

MEET UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON'S CEO

(Chief Enabling Officer, that is)



Exclusive interview with the university's Vice-Chancellor, Debra Humphris

Debra Humphris has been the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Brighton for less than a year, but she has made a big impact already. Straight-talking and ready to embrace change, Debra is determined to strengthen the bond between the university and the wider business and local community.

If anyone has been coasting in the sheltered bubble that can often be found in university campus life, they may well have had a bit of a shock. Debra Humphris is on a mission, as she makes clear when we meet to discuss her plans for the university.

"I've come to an institution where there is a very clear imperative to refresh and renew, and to reassess our role and our purpose in society," says Debra. "There are numerous opportunities for us. The economic climate and the policy context that we find ourselves in as an institution are changing dramatically, and we must adapt if we are to improve.

"We have had a period of flushing out a whole load of things that we need to speak openly about, speaking truth unto the institution and ourselves so that we can re-base and start to move forward.

"There were some changes in the previous senior leadership - retirement, people moving on to take new opportunities - and that has opened up opportunities for me to create a new team."

More than ever, the role of a Vice-Chancellor has mirrored that of Chief Executive in a company. The aims may ultimately be different, with educational attainment replacing the search for profits, but the pressure on budgets and tough decisions mean that the two worlds are becoming more intertwined. Pragmatism is the key, and this

is an attribute that Debra clearly possesses. But does she see her role as primarily a Vice-Chancellor or a Chief Executive?

"I'm an academic, so I'm a Vice-Chancellor first and foremost. But absolutely, I am also the Chief Executive. I am responsible for a £200 million business, 21,000 students and 2,800 staff - no pressure there, then!

"But my primary focus is always on our students. We owe it to them to give them the best possible education and experience that we can.

It may surprise some to learn that 73% of our income now comes from student tuition fees. So it's very evident who we should be paying attention to. People now invest in their education, and they think about it as an investment. "You can't buy a degree - you have to work for a degree. It's very much a partnership. As a student you join our academic community and we create the conditions for you to realise your potential - to shape your future. You can buy an expensive text book, but you have to put the effort in if you want to get the value out.

"I keep reminding everybody, my job is to enable good people to do great things. The CEO in me is, I hope, more of a Chief Enabling Officer, and my job is to enable the talent to go and do brilliant things."

Enabling the students and creating the right environment for them to succeed would be a much simpler outcome if funds were unlimited. There is no such luxury, and educational institutions have to make tough decisions. Perhaps the biggest dilemma that Debra has faced so far is the future of the university campus at Hastings, which has been running at an annual loss of around £1.2 million. On announcing that the future of the campus was up for review, Debra has faced a barrage of criticism.

Debra says, "A number of universities across the country are having to make some tough, serious changes because the economic context of universities has changed quite considerably.

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The model that we currently have in Hastings was predicated on a certain number of students and before the changes to fees being there. We have sadly never met that target, and it's unlikely despite our best efforts that we ever will; it's just not financially sustainable. Our staff in Hastings have put in huge amounts of effort and commitment, but we only have a certain amount of income and we don't get a big grant from the Funding Council anymore. We have to make some really tough decisions for the institution as a whole.

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"We want to evolve the way we deliver higher education in Hastings and do it in partnership with colleagues at the Sussex Coast College Hastings to create a locally appropriate higher education offering. They already deliver higher education and degrees accredited by the University of Brighton, so there remains higher education in Hastings.

"If we can end up in a situation in Hastings where, with the college, there is a sustainable model of higher education provision that's locally relevant, that will be a good place to be for the town, for us and for the college."

Transforming Lives

If the emphasis of the interview has been about tough decisions and pragmatism, this is only part of Debra's story. She is committed to helping create a fairer society with an emphasis on greater social mobility. It is this ethos which influenced her decision to take on the Brighton role.

She began her career as a nurse and worked

in the NHS before doing a PhD at St George's Hospital Medical School Tooting, establishing with a colleague the Healthcare Evaluation Unit. Her focus was on how you change clinical practice in evidence-based health care. This was in the early days of evidence-based practice in medicine and health care, and the unit became the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. Later, she established the Health Care Innovation Unit at the University of Southampton before becoming the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education at the University of Southampton.

Her next move was to take the position of Vice-Provost Education at Imperial College London: "Imperial was an amazing place to work and I had a wonderful time," recalls Debra. "I'm told that in three years I made a real impact. However, what had struck me was that I was sitting in an extraordinary organisation with extraordinary students and there was something about my core values that slightly grated. On a personal level I worried about how much privilege I was giving to the already privileged. I know what a transformation education is in people's lives because I look at my own."

In a similar vein, as the first female openly gay Vice-Chancellor, Debra is keen to promote diversity and opportunities for female students in sectors where they have often been under-represented. The university is committed to the Athena SWAN Charter, which was established in 2005 to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment in higher education and research.

"It's about gender equality," explains Debra. "It is about women in engineering and it's equally about men in female-dominated areas. I'm delighted that our new Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research will be the first leading woman taking the research brief in this institution.

"One of the first things I did when I arrived here, was to take over chairing the Equality

and Diversity Committee for the university. It was important for me to take part in Pride this year, which was just amazing. Imagine, if I'm a female, gay Vice-Chancellor and yet I don't turn up to Pride – in Brighton! I make sure I fly the flag for the university. We have to be really clear about statements around equality and inclusion. We're an inclusive community and are very proud of that."

Business Connections

One community that Debra is building connections with is the business community, and key to the future engagement is a new proposed Business School on the long-anticipated Moulsecoombe development on Brighton's Lewes Road. What is the remit for the new school?

"We need to ask ourselves some serious questions: "What will a business school of the future look like? What is a business school? Is it an entrepreneurial or an enterprise centre? What will be the social enterprise endeavor?"

"There's a difference between a building and an academic vision for business. Thinking about the academic vision for the Business School, the element we are clear about is that the school will be open to and for business. We've had some really interesting conversations about how, in many institutions, you'll see science parks. We should think

about having a business park where people who want flexible space can come in and use a co-working space. They may want to hire a desk and for it to be in an open working environment in which there are other people sharing ideas and doing similar things; facilities, coffee machines that spark conversations and connections. This is the sort

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of modern business environment for start-ups, and I'm very interested to explore how we do that with partners in the business community.

"Two weeks after starting I was part of the Greater Brighton Devolution pitch to ministers, and one of the core pieces in there with which I have great empathy is how we help find the next Google, how we scale up start-ups and help SMEs take their businesses to the next stage. It's about supporting and maturing businesses, how you help people to recruit

staff – all of those sorts of really challenging things about just scaling your business, which may take you away from the core idea that drives you and makes you into more of a manager."

The Business School is an exciting development, but what about the current links with business, and the recurring theme of how young people can leave education and be work-ready? It is not the first time this topic has come up, as Debra explains:

"Every year The CBI produces a report which highlights this issue, and every year we ask employers what it is they want us to do, and what we should put in the curriculum to add to the educational experience. And that's when it gets just a bit trickier, because they're not quite sure what things they specifically want. So, the closer we work, the more likely we are to come up with a better solution, and placement opportunities will be key.

"Part of our future strategy is enhancing that partnership that we have with employers to understand what the skills are that they're looking for. Some of this is just about the attitude of the graduate - about turning up on time, how they work together in a team. And we can mirror that to a certain extent in the undergraduate experience. But it's never going to be quite like the reality of going into a work environment.



"We have very helpful industrial advisory boards with key related businesses and industry colleagues in many of our curriculum areas. Having that free flow and exchange of ideas between industrial partners is really important. We bring expertise to contribute to the delivery to students. The merging between what business is seeking and what the university can deliver is getting that much closer. There doesn't have to be a gap. It's entirely up to us how we work together."

What do you think the effect of Brexit is going to be on the university?

"We're part of Universities UK (effectively the universities' lobby group), and I was one of the 100 Vice-Chancellors who signed the letter saying this is just not a good thing for the UK and our education. There are a number of fundamental worries. In terms of research funding, we do well out of Horizon 2020, and the EU Research Council funding. We're the better and richer for it in terms of that intellectual activity. I don't think anybody in the HE sector has any confidence that, post-Brexit, there's going to be any greater investment in the UK research councils.

"There is a real worry of losing students from the EU. Will EU students still be able to access student loans through the student loan company? If they are classed as international students, their fees will go up. We have

about 1,000 EU students currently at the university– out of 21,000 students. It's not just a financial challenge, it's the diversity. I've said at all my graduation speeches this year that I applaud the diversity of nationalities that we represent in the university. We're an international community, we're preparing students for a global society, so I think it would be a retrograde step if we just became less internationally focused."

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What's the working relationship with the University of Sussex? Like Brighton, they have just appointed a new Vice-Chancellor.

"We have a joint Medical School, which is the happiest medical school in the country, with the most satisfied students. That, I can assure you, is no mean feat; it is a real testament to the School and to the current Dean, Malcolm Reed. So we come together around that. The new Vice-Chancellor,

Professor Adam Tickell, has started and we will be looking for opportunities to work together."

Education has been in the news, with the new Prime Minister talking about grammar schools, and also about how universities should be involved with their local schools. In her first major speech as Prime Minister, Theresa May praised the University of Brighton for its commitment and track record in raising the aspirations of school students through its support for academy schools.

"We already do this," stresses Debra. "We've got our two academy trusts supporting fourteen schools across Sussex, which is making a real difference to the quality of education, both in Hastings and Brighton. Most recently, a secondary school in Burgess Hill has joined our University of Brighton Academies Trust. I jokingly said the other day – we checked it out this morning – that you can go from nursery to PhD through a University of Brighton experience – that's lifelong learning."

Many thanks to Debra for sparing the time in her busy schedule. The interview is only a brief summary of the conversation. We have the feeling that Debra will make a significant impact on the university and education in the region. Watch this space!

