

## Miriam Zukas

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

Today, I have the delightful task of celebrating a new Fellow of our College: Professor Miriam Zukas. We are honoured to welcome her to this position in gratitude for her extraordinary dedication to the Birkbeck project: most notably, in her role as the former Executive Dean of the School of Social Sciences, History, and Philosophy where she has not only transformed institutional structures and managerial processes, but has also served as a role-model and mentor to us all.

Let me start with a conundrum, however. Inviting Zukas to become a Fellow of Birkbeck is slightly awkward. Although the word “Fellow” is not etymologically masculine (it comes from Old English feolaga meaning “partner, one who shares with another”), since the mid-fifteenth century, it has been used in common parlance to mean “any man, male person”.

So, how was I to go about honouring Miriam Zukas – feminist, formidable leader, and mentor – with the title “Fellow”?

The solution to this problem – as with most things in life – lies with the ancient Greeks, and the clue in the words: feminist and mentor. The story that came to

mind can be found in Homer's tale of Odysseus. As you will all know, Odysseus embarks on a long journey and entrusts his son (Telemachus) and household to his old friend Mentor. Telemachus is not a natural leader: chaos ensues throughout the kingdom. The grey-eyed goddess, Athena, enters the mortal plain, disguising herself as Mentor and promising her father Zeus to "light a fire" in Telemachus' mind, and "put fuel in his thoughts". Athena, disguised as Mentor, eventually enables Telemachus to realise that he is truly "old enough to learn from others what has happened [in the kingdom] and to feel [his] own strength at last". Athena then departs, leaving Odysseus and Telemachus to fight while she, taking "the shape of a swallow, darted aloft to perch on the smoky main beam of the hall" to observe. In other words, Mentor is a goddess in disguise, who comes to help and then leaves the protagonists to it; the concept of "Fellow" is not "man" but "partner, one who shares with another". I want to dare to suggest that Zukas has fulfilled a similar function in the lives of those of us who manage, teach, and study at Birkbeck. As a Fellow, she will continue to "share one with another", albeit perching in a different office.

It is no random act of mine to choose this story when thinking about Zukas. She has written and spoken extensively about the role of mentoring, and even alludes to Homer's tale in a footnote in one of her chapters. Zukas is an exemplary Mentor.

So, who is this person who came to Birkbeck in 2009 and set about managing a remarkable transformation? Her mother was originally from Strasbourg who, during the war, went to live in Lyon and then Israel. There, she met a

handsome Lithuanian, the man who was to become Zukas' father. They emigrated to Zambia to run a successful business selling children's clothing. That was when Zukas and her two siblings were born. She grew up in Ndola, which had a sizable Jewish community at the time, but frequently accompanied her parents to Europe. As a child, then, Zukas was as familiar with the stark beauty of the Copperbelt as she was of Europe. She also learnt the importance of justice, with an uncle who was active in anti-apartheid politics. After some time in Switzerland, where she honed her different languages, she ended up at the University of Exeter. That was where she started her rapid rise as a psychologist and expert in adult education.

Her first career was as a lecturer in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Leicester, but then she moved to Leeds as a lecturer in psychology, moving up the ranks, eventually becoming the Director of the Lifelong Learning Institute and, in 2004, Professor of Adult Education. She was renowned for reaching communities in Yorkshire that the University had traditionally neglected. In particular, she was crucial in helping women gain access to Higher Education.

She is also an academic researcher. She has presented her research all over the world. Zukas has had visiting roles in the US, Denmark, Australia, Japan, Finland, and South Africa. She has been on the advisor board or served as consulting editor or editor of journals such as Studies in Continuing Education, Adult Education Quarterly, Canadian Journal of Studies in Adult Education, and Studies in the Education of Adults. She is an impressive editor of books and the

author of over 40 major publications (not including other journal contributions and published conference proceedings).

But at Birkbeck she was to meet her greatest challenge. Zukas joined Birkbeck as Executive Dean of the School of Social Sciences, History, and Philosophy (SSHP) in 2009. In many ways, Birkbeck was her dream job: she had long championed lifelong learning. But, in all truth, it was not an enviable job. She faced formidable financial and other challenges, including having to dissolve departments. Restructuring involve merging 17 schools in 5 mega-schools. Who likes change? She met resistance with calm determination and integrity. She calmed anxieties.

When she arrived, heads of departments were used to operating fairly independently, and saw other departmental heads as rivals. She forensically analysed what each department was doing and quickly won the trust of a diverse range of staff – in part because of her open-door policy and her long-standing commitment to the Birkbeck values of lifelong learning. Within a short period, there was a sense of a collective endeavour in the School, as opposed to seven disparate fiefdoms fighting it out.

How did she do this? Her managerial approach is informed by her feminism. As she stated in an article on “Friendship as Oral History”,

as a feminist, my approach to psychology now is that it should be concerned with research that is for woman, rather than about women. It should also acknowledge the specificity and social construction of knowledge, and recognise the conjunction of knowledge and power.

In College, she provided direction; she listened; she put into practice her formidable emotional intelligence and people-skills. She made the School operate as a School without destroying each department's unique culture. Although the different Deans all had very different personalities, priorities and interests, Zukas was key to the decision that the success of the School and College depended on everyone helping each other. In the words of one Dean, when her School was going through difficulties, Zukas' first question was: "How can we help?"

Zukas is also a technical wizard. She has been working with computers and advanced systems since 1978, an era when computers were being used in offices for the first time. She is widely known at Birkbeck as the "Goddess of Tableaux", that is, the college data system that most of us mere mortals find incomprehensible.

But I think there are other, less tangible, reasons for her success. She fastidiously applies the Greek law of hospitality to everyone: after all, as the Greeks remind us, visitors must be treated with respect because they might be

gods or goddesses: whichever of the many genders we self-identify with, we all might be Athena in disguise.

Zukas is famous for her entertaining and lush dinner parties. If you visit her office, you will be offered the choice of dozens of different teas, the most heady coffee, and cakes (although she does not eat them herself). I am reliably informed that some members of the management team inveigled things so that meetings were held in Zukas' office. I doubt that this is what HEFCE means when they talk about "developing a culture of quality", but it certainly works. And without wishing to add to a "culture of competition", I would like to encourage her successor to see if he can beat her hospitality.

Let me also share with some of the comments I received when asking about Zukas. "She is a born collaborator", I was told, "with a genius for seeing the possibilities that can emerge from very diverse interests and skills". She is a "brilliant teacher" and "extremely generous". Everyone reiterated her "strong ethical principles" and her talent in "finding peaceable and just solutions to the conflicts, challenges and tensions that happen in every academic setting". She has integrity. She has a vision of friendship that is "constant, loyal, and tough in the face of adversity". But my favourite comment came from a friend who said: "She is a very good and loyal friend, and probably a good friend to people she isn't friends with!"

As a personality, Zukas is tough, decisive, formidable – but she is also warm, funny, loyal, thoughtful, kind. She is voracious reader, passionate

photographer, and adventurous traveller: India, Japan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Mexico, Iceland, and the US, to name just a few. She names her cats after characters in Jane Austen novels: for example, Emma and Charlotte (who unfortunately turned out to be a male, but never mind). She is a devoted aunt to “The Niblings”, her 5 nephews and nieces. She is also a really enthusiastic driver. According to her partner, Sue Wilder, whom she has been with for thirty years, when they met, she had a blue Citroen called Florence (a la the cult children’s television programme Magic Roundabout rather than the cult nurse Nightingale).

Like Athena, disguised as Mentor, she is incensed by injustice.

And at the end of Odysseus, Zeus praises Athena for having ‘fought like a warrior’. Athena explains that:

“It was a just cause....

I was invisible -- at Odysseus' side.

I lent an unseen hand when he laced the bow,

[I] bent that obstinate wood into shape.”

When Zeus added, “It's how justice should be: an invisible, silent force”.

Athena murmured, “And like love too. Love should be the same”.

It is with love that we welcome Zukas to this Fellowship at Birkbeck.