Fit, healthy and sustainable

Cycling is a silver bullet for sustainability but needs aggressive promotion, says Steve Edgell

John F Kennedy once said: “Nothing compares to the simple pleasure of riding a bike.” Beyond being an enjoyable pastime, cycling is increasingly viewed as a sustainability strategy for universities that want fit, healthy and productive employees and students while reducing their impact on local environments.

The University of Reading knows it. Cycling is a key element of Reading’s sustainability drive – its campus can park 3,600 bicycles – and the Telegraph ranked it one of the UK’s most cycle-friendly universities. It’s also among the top five universities in England for carbon reduction: according to consultancy BetteGreen, it slashed emissions by 51% between 2005 and 2016.

As higher education institutions strive to meet or exceed HEFCE carbon reduction targets by 2020, promoting walking and cycling seems an obvious step. But, even at Reading University where it’s easy to be a cyclist, the numbers of staff and students cycling are not growing.

Why? For active travel to prevail, there needs to be a happy marriage between infrastructure and culture.

Cheap, green and healthy
Cycling should be the easiest sell on the planet. It’s cheap, green, healthy and leads to a more pleasant environment. But, unlike in Germany and Holland, cycling just isn’t in our national psyche.

Here in the UK, hopping on a bicycle is rarely even an afterthought when we plan journeys to the shops or commute to work. In fact, just 2% of journeys in the UK are made on bicycles.

Cambridge is an anomaly. It has a long-standing love affair with cycling. A quarter of residents bike to work along its 80 miles of cycle lanes and enjoy ample parking. Many students coming to the city to study adopt the cycling culture, biking to lectures and seminars. It happens because, in Cambridge, cycling is cultural. Plus, the university makes it hard to be a motorist: it does not allow students to have cars within a 10-mile radius of the university.

Raising awareness
Beyond Cambridge, UK employees and students need extra encouragement to make bicycles their first choice mode of transport. They need to be reminded, regularly and eye-catchingly, that it’s a viable option.

This requires far more than a ‘cycling’ page on the university website. On-campus advertising, social media campaigns and internal communications should be used to flag the excellent perks and facilities for cyclists that many universities are investing in – be it low-cost bike-share schemes, indoor cycle parking, free bike pumps, showers, lockers and drying facilities, or printed maps showing quiet routes around the city and between university buildings. Dozens of universities such as Nottingham, Essex and Kent also offer regular ‘Dr Bike’ services with free bike maintenance and minor repairs. But how many students and staff are aware these exist and how often are they reminded?

Get motivated
A Transport for London survey found that cycle to work schemes (46%) and carpooling (41%) are the best motivators to get more people pedaling to work. As well as being offered the cycle to work scheme, which would deliver staff huge savings on bikes and commuting accessories, the faculty could be rewarded for miles cycled. Note that this is usually more successful when departments and teams are competing against one another for internal accolades.

Provisions and facilities for enabling cycling are crucial but so, too, is promoting their existence and rewarding those who help universities reduce their impact on the environment. That’s why a good sustainability strategy will include tactics for publicising such opportunities because cycling propitiates cycling.

Universities are working hard to deliver a good experience for cyclists but they must go a step further to make cycling part of the cultural fabric or risk undermining all their good work.

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