Balancing the Needs and Expectations of Society with the Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions

Wendy Purcell, University of Plymouth, United Kingdom
Traditionally, universities are seen as places of learning and research. For many years these autonomous institutions could be perceived as ‘ivory towers’, slightly removed from the responsibilities of society, with researchers and lecturers working towards the greater good and the pursuit of knowledge and learning for the sake of knowing. Over the last few years, many studies in the UK have acknowledged that higher education institutions are worth far more to their regions and nationally contribute almost £45 billion to the economy, providing direct employment for over 600,000 people. So, in this modern age, what are society’s needs and expectations of higher education needs? How are universities shifting to address them? How can we balance society’s needs with the autonomy of higher education institutions? When making such a large contribution to the regional and national economy how can we deliver to our stakeholder communities? Professor Purcell addresses these questions, using her role as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Plymouth to provide a regional context and providing key examples from her institution that is carving out its niche as the enterprise university.

“Higher education is critically important to the future of this country. It can unlock the talents of our people, provide the research and scholarship our economy and society need, and play a critical role in maintaining a competitive and innovative economy” (Rt Hon John Denham MP, Secretary of State, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, UK).

What are the HE needs and expectations of Society?

Society has great expectations of universities. The role of the university is to further the knowledge of the community and to encourage and develop scholarship and learning. In 2008, we believe that all citizens have the right of access to learning, both for the joy of education and for the opportunities it presents. This acquisition of knowledge is an ongoing right, encouraging life-long learning and new skills for personal, social and employment benefits.

These needs and expectations can be summarised under a number of headings:

**Contributing to growing the knowledge economy**

In 2006 the UK government commissioned Lord Leitch to undertake a review into the country’s long-term skills needs. The report: *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy - World Class Skills* underlined how critical graduate-level skills are to Britain's competitiveness. Leitch concluded: “In the 21st Century, our natural resource is our people - and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills are the key to unlocking that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous - higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.”

At the University of Plymouth, the importance of developing the skills potential of local people is illustrated by the ‘Plymouth Higher Group’ initiative. This innovative example involves all four institutions delivering higher education in the city, two of which are Further Education Colleges, one a university college with the University of Plymouth taking the lead. This project offers a seamless portal for access to skills development and training for the creative economy. The Group will establish a Creative Economy Learning Platform designed
to sustainably accelerate the revitalisation of Plymouth’s economy, and that of the wider South West region. Collaboratively, working across further education/higher education boundaries, a broader range of opportunities can be delivered with well-defined development pathways from school into higher level qualifications and beyond into business. The overall aim is to ensure a high-quality, local skills base for the creative sector, increasing the rate of knowledge transfer into the business base.

**The development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base**

Lord Sainsbury’s review (2007) of UK government science and innovation policy concluded: “the translation of university research into commercial goods and services has significantly increased in the past decade...The performance of our universities is now comparable with US universities”. Universities are seen as regional knowledge and enterprise hubs, working within the sector and with local businesses to facilitate the growth and development of knowledge. Part of this offer is working with/running the local science park and developing clusters with both regional and international outputs.

Working with Plymouth City Council and the local Business Link provider, with funding from the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) and the EU, the University of Plymouth was a founding partner in the nationally recognised and award winning Tamar Science Park. This impressive facility was described by Lord Sainsbury (former UK Science Minister) in 2001 as “world-class”. It is now home to over 50 knowledge-based companies including university spin-out operations. Providing a ladder of business growth progression to the Tamar Science Park, the university launched a pre-incubation business support space for the fast growing creative industries sector in 2007. ‘Formation Zone’ provides a dynamic environment encompassing the knowledge, facilities and resources to inspire and enable creative people in Plymouth to start and build successful businesses. Formation Zone not only supports the university’s staff and students in growing their business ideas but is open and accessible to the local community offering a full support package to individuals and new and existing businesses.

**Quality education and training – lifelong learning**

Graduate professionals from universities support the local region in many sectors such as teaching and health. This attracts many support businesses to locate near universities boosting local employment and contributing to the regional economy. Higher education institutions also provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to local companies either in a distance learning format, on-premises company courses or as a part-time study package. Universities also play a key role in providing public lectures, evening classes, opportunities for part-time study and the nucleus of community education activities such as Science Week.

The University of Plymouth, as well as providing a wide and varied range of public lectures and community education activities, also provides an equally wide and varied range of accredited and non-accredited CPD at a local, regional, national and international level. This provision varies from leadership development to business and management training delivered to international audiences to bespoke programmes delivered with employers e.g. Foundation Degrees with progression to Honours Degrees.
Creating centres of excellence in research, consultancy and advice

The 2002 UK Lambert review called for increased collaboration between business and university research departments for the benefit of the UK economy. Encouraging researchers to be innovators and entrepreneurs increases knowledge transfer opportunities for both universities and the companies, exploiting research and delivering academic and economic benefit.

The University of Plymouth operates on a truly international stage in relation to marine and maritime innovation and developments. Plymouth has a unique maritime history of discovery. True to this tradition, the University of Plymouth offers world-class teaching and research in a wide spectrum of marine subjects brought together under the banner of its Marine Institute. A current project involves working with the SWRDA and the University of Exeter to research the viability and impact of the £28 million wave energy project off the coast of Cornwall. Another example is the Plymouth Marine Sciences Partnership involving the Institute and a range of regional stakeholders such as the National Marine Aquarium. This partnership conducts research of international standing, increasing knowledge, providing practical solutions to impacts on the marine and coastal environment. The partnership is currently making a strong case to government to locate the proposed UK Marine Management Organisation in Plymouth.

Embedding international, multi-cultural education in the curriculum

In an ever-increasingly multi-cultural world, students need skills, experience and knowledge to operate and compete internationally. Giving students the confidence to travel, seek out opportunities and become global citizens is of key importance in the higher education sector. This internationalised approach to education also means that students from overseas find it easier to settle into the university, finding courses more relevant and contributions easier to make.

The University of Plymouth has a far lower proportion of international students and far fewer international exchange opportunities than you would expect of a major city with a long seafaring tradition that prides itself on its ‘spirit of discovery’. To enable students to deliver of their best in an increasingly global market place, the university is now making a much deeper and all-embracing commitment to the principle of internationalisation. This is a critical component of the mission and will mean more international collaborations with some of the best institutions in the world in both research and teaching, a richer cultural programme and a wider range of exchange programmes and internships for staff and students.

Promoting equal opportunities and access to higher education

Higher education opens doors to many new opportunities. These opportunities should be encouraged across the whole population and are not dependent on cultural or racial background, age, gender or disability. Raising educational aspirations and educational attainment in under-represented communities is part of the widening participation agenda in universities.

The University of Plymouth’s partner college network is another example of how traditional borders between further education and higher education have been blurred to offer students more choice and opportunity. The network of Further Education Colleges is embedded within the university as a faculty in its own right and is held up nationally as a
model of best practice, along the lines of the Wisconsin model in the US, with strong collaborations allowing credit transfer and education pathways across campuses – but without the single governing body and budget arrangements that exist in the US. The South West region is large and mainly rural with a dispersed population and partnership with Further Education Colleges across the region ensures local access to courses validated by the university. The commitment to equal opportunity and access is now deeply embedded across the region. In anticipation of further developments, the university is already working with its partners to develop new models, some examples of these new models appear later in this paper, such as the Cornwall institute for Enterprise.

What does a university bring to a region?

Universities impact greatly on their community, not only contributing to the regional skills base, local employment and educational opportunities but also in the provision of cultural and sporting facilities. The University of Plymouth acknowledges and encourages regional activity, working with local councils and agencies to develop a city that has a shared vision, encourages talent and skills development and is fit-for-purpose in the 21st Century. The University has over 30,000 students (nearly 1% of the total population of the region) and with 3,000 staff is one of the largest employers in the South West region. Indeed, a recent study commissioned from Experian (2006) calculated that the University of Plymouth contributed £128.4 million per annum to the economy of the City through direct and indirect effects of staff and students, while in the region as a whole this figure rose to £157.6 million per annum to the regional economy through direct and indirect effects of staff and students. However, these figures exclude infrastructural investment and other capital consumption, research income and the impact of engagement with local and regional businesses. On a national scale universities contribute significantly to the economy.

Looking at the national picture, in the UK:

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are large employers, often the largest in their locality. Generating almost £45 billion of output a year, HEIs are a larger part of the economy than either the UK pharmaceutical or aircraft industries.
- Universities ‘spin-out’ companies to develop research are worth more than £3 billion to the UK economy – in 2003/04 UK HEIs had over 1,000 active ‘spin-out’ companies, employing 15,000 staff.
- Two thirds of universities provide distance learning for businesses, with 80% providing short courses on business premises. In addition, universities offer degrees in entrepreneurship and work with employers to develop business-focused degrees and enhance graduate employability.
- Making knowledge and education accessible to people living and working in the local region is a key activity for universities through continuing education programmes, evening classes, part-time study, and public lectures. Over 10,000 academic staff days were dedicated to free public lectures in 2003/04, for over 400,000 attendees.
- Graduates are more likely to stay and work in the region of their university, for example 62% of graduates in the North West stay and work in the region post graduation. However, the South West region is a net exporter of graduates and current initiatives to develop new businesses in the region and to accelerate business growth are underway to reverse this trend.

Source: The impact of higher education institutions on the UK economy, Universities UK, 2006

A university brings the following opportunities and facilities to a region:
Education – lifelong learning

The University of Plymouth places a growing focus on CPD and lifelong learning. It also runs programmes of public lectures on a range of topics encouraging the local community to be an active part of the university. Sustained engagement with local schools aims at widening participation in higher education from local people and especially under-represented communities in Plymouth.

Employment and providers of skilled graduates

The university is a key member of the Higher Education Regional Development Association (HERDA-SW), formed in 1999 with a mission to influence and shape the academic, economic, social and cultural development of the region. Reflecting a more explicit focus on collaboration among Higher Education, regional bodies, businesses and the community, it is designed to promote regional competitiveness and productivity. HERDA-SW also manages ‘Expert Solutions South West’, an electronic gateway for business to navigate access to regional HE expertise. The site also links employers to Gradsouthwest, a service that matches employer vacancies with graduates from the region’s universities.

Providing cultural and sporting facilities

The University of Plymouth recently developed a £36 million arts and community complex and has an active arts and cultural programme called Peninsula Arts providing a diverse programme of exhibitions, music, talks and events. The university is also working with Plymouth City Council to improve sports facilities for the whole community and offers gym membership and squash courts to the general public as well as staff and students. The university and the City Council jointly run The Mountbatten Water Sports Centre, which is an accredited AALA (Adventurous Activities Licensing Authority) Centre, teaching on the land and sea. It offers a wide range of outdoor activities from abseiling to kayaking, powerboating and coasteering. The centre plays host to all of the university’s recreation, Royal Yachting Association courses and Students’ Union water sports clubs and has been nominated as a potential Olympic training venue for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Business support – personal, professional and business development

The University of Plymouth provides exciting opportunities for personal, professional and business development (PPBD). The university’s reputation for innovative course design and delivery underpins a range of programmes designed to be appropriate, effective and relevant. These opportunities are designed to meet the needs of individuals working in business and industry, the public sector and the community, and can be undertaken at the university, in the workplace or at another more suitable location, delivering PPBD locally, nationally and internationally. The university’s ‘spin-in’ company, The Centre for Leadership and Organizational Excellence (CLOE), was established to fuse strong private-sector management consultancy expertise with academic quality standards and accreditation. It delivers leadership and company performance solutions in masters-accredited, bite-size chunks of learning to a growing client base including organisations as diverse as CISCO and the Police Service. Recently, the university joined forces with the Britannia Royal Naval College in a 10-year collaboration for the delivery and accreditation of academic aspects of the college’s navy officer training programmes. Under this agreement with Britannia, teaching staff at the college become university employees with full access to a broad range of university services, facilities and research opportunities.
Supporting the public sector and local services

The University of Plymouth educates many of the South West region’s teachers and health professionals, and contributes to their ongoing professional development. More specifically, SERIO (the Socio-economic Research & Intelligence Observatory) a joint venture between the University of Plymouth, the City of Plymouth and the Plymouth 2020 Local Strategic Partnership, in line with the Lambert Review, informs business and public policy centred on local and regional economic regeneration. One of the many research and evaluation projects SERIO delivered was the evaluation of the delivery of local health and education provision as well as providing benchmarking and data for the central government driven neighbourhood renewal index of deprivation. SERIO, like other aspects of the university, provides tangible and valuable support to the public sector and helps to monitor, inform and aid service improvement for local people.

Enterprise, innovation and knowledge transfer opportunities

Enterprise, innovation and knowledge transfer activities are fundamental agendas at the University of Plymouth. The university for example, is nationally renowned for its Knowledge Transfer Partnership activities (KTP) which places graduates into organisations in the public and private sectors to undertake a specific project or programme of activities. KTP’s supported by the UK Technology Strategy Board is noted as being among the world’s leading initiatives using the knowledge and skills of high-calibre graduate associates and their academic supervisors to inject fresh ideas into business and is a classic example of knowledge transfer. At Plymouth, around 20 KTP’s are in operation at any one time, ranging from those in the City Council, local authorities to others in small and medium-sized businesses.

Cornwall, a neighbouring county, is an area with considerable levels of economic and social deprivation, its GDP per head being just 73% of the EU average and the lowest of any region in the UK. The economy has long relied on tourism and its talented young people have had to leave the county to find skilled employment elsewhere. The remaining workforce is largely unqualified with low levels of achievement at degree level or above, and a high proportion of the population is economically inactive on incapacity benefit or unemployed. The Cornwall Institute of Enterprise (CIE), a joint venture between the University of Plymouth and a local Further Education College, sets out to redress the balance. It proposes a unique and pioneering economic model, co-locating schools with further and higher education and businesses on a single, new campus. Enterprise, innovation and entrepreneurship training and education will be embedded within the educational curriculum, from school through to university. Business leaders and trainers will also provide support for business start-ups and offer bespoke research, leadership and management development to existing small and medium sized businesses.

Significant contribution to the regional economy

Higher Education in the UK South West contributes £0.66 billion to the region compared with a total economic output of £55 billion. Working with the SWRDA, the Plymouth ‘Marine Science and Technology Centre of Expertise’ gives marine-based companies access to world-leading research capability within the University’s Marine Institute and, in turn, to a wider network of expertise within the Plymouth Marine Sciences Partnership. In 2007, the Peninsula Research Institute for Marine Renewable Energy was also established in partnership with Exeter University. Drawing on support from SWRDA, it will focus, initially, on work to inform the £28 million Cornwall Coast Wave Hub Project.
What is meant by the autonomy of universities?

In the UK universities are legally independent corporate institutions. Most are run like commercial companies but on closer analysis, there are many differences between universities and businesses. Both act as employers, loosely supply ‘products’ and add value, but the role of a university as an institution in the region and nationally is very important. The closure of a university would have a huge impact on the regional infrastructure. Whether the government would be charged to assist in the form of monetary aid and/or advice remains a key question. One area that needs to be developed for UK HEIs is autonomy in funding. Currently, 39% of income to English universities comes as part of the government’s Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) grant. For a business, this over-reliance on one key income source would be extremely risky and could compromise future autonomy. Higher education organisations are encouraged to diversify their funding sources, looking to business, consultancy agreements, student fees and alternative funding opportunities.

In order to compete effectively at home and abroad, universities must be able to control their policies and resources. Without such autonomy for universities we cannot play our full part in realising the Government’s, and the country’s objectives. (Rick Trainor, Universities UK Annual meeting 2007)

A UK university has autonomy in the following areas:

**Staff and students - admissions, progress and discipline**

Within legal frameworks regarding equality of opportunity, institutions are free to set levels of entry for their courses and select appropriate students to enrol.

**Curriculum and teaching - methods, examinations, content, text books**

Working within a good practice framework and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines, universities set up their own assessment procedures and award their own qualifications based on the national standard.

**Academic quality - academic standards, quality audits, accreditation working with QAA**

Working within the QAA framework and guidelines a university is free to offer particular courses and teach those courses using a range of methods.

**Research and publication - postgraduate teaching, priorities, freedom to publish**

Working within EU, national, academic and the university’s own guidelines, researchers are able to follow any lines of enquiry agreed with the funding body.

**Governance - councils, academic boards, student associations**

Working within good governance guidelines, higher education institutions are able to select their own governing boards and decide on the best structure for a successful organisation.
Administration and finance—funding of institutions; operating grants, capital

Currently 39% of income for English HEIs is from the HEFCE block grant; this is essentially tax-payers money. The need for more autonomy needs to be balanced with HEIs requirement to diversify income streams.

Drivers, developments and challenges in Higher Education

Higher education and the needs of students are continually changing. It is therefore important to ensure a responsive and flexible approach, maximising human potential and resources and also using technology to deliver excellence in educational opportunity and content.

Universities will not become innovative and responsive to change unless they are given real autonomy …. In return for being freed from over-regulation and micro-management, universities should accept full institutional accountability to society at large for their results. (Communication from the EU commission, 2006)

The key drivers and developments over the next few years are:

Students as consumers

In the UK, students are charged fees towards the cost of their education. This has encouraged a view of students as consumers. The increasingly important National Student Survey means that universities need to be more responsive to the needs of students (and their parents) in the pursuit of excellence.

Demographic changes

A substantial demographic downturn in the number of students is expected across Europe from 2012. The anticipated 14% expected decrease in the number of 18-20 year olds means that to maintain current levels of undergraduates new ‘sources’ of students need to be established, for example taking higher education into the workplace. There will also be a requirement to develop alternative learning models.

Figure 1: Projected population of all EU countries (thousands), aged 18–20, 2006 to 2027, the future size and shape of the higher education sector in the UK: demographic projections, Universities UK
Leitch targets

In the UK, the Leitch report on skills developed a series of targets for 2020 based upon an analysis of the mix of jobs in the country and predicted if the nation was to remain competitive internationally 40% of the population would need to be educated to level 4 (level 4 equates to university degrees as well as some professional qualifications, for example, in teaching and nursing) - up from 29% in 2005.

Global competition

With the predicted downturn in student numbers and the growing awareness students have about the educational opportunities across the world, global competition for ‘international’ students and research contracts is becoming more intense.

Diversify income streams

To ensure stability and strong foundations for future development, universities need to review their sources of income. Looking at Figure 2 below, over 39% of income comes from the UK government’s grant. It is clear that other income streams need to be expanded, whilst maintaining a healthy level of funding to ensure excellence in all areas of operation.

Figure 2: Income and expenditure of UK HEIs: 2005/6, Higher education in Facts and Figures, Summer 2007, Universities UK

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2007), Resources of Higher Education Institutions 2005/06, tables 1, 2a, and 2b.

How can we balance society’s expectations and a University’s autonomy? Is there a conflict?

We need to ensure society and our students are getting the best deal without compromising academic freedom and standards. There was an explosion of vocational degree programmes throughout the nineties, with concern from some quarters about the so-called ‘dilution’ of the academic domain, comments that were ill-informed and proven now to be
largely irrelevant. In my view, the University of Plymouth has succeeded in retaining academically rigorous quality standards whilst delivering professionally relevant courses.

Using the University of Plymouth as an example, it seems to me that it is perfectly possible to achieve a balance between preserving our autonomy as individual institutions and serving the needs of society. We do not exist in isolation but as part of a wider community – often with global reach and impact. It is incumbent upon us all to address the issues and concerns of the time and society in which we live.

The pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake is personally fulfilling - a worthy academic pursuit. The pursuit of knowledge for cultural, economic and social benefit is deeply empowering and enriching. I recognise that, as universities, if we are truly to meet the needs of our stakeholders in business, the professions, the public sector and the community at large – we need to become more demand-led and better attuned to the priorities of our city and the region in all of our activities. That is the journey on which I have embarked with my colleagues in Plymouth. We can influence the development of society through our academic values, quality standards and stakeholder engagement. Our university is making a deliberate shift from the focus on ‘business-facing’ universities to a new space or paradigm to become truly ‘business-engaging’ by making Plymouth the Enterprise University.

To ensure there is a balance between society’s expectations and individual institution autonomy:

- Higher Education Institutions need to be transparent and accountable, particularly in the areas of academic quality and income, building sustainable partnerships both in the UK and overseas.
- Organisations need to regularly assess risk and diversify their funding streams to ensure financial security, running the institution in a professional and business-like approach.
- Universities need to work with stakeholders to gain market intelligence and have robust governance structures and procedures.
- We can neither afford to be ‘an ivory tower’ nor do we want to be one!