Together, these gave the catering team both immediate operational insight and long-term performance data.

"The Clever Cuisine meal plan has been incredibly successful because it gives students genuine flexibility, but listening to feedback is what has allowed us to keep improving it. Every change we make helps create a better experience, and that's what keeps students choosing to eat on campus."

Matt Tebbit, Head of Catering, University of Reading

LISTENING THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

QR codes positioned throughout campus make it easy for students, staff and visitors to leave feedback while their experience is still fresh.

Rather than waiting for annual surveys, managers receive a continuous stream of comments covering:

- Menu variety
- Healthy choices
- Value for money
- Speed of service
- Dietary requirements
- Communication
- The overall dining environment

AI helps identify recurring themes, allowing managers to prioritise improvements and respond quickly before small issues become larger ones.

SMALL CHANGES. BIG RESULTS.

Many of the most impactful improvements have come from relatively simple operational changes.

Student feedback led the University to:

- Expand healthier and high-protein menu options
- Introduce more themed dining events
- Improve allergen, nutritional and sustainability information through Digital Dining
- Offer greater meal personalisation through self-build options
- Improve communication and signage across dining locations

None of these initiatives happened in isolation. They were informed by continuous student feedback and refined over time.

"For me, the value is in the evidence. The feedback shows us not only what's working but where we need to focus next. It's changed how we plan campaigns and communicate improvements because every message is backed by what students are actually telling us. That helps build trust and encourages more students to engage with our Dining Services offer."

Mark Berridge, University of Reading

The University also found that students were far more engaged when they could see their feedback leading to visible improvements; creating a cycle of trust, participation and ongoing engagement.

COMMERCIAL IMPACT

The results extend well beyond improved satisfaction.

Since launching Clever Cuisine, the meal plan has grown from 5% of catering turnover (sales revenue) to more than 50%, becoming the cornerstone of the University's catering strategy.

As participation has increased, the University has experienced:

- Record numbers of meals served
- Increased use of catering outlets across campus
- Higher student engagement with campus dining
- Better utilisation throughout the day and week
- More predictable demand forecasting
- Reduced food waste
- Improved purchasing decisions
- More efficient staffing

5% → 50%+

Meal plan contribution to catering turnover (sales revenue)

Perhaps most importantly, commercial growth has been driven by improvements in the student experience, not discounting or increased pricing.

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CREATING A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

For Reading, feedback isn't an annual exercise.

Real-time insight allows managers to identify trends, implement changes and measure the impact of those decisions throughout the year. Annual benchmarking then validates longer-term progress and helps shape future priorities.

This combination enables the team to make evidence-based decisions with confidence, continually refining both the meal plan and the wider catering operation.

ADVICE FOR OTHER UK UNIVERSITIES

The University of Reading's experience offers an important lesson for institutions looking to grow catering revenue.

A successful meal plan isn't simply about increasing transactions. It's about creating a dining experience students genuinely want to use.

Likewise, collecting feedback only creates value when it leads to action.

By combining continuous operational feedback with strategic benchmarking, universities can make faster decisions, improve the student experience and build stronger commercial performance over time.

The biggest opportunity isn't simply introducing a meal plan. It's creating a feedback-led catering operation where every improvement encourages students to dine on campus more often and where better experiences naturally lead to higher participation, stronger revenue and a more sustainable catering business.

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