The savings universities are chasing are hiding in their own underutilised buildings

Monday 27 July, 2026

New analysis from the Smart Space Forum shows university teaching space is utilised at levels as low as 10% while one university avoided £5.1m of new construction by using space it already had.

As universities across the UK face mounting financial pressure and race towards net zero, the people who run their campuses are reaching a striking conclusion: much of the money the sector is looking for is already there, it is simply sitting in buildings that stand underused for most of the week. That is the central finding of the **Smart Space Forum**, a group of around twenty university estates and space-planning leaders convened by building intelligence company SmartViz and chaired by former Oxford University Director of Estates, Trevor Payne.

The Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE) states an anecdotal **over-provision of university space by as much as 40%.** SmartViz's own analysis, drawn from billions of real occupancy data points across more than 15 universities, is starker still: teaching spaces, in most universities, are typically utilised at around 20% and for some, **under 10%,** while university offices run at around 25–30% utilisation against 50–60% in the commercial sector.

Yet those same buildings are still cleaned, heated, secured and maintained as if they were full five days a week. **Universities now spend almost £1 billion a year on energy.** SmartViz analysis, undertaken with Cardiff Metropolitan University, indicates that around half of that energy is consumed outside normal operating hours, keeping largely empty buildings running.

A visibility problem, not a space problem

Across most campuses the perception is the opposite, that there is never enough space, and constant pressure to build more. The Forum's argument is that the shortage is one of insight, not bricks. “It is not whether space exists,” the group concludes, “it is whether we know it exists.” The data needed to prove it already sits in timetables, room-booking systems, card access and Wi-Fi, or can be gathered quickly with low-cost ‘peel-and-stick’ sensors.

> "The money we're being asked to find is already there ?it's just sitting in unused estate. If we can evidence that we've got the space we need, we don't need more space, but different types of space to different cohorts." says Trevor Payne, Smart Space Forum Chair and former Director of Estates at the University of Oxford.

> "Every university is on a journey towards better evidence. The goal isn't to wait for perfect data, but to start making better decisions with the evidence that's already available." says Shrikant Sharma, Founder and CEO of SmartViz and Smart Space Forum Provocateur.

Proven in practice

Forum members are already turning this insight into hard savings and lower carbon:

- **Cardiff Metropolitan University** avoided **£5.1m** of new construction by using space it already had. Operational insights were used to reduce gas use by 33%, electricity by 10% and water by 20%, saving a further £1.8 million.
- University of Glasgow split a single 500-seat lecture theatre into two 250-seat rooms. The data showed occupancy topped 250 just twice a year **saving more than £1m** without building anything.
- **Midlothian Council** merged two buildings into one; **Vodafone** saves **$40m** a year across its global portfolio using the same approach.

About the Smart Space Forum

The Smart Space Forum is a select group of estates, space-planning and campus-operations leaders from UK higher education, chaired by Trevor Payne. It meets two to four times a year to share what is working, what is not, and to co-create a better future for university buildings and estates. The next Forum

Media:









Smart Space Forum



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takes place at UHEI in Birmingham on 24 November 2026.

About SmartViz

SmartViz is an operational Intelligence platform that continuously measures how people actually use buildings, turning occupancy and building data into clear, actionable insight. It integrates building management systems, room-booking platforms, energy meters and open IoT sensors into a single live 3D digital twin, a learning model built on more than 17 billion real-world data points. Estates teams can test before they spend
modelling the cost and carbon impact of closing a floor or resizing a room before committing capital, and deploy in hours, not months, using peel-and-stick sensors. SmartViz helps universities, hospitals, councils and global organisations use the space they already have more efficiently.

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