

Derek Hicks

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Derek Hicks as a Fellow of Birkbeck.

Birkbeck was in crisis. One of its leading supporters and benefactors announced that

When the funds of an Institution are exhausted, it is wiser and more manly to put a stop to all transactions, rather than go obstinately on, sinking deeper into liability, and incurring not only embarrassment, but eventually disgrace.

One of Birkbeck's protagonists asked: was Birkbeck "making shoes out of stolen leather" (in other words, educating its students at other people's expense)? Were the doors of Birkbeck to be closed for ever?

Birkbeck's management panicked, but set to work. Trustees and treasurers were contacted; alumni and advocates rallied; parliamentarians and political elites were lobbied; appeals were made to the press. A petition was presented to the House of Commons, the Corporation of London, and other committees. Money was amassed from the "friends of popular education".

This crisis was in 1857. Birkbeck – or, as it was known then, the London Mechanics' Institution – was saved.

An account of it was set out by John Robert Taylor, Honorary Secretary of the London Mechanics' Institutions' Special Donation Fund. He lamented that

There are thousands and tens of thousands of human beings who enter into this world, and pass through the portals of death, without their minds being even so much attended to as the treatment bestowed upon the inferior animal.

Humanity must remember that great principle, he reminded listeners: “The soul without knowledge is not good”.

Exactly 250 years later, Birkbeck was again in crisis. Indeed, it found itself riding a tsunami of crises. The first one to hit was the government’s announcement of their Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQs) policy. This was HEFCE’s devastating news that they would “no longer provide funding... to teach students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification which they have already achieved”. With one swoop, 40 per cent of Birkbeck’s funding was removed. Our Master, the College Secretary, and devoted team had a fight for survival on their hands.

Into this crisis stepped Derek Hicks, at that time Regional Consultant for London and the East of England and Birkbeck’s nominated contact. He had been charged with leading on HEFCE’s interaction with the college. As he has said, Birkbeck’s unique mission meant that it suffered unintended consequences of government policy: Birkbeck was their “punch-point”.

Hicks immediately grasped the seriousness of the crisis. After all, 71 per cent of ELQ students studied part-time and, at Birkbeck, 90 per cent of students combined academic study with full-time employment. Certain departments would be hardest hit: computer science and information technology, management, geology and earth sciences, and psychology. So, too, would older students, minorities (including disabled ones), Black and Minority Ethnic groups, and women. We must never forget that 62% of part-time students are women, and they are the ones most likely to be seeking reskilling after returning to paid employment after raising children.

And this wasn’t the only crisis: it was followed quickly by fee rises in 2012 and the loans issue (which were initially not available for part-time students). In all these crises, Hicks was crucial in minimising the damage (at least) and devising solutions (at best). Amongst other things, Hicks and the College aimed to persuade the government to freeze funding in those institutions (which included Birkbeck and the Open University) most affected for three

years, raise the part-time premium to minimise the effect on part-time students, and develop strategies to work with HEFCE to develop and extend Birkbeck's mission in order to recruit additional students to replace the numbers who would not be funded. Our Master, Professor David Latchman, asked HEFCE to fund external consultants to develop an optimal strategy and to underpin a major bid to the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund. This included a "proposal for further engagement with employers not only in Bloomsbury but also by developing a significant employer engagement strategy in Stratford". Therefore, the Stratford campus was started, a partnership with the University of East London. It was a bold initiative that taxed the negotiating skills of all sides. This would not only boost student numbers, but also contribute to our widening participation mission.

The College had to develop a bid to HEFCE's Catalyse Fund to introduce three year degrees and develop links between the world of study and the world of work. We needed to find new ways to deliver flexible university education to new types of students. None of this was easy. Hicks had a tough job.

But his advice and creative thinking worked: Birkbeck was saved, in large part due to Hicks' pragmatic approach to the crises, while always understanding and never losing sight of Birkbeck's unique mission. Both the Master and Hicks adopted a positive stance: "Let's give it a go!" was their catchphrase.

So, what about the human dimension of these crises? Who is Derek Hicks? He grew up in the West County and went to school in Plymouth. He was the first of his family to go to university – Sheffield University – where he read economics and sociology. After university, he drifted around for a few years, working in retail, as a consultant, teaching English in Saudi Arabia and Libya, before ending up in University management.

Hicks is a voracious reader, passionate about music, and a fan of the Liverpool Football Club. He is also a husband to Lucy and devoted father to Emily and Lowenna (Cornish for "Joy, Bliss")

In speaking about Hicks to the Master, the College Secretary, and other colleagues, time and again I was told that he is professional but genuine; soft-spoken but with a razor sharp mind. A "fixer in the best possible sense". A "critical friend".

I am also told that in negotiating with HEFCE, there were numerous James Bond moments. There was Hicks shushing our Master, advising him to remain quiet at a meeting so that Alan Langlands, the Chief Executive of HEFCE, would not realise that our Master was the only person to ever attend two successive meetings of the Strategic Development Fund to ask for (and get) large sums of money.

But my favourite is the time the Master and the College Secretary were ushered into a formidable meeting room at HEFCE's headquarters in Centrepont. They sat down at one end of a long meeting table, only to be presented with a video screen at the other, far end of the room, at which were sitting the dignitaries from HEFCE – also seated at the far end of a large committee room. Tensions were high, until in walked Derek Hicks, who quickly flashed a warm smile, and the Master and the College Secretary took a deep breath: all was well in the world. Perhaps the College Secretary won't be too offended if I quote him: "Hicks is pragmatic", he told me: "and not full of bull-shit".

But the final word must be left to our Master. Quite simply, he told me, we owe our survival to Hicks. He was key to new initiatives at Birkbeck. Exactly 250 years after John Robert Taylor rescued the London Mechanics' Institution from a financial crisis and insisted that "the soul without knowledge is not good". Derek Hicks stepped up and did the same for Birkbeck, College of the University of London.

We are proud that he has agreed to be a College Fellow.