A DECADE OF DENTAL EDUCATION

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THE LAUNCH OF THE ARTS INSTITUTE
CREATING A CULTURE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE IMMERSIVE VISION THEATRE
A message from our Chair of the Board of Governors

A new year, and new beginnings: I am delighted that Professor Judith Petts has now joined us from Southampton and formally taken up the reins as Vice-Chancellor of our University. I know she is keen to meet as many people as possible in her early weeks in office, so we’ll be working closely with her to help ensure that the transition from the leadership of Professor David Coslett is as smooth as possible.

I would like to pay tribute to David for the wonderful job he’s done over the past 14 months. He took over at a turbulent time, but has brought calmness and clarity to the role, has championed greater diversity at UEG, and has helped to propagate a culture of discussion and openness that underpins so much of the work we have been doing on our governance structure.

That governance programme is now focusing upon some significant milestones, including the creation of the Senate and the seeking of Privy Council approval for the changes we have proposed to our Instrument and Articles – amendments that will enable us to become a more modern and flexible institution. It promises to be a hugely important – and exciting – year for Plymouth University.

Best wishes
James

James Brent
Chairman of the Board of Governors

A message from our Vice-Chancellor

It has only been a matter of days (at the time of writing) that I’ve formally become a part of this academic community, but already I am struck by the quality and personality of Plymouth University.

In the coming months I am keen to meet as many people as I can and to hear first-hand about the exciting work that is taking place across the institution. It is clear to me that if we are to meet both the challenges and opportunities that we will face over the next few years, then key to our success will be drawing upon our University community: our staff, our students and our alumni.

One of the things I am passionate about is the experience that we provide for our students, and so it is great to see a feature in this edition about some of the ways in which we are supporting them, whether through peer learning, writing clubs, Disability Assist, or expert advice and guidance.

I hope that you enjoy this issue.

Judith

Professor Judith Petts CBE
Vice-Chancellor

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It was the first new dental school to be created in the UK for 40 years: a symbol of a national commitment to increase the number of training places available in the profession. Now, after a decade of teaching, research, and award-winning community engagement, the Plymouth University Peninsula School of Dentistry (PSD) has become an integral part of the University and a key component of the health and wellbeing landscape for the region.

In that time, the PSD has produced 287 new dentists, many of whom have remained in the South West to build their careers, and treated more than 18,000 people through NHS appointments at the four Dental Education Facilities in Plymouth, Exeter and Truro. And then there are the many community groups, charities, schools and other organisations that have benefitted from working with the students, consultants and support staff of the PSD, on events ranging from tooth-brushing clubs to triage sessions, animated films to advice and counselling.

“Ten years is a significant milestone for us,” says Professor Chris Tredwin, Head of the PSD. “In that time we have been at the cutting edge of new and innovative ways to train the dentists of tomorrow. And the results have been impressive: not only have we produced superb...
dentists who are empathetic to their patients and fully equipped to excel in the profession, but we’re addressing oral health needs across the South West, and have seen our methods adopted by other dental schools in the UK and further afield.”

The PSD was formally announced on 26 January 2006, and would come to take its place alongside the Peninsula Medical School, at the time jointly run by the Universities of Plymouth and Exeter, in the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry. The first students walked through the door in September 2007, and in early 2008 it opened its first Dental Education Facility (DEF), in Exeter.

“I came to Plymouth University as the inaugural Dean of the Peninsula Dental School in May 2006,” says Professor Elizabeth Kay, Associate Dean of Equality and Inclusion at Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (PUPSMD). “At the time, I said that the post represented an opportunity to put in place a programme that would be radical, reflect modern approaches to teaching, and equip practitioners with the skills and abilities to adapt to rapidly changing professional roles. I am delighted that we have achieved and continue to achieve those objectives.”

The DEFs are where Plymouth students treat NHS patients under the supervision of a qualified dental health professional as part of their studies, and they define the innovative approach taken by the PSD. In 2015, for example, 267 students delivered 88,210 clinical procedures across 20,182 appointments – with some 9,000 patients being treated on average each year. Where treatments are beyond the capabilities of students, they are handled by staff, and these have included periodontology, prosthetics, endodontics, conservation, minor oral surgery, paediatric, and special care.

Following the demerging of PCMD in 2012, Plymouth retained control of dentistry within the new PUPSMD faculty, and the following year unveiled the Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE) to manage and develop the DEF programme and community engagement activity. This new formalised structure has taken the work to a new level – something recognised in 2014/15 by Green Gown and Guardian University Awards.

From asylum seekers to substance abusers, and adults with learning and physical difficulties to the homeless, the PDSE and the dedicated Community Engagement Team have developed new links to a range of groups and organisations, many of which also engage directly with students thanks to the Inter Professional Engagement (IPE) projects, where teams of undergraduates will work jointly with a group.

With changing patient demographics – an ageing population living with their teeth for longer (something referred to as the ‘heavy metal generation’), combined with other conditions such as dementia – so the nature of treatments needed, and the skills required to perform them, are also altering to reflect them.

Chris says: “This is what awaits the profession in the future, and this is why there is a constant need to innovate the way in which we train the dental professionals of tomorrow while addressing the issue with innovative research – a challenge that is bread and butter to the team here at Peninsula.”

That growing research pedigree includes lab-based projects covering fields such as tooth regeneration, the effect of local anaesthetic on children’s teeth, and the development of treatments for severe gum disease. Research investigating the delivery of dental care and oral health promotion covers issues such as addressing the national problem of poor oral health in children, and oral care for those with physical and mental disabilities.

“We are still committed to our founding principles, which are to create empathetic dental professionals fit for the future of the profession, while at the same time identifying and addressing local dental health and care inequalities,” reflects Professor Rob Sneyd, Dean of PUPSMD. “What’s different between 2006 and now is that, as a result of our success, we are doing more activity based on those principles, which in turn is having an impact on our profession. Whereas at the beginning some eyebrows were raised at our approach, now our methods are being adopted by dental schools across the UK and further afield.”
The Arts Institute: bringing global excellence to local audiences

“We have arts researchers and facilities renowned nationally and internationally but within the city, and even the University, they are not so well known – we need to change that.”
These words from Professor Roberta Mock, Director of Plymouth University’s new Arts Institute, reflect the financial and aspirational investment that has gone into arts and culture within Plymouth in recent years. But they also emphasise the amount of work still needed to ensure that when people think of the University’s outstanding areas of research, the arts and humanities are up there with the very best.

In many respects, the foundations for that have already been laid, with around two-thirds of arts and humanities research rated ‘world-leading’ or ‘internationally excellent’ in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). Within that, there was a focus on global impact, from Dr Gemma Blackshaw curating exhibitions in the National Gallery to Dr Adam Benjamin teaching dance to disadvantaged children in Ethiopia; from Gerard Donovan having his books translated into multiple languages, to Professor Eduardo Miranda using computer music to help people with locked-in syndrome.

These examples of research excellence complement a blend of outstanding and nationally renowned facilities, most recently with The House in November 2014. But, says Roberta, recognition levels across the city, and within the University, are perhaps not as high as they could be. And while she is under no illusion that such a change of perception is going to happen overnight, she is firmly of the belief that the talent and will are there, and that the new institute can drive the arts and humanities towards the higher echelons of the University’s research reputation.

“When you are looking at most of the science disciplines, it is really clear what the research agenda is all about,” says Roberta, Professor of Performance Studies. “But while we, in arts and humanities, are constantly pushing the boundaries and have outstanding pockets of impactful research, the natures of our disciplines mean people often struggle to separate out the research from the everyday engagement. We have to get that out there, but in a way that emphasises our unique contribution to the city, the region, the University and the country as a whole.”

The new institute encompasses an array of subjects, including Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory; Music, Drama, Dance and Performing Arts; English Language and Literature; History; and Architecture, Built Environment and Planning. And for its first year, it will focus on three core themes – Marine Cultures; Histories, Memory and Memorialisation; and Transdisciplinary Creative Practices. They have been specifically designed to spread the word about the impact of arts research, and at the same time provide a link to the University’s existing institutes and areas of excellence, and facilitate efforts to work across faculties and subject areas.

“Marine is one of the first things people associate with Plymouth, but what they perhaps don’t realise is that we have researchers in music, creative writing and digital art working in collaboration with marine scientists,” says Roberta. “The second theme is a nod to our historians, but also to the ways subjects such as photography and architecture can help us engage with memory. And the third is about developing existing and new collaborations, to facilitate projects that demonstrate how the arts can be relevant to other subject areas.”

An advisory board is in the process of being developed to provide a crucial and critical voice in understanding what Plymouth’s arts research is all about and enabling the city to connect with it. And Roberta is keen to create an environment where all researchers – from undergraduate and postgraduate students all the way up to professors – are encouraged to push the boundaries without constraint or fear of failure.

“As a University, Plymouth has always had a reputation for trusting its researchers and giving them the freedom to be creative,” Roberta adds. “Our goal is to share knowledge and understanding about art and culture in ways that are inclusive, life-affirming, challenging, informative and enjoyable. By doing that, at the same time as making people internally and externally more aware of our areas of truly quality research, I believe we can help the city achieve its rightful status as the arts capital of the peninsula.”
The Immersive Vision Theatre (IVT) is a building of contrasts. Outside, it would appear to be simply one of the smallest permanent structures on campus and a reminder of its former use as a planetarium. But venture within, and you can be transported billions of light years to the far reaches of the observable universe, thanks to cutting-edge imagery and the latest computer software.

The latter means it is a favourite with visitors of all ages, and the IVT is regularly used by school and community groups, and for public performances and conferences. But with recent advances in technology and software, there is now a drive to make more people on campus aware of its potential, encouraging students and researchers to use it more regularly.

“The IVT transcends the gap between the arts and sciences, and its potential is enormous,” says Professor Mike Phillips, Director of i-DAT in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. “We can enable audiences to fly through the Milky Way, but we also have software through which they can journey deep inside the human body to the microscopic and nano level. Plymouth is one of very few universities to have such a facility at its disposal, and it is something quite special of which we should actually be very proud.”

The IVT was originally founded as the William Day Planetarium, opening its doors in 1967, but was transformed through HEFCE’s Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) programme. After an internal refurbishment, it was reopened by scientist and broadcaster Adam Hart Davis in 2008, around the same time as its management was taken on by i-DAT.

Once inside, audiences of up to 40 can be exposed to ‘fulldome architecture’ with images generated digitally through a high-resolution projector, fitted with a fisheye lens and connected to customised powerful computers. A ten-speaker audio system completes the immersive experience, also allowing the venue to be used for sophisticated musical performances.

In recent years, its public-facing events have included cutting-edge performances as part of the Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival, while the venue also hosted the inaugural Fulldome UK Festival (now a biennial festival hosted by the National Space Centre in Leicester, with touring shows through Brazil, Russia and European planetaria) and displays as part of the BBC’s Stargazing Live.

i-DAT and the IVT are also partners in the international EU-funded European CONNECT NEWS: A VISION OF THE FUTURE
Mobile Dome Lab artistic research project, which produced a series of interactive performances shown at the Société des Arts Technologiques in Montreal. And the IVT has also been host to globally renowned researchers including Professor Donna Cox, Director of the Advanced Scientific Visualization Laboratory at the University of Illinois, and Dr David McConville, Chair of the Board of the Buckminster Fuller Institute, both of whom completed PhDs under the banner of the University’s Planetary Collegium, led by Professor Roy Ascott.

But the aim is now to expand that academic offering further, thanks to an exciting array of software being developed by academics and technicians in Plymouth. And the IVT is now being used by students and researchers in subjects as varied as digital art and technology, biosciences, design, dentistry, geology, mathematics and psychology.

Luke Christison, a University graduate and now Associate Lecturer within i-DAT, says: “With industrial support from SCISS and their Unievew programme, using data from NASA and the European Space Agency, we are enhancing students’ learning about everything from particle physics to the geology on the surface of Mars. But conversely, the IVT has also regularly been used by the Plymouth Astronomical Society, and even by local cubs and scouts to earn their astronomy badges.”

“Under the Experiential Learning CETL programme led by Dr Ruth Weaver, the IVT was envisaged as somewhere for students to re-experience field trips and research projects,” Mike adds. “But what we have now created is a Rosetta Stone, a virtual tool that can be used to decode cultural and scientific dialogues. It is something around which many disciplines can decipher their identity in an open and truly transdisciplinary way, and the possibilities for developing its capabilities in the future are both exciting and endless.”

For further information visit: http://i-dat.org/IVT/
“This type of event only happens every seven to ten years,” Amber says. “Boys aged 8-14 walk for up to six days to reach the ceremony where they’ll dance and undertake trials in order to become men. And as we watched this incredible spectacle, it dawned on us that it may not happen again on this scale because of how the traditional way of life is changing for many Maasai.”

Evidencing that change was a key aspect of the trip, supporting an ongoing project with Comic Relief and the Farm Shop Trust in Kenya (and part-funded by the Seale-Hayne Educational Trust), which aims to help around 100,000 farming households out of poverty in Kiambu County and adjacent areas.

Over a six-week period, Amber, a Network Advisor in Entrepreneurship, two students – Liam Moore (IT) from Plymouth, and Morwenna Roberts (Horticulture) from Duchy College – and Claire Reigate, an animal health expert from Duchy, were asked to assess the progress of the work being done to support farmers through better farm shop infrastructure.

“Kenya is a country with tremendous potential, incredible entrepreneurial spirit, and hard-working people, but not necessarily the infrastructure to support it all,” Amber says. “This is the case with farming, where farmers are now increasingly targeting ‘cash crops’ rather than growing a variety for their own needs. But when they go to farm shops for supplies, they can encounter issues such as lack of stock, and poor or even incorrect labelling.”

Working with the students, Amber interviewed farmers and Farm Shop Trust franchisees across a wide area of...
A TRADITION OF ENTREPRENEURIALISM IN KENYA

Kiambu, and developed case studies from this data. She conducted a focus group with female franchisees, assessed the organisation’s supply chain, and developed a list of minimum requirements for a shop assistant training programme.

“Overall, we found that the Farm Shop Trust model was working well, particularly the agricultural and horticultural training and demonstration days for farmers.” Amber says. “But because they are in this rapid growth phase, there have been issues around stock and supply, with the organisation struggling to keep up with the number of new franchises opening up. And in a country where vets’ fees are so expensive, it is absolutely vital that the farm shop assistants have advanced product knowledge and good communication skills so that they can provide the expert advice needed on whether, for example, a certain type of seed is right for a customer’s soil.”

Amber wrote weekly blog articles on the support and free training that the Farm Shop Trust provides to farmers and franchisees, and taught three staff how to write blog articles and use WordPress so that the work could be carried on once she’d left. She also helped to coordinate development of the organisation’s website.

And it was towards the end of the project that the opportunity arose to visit the Maasai ceremony, located within the Olakirimatian group ranch near the town of Magadi. Driving six hours from their base in Nairobi, Amber, Claire and Morwenna camped on land belonging to the host of the event, and spent three days observing – and participating in – some of the festivities. And Amber now has a special memento of the visit, after she was presented with a traditional shuka cloth, the ceremonial sheet that is wrapped around the shoulders.

“The trip to Kenya has resonated on a personal level,” Amber reflects. “It is very important to realise and experience just how many diverse ways of life there are and how each is important. The Maasai living within the boundaries of the Olakirimatian group ranch in Kenya offer a remarkable insight into the impact of culture on entrepreneurial behaviour – old and new socio-economic systems living side by side, and we were there in the middle of it.”

The University has been involved with ongoing research in Kenya, led by Dr Robert Newbery of the Faculty of Business. Much of this work has looked at the changing culture of the Maasai and their entrepreneurial behaviour.
ANDRÉ ROBERTS: swimming against the tide

What possesses someone to swim the Channel? 21 miles – if you’re lucky – across one of the busiest shipping lanes in Europe, with jellyfish for company... and that’s before you consider the training programme.

“I thought I needed a new challenge,” answers André Roberts, 21, a third year BSc (Hons) Chemistry student, who at the end of last year added his name to the roll of honour of those who’ve conquered ‘La Manche’. “I started planning the swim more than two years ago, and I guess I didn’t fully realise what I was taking on!”

André only took up swimming at the age of 17, through triathlons, but having enrolled at Plymouth, he joined various clubs in the city. And it was through friends made in the pool that he became inspired to undertake the crossing, and found himself putting down a £1,000 deposit to secure his place a full two years before the event.

“It sounds bizarre that you have to do it that far in advance, but there are only two associations that regulate crossings, and they have limited slots,” he says.

Swimming every evening, and three mornings a week, in the Plymouth Life Centre, André began to build up his stamina, averaging around 40km per week. In the summer he would also swim at Cawsand, all balanced against a packed 25-hour week on his degree.

“I did find it quite difficult,” André admits. “It’s a heavy workload, so between studying and swimming, there was no time for any socialising.”

In June 2014, André achieved his first six-hour swim after competing in the British Long Distance Swimming Association’s ‘Champion of Champions’ event in Dover, and then, two months later, he was part of a relay team that swam to France. But it was not until August, last year, when he swam 21 miles across Lake Windermere and back at night – a
feat that took him 11 hours and 45 minutes – that he knew he was ready.

The big day was scheduled for September, but high winds forced a 24-hour postponement just three hours before they were due to convene on the dock. One day later, he lined up on the shore, ready to go.

He says: “I think that start point has to be the loneliest place in marathon swimming. I had a moment to take it all in and part of me thought there’s still time for you to get out of this. Fortunately the other voice in my head shouted much louder ‘You knew it was going to be like this, no turning back, this is it!’ The boat’s horn sounded, I sprinted and dived into the waves. I was buzzing.”

But, one hour into the crossing, André noticed that his dad, who was on the support boat, was being sick – and then, at the two-hour food break, he realised something might be seriously wrong.

“I noticed people running about the boat and I couldn’t see dad anywhere,” he recalls. “My friend Beth told me, ‘It’s okay, keep swimming, you’re doing great’. But I knew that something wasn’t right and I was beginning to worry. Then the unthinkable happened: Eric, the pilot, came out on deck and waved me in and told me that we had to get back to land. I looked at him for a moment and thought, ‘Is this some kind of sick joke?’ It wasn’t.”

The sea sickness had caused his father to keel over and hit his head, and it meant the attempt had to be cancelled. André climbed out of the water and was ushered back to Dover in the boat.

“I burst into tears on my mother’s shoulder,” André admits. “This was the end of my channel swimming experience, no glory of landing in France, just a feeling of utter disappointment and despair.”

At a total cost in excess of £4,000, and the prospect of having to wait until the end of 2016 for the next opportunity, the dream appeared to be sunk. But one month later, the skipper of the vessel contacted André and offered him the chance to do it again if he could cover the fuel costs. He did not need asking twice, and a few days later, at 3.30am, he again breached the waves at Samphire Hoe.

He recalls: “All I could see for the first three hours was the bright glare from the lights on board the boat. Every so often, I felt a sharp pain across my chest as jellyfish tumbled down my body. At least the tingling sensation was keeping me warm!

“At ten hours, the shipping buoy that marked the start of the French inshore waters came into view. This was where you have to beat the tide or risk adding hours on to your swim time and potentially failing. Things were hurting, but the weather was perfect and I started looking up for France. It never seemed to get any closer.

“I began to swim faster, and then the water became shallower and I started to scoop up sand in my hands. I realised that I was landing. I stood up, a little dizzy with excitement and the fact that I had been horizontal for 13-plus hours! I managed to clear myself of the water and burst into tears – I couldn’t believe what had just happened. A Frenchman came up to me and handed me a pebble and said, ‘Bravo monsieur, très bien!’ I smiled at him and shook his hand.”

The team returned to Dover in triumph this time, and after signing his name at the White Horse pub, as is tradition, André was off, returning to Plymouth at 4am on the Monday morning.

“I had a physical chemistry lecture at 9am – and I made it,” he says. “Though I’m not sure how much I took in!”

André admits there are no further challenges on the horizon, beyond graduating and starting a career, but it’s proven to be a high-water mark in his life. He says: “I’ve met so many incredible people through this and all of them have that same mad sparkle in their eye!”
“Student engagement can take many forms, and can be as simple as attending a lecture or speaking with a tutor,” says Mel Joyner, when asked about the University’s approach to engaging with its student body. “It’s a choice, but also part of the lived experience, and varies from student to student.”

The University’s new Director of Student Services has formally been in post since November 2015, and the former Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences is under no illusion as to some of the challenges that lie ahead for higher education over the coming years. But, with her teams in Careers & Employability, Complaints & Appeals, Learning Support & Wellbeing, and the student-facing elements of Residence Life, she is focused on creating a culture of engagement that is both enabling and inclusive.

“We start off from the principle and ethos of care,” says Mel, who joined the University as a lecturer in social sciences in 1996. “What we want to do is contribute to the University environment and student experience so that students feel cared for and safe in order that they can take ‘academic risks’. And within that, we need to both support the student but also the faculties, which have the primary responsibility of delivering that academic experience.”

The ‘joint challenge’ for Student Services and the Students’ Union, with whom they work closely, is to build upon the success they’ve had in engaging with the 18- to 21-year-old undergraduates, and look to improve in areas that have typically proven more difficult to reach.

Mel says: “If you have a timetable that dictates 30 hours per week of lectures, and you’re commuting in from Cornwall, you’re probably not going to spend a great deal of time in the Students’ Union. One of the challenges we face is accessing those marginal voices.”

Providing new ways to engage with the University, and broadening choice in terms of the range of services offered, has been central to addressing that challenge. For example, confirming the feedback provided by the UPSU Pre-Freshers’ Survey and freshers’
feedback, Residence Life has introduced the option to request ‘quiet’ accommodation (with up to 220 beds available), and alcohol-free events have also proven to be a very popular addition to the calendar.

There is also a range of support for literacy and numeracy, for example the SUM:UP drop-in sessions, hosted in the library, which provide advice on all aspects of undergraduate mathematics and statistics. There is a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow who can be booked for appointments, while the Writing Café, based on the top floor of the Babbage Building, not only encourages students (and staff) to explore techniques and strategies to improve their academic writing, but draws in community organisations and contacts as well, and runs events throughout the year. Hundreds of students from across the faculties use the café every term, and some are paid to be writing mentors. In addition, postgraduate architecture students have been helping with plans to refine the layout, to provide new lockable storage, and private and communal seating areas.

Christie Pritchard, Learning Development Advisor, said: “In the higher education context, there is increasing attention upon the ways in which physical spaces on campus can create opportunities for, and barriers to, learning. Social, communal spaces can be extremely valuable in this context because they support discussion related to research and learning. What we’ve done with the Writing Café is take an under-utilised area in Babbage and draw on the historical legacy of the coffeehouse to provide a creative hub where staff, students and members of the wider community can meet to explore and develop their academic writing alongside student writing mentors and Learning Developers.”

Providing pastoral care and support to students is also a major part of the offering, particularly with a huge increase in the number of students

Managing parental expectation

“I have definitely observed a significant rise in ‘helicopter parenting’, and I also saw an increased trend in New Zealand before I left,” says Scott Walker, Head of Residence Life and Student Accommodation Services. “And that is something that we have to be mindful of when we run our service.”

The ‘helicopter parent’ is the term used across the higher education sector to refer to the more hands-on approach that some parents have adopted to their children’s experience, particularly when it comes to accommodation. This typically manifests itself in an increased number of enquiries and complaints direct from parents rather than students, and issues where parents complete the accommodation application themselves, resulting in unhappiness from their children when they arrive for the first time.

So the team has made a number of changes, including insisting that all applications are completed by the student, and providing a wider range of accommodation, with new quiet zones introduced. The team are also considering the introduction of an induction course for parents, creating bespoke communications for them, hosting a specific area on the University website for them, and providing the option for students to name their parents as ‘guarantors’, which will enable the University to share more information with them if needed.

“We are building the residence life model to act as a safety net for students,” Scott says, “where they can learn independent living in a supportive environment. So within the community we give the message that students should try to resolve issues themselves first with the advice and support of the residential assistants and hall coordinators. Parental involvement reduces our ability to do this as the parent’s expectation is that we will solve it rather than help the student resolve it. Ultimately, it’s about marketing our halls as a great option where we implement a friendly, supportive and safe environment, but one where the student experience is entirely related to what they put in.”
reporting mental health issues. A Higher Education Funding Council for England report published in September 2015 found the number of students declaring mental health problems had increased from just less than 8,000 in 2008/09 to nearly 18,000 in 2012/13, with HEFCE predicting that the trend would continue.

“We put together a business case for two full-time mental health workers and they have been a fantastic addition to the Student Counselling and Personal Development team, offering one-to-one and group support for students, and advice for staff,” says John Hilsdon, Head of Learning Support & Wellbeing, when asked about the issue. “The Student Counselling team also offers personal development sessions, including ‘Mood Boost’ and mindfulness, a 24-hour advice line, and the ‘Listening Post’, which is staffed by trained volunteers from outside of the University. These initiatives owe a great deal to the pioneering leadership of Anne Bentley, the manager of our counselling service. And there is SHINE, another highly acclaimed Plymouth University initiative, a self-help online-resource site that provides articles and links, and practical exercises relating to psychological and emotional wellbeing to hundreds of followers, via social media.”

The challenging mental health landscape is part of a broader picture that includes government cuts to the level of disability support it provides to universities. At Plymouth, there are around 3,600 students with a declared disability, representing 16% of the student population – around double that of the national average – and until recently the cost of meeting their additional needs was largely met through the Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA). But, in 2014, the government announced that it would be making significant changes to the way the funding worked, switching the emphasis to universities being responsible for funding – from their fee income – the ‘reasonable adjustments’ needed for students with disabilities. And that includes no longer funding changes to accommodation, and severely cutting back the support available to those with less-severe forms of disability.

“Plymouth University has a reputation for being an excellent provider of services to students with disabilities going back a number of years,” says John, “certainly to the time of Judith Waterfield, who was a National Teaching Fellow and undertook a great deal of pioneering work here. As a result, a lot of parents have seen Plymouth as a go-to university.”

Disability Assist

The University’s support for disabled students begins the moment they apply to study here via the Disability Assist (DAS) admissions programme.

“We began our pre-admission work for the 2016/17 academic year in January,” says Karen Sheret, the DAS manager. “It’s a huge undertaking, because we assess what support the student may need, and that often involves scheduling meetings for students with more complex disabilities along with their family and a member of the Residence Life team and their programme staff. For the past three years, we have also run a ‘Pre-Induction Scheme’ for students on the autistic spectrum. Students with autism are invited onto campus for up to two days, along with their family if they choose, so that they can orientate themselves and learn where the different facilities are – the cafés, the libraries, where the city centre is, etc. And as part of that, we pay for their hotel stay and their food on campus – it really is one of our flagship projects with great student feedback.”

Support for autistic students is also catered for in partnership with student-led services. Other projects include ‘Social Eyes’, a training programme that facilitates social skills and social understanding for students on the autistic spectrum.

The DAS team has redesigned the Student Support Document (SSD) to make it easier for staff and students to understand – and inform the faculties of the individual needs of students with disabilities, and provide ways of implementing an inclusive learning environment. It has also established a reimbursement scheme for students who struggle to receive a diagnosis for a specific learning disability or ADHD, enabling them to fast track a diagnosis and pave the way for the appropriate support.
In advance of the cuts to the DSA, the Disability Assist team has been running awareness-raising sessions with academics on the changes and their implications, and working with Teaching & Learning Support to look at how they might advise academics on ways to make the learning environment even more inclusive.

John says: “That might mean making more learning materials available in advance of sessions, increasing the use of video and online content, offering alternative forms of assessment, and sometimes offering modifications to the learning experience such as alternatives to group-work. It’s not always easy to do, but it’s about making the experience more flexible and suitable for a range of learners.”

The disability issue is one of three core challenges facing higher education, according to Mel – one she has close experience of, both as a specialist tutor and for her work with Sarah Anderson in introducing the case conferencing approach (see boxed articles for more details on disability, student debt and the ‘helicopter parent’).

But addressing such challenges can, in the process, create opportunities for partnerships between Learning Support and Wellbeing and the student body. For example, the acclaimed Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS) is largely delivered by trained students who lead regular study sessions with those in the year below, facilitate discussion around course content and approaches to learning, and capture and reflect experiences and concerns from their students. And the success of PALS was demonstrated when students Ross Busby and Kathryn Edwards were invited to present an academic poster on personal tutoring at the Houses of Parliament in February.

John says: “Ultimately, our ethos is to improve the student experience, and we do that by both providing professional support staff, but also offering opportunities for students to get involved. Whether it is for their own professional development or simply because they want to help, we can help students develop their communication skills and their teamwork and autonomy, and it will contribute to their Higher Education Achievement Report.”

Student Services also provides an important link to the community, and one of Mel’s remits is to maintain close working partnerships with the likes of Plymouth City Council and Devon & Cornwall Police. That means that key initiatives such as Prevent fall under her purview, something closely aligned to her own teaching and research interests in public policy, sociology, criminology and criminal justice studies.

“It’s an enjoyable part of the job,” Mel says. “It’s an opportunity for us as a university to work with local authorities in the public arena and address some of the challenges facing our students, particularly vulnerable students, such as alcohol misuse, sexual violence, lad culture, and radicalisation – which in the South West is less about Islamic radicalisation and more about the Far Left.”

Supporting, empowering, enabling: all watchwords within the Student Services strategy, and an indication of the direction of travel for the function.

“There is a difference between simply providing a service to our students and really engaging with them,” Mel says. “It’s about responding flexibly to the student journey, and that is what we have to be prepared to deliver.”

Student finance

From providing support and guidance on applying for student finance, bursaries and scholarships to providing financial assistance and advice for those most in need, the Student Funding Team plays a vital role in supporting the University’s students.

“We offer a service all year round, although our work begins with Open Days and Applicant Days,” says Kay Coutts, Student Funding Advisor. “We find that parents and students have lots of questions around funding and budgeting, so we try to provide them with as much advice and guidance up front, and as such try to ensure that the students receive everything they are entitled to.”

The allocation of the various University bursaries and scholarships available at Plymouth is mostly triggered automatically during the application process – but there are still times when students are faced with budgetary crises that require University support.

Kay says: “When students come to see us they may be dealing with a sudden and unexpected event that has thrust them into hardship, or facing ongoing financial difficulties, perhaps with rent, travel or childcare costs. We ensure that they have pursued every avenue that they need to – and we have available funds that we can dip into to help if appropriate.”

These include the Financial Support Fund, making sure those with the greatest need have access to additional funds; and interest-free short term loans to help with delayed funding. And they also link in with the Student Jobs team to ensure that work options are thoroughly explored.

“Our friendly team is here to help students immediately with the best possible advice,” adds Kay. “It’s about supporting them, but also helping them to support themselves.”
It may not have been the biggest graduation ceremony in the University’s history: a little over 100 students receiving their degrees in business and science. But what it lacked in scale it made up for in significance as the first cohort of Plymouth graduates in Sri Lanka took their bow and made their way into the world.

It also signified a graduation of sorts for the University’s partnership with the National School of Business Management (NSBM) in Colombo. For more than three years the collaboration has grown, with Plymouth staff regularly flying 5,500 miles to deliver teaching, and students from both institutions taking up reciprocal international study opportunities.

Dr Dulekha Kasturiratne, Associate Professor of Marketing, has been lead academic on the partnership since its launch and has worked on a range of projects in the country, including the PMI2 programme, on developing entrepreneurship through collaboration. “I think the two institutions have learned much from each other,” Dulekha says. “There have undoubtedly been some cross-cultural challenges, but discussion and negotiation have led to mutual understanding. And with challenges come reward, and we can be very proud of where we’ve got to after three years.”

Eight courses were offered at the outset, covering business, computing, finance, accounting, marketing, and tourism and hospitality, and the University has since supplemented those with degrees in shipping and business communications.

Dulekha says: “We started with modest student numbers – no more than about 150 – but now, across three academic years, we have nearly 1,500 students. This is a huge achievement for the partnership in such a short time period, and speaks volumes for the input of the University and NSBM teams involved.”

“The venture has been quite a successful partnership, considering the growing competition for undergraduate-level education in the country,” adds Mr Chaminda Rathnayake, Senior Manager of
Academic Affairs, at NSBM. “The partnership with Plymouth has also enhanced the reputation of NSBM as an institute that awards internationally recognised British degrees in IT and business. Moreover, we have also benefited from the exposure to the processes and procedures of academic delivery and administration used by Plymouth. The knowledge acquired has helped us in turn to become more efficient.”

Under the agreement, the first year of the degree belongs to NSBM, with the second and third years being quality assured by Plymouth. And it is in that final year that the ‘flying faculty’, comprising some 15 academics from the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Science and Engineering, swing into action. Flying out for two weeks at a time, they deliver around half of the final year modules in person, and validate the rest.

Bogdan Ghita, Associate Professor in the School of Computing, Electronics and Mathematics, is one of those delivering the degrees. He says: “Although it can be a rather demanding experience, I do enjoy teaching in Sri Lanka as I feel that my expertise contributes directly to the learning process of the students, who really do embrace the information and knowledge. The learning culture is slightly different, as traditionally in Sri Lanka academic staff engage in a more formal, strict interaction with students, whereas I try to encourage my students to express their views and speak freely in order to help them understand the concepts discussed and guide them through their learning.”

Dr Carmen Lopez, Lecturer in Marketing, in the Plymouth Graduate School of Management, is another who is responsible for course delivery. She adds: “Working in Sri Lanka is a rewarding and educational experience both personally and professionally. I found the students respectful, responsive and engaged in the subject matter, and I enjoyed adapting to the environment in which I was teaching and living. The experience allows me some opportunity to see life in Sri Lanka and has been a valuable learning experience in understanding the motivations and priorities of the students in Sri Lanka compared with those of their peers in the UK.”

With demand for higher education in Sri Lanka outstripping supply, the partnership is being closely monitored by the country’s government. Indeed, the graduation brochure for the Plymouth event carried no less than seven introductions from heads of state and government leaders, including the President and Prime Minister.

NSBM is taking steps to meet that extra demand by creating a 26-acre green campus in Homogama, which will enable the school to enrol up to 30,000 students, and will contain in-house supermarkets, banking facilities, and business centres.

Mr Rathnayake says: “The Green Campus is a Rs. 10.2 billion investment, and seeks not only to provide an unmatched academic experience but also to set the backdrop for an authentic university life. And we see many potential benefits, from elevating the quality and level of education in Sri Lanka to new heights comparable with those in the developed world, to retaining Sri Lankan students and attracting overseas students to the country. We hope it will contribute towards establishing Sri Lanka as a seat of learning in South Asia.”

With new courses under discussion, not to mention interest being expressed in our marine and maritime expertise, there is potentially an even greater role that Plymouth might play in Sri Lanka in the future.

“Graduation was the culmination of years of hard work, and was a celebration that was shared by the students, the parents, and the two institutions,” says Professor Simon Payne, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and strategic lead for the University’s international partnerships. “It’s a very important strategic partnership for the University, and interesting stories are beginning to emerge from our presence here. People have taken notice of us.”
It is a dichotomy that occupies the thoughts of Stephen Ball, the very recently-retired CEO of Lockheed Martin UK. From his vantage point, he has been able to view first-hand the growing deficit in terms of the number of engineers required by the country in order to support its growth targets and the actual figure being produced. It’s a situation exacerbated by a lack of diversity and too few entering from non-academic routes. So, if the pipeline of talent has become ‘choked’, how do we prevent the economy from wheezing and misfiring as a result?
One answer might be pioneered by the Tamar Engineering Project, a new programme conceived by the University’s Development Office, and championed by Stephen. It seeks to provide financial support and mentoring opportunities for those students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and Stephen is leading from the front, personally mentoring a third year engineering student, Ajen Limbu, through weekly phone calls and emails.

“I’m finding mentoring Ajen to be hugely rewarding, and it’s transformative to see him building his confidence, tackling issues and being successful,” Stephen says. “For example, he reached out to me shortly after he began his placement because he needed to talk about something, and then he emailed me a few days later to say he’d sorted it out and it was going much better. Ajen is doing wonderfully well, and he has that passion that engineers need to succeed.”

Stephen’s own passion was rooted in his upbringing in Cornwall, where his dad was an engineer for Cable & Wireless, and his mother an artist. Racing cars and rockets fired his imagination and led him to enrol at Plymouth Polytechnic in 1973.

He says: “When I arrived it was a large version of a technical college, really nothing like the university as it is today. I think it had one computer, and you used to have to fill out a form, which would be manually processed onto punch cards. You would then put the cards into the computer and they’d run it overnight and you’d wait to see if it had worked or not.

“I graduated in 1976 and it was just at that point that scientific electronic calculators were becoming available. Within three to four years nobody was using a slide rule anymore and you could do it all on a calculator. So it heralded a massive change in processing power.”

It was the award of an Honorary Doctorate of Science that connected Stephen to the University in 2013, and he took the opportunity to look around the Smeaton and Brunel buildings to see how things had changed – or otherwise.

“It was strange because there were some things that were so different, and others where it was like I’d just been home for the weekend,” he says. “I walked into the materials science lab in the Brunel Building and suddenly I was back there in my degree. And as we walked around, it was clear that the fundamentals of engineering being taught there were still the same. Those fundamentals don’t change, and to see the students building their bridges in that first week was very exciting. It was great to see how things had moved on in such a positive way.”

In January, Stephen also had an opportunity to see how the University was helping to support both Marine Academy Plymouth and University Technical College Plymouth. A firm believer in encouraging multiple routes into engineering, and not just through higher education, he was particularly struck by the standard of teaching at UTC Plymouth.

“It was clear that these people were engineering practitioners who had an understanding of the challenges of industry,” Stephen says. “The quality of their education is going to be more relevant, and that is supported by the academic side, which is tailored toward specific applications, such as writing for business.”

Acting as a Special Advisor to Lockheed, having retired from his CEO position in December, Stephen has pledged to meet with his contacts in industry to generate further support for the Tamar Engineering Project, and that includes senior figures in the Office for Fair Access.

“I hope it can become a national benchmark, and a differentiator for Plymouth,” adds Stephen. “It aligns with government objectives and the needs of industry, and it provides the University with an opportunity to be at the cutting edge of developing something that could make a profound difference.”
By her own admission, Cleveland, Ohio, is an unlikely spawning ground for marine biologists, let alone those able to swim in political waters and influence the tide of policy. But then Dr Abigail McQuatters-Gollop, Lecturer in Marine Conservation, and an internationally respected scientist in the field of plankton, was never going to accept anything less.

“From the age of three I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life,” Abigail says. “I grew up in a boring suburb of the city – a city that, if you look at the map, could not be further from the sea. So, it’s weird that the marine environment became my complete obsession.”

It was the documentaries of trailblazing ichthyologist Eugenie Clark, programmes such as The Voyage of the Mimi, and trips to Sea World (“before we knew what it was really like”) that started it. Then, at school, Abigail excelled at biology and won the school prize despite refusing to dissect animals as she was instructed to do. She received a scholarship to study marine biology at the University of Miami before later switching her major to marine affairs and policy. It was an era of her life when she experienced the wonder of the Florida Keys, and saw first-hand some of the human impacts on the environment.

“Biscayne National Park was only a couple of miles away, and I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time in the water, snorkelling and diving in these sub-tropical waters,” Abigail says. “But I also saw how people were impacting upon the environment – touching coral, anchoring where they shouldn’t, and even conducting marine archaeology using dynamite. I found that quite shocking.”

Abigail went on to do a masters in marine affairs and policy, and was working at both a Geographical Information Systems company and as a part-time marine science...
teacher in a high school when the economic downturn, post 9/11, altered her course.

“I lost both of my jobs, so a friend and I came to Plymouth on a whim,” she says. “I ended up working for Royal Mail, and then a couple of years later I undertook my PhD at the University under the supervision of Professor Laurence Mee and Professor Martin Attrill.”

Having completed her thesis on plankton as indicators for marine ecosystem health, and as a method of informing policy, Abigail joined the Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science as a post-doctoral researcher. She began to shape the role into one focused on policy, securing European funding for her work and a NERC knowledge exchange fellowship. She was also invited to sit on Defra’s Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas Evidence Group.

“ Policy-makers have very different timescales – they often need things at a moment’s notice, so you have to be responsive and adaptable. And you need to be able to form relationships and build trust. I am the representative for the UK plankton community, and I’ve learned that government agencies will trust you if you can truly present a united front.”

After eight years at SAHFOS, Abigail joined the University in September 2015, and says she really enjoys the new dimension of working with students. “I want my students to understand all aspects – from the ecology and biology that underpin ocean and marine conservation to human pressures on the marine ecosystem,” she says. “If we can produce graduates that are engaged with all stages, it will be better for our environment in the future.”

It’s a far cry from that suburb in Cleveland, playing guitar in punk bands and aspiring to a life aquatic. “Cleveland has changed a great deal in the intervening years, but I love Plymouth – it’s my home now,” she adds.
When law looks at history, it tends to assume that a particular outcome was inevitable.

“I have spent the last 15 years showing that they do,” says Professor Judith Rowbotham, reflecting upon her partnership with Professor Kim Stevenson, one that has delivered the case for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the social and historical context of law and criminal justice.

From finding parallels of modern crimes in past history to looking at how contemporary policy around crime and the use of law in everyday life is overly reliant on models predicated upon studies of big cities, the two have defined a new field of enquiry. In the process, they have created an international network of academics and legal and non-legal practitioners, and seen their work translated across language and disciplinary boundaries.

“It is a quote etched in their memories: eminent Cambridge historian Sir Richard Evans telling an audience that “law and history have nothing to say to one another”.

“What interests us, though, is the cultural, social and historical forces at play when laws come to be passed and the consequences of them,” adds Kim, Professor of Socio-legal History in the Plymouth Law School – and the person whose question prompted Sir Richard to deliver his damning judgment many years earlier.

Kim and Judith met nearly 20 years ago when they were at Nottingham Trent University: “I was known for working on Victorian society and culture,” remembers Judith. “My first book was ‘Good Girls Make Good Wives’, which looked at guidance for girls in Victorian literature. Then Kim rang me out of the blue and said, ‘Were Victorians interested in bad behaviour?’ I can say that, tempted by this opportunity, I abandoned good behaviour without a backwards glance!”

“We started working on how a sense of history, either recent or distant, could really provide context...
to present ideas and potentially become the basis for future policy," Kim recalls. "It became apparent to us at this time that there were many other people interested in working on crime and law-breaking across disciplinary boundaries, particularly law and history.”

It resulted in the pair forming the SOLON Research Group in 1999, which now, as the SOLON consortium, promotes interdisciplinary study in law, crime and history, and encompasses seven universities and 350 academics and practitioners. Described by both as an ‘umbrella organisation’, its aim has been to inform members of the latest developments through conferences and regular emails.

Kim, a former sergeant with Nottinghamshire Police, moved to Plymouth in 2004 and introduced the University to the network – and Judith to the University. They had already organised a number of conferences together while at Nottingham Trent, including ‘Behaving Badly’, ‘Off the Rails’, and three on Hate Crime. From 2004, they added further conferences on Crime, Violence and the Modern State; Experiencing the Law; and a series on War Crimes, the reports of which have circulated internationally and are used by groups in Kosovo, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cambodia and beyond.

A particular specialism is in crime reportage, and, together with their PhD student, Samantha Pegg, they produced Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility, 1820-2010. This was the first sustained survey of the history of crime reportage, covering the late 18th century right up to the Leveson Inquiry, and explored how reporting has affected how people understand the operation of the law.

One of the first events in this project is an interdisciplinary Witness Seminar, in April, which will examine how policing and the public perception of it has changed in Plymouth since the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.

Judith says: “One of the things we argue is that when it comes to interdisciplinary research, you cannot just borrow from neighbouring disciplines as it suits you. You have to understand the theory and the method used by that discipline, and above all respect it, when you choose to use it. I taught myself law through textbooks from the 18th century onwards, bringing myself up to date, and now I teach historians how to be law-minded – and lawyers how to be history-minded.”

“There we want to look at provincial locations and see if the current habit of applying universal strategies works. In doing so, we can develop a methodology that provides a template that could be rolled out to provincial towns, here and abroad,” adds Kim.

When law looks at history, it tends to assume that a particular outcome was inevitable.
The glass of water ripples with vibration and a large eye presses up against the car window, the retina shrinking as torchlight is shone into it. It’s clear that we’re in *Jurassic Park* territory here – but there’s a comic twist. The camera pans back to reveal that the owner of the eye is a large and familiar balloon animal, before the video closes with a tagline, “They’re Coming.”

You want the work so you end up agreeing even if you know inside that it’s not the right thing to do. Over time, however, you develop the confidence and the experience to stand your ground.

**ANOTHER ROBOT:**
**GETTING ANIMATED**

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**CONNECT | SPOTLIGHT:** INNOVATIVE, ENTERPRISING PEOPLE
The animation is a teaser that has supported the University’s 2016 National Student Survey campaign, one of four based around an iconic scene from cinema and featuring the balloon branding created last year. And it’s indicative of the playful and imaginative work of graduate start-up business – and the video’s creator – Another Robot.

“We try to have some fun with what we do,” says Jacob Roberts, who launched Another Robot in 2012 with friend and fellow BA (Hons) Media Arts graduate Adam Howard. “I think there is a light-hearted element to a lot of our work.”

Their portfolio is growing steadily, and with it, their renown. With video and animation supporting social media campaigns for the likes of Vodafone, The Sunday Times, and giffgaff, their reputation has reached the creative heartland of London. Not bad, considering their commitment to remain rooted in the South West.

“The location is important to us – we like living here,” says Adam, who, like Jacob, grew up in Somerset. “And we’re in an industry where we can work through agencies, who will submit pitches to clients, and where all of our contact can be done digitally.”

The possibility of going into business was something the pair had discussed during their degree – but it was only when they reunited for graduation in 2011 that they set themselves an ultimatum: find something interesting to do by Christmas, or move back to Plymouth and set up a business.

“I didn’t even wait that long,” says Jacob, 26. “I applied for and got a part-time job at the University working in the media library, and the rest of the time was spent working with Adam to get the business up and running.”

Their first paid job came via a flatmate, who introduced them to a local band that needed someone to produce one of their videos. It was the start of a steep learning curve.

“Thinking back to that first job, we were running around in circles making sure we did not put a foot wrong,” says Jacob.

“And we definitely had a tendency to be ‘yes men’ in those early days,” adds Adam, 27. “You want the work so you end up agreeing even if you know inside that it’s not the right thing to do. Over time, however, you develop the confidence and the experience to stand your ground.”

With low overheads – the pair worked from home and already had most of the equipment they needed – they were able to reinvest the revenue from their early jobs back into the business. And in 2014, they moved into Urban Splash accommodation at Royal William Yard, where they share a building with other businesses with strong connections to the University, including creative agency Knowledge, and videogame designers Mutant Labs.

“It’s great to be around people who have started their own business,” says Adam. “Even though businesses like Knowledge and Mutant Labs are different to us, we share similar problems and highs.”

One of those highs came in early 2015 when Another Robot was approached by a London agency that wanted to put the company forward for a contract to create a series of vines for a social media campaign promoting Microsoft Office. They duly won it.

“We realised at that point that we could pitch for and win big client work,” says Jacob. “And we stopped going for everything and began to be a little more selective in the work we do.”

That includes coming back to the University and working on the teasers for the NSS, which were shown across the campus to raise awareness among students that the survey period was open.

“We really enjoy the creative side of things and pitch for jobs that enable us to input into the concept behind the animation,” says Jacob. “And hopefully we can push on this year, continue to secure big client work, and maybe move into creating content for bigger screens.”
ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY STUDENTS

Students in the School of Art and Media were cast in the role of technical gurus for the filming of a live insert into a forthcoming play. Using green screen technology, the students shot news and weather reading sequences for a production of *Robin Hood & His Merry Men*, which played at the Barbican Theatre over Christmas. BBC Spotlight presenters Natalie Cornah and Emily Wood, who were filmed by the students, spent some time talking to them about work in television.

Phil Ellis, Associate Head of School, Art & Media, said: “It was a fantastic experience for the BA (Hons) Media Arts and BA (Hons) TV Arts students. Working with professionals from the BBC, Le Navet Bête (who are Plymouth graduates) and the Barbican Theatre on a live project will be great for their understanding of working collaboratively in such a pressured, but hugely enjoyable, environment. The students are working on their own online TV channel so the experience was good practice for their forthcoming live streaming projects, and the broadcast aspect of our programmes is something that we are looking to develop and strengthen at the University.”

LABORATORY TOURS OF PUPSMD

Patients, families and fundraisers have been visiting the University to see for themselves some of the work that is being carried out to develop therapies and treatments for some of the world’s most pernicious diseases.

As part of a public engagement programme, groups with an interest in brain tumour research, Huntington’s disease and Parkinson’s have all visited the Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry (PUPSMD) in recent months and been given a preview of the under-construction £14.8 million Derriford Research Facility.

The latest tour just before Christmas saw people who are either diagnosed with Parkinson’s, or who care for someone with the condition, visit PUPSMD laboratories and meet some of the lead researchers working in the field, including Dr Kim Tieu and Dr Oleg Anichtchik.

Kim, who leads a world-first study looking at how a drug that protects mitochondria (the ‘batteries’ of our cells) could be used to slow or stop Parkinson’s disease, said: “It was wonderful to be able to invite this group to our labs to see at first hand the work that we do. Whenever we meet people with or affected by Parkinson’s, it is a good reminder to us of why we carry out our research to find effective therapies for this devastating neurological condition.”

As well as Kim’s study, other research on show included another mitochondria-based study led by Kim and Oleg, and a range of clinical trials investigating the effectiveness of not just drugs, but also technology.
MARITIME MEDAL FOR FORMER ACADEMIC

Paul Wright, Visiting Fellow in the Plymouth University Marine Institute, and a long-time former member of the Faculty of Business, has been awarded the prestigious Merchant Navy Medal. The honour recognises ‘services to maritime training and the Nautical Institute’ and was presented to Paul by former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West of Spithead, at a ceremony at Trinity House, London. Paul spent 35 years at the University and predecessor organisations, training seafarers and helping to support persons wishing to work in maritime shore-based employment.

ONE GIANT READ

University academics and scientists including Professor Iain Stewart, Professor Camille Parmesan, Professor Kevin Jones and Dr Natasha Stephen have all contributed to a major arts project celebrating astronaut Tim Peake’s journey into space.

One Giant Read was launched in December to provide access to reading materials and content themed around the Principia Mission. Created by charity Literature Works, in partnership with the Royal National Institute for the Blind and the UK Space Agency, and supported by the Plymouth Literature Project at Plymouth University, it featured both science fact and science fiction – including the work of Plymouth academics.

Professor Kevin Jones, Dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering, said: “Space exploration is one of the greatest scientific achievements of our time, and consistently inspires people to think beyond the boundaries of what might be possible. One Giant Read provided a great opportunity for us to use our world-leading expertise to enthuse people about STEM subjects.”
JUMPERS FOR CHARITY

Animal conservation student Nicola Congdon, in the School of Biological Sciences, is well-versed in the old adage of ‘taking her work home with her’. For more than a decade, she has looked after rescue animals and those in need of rehabilitation from her home in Cornwall, including bearded dragons, tortoises, birds, and other exotic animals.

Among the many animals she cares for are ‘ex-bats’, former battery farm hens, many of whom arrive underweight and missing feathers. So Nicola has taken to knitting fitted jumpers for them to keep them warm through the winter months, and has turned it into a charitable and educational endeavour.

“Over the last six months, my mum and I have been knitting jumpers to help raise awareness of the caged conditions that battery hens live in, and the featherless state that many leave in,” says Nicola. “The jumpers help them to keep warm and help with the re-growth of feathers, but still allow them to behave as normal.”

Nicola now takes the chickens to local schools and gives educational talks to accompany hands-on sessions. She said: “Many schoolchildren are shocked to see a real chicken close up as they have never seen one before, so this makes a difference to them.”

All of the money raised from the sale of the jumpers goes to a UK registered charity called Project Primrose, which supports an AIDS orphanage in South Africa. It provides food to more than 40 children, and Nicola visits it every year, most recently over Christmas.

She said: “I organised to give them an extremely memorable Christmas party by showing that people who are donating to the charity care and are proud of what they do. I took presents and gifts that people gave personally to the children.”

CULTURAL FOOD EXCHANGE

Crosspoint in the Roland Levinsky Building was transformed into a melting pot of cultural cuisine as a way of integrating international students with life at the University.

Organised by the Plymouth University International College (PUIC), the Cultural Food Exchange attracted around 220 students, sampling Chinese and Afro-Caribbean, as well as Italian and Middle Eastern, dishes, all from local suppliers and with the assistance of hospitality students.

“We introduced the event to act on essential feedback from the College’s Student Council,” said PUIC head Peter McDonnell. “We were aware that many of our students will have had limited exposure to an international environment and appreciate some additional support in settling in to their time with us, and so the event was designed to bring everyone together to celebrate the different cultures we have at PUIC and across the University.”

Among the departments and organisations that also attended were the Careers & Employability Service, the International Student Advisory Service, the English Language Centre, the Languages Café, Devon & Cornwall Police, and a number of UPSU societies.
THE TRANSAT TO SAIL FROM MARINE STATION

The Marine Station was the venue for the official launch of The Transat – one of the classic races on the sailing calendar. Professor Martin Attrill, Director of the Marine Institute, welcomed organisers, guests from the city, and members of the media and provided an overview of the £5 million waterfront facility and the University’s expertise in the field of marine and maritime.

The Marine Station will host the race headquarters, including the skippers’ lounge and the media centre, in April and May ahead of the race getting underway. It is the first time The Transat has been based in Plymouth for eight years.

SURF SCIENCE

Plymouth’s marine location means a number of its academics have strong connections with marine sports such as surfing. Professor Paul Russell, Lead for the Centre for Research in Coastal and Ocean Science and Engineering (CCOSE), is one of them. A former European Champion, Paul has formed a world-renowned partnership with Professor Gerd Masselink and colleagues in the School of Marine Science and Engineering, securing millions of pounds worth of funding for research on the impacts of waves and storms upon the coastline.

But, as this picture shows, he’s not forgotten how to ride a wave. Paul said: “This winter’s relentless North Atlantic storms have sent some perfect surfing waves to Southern Europe, and I was fortunate to get to the Canary Islands at Christmas to ride a few of them”. The picture brings to mind Longfellow’s 1850 poem, ‘The Secret of the Sea’, which is also quoted at the front of Paul’s PhD:

“Wouldst thou,” so the helmsman answered,
“Learn the secret of the sea?
Only those who brave its dangers
Comprehend its mystery.”
The Rolle Marquee was home to a two-day celebration of the Chinese New Year in February, with a packed programme of activities, performances and displays. One of the highlights was the community marquee dinner, which featured some spectacular suspended ribbon dancing, hoop aerial acrobatics, pot juggling and traditional lion dances.