



# The ultimate balancing act cutting costs vs driving growth

Part 1: STRATEGY AND TRANSFORMATION



SUMS group  
SPECIALISTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

May 2025



# Part 1: STRATEGY AND TRANSFORMATION

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# Welcome

## The ultimate balancing act

**As universities continue to face significant pressures on a range of fronts, the support they need is more pressing and wide-ranging than ever.**

At SUMS we're rising to that challenge, now working with more universities and on programmes and projects of a greater scale. **In the last five years our membership has more than doubled and our consultancy business has grown significantly.** We're also trusted by national bodies, such as the Office for Students and the Higher Education Authority of Ireland, to carry out sector-wide assignments.

This year we're making it easier for our members to find the best support for their situation by presenting our services within four hubs: **supporting higher education; strategy and transformation; service excellence; and delivering change.**

In keeping with this approach we're sharing our annual report with you through a series of focused instalments, allowing you to engage with specific themes and examples most relevant to your institution's priorities. For each hub you can read about **how we use our unique understanding of the sector today to offer services which support our members to navigate challenges and excel.** Through case-studies and examples, you'll see the difference our consultancy support is already making.

In this section we're focussing on insight from our **strategy and transformation services hub.** We've included an interview with our **Chief Executive Officer, Joel Arber**, to share his thoughts on the sector and SUMS' role in supporting our members through strategic transformation. Plus a thought piece about

options to make that transformation long-lasting from **David Becker, our newly-appointed Chief Operating Officer.**

The services featured here are illustrative of the range we provide to support you, our members – there's plenty more that we can also offer you. **Whatever your challenges and opportunities look like, we're always here for a conversation and to help you find the best way forward together.**

**At SUMS we're proud to be a different kind of consultancy – one that works side-by-side with our community of members, clients and partners to help them be better, more effective organisations.** Whether your institution is facing the perfect storm or the perfect opportunity, you don't have to do it alone.

# In conversation with Joel Arber, SUMS Group CEO

**Joel Arber was appointed SUMS Group Chief Executive Officer in November 2024**, having been Group Managing Director since 2019.

With extensive leadership experience from across commercial, higher education and charity sectors, he has led significant growth of SUMS Consulting. Here he tells us about the challenges and opportunities he sees in the sector now and the exciting ways SUMS can be a partner in the radical change universities need.

## **What's your view of the higher education sector in the UK today?**

People have been talking about the perfect storm in higher education for as long as I've been working in the sector. But the last couple of years in particular have felt more challenging than ever before, with large numbers of universities

now forecasting deficits and making job cuts. We know there are multiple factors contributing to these challenges; fundamentally it comes down to falling income coupled with rising costs. At the same time, there's a tough love message that universities have not traditionally been good at cost control and can be inefficient in the ways they operate.

## **What do you think leaders and institutions need to do now?**

The message from government is that they believe in the value of education and want to help, but that institutions need to do more to help themselves. Senior sector leaders are recognising that they can no longer keep doing the same things and they need to transform. But you can't just cut your way to success. Now is the time to think bigger, look for innovative solutions and explore your options. This can seem overwhelming and difficult to know where to start, but SUMS is here to help.





**“We work in partnership with our members and offer great value for money. This feels particularly important at a time when justifying spend on consultants can be difficult.”**

## **How can SUMS help university leaders to solve the problems they face?**

The day-to-day job of running a university is hard enough without adding strategic transformation work too. We work with our members across a whole range of areas, depending on their specific strategic priorities.

The challenges universities are facing are large and significant so the work to bring about change and efficiency needs to be done at scale too. From one-off workshop facilitation to 600-day transformation programmes, our support is scalable. We are increasingly working with members on cross-university transformation.

## **What makes SUMS the best choice for institutions?**

As a not-for-profit organisation owned by universities we are part of the sector and led by our shared values, not commercial drivers. We work in partnership with our members and offer great value for money. This feels particularly important at a time when justifying spend on consultants can be difficult for university boards and procurement teams.

SUMS membership also offers you a community. The commonality of challenges that universities face means this is a perfect time for being part of a community where you can share best practice, learnings and peer support.

## **What does the future hold?**

I'm excited for the future and the opportunity to diversify the SUMS business for the benefit of our members as their needs grow and evolve. We've already seen fantastic growth in the amount and level of support we're able to offer. We're going to look internationally and at other values-driven sectors to see what we can learn from them. And we want to integrate the work of the SUPC even more into the SUMS Group to support our members with the best possible use of their non-pay spend.

Having led the growth so far, it felt the next natural step to take up this new role and lead the organisation to fulfilling even greater potential to help the HE sector. **We will continue to offer exceptional value for money services through our team of excellent consultants.**

[Speak to our team to learn more about the full range of services we offer](#)



# SUMS' strategy and transformation service hub

Financial challenges are driving universities to be ever more strategic while realising operational efficiencies.

Successful delivery of a new strategy means change: new ways of working, new systems, new processes. This change can be challenging, especially against the background of the current sector context. But there is also the potential for transformation that enables your institution to thrive.

**At SUMS we understand the complexities involved in devising and implementing a university strategy.** It's our first job to make sure our members have the right evidence, diagnostic tools and insights to really understand what's going on and where improvements are needed. We help you to prioritise, to focus on the areas that really matter and to get your organisation working effectively and efficiently towards your goals.

In short, we work with you and your community to make the right changes, in the right way for the best outcomes.

Our community of consultants, practitioners and experts are supporting our members in areas as transformative as:

- designing new operating models which bring their strategic ambitions to reality
- reviewing their non-pay spend and identifying opportunities for cost efficiencies and value for money
- maximising the value of their data to turn it into high quality, actionable insight which ensures they build their plans on a solid platform of evidence
- designing optimum operating models and structures to deliver ways of working and processes that are efficient, effective and sustainable for an uncertain future
- articulating a top-level vision that is grounded in what really matters to them and their community in unpredictable times
- reviewing sustainability activities and engaging stakeholders to develop resilient principles, targets and delivery models
- developing a strategic purpose framework to guide future decision-making that delivers on their ambitions.

Visit our website for more information about all of our services in the strategy and transformation hub including:

- Vision and strategy development
- Operating model design
- Sustainability support
- Business insight and benchmarking
- IT strategy
- Strategic planning

# Make your non-pay spend work harder

Non-pay spend can be overlooked as a source of savings and efficiency for universities.

But according to HESA data, in the year 2022-2023 non-pay spend represented nearly half of universities' expenditure, at 48.6%. So there is a significant opportunity to be smarter about managing spend data in a way that enables decision makers to make informed and timely decisions and promote effective spend behaviours.


These costs can be reduced through more effective budget setting, better demand management and optimising procurement. The goal is to reduce or optimise costs without impacting student experience, teaching or research quality.

**Procurement Value Assessment (PVA)**  
Providing insight, not just data, is critical. Our Procurement Value Assessment (PVA) is supporting institutions to do just that.

Through delivery of the PVA we continue to support institutions to pinpoint and evaluate savings, efficiencies and priorities. We use our expertise in qualitative and quantitative analysis, coupled with sector benchmarking, to paint a picture of your procurement maturity and its impact on your institutional goals. Members are able to make data-driven decisions about potential costs, benefits and implications, even those which were hidden from view at the outset.

## **Lasting impact**

We don't just leave you with the findings; we support you to build a robust action plan that includes proven approaches to develop trust and buy-in from internal stakeholders. That way, our members who undertake a PVA see their procurement strategy make a lasting impact on their institution.



[Speak to our team to see how you could get greater value from your non-pay spend today.](#)

# Example assignments

## Business Systems Review at SRUC

- » SUMS supported SRUC in evaluating their current systems, identifying pain points and developing a set of system user requirements. This involved understanding the future needs of the institution as the basis for exploring whether SRUC should consider reimplementation or replacement of selected business critical systems. Our recommendations provided a solid foundation for the development of a detailed business case and the basis for SRUC to develop its programme planning.

## Target Operating Model, Queen Margaret University

- » As part of a significant transformation and change programme, SUMS worked with QMU to understand how its lean professional services were operating and to identify where there were further efficiencies to be made. Our approach combined an adapted target operating model methodology with a strong focus on change management. The recommendations and action plan proposed how QMU could make best use of existing skills, capabilities and technologies as well as identifying opportunities for tactical investment to realise significant benefits and savings.

## Target Operating Model, Robert Gordon University

- » Our consultants worked as a tag-team to complete a rapid evaluation and redesign of RGU's operating model to inform the future of professional services provision at the university. This involved detailed discussions with Professional Services Directors to explore current services and capabilities and identify opportunities for change. Working closely with senior leadership to align with institutional priorities, our findings formed the basis for a set of evidence-based recommendations for how RGU could develop its services and structures to align with future resourcing.



### The ultimate balancing act



# Exploring your options for positive and long-lasting transformation

If you want to know what challenges the HE sector faces right now, you won't be short of material. Articles, podcasts and social media commentary abound. The storm which the sector needs to navigate shouldn't ever have come to pass - an argument for another day - but it is here and it requires a response.

## Balancing tensions

Universities need to balance the tensions of bills to pay and services to provide. Some services are business or mission-critical, some aren't. Not all universities have a full, accurate and costed picture of all the activities they deliver. The bottom line is that once critical services have been resourced, there's a finite pot of money left. Difficult choices must be made.

Institutions have a raft of measures open to them. The common strand is the need for clear, bold but sensitive leadership. Some universities have no choice but to plan a complete overhaul of how they do business. This involves a fundamental change in how the academic mission and its supporting professional services operate. An entirely different model to remain viable whilst protecting quality.

## Exploring options

There's increasing recognition that academic size and shape is often a driver of inefficiency. So universities are starting to explore their options. Some of these are obvious:

- driving more value out of non-pay
- reducing layers of management hierarchy
- cashing in capacity through leaner processes

But some solutions are more adventurous. The merger of UMIST and the University of Manchester may have left scars on the sector's collective memory but that was twenty years ago. Within the last year we've seen the creation of City St George's, and Writtle University College merged with Anglia Ruskin University to form ARU Writtle.

Other, less common methods of delivery exist too. The London South Bank University Group has taken over local FE colleges to offer students a genuine choice between learning styles. King's College London has agreed to run a medical school at the University of Portsmouth using academic expertise from both institutions. This meets King's College London's long-held ambition to deliver service to society whilst helping the region unblock issues like scarcity of GP services.

David Becker,  
Chief Operating Officer,  
SUMS Group



## Beyond the UK

It can help to turn our attention beyond the UK too. In the US the University of Georgia developed a Shared Services Centre which delivers functional and transactional support across 26 institutions in line with their principle to be more efficient.

And let's not forget the need to drive value out of non-pay expenditure too. The University of California leverages its vast purchasing power to offer strategic sourcing to all its 10 campuses and 5 medical centres. The Procurement Value Assessment delivered by SUMS identifies opportunities to squeeze every penny of value out of non-pay spend before tackling weightier and more complex projects.

Our view is that universities can take control of their own destinies and do much more than simply survive in this new era. By shaking up traditional models, learning from other sectors, opening their doors to innovation and making data-informed decisions, positive and lasting change is possible.

[Speak to our team to see how SUMS Consulting can enhance your University's performance](#)

## Developing a programme for reducing scope 3 carbon emissions

### The situation

Oxford Brookes University wanted to identify the key leverage points for managing scope 3 emissions and develop a framework for reduction, building on its net zero agenda in scopes 1 and 2.

The brief included developing initial targets and an outline timeline for reducing scope 3 emissions. The University was also keen to use the opportunity to build awareness and momentum around the agenda.

### What happened?

The University engaged SUMS, in partnership with EAUC, and our consultants undertook a review of the core documentation around the University's carbon management and sustainability agendas and its existing scope 3 emissions data. They also conducted an engagement exercise of structured interviews with key stakeholders. The team set the

University's current status and approach in context through a comparison with global frameworks and leading practice approaches.

We developed a set of principles, targets and a proposed model for the University to move towards decisive reduction in scope 3. These proposals were tested with the relevant stakeholders to build consensus and buy-in around the feasibility of the approach.

### The difference it made

Our report is being used as a basis for developing a new strategy for reducing carbon emissions.

This will include:

- **embedding scope 3 reduction** across all operational areas
- **integrating the approach** into existing frameworks
- **monitoring, measurement and interim target setting**
- ensuring that **robust governance structures** are in place to oversee successful delivery.



*“This was a key piece of enabling work for Oxford Brookes to further develop and future-proof our Carbon Reduction Strategy. Understanding our scope 3 impacts to develop robust plans and roadmaps will be key to successful delivery. We greatly value the insights and recommendations and learned a great deal during the process. The report will be used as a basis for developing a new strategy, ensuring integration within existing frameworks and the development or enhancement of robust governance structures.”*



**MICHELE MORLEY** Head of Environmental Sustainability  
Oxford Brookes University





## Procurement Value Assessment at the University of Kent

### The situation

The procurement team at Kent had been steadily developing from a tactical function to become more strategic, with a longer term planning approach. They had identified the libraries, journals and publications category as an area of significant spend for the University, in a market undergoing huge changes.

They wanted to:

- assess the **impact** of these market changes
- **benchmark** their activity, level and range of spend against similar institutions
- **understand best practice** approaches to enhance the student experience.

### What happened?

The University asked SUMS Group to carry out a Procurement Value Assessment (PVA) on their spend and activities in this category. The consultant carried out a benchmarking exercise, analysing data and providing a collaborative overview.

Areas covered included supplier delivery models, pricing and student satisfaction. The resulting action plan was delivered to the procurement team and library stakeholders in a sensitive and tailored way.

### The difference it made

Like the rest of the sector, the University of Kent is facing financial pressures. The action plan identified a different, better value model for the delivery of information provided through periodicals, journals and books. This new approach can be applied consistently across the institution.

The PVA has given the team confidence to deliver a changed approach for the supply of information to students, in a way that is also better financially. SUPC recommended that by further investing in developing the procurement team, that target savings could increase by 25% over current savings.



*The PVA was of great value to us. It enabled our team to further identify and signpost significant potential non-pay savings and value opportunities as well as benchmark our performance to our peers. Included were opportunities that could be realised with further investment in the procurement team with a ROI conservatively estimated at 3:1."*



**MARK REED** Assistant Director of Finance (Procurement)  
University of Kent



# Why choose SUMS?

**We don't just understand higher education — we live and breathe it.**

SUMS supports **over 60% of UK universities**, including Cardiff, Nottingham, and Durham, as well as global institutions like Trinity College Dublin and KAUST. **Our unique membership model offers great value-for-money with flexible options.**

SUMS members access our management consultancy services, our expert staff and our extensive knowledge base. Across our core team and our associate pool, **we have a depth and range of knowledge and experience you don't find elsewhere, bringing together sector understanding with cutting edge insight from the commercial consultancy world.**

[Find out more about our members and the benefits they enjoy on our website](#)

This year we've expanded our team to reflect areas of growing focus for our members. We have increased capacity for strategic sustainability consultancy and to support even more robust data insight in our members' decision-making. We've also increased our own operational expertise, to ensure we're in **the best shape possible to continue delivering excellence and value-for-money to our members.**

**Community and shared learning remain central to the SUMS ethos.**

Members engage in our community of practice groups, annual conferences, webinars and workshops. Recent workshop topics have ranged from timetabling software demonstrations to strategic workforce planning and a free salary benchmarking service. Members also have access to the services offered throughout the SUMS Group, including SUPC frameworks and advice.

- **Deep sector knowledge** – our team includes experienced university leaders who have driven transformational change within institutions.
- **The best of both worlds** – we combine hands-on HE experience with commercial expertise, delivering cutting-edge solutions tailored to the sector.
- **Practical, cost-effective solutions** – we provide actionable insights and recommendations, all at **20% lower costs** than commercial consultancies.
- **True partnership** – guiding, challenging and supporting our members every step of the way to co-design sustainable change.
- **A commitment to the sector** – our goal is to maximise value for the whole sector, not profit from it.

The logo for SUMS Consulting, featuring the word "SUMS" in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font above the word "Consulting" in a lighter blue, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a white square background.

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