THE LAUNCH OF THE FUTURES ENTREPRENEURSHIP CENTRE

MAKING THE MARK WITH SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

PLYMOUTH GRADUATE GRABS THE SPOTLIGHT WITH PROSTHETIC HAND

THE LORD KESTENBAUM: PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY’S FIRST CHANCELLOR
Welcome to the final edition of CONNECT for 2013, which we’ve held back as long as possible to capture some of the landmark moments that have taken place late in the term.

September is always a highlight in the University’s calendar, launching the academic year as it does with spectacle and celebration – and we look back on a remarkable Graduation through the eyes of one very brave student.

But this year, it’s met its match! October welcomed HRH Prince Andrew The Duke of York onto campus for a tour of some of the facilities working to generate enterprise in the region – and he was wowed by the wave tanks and the work of the Peninsula Growth Acceleration and Investment Network.

There were fireworks in November with the launch of the stunning Futures Entrepreneurship Centre, the presentation of two Social Enterprise Marks – the first to any university anywhere in the world – and the staging of our second graduation ceremony in Hong Kong.

And then in December came the installation of the University’s first Chancellor: The Lord Jonathan Kestenbaum – and we bring you his first interview, in which he sets out his hopes for the future.

Enjoy the issue and have a Happy Christmas.

Andrew Merrington
Editor
The Lord Jonathan Kestenbaum was presented with the University’s new regalia – a silver and gold chain linking elements of the Coat of Arms – at a special ceremony at the Rolle National Building on 5th December.

Addressing an audience of hundreds of people, including staff, students and special guests from the city and beyond, Lord Kestenbaum formally accepted the position and delivered an emotional address containing a number of personal reflections, including his family’s fleeing from Nazi Germany after the ‘Kristallnacht’ of November 1938.

He said: “It is very hard to describe the sense of privilege and very deep gratitude I have for you bringing me here, to the moment where I stand in front of you as your very first Chancellor.”

Praising the influence of Professor Wendy Purcell, Judge William Taylor, Chair of the Board of Governors, and Pro Chancellor Nick Buckland, Lord Kestenbaum said: “It’s a team effort at Plymouth. To all of the staff both here and beyond, to the civic and naval leaders, and above all the students; my aim is to be your Chancellor. I will tell your story to the widest possible audience. I will dream your dreams, and do whatever I can to open the hearts, and minds, and doors for our joint aspirations.”

Lord Kestenbaum’s installation cements a relationship that has developed over recent years since the University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Technology in September 2010. Since then, he has become increasingly involved with the institution, and recently played a part in the University’s Care Leavers programme, and hosted an event at the House of Lords for alumni and supporters.

Professor Wendy Purcell, Vice-Chancellor, who followed Lord Kestenbaum on stage with a Vote of Thanks, said that the installation was a “historic moment” and symbolised the University “coming of age”.

“The role of university Chancellor dates back to medieval times, and carries with it significant ceremonial and ambassadorial duties,” Purcell said. “Chancellors act as champions and advocates, supporting the university’s mission and values through their networks and contacts.

“Lord Kestenbaum’s professional and personal achievements across public, private and charity sectors, reflect our enterprise mission and resonate with our mission to advance knowledge and transform lives through education and research. He really understands our social purpose and economic role as a connected, place-making anchor institution helping talent express itself in our society.

“We are excited about Jonathan’s installation as our first Chancellor and look forward to a long and fruitful friendship and partnership.”

Judge Bill Taylor, Chairman of the Board of Governors, and Sarah Bowman, President of the University of Plymouth Students’ Union, also gave their thanks before the ceremony was brought to a close.

Who is Plymouth’s New Chancellor, Lord Jonathan Kestenbaum?

Born in Tokyo, Lord Kestenbaum came to the UK in 1964 at the age of five. He graduated from the London School of Economics, and earned an MBA with distinction from the Cass Business School. He is also a graduate of the Strategic Agility Programme at The Harvard Business School, and completed the Cabinet Office Top Management Programme.

Lord Kestenbaum started his career in education, building an international training programme for young educators, and after a spell developing his family’s commodity business, entered public service. He was appointed Chief Executive of the Office of the Chief Rabbi, and within five years had been asked to head up one of his leading voluntary organisations – UJA – which was to win the National Charity Award in 2001.

Returning to business, Lord Kestenbaum was appointed Chief of Staff to Sir Ronald Cohen, Chairman of Apax Partners, one of Europe’s largest private equity companies. Then in 2005, he became Chief Executive of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), which was the largest source of investment capital for technology start-ups. As CEO, Lord Kestenbaum became a recognised spokesperson of the importance of innovation in economic growth. He is now Chief Operating Officer of BIT Capital Partners plc, one of the country’s most respected investment companies.

Among a number of non-executive roles, Lord Kestenbaum was on the Board of the Design Council and Enterprise Insight, and was a Commissioner of the Manchester Independent Economic Review, which looked at ways to enhance the city’s economic development. He was also a member of the Governing Body of the Technology Strategy Board.

Lord Kestenbaum was made a Life Peer of the House of Lords in 2010 – as Baron of Foxcote in Somerset.
THE LORD JONATHAN KESTENBAUM
PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY’S INAUGURAL CHANCELLOR UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

“An all of those challenges will not be addressed by yesterday’s solutions; they will need tomorrow’s solutions, and tremendous ingenuity of spirit.”

How has your relationship developed with the University since the award of the Honorary Doctorate of Technology in 2010?

I think my relationship with the University has strengthened and deepened over the years. I was very delighted and surprised to be awarded the Honorary Doctorate, and I wanted to make sure that it was not a one-off moment, and I found an extraordinary appreciation and encouragement as I familiarised myself with the University and its leadership. It’s been an increasingly warm and close relationship, and above all, as I’ve got to know its aspirations, its people, its distinctiveness, it has very much drawn me in. In the best sense of the word it has seduced me and I have become like so many thousands of others, just a firm believer in everything the University stands for. I’ve also had the opportunity and privilege to participate in one or two aspects of the University’s mission, including the Care Leavers Programme, and by virtue of being involved with that, it drew me into the heart of the University’s values.

That event played an important part in the University’s reaccreditation for the Bute UK Quality Mark for Care Leavers – that must have given you great satisfaction?

It does and it also gives me a sense of what we can achieve together in the future. The one word I would use to capture all of my interactions with the University and the people within it, both students and staff, is ‘ambition’. There is a strong sense of ambition pervading the institution and all who are associated with it. I think in some measure it is derived from the increasing sense of competitiveness we confront, not just in academic terms, but economic, national prosperity and social challenges. The option of being complacent and taking it as a matter of course that, for example, Britain has always been a superior nation in economic and social terms and will remain so for successive generations, is no longer enough. It will be different unless we are supremely ambitious and very, very aware of the challenges of competition everywhere.

The same applies to the University – we need to take that ambition and drive it through everything the University does. And you can see it among the students; you see it right across the faculties and directorates. You see it in the focus that the University has on being an enterprise institution, you cannot be an enterprise university otherwise. For all of these reasons I feel absolutely thrilled to be a part of things and I will give it all of my available energies.

In your role at NESTA, you were very much a champion for innovation and enterprise – would it be fair to say that the University’s enterprise mission chimes with you on a personal level?

Very much so. It’s been an enormous preoccupation of mine for several years and I have total conviction that the road to prosperity, the road to social harmony, the road to our ability to deal with very considerable urban, rural, economic, social challenges travels through ingenuity, creativity and innovation. This is not just about new technologies or competitiveness. It’s about our ability to solve the most pressing challenges right across the board: whether it’s health, raising educational standards, next generation opportunities – for example, what does a 21-year-old Plymouth graduate look forward to when they come to the world of work? All of those challenges will not be addressed by yesterday’s solutions; they will need tomorrow’s solutions, and tremendous ingenuity of spirit. And I think that in many respects Britain has always been a country which has been at its best when it’s been at its most ingenious. It’s a country of developers and inventors – an enormously creative country – and what I can increasingly see here in the South West, the city, and the University in particular, is a harnessing of that ingenuity.

What were your first thoughts when the University asked you to become its first Chancellor?

In the nicest possible way I didn’t see it coming. I was enjoying what I was doing with the University and focusing on that. But there has been a lengthy courtship, at the end of which, the question was popped so to speak! I knew it sounds like a cliché, but I was very humbled by it particularly because it is the first time the University has chosen to initiate this office. I don’t take it lightly. I think people who step into a role for the first time have a particular responsibility of meeting the expectations of those who’ve made the decision. So I’m very aware of that responsibility and the confidence that has been shown in me and I will do everything possible to tell the story of this great university, to as wide an audience as I can possibly reach.

So communication is one of the very things that you’ll be focusing upon as Chancellor?

Yes. I would say that great institutions and great universities are able to tell their stories in a compelling way. They have the foundations and credibility, of course, which allow them to tell that story, but then they communicate it effectively and as widely as they can. I think that has been done in an extraordinarily powerful way in recent years at Plymouth, and I look forward to playing my part to enhance it.

What’s your take on the university sector at the moment?

I think that at time of great economic strain, universities have once again redefined themselves, as they have done across the generations. There were times when universities were simply bastions of cerebral academic research and nothing else, and the prospect of them interacting with their surroundings would have been sacrilege. Now, every enlightened civic leader knows that the road to regional prosperity travels through the strength of the university and it would be inconceivable to imagine a region or city in this country which had ambitions for prosperity and social harmony and which didn’t have within it an equally enlightened and equally ambitious university. And in that sense I think the prospects for Plymouth and the South West are incredibly promising. The University has taken a lead in recent years in terms of its sense of ambition and that will be contagious for all in the surrounding area.

What did Higher Education give you in your career?

It’s an interesting question as I reflect back. I think above all else it is and was the student experience which remains the primary influence on me over the years – the diversity of that student experience, the range of cultural backgrounds and personal stories; to this day I find it inspirational. We just had the 20th year reunion of our MBA class and people flew in from all over the world – Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Israel – and it gave me a sense that the type of experiences that are shaped at university travel with you for a lifetime.

“I think above all else it is and was the student experience which remains the primary influence on me over the years – the diversity of that student experience, the range of cultural backgrounds and personal stories.”
GILBERT AND GEORGE LEAD THE CELEBRATIONS AT GRADUATION 2013

From the ‘Ten Commandments’ of Gilbert and George to the remarkable tale of a graduate who battled brain cancer to take her place on the stage – Graduation 2013 proved to be another memorable occasion, filled with stories and sub-plots aplenty.

Heled for the sixth year on the Hoe, in the spectacular marquees (whose structural mettle was tested on more than one occasion by the uncommonly inclement weather), the 18 ceremonies saw more than 5,000 students graduate and 17,000 visitors attend in support.

For one of those graduates, April Watkins, the ceremony capped a remarkable personal journey that began back in September 2009 when she was diagnosed with a life-threatening brain tumour. Rushed into Derriford Hospital for an emergency seven-and-a-half-hour operation after suffering a series of blinding headaches, April was forced to miss the rest of her first year as she underwent chemotherapy, while at the same time coming to terms with the loss of her mother, also to cancer.

But April returned to her studies the following September and also began raising money to create a charitable fund that could be used to help parents or friends who might suddenly face emergency travel or accommodation costs when supporting a loved-one in hospital.

April, who graduated with a 2:1 in Sociology, added: “It was wonderful to have my family around me on the day, and it was very emotional.” It was also a family affair for Madeline Butter and Pierre-Edouard Duedal, who took their seven-month-old son Emmanuel to see both of them graduate on the same day. Madeline was first to the finish line when she received her BA (Hons) in Music on Friday lunchtime, before partner Pierre-Edouard graduated in Architecture in the afternoon. Madeline said: “Emmanuel was born just a couple of days before the deadline for our final year projects – so he’s been a part of our journey through Plymouth. It’s wonderful to have him here with us for graduation.”

Michael Ball was the star turn on that Friday, posing for pictures with staff at Elliott Terrace, and singing along to Take That in the Graduation Marquee, after he’d accepted his Honorary Doctorate of Arts. He was one of 18 honoraries in 2013, and part of perhaps the most high-profile cohort in the University’s history. They included Lord Kenneth Baker, who spoke warmly about the University’s role in the creation of University Technical College Plymouth; journalists Kate Adie OBE and Adam Boulton; Sir Kenneth Grange, Britain’s most celebrated product designer; Entrepreneur and ‘Dragon’ Doug Richard; and We Bought a Zoo author Benjamin Mee.

Leading the way, with a remarkable appearance in the first ceremony on the Monday, was legendary art duo Gilbert and George, who took to the stage to share with the Biological and Biomedical Science students their version of the Ten Commandments, and their Rules of Sculpture.

It was a homecoming for Plymouth-born George, and the Turner Prize winning pair have promised to return to host a special live Q&A in the coming months. Renowned for their privacy, they even granted the University an interview on the Hoe, and spoke warmly of the graduation experience. “We are very thrilled and very touched to come here for the ceremony – it is very, very moving to see all these young people beginning their lives,” George said. “It’s a wonderful, wonderful city, and we’re very pleased to be here – and we’re coming back!”
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE WITH THE LAUNCH OF A NEW ENTREPRENEURSHIP CENTRE

The similarities between starting your own business and playing rugby might seem remote. But for Professor Gideon Maas, the Director of Plymouth University’s Futures Entrepreneurship Centre, they are striking: “In rugby, if you’re injured, you have a period of recuperation and then you strive to come back fitter than ever. Running a business is exactly the same and what we can do is give people the knowledge and expertise to overcome the pitfalls, which will happen to any new business, and come back stronger than before.”

That spirit of nurturing and mentoring is one of the key elements embodied in the new centre, which aims to inspire the global business leaders of the future and give them the chance to hone their entrepreneurial talent and enthusiasm.

Based alongside the Graduate School of Management in Mast House, at the heart of the city’s business community, Futures strengthens Plymouth’s enterprise mission and provides a creative and social space, encouraging the set-up, development and growth of sustainable businesses across the South West.

Professor Maas, who has arrived in Plymouth via Namibia, Cape Town, Ireland and, latterly, the Institute of Applied Entrepreneurship at Coventry University, said: “Plymouth has a genuine commitment to invest time and effort in entrepreneurship and there are not many universities that can say that. By embedding entrepreneurship across the University and community, we can give people the knowledge and experience to accompany their ideas and enthusiasm.

“There are a lot of great existing initiatives, and we hope the creation of Futures will inspire innovation and channel the energy of the business leaders of the future.”

The Futures centre was launched during Global Entrepreneurship Week with members of the business community invited to view the facility, along with guests from the global entrepreneurship education sector. It will act as a focal point for entrepreneurial education and research at Plymouth, providing a range of academic courses, support, mentoring and network opportunities.

It will work alongside the University’s existing enterprise initiatives – including the three innovation centres in Cornwall and the Peninsula Growth Acceleration and Investment Network (GAIN) – while linking with partner schools and colleges across the region and international partners such as the US-based Babson Global Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education.

Speaking to guests at the launch event, Vice-Chancellor Professor Wendy Purcell said: “As the enterprise university, we are truly engaged with business and the community, helping deliver outstanding economic, social and cultural benefits through our transformative education and research. But we also want to nurture a globally aware, forward-thinking generation, ready to change the face of business practice. Futures will provide a space where entrepreneurship and social enterprise can flourish together; where we can encourage the creation, development and growth of sustainable businesses, across the South West and beyond on a global stage.”

The new centre is also being supported by one of the country’s most successful entrepreneurs, Dominic List, who has established a number of successful companies since completing a Design and Technology Business degree at Plymouth in 1997. Students based at Futures will be able to apply for up to £50,000 of investment from the Dominic List Enterprise Fund, with the grants being used to help them onto the first rung of the business ladder.

“Plymouth University gave me a lot of direction and focus, and I believe there is so much we can achieve together. I’m excited about playing a part in the Futures Entrepreneurship Centre and about other commercial tie-ups that have been, and are being, set up by the University. They provide a real proof point between learning and practical application and I hope I can inspire other students to do great things with their lives.”

Dominic List

Professor Gideon Maas
Making Its Mark at the Double with Social Enterprise

Plymouth University broke new ground in November when it became the first higher education institution anywhere in the world to be officially classed as a social enterprise.

Global Entrepreneurship Week was a suitably international occasion for the landmark when not one but two Social Enterprise Marks – the only independent validation that an organisation is putting people and planet alongside profit – were presented to the University.

Professor Julian Beer, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional Enterprise), accepted the Mark on behalf of the University during the Plymouth Social Enterprise Festival event held at the Futures Entrepreneurship Centre.

“Social enterprise is a key ingredient of any healthy economy, and so the University has made it a priority to actively support their nurture and development in the city, the South West, and beyond.”

Professor Beer, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Regional Enterprise)

Scho...
JOEL GIBBARD – ROBOTIC INNOVATION AT HIS FINGERTIPS

It was in October that the national media got to grips with Joel Gibbard, a Plymouth graduate on the cusp of making an extraordinary breakthrough in the realm of robotic limbs.

The newspapers were filled with images of Joel’s prototype prosthetic hand, created by 3-D printing techniques at a fraction of the cost of those models available through the health service, and based upon an open source platform that would see the blueprints made available to experts in the field.

One successful crowdfunding appeal later and the 23-year-old from Bristol is now working to finish his model – and potentially revolutionise patient care in the process.

“My inspiration has always been the cutting-edge prosthetics developed by companies such as Touch Bionics and BeBionic,” said Joel during a telephone conversation with CONNECT. “But I felt that the cost was too high for people to afford, and I wanted to do something about that.

“I developed an early version of the hand during my degree at Plymouth, and for my final-year project I completed a metallic version, which in fact is still at the University.”

Joel graduated in 2011 with a first-class degree in BEng (Hons) Robotics, and scooped three prizes in the process including the Best Application of Technological Skills award (“One of which is hanging above my desk right now!”). He spent two years working as an engineer with National Instruments, before making the bold decision to leave his job and focus upon his invention, Dextrus, and the Open Hand Project.

“At University I was able to prove the hypothesis that you could build a prosthesis with the same functionality as an advanced version but do it far cheaper,” Joel said. “During the two years I was working, there’d been some amazing advancements in 3-D printing technology, and programmable micro controllers, and still nobody had come up with a cheaper way of creating prosthetic hands.

“So it felt the right time for me to give it a go. I moved back in with my parents and launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise £50,000 to take it forward. So far we’ve raised more than £40,000.”

The Dextrus hand uses motors, steel cables and 3-D printed plastic to simulate a real hand, and is designed to be used by anyone, without the need for a medical fitting. Joel is currently testing it with amputee chef, Liam Corbett, who got in touch with him through Facebook after hearing about Joel’s research.

“He’s living the project,” Joel said. “And it is for people like Liam, who can’t afford to pay for one through the health service, that I’m doing it. I find it frustrating to see new technology which is too expensive or not in the public domain. Money is not my goal with this; I want to make it more accessible for amputees – and offer up the code for others to follow if they can.”

The investment provided by the crowdsourcing will enable Joel to refine the Dextrus further and bring it closer to a useable standard. He’s formed his own company, and is already in conversation with a wide range of people – from local health authorities to a major bionics company.

“The plan is to bring this to market and then through open source sharing, see the technology improve and become even cheaper,” he said. “I’d like to then move on to other areas of bionics and health.”

Reflecting on his days as a student, Joel paid tribute to the University in helping him develop his skills as a robot engineer. “Plymouth cultivates a practical approach and being able to actually get hands-on with the robots is a massive boon for undergraduates,” he said.

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“Whether it was iCub or the robot footballers, by using these robots, studying how they work, you can build your own innate skills. Theoretical knowledge is great, but it comes to life through practical application. When I look at what I have done, there is no way I could have achieved so much without the practical experience Plymouth provided.”

Joel Gibbard
“Gilbert and George walked in wearing their iconic suits, and what was interesting was that I felt like I knew them. They might be these very quirky, secretive artists but you really feel you know them.”

When Phil Power came face-to-face with Gilbert and George at this year’s graduation ceremonies, he found himself uttering the first reasonable thought that came into his head.

“Bloody hell, that’s Gilbert and George,” said Plymouth’s Associate Professor of Fine Art and Contextual Practice, and the academic who first reached out to the Turner Prize-winning duo about the possibility of accepting an Honorary Doctorate of Arts.

“It was probably the same words I used in 1977 when I first met them,” added Phil, reflecting on two occasions separated by three decades and filled with more anecdotes from the world of art than could ever be done justice in a single CONNECT interview. “Gilbert and George walked in wearing their iconic suits, and what was interesting was that I felt like I knew them. They might be these very quirky, secretive artists but you really feel you know them.”

Phil at least can claim to have spent time with the duo, who he met in the company of Nigel Greenwood, the Plymouth-born pioneering art dealer whose Chelsea gallery first showcased their work. Indeed it was Greenwood who related to him the now legendary tale of Gilbert and George tipping a bowl of spaghetti bolognese over the head of one gallenist during an argument.

“You know that they’re probably a little bit anarchic, and that they might just undress on the stage. But they actually gave us a duet, like Flanagan and Allen, with their ‘Four Rules of Sculpture’ and ‘The Ten Commandments’. We all understood that there is an element of light in their work.”

In a very different sense, ‘light’ is at the centre of Phil’s work. Light, in fact, is his work, the medium through which he expresses himself and explores his themes (such as the Jungian concept of the shadow). It’s a fascination that dates back to his childhood, when he was taken to see some illuminations in a tree, and felt profound disappointment that the tree was not itself the source of the light.

“That feeling remained with me – I can still feel it,” Phil said. “It reminds me of a wonderful quote from (American artist) James Turrell, who said, “You know, there’s truth in light”, and that’s what I want to explore. I want to look at light, rather than have light illuminate another thing. It is light that is the revelation.”

But like the light from a distant star, it took a while for Phil to arrive at the understanding that he was himself going to be an artist. Brought up in the Mumbles, and sent to boarding school in Surrey, he had been casting around for a direction and a career, finally accepting that he was not going to be a professional cricketer, and eschewing offers from both McAlpines in Birmingham as a quantity surveyor, and from the University of Cambridge. And then he walked into the Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea.

“There was a piece on display, An Oak Tree by Michael Craig-Martin. It consisted of a glass of water placed on a small glass shelf about 6ft high, and attached to the wall below and to the left of the shelf and glass was a text where Craig-Martin claimed that the glass of water had been transformed into an oak tree.

“What inspired me was Craig-Martin’s text deliberately asserting the impossible. I didn’t know this at the time but An Oak Tree is based on the concept of transubstantiation; this seeing (and knowing) is at the heart of conceptual thinking processes, with intellectual and emotional values conferred onto images and objects. I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life.”

A foundation degree in Swansea, a Bachelor of Arts in Maidstone, and a masters degree at Reading University followed, during which time he helped out at the Nigel Greenwood Gallery, and began meeting some of the legendary figures of the 70s and 80s art scene. He later moved to Edinburgh, teaching at Glasgow School of Art and the University of Edinburgh, and met people like Nicholas Logsdail, the man who founded the pioneering Lisson Gallery that showcased the work of contemporary artists such as Sol LeWitt, Anish Kapoor, and Douglas Gordon among many (the latter with whom Phil shared a studio with!).

Fuelled by such experiences, and inspiration from the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Italo Calvino, and Junichiro Tanizaki, Phil developed his public arts profile with a number of commissions, including a residency with SMS in Bracknell, where he experimented with plastic fibre optics, and at the headquarters of Clarks shoes.

He’s still active now, or as active as he can be with his teaching commitments at Plymouth, whom he joined in 2004, initially tutoring students in sculpture. A permanent position in Fine Art followed, and he’s been actively engaged in a range of initiatives ever since, including the expansion of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities to Royal William Yard, the Cultural Harbours project, which links Plymouth to other port cities around the world, and the application to host the 2015 Turner Prize at the University.

“I enjoy teaching because I’m still learning,” he said. “The teaching is based on a structure of thinking for yourself, of being confident, of trusting your instinct, of knowing how to evaluate things and knowing how to change. The student should take with them the flexibility of mind and the imagination to be able to change with the changing demands of the world and of themselves.” And it is for those same students that Phil is so excited about the potential inherent in any ongoing relationship with Gilbert and George.

“It was amazing to have them here – these artists who I’ve admired for so long. They were so generous with their time – and they will come back. They’re really keen to do something for the students – and that is wonderful.”
Dr Louise Belfield is a Plymouth University success story, and something of a pioneer in her field. Earlier this year, Louise became the first dental nurse in the country to achieve a PhD - and she’s now using that expertise as a lecturer in biomedical sciences at the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (PUPSMD).

**What inspired you to start a degree?**

I began this journey in the happy position of working as a dental nurse at South Devon Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust in 2001, with a dentist who was really supportive and inspirational. I’ve always been interested in the human body and how it worked, and he was happy to support that interest by involving me in diagnoses and treatment, such as showing me radiographs and talking through what they contained.

I’ve always loved being a dental nurse, but the more I learned in this practice the more my curiosity was fuelled, and I was determined to do something with that curiosity. I decided to sit a degree at Plymouth and undertook a BSc in Human Biosciences. I still wanted to nurse and care for patients, so during the degree I worked as a locum dental nurse working in any number of situations, including the community, emergency clinics, domiciliary visits, schools and with people with special needs. In my third year I had a part-time post with NHS Direct in Exeter, working three days a week from 6pm to 1am then home to Plymouth, short sleep and off to the University.

**And you didn’t stop there did you?!**

No. My experience of studying for a degree and writing a dissertation (on the effects of titanium oxide and calcium phosphate on microphage responses to Porphyromonas gingivalis lipopolysaccharide – essentially investigating how cells of the immune system behave when they are involved with oral cancer or chronic inflammation), were the catalyst for my decision to pursue a more research-centred career and go on to study for a PhD - I think too, I’m a bit of a nerd to be honest!

My PhD was on a similar topic to that of my honours dissertation – ‘Interactions between Porphyromonas gingivalis and macrophages in oral pathology’. Again, I turned to my nursing experience to see me through the task and it was good to maintain my hands-on clinical skills while pursuing my academic ambitions.

I achieved my PhD this year with the University and PUPSMD, and I am delighted that Plymouth has appointed me as a lecturer in biomedical sciences. I will carry out research in oral immunology and be involved in planning and delivering the new five-year Bachelor of Dental Surgery degree.

**As someone who is clearly inspired by patient care, how excited are you at the way PUPSMD has created a model of education that sees dental and medical students treating patients in its facilities across Devon and Cornwall?**

I am very excited. Working as a dental nurse in the community team, I have seen at first-hand what a difference it makes to peoples’ lives to receive dental treatment when it had previously been unavailable to them. Our dental education facilities provide this service to over 10,000 patients throughout the region. Not only is this an invaluable facility for the patients, who receive much needed dental care and oral health education, it also allows our future dentists to gain exposure to a wide range of patients from very different backgrounds. With that comes a range of treatment plans and care delivery, so they will be well equipped to deal with anything that comes their way when they are out in the world, representing the school as qualified dental practitioners.

**What words of advice would you have for someone who was in a similar position, and considering taking up a degree or some other form of study?**

I’ve been driven by curiosity to do this, and while it has been immensely hard work, every single minute of that has been worth the result. I think that my experience as a dental nurse has given me an invaluable insight into the practicalities of dental care and the treatment of patients and I am sure that this will translate into my research projects.

My advice to anyone wanting to do the same? If you want it hard enough, you will find a way to make it work. I hope that your experience will be similar to mine, in that you will find excellent, supportive people along the way who will help you achieve your goal. Even closed doors open if you push them hard enough!

**And finally – can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues might not know.**

I love music. I am a keen guitar player, novice drummer, and am learning to DJ. With grand ambitions, two musical friends and I started a band. We had two practice sessions before we realised we weren’t very good. Sadly for me, it seems keenness doesn’t equate to talent. I keep practising but I think I should stick to science.
ARCHAEOLOGY

WHITEHOUSE

DR NICOLA

COMBINING CLIMATE CHANGE AND ARCHAEOLOGY

It was in the foothills of the Alps, in northern Italy, that Dr Nicola Whitehouse's passion for environmental archaeology was first etched in stone. Surrounded by the remnants of a fallen empire, she began her path towards a career that has majored on insight and discovery. She was aged all of seven.

It’s a journey that led to Newcastle University, where she took her degree; Sheffield University for a masters and PhD; a brief stint at Exeter University as a postdoctoral researcher; and 13 years of research as a lecturer and senior lecturer at Queen’s University in Belfast. Since September, she’s been a part of Plymouth – a “refreshing change,” she said. “Whole systems interact with environmental science,” she said. “In some respects, it’s like Groundhog Day,” she said. “Whole systems reassemble after each ice age, with species returning and spreading north as the ice sheet retreats. But recent analysis has shown that each warming period is different and the composition of species and the order in which they return changes each time. So the present is unique, and what’s fascinating is the insight it provides into how ecosystems function and how resilient they are.”

Such insight, Nicola says, should be applied to conservation management where policies can be based upon a “snapshot of the present,” such as in peat bog restoration, where trees growing on bogs are often cleared, contrary to paleoecological evidence which suggests that the two were commonly found together in previous areas.

It also raises implications for mankind and its relationship with the environment and climate, and this is where Nicola has been laying an archaeological perspective over the ecological ebb and flow. Across countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Sweden and Estonia, she has conducted fieldwork, building a picture of how humans have impacted upon the land, and just as importantly, how they’ve had to adapt to change.

Both aspects can be seen in her most recent research paper, published in The Journal of Archaeological Science in October, on the origins of agriculture in Ireland. It followed a €250,000 grant from Heritage Council Ireland, working in conjunction with the University of Oxford.

Nicola said: “It’s a common assumption that our evolutionary trajectory has been one of constant betterment and advancement but that’s not the case. Take the dawn of agriculture, for example, which was incredibly abrupt; around 4,000 years BC we have this period of 100 years or so where the hunter-gatherer model is suddenly replaced by farming, with deforestation and the building of houses.

“We see this agricultural frontier sweeping across Northern Europe; but then suddenly it stops, and cereals decline, houses change, and we revert to the previous model. It coincides with an increasingly wet climate, and with it the realisation that farming in Ireland isn’t terribly easy! Over time, those cereals would adapt to germinate in wetter conditions, but what we see initially is how communities respond to a changing environment.”

It is, as Nicola says, a classic case of not “putting all of your eggs in one basket”, and in research impact terms, an example of how archaeological science can bring the past forward to inform the present and future. It’s there as well in other examples she cites: how the long-forgotten technique of channelling seasonal rivers in the Libyan Desert to irrigate crops is being ‘remembered’ and reintroduced; or how fossils reveal that crops such as wheat and barley were once grown together to help mitigate risk of failure, unlike the monocultures of today.

From the Alps to Dartmoor; Turin to Plymouth, the terrain might have changed, but the passion has never wavered.

“If we want to ask these big questions, we have to work collaboratively,” Nicola said. “There will always be scope for the lone scholar, but for the global view we need to work in multidisciplinary teams – and that is one of the things that excites me most about coming to Plymouth.”

“When I was younger I wanted to be a pure archaeologist, even an Egyptologist! But within days of starting my degree I had become fascinated by Quaternary science and geography, and the insights it could provide.”
A MEETING OF MINDS

To celebrate World Mental Health Day in October, Learning Support and Wellbeing hosted an information and networking session for service providers offering support to students with mental health difficulties.

Seventeen organisations from the City of Plymouth attended the event in the Rolle Building, ranging from primary and secondary mental healthcare to specialist counselling services. There were informative presentations from the University’s Student Counselling Service and Disability Assist, Plymouth Mind, and Option, and one graduate shared his experiences and talked about the support he had received during his time at the University.

Feedback from the delegates was that the day had “exceeded expectations” and that the opportunity to network with services they rarely encountered face-to-face had been extremely valuable.

During the event, the University of Plymouth Students’ Union (UPSU) signed up to Mind’s ‘A Time to Change’ campaign (pictured: Charles Green, Vice-President for Welfare and Community, (pictured centre, with John Hillson, left, Head of Learning Support and Wellbeing, and Colum McGurk, right, from the National Union of Students) said: “The event was a resounding success. The combined signing of the Time To Change pledge from UPSU, Plymouth University and the NUS is the next leap forward in addressing the significant issues of discrimination and stigma surrounding mental wellbeing. For so many students this is a more than welcome sign of changes to come.”

MARINE MATTERS

The Marine Institute has secured a string of high-profile grants from international organisations this term in recognition of its world-class research expertise. The first was a huge £1.2 million award to Dr Kerry Howell, in collaboration with Oxford University, from the Natural Environment Research Council, which will assess how populations of marine life connect with one another at different depths.

The second sees Plymouth lead a 12-partner Anglo-French project, totalling £1.2 million, which will contribute directly to the improved governance of the English Channel. Dr Steve Fletcher and Dr Gillian Glegg, of the Centre for Marine and Coastal Policy Research, are leading for Plymouth, which takes a £270,000 share of the funding.

The institute was also successful with a bid to HSH Prince Albert of Monaco’s Foundation. The grant of €140,000 will fund the project, ‘Marine Protected Areas: understanding the flow of marine ecosystem services’, led by Professor Martin Atrill and Dr Oliva Langmead.

HONG KONG GRADUATION

The second graduation ceremony to be held at the University of Hong Kong’s School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE) took place in November with more than 120 students receiving their Plymouth degree certificates.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Wendy Purcell, and Professor Simon Payne, Dean of Academic Partnerships, led the Plymouth representation at the event for students on the BSc (Hons) International Shipping and Supply Chain Management, BA (Hons) International Trade and Operations Management and BSc (Hons) Business Management courses.

Professor Purcell said: “Graduation ceremonies are always a cause for celebration, but it is especially rewarding to see how Plymouth University’s enterprise agenda is being exported globally. Through partnerships with like-minded institutions across the world – such as HKU SPACE – we are working together to transform lives on an international scale.”

The partnership with HKU SPACE is Plymouth’s largest overseas link, with student numbers growing to more than 500 in Hong Kong.

As part of the graduation weekend, the University also held a celebratory event for alumni based in the Chinese territory. It was attended by around 100 guests, including several who had completed their studies in Plymouth since the 1970s and other recent graduates from Hong Kong itself.

THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT GARLANDED AT GREEN GOWN AWARDS

There was further recognition for the University’s sustainability credentials in November, when it won a Green Gown Award: Highly Commended for the work the school’s Design Team has done to embed green principles within all of its courses. Professor Stephen Sterling, Head of Education for Sustainable Development, picked up the award on behalf of the school from the event host for the evening, the University’s very own Professor Iain Stewart MBE.

WHAT’S IN THIS ISSUE

HRH THE DUKE OF YORK BACKS GAIN PROGRAMME

HRH The Duke of York visited the University in October to learn more about how its innovative economic strategy GAIN – the Growth Acceleration and Investment Network – is supporting innovation and businesses in the South West.

The Duke met entrepreneurs and businesses who have benefited directly from GAIN’s work when he toured the University’s Formation Zone and the state-of-the-art wave tanks facilities at the Marine Building, which his father, HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, had officially opened 12 months earlier.

Speaking during his visit, HRH The Duke of York, said: “Universities are crucial to the opportunity for young people to understand that they can start their own business, and the environment that Plymouth University has built up over a number of years is absolutely fantastic. If we don’t breed that next generation of entrepreneurs, and give them the support in areas and in technologies, we are not going to be at the forefront of the future. The South West has a very good network that other parts of the country can learn and feed off – in short, Plymouth University is making a difference.”

Among the businesses The Duke spoke with in the Formation Zone were The Indi Project, a sustainable arts company run by three former Plymouth University photography students, and Knowledge, an amalgamation of three former Formation Zone businesses that have joined forces to create design and marketing solutions.

The Duke also met senior city stakeholders and partners and was briefed on how GAIN and Plymouth University is at the heart of the proposed City Deal, helping to bid for it along with Plymouth City Council and other local authorities and business organisations across the South West. Plymouth’s City Deal will focus on developing the region’s maritime assets and capabilities but will also act as a catalyst for economic growth across the region.

A T GREEN GOWN AWARDS

The Gown Awards are a series of rewards for excellence in sustainability and green initiatives throughout the University. In November, the School of Architecture, Design and Environment was awarded the Top Gown Award: Highly Commended for its work in embedding green principles into its courses and programmes.

The award was presented at the Green Gown Awards ceremony by Professor Iain Stewart MBE, Head of Education for Sustainable Development.

RETURN TO TOP
Storm chasing: Professor Gerd Masselink (in red) and Dr Tim Poate, both of the Centre for Coastal and Ocean Science and Engineering, brave the elements to conduct a beach survey on Westward Ho! and record some of the biggest waves of the year. In the wake of the St Jude storm – when Gerd and his colleagues were stationed at Hayling Island and Perranporth – the combination of spring tides and further strong winds created waves of eight metres and more, with some spilling over the beach ridge. The surveys contribute towards two ongoing research projects: New Understanding and Prediction of Storm Impacts on Gravel beaches, and Adaptation and Resilience of the Coastal Energy Supply in the UK, both funded by the Environmental and Physical Sciences Research Council.