

# Policy shifts pose challenges for the behaviour change wizards

The University of the West of England caused a stir when it established the Centre for Transport & Society (CTS) in 2004. So, ten years on, how have things turned out? The Centre's founder, **Glenn Lyons**, and current director, **Graham Parkhurst**, tell **Andrew Forster** about the highs and lows, and the challenges posed by austerity and changing Government transport policy

**T**ransport is a people business but in academic transport studies the people are often boiled down to numbers shaping demand curves or populating transport models. So there was a good deal of excitement in the transport community when, in 2004, the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol launched its Centre for Transport & Society (CTS). Here at last was a place that was going to put the social dimension of transport centre stage. It chimed with many of the ideas gaining ascendancy in transport policy at the time, such as travel behaviour change and car demand management.

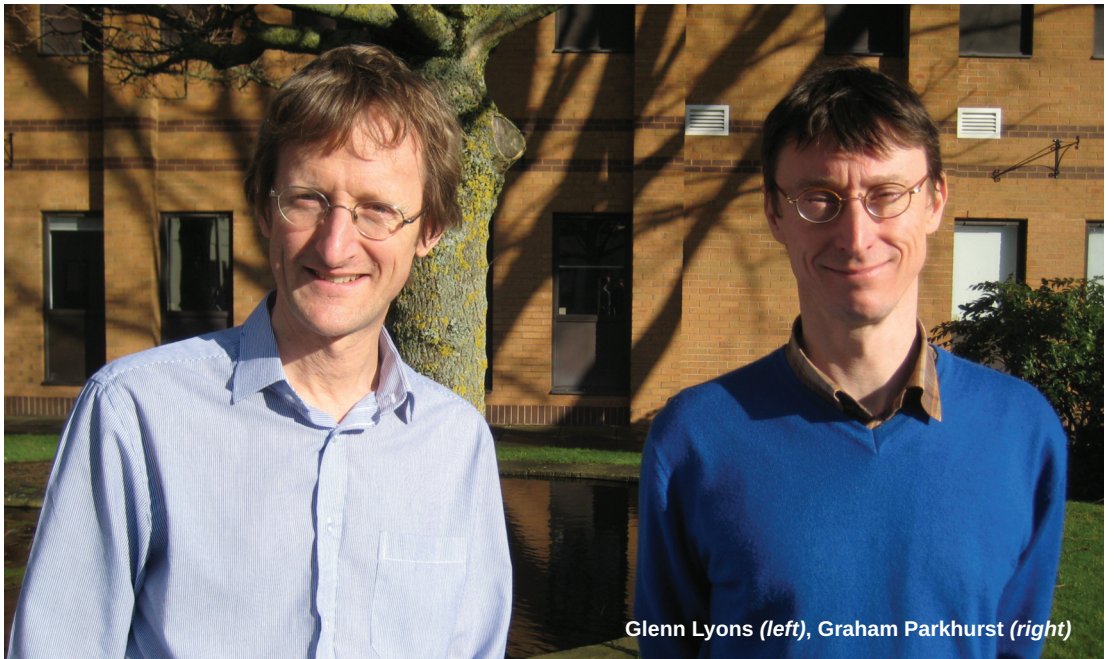
Academics at established transport departments watched developments at UWE with interest. One told *LTT* their own university had 'missed a trick', being slow to recognise the rich research opportunities within the space CTS had occupied. But a lot of ingredients are needed to turn a good idea into an enduring success. So, ten years on, how is the Centre faring? To find out, I've come to UWE's Frenchay Campus on the northern outskirts of Bristol to meet the Centre's founding director, Glenn Lyons, and its current director and professor of sustainable mobility, Graham Parkhurst. Although Lyons was promoted in 2010 to become an associate dean in the CTS's parent environment and technology faculty, he remains active in CTS life and is professor of transport and society.

Lyons explains an interesting bit of background to the CTS's formation. Historically, UWE had a strong reputation for planning and built environment studies and the university recognised that transport was a gap worth filling. But Bristol City Council was keen to see a transport centre established too. In the late 1990s/early 2000s the city council was widely regarded as one of the leading transport authorities in the country. Under the leadership of Labour councillor Helen Holland and, on the officer side, Richard Rawlinson, the city was pursuing a new tram system and talking up the prospect of urban road pricing too. "They were frustrated by the fact that they couldn't enter into European projects with a partner university in the way that cities such as Leeds, Newcastle, Southampton and London would do," says Lyons.

Lyons and Parkhurst joined UWE in 2002. They were rising young stars in transport academia. Lyons, a civil engineer with a PhD in driver behaviour and artificial intelligence, joined from the University of Southampton's Transportation Research Group. Parkhurst, whose background was psychology and a PhD in transport geography, had spent ten years at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded transport research centre, led by Professor Phil Goodwin, which was initially based at the University of Oxford but later transferred to University College London.

The CTS quickly started attracting academics and students alike. Goodwin was an early recruit. "He was excited by it and thought, this is a place that's got some new buzz, that resonates with things like the New Realism and the behaviour change agenda that he'd been following," says Lyons. "As a new university we were attracting Russell Group calibre people [the group that represents 24 leading UK universities] from an international field when we had new research posts available because people were saying: 'Finally there's a group out there that has embraced the take on transport that I felt was right'."

A Masters course in transport planning enjoyed a flying start, aided by a nationwide shortage of transport planners.



Glenn Lyons (left), Graham Parkhurst (right)

"When I left Southampton the biggest number they'd ever had on their MSc was 19 and I was there seven years," says Lyons. "The first year Graham and I ran the MSc here we had 11 students and the following year we had 19 or 20."

Despite its title, Lyons emphasises that the CTS was never going to be a social science group that simply "philosophises over people's lifestyles". One of its particular interests is how new transport technologies impact on people. "We look at the socio-technical interface of transport. So, given there are these technological innovations going on, whether it be information systems, or different types of demand responsive transport, let's look at those but through the lens of social psychology."

## A changed landscape

Things were going rather nicely but then, in 2008, the recession struck: hundreds of transport planners lost their jobs and demand for university transport Masters courses among domestic students nose-dived. "We used to get consultants in particular who would fund new graduates through the Masters and it was a way of perhaps ensuring they stayed with the employer for a few years, built up some loyalty," says Parkhurst. "But consultants have basically stopped doing so." Ditto local authorities. The introduction of student fees means students are also reluctant to self-fund a Masters course, adds Lyons.

Numbers on the CTS MSc are now about half of what they were – eight compared with 15 a year (it's hard to be precise because some are studying part-time).

Says Lyons: "I'm much more conscious now, having got further through my own career, that transport planning's a cyclical profession, which isn't overwhelmingly encouraging if you were advising your own 18-year old son or daughter which profession to go in. 'Well, you could go into transport planning and if you're really good you'll survive the first wave, second wave and third wave cuts. But you might want to go into finance or some other career.' So I think it's more challenging for us but ultimately you can't see that transport planning goes away fully."

Parkhurst believes things will pick up. "I think they [consultants] have been relying on the fact that there were so many people laid off at the beginning of the recession that the market was full of available skills. That is now turning. My concern is the companies are not recognising that and I think they're going to discover they have problems. We are being contacted most weeks to put round adverts for graduates to join companies from the Masters course but we don't now have the graduates coming out to meet that demand."

The Government's austerity drive hit the CTS's research activities too. "The DfT in effect cut-off funding when the new Government came into office," Parkhurst recalls. "They basically had a review of consultancy and I think that for about a year there were no commissions from the DfT. And then they trickled and now the tap's pretty much on again. So that definitely affected us."

Another big challenge for CTS has been the shift in Government transport policy. The travel behaviour change agenda has lost some of its momentum in recent years, with renewed interest in increasing road capacity and solving road transport problems – such as emissions – with technology.

Says Lyons: "If I liken it to Harry Potter, near the beginning [of CTS's existence] the Dark Lord, Voldemort, was banished to the shadows – the Dark Lord of technology fix and capacity provision – and Harry Potter and his chums were the behaviour change young wizards who were going to bring about improvements to the whole arrangements of travel. But they didn't perhaps get the support and tutoring that they needed and so gradually the Dark Lord is mustering his powers again and the technology fix argument is coming back to centre stage."

"Somehow we've gone from asking, 'how do we tackle congestion and its social and economic and environmental consequences?' to 'MY GOD THE RECESSION IS CRIPPLING US, IT'S ABOUT ECONOMIC GROWTH, OH, AND CLIMATE CHANGE.'"

"So you've just got this complete refocusing that's happened in the space of the decade we've existed from being in the right place at the right time to catch an upswing of belief that behaviour change really mattered, you had DfT



“Harry Potter and his chums were the behaviour change young wizards who were going to bring about improvements to the whole arrangements of travel. But the Dark Lord of technology fix and capacity provision is mustering his powers again.”

Glenn Lyons

with I think much more energy behind it and latitude for pursuing social research, and then bit-by-bit that's been eroded and boxed in by the forces of engineering and science that said, 'Hang on a minute, we never liked this in the first place, and actually we can do some proper stuff now.'"

It's not been a total reversal, he emphasises. "It's not a bleak picture that everything's been lost, because some of the fruits of those early years have endured in the psyche of transport planning and they're coming out in the Local Sustainable Transport Fund-type work. But that for me has been the real tussle that we've seen."

The CTS has benefitted from the DfT's £600m LSTF programme. "We have done extremely well out of the LSTF-like initiatives – evaluation studies in particular," says Parkhurst. "We're fortunate in that local authorities in this particular area have done well in terms of funding, so we've had some commissions to support them." As well as evaluating the West of England Partnership's LSTF programme, the CTS is a member of a consortium led by Hertfordshire County Council evaluating employer-based initiatives across a number of authorities.

## University economics

All these changes mean the CTS has contracted a little in size. "It's a bit smaller now but not to the point where you say, 'Oh, it's half the size it was'," says Lyons. "But the most important thing is the question of critical mass and I don't think it's failing on its critical mass where it is now." As well as Parkhurst and Lyons, the professorial/lecturing staff are John Parkin, Kiron Chatterjee, and Steve Melia and then there are seven research staff and a similar number of PhD students.

Parkhurst says the CTS has adapted to the changing environment. "We wanted to keep our niche and particular flavour but we have needed to embrace certainly on the teaching side a wider perspective." This autumn will see the Centre launch a second MSc course, in transport engineering and planning, which, it's hoped, will appeal to international students. Parkhurst explains why this is important. "Research needs to be subsidised because for every research council proposal or EU proposal that is successful we only get paid 75% or 80% of the costs we declare so there's an expected institution contribution. That has to come from essentially what we make on teaching.

"Seeing as we can't make much on undergraduate students and on [UK] postgraduates we currently lose money, international students are the only way you can balance the books really, or other industrial contributions – projects perhaps that we undertake on a consultancy basis. But in terms of serious money it would be from international student fees."

A UK/EU student would pay about £6,200 to study a Masters transport course full-time at UWE (surprisingly, Parkhurst says this is higher than a Masters in London, where courses for domestic students are more heavily subsidised). But a non-EU international student on the existing MSc at CTS pays £11,750. "That is significantly less than you'd be quoted to study at University College London, or Imperial – I think they're heading towards £20k now."

Parkhurst says the second MSc course is needed

because the phrase 'transport planning' isn't well-understood in the overseas markets the CTS is targeting. "The term transport planning just doesn't play is the feedback we've had – if you're in India, or China or the Middle East, you're looking for a transport engineering course. You'll be happy to study some transport planning within that but you need to have a course name with engineering in it."

The CTS will seek Institution of Civil Engineers accreditation for the new course. "That's a world brand in terms of quality," Parkhurst points out. "The idea is if we can recruit maybe ten on each MSc then we'll be back to the 20 that is where we need to be for long-term viability."

Recruiting international students is made trickier by the fact the CTS doesn't have the word-of-mouth connections that universities with longer-established Masters courses enjoy, Parkhurst admits. "That will come or it is coming now but you can imagine if someone studied their engineering course in the 1960s at Imperial [in London] and they're now working in India somewhere, they're probably going to direct younger colleagues back to the course they experienced themselves."

## Making research count

Since the CTS was established other university transport departments have expanded their social research, says Parkhurst. "Certainly the Oxford group [the Transport Studies Unit] is now a significant player and I think some of the mainstream transport groups such as Leeds do more on the social side."

As well as its LSTF work, CTS's current research interests include: a new EU project, EVIDENCE, that is seeking to repeat 'smarter choices' work at an EU level; a Technology Strategy Board project that could lead to a taxibus trial in north Bristol; and work on mobility and the ageing population. Lyons has just completed a joint paper with Mark Wardman, of the Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds, into the contentious matter of travel time use and savings.

Lyons and Parkhurst do some advisory work both here and abroad. "Graham and I are doing some work at the moment where we're essentially 'critical friends' inside projects," says Lyons. "In resource terms we're a very small shareholder but in influence terms it's a very worthwhile role. I've just completed a piece of work with one of the big consultancies on a Transport 2050 vision. I've come in part-way through the study as someone who shakes the tree and says, 'Hang on a minute, which angle are you looking at? Supposing you considered these issues and set a more provocative context for what you're doing.'"

Lyons is also spending three months of this year on secondment advising the New Zealand Government's Ministry of Transport. "The input they were looking for, their words not mine, was 'thought leadership and intellectual grunt' – though I'm not sure I've ever put intellectual grunt on my CV!" he laughs. He's leading a piece of work on future travel demand in the country.

In his role as associate dean for research and knowledge exchange, Lyons was responsible for overseeing the faculty's Research Excellence Framework (REF) submission last autumn to the Higher Education Funding

Council for England (HEFCE). REF is the new system for judging the quality of research in UK higher education and the results, to be announced on 18 December, will shape university funding from 2015 as well as the league tables prospective students look at when choosing where to study.

The CTS made one of the two strongest contributions in the faculty's submission, says Lyons. He explains how the REF assessment works. "The current formula says if your work is anything up to internationally recognised, which is two stars, sorry, we're not going to give you any money for that any more. If your work is internationally excellent, three-star, we'll give you a multiplier of one in our funding formula. If your work is world-leading, which is four-star, we'll give you seven times as a multiplier. So it's really sending out a very clear signal that turning out volume is of no interest to anyone, they (HEFCE) want some paradigm shifting papers and contributions."

The REF also considers research impact. "What we've had to do is compile mini-stories that tell how research done at UWE has gone on to be picked up by policy practice or commercialisation, or new products and services," says Lyons. "It's really quite challenging because we can all say, 'Well of course we're doing this study on understanding how young people choose which modes of travel they use and whether smartphones are going to influence and blah blah blah,' but does it actually feed through to the DfT saying: 'We're going to change our policy on this', or a telecoms provider saying: 'We could develop something here that capitalises on that and changes behaviour.' We have to get testimonials from people to say, 'Yeah, I can vouch for the fact that it's not just these academics claiming they've done something.'"

"The audit trail is very hard," agrees Parkhurst. "The DfT has generally over the years not been good at acknowledging academic influence. Even if you have a consultancy study, typically they often won't actually badge the names of the authors – they'll just badge it as the Department. And rarely would they want to say that one academic group had led to a change of policy; at best they might acknowledge that it was an interesting contribution to a wider current."

One of the criticisms of academic research is that too much of it is hidden away in academic journals that few people read. The CTS runs an annual conference to disseminate its work to transport practitioners from the local area. But big changes are also afoot to make all academic research more accessible, as Lyons explains.

"What we are now able to do is pay the academic journal for Gold open access, which essentially says, 'Look we'll pay you the journal £1,500 as the authors and you'll publish it totally free and available to anyone in the world'. Or they have what's called Green open access, which is they have an embargo period and they'll say, 'We will publish it as a journal but after 12 months we will allow you to make available the pre-published version on your own website'."

HEFCE has just announced that for the post-2014 REF, journal articles must be "discoverable, and free to read and download, for anyone with an internet connection".

"So there's a strong direction of travel here," says Lyons, "that says research should be for the shared common good." **UT**



The University of the West of England, Bristol

PHOTO: GUWE