

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON: INTRODUCTION OF AI-ENABLED TILLS ENABLES AN OPERATIONAL AND CULTURAL SHIFT

For the University of Southampton, a leading Russell Group institution with over 24,000 students and around 7,000 staff across six campuses, creating a more agile, efficient and future-ready catering operation had become a clear priority. Within its Catering, Hospitality & Commercial Operations service - Campus Kitchen - the focus was on evolving retail catering to better meet the demands of a complex, high-volume and highly variable trading environment.



For Associate Director Felice Foscheri, the challenge was as much about mindset as it was about systems. “We needed to operate smarter. The model we had was too reliant on labour and didn’t give us the agility we needed.”

Like many university catering operations, the service was facing sustained pressure from rising labour costs, ongoing recruitment challenges and increasing expectations from

students around speed, convenience and value. Peak periods between lectures were placing particular strain on the operation, with queueing becoming a visible and recurring issue for customers.

At the same time, the limitations of existing EPOS systems were becoming increasingly clear. Transaction speeds could slow significantly at busy times, while reporting was often retrospective and fragmented. Although data was available, it required manual

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- Felice Foscheri,
Associate Director - Catering, Hospitality &
Commercial Operations Services.

interpretation and did not provide the immediacy needed to inform real-time decisions. This made it difficult to flex staffing levels, adjust menus or respond dynamically to demand as it happened. As Felice explains, "We had information, but not in a way that allowed us to act quickly or with confidence."

With the service moving into a new phase focused on financial sustainability and a more commercially driven, data-led approach, the need for a change became clear.

The introduction of AI-enabled till systems across the retail catering operation marked that shift. Moving beyond a traditional EPOS upgrade, the University adopted a solution designed to fundamentally improve how the operation functions; combining faster transactions, high-quality real-time data and reduced reliance on manual processes.

A number of alternative systems were explored, but the chosen technology stood out for its ability to deliver both operational efficiency and actionable insight at scale. Crucially, it offered the flexibility to be deployed consistently across a large, multi-site estate while supporting a more streamlined operating model.

Implementation was delivered through a phased rollout, allowing individual sites to transition with minimal disruption. Teams were supported through hands-on training, parallel running during the changeover and clear communication with customers. Early engagement with frontline staff was a key enabler, helping to build confidence and ensure the technology was seen as a practical tool to support service delivery. "It was about helping people understand how this would make their roles easier and more effective," Felice notes.

The impact was immediate. With the first AI-enabled till going live, the operation removed the need for one full-time equivalent role at the point of sale. Importantly, this did not result in redundancies, with that capacity instead redeployed into other areas of the business to strengthen the overall offer.

£300,000

annual fixed cost savings

£16,000+

saved per month through restructuring



Financially, the results have been substantial. Efficiencies linked to management restructuring have delivered savings in excess of £16,000 per month, contributing to an overall reduction in fixed costs of approximately £300,000 per year. These improvements have been achieved alongside an improved flow and reduced pressure during peak periods.

Beyond the financial impact, the introduction of AI-enabled tills has enabled a broader operational and cultural shift. Access to reliable, real-time data has transformed how decisions are made, allowing teams to plan more effectively, respond more quickly and operate with greater confidence. The ability to flex staffing, refine menus and inform pricing decisions more effectively has created a more responsive and adaptive operation. Staff are now able to focus more on customer engagement, food quality and overall service standards.

Support from TUCO played an important role throughout, providing access to procurement frameworks, market insight and sector benchmarking. Engagement with TUCO's wider services - including training and development, regional meetings, conferences, research and the member forum - also supported knowledge sharing and informed decision-making.

Looking ahead, the University is continuing to build on this foundation, using the insight generated through the system to further refine menu design, pricing strategies, staffing models and sustainability initiatives. There is also potential to extend similar technology-enabled approaches across other areas of its commercial operations.

Reflecting on the journey, Felice highlights the importance of clarity and alignment. "Technology should support your strategy, not dictate it," he says. "And bringing people with you is absolutely critical." He adds, "This has fundamentally changed how we operate. We're faster, more informed and far more resilient as a result."

About TUCO

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It provides a platform where members can **Share and celebrate achievements; **Learn** via a range of courses, training and study tours; **Grow** their business through latest market research, trends and analysis; and **Buy** via TUCO's UK compliant frameworks and wide range of suppliers - maximising value through the combined **£160m+** annual spend of TUCO members.**

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