

Chancellor's Commission Student Essay Competition

Supporting, Inspiring and Engaging a Region

By Luke Blackburn

Introduction

Warwick University was founded in 1965. Now, 50 years later, a special *Chancellor's Commission* has been set up to reflect on the original vision of the University, of forging academic links with business and industry, and producing recommendations to guide the University over the next 50 years.

The Commission has opened a student essay competition to stimulate stakeholder involvement. Students are tasked with considering Warwick University's scope for *Supporting, Inspiring and Engaging* the region, the nation, and the globe. I decided to enter this competition because I believe I understand its true goal: to receive brilliant and stimulating ideas from a cohort of smart, young people who value intellectual integrity above all else, and who are not beholden to conventional wisdom nor institutional conflicts of interest. For me, this is the essence of the Academy.

I am originally from Solihull and started at Warwick during this fiftieth anniversary year, studying for a PGCE in chemistry. I decided to come to Warwick for two reasons: firstly, because of its sterling reputation; and secondly because of its proximity to my hometown. Here lies the University's first major advantage: its position within the greater Midlands conurbation means it can simultaneously be far enough away from a domestic undergraduate's regional hometown to be a 'new experience' yet close enough for their hometown to be only a short journey away. Undergraduates are to universities what electrons are to atoms- transient, yet defining. If there is one theme to this essay, it is the importance of each undergraduate cohort.

Accordingly, this essay will discuss four intentionally provocative and radical ideas. It is only by pursuing excellence with such self-confidence and single-mindedness that Warwick can continue on the trajectory it was set on 50 years ago.

Proposal 1: Build a dedicated Warwick University Main Campus train station.

Summary: The University can support and engage the region by constructing a purpose-built train station ('Campus' station). This can be to the South of main campus. It would directly connect the University by train with Birmingham New Street, Birmingham International Airport and Station, and Leamington Spa¹.

Rationale: Transport links are vital for any institution. Building this station will better accommodate the transport needs of three key demographics:

1. Students

Students are generally a price sensitive population. Expanding transport, and therefore accommodation options, for students will lead to an expansion in the supply of viable accommodation. Journeys to and from current student accommodation centres would be shorter and easier; and more towns and villages would be reachable.

Moreover, students who travel long distances to get to Warwick, such as home students from outside the region, EU students, or international students, will find it easier to reach the University via hub train stations or Birmingham International Airport.

2. Support staff

Support staff, or those on lower salaries, are generally local residents and therefore are fixed to one geographical area. Commute times within this original area will decrease, while the new area will be greater.

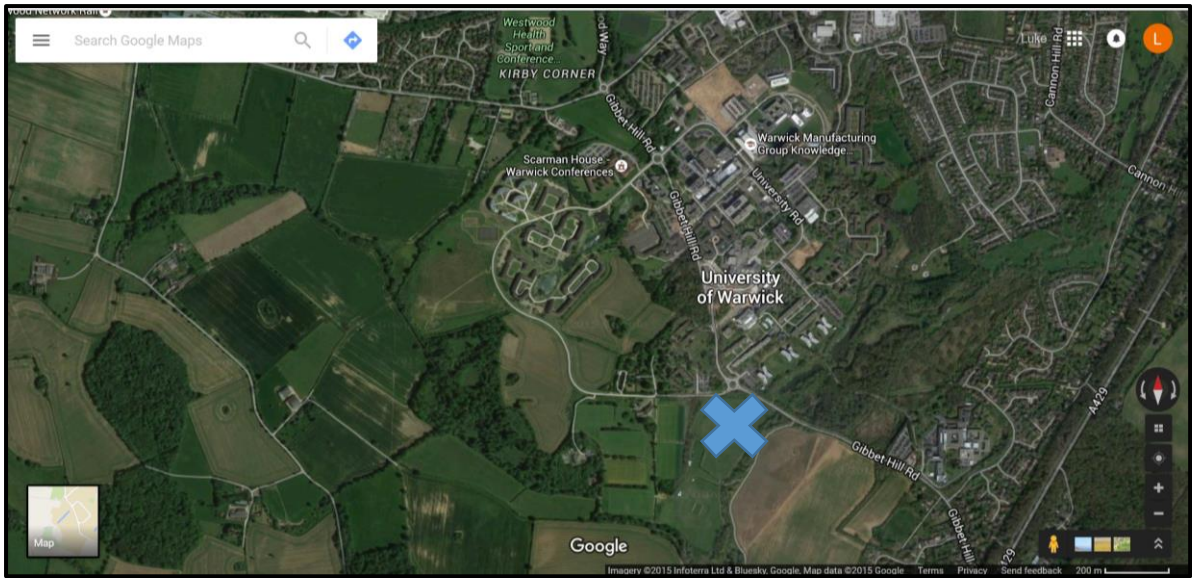
3. Academic staff

Academic staff, or those on higher salaries, generally prioritise the location of accommodation over price or commute time. The commuter belt for the University would expand, attracting academic talent.

Feasibility: As figure Fig. 1 shows, the Campus train station could be built, for example, slightly to the South of the University, off Gibbet Hill Road, at Stoneleigh (coordinates [52.375205, -1.562152](#)).

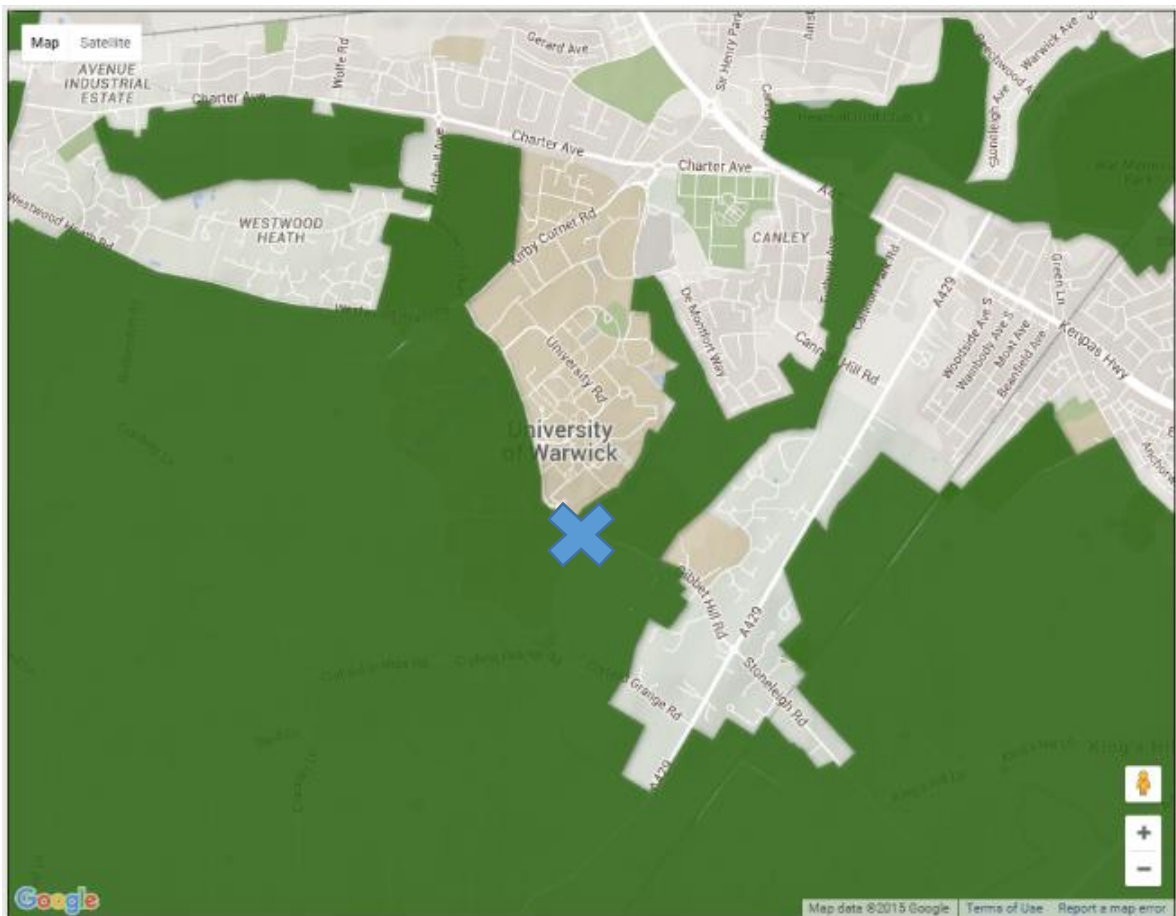
Fig. 1: Map showing the proposed site of Campus station

¹ As well as Kenilworth train station, due to re-open in December 2016.



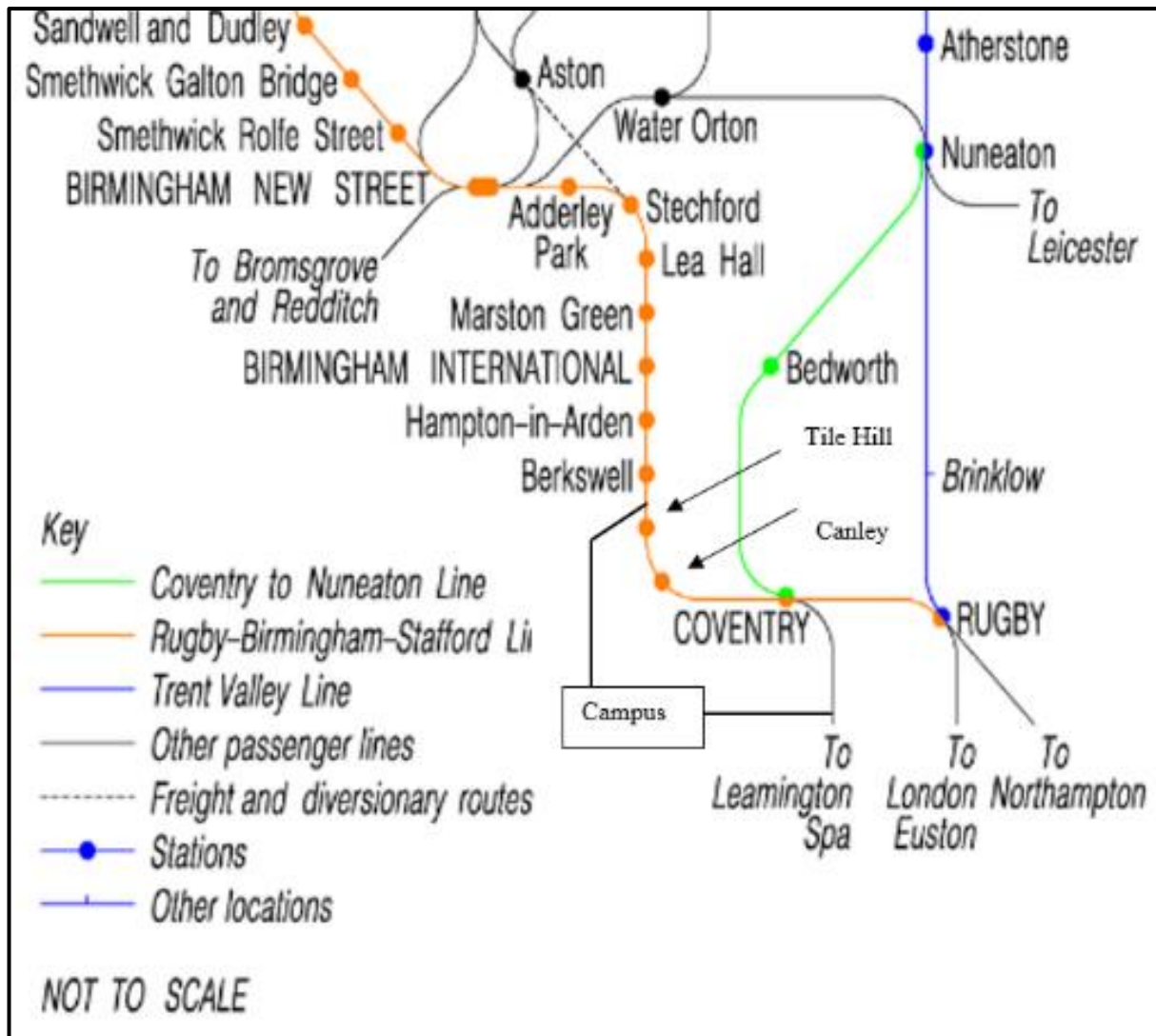
This area is greenbelt land and significant local political obstacles may have to be overcome in order for planning permission to be secured:

Fig. 2: Map showing greenbelt land surrounding the University's main campus



Campus station could connect with the Rugby-Birmingham-Stafford loop of the West Coast Mainline via a junction just after (i.e. South-East of) Berkswell before connecting with the Coventry – Leamington line:

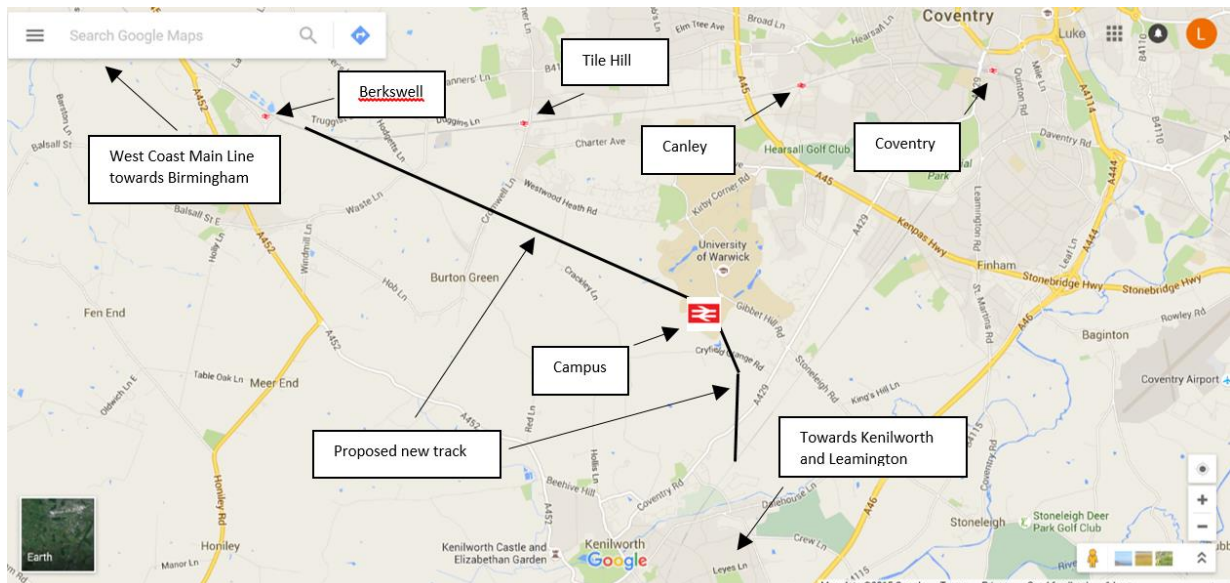
Fig. 3: Diagram showing how Campus station will integrate with the existing rail network²



A 4 mile track extension after Berkswell would lead to journey times between Birmingham New Street and Campus of 20 minutes (minimum), whereas it currently takes at least 50 minutes by train and bus via Coventry station. A 1 mile track extension would connect Campus to the Leamington line, but would not directly connect Campus with Coventry as this demand would continue to be met by recent investment in bus routes:

² This image is in the public domain.

Fig. 4: Map showing how Campus station will integrate with the existing rail network



Regional stakeholders might object to trains *from* Kenilworth bypassing Coventry altogether. It would be possible for trains from Kenilworth to alternate going via Campus and via Coventry before heading towards the Birmingham stations:

Etc - Leamington Spa – Coventry – Canley – Tile Hill – Berkswell - Etc

Alternating with:

Etc - Leamington Spa – Campus – Berkswell – Etc

The combined costs of building the indicated track and station would be approximately £22.5 million³. The University could contribute a large portion of this, investing back into the local region for the benefit of all.

Assessment:

The overheads and political considerations involved in this proposal are significant. Nonetheless, it is hard to see how the University or the city can meet their presumed long-term goal of limiting road traffic increases and the accompanying pollution (as implied in the University’s Master Plan) without such an approach.

³ A new station was built at Southend Airport in 2011 for £12.5 million; train line is estimated to cost £2 million per mile in unpopulated areas. (<http://www.railway-technical.com/finance.shtml>)

Proposal 2: Spearhead a Gifted and Talented programme modelled on the American Advanced Placement (AP) scheme.

Summary: The University can engage and inspire local families and schools by developing an AP accreditation scheme for high attaining sixth form pupils from the region. Pupils would gain university credits for studying undergraduate degree level modules before formal matriculation.

Rationale: In the United States it is possible for high school students to take and earn credit for undergraduate degree level study while still at school. Exams and syllabi are created by College Board, a non-profit organisation. College Board then accredits schools to teach AP courses.

The University can demonstrate its national and international excellence by showing leadership in developing this aspect of higher education. By working closely with schools in the region to set-up a similar system, the University can improve its academic reputation, with the ultimate aim of being deeply involved in a resultant national programme.

Also, by working closely with schools in the area, the University can maintain its position as the best university in the region. The University can use the programme to attract and recruit the highest performing local pupils for each year's undergraduate intake. For example, unconditional university places, scholarships or the prospect of early graduation can be offered.

Feasibility: The US higher education system is significantly different in that students enter when they are 17, generally pursue a broad course of study for the first two years, then declare a major and specialise for the remaining two years. By comparison, a UK student can study Biology, Chemistry and Maths at A-level and go straight into a graduate level qualification such as Medicine.

Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) previously challenged the most able candidates at A-level. These have been phased out and replaced by the A* grade for all subjects but maths. Moreover, the International Baccalaureate (IB) qualification is offered by many UK schools and contains advanced material. However, the University has particular strengths in maths and economics. This suggests that it might be best to start the AP scheme in maths.

Assessment: The University would have to poll educational stakeholders for support and look into the regulatory implications of granting degree level credit. The University would also have to explore which subjects should be

offered. However, the programme could be started in a short amount of time with little investment.

Proposal 3: Make the study of a second language compulsory for all undergraduates

Summary: The University can engage and inspire the international community by requiring all undergraduates to study a foreign language as part of their degree, as a condition for graduating.

Rationale: English might be the world's lingua franca, but the deficiency in the foreign language skills of British graduates is an obstacle to their mobility as a labour force and a brake on the engine of British economic development.

This programme would improve the language skills of undergraduates and make them more employable both in the UK and internationally. It would raise the profile of the university and endow it with a globalist and welcoming image. It would enable the University to be seen as a leader in higher education for the region and the nation.

Feasibility:

A British Council report⁴ concludes, somewhat surprisingly, that the most important languages for British students to be proficient in are, in order:

- a. Spanish
- b. Arabic
- c. French
- d. Mandarin Chinese
- e. German
- f. Portuguese
- g. Italian

All individuals are capable of learning a language. In my opinion, the greatest obstacles are, firstly, the expectations and demands placed on students with regards to learning a second language and, secondly, the difficulty of the language being learnt. Of the seven languages listed above, Arabic and Chinese are renowned for being particularly hard to access, whereas the other five are all Indo-European languages. Moreover, mandating learning a second language and developing a culture where this is the norm can overcome resistance. In

⁴ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/languages-for-the-future-report.pdf>

addition, 'the study of a second language' could incorporate the study of British Sign Language, or the study of the dialects and phonology of English such as International English, Indian English or Basic English.

This programme would possibly result in an influx of foreign language teachers to the region. Significantly, one would expect the employability of the University's graduates to increase, along with the international reputation of the University. The University could also make use of the large Chinese-speaking student population to develop Chinese language skills amongst undergraduates in particular. This programme would also be an international news story.

Assessment:

It would require significant institutional commitment in order for this to be pushed through. Moreover, there is the danger, at least in the short term, of prospective undergraduates being put off from applying to or accepting a position at the University given the language requirement. As such, the programme might have to be phased in gradually, or accompanied by a media and information campaign to win students over.

Proposal 4: Renovate the main campus to become pedestrianised and more aesthetically appealing

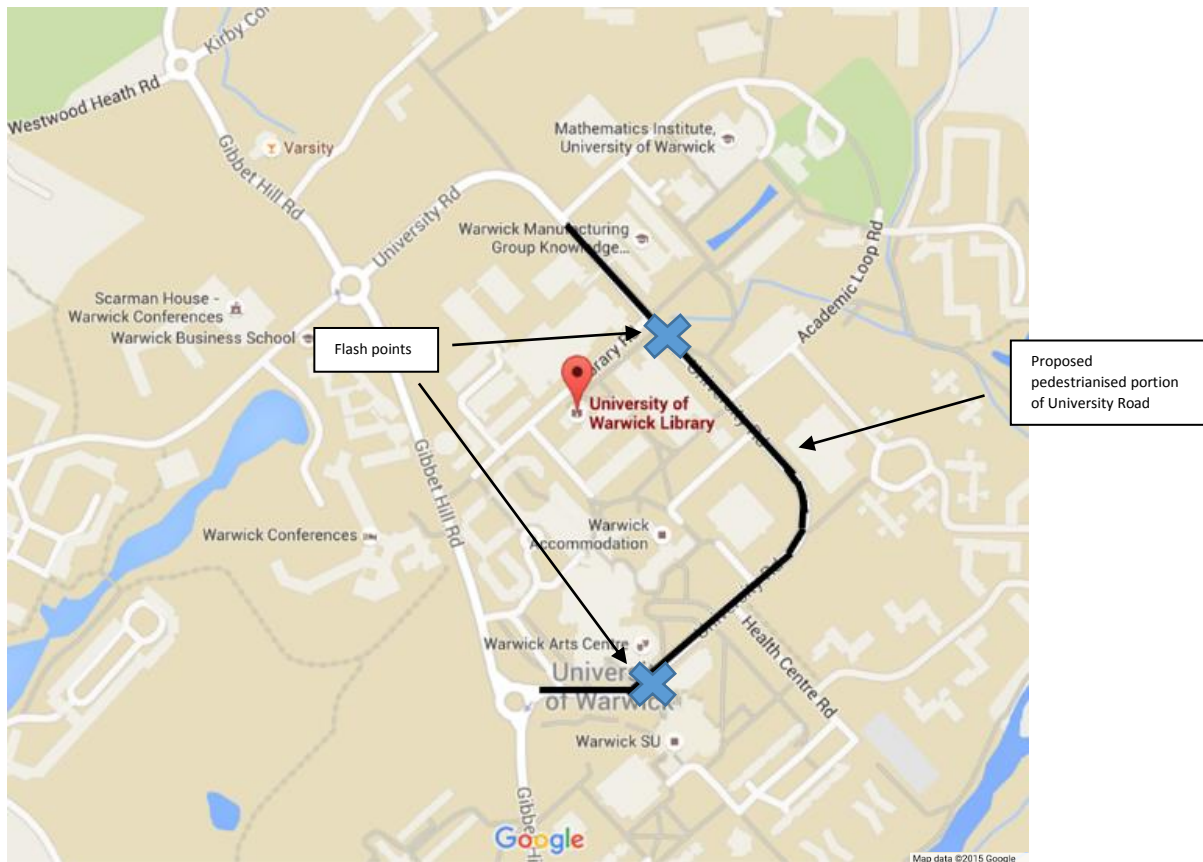
Summary: The University can support and inspire students and the higher education community by pedestrianising large parts of University Road and creating greener, open spaces for students.

Rationale: As the University has grown, it has spilled over into adjoining tracts of land. In particular, core University buildings are now found on both sides of University Road, which itself remains a public road for motor vehicles. As a result, the campus has a road bisecting it. Not only does this make for an unattractive campus, but it is dangerous and inconvenient to have such a large number of students in close proximity to cars and buses.

Particular flash points are the pelican crossing next to Library Road connecting to the mathematics institute, and the (lack of a) road crossing outside Rootes store (Fig. 5). Eventually, a student, employee or member of the public will almost certainly be injured under this arrangement.

University Road can be closed off, pedestrianised, and parts of it converted in grassed areas. Making the campus safer and more attractive will make the

university's offering more appealing. Prospective students will have a better impression of the University from open days.



Feasibility:

Road access to facilities further down University Road, such as the gym, could be secured by making use of smaller roads such as Academic Loop Road. It would be harder, but less important, to retain road access to the medical centre. In any case, pedestrianisation would be carried out while retaining the *possibility* of vehicle access, such as for emergency service vehicles in an emergency.

Also, road modifications have only recently been made to the area outside Rootes, and there might be political sensitivities involved in 'backtracking' on such an investment so soon. It might also be difficult to restrict motor vehicle access to University Road. It would involve Coventry Council's approval. This could be circumvented by proposing a coherent case for pedestrianisation but retaining public right of access.

Conclusion:

Owing to overriding safety considerations, I am convinced that proposal 4 will happen eventually. I believe that proposal 1 should be a major long-term priority of the University in the region, though it would take several years and major institutional commitment to achieve this.

While I believe it merits further investigation, I do not think it is feasible mandate the study of a foreign language without negatively affecting undergraduate applicants in the short term.

Out of the four proposals discussed, I believe that proposal 2, spearheading an AP scheme, is an excellent way to engage and inspire the region.

I would be happy to further investigate and expand upon any of the proposals discussed here, as well as working alongside the Commission as they develop their proposals.