

# Full steam ahead for Heriot-Watt

A seal of approval from both satisfied students and grateful employers proves a winning mix, writes **Sue Leonard**

It began as a conversation between an Edinburgh clockmaker and a forward-thinking educationist about the lack of technical training for the working classes, and today, 190 years later, the world's first mechanics' institute, now Heriot-Watt University, is still guided by the needs of business and industry.

The university's high employability rate and excellent results in the National Student Survey (NSS) contributed to its rise seven places up our league table this year, ranking it 31st overall and fourth in Scotland, its highest position in our 14 years of publication.

It is the second successive seven-place rise for Heriot-Watt, which continues to impress with its innovation, investment and ambitious plans. These include creating a second overseas campus to add to the thriving one in Dubai.

The university moves from runner-up last year to take the title of The Sunday Times Scottish University

of the Year, and what better time for the institution, which along with so many others is raising its tuition fees for students from other parts of Britain to £9,000 from next year.

Students flock to Heriot-Watt, attracted by the university's highly-prized profession-based courses and leading-edge research, which see employers gobble up graduates. Just 6.9% are unemployed six months after leaving and 80.4% are in well-paid graduate-level posts. Heriot-Watt ranks 19th in the UK for graduate starting salaries, with first jobs netting new graduates earnings of £21,534 on average, well above the norm. It's little wonder few drop out.

Almost seven people chase every place to get in and this summer the institution was in clearing for just one hour for a couple of subjects, after not entering clearing at all in 2010.

This is all down to "doing the basics well", good relationships between students and staff and a focus on preparing students for the world of

work, according to principal and vice-chancellor Professor Steve Chapman. "Heriot-Watt has a clear ethos and it is the same ethos it had back in 1821," says Chapman, who has chalked up two years in charge of Britain's eighth oldest higher education institution. "It provides professionally-relevant education for the good of society.

"We provide a large number of people for the insurance and financial industry from our maths school. If you look at petroleum engineering, it has a professional outcome," Chapman adds.

While many university language courses are literature-based, the ones at Heriot-Watt involve translation or interpreting. "We do not do classics or philosophy. There is not an obvious industry at the end of it," he says.

Named after George Heriot, the 16th-century philanthropist and financier to King James, and James Watt, the 18th-century inventor and engineer, Heriot-Watt is internationally renowned for its



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expertise in offshore oil and gas engineering as well as brewing and distilling, and its School of Textiles and Design at its campus in Galashiels is one of the world's leading textile institutions, a centre of excellence, and one of the lead partners in the Scottish Academy of Fashion (SAF), an ambitious project to develop Scotland as a global centre of excellence in fashion-related learning and commercially relevant research.

The university's pioneering International Centre for Island Technology, part of its Institute of Petroleum Engineering, is based at its Orkney campus in Stromness.

With its niche programmes, good job prospects and its reputation among students as a great place to spend four years, Heriot-Watt is a popular destination for overseas students, who account for a third of the student population and a significant amount of fee income for the university.

Almost one in five students (18%) come from England, Wales or Northern Ireland, the third highest proportion of any Scottish university, after St Andrews and Edinburgh. Chapman predicts that once the new fee regime comes in, many may opt to take its three-year degree courses, which are designed for A-level students, rather than the four-year courses traditionally associated with Scottish universities.

"A lot of students choose to do the four years because they like the experience, but I think they will maybe have a rethink," says Chapman, who believes Heriot-Watt's new fee regime

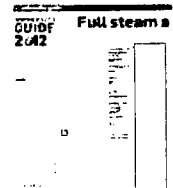
— with its generous bursary scheme and a guarantee that no undergraduate will be penalised for opting to take a four-year course by putting a ceiling of £27,000 on fees — compares favourably with what is on offer elsewhere.

"We want to make an attractive offer. The last thing I want to do is inhibit someone for reasons of funding," says Chapman, who grew up in South Shields in a family where money was tight. "If you look at my background, I know what it is to be frightened of debt. I am the only one from my family who went into higher education. Why did I go? Because the state helped. If the grant had not been there I would not have gone. I have never forgotten that."

There's another reason Chapman understands the concerns that students have. His son heads off to university next year and is thinking of studying in England. "Students will think a lot harder about it and their subject," says Chapman, who believes in the view taken by foreign students that the fees are an investment in good earnings in the future. "A degree is a portable commodity and that degree will have a cachet associated with it."

Robert Buchan would agree. The Scots-born, Canada-based gold-mining tycoon last year donated £1.3m to his alma mater, a testament to the fact that not only does he still hold fond memories of his university days more than 40 years ago but that he's also done very well for himself.

The results of the NSS are testament



## HERIOT-WATT CONTINUES TO IMPRESS WITH ITS INNOVATION, INVESTMENT AND AMBITIOUS PLANS

to the fact that the university puts a high priority on ensuring the undergraduate experience is a good one. Heriot-Watt has considerably improved its position to 29th out of 120 UK universities in the 2011 NSS, up from 47th last year. For the third year running, 100% of chemical engineering students participating in the NSS reported "overall satisfaction" with their degree course. Heriot-Watt also had the joint highest rate of university student participation in the survey, with a 78% response rate.

A multi-million-pound investment programme is improving facilities at the university's picturesque 380-acre site at Riccarton on the western edge of Edinburgh and at the campus it shares with Borders College in Galashiels.

Work is under way to replace ageing student accommodation at both locations. The £34m project will provide places for almost 500 students in a mix of ensuite bedrooms and flats, with 60 more rooms being considered for phase two in the Borders, where a £400,000 indoor health and fitness centre has recently opened.

Students at Riccarton, which boasts a loch with swans, nature trails and 500,000 trees and shrubs, have access to some of the best sports facilities of any university, as Hearts football club, which trains here, would attest to. The university's sports scholarship scheme is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the UK, with more than 30 current scholars including those competing at Commonwealth and Olympic Games level. Heriot-Watt is one of 11 universities in Britain to receive funding from the R&A for its golf scholarship programme and is also

home to the National Competition and Training Centre for Scottish Squash.

Heriot-Watt does culture too. Interestingly, while music degrees don't feature in its curriculum, gifted singers or musicians are invited to apply for a music scholarship, in return for which they must join the choir or orchestra.

The university, which established the first research park in Europe, has lost nothing of its pioneering spirit. In addition to a raft of new initiatives, which include the establishment of the Scottish Financial Risk Academy and the SAF, it has plans to open a campus in Malaysia for up to 3,500 students.

This month, Heriot-Watt opens the first phase of its £38m purpose-built Dubai campus, which has been created to meet growing demand in the region, where it has been running degree programmes for six years. The site, which will have capacity for 6,000 students when completed, is expanding its courses as well as its student numbers with new additions from November including interior design, management and psychology and architectural engineering. Its overseas presence gives UK students the option of studying the same course they are enrolled on in Edinburgh in somewhat warmer climes.

Heriot-Watt does not exaggerate when it calls itself Scotland's international university. It has partnerships with institutions around the world and more than 16,000 students in 150 countries on its degree programmes, including petroleum engineering in Tomsk in Siberia, and specialist MScs in Trinidad and Tobago,

head for Heriot-Watt



where it is the third largest provider of higher education. Its Edinburgh business school runs the largest distance learning MBA programme in the world.

Heriot-Watt is gearing up for its 50th anniversary of becoming a university in five years' time with a fundraising campaign to redevelop the centre of the Edinburgh campus. Chapman couldn't be prouder of the university.

"I get up in the morning and think am I Mr Lucky? How did I get this job? People who come here will have an exceptional time. It is a very special place," he says.

So, too, is Robert Gordon, last year's Scottish University of the Year and now the best modern university in Britain after knocking Oxford Brookes off top spot, the first institution to do so in more than a decade. The achievement earns Robert Gordon a shortlisting for our UK University of the Year title.

Like Heriot-Watt, it has benefited in our league table from the added emphasis given in the rankings to graduate employability. With just 3.8% of graduates unemployed six months

after leaving, a degree from Robert Gordon University (RGU) is as near to a guarantee of a job after graduation as you can get. Only the private University of Buckingham surpassed it with a 100% employment rate among a much smaller pool of graduates.

RGU's graduates don't just get jobs, they get good ones, with 84.9% securing jobs commensurate with their qualifications, ranking it 11th on this measure with starting salaries at an impressive £20,897.

These results make a great start to the new term for Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, who took over as the principal and vice-chancellor in March, filling the post that became vacant following the sudden death of Mike Pittilo in February 2010.

The university's success lies in its strong links with business and the professions — local, national and multinational. It works with employers at every stage from course development and accreditation to scholarships and placements — 90% of courses involve some form of work experience.

The facilities are top-notch too. The

next stage in Robert Gordon's development has already begun with work starting on a £170m construction project, which will see all of the university's academic activities located at its Garthdee site in Aberdeen. The development is part of the university's ambition to create the best riverside campus in Europe. The already impressive estate includes a purpose-built clinical skills centre, high-tech television and radio studios, a green screen suite, a recently refurbished and award-winning union and an £11m sports centre with a 25-metre swimming pool, gyms, a large multi-purpose sports hall and a climbing wall.

Robert Gordon has developed a reputation not just for its enviable employment record but also for its talented athletes, drawn by its facilities and sport scholarships. Current recipients include European and Commonwealth swimming gold medallist Hannah Miley, footballer Rachel Corsie, who represents Scotland, and cross-country skier P J Barron, who competed in the 2010 Winter Olympics.



Rushing out to everyone: Heriot-Watt prides itself on providing professionally-relevant education for the good of society

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