FROM CORNISH ART TO CAPITAL DEFENCE LAW
Plymouth alumni share their stories

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE
- The Brain Tumour Research CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
- Volunteering in Sierra Leone in THE FIGHT AGAINST EBOLA
- Research in UNCHARTED TERRITORY in the Indian Ocean
When we talk about our academic community at Plymouth University, there is a special place for our alumni: they – you – are our greatest ambassadors. The experiences you have as a Plymouth student are carried with you throughout your careers and lives. Your words and reflections help define us in the eyes of others.

So I am delighted that this edition of our CONNECT magazine not only features some truly inspirational stories of how graduates have used their degrees as a springboard to new opportunities and horizons, but also that the magazine itself is being sent directly to our alumni for the first time.

For some of you, the University might look a little different in these pages, but I hope our values and ethos still ring true. And, of course, there’s an open invitation for you to visit us, so you can see how we’ve developed and invested in our campus and facilities – supporting not only our teaching but also our research, which is making a real difference in so many fields. You may also notice that we’re celebrating the legacy of our graduates through a series of Alumni Portraits on our buildings.

We hope that you can stay in touch and will let us hear what you’re up to. In sharing your stories you inspire our students – and your proud tutors!

Regards
David

Professor David Coslett
Interim Vice-Chancellor

WELCOME...

...to the latest edition of CONNECT and the first to be themed around our alumni.

In these pages we look at the work the Development Office has been doing to support our Brain Tumour Research Centre of Excellence, and the opportunities it has helped to open in international research funding.

You’ll also meet Joe Kennedy and Rachael Walsh, whose stories, while on the surface very different, share a compelling commonality – a deep respect and gratitude to their tutors at Plymouth.

For Joe it was the gift of new ideas, materials and techniques that have inspired him to diversify his design work; for Rachael it was the support and guidance she received in a moment of crisis that kept her studying, and then an introduction into capital defence charity work that set her on a remarkable early career path in law.

Not every alumnus can claim to have a national award or to have represented an inmate on death row. But with more than 100,000 alumni out there, we certainly have no shortage of life-stories to tell in future editions.

Enjoy the issue.

Andrew Merrington
Editor

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UNIVERSITY LAUNCHES BRAIN TUMOUR RESEARCH CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE CAMPAIGN

It is a condition that kills more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer; its mortality rate within a year of diagnosis is an appalling 55% – and the number of cases has risen by 25% over the past 30 years – with the South West topping the list in cases per million. And yet it receives just 1% of national spending on cancer research.

“The idea that a local team is looking into better treatments and ultimately cures for brain tumours is amazing and something I am very proud of in our region.”

Benjamin Mee
Director of Dartmoor Zoological Park, and an Honorary Doctor of Science at Plymouth University.

The University was chosen as one of Brain Tumour Research’s official Centres of Excellence last year, in recognition of the expertise embodied by Professor Oliver Hanemann and his team in researching these tumours. Plymouth was the fourth national centre to be chosen, and each has pledged to provide support with up to £1 million per year in funding.

“Brain tumour research is woefully underfunded,” said Professor Oliver Hanemann, who is the Associate Dean for Research in the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (PUPSMD), and lead for the centre. “This means a critical lack of researchers to investigate the condition and more effective treatments – at this rate it could take another 100 years to find a cure.

“Plymouth’s Centre of Excellence specialises in low-grade brain tumours, which are slow-growing but ultimately can become malignant. Our focus is to identify and understand the mechanism underlying their development and explore ways to halt or reverse it.”

The University was chosen as one of Brain Tumour Research’s official Centres of Excellence last year, in recognition of the expertise embodied by Professor Hanemann and his team in researching these tumours. Plymouth was the fourth national centre to be chosen, and each has pledged to provide support with up to £1 million per year in funding.

“The Brain Tumour Research campaign is our first major project in terms of strategic fundraising and will be one of a number that we will support from across the University under the umbrella of ‘Campaign’,” said Christian Burden, Director of the Development Office. “The Campaign will showcase our strengths and aspirations as a university, and will be very much driven by the faculties with our support. In the case of Brain Tumour Research, this is all about Oliver and his team; they are the reason why we got behind the application to become a partner to Brain Tumour Research, and they are the reason why we now have a global reputation for research in this field.”
The Development Office, which brings together Alumni Engagement, Campaign, Fundraising, Events, Partnerships, and Community Engagement, is now looking at ways to engage with stakeholders, including alumni, in support of the projects—whether ‘in kind’ or financial. One of those, in the case of Brain Tumour Research, is Benjamin Mee, Director of Dartmoor Zoological Park, and an Honorary Doctor of Science at Plymouth University. Benjamin lost his wife to a brain tumour in 2007 and has backed the project with awareness-raising events at the zoo.

He said: ‘At the time when we were exposed to the relentlessness of Katherine’s brain tumour, I was more than frustrated. And I remain frustrated that a diagnosis of cancer is something of a lottery depending on where it is situated in your body. We know from the success stories of other cancers that improvements in timely diagnosis and effective treatment are possible, due to investment in research.

“The idea that a local team is looking into better treatments and ultimately cures for brain tumours is amazing and something I am very proud of in our region.”

One of the elements of the project is the Wall of Hope (pictured below with Professor Hanemann) at the Derriford HQ of PUPSMD, where for every £2,740 donated—the cost of one day of research—a tile will be placed with a personal message.

Future campaigns will showcase and support a number of the University’s major life-changing projects, with others set to include a new medical research facility, a new scholarship programme for engineering students, a major marine and technology research initiative, and exciting projects in art and culture. ‘This project gives us a shared vision, a focus and a structure around which we can engage with our students, our staff, our alumni, and our community partners, to make a real difference in the world. Pride is a key word for us. We want our alumni and supporters to sit up and take notice, and say ‘Wow! That is my university!’ And we want them to get involved and help in whatever way they feel able to.”

www.plymouth.ac.uk/campaign
THE DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

It was a simple and honest piece of feedback:

I don’t care what it looks like, I just want it to be used

said a student when asked for their views on a proposed new digital learning environment last year.

They were words that resonated with Professor Neil Witt, Head of Academic Support in Technology and Learning, and the man whose vision of a more innovative and engaging learning experience was beginning to take shape at that time.

“The expectations of our students are constantly growing and changing,” said Neil. “And we need to move with them by adapting to new technologies and preferences, and delivering them to any platform or mobile device, wherever they are using them.”

But how could the University deliver on that technology-enabled learning ideal – and do so without causing significant disruption to its core operation? Then again, how could it afford not to?

“I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say there was genuine excitement when the Digital Learning Environment (DLE) project launched,” reflected Rupert Frankum, Technical Project Manager in Technology Information Services. “People have battled so long with SharePoint that they embraced the change and engaged with the process.”

The decision to create the DLE was taken following an extensive period of feedback gathering and reflection, a process that involved the canvassing of more than 3,500 students, and the holding of 20 staff and student focus groups. It set a benchmark for engagement – particularly student engagement – that would be maintained throughout the project.

Rupert said: “I think students and staff very quickly appreciated that we were looking to move to a position where, instead of technology dictating to them what their practice should be, they could dictate how their practice should be supported by technology.”

The idea was to replace the existing module-focused virtual learning environment with something more dynamic and flexible: something that was mobile-first, housing a range of resources and systems all behind a single sign-on. Bringing that to life fell to Rupert and his team, using Agile methodology and working in fortnightly sprints to release segments of the DLE to a group of early adopters, who grew in number from 30 to 200 over the course of the nine-month production.

“We held ‘show and tells’ with staff and they were so popular, we had to move them into lecture theatres,” said Rupert. “We had a total of 2,000 people attend and that provided a wealth of feedback that we were able to address by adding new functions to the DLE.”

Those new functions included timetable information, coursework submission, e-assessments, quizzes (driven by unanimously positive feedback from students) and ‘minimum module information’, consisting of details of each module, electronic reading lists, past exam papers, forums and wikis – all to help students make more informed decisions about their learning journeys. Peer-reviewed learning and the functionality to book meetings with tutors were also included.
And while the DLE project has been understandably technology-centric, it has also advocated support, with faculty-focused support teams managing the process of training and development, and a University-wide subscription to lynda.com providing access to 1,600 software courses for all staff and students.

“The great success of the project has been the way it has delivered and offered that support, with minimum disruption and maximum benefit in all areas,” said Neil. “And feedback has been universally enthusiastic: simple features such as being able to book slots with lecturers and personal tutors, and the use of quizzes are significantly enhancing student learning. Students have also reported that they are seeing a marked improvement in the availability of lecture materials and consistency of information.”

The statistics have spoken volumes for the way it has been embraced. Around 10,500 students access the DLE on a daily basis and 90% of the Mobile with Plymouth App usage is now related to teaching and learning activities. In the first three months after launch, more than 2,000 online video tutorials were created among 24,000 learning resources; there were 630 modules using e-submission, 250 quizzes, more than 200 forums, and 50 live chats. And those learning resources have been viewed more than 800,000 times, and more than 5,000 users have watched 75,000 educational videos.

“It opens up a wealth of possibilities for teachers to engage with students outside of the classroom,” said Neil. “Of course, that does mean that we might have to work a little harder to provide that additional content that will enrich their studies, but with the DLE automating a number of processes, it frees up time to provide that rich content students respond to.”

With 6,000 partner college students now also able to access it, and the potential to open it up to prospective students and other external contacts, the DLE has become a portal into the teaching and learning community of the University.

“Thanks to the DLE, the University can start to collect learning analytics to re-invest back into the student experience, ensuring a living learning environment shaped by its community,” added John Wright, Chief Information Officer. “It’s a key strand of our ambition to become an ‘edgeless university’, where technology delivers, supports and enhances the student experience to the point where it blurs traditional campus boundaries.”
They are the UK’s largest alternative provider of higher education by student number, and a distinctive member of the University’s Academic Partnership network since 2005.

In November of last year, they received a national award for the way they have invested in their infrastructure and student experience, and they have just announced that Sir Bob Burgess, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester, is to be their new Chair of the Board of Directors.

By any measure, it’s been quite a story for GSM London over the past couple of years – and it’s one that has perhaps not been fully appreciated across the University community. Founded in 1973, it has been transformed from a niche college of around 1,000 students as recently as 2011, to the 7,000-strong institution of today, backed by significant investment from Sovereign Capital.

“Our academic model is much closer to a university than many people might think,” says Professor Alison Wride, Provost at GSM, who along with CEO Alison Wheaton leads the institution. “We have a full range of courses across business, law, finance, travel and tourism, all approved by Plymouth; we have faculties and deans; staff who are research active; a vibrant students’ union, and a full community engagement programme. But we’re also distinctive and different, with a necessarily nimble business model.”

Joining in 2012, the former Deputy Director of the Business School at the University of Exeter came on board just as the institution was responding
to a critical Quality Assurance Agency Institutional Review. It was a review that it had actively sought, and with Plymouth’s support, GSM made rapid changes to ensure it was meeting expectations within the year.

“One of the misconceptions of private providers is that they are something of a soft touch when it comes to regulation – that we ‘get away with’ low quality,” says Alison. “They are hungry for education and qualifications, but have not had the advice and guidance they need.

“But I can tell you, I have never worked in an institution with so many interesting back-stories. Our student body includes a relatively high number of first generation UK citizens, including former asylum seekers, and many are single parents or were working full time in low paid jobs. By the time they graduate, they are heading for jobs in the city or are starting their own businesses.”

The focus on social mobility and an ambition to become a powerful national voice in this area is embedded within GSM London’s strategy, and it’s something that resonates deeply with Alison. Enrolling on an economics degree at Exeter as a mature student, having had a family early in life, Alison felt her outlook on life was transformed by university.

“I was alongside a cohort of mature students, many of whom were mothers returning to education, and you had a very real feeling for how life-changing it was and how a degree gives you economic power,” she says. “It provides you with choices you would not otherwise have. And here, you really see the transformation of people’s lives on the ground.”

In November, GSM and the University hosted a first joint graduation ceremony in London and more will follow this year. Plymouth will also begin accrediting its postgraduate degrees as well.

“Many of our conversations are around the things we can do together in the future,” says Alison. “I believe there’s a mutual respect there, and I know that when Plymouth staff visit us they are surprised to find just how big we are and how much we have in common.”

“We can be genuinely very proud of our partnership with GSM London,” adds Professor Simon Payne, Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Academic Partnerships. “They have been on a remarkable journey, and as anyone who has ever attended one of our joint graduation ceremonies will tell you, they have created a vibrant, exciting culture, with an incredibly positive buzz.”

We’re looking forward to a long-term partnership with them.

Professor Simon Payne
Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor and
Dean of Academic Partnerships
Home to the largest ‘no-take’ Marine Protected Area in the world, spanning an area the size of France, it is famed for the pristine coral reefs that fringe the 60 or so islands and a diverse marine ecosystem, most notably the sharks and rays that provide the National Geographic glamour. But very little is known about the oceanography of the region and the reasons it supports such an abundance of marine life.

So when two academics in the School of Marine Science and Engineering were presented with an opportunity through the Marine Institute to join a select group of scientists on a research trip funded by the Bertarelli Foundation and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, they were only too happy to sign up.

“At the risk of cliché, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit an uncharted territory and be the first to collect a continuous time-series of measurements,” said Dr Phil Hosegood, Lecturer in Physical Oceanography. “We know so very little about the oceanography of this pristine environment, so this was a chance to begin to build an understanding of how physical processes like ocean currents are contributing to one of the most diverse and abundant ecosystems on the planet.”

Phil, and Dr Kate Adams, a post-doctoral researcher who joined the University from Oregon State in October 2014, flew out in January to join 12 scientists from a new Chagos-focused research consortium represented by a range of international organisations such as the Zoological Society of London and the University of Western Australia – each researching a different scientific discipline, from acoustic mapping of zooplankton to manta ray tagging. They then departed from the United States’ military base Diego Garcia on their ‘research vessel’ – the patrol ship that monitors the area for illegal fishing.

“The biggest challenge was that the ship was not designed for research,” said Kate. “Phil and I were working underneath the exhaust stacks and next to the welding table, so we were dealing with 40 degree heat and having to wear ear plugs.”

“It was nothing that a few ratchet clamps and cable ties couldn’t fix,” added Phil. “And while it was certainly

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FEATURE: UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Five hundred kilometres south of the Maldives, in the heart of British Indian Ocean territory, you’ll find the Chagos Archipelago.
a challenge to work around so many other people, we often had the run of the ship at night and received tremendous support from the ship’s crew.”

While collecting measurements throughout the archipelago, they were especially interested in the edge of a seamount, a 100-metre deep area where previous measurements have shown huge aggregations of fish and an abundance of sharks. They deployed a range of sensors and acoustic devices to measure water currents, temperature, salinity and turbulence to identify the processes responsible for creating such a rich and abundant ecosystem over the seamount. This included a Minibat – a vehicle towed behind the boat that undulates between the surface and a programmed depth – which helped them look for evidence of periodic ‘up-wellings’ of cold, nutrient-rich water from the deep ocean onto the seamount plateau, where the sunlight might trigger photosynthesis and plankton blooms. They also used the holographic camera designed by colleague Dr Alex Nimmo-Smith to visualise zooplankton in the water, the results of which provided insight on the feeding habits of the manta rays.

“We had the opportunity to get into the water and help the Manta Trust with the tagging and filming that they were doing,” said Kate. “They successfully tagged five, and added 26 to their index through photo identification. And swimming with mantas was a truly awesome experience. They seemed completely unfazed by our presence and were sometimes just an arm’s reach away. The mantas would emerge from the deep water, swim to within a metre or two of the surface, then roll backwards and continue rolling like this over and over again while they filtered the plankton.”

And it was not just manta rays that they had a close encounter with – there were some other, toothier species as well.

“It was very eerie,” said Phil. “The buildings are still there, slowly being reclaimed by nature, and housing only these huge coconut crabs. Hopefully the body of work that comes out of this trip – and we’re currently writing a number of research papers – will go towards developing a better understanding of the impact of the MPA, so that the future of the islands can at least be discussed in a more informed manner from an ecological perspective.”

Phil is now writing proposals to NERC to undertake further research in the Indian Ocean, and following the success of this expedition, the marine physics team’s capability will be part of discussions on how Plymouth University can support a long-term international programme of research in Chagos.

It’s wonderful that researchers from the Marine Institute in Plymouth, a city of which I have fond memories, were able to join this expedition. We’re delighted that Phil and Kate are both furthering our knowledge of Chagos – one of the world’s most incredible places – and helping to protect the oceans for future generations. 🌍

Ernesto Bertarelli
Co-Chair of the Bertarelli Foundation

Images courtesy of and © Daniel Fernando | MANTA TRUST
One minute I was getting ready for Christmas, the next I was in a lab in the middle of the jungle surrounded by medics in space suits!

Dr Leigh Jackson
Research Fellow in Applied Health Genetics, in the School of Nursing and Midwifery

VOLUNTEERING IN SIERRA LEONE

Dr Leigh Jackson reflects on a month he’ll never forget volunteering in an Ebola testing and treatment centre in Sierra Leone.
Leigh, a Research Fellow in Applied Health Genetics, in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, has just returned to university duties (in mid-February) after completing a mandatory period of time away from campus. Sitting in the Reservoir Cafe, it’s a far cry from the camp in Makeni, where he spent December and January analysing blood samples to help contain and combat the spread of the disease.

“I had been following the Ebola story on the news with a feeling of growing frustration and sadness,” Leigh says. “It’s a nasty disease, but one which can be stopped relatively easily with just soap and water. But it takes the right people and processes to contain it.”

In November, Leigh contacted Public Health England after hearing that they had established field labs in Sierra Leone, and enquired as to whether they might find a use for his skills. Having completed his PhD in stem cell research, he was no stranger to working in labs using polymerase chain reaction equipment (a technique used to study DNA in molecular biology).

With permission from his supervisor Professor Heather Skirton, and the blessing of Head of School Dr Ann Humphreys, Leigh underwent a medical, a psychological questionnaire and an interview with a counsellor, before being invited to a week’s training session on December 15 at Salisbury Plain. Within days he was on the plane to Africa.

“I didn’t even have the chance to come home to Plymouth,” Leigh said. “It was quite a shock, probably more so for my family with whom I’d had the delicate conversation some weeks previously. They were worried, of course, but then my dad had volunteered on the Plymouth lifeboat for 17 years, so he didn’t have a leg to stand on!”

Leigh joined a team of 14 Public Health England volunteers, who came from universities, pharmaceutical companies and hospitals from around the country. Based in the only brick building on the camp, up to ten volunteers at any one time would work on blood samples and swabs brought in from the community or taken from patients who had been invited to attend the centre.

Working in an isolator, through no less than three pairs of gloves, Leigh and the team would process up to 60 samples per day, using a centrifuge to spin the blood, a process that would enable them to extract the plasma and neutralise any risk of transmitting the disease. Once that was done, they could then work without protective gear while they tested the plasma for signs of Ebola and malaria.

If the sample was found to be positive for Ebola, the patient would be admitted to the centre for treatment, or if it had come from the community, then containment, clean-up and burial teams would be dispatched to the location. Anti-malaria drugs would also be issued if anyone was found to be suffering from the disease.

“Most of the swabs had come from dead children, and that is the grim reality in an area where infant mortality is so high,” said Leigh.

Unlike at many of the other charity-sponsored camps, the volunteers at the International Medical Corps camp (the charity behind the Public Health England operation) were allowed to go out into the community. Leigh’s hotel was in the centre of Makeni, and he had the chance to visit the local markets and speak with the people.

“We had many locals come up to us in the street and thank us for our help, and that was inspiring. But it was also important for the people. When the outbreak started, many were in denial about the disease. Then, when the clean-up and burial teams started to arrive, clad in their all-over protective suits, it was a very intimidating thing for them to deal with, not to mention a challenge to their social traditions around burial. So to be out there in the community, presenting a human face so to speak, was great.”

By the time Leigh departed for England, the camp’s turnaround time for obtaining results was down to as little as two hours. And it had also released its 19th patient back into the community – meaning more people had been successfully treated than had died in the centre.

“It’s the singing and dancing of the patients when they leave the facility that stays with you,” Leigh says. “And with every handprint and name on the ‘survivors’ wall’, we’ve helped to address not just the medical, but also the cultural and social challenge of combatting Ebola in Sierra Leone.”
Rachael Walsh had only taken a handful of steps towards the trailer when a diatribe greeted her from the woman sitting on the porch. Years of frustration and anger spewing forth, aimed at the spectre of her delinquent, drug-taking father – a father facing the death penalty for murder.

It was the first time anyone had asked the daughter about her dad. Rachael, just months out of university, had been the one to cross the divide and break the silence.

“She began popping off a list of all of the bad things he’d done, and I thought to myself that this isn’t going too well,” Rachael recalls. “And then she said ‘but he’s my dad, and if I want a relationship with him, that’s my choice, not that of 12 men and women who do not know him’. It was then that I knew I had to put her on the stand.”

Welcome to the world of the ‘mitigation specialist’, where the lives of your clients hang on your ability to find the human story behind the capital crime. And it’s one that Rachael has thrown herself into wholeheartedly following her graduation from Plymouth in 2012 with a 2:1 in Law. Working initially as an intern for charity Amicus in Mississippi, helping to represent those either convicted of, or facing trial for, capital offences, the 24-year-old is now employed full time by the State of Georgia, working on cases where a death notice has been served.

“If the District Attorney deems the offence to warrant the death penalty – if there are aggravating features that push it across the threshold – then the clock resets and the defendant is required to have capital defence lawyers,” she says. “It is entirely at the DA’s discretion, and we often have cases where co-conspirators are facing the death penalty even if they were not the ones who actually committed the crime.”

A Canadian passport, courtesy of being born on Vancouver Island, might have made it easier for Rachael to secure employment in the US, but her path into law is very much rooted in her time at Plymouth. Indeed, she admits she might never have made it this far but for the support of academics within the School of Law.
You’ve got to build a relationship with your clients and really get to know them. In some cases, I am the first and only person in their whole lives to ask what it’s like to ‘be’ them; to be the first person to apologise for the terrible things that have happened to them.

When her father died during her second year of study, Rachael was close to dropping out, before an emotional meeting with her tutor, Associate Professor Jason Lowther, convinced her to continue. And later, it was Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning Joanne Sellick who alerted her to a debate in London, organised by Amicus, on the issue of the death penalty.

Rachael says: “I came home that night and I knew that that was what I wanted to do. I got involved with the charity, and organised some events at the University, and then applied to become an intern.

“I was in Jackson, Mississippi for six months, and I couldn’t believe that there could be such poverty in a developed country, and such disparity of wealth. But I loved the South and the work I did, and I just couldn’t imagine going back to Britain, so when a job came up, I applied for it, and here I am.”

That job takes her across north-east Georgia, from major conurbations to the isolated towns of the Smoky Mountains, where methamphetamine-related crime is rife. Rachael typically works six cases concurrently, with a daily routine ranging from researching the background to cases to actively searching for potential witnesses, often in areas of extreme socioeconomic deprivation. And she also gets to spend a lot of time in jails.

“It can be difficult to sit in a room with someone, knowing what they stand accused of, and having seen the crime scene pictures,” she says. “But it is part of the job. You cannot judge them by your own standards.

“At the same time, you’ve got to build a relationship with your clients and really get to know them. In some cases, I am the first and only person in their whole lives to ask what it’s like to ‘be’ them; to be the first person to apologise for the terrible things that have happened to them.”

Those prison visits often have to begin with a walk through the ‘general population’, something Rachael is careful to do without heels and make-up – a lesson she learned after a very uncomfortable initiation to inmate etiquette. And yet it is the prison guards themselves that have proven to be the hardest part of the job, acting as both silent and vocal moral commentators on the nature of her work.

“Most of them don’t like me,” she says. “They don’t like my work; they hate the fact that I am required by law to have private meetings with my clients. In their minds, these people should be being constantly punished and they cannot comprehend that I am just having a conversation with the prisoner. It’s not uncommon for mitigation specialists to be accused of having inappropriate relationships with their clients because the guards simply don’t understand the nature and purpose of our jobs.”

For how long she can continue to work in such an ‘emotionally draining’ environment, Rachael is unsure; becoming an attorney remains a tempting option – and she is sitting her New York Bar exam in the summer. But for now, she is concentrating on her clients and helping to tell their story.

“I love what I do,” she says. “I meet not only the clients but their families, friends, teachers, social workers, and sometimes the family of the victims as well. That, of course, is difficult, and sometimes they are not at all happy to see me. But just as many will tell me that the death penalty won’t take away their pain, and that’s incredibly powerful.”
Joe Kennedy puts down his sanding block and runs his hand along the wood grain of the iroko door perched atop his workbench. With its clean lines and very evident heft, it wouldn’t disgrace a hall in Middle Earth or King’s Landing.

“There’s an old saying that you ‘look with your fingertips’ when it comes to working with wood, and that is absolutely true,” says Joe, his voice rising above the soundscape of industrial saws and air hoses of the joinery in Falmouth. “It is such a warm and tactile material; it’s right when it feels right.”

The 22-year-old Plymouth design graduate, who came to public attention in 2014 when one of his pieces was named best exhibit at the Young Furniture Makers Exhibition in London, has been fascinated by wood since the age of five. It’s a love he inherited from his grandfather, in whose company he spent many an hour as a boy, watching and learning as he crafted furniture in the family home in Penryn, Cornwall.

“He had no machines; everything was exactly the same as when he did his apprenticeship in the 1950s,” Joe says. “It was woodwork in its simplest form, and there is a great romance in that.”

That element of the traditional – both in terms of materials and craftsmanship – has permeated Joe’s art and work. And from his proud Cornish roots, so he’s begun to diversify through the range of influences he’s been exposed to.

“I’ve never lived more than three miles from Penryn, and much of my work expresses that I’m Cornish and I’m inspired by Cornwall,” Joe says. “But it was great to spend time at Plymouth – I was a sponge, soaking up the specialities of my teachers like Polly (Macpherson) and Roy (Tam). I learned to work with new materials like metal and plastics – I’d always found metalwork to be cold, but I learned from listening to others and I learned from doing and making mistakes.”

If this diversification owes much to the School of Architecture, Design and Environment, then the very fact that Joe came to university at all is a validation of the model of education created by Academic Partnerships.
For it was through the partner college network that Joe obtained his degree on the BA (Hons) 3D Design course, having first completed a foundation degree at Cornwall College in Camborne.

It meant that he was able to continue working at Marnick Joinery in Falmouth, where he’s been a fixture and fitting since the age of 16, ensuring he not only had the funding for his education, but quality workshop time for his project work.

On the advice of Pete Davis, Lecturer in Design Culture, Joe continued on to the MA Design: Maker and Materials programme, and it was during his final project that he found perhaps the perfect expression of the theme of cultural inspiration. Embarking on a Grand Tour of nine European countries in 20 days, driving to Rome and back in a Fiat Panda, Joe collected materials associated with each country – steel from Luxembourg, oak from France, marble from Italy, for example – and created a series of products that referenced local, traditional techniques.

“The Grand Tour was the completion of a gentleman’s education,” Joe says later when we reach his home. “I undertook a literal interpretation of that concept, only instead of taking three years I did it with my girlfriend in three weeks!”

Many of the products he created are here in his home – a pair of Carrara marble vases adorn the floor, an architect’s table (made from galvanised steel and an old railway sleeper) is in the corner of the lounge, while two conical copper lights sit atop some shelves. As too is one of the two tables that he submitted to the Young Furniture Makers Exhibition last year, at the suggestion of Roy Tam. It led to an invitation to exhibit them at the premier show for students across the country and an entry into the competition.

Joe says: “All of the other awards had been given out, and the winners had all had their photos taken. And then they came to this last award and my name was being read out – it was quite a shock!”

Receiving the award from the Managing Director of Blum, an international furniture fitting company, and in front of the watching Rupert Senior, a renowned furniture maker, Joe’s prize was a trip to Austria to see the company at work and tour their facilities. It promises a glimpse into the kind of working environment that Joe would love to experience for himself.

“I want to design for people and get involved with prototyping. I love bringing things to life, experimenting, changing little aspects to make it better and to make it work.”
It is not every career that prompts a national newspaper to run an editorial in which it praises your work as doing ‘more than most to illuminate British democracy’. But they were the words used by The Guardian when it came to reflect upon the body of work amassed by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, both Professors of Politics at Plymouth.

For 30 years, Colin and Michael have built and maintained a database of local election, and latterly General Election, results, which has redefined the very science (and art) of political analysis. In the process, their insight has led to policy reform and revolutionised the way the media across five continents covers elections.

Their story is one that dates back to 1976–77 when the pair first joined the institution as lecturers; a time when simply no one systematically collected local elections data, and media analysis was the equivalent of ‘sticking your finger in the air to see which way the political wind was blowing’.

“We were looking to do something innovative and different,” says Colin. “No one had ever attempted to collect results before – it was deemed too daunting. But that is what we did from 1985, and by building the database, we opened two distinctive opportunities.”

“The first was on the academic side,” adds Michael. “You could now produce evidence-based research on local elections and make informed evaluations. The second was in relation to the media, who now had actual data which they could use to benchmark voting trends.”

It was a ‘Eureka moment’ for the pair and The Elections Centre that they founded – one that established local elections analysis as a legitimate academic sub-field. With research council grants, they meticulously began to back-fill the database, collecting information by post, email and telephone from local authorities, as well as recording all subsequent elections.
The British Local Elections Database now contains more than 300,000 results dating back to 1899, and information on almost one million candidates. Names, party labels, votes cast, electorate and turnout are freely available to analysts of all disciplines across the world and can be viewed at a candidate, ward and local authority level. And as if that wasn’t enough, Colin and Michael have been conveniently pulling all of this information together in the annual Local Elections Handbook since 1985.

From 1992, the focus broadened to include General Elections, and it was their successful prediction of national vote shares prior to the 1997 result that sealed their status as the ‘go-to analysts’ for the international media. Their near-forensic insight into the consequences of parliamentary boundary changes at the 1997 and 2010 elections for a consortium of media outlets including the BBC and the Press Association only reinforced that reputation.

“The model we developed in the mid-90s was able to track the current state of the parties through real data and results, rather than asking people for their voting intentions as the pollsters would do,” says Colin.

Already columnists with The Sunday Times, Colin and Michael have become fixtures with ITN and Sky News, notably on their live election-night broadcasts.

“For two academics from the same institution to have been providing analysis for two competing national media stations for more than 20 years is unique,” says Michael. “It gets the adrenalin pumping to be part of events as they unfold.”

Recognised in 2007 with the esteemed Political Studies Association of the UK’s Communication award, it is their standing in the Westminster ‘village’ that is perhaps most revealing – even to the extent that they received weekly calls from the late Lord Gould, Tony Blair’s strategy advisor, in the run up to the 1997 election.

“The phrase ‘It’s what Plymouth says’ is the one we hear the most,” says Michael. “That shows the esteem that the University is held in.”

For the past 18 months, Michael and Colin have been working on an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project to further update the British Local Elections Database, and place the information in the public domain via the internet. And then there’s the small matter of the General Election, which promises to be a desperately close race between Labour and the Conservatives, and with plenty of sub-plots.

“The rise of UKIP in England and the SNP in Scotland makes this the most unpredictable election for over 40 years,” says Colin. “Who wins individual seats and how the picture stacks up nationally will reflect considerable variations in behaviour across the country - the days of uniform swing look well and truly over.”

“We’ll be spending Election Day watching responses come in on the joint BBC/ITV/Sky exit poll and helping the analysis team make sense of it all,” adds Michael. “It’s a nervous time once the count begins and we have to wait several more hours to see whether, as in 2005 and 2010, we’re on the button.”

Once more unto the breach: it’s clear that Professors Rallings and Thrasher have not finished illuminating British democracy just yet.
Professor Kevin Jones joined Plymouth University from City University London at the start of the current academic year. CONNECT sat down with him to talk first impressions, faculty strengths and the four ‘Rs’.

Q What were your first impressions of Plymouth University, and how have they changed during your first six months as Dean?

I quickly realised the University is even better than I had expected and the true quality of its research and teaching are something of a hidden gem. I knew it possessed many outstanding academics and through my own experience, and by talking to colleagues from institutions among the global elite, it was evident many people here are very well thought of. But in fact, the level of expertise is far broader, as evidenced by the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) in which nearly two-thirds of our research was graded as world-leading or of international quality.

Q Your new faculty covers a broad spectrum of subject areas. How do you begin to influence areas where you might not, at present, have an in-depth knowledge?

I am a both a Chartered Scientist and Chartered Engineer, so in a very broad sense I guess it’s not a big stretch, for example, to marine and other areas. But the faculty has excellent leadership at all levels, so where I may not have specific subject knowledge there is the right expertise in place, and each school or institute has areas that are truly world-leading. As Dean, my role is to make sure that everyone is integrated and working towards the same goals, so that students and staff get the best possible experience during their time here.
So, as Dean, what is your overall vision for the Faculty of Science and Environment?

Well for a start, I think ‘engineering’ should be reflected within its title. Essentially though, our faculty covers the STEM subjects, which means that at a national level we are fulfilling a core need, and I have a very clear vision for what we should be doing. We need to be focusing on the areas where we already excel and concentrate on teaching the fundamentals. But I also do not think we should be afraid to take risks and build on Plymouth’s reputation for thinking outside the box. The notion of the enterprise university also excites me, as it demonstrates that we do things differently here and are working to create a unique environment.

Your specialist subject is computer science. What role do you feel universities can play in enhancing its teaching at all levels of education?

Computing is the underlying discipline that has allowed the modern world to create all of the wonderful technology we now depend on for every facet of our lives. And my vision would be for education to no longer focus on the three Rs but for another to be added, creating the four Rs of Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Programming. To truly inspire the next generation of teachers, I believe we need to be working alongside teachers to ensure that young people understand the fundamentals at primary and secondary school before teaching them specific skills at universities and in the workplace. Providing a rounded education, which ensures that young people have a level of competency in several aspects of computing, is the way forward.

And finally, tell us something about yourself that people here might not know.

Can I broaden that to three things? Firstly, I spent 20 years in start-up companies in Silicon Valley, experiencing both the boom and the bust and working in spin-outs that became billion-dollar industries. Secondly, I have been practising Aikido for 45 years and, in 2000, set up an international charity that runs dojos and classes across the United States and Europe. And thirdly, I hold a Commercial Pilot’s Licence and own an ex-RAF De Havilland trainer – although she is currently still back in America, and hasn’t flown for four years.

The notion of the enterprise university excites me, as it demonstrates that we do things differently here and are working to create a unique environment.
UNIVERSITY HOSTS LEADING MARITIME FIGURE

The leading official at the United Nations body responsible for global safety and security in the maritime industry visited the University this term to discuss potential collaborations with University leaders.

Mr Koji Sekimizu, Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), also met students and academics as part of World Maritime Day 2015, which has a theme of education and training.

Mr Sekimizu, the seventh elected Secretary-General of the London-based IMO, was given a tour of the Marine Building by Professor Martin Attrill, Director of the Marine Institute, and held talks with Interim Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Coslett, and Dean of the Faculty of Business, Professor Nikolaos Tzokas.

The IMO’s primary purpose is to develop and maintain a comprehensive regulatory framework to govern all matters of global shipping, including safety, environmental concerns, legal issues, technical cooperation, shipping security and piracy.

Professor Jingjing Xu, Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Business, and an expert in maritime law and economy, said: “It was a great honour to welcome Mr Sekimizu to Plymouth, as the IMO plays a significant role in an industry responsible for carrying around 90% of world trade. Plymouth University has helped in training the leaders of that industry over many years, and our world-leading facilities and researchers will ensure we continue to be at the forefront of global shipping education.”

SATELLITE ART

A lecturer in radar and telecommunications has taken the science of satellite imagery and created an artistic exhibition. Dr Chris Lavers, based at the Britannia Royal Naval College, unveiled a gallery of images at the Flavel Centre in Dartmouth. Chris, who has worked on a number of Institute of Physics-funded public engagement projects in the past, said: “Satellite imagery provides an amazing window into the diverse landforms, flora and fauna, and natural processes of the creation around us. Many natural processes have left their mark on the earth, adding to the rich tapestry that makes up the world we see around us, from flooding, earthquakes and volcanic activity, to space impacts, which have no respect for temporary earthbound geo-political boundaries.”

OPEN WIDE AND STEP INSIDE

Hundreds of primary-level schoolchildren packed into the Immersive Vision Theatre during the course of this term to watch a new short film aimed at improving oral health and wellbeing in the South West. Open Wide and Step Inside was produced in partnership between the University’s Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise and The Wrigley Company Foundation, and features a song created by Plymouth Music Zone. Dr Rob Witton, Director of Social Engagement and Community-based Dentistry, said the plan was to engage more than 2,000 children by September. “The reaction from children and schools has far exceeded my expectations and due to its success we are actively looking for more funding to continue to deliver the programme when it’s officially due to end later this year. And it’s been a fantastic example of partnership working, with the PDSE, the University, Wrigley’s, GlaxoSmithKline, Plymouth Music Zone and local schools all pulling together.”

From left: Anna Batson, Plymouth Music Zone; Rob Witton, Director of Community-based Dentistry, PUPSMD; Wendy Smith, Community Engagement Lead, Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise; Mark Andrews, Managing Director of Wrigley plc; and Arunangsu Chatterjee, TELMeD Lead, PUPSHD
BUSINESS STUDENTS SECURE UNIVERSITY FLUX TITLE

A team of business students by the name of Igniting Enterprise won the Plymouth University FLUX Final in February to earn the right to defend the institution’s national title later this year. Francesco D’Alessio, Usaj Basnet, Michelle Singh, Marc Rowbury, Mingaile Rutkauskaite and James Roberts secured their place in the national final to be held at Lancaster University, where they will attempt to emulate four previous Plymouth teams to have won the event in the past seven years.

The competition, which challenges students to solve a business or enterprise challenge before pitching to a panel of judges, saw 42 students from courses across business, arts, health and science go head-to-head with ideas to tackle the stigma around food banks.

Sponsor Callington Foodbank was so impressed with the quality of the ideas put forward that it has promised to implement them locally and potentially nationally as well. In addition, three students caught the eye of the business panel – Babcock, KPMG and IBM among them – and have been offered placement or graduate opportunities.

The standard of our faculty and University FLUX events just gets higher and higher, and that is a tribute to our students across the institution for the way they’ve embraced it year-on-year. And it is clear that the competition itself is generating social benefit to our sponsors, and employability opportunities for our students – it is actually putting them in the shop window.

Shirley Walker
Head of Careers and Employability

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR OCEAN DRILLING EXPERT

Professor Tony Morris, of the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, has been recognised for his decade-long involvement with the world’s largest and most successful international Earth Science collaborative research programme after being named an ECORD Distinguished Lecturer for 2014–15. Tony has been closely engaged with the Integrated Ocean Drilling Program (now renamed as the International Ocean Discovery Program) and has undertaken four expeditions over the past ten years, which usually involve exhausting two-month expeditions into the middle of the ocean, drilling for samples of the earth’s crust.

Tony will represent the Earth Connections theme at a series of invited lectures at a variety of institutions in Europe and Canada.
ALUMNI PORTRAITS

Professional footballer-turned scientist Charles West, and one-time Three Hungry Boys TV star Thom Hunt are among a number of alumni who are being featured in a series of giant portraits around the campus. Created by the Document Production Centre, with photographs by Lloyd Russell, the Alumni Portraits share the personal reflections of each graduate, often on a particularly treasured memory of their time at Plymouth. The series will feature alumni from across the faculties and more will appear over the summer.

The deadline for editorial submissions is MAY 9, 2015.
Please contact Andrew Merrington on 01752 588003; andrew.merrington@plymouth.ac.uk

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