New Fellows

Professor Laurence Brake
Laurence Brake, Professor Emeritus of Literatures and Print Culture, is a distinguished scholar and author whose long affiliation with Birkbeck began in 1975, when she completed her doctorate at the College and took up a three-year Research Assistant post. Returning in 1988 to head the Literature in English programme in Continuing Education, Professor Brake taught at Birkbeck for 20 years, before retiring in 2016 as Professor of Literature and Print Culture. During that time she helped to found the Certificate in Creative Writing, an interdisciplinary MA in Gender and the MA in Creative Writing. Professor Brake served as a staff Governor and was for many years equal opportunities officer for the Association of University Teachers trade union. Since her formal retirement, Professor Brake has continued to teach an MA module at the University of London’s Institute of English Studies and is involved in Birkbeck’s Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies. She said: “I was delighted, touched – and a little surprised! – to be invited to become a Fellow of a university which is pushing its horizons to engage with society.”

Mary Curnock Cook CBE
Mary Curnock Cook CBE joined the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) as Chief Executive in January 2010. She came to UCAS after six years at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency. From 1994 to 2010, Mary Curnock Cook was Chief Executive of BEIL, the professional body for licensed retailing. She served as a Council member on the Further Education Funding Council between 1997 and 2003, and was Chairman of award-winning e-learning company Creative Learning Media from 2002 to 2003. She has an MSc in General Management from the London Business School, and was awarded an OBE in the 2010 Queen’s Birthday Honours for services to training in hospitality and tourism. She said: “With some 20 years of experience working in secondary, vocational and now higher education, I am particularly proud to become a Fellow of a university which is pushing the boundaries of understanding learning and teaching through its education research programme and the Centre for Educational Neuroscience. This research is so fundamentally important – to be honest, I’d like to enrol right now. But then, enrolment – envy is an occupational hazard in my job and a Fellowship of Birkbeck is a truly wonderful alternative.”

Professor Philip Dewe
Professor Philip Dewe is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Birkbeck. Having joined the College from Massey University in his native New Zealand in 2000, Professor Dewe also gave outstanding service to Birkbeck as Vice-Master for 11 years. Stepping down in summer 2014 now allows him more time for his research interests, while he continues to contribute to the College as Pro-Vice-Master for Special Projects. Among Professor Dewe’s many achievements as Vice-Master has been his work in Stratford, east London, which culminated in the opening of the University Square Stratford campus in November 2013. He said: “It has given me enormous pleasure to see the completion of this milestone. Its existence is the fruit of many years spent exploring opportunities for widening participation, developing programmes that capture the aspirations of those living in east London, and developing our relationships within that community so that they may be able to become part of the wider Birkbeck community.”

Sir Alan Langlands
Sir Alan Langlands is Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds. Between 2009 and 2013 he was Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Prior to that, he was Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dundee (2000–2009) and Chief Executive of the NHS in England (1994–2000). He has a particular interest in the scientific basis of health services and, from its inception in 2004 until 2012, he chaired the board of UK Biobank, a major genetic epidemiology study funded principally by the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council. Knighted in 1998 for his services to the NHS, Sir Alan is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and an Honorary Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences. He said: “I have long been impressed by Birkbeck’s pioneering role in adult education for working people. Its founder, George Birkbeck, was a professor of natural philosophy at the Andersonian Institute in my home town of Glasgow, and Birkbeck was founded in the Anderson tradition of a liberal education at the forefront of applied science and technology. Its success across the wider range of academic activity, from arts and humanities to social sciences and biological sciences, is testament to the great values of those early years.”

John McDonnell has been the Member of Parliament for Hayes and Harlington since 1997. His background is similar to that of many Birkbeck students, in that after leaving school he held a series of unskilled jobs before studying for his A-levels at night school, going on to study for a BSc in Government and Politics at Brunel University. He completed a Master’s in Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck, while helping to run a children’s home and working for the National Union of Mineworkers and then the Trades Union Congress. Active in his local community as a grassroots campaigner, John McDonnell joined the Labour Party and was elected to represent his home constituency of Hayes and Harlington on the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1981, becoming Chair of Finance and Ken Livingstone’s deputy leader. Following the abolition of the GLC, he joined Camden Borough Council as Head of its Policy Unit, later becoming Chief Executive of the Association of London Authorities and the Association of London Government. In Parliament, he is the Chair of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs. John McDonnell said: “Birkbeck gave me the opportunity to explore a radical new world of ideas and it opened my eyes to the potential we have to change society.”

Peter Westley
Peter Westley has spent his career in the service of colleges of the University of London. After qualifying as an accountant in 1982, he joined University College London, before spending 16 years at the Institute of Education, where he was Deputy Finance Secretary. He joined Birkbeck as Finance Secretary in 1994 and retired as Director of Finance early in 2014, having steered the College’s finances prudently through turbulent times, including the collapse of the College’s then investment banker, Barings, in 1995. During the late 1990s, Peter Westley studied for a BA in Accounting and Management at Birkbeck, graduating with a First in 2000. He said: “I wanted to refresh my knowledge and I am particularly pleased that I was able to do this at Birkbeck. I am now enjoying my retirement and the arrival of a grandson. I am immensely proud to have been offered a Fellowship and look forward to continue being involved with Birkbeck in the future.”

Honorary Fellowships are awarded to individuals who have attained distinction in academic or public life, who have rendered exceptional service, which may include philanthropic support, to Birkbeck, or who have, or have had, a close association with Birkbeck.