

University of Surrey

Statement to me by a GBC councillor:

“What the University wants, the university gets”

The University now proposes to become a major property developer, with a large potential housing development in a sensitive area, the Hogs Back. Should this tradition of giving the University what they want continue, despite fierce local opposition to this housing plan?

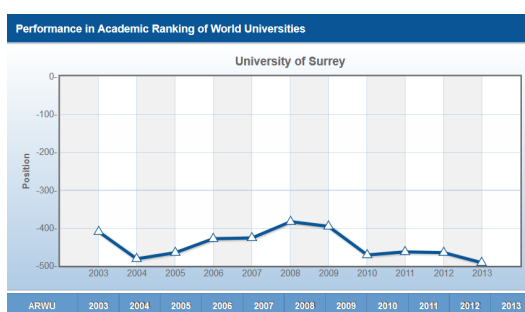
Reasons why this should be so can be summarised as:

- Successful university, top ranked in the UK
- Makes major economic contribution to GBC are (claimed £1.2 billion/year)
- Research activities generate new business start ups
- Brings high value added activities to Guildford

Need to look at some of these claims

University Ranking Guides

There are several university guides, providing rankings of UK universities on various criteria. In most of these, the University of Surrey does well, being ranked 6th in The Guardian, and 12th in both the Complete University Guide and the Sunday Times guides. Both of these use the National Student Satisfaction survey as a criterion, so it is unsurprising that they both rank the University of Surrey highly. There are several differences in the criteria, for example, the Complete University Guide includes a research assessment criterion, whereas the Guardian has as a “value added” criterion. In all of these studies, ranking by individual criteria are also possible – for example, the University of Surrey drops to 35th (out of 115) WHEN ranked on research quality in the Sunday Times guide. On graduate prospects, it drops to 29th in the Guardian guide, similar to 25th place in the Complete University guide. It can be seen that stripping out student satisfaction changes rankings very considerably. The ranking methodology used by both (and other UK surveys) has been criticised by numerous commentators (see Wiki for examples), as international studies show the University of Surrey in an entirely different light. In the Times Educational Supplement Survey, the “Academic Reputation Survey” it was rated between 351st and 400th in the world, and in the same survey at 49th in the UK.



In the Academic Ranking of World Universities, the University of Surrey was placed even lower, almost at the bottom of its ranking of 500 world universities – and in recent years the performance has been disappointing, as shown by the recorded performance against time. Surrey has also been falling in the QS World University rankings, from 190th in 2007 to 284th in 2013.

Rankings are very important as education becomes a competitively funded sector, with students as consumers, and so the importance of global ranking is increasing, as universities try to build their profile in order to support recruitment efforts and research as well as attracting overseas students. As the university is more than half way through its 10 year strategy aimed at positioning the university as a leading national and international institution by 2017 it is appropriate to review progress towards these goals. The declared goals were to be a top 10 UK university and amongst the top 100 international universities. This brief review suggests the situation is not as rosy as projected by the University itself, and that there is a need for considerable improvement if the international ranking goal set by the University itself is to be met. This is an important goal as the University itself has stated "*The University's international strategy is core to all activities.*" (2012 financial statement)

Contribution to the Local Economy

Total expenditure by the University during the financial year ending in July 2013 was just over £211 million. Not all of this would have been spent in the UK, let alone within the Borough. In addition to this, spending by students would have contributed to the local economy, with students living outside halls of residence probably contributing the most. Overall, this total is unlikely to exceed about £60 million (13000 students spending £4500 per year) so the total spend by the university and students was probably less than £300 million, some way short of £1.2 billion. Although company start-ups from the university contribute to the local economy too, their contribution is due to the management of these companies. Could my mother claim to make an annual £1.5 million contribution to the UK economy, due to the spending by her children and grandchildren?

Although the exact contribution to the local economy could be endlessly debated, what is of greater significance is how this may change with the future. The life of each and every one of us is changed on a daily basis due to the digital age and the internet. We don't notice it on a daily basis, because the change is small. But over a 15 year period, the total change is huge – and this will be the case with the University too. It will be a very different institution in 2030 compared to what it is now; it is highly likely that distance learning will be of greater importance – probably leading to fewer students physically on the campus. Research activities will change too, with internationally recognised centres of excellence likely to become dominant. These changes are likely to lessen the contribution the university makes to the town – and so it would be sensible to incorporate likely changes into a Local Plan that recognises that changes in the relationship between town and gown are inevitable.