

Rails To Opportunity: How Rail Connectivity Can Fuel Access and Achievement in Higher Education (HE)



**Prepared for Midlands Connect
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Report Summary

Interviews with academic institutions along the Coventry to Nottingham rail route.

Midlands Connect have submitted a Strategic Outline Business Case to Department for Transport, proposing that the direct rail line between Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham should be reconnected, delivering faster and more frequent trains between the three cities, while removing the need to change train in Nuneaton.

The rail corridor between Coventry, Leicester, Loughborough, and Nottingham is home to a significant number of world-class academic institutions. The connectivity between them having a significant impact on all facets of their operation, from attracting students, to retaining staff and enhancing research opportunities.

To understand the relationship the universities along this corridor have with their fractured rail connection, Midlands Connect have undertaken a series of interviews that paint a picture of how investment in this transport corridor could drive improved operations at the region's academic institutions.

The full report provides a summary of insights, including quotes, gathered from five universities along the Coventry to Nottingham rail corridor. These interviews were undertaken via one to one or small group interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams during January and February 2024.

Over the next few pages, we provide a summary of what universities and students have been telling us.

What did senior university staff say?

Current train reliability, travel time and capacity are having a wider impact on the economy of the region, with a knock-on effect on universities.

Universities highlighted the key role their institutions play in driving economic development in regional areas.

The feeling across the universities is that the inadequate rail links in the Midlands and between Coventry, Leicester, and Nottingham were risking giving the impression to investors of an incoherent economic geography, presenting a challenge to attracting investment.

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I think investment in the rail corridor between Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham would facilitate growth at the university. Without a doubt, it would facilitate the kind of cross university collaborations that are increasingly essential if you're going to attract public funding for research. Improvements to Nottingham's tram network has made it far easier to collaborate with colleagues at the other local university in the City of Nottingham.” (William Rossiter, Nottingham Trent University)

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Leicester and Coventry are the two largest cities in Europe that are not directly connected by a rail service. We've got an economic geography that just doesn't function effectively because of our, basically broken transport links” (William Wells, University of Leicester)

Poor connectivity in the region is impacting on universities being able to attract a pool of staff from the wider region.

With many universities in the region, along both this rail corridor and into the West Midlands, there is a lot of competition to attract the best staff.

Highlighted from this research was the nature of changing working patterns, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. With an increase in remote working making attracting and retaining staff easier, as they are not required to live within a short distance of the university.

Universities highlighted that improved rail connections goes beyond just widening recruitment pools, but also having a positive impact in enhancing staff wellbeing and improving employee retention.

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We tend to operate on quite large catchment areas, particularly for academic staff because of the need to fill roles that are very specialized. I would argue for universities, intra and interregional transport connectivity is more important than the average employer.” (William Rossiter, Nottingham Trent University)

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Anything that reduces that travel time and makes it easier for staff to get here would be good for wellbeing of the faculty.” (Stephanie Whitehead, University of Warwick).

Better public transport in the region, including better rail links between regional cities would help universities meet their sustainability objectives.

All the universities interviewed had set sustainability targets and emphasised the importance of improved public transport options in achieving them.

The universities spoke of policies used to promote sustainable modes of transport but highlighted that if the options and infrastructure is poor, there is only so much they can do to incentivise people.

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Staff and student travel accounts for 1/3 of our emissions. If we can't get more of our staff and students out of cars, then we're never going to be able to address that.” (Stephanie Whitehead, University of Warwick)

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I think from a staff point of view, the increased frequency and speed of the service between Coventry and Nottingham would make the train a more attractive option, if they live relatively close to the train station.” (Sarah Hannaford, Loughborough University)

Connectivity improvements across this network enhance research and innovation programs across academic institutions.

Knowledge exchange and collaboration, both with industry, but also with other universities is a key element of the relationship between the academic institutions interviewed.

Universities felt that while more research is taking place virtually, there is still a significant need for travelling between universities and to key third sector partners in other cities. For many post-graduate students, the train is the only option to make these journeys.

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We are doing a lot more online these days, like all universities. But there's still all sorts of research group meetings, collaboration and conferences that require both staff and students to move between cities, including Coventry, Leicester, and Nottingham.” (Stephanie Whitehead, University of Warwick)

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Academic and economic productivity would improve considerably if there were improved commuting options in the region.

Alongside interviews with academic institutions across the region, Midlands Connect have also conducted a survey with students in Coventry, Leicester, Loughborough, and Nottingham.

The full report includes the results which enable us to understand the relationship students at these universities have with the local rail line and how a reconnected rail line at Nuneaton, with faster and more frequent trains, would impact their university experience. One of the results from the survey found that over 72% of students were either very likely or somewhat likely to travel by rail more if local services were improved.

Conclusions

The universities felt that the east to west rail links in the Midlands, particularly along the Coventry, Leicester, Nottingham corridor are inadequate and presenting a challenge for both the universities, and the wider region.

Local rail connections are a clear consideration of students, whether choosing to move or to commute, when determining university options. However, discussions with the academic institutions along the Coventry, Leicester, Nottingham corridor have indicated that the importance of rail connectivity to their operations goes far beyond this.

Reconnecting the rail line at Nuneaton, allowing for faster and more frequent services between Coventry, Leicester, and Nottingham, would be a backbone for growth in the Midlands. With the investment supporting our region's universities to flourish, while allowing them to drive our local economy most effectively.