WELCOME

I think you’ll find a particularly eclectic mix of stories this edition, which serves to emphasise the sheer variety of work taking place across Plymouth University at any one moment.

A combination of neuroscience and music is our cover story, with the rise and rise of the Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival. We’ve got cutting-edge, next-gen spin out companies in science and technology; enterprise support for innovative business in the health and wellbeing sector; blossoming partnerships with the Royal Navy; and major cultural projects that are shaping our community.

What they all have in common is that they are rooted in the vision and hard work of Plymouth University people – like our cover star Professor Eduardo Miranda, Ian Sherriff, and Professor Peter Matthews.

Enjoy the issue.

Andrew Merrington
Editor
STRIKING A CHORD WITH THE PUBLIC AND THE CRITICS

The 2013 Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival

“Decidedly progressive... fascinating... . In every sense, a memorable weekend.”

Michael White
Telegraph.co.uk

“The work of the ICCMR doesn’t begin and end in the lab... the festival teems with compositional creativity.”
Alexandra Coghlan
New Statesman

“Such music-scientific synergies typify the spirit of adventure that has been a hallmark of the Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival since its inception almost a decade ago.”
Pwyll ap Sion
Gramophone

Such were the considered opinions of some of the country’s leading music writers after a weekend that keyed into the theme of memory, crossing notes with neuroscience. From Beethoven’s 7th Symphony, remixed through the brains of a ballerina and a philosopher, to some deeply personal compositions reflecting upon the loss of a father and a battle with Alzheimer’s, the 2013 Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival lived up to its Sensing Memory moniker.

“It was the most cohesive festival yet,” said Simon Ible, Director of Music at Peninsula Arts and co-founder of the PACMF. “Every piece and performance contributed to the theme of ‘Sensing Memory’, with a strong focus upon research. At the same time, there was great diversity, realised through acoustic music, chamber orchestra, and solo piano performances. Everything stacked up – and from the feedback we received, it was clear that the audiences all took something different from it.”
Headlining the festival was Professor Eduardo Reck Miranda’s Symphony of Minds Listening, a musical demonstration of how the brain constructs reality, and the first public preview of the three-quarters-of-a-million pound research project being co-led by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Computer Music Research (ICCMR) into the development of a new form of computer that could write music to combat stress or depression.

Eduardo used three volunteers – a classical ballerina, a philosopher and himself – and conducted functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans as he and they listened to the second movement of Beethoven’s 7th Symphony. Having analysed their responses he restructured the original orchestral score to reflect the volunteers’ brain activity during listening, which was done with the help of bespoke Artificial Intelligence software developed at the ICCMR. The resulting ‘remixes’ were then played live by the Ten Tors Orchestra, conducted by Simon, while a movie screened the brain activity of the volunteers.

Eduardo said: “This is the beginning of a four-year journey for us, and as the research progresses, we’ll look to draw in new performers, who’ll respond in different ways to the themes of the brain, neuroscience, memory and emotion.

“This is now a genuinely international festival in outlook, but one which is definably Plymouth University in its identity. It has real integrity to it.”

That sense of identity was manifest in the line-up, which included graduate Will McNicol’s solo guitar series As the Leaves Fall, By the Water, Those Snowy Hills, Come Ever Closer, on his father’s battle with Alzheimer’s, and Honorary Doctor of Music Nick Ryan reflecting upon the memory of his own father, who died when he was just three, in his composition As above, so below.

And there was another innovative piece of work from Dr Alexis Kirke, who managed to fuse the Schrödinger’s cat experiment with a debate about contemporary narrative cinema in his interactive film Many Worlds. Filmed using Faculty of Arts student actors and crew, Alexis wrote a storyline that branched with four possible endings. As the film was played to the audience in the Jill Craigie Cinema, a computer monitored the responses of four members, who were measured for heart rate, muscle tension, sweat, or brain waves, and then selected a ‘path’ based on those inputs.

Alexis said: “Look at how many Hollywood films are flops despite all the testing and screenings that take place. What if you could have a film that reads the audiences minds and adjusts its narrative accordingly? That was the idea of Many Worlds.”

More than 700 people attended over the weekend, including a large number of students, many of whom took part in an interactive workshop hosted by David Strang. Along with many media representatives, it contributed to the busiest festival yet.

“We had BBC films crews, Al Jazeera television, national music critics,” said Eduardo. “We also did a host of national radio interviews ahead of the festival – it is clear that the reputation is spreading.”

“But what was really special was to see people enjoying contemporary music,” added Simon. “For some it was clearly a revelation – and that is the point of the Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival; we’re introducing people to something new and breaking down barriers.”
THE ABSORBING STORY OF POREXPERT

How years of research excellence has given rise to a new cutting-edge spinout company

For the Environmental and Fluid Modelling Group (EFMG), in the School of Marine Science and Engineering, the past 12 months have been a remarkable success story. Launching their market-defining product PoreXpert in September, the same month they were awarded the Vice-Chancellor’s Enterprise Award for Applied Expertise, the team has also found time to secure £1.5 million in research grants and consultancy work and lodge two outline patents.

It is, according to Peter Matthews, Professor of Physical Chemistry, testament to both the years of diligent research that has laid the foundations for EFMG, and an indication of the very rapid impact that the University’s commercialisation partner Frontier IP Group plc has had.

“It was PoreXpert’s predecessor, Pore-Cor, which first caught the attention of Frontier when they began to assess the commercial potential of projects across the University in 2011. Launched back in 1996 on floppy disk, Pore-Cor went through a number of iterations, and though never seriously marketed, did achieve some commercial success, such as with British Gas, who bought the technology to help with risk assessment for insulation oil leaks in soil.

Peter said: “Porous materials are vital to improving and sustaining our standard of living. They include the underground reservoir rock from which we extract oil and gas; catalysts; paper coatings; filters; tablets; woven and fibrous materials; and soil – and it is often of great importance to know the structures of these materials and how fluids behave and move inside them.

“However, measuring pore structure is surprisingly difficult. If you look at the porous material then only the outer surface is visible. If the sample is cut and the surface observed, the sizes of

“We are very impressed with your work. We’ve sent samples to other groups for analysis and none have even come close to the information you’ve given us.”

Jeffrey Alvaji
QuestAir Technologies Inc., Canada
the holes or ‘pores’ are evident, but it is impossible to judge the degree to which they are inter-connected in three dimensions – and it is that inter-connectivity which is crucial to the ease with which fluids, such as oil, move through the network of pores.”

Around 12 months of work had already taken place on PoreXpert when Frontier became involved – “a complete redesign from the bottom up” – with the crucial addition of ‘What If’ functionality being one of the unique selling points. Essentially, this enables companies to test their products and designs – for example changing the size of the pores on a filter for a gas mask – and generate performance models, without going through the actual expense of laboratory and production time.

Even months ahead of its official launch, PoreXpert was generating sales in Poland and Germany, and a bespoke version of the software had been designed for the Milan-based global science company Thermo Fisher Scientific.

Peter said: “It defies belief how quickly it can calculate complex results – there is an enormous amount of mathematics powering PoreXpert. It has no rivals out there on the market.”

PoreXpert Limited has now been set up as an official University spinout, with 50% control retained by the academics – including Peter, Dr Giuliano Laudone, Dr Christopher Gribble, Dr Philip Gerstner and Joseph Matthews – 35% to the University, and 15% to Frontier.

Working with Paul Tiltman, Specialist IP Advisor in Research and Innovation, a plan has been put in place to steadily grow the company, moving resources across from the University in a scaled fashion.

Paul said: “Universities are fantastic at nurturing things, but the failure rate of spinouts is notoriously high, as institutions try to do too much too soon. You have to be able to ‘scale up’. So PoreXpert is pioneering both in terms of the software and the way in which the company has been set up. We’re creating a template here that others can follow.”

With a major contract signed with EDF Energy for consultancy work on the strength of PoreXpert, it is clear that EFMG has an equally busy 12 months in prospect.

“You are always aware of the challenges ahead,” said Peter. “We’ve come a long way up the mountain, and the views are very pleasant – but there are more summits to come!”
The opening of the Health and Wellbeing Innovation Centre

The third and final piece of the £45 million innovation jigsaw for Cornwall has been placed – with a mission to give the human health and wellbeing sector a booster injection of entrepreneurialism.

The Health and Wellbeing Innovation Centre (HWIC) in Truro will nurture and support businesses across a broad spectrum in the sector – from designers to practitioners, product developers to manufacturers.

HWIC will also look to work alongside the research and healthcare cluster at Royal Cornwall Hospital’s Trust (RCHT) and researchers at the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry, as well as offering spinout space and support to emerging technologies and advances in practice.

Tenants have been steadily moving in since January, with around ten in place well ahead of the March 18th official opening, when Dame Carol Black completed the formal honours. And, like its sister centres at Pool and Tremough, HWIC provides Formation Zone early stage incubation facilities and conference and event space for the University and the community.

Karen Murray is the Centre Manager and joined the University’s Cornwall Innovation team last May. With a career background that includes medical insurance, patient commissioning for RCHT and running her own business, Karen is on familiar ground with HWIC. By being in post so early, she has not only received a thorough induction into Cornwall Innovation, but has been able to play an active role in the set up process of HWIC.

She said: “We’ve been in a great position to see what has worked well at the other centres and then make some tweaks accordingly. Each is different
– Tremough (TIC) is funky and artistic; Pool (PIC) slightly more corporate; we hope people will feel this is a blend of the two.

“What is the same, however, is the focus upon supporting business development, growing enterprise and creating jobs through commercial innovation. PIC and TIC have set the bar very high – and we have a lot to live up to. I’ve had phenomenal support from Richard Scutt at PIC, and Richard Snell at TIC – but I’m not going to deny that there is not some friendly rivalry between us!”

Spread over four floors, with 41 offices (catering for between two to 16 people), lab and workshop space, ten meeting/conference rooms plus a dedicated 100-person conference centre, HWIC has a flexibility that enables it to accommodate a broad range of client needs. With its colour-coded floors for the visually-impaired, hearing induction loop technology, natural venting, biomass boiler, rainwater harvesting and acoustic muffling panels, it is a model of sustainability. The pièce de résistance is the huge three-storey glass atrium, with fine views across the Cornish countryside (“We could probably do weather and traffic reports from here” – Karen), creates a relaxed air – one that’s been praised by visitors, such as Unlocking Cornish Potential, who ran the centre’s first external event, a three-day graduate boot camp, in December of last year.

One thing that HWIC isn’t is an NHS medical centre. Overcoming misconceptions of its purpose has been an important task for Karen and she’s spent a great deal of time attending events and networking in the sector.

“HWIC is about innovation, taking businesses and enabling them to develop and better support themselves,” Karen said. “We are creating value, and nurturing commercial enterprise.

“I envisage a very eclectic and vibrant community in the fullness of time, from designers of ergonomic furniture, urban space planners, and organic skincare product manufacturers, to research and development arms of practitioners. We’re even talking to a surf therapist.”

All three of the innovation centres now offer One Stop Shop-style drop-in centres and are supporting Research and Innovation’s Tectona Business Ideas Challenge. It is an indication of how embedded they have become within the University-led Growth Acceleration and Investment Network (GAIN).

Bernard Curren, Director of Cornwall Innovation, said: “It is testament to the team that we’ve established a genuine brand with Cornwall Innovation and a level of service and delivery that is consistent across all three centres.

“We’ve exceeded expectations in that regard, just as we have with the economic impact of Pool and Tremough after two years and one year respectively. People no longer see them as separate centres, and that was always the ambition we had: three entities, same culture, one ethos and an innovative business community.”
Professor Alan Myers escorts CONNECT through the Quarterdeck and offers to introduce us to The Commander. The lecture rooms to our left and right are already full – the cadets after all have observed the ‘Five minute rule’, arriving ahead of time before reporting for instruction. Outside, a further eight are marching across the Parade Ground that has hosted Royal and State visits since 1905.

Welcome to the Britannia Royal Naval College – a truly unique posting for Plymouth University.

“We are completely embedded within a thriving naval college,” said Alan, who is Director of Studies and the lead for the higher education partnership, which the University and BRNC entered into five years ago. “It is a fantastic environment full of challenges and opportunities – but it is very different to university life. We are steeped in years of naval tradition and heritage, and you have to embrace that.”

There are 17 members of the University team based in Dartmouth, entrusted to run the education programme for around 300 Royal Navy officer cadets. Currently the partnership extends to a two-year foundation degree consisting of meteorology, oceanography, sensors and telecommunications, ship technology, strategic studies, and English. But with the support of the University and command at BRNC, the team has developed two full degrees – a BSc (Hons) in Defence Studies and a BSc (Hons) in Military Aviation Studies for the Fleet Air Arm – which they hope will be approved by the Ministry of Defence shortly.

Alan said: “Until 2008, all of the education was undertaken by the MoD. Having a university on board gives us far greater opportunity and potential within the field of education, and adds prestige to the accreditation process. With Plymouth’s world-class reputation, and long connection to marine and maritime studies, it is a natural fit.”

The education component of a cadet’s day accounts for around 25% of their time, with a full programme of training including shooting, seamanship, physical exercise and drills rounding out a busy schedule. However that proportion of education could rise in the near future.
Alan said: “The Royal Navy wants officers that are critical thinkers and have questioning minds, and it is up to the University team to foster an educational environment that is conducive towards that – and this can sometimes come as a surprise to cadets who are expecting a more military atmosphere. We do have a captive audience here, so the onus is upon us to review and develop our teaching syllabus so that we’re engaging them in the way that we should.”

Part of that engagement process is with BRNC’s growing number of international cadets, drawn from scores of countries around the world. Calling upon a wealth of experience gained through contract work overseas, primarily in the sphere of language and cultural development in a military environment, Alan has been able to advise on cultural awareness issues at the college.

Having been a part of the setup since 1994, Alan is keenly aware of the history engrained in BRNC. It is there in the roll of honour of those who have held the position before him, dating back to former headmaster Sir Cyril Ashford in 1905 (indeed, it is significant that Alan’s name and that of the University are now engraved upon the inside of the front door to the college); and it is there in the lexicon of the college, which draws upon the tradition and etiquette of the Royal Navy, and where “going ashore” to post a letter and “staying on board” after a social function in the Wardroom or Senior Gunroom are as much accepted expressions as if you were on a vessel in Her Majesty’s fleet.

In amalgamating that past with a vision for the future, the partnership between the University and BRNC has gained its sea legs. “There’s a lot of future and promise,” added Alan. “We’re only just beginning to explore the potential of the partnership.”
PLYMOUTH STUDENTS LEAD AND LEARN THANKS TO NEW EMPLOYABILITY INITIATIVE

When the University of Plymouth Students’ Union (UPSU) asked for help in developing the leadership skills of their society chairs, the Plymouth Business School was only too happy to offer its services.

Now, one year on, the programme created has proven so popular with students that hundreds have given up their weekends to attend – and many have even credited it with helping them to flourish in job interviews.

Lead and Learn has been designed to provide a bundle of skills for students including developing self-awareness, listening, and team-building – and it’s helped bring together people from different schools and faculties to provide a valuable networking experience for both home and international students.

Steph Driscoll, Vice-President for Education and Welfare at UPSU, told CONNECT: “Lead and Learn is a great example of how the Students’ Union and the University can work together to create something that has a real impact upon the student experience. At the outset we were focused upon the need to provide development support to the society chairs who often have to manage and influence people in their role. But that proved to be just the starting point.”

The pilot project was worked upon by a team including Hilary Duckett, Associate Director of Teaching and Learning. It pulled in the expertise of Chris Reedthomas and Sybille Schiffmann, consultants in organisational development, and facilitator Annie Broadbent.

Chris said: “Lead and Learn has been developed in close collaboration with all the partners involved, and with a serious level of support from UPSU. It has a very modern slant on leadership, a collaborative model that emphasises influencing over controlling.

“Having that emotional intelligence is key when it comes to working with other people – especially in a situation where you’re not invested with the authority to directly tell someone what to do, as is the case with the UPSU society chairs.”

The UPSU team trialled the programme in March 2012, and the feedback was so positive that the decision was taken to roll it out to students. Sarah Deignan, Executive Education Officer in PBS, had the responsibility of taking it forward.

She said: “This may have come out of the Business School, but it has been embraced by everyone, and we’ve had a broad mix of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, and from every faculty in the University.
“A good example of this would be those students from the School of Education, who have said how much the programme has helped them in the classroom because it has given them confidence to speak in front of people. Some of them have even gone on to mentor their fellow students and disseminate that learning.”

The first day focuses upon self-awareness, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and influencing skills. These are then put into practice on day two, when students are asked to identify a project they are going to be involved with, and then tasked with presenting a plan to a panel of dragons, which has included Professor Julian Beer, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Regional Enterprise; Justin Bovington, Entrepreneur-in-Residence at PBS, and Greg White, Chief Executive of UPSU.

Chris Reedthomas said: “What’s been fascinating is that some of these ideas are just that, and there is no intention for them to be taken further. But others have very real outputs – such as one student who is taking forward a dietetics app that helps people understand how much they’re eating.”

With feedback built into each day, the team has been able to adjust the programme on the fly, ensuring that no two weekends have ever been quite the same.

Steph said: “I’ve been on most weekends since the pilot, and the reaction from students has been remarkable. I’ve had first-hand accounts of how some of the students have been using their new skills in job interviews – in fact one girl who took the course over the weekend found herself eulogising about it in an interview on the Monday, and she said it had helped her so much. And that’s great – we’re at a stage where students are signing up on the strength of word-of-mouth.”

With the vision of delivering to partner colleges throughout the South West, in addition to more sessions on campus, the potential for Learn and Lead is evident.

Steph Driscoll, Vice-President for Education and Welfare at UPSU

“Steph Driscoll
Vice-President for Education and Welfare

“When you speak to students and graduates about interviews, one of the key things that comes up over and again is evidence of leadership skills – not what grade they’ve got.”

Steph Driscoll
Vice-President for Education and Welfare
In September, Plymouth will become the first modern university to run its own medical (and dental) school. CONNECT went to meet the Dean of the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (PUPSMD), Professor Rob Sneyd, to ask for his prognosis for the future.

Q It’s been 15 months now since the announcement that the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry would be transformed into two new institutions. What stage have we reached in that process?

Plymouth and Exeter have now set up their own Medical Schools and Plymouth its own Dental School. We had excellent application figures, and have made offers to our first set of undergraduates, and I’m pleased to report that a good number of these have already been accepted. Our undergraduate courses in medicine and dentistry will admit their first students in September, and so we’re working hard to make sure everything is ready for the launch.

Q What’s your vision for PUPSMD?

I am committed to exceptional clinical learning, strong social engagement and world-class research, and these are, I think, embedded in the DNA of the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry. They have at their heart a commitment to improving lives, through a focus upon groundbreaking research; the delivery of expert care and treatment; and the provision of an experiential education for our students, ensuring they have the opportunity to apply their scientific learning at the earliest stage so they can develop a more holistic approach to patient care. All of this requires close working with our NHS and academic partners. We will realise these ambitions by putting the students at the centre of everything we do, close engagement with our NHS partners and close working with our University, our city and its community.

Q Do you envisage even closer ties with the University – and in particular the Faculty of Health, Education and Society, and the School of Biomedical and Biological Sciences?

Life will certainly be simpler now that we relate to a single university, and through PUPSMD we have an excellent opportunity to tie very closely our activities to the rest of the University. We already collaborate closely with...
researchers in biomedicine and we shall be strengthening our links to the Faculty of Health, Education and Society. And we’re excited about the potential of the Health and Wellbeing Innovation Centre in Truro, which will be an important hub for research translation and exploitation.

Q With the recent announcement about the Cumberland Centre – added to the dental treatment provided to people across the peninsula – that public facing element is presumably a key part of the future?

I am tremendously proud of our achievements in Devonport but these are only a beginning. Our students should be where the health need is greatest, and we’re intending to expand the partnership between Plymouth University and Plymouth Community Health Care. We’ve got lots of new ideas and we are working through them to establish priorities with a focus on things that are useful, achievable and of value to the local community as well as our students. The greater the health and social need, the more important it is for us to be there, as we seek to inspire the next generation of health professionals and produce doctors and dentists who know, understand and respect their patients’ needs.

Q Can you tell us something about your own research interests? Is it very difficult to remain active in the field with your new role?

I don’t have as much time for my own research as I would like, and what I do is all in partnership with my hospital and University colleagues. In the hospital I am part of a team working on major bowel surgery with an emphasis on reducing mortality, shortening length of stay and improving the quality of our care. In the laboratory, I have PhD students working on plasticisers (gender-bending chemicals contained in plastics) and separately on the lung injury caused by high oxygen concentrations. Research is incredibly exciting and great fun and I want to remain involved as much as possible. And it is true to say that everyone wins from healthcare and medical research – most importantly the patients, but also medical students and doctors learning and working in an environment in which research leads care.

Q Finally, can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues might not know?

I am passionate about sailing – I love the teamwork and the excitement of a closely contested race – and my competitive streak also finds an outlet in orienteering at which I am enthusiastic, but not terribly good!
John Wright was appointed to the newly-created role of Chief Information Officer in Technology Information Services, last October, bringing with him a wealth of experience amassed in the private and public sectors. As CIO and Director of HM Land Registry, John oversaw the transition of the government office to becoming a predominantly electronic service provider. Prior to that, the born and bred Devonian held international roles at DHL and G4S. CONNECT met up with him to find out more.

Q What is the rationale for having the position of a CIO at the University?

Plymouth has a vision of becoming an ‘edgeless university’, and that means placing information and technology at the heart of the learning experience. With greater dependency on technology comes the need to ensure that there is a coherent and integrated IT strategy across the University. In organisational terms, the University is a sophisticated business – a £220 million turnover, 3,000 staff, a wealth of international partnerships – and the CIO is there to create and deliver a strategy that supports it. It is not a new name for an Information and Learning Services Director; the CIO has purview across the University, setting the strategic direction in all aspects of information systems delivery. As someone who has lived and breathed technology in a variety of industries, I find that an incredibly exciting proposition.

Q What will be some of your key objectives in the coming months?

A critical step will be the definition of a pan-University IT strategy and accompanying business plan for the next 12 months to two years which will see us refresh some of our existing technology platforms and services as well as adding some completely new ones. Amongst these initiatives will be the replacement of our Tulip learning environment, a new University website and major investment in WiFi and library services to help improve the student experience. In embarking on these ventures we intend to explore what other universities do and examine their relevance for Plymouth. The key thing about making decisions on technology is that you don’t find yourselves in ‘Betamax-land’. The IT industry moves at an incredible rate and it is very easy to back a product or solution that leaves you in a cul-de-sac further down the line. We can all be
wise in hindsight, of course, so we need to have a clear vision of what we need to support our University – the right platform and the right vendor.

**Q** So what are your initial impressions?

Well, as with any organisation of a similar scale, there are legacy issues such as multiple systems undertaking similar or overlapping tasks, or not integrating with each other as effectively as they should. There is nothing unique in that; it happens everywhere. My role is to seek these out and provide the focus to make sure that technology is working for us and not hindering our progress. What is abundantly clear from my first few months here is that there is an appetite for modernising our infrastructure and service. For example, TIS really pulled out all of the stops to ensure that PlymDESK 6 was delivered as it should be. And we’ve got some truly innovative educational technologists here that are pioneering the edgeless university ethos I mentioned earlier.

**Q** What attracted you to Plymouth and the HE sector – and what do you think you can bring to the University?

Well, avoiding the ‘coming home’ cliché, I do have an affinity with the region, and one of the attractions of the job is to make a contribution to the university of the city of my birth. I hope that I’ll be able to leverage my experience of working in the private and public sectors both in the IT field and elsewhere (my roles have previously encompassed Estates, Procurement and Sales). Having made that shift from the private sector, I knew what to expect – and my initial impression is that the University is much more like the private sector, where speed of decision making is crucial, and people are empowered in their roles.

**Q** And finally, can you tell us something about yourself that your colleagues might not know?

(Pauses for thought for a few seconds)

Well, a few years ago I spent some time on business out in Malta, and over the course of a week or so I stayed in the same hotel as the cast and crew of *Gladiator*. Whilst it was an exciting time it was also touched by sadness as unfortunately it was there that Oliver Reed passed away. I know he was something of a controversial character but in the brief time I spent with him I found him to be warm, generous and unpretentious.
When Ian Sherriff was named Plymouth University’s Ambassador of the Year at the 2012 Vice-Chancellor’s Enterprise Awards, in recognition of his work to research and raise awareness of dementia, it marked the culmination of a remarkable decade.

Just ten years earlier the School of Social Science and Social Work academic had his first encounter with the condition, when he answered a call for volunteers from the Plymouth branch of the Alzheimer’s Society. Now he is one of the nation’s most respected experts on the condition and a serving member of the Prime Minister’s Dementia Champions.

Ian has been a part of the University’s fabric since 1985 when he came to train as a social worker. He had grown up on the Balmoral Estate where his father was employed, but left Scotland at the age of 14 to work on a Thames barge. He then became an aircraft engineer in the Fleet Air Arm, and spent the next 25 years serving across the world.

When he left the service at the age of 40 – “to get a proper job” – he chose Plymouth, and followed up his social work training with an MA in Management in 1996.

“Plymouth University has been a part of my life for almost 30 years,” Ian said. “It kicked off my experience of caring for people and, thanks to our growing expertise and enthusiasm for the subject, we are now at the national forefront of researching dementia and caring for those affected by it.”

Ian had worked in local government in Devon and Plymouth before he took his first role directly related to dementia, becoming chairman of the city’s Alzheimer’s Society branch and later chairing the South West Dementia Forum.

He joined the University roster on an unrelated project six years ago, but his work with dementia took off when he and three colleagues – Dr Mike Sheaff, Professor George Giarchi, and Dr Helen Macfarlane – were awarded a Community Research Award (CRA) in 2009.

Their project looked at how GPs diagnose the early onset of dementia, but it has since been greatly expanded with the University now providing consultancy services to a range of local authorities, including a contract to support Devon County Council, and other organisations in Bolton,
Middlesbrough, Bromley and the Welsh Assembly.

The CRA has generated further research projects with a number of other UK universities, including Bournemouth and Northampton, with further developments planned for 2013. The research team has also presented papers at the International Alzheimer’s Conference in Vienna, and other conferences in the UK during the past 15 months.

“A few years ago, we weren’t at the forefront of people’s thinking,” said Ian. “But now it is fast becoming the case that when people think of dementia research, they think of Plymouth University. We are well down the line to providing an integrated and multidisciplinary research, training and consultancy service which is at the top table as far as dementia is concerned in the UK.”

Through his work, Ian has taken on a number of local and national roles, including being Vice-Chairman of the Plymouth Dementia Action Alliance and on the Board of the Alzheimer’s Society nationally.

He was also the driving force for an organisation providing educational and social care programmes in Romania and Moldova, working in partnership with Devon County Council, Plymouth University and government officials in the Eastern European countries.

And then in early 2012, he was appointed by Prime Minister David Cameron as one of his national Dementia Champions, which sees him travelling the country and advising on ways to improve national policies on the condition.

“The Prime Minister realises dementia is a major issue affecting millions across the country, and the creation of the Dementia Champions shows how seriously he is taking it,” Ian said. “Making the entire population aware of dementia is a huge challenge, but in just one year, we have made big strides and it is an exciting time to be involved with dementia research.”

Recognition of Ian’s standing in the region was further demonstrated when he was nominated to take part in the Torch Relay for the 2012 Olympics, not just for his dementia work, but also for his service to Saltash United Football Club, where he is Vice-Chairman of the junior club, and for his membership of the National Blind Veterans’ Charity, with whom he has been involved for almost 40 years. That came just a couple of months before he received the Ambassador of the Year accolade, although he is always quick to share any personal praise he might receive with the rest of his team.

“The Vice-Chancellor has always been incredibly supportive of our work and committed to dementia research, and by continuing to work together we can make great strides in improving the lives of those families affected by this horrible condition,” he said.
He has been described as ‘the Philip K Dick of contemporary music’, a moniker given to him by no less a judge than internationally renowned pianist Lola Perrin. He’s staged duets between the sun and the Roland Levinsky Building, transformed the ocean wave tank into a surging symphony, and created opera from London stock trading; not a bad resume for a man who once looked destined to perform in the financial markets to a very different tune.

Dr Alexis Kirke is now a key component of the University’s acclaimed contemporary music scene, and Composer-in-Residence at the Marine Institute. A proud member of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Computer Music Research, and a mainstay of the annual Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival, Alexis has, with the support of his mentors Professor Eduardo Miranda and Director of Music Simon Ible, created an innovative body of work that has genuinely captured the imagination of the public and national music writers alike.

“Inspiration is central to all of my compositions, whether it is the sun rising, the emotions on the trading floor (in Open Outcry), or the tremendous power and potential of waves, I have to be moved by the possibilities.”

“Where I differ from others, I guess, is that rather than write music that is ‘about’ these concepts, that uses music as a metaphor for something, I have to incorporate it directly into the performance, and this creates a unique challenge.”

It is a challenge Alexis has readily accepted time and again – from his ‘breakthrough’ with Sunlight Symphony: Sunrise in 2010 to transforming the main ocean wave-tank in the Marine Building into a giant instrument for Sound-Wave at the Royal opening last October.

Alexis said: “Sunlight Symphony was a big surprise to me to be honest. My original idea was for a 360-day installation, but Simon Ible said to me – ‘Can you do it in half an hour?’ And he was absolutely right – he brings that audience perspective that is crucial.

“I certainly wasn’t prepared for the impact it would have in the media – and it would have been easy for me to go on doing Sunlight Symphonies. But my heart would not have been in that, and I don’t think the University would have wanted me to do that when it is more important that I continue to grow.”
And so it was that Alexis went on to create Cloud Chamber in 2011, in which he brought together the unlikely bedfellows of sub-atomic particles, a granular synthesiser and Dr John Matthias on violin.

“In all of my work, I set up these duets, and give them the freedom to express themselves,” Alexis said. “It is that freedom that really interests me – no matter how much sculpting and editing I do at the outset, ultimately the performance rested upon the movement of the particles, and the way John reacted to them with his violin.”

It is all a far cry from the early years of his career, when Wall Street seemed the most likely stage for his talents. Graduating from Plymouth with a degree in mathematics in 1994, Alexis took his first PhD in Artificial Intelligence, alongside contemporaries such as Professor Sue Denham, head of the forthcoming Cognition Institute. He specialised in neural networks and how AI had the potential to cooperate and develop emergent behaviours – something which proved a major asset to his first employer in the financial sector.

Alexis said: “I wanted to get into the Stock Market so I got a job as a programmer with a company who dealt in the pension market. It was just a way to get closer to the actual market action, the ‘rocket scientists’ who move billions of dollars’ worth of stock each day. After a little while I was transferred to New York and became a quantitative analyst.”

As part of an institutional broker Alexis analysed the market and created the strategies that would enable clients to move large amounts of stock while minimising the risk of their actions creating a major shift in the market. It was a precursor to the kind of algorithmic trading that caused the recent meltdown in the US mortgage sector.

Alexis said: “It was undeniably exciting – but it was not inspiring. I asked myself if I wanted to be remembered as a man who made it easier for companies to move stocks. I needed to evaluate and I couldn’t do it in this all-consuming environment – so I left and came home to Plymouth.”

Signing up to a second PhD in 2010 – in Computer Music – set him on a course to meet Professor Eduardo Miranda, and the rest, as they say, is history.

“There are many famous quotes about science and art and where they meet,” said Alexis.

“It is such a rush when those two seemingly disparate things come together. I don’t just mean conceptually either – when you share it with an audience, you bring yourself closer to people through this meeting of art and science. It is a buzz like no other.”
YOUR STORIES

CAMPUS TRANSFORMED FOR APPLICANT DAYS

Thousands of prospective students from across the country and as far afield as Malaysia and China came to Plymouth in February and March for a taste of University life at four high-profile Applicant Days. More than 600 staff and student ambassadors were waiting to greet them from almost first light as the campus was transformed into a festival of music, food and colour.

From the large marquee in Rolle Square serving up Devon Fairtrade fish and chips and Cornish cream teas to the campus and city tours that took in the Hoe and the Barbican, the theme of Applicant Day was very much one of showcasing the University – and a taste of what the city and region has to offer.

Behind the fanfare and festivities, there was a wealth of information provided by all the schools, faculties, and support services. There were insightful subject talks from academics, and a showcase of learning facilities and technology – part of 56 different programme streams on each day. Current students and UPSU reps were also on hand to provide a guide to ‘Plymouth student life’ from finance and careers to accommodation and entertainment.

In total, around 7,000 people attended, including more than 3,000 prospective students. And when they’d finished with the talks, tours and teas, there were student bands at the Students’ Union, demonstrations from UPSU’s sports clubs, and a giant screen with a live Twitter feed from the day to further entertain.

The campus itself was also adorned with giant building wraps, multi-lingual flags, inflatable archways and 500 specially commissioned signs to help visitors find their bearings.

Professor Wendy Purcell, Vice-Chancellor, said: “I’d like to extend a huge thank you to everyone across the University who worked so hard to make our new-look Applicant Days such a great success. The events were nothing short of a show-stopper; the campus looked absolutely fantastic and all our staff and students represented the University to the highest standard.”

SERVINGS OF SPANISH AND FRENCH AT THE VIRTUAL LANGUAGES CAFE

An international day of languages in February inspired Business School students to organise and take part in the first-ever Plymouth University Virtual Languages Cafe. The event, commemorating International Mother Language Day, used the University’s Babbage videoconferencing suite to connect with students learning English at the University of Girona, Spain, and the Groupe Scolaire Anne-Marie Javouhey in Brest, France.

Split into two sessions with a connection to Spain in the morning and France in the afternoon, the event enabled the students to practise their language skills in a relaxed setting, covering topics such as the RBS Six Nations, David Beckham’s move to Paris St Germain, and the horse-meat scandal!

The event was organised by three BSc (Hons) Events Management students – Erin Blyth, Lucy Callingham and Sophie Gulliver – as part of their final year project and has caught the attention of language lecturers in the Business School, who hope to continue the event in the future. Email addresses were exchanged between the students in the hope that they may connect again in the future to help one another to practise their skills.

Operated and maintained by Technology and Information Services, the University uses dedicated high-quality videoconferencing facilities at various locations around the campus as part of its sustainability strategy. Some of the more exotic overseas locations that the University has reached include Brazil, Iran, India, Newfoundland, Japan, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and New Zealand. Further information about videoconferencing can be found at: https://staff.plymouth.ac.uk/vidlink.
HISTORIC DRAKE’S PLACE FUTURE SECURED WITH LOTTERY SUCCESS

The future of Drake’s Place Gardens and Reservoir, the historic landmark whose story stretches back to 1592, is set for an exciting new chapter after the University secured Lottery funding for important restoration work.

More than £600,000 was awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund and will form part of a £1.4 million project to return the site to former glories as a focal point for community activity and engagement.

A new entrance from North Hill to the reservoir area will be created, as well as level access to the promenade leading to the cafe. The fountains in the reservoir will be reinstated along with the cascade which runs through the gardens, and listed features, such as the turret house, will be restored. New seating and improved lighting will be introduced, and the gardens replanted to the 1910 design of Cornish firm Treseder.

Stretching beyond the physical work – which is expected to begin later this spring following a tender process – is a five-year plan of events involving staff, students, local residents and community partners, all overseen by a new part-time Community Engagement Officer dedicated to the project and based within External Relations.

Paola Simoneschi, Trusts and Foundations Manager in Development and Alumni Relations, led the bid process for the national Parks for People funding from the Lottery. She said: “The engagement and support we’ve had from the community was crucial to the success of the bid. From the consultation period that provided a wealth of ideas, to those that have come forward and asked to be volunteers, this really is a project in partnership with the community, for the community.”

Events ranging from wildlife illustration workshops for children and gardening workshops for the community, to heritage trails, school visits and craft fairs are being planned, many delivered by volunteers from the University and wider community. The developments will also raise the public profile of the Reservoir Cafe as a space shared by students, staff and visitors.

The site took its name from Drake’s Leat, the 28km channel built by Sir Francis Drake to bring water from Dartmoor to the townspeople of Plymouth. In what is now the gardens, which were opened in 1891, there once stood Drake’s ‘Higher Mills’, which supplied the town with flour. The reservoir was built in the 1820s.

For more information, and to find out how you can get involved, visit www.plymouth.ac.uk/sustainability, or email Paola (paola.simoneschi@plymouth.ac.uk).

ANATOMY OF SUCCESS

Dr Kathryn Yuill, Lecturer in Physiology in the School of Biomedical and Biological Sciences, has been awarded the 2012–13 Bill Bowman Travelling Lectureship by the British Pharmacology Society. The prestigious and competitive prize is awarded to support the professional development and research career of younger society members, and funds the awardee to deliver three research lectures at academic institutions in the UK. Kathryn, who was nominated by a professor at the University of Oxford, delivered her lecture, The atrioventricular node in health and disease: the heart of the matter, at the universities of Leicester, Cambridge and Strathclyde in March.
Three days of events celebrating the Chinese New Year were held on campus in February, with business and student networking events, cultural workshops and a food festival, culminating in a marquee-hosted dinner with fire dancing and acrobatics.