

Winner: University of Southampton - Uni-link Provides Smart Travel Options

Key Points

- Uni-link connects 14 University sites with each other, and with the city centre and air/ferry/rail links
- Passengers have grown by 30% per annum
- Residents pay for the service through an element included within the Halls fee structure

The University has 5 teaching sites and 9 major halls of residences, which results in staff and students making hundreds of thousands of journeys a year. These have been problematic as bus routes and timings did not align easily with academic timetabling. In 2001 the University established, in partnership with bus operator Minerva Accord, its own service, uni-link. By 2004 uni-link had grown to operate 14 buses, employ 35 staff, and operate 4 routes connecting the 14 sites with each other, the City Centre, and rail, coach, air and ferry interchanges. Services operate from early morning to late evening and remain frequent at weekends. Passenger numbers have increased by 30% per annum - probably faster any other UK bus operator - to reach 1,630,000 in 2003/4.

To increase viability, and to help local communities, the service is open to the public, who account for around 25% of term-time passengers. About 2% of external passengers are elderly people with concession passes whose 30p fare is made up to the full £1 flat fare by the Council. Many mobility impaired people also benefit from an unusual feature of uni-link buses - accessibility and substantial on-board space for wheelchairs. The space also provides a standing area for periods of high demand, and allows students to easily carry shopping to residences.

75% of passengers pay for the service through smart cards – which enables very efficient loading, and therefore high utilisation of buses. (This is also facilitated by separate entrance and exit doors, which are common in London but still rare elsewhere). Most are students who pay for annual smart cards through an average levy of around £200 on their hall fees. This provides around 43% of total uni-link revenues. Other smart card users either pay an annual fee of £220, or put ad hoc credit onto their cards through machines around the university or on the buses themselves. Around 25% of passengers pay cash - amounting to £500,000 in 2003/4 - on boarding.

In 2003/4 the University provided core funding of £200,000. This will halve in 2004/5, and income - which will increase through use of higher capacity buses - should cover all operating costs the following year. Uni-link's benefits include a reduction in staff inter-site travel expenses, greater flexibility in providing campus services, greater student satisfaction and safety (which influence national reputation and therefore future recruitment), and an improved image within the city. The scheme is also the main factor in 1000 less cars being parked by hall residents.

Uni-link is now playing a lead role in a relaunch of Southampton's real time information and bus management system, and in a citywide scheme to develop a single smart card to pay for many transport and other services. It is also extending its routes to serve other local bodies - in 2004 a sixth form college provided financial assistance to enable a new route to be opened to serve both its students, and the university's own needs, and a similar initiative with a local Hospital Trust is planned.

John Waugh, Transport Services Manager, University of Southampton

"Uni-link has succeeded because of the University's start-up support, careful selection and management of a good provider, and close attention to user needs - especially for a frequent and reliable service. In addition costs are low compared to the benefits of student satisfaction, operational efficiency and community reputation we have obtained."

