Sustainability champion installed as Chancellor

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A time to thrive – Jonathon Porritt on his new role and the challenges ahead

Jonathon Porritt has been installed as only the fourth Chancellor of the University of Keele. Here the eminent writer, broadcaster and commentator on sustainable development, talks about the role of Chancellor, his hopes for the future for Keele and shares some of his recollections of his time at university.

1. Why did you agree to become Chancellor of Keele University?
When we set up Forum for the Future in 1996, Keele University was one of our very first Partners – to do a rather geeky piece of work on defining the key sustainability measures underpinning all the Forum’s activities. We’ve collaborated on various projects since then – especially as Keele’s commitment to sustainable development deepened over the years. The Forum has always emphasised the critical role that the HE/FE sector plays in helping to mainstream sustainable development across society – in terms of what’s taught in HE/FE, how those institutions are managed, and how they engage with their host communities. All of which makes for a fantastic challenge!

2. How do you see your role as Chancellor?
It will be much easier to answer that question in a year’s time – as I’ve never been a Chancellor before! If it was solely a question of dressing up and dishing out the degrees, that wouldn’t really do it for me. Keele’s work on sustainable development and health is clearly of direct interest, but Keele’s Chancellor is clearly Chancellor for the whole University, not just the bits of direct interest to him or her! And beyond Keele, what a time it is to be getting more involved in the HE Sector!

3. What hopes do you have for the University in the future?
After all the ructions over the last few years, there are some pretty downbeat assessments out there about the future of HE as a whole in the UK. And things are certainly going to be pretty gritty from a financial point of view for a long time to come – which means there are all sorts of challenges ahead regarding the sustainability of the entire sector. Like it or love it however, this is the context in which Keele has to thrive – and thriving is all about that elusive combination of vision, performance, prioritisation, differentiation, brilliant teaching, world-class research and networks and relationships to die for.

4. What are your recollections of your students days?
I was at Oxford between 1968 and 1972, doing French and German. I then went on to teach English and Drama for ten years at a comprehensive in West London, and the rest of my life has been in the world of sustainable development. Not much of a connection there! Looking back, I don’t think I made as much of my time at Oxford as I might have done. I was deeply unimpressed by the quality of the teaching, I was probably doing the wrong degree. I was happier living outside Oxford than in Oxford, and I was quite bolshie in those days! I worked hard, played hard, and got at least some of the job done – in terms of a good degree. (And, of course, I am now very proud to be a Fellow of Magdalen College!)

5. What was the most important thing/best thing you took from your student experience?
I was rubbish at actually speaking French and German, but that didn’t actually matter in Oxford at that time: to all intents and purposes, they were treated as dead languages! So I got very deep into the literature; Balzac and Thomas Mann; Baudelaire and Rilke; Racine and Schiller. Wonderful. Privileged, self-indulgent escapism – before the real work kicked in. And all paid for by tax payers at that time, with no outstanding loans!

6. What role can the student population have in the sustainability agenda?
Given how effectively and comprehensively my generation has trashed the prospects for all young people today, it astonishes me just how disengaged most students are on issues like population, climate change, biodiversity and global resources. I got a little bit caught up in the student protests of the 1960s, but by comparison with today’s converging crises, ours was a pretty benign world. I know they’ve got a lot of other things on their minds, but if student bodies aren’t holding their Universities to task (really holding them to task!), then they clearly haven’t got a clue about the state of the world that awaits them – once they’ve been sent forth into that world by their dutiful Chancellor!

7. What are the key challenges for the future (biggest threats/opportunities)?
The list of sustainability-related challenges we now face is so long – and so gloomy – that I’m just not going to run through it here! So focus on one thing: the biggest single challenge of all is that people fail to recognise the massive opportunities entailed in moving from today’s fundamentally unsustainable economy to tomorrow’s fair and sustainable economy – in terms of innovation, jobs, skills, technology breakthroughs, new investments and so on. It’s all there right under our noses, but we’re stuck in today’s growth-at-all-costs trap. Part of my role today is to help people see that opportunity for what it is – at Keele and beyond.
New Chancellor arrives on campus

Jonathon Porritt was officially installed as the new Chancellor of Keele University at a special ceremony in the University Chapel last week.

He is the University’s fourth Chancellor and succeeds Professor Sir David Weatherall. His installation as Chancellor is the first official event in Keele’s 50th Anniversary year.

The new Chancellor told a packed audience in the University Chapel: “This is quite a privilege for me – quite a daunting experience to be honest. This is a very heavy responsibility placed on my shoulders and a very interesting time to take up this role as the University embarks on the 50th Anniversary of its incorporation.”

He said he was “absolutely delighted and deeply honoured” to be the Chancellor of Keele University – “a critical part of my excitement at taking up this role is that Keele is already an exemplar in many aspects of sustainability and academic rigour, good science and the use of knowledge are an essential part of what we are doing.”

Professor Nick Foskett, Vice-Chancellor of Keele University, said: “We believe that Jonathon’s appointment as Chancellor recognises and underlines our core values and ambitions. His own profile as critical thinker, as clear advocate for the values that we share, as believer in the importance of evidence-based and science-based policy and decision-making, and of course his leading commitment to the sustainability of current and future society matches closely what we uphold at Keele. We look forward to his support, to his wise counsel and to his engagement in developing and delivering our vision for Keele and its students over the coming years, as we seek to further enhance the achievements, profile, reputation and influence of Keele University.”

In his oration to present the Chancellor Designate, Professor Pat Bailey, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Natural Sciences, said: “Jonathon has received acclaim and recognition from the highest levels, but is committed to addressing issues that affect everyday people around the world. His impact on environmental issues is aligned to Keele’s commitment to sustainability – a commitment that concerns activities ‘locally’ here on campus, but also in the wider regional and UK communities … and hopefully globally too. His adherence to academic rigour and scholarly argument align perfectly with the ideals of this University.”

As he proceeded to his Chair of Office, escorted by Pro Vice-Chancellors, Professor Mark Ormerod and Mr Kevin Mattinson, the Chancellor Designate was formally greeted by the Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire, Sir James Hawley and The Mayor of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Trevor Hambleton, and the President of Keele University Students’ Union, Rosie Weatherley. Pro Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Shepherd and Professor Andy Garner, assisted with the robing.

A further selection of Installation pictures can be seen here: http://tinyurl.com/8xmhr7

Sustainability and The Future of Capitalism – Jonathon Porritt delivers his inaugural lecture.
Acclaimed photographer chooses Keele campus to debut sustainability exhibition

Jonathon Porritt performed his first official duty as Chancellor of Keele University when he cut a ceremonial ribbon to mark the opening of an extended version of Mark Edwards’ ground-breaking, internationally acclaimed outdoor exhibition, Hard Rain.

It was also the official launch of the exhibition in the UK and was attended by Joan Walley, MP for Stoke North and Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, a Parliamentary Select Committee, with key figures from the University.

Located adjacent to the Claus Moser Building, the exhibition will be open to the general public and showcases some of environmental photographer, Mark Edwards’ most powerful work, dating back to 1969, when he was lost in the Sahara desert and was rescued by a Tuareg nomad.

Inspired by the lyrics to Bob Dylan’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”: which explores “sad forests” and “dead oceans”, “where the people are many and their hands are all empty”, Edwards had the idea to illustrate each line of the song with images.

Following on from Hard Rain, Whole Earth? aligns the natural photography from Hard Rain with human experience, presenting a solution to the problems highlighted in the first exhibit, but demonstrating how governments need grass-roots support if they are to scale up these solutions and move towards sustainable development.

Pat Bailey, Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences at Keele University, comments: “We’re proud to host the official opening of this extended edition of Mark Edwards’ Hard Rain. We’re passionate about embedding sustainable behaviours at Keele from our curriculum to day-to-day life on the campus.”

Mark Edwards at the opening of the Hard Rain: Whole Earth exhibition at Keele.