This is the first time I have written for BBK, and I am delighted to have done so. I am enormously proud of my role at Birkbeck, which I took up in April 2013, and I have been doing my utmost to champion part-time study since then.

It is an appointment with very special meaning for me. I grew up in a modest suburb of Stockport, where one of the most impressive buildings on the high street was the Mechanics’ Institute. I knew it as the place where aspiring people of all ages went to add to the knowledge they already had and to strike out along paths of new enquiry. It seemed to me as a child an impressive thing to do. So, when I learned that Birkbeck itself had begun as the London Mechanics’ Institute in 1823, I immediately identified it as a place I already knew as important in transforming many lives.

As President, I follow in the steps of one of the most illustrious historians of our day. Professor Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) had a profound grasp of what history was about and how understanding it could bring insight and wisdom to the contemporary world. But on a personal level I am touched to be his successor.

In the 1950s, when I was a very eager, but naive, student at Cambridge, he was my history supervisor. This meant I visited his rooms once a week and had one-to-one tuition in nineteenth-century British history. Together we examined the social and political mood of those times, the changing industrial face of the country and its shifting power structures.

Eric Hobsbawm loved Birkbeck and had a 65-year-long association with it. Above all, he loved what it stood for. And I share his outlook.

For all these reasons, I was delighted to spearhead the national ‘Part-Time Matters’ campaign to champion the benefits of part-time study, when it was launched in May 2013. I also spoke in the House of Lords in July 2013 about the importance of part-time study for the economy and social mobility.

There is an increasing groundswell of support for part-time education, and I am confident that it has a great future. As one of the world’s most prestigious centres of part-time study, Birkbeck is ideally suited to meet the challenges of the future.

Listen to a podcast interview with Baroness Joan Bakewell at: www.bbk.ac.uk/birkbeckvoices/episode8

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