

Philip Powell

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

Today it is my great honour to welcome Professor Philip Powell to a Fellowship at Birkbeck. It is always a particular pleasure to be able to welcome a colleague to the fellowship, especially when that colleague has made such incredible contributions to the College over so many years.

Powell came to the College in September 2009 as the first Executive Dean of the School of Business, Economics and Informatics. He has also been Pro Vice-Master (PVC) of Enterprise and Innovation. It must be admitted that 2009 was not a happy time for the College. A change in government policy meant that about 40% of the College's teaching income was going to be stripped away (this was the ELQ funding withdrawal crisis). Structural change was necessary if the College was to survive. Powell came to our rescue. With the support of Professor Linda Trenberth, over 30 new programmes were introduced within two years. This included entirely new BScs, MScs, Graduate Diplomas, foundational degrees, Graduate Certificates, PG Certificates, MRes, and Professional Doctorates. The flurry of activity succeeded. There was an increase of 600 student 'full time equivalents' (FTEs) in that year alone and a 60 per cent increase in student numbers over his first six years in post. This meant surpluses in his School of between £1 and £6.4 million each year, or a total of £40 million in the decade Powell was in charge.

Is it vulgar to mention money so early in an oration? Probably.

But here's the thing: he did this through teamwork, consensus, and sheer hard work. His style of leadership was clear from the time he was appointed. He didn't simply "meet and greet" every member of staff; he met, greeted, listened, and acted on what he heard. He inspired all 200 staff he was responsible for to work for the collective, not just themselves. He is a feminist, known for championing excellence in female scholars, ensuring gender balance, and earning Athena SWAN status for its departments.

“Management speak” was never his mode. He is famous for witty aphorisms: “strategy documents are pointless. But preparing strategy documents is crucial” and “Do quite some more, with a little bit more”. But, and this is my favourite: “Working groups are like toenails – they need to be clipped regularly!”

It is invidious to signal out particular schemes that he has been involved with, but let me try to give at least a “taster” of his innovations. He has championed new alliances – such as with Le Cordon Bleu Culinary Arts Institute, an internationally recognized leader in the teaching of culinary arts, with a team of classically trained Master Chefs, and Wine and Hospitality professionals. His team also introduced the most innovative MBA currently available in the UK, involving a collaboration with Central Saint Martins, thus merging management and business with the arts and creative industries. As Powell told the Financial Times, Birkbeck was “rejecting the functional silo teaching that is typical of most MBAs.” The MBA was shortlisted for the QS Re-imagine Education Award Ceremony in San Francisco (the Oscars of Higher Education). And then there is the Executive Master for International Players – in collaboration with UEFA (the governing body of European football). This is the most difficult course in the UK to get accepted on to because students had to have played for a country at least once at international level. It is a way to provide top players with the opportunity to transfer their skills from the field into decision-making and leadership roles. There have been links with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, as well as other degree apprenticeship programmes. He was part of the team responsible for establishing the Birkbeck Institute for Data Analytics, an interdisciplinary institute, which seeks to identify meaningful patterns in data, extract greater value from data, and gain new insights that can have an impact. He has supported the Knowledge Lab, an interdisciplinary lab exploring how digital technologies and information are transforming knowledge as well as our working and cultural lives. Online learning and MOOCs have become part of the School’s routine practices.

But Powell is more than a builder of communities. He is a distinguished academic in his own right. His own expertise is in information systems, project and strategic management, operational research, health, accounting, and higher education. Powell is one of the most-published European academics in the international field of Information Systems. His record

of books, research papers, conference papers, and other publications runs to more than 20 pages.

Unlike many researchers who publish either alone or with a handful of co-authors over their career, Powell has published with a host of co-authors, which is a testament to his willingness to mentor younger researchers and to collaborate with a wide range of fellow academics. He has received a total of 32 research grants including those from prestige organizations such as the Institute for Chartered Accounts in England and Wales, Operations Research Society, NHS, and the EU, as well as Ministry of Defence, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. This makes him an outstanding administrator of research as well as practitioner of research.

Powell's editorial record is as impressive as is his prolific research output. It includes his role (since 1994) as associate and then managing editor and editor-in-chief of the Information Systems Journal, one of the highest ranking IS journals in the world. The journal publishes "high quality, yet 'risky' papers". Uniquely, it is committed to representing "all epistemological and methodological traditions" within the field and is global in its scope. He shows intellectual leadership – serving as past President of the UK Academy for Information Systems, for example, and being Special Subject Assessor for the 2001 RAE. He is a Fellow of the British Computer Society and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. He has supervised 22 PhD students to completion. In 2011, he was part of the team winning the Times Higher Education Senior Management Team award. He has had a long-standing Honorary Professorship of Information Management at institutions such as the University of Groningen in the Netherlands where, I am told, he is widely admired for being approachable and keen to give advice to senior as well as junior colleagues.

All this is rather daunting. So, what about "The Person"?

Powell was born at home in Twickenham in the early 1960s but the family moved shortly afterwards to Eltham in south-east London. His mother was Barbara, a nurse before her marriage but who worked for a printing company afterwards. His father was Kenwyn Arthur

Powell, Liberal Party candidate for Twickenham in 1959 General Election, but also a management training consultant who published a book called Practical Accounting: An Introduction for Managers and Supervisors (1970). Powell and his brother Alun were expected to be incredibly quiet when their father was at home writing this book. This is speculation, but perhaps Powell had been plopped in front of the TV during this period. This is the only way I can explain his prodigious knowledge about the 1960s/70s children's TV series, the Magic Roundabout: Ermintrude, Dylan, Doogal, Brian, and Florence.

Powell attended St Dunston's College in Catford, South London. He became an Actuarial Trainee in the Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance, worked as a programmer in CUNA Mutual in Madison (Wisconsin), and as an auditor at Arthur Young and Co. in Namibia.

But the academic life drew him. Powell completed his BSc and PhD (awarded 1992) at Southampton University. While there, he was a teaching Fellow, Experimental Officer, and Lecturer. He was a senior lecturer in Computerised Accounting and Systems at the University of Adelaide in Australia, from which he went to Warwick Business School before being appointed Professor of Information Systems at Goldsmiths College. Before joining us at Birkbeck, he was Deputy Dean at the University of Bath.

It is fair to say, though, that his career at Birkbeck showcased his extraordinary abilities.

Powell has homes in both London and Cheltenham. The light of Powell's life is Sara, his daughter, whom (I am very reliably told) he dotes on. They enjoy going shopping together, hiking, and sharing glamping holidays. His own childhood was characterized by camping holidays, which were generally wet and miserable, with tents that collapsed in the middle of the night, leaving sleepers in inches of water. This was not good enough for Sara, who is treated to the most glamorous of tents in startling beautiful locations in places like Wales, Suffolk, and Isle of Wight. He is a formidable traveler. But no frenzied airports for him: he prefers the more civilized chug-a-chugging of inter-country trains. Despite planning itineraries in minute detail, he nevertheless insists on being hours early for any form of transport.

A friend told me that he has “an acerbic wit, a quick mind, a rapier tongue, a sparkling turn of phrase.... His work ethic is phenomenal”. He is hilarious – although no-one seems certain whether this is a dry humour or an “eee-aw” type funny. He is hardworking, quick, and loyal. He is obsessive about what he enjoys. He is a vegetarian and, although he currently does not have pets, he is an animal-lover. He enjoys art galleries and historical sites. He is a legendary and extremely fast walker (doing over 15 km a day, often while listening to economics podcasts). He also has a huge collection of bags – over-night ones, 2-night ones, 5-night ones, briefcases, shoulder bags, rucksacks, suitcases, and so on.

Finally, he is a private person and self-contained. I imagine my oration has made him uncomfortable.

I am conscious also that there are graduands waiting to graduate, so let me conclude:

Everyone is unanimous that he is “the funniest, most clever person... You cannot be unhappy in his company”. He is never one to shy away from the complexities of systems, Powell’s approach to both his research and management roles could perhaps be summarized as: “Think it. Plan it. Do it. Move on.” One of Powell’s statements is that “some people want to be someone, others want to do something”. Powell is always a do-er.

We are incredibly proud to be able to welcome him to a College Fellowship.