



Birkbeck
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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A FORCE FOR CHANGE

International bestselling author Abi Daré reflects on the success of her debut novel, *The Girl With The Louding Voice*, and how her second novel, *And So I Roar*, with its urgent focus on the climate crisis, led to her winning the inaugural Climate Fiction Prize.

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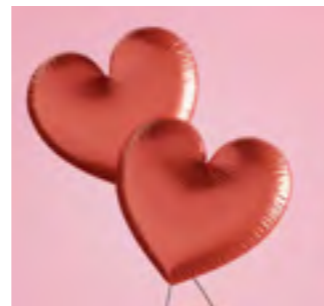
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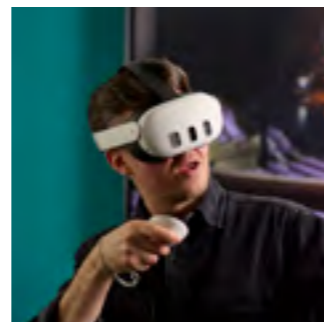
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WELCOME FROM VICE-CHANCELLOR SALLY WHEELER



As I am about to officiate over a new set of graduations, which celebrate the achievements of hundreds of our students, I'm reminded that the past year at Birkbeck has been one of purposeful progress.

Now in our third century, we have remained focused on what has always set Birkbeck apart: our mission to make quality higher education accessible to all who can benefit from it.

That mission, and our responsibility to ensure students have an outstanding experience while studying with us, has guided significant investment in our learning environment and research. The refurbishment of Birkbeck Central, officially opened by HRH The Princess Royal – see page 19 - has created a modern and welcoming space for study, collaboration and community.

Alongside investment in our estate, we are strengthening Birkbeck's role at the forefront of intellectual and societal change. Thanks to a £1.97million investment from the Office for Students, we are launching the new Centre for Creative AI this summer. Working closely

with our new Immersive Learning Centre, it will create opportunities for students to combine AI-driven creativity with cutting-edge immersive technologies. Read more on page 19.

Our commitment to research that addresses global challenges continues. On pages 26 and 27, you can read how a major donation has brought a world-class cryo-focused ion beam microscope to Birkbeck, enabling researchers and students to study cells in extraordinary detail. We have also launched the Carena Institute of Sustainable Archaeologies thanks to a generous gift from alumnus Marc Carena, placing environmental responsibility and community-centred practice at the heart of archaeological research and education. Hear from the inaugural Carena scholars on pages 14 and 15.

The principle behind these changes at Birkbeck remains constant: we must continue to place our community and the student experience at the heart of everything we do. Whether through enhanced campus spaces, innovative teaching and engagement, or research-led education, we ensure that Birkbeck supports students to thrive.

We are strengthening Birkbeck's role at the forefront of intellectual and societal change

None of this would be possible without our remarkable community of alumni, supporters and volunteers. Your generosity of time, expertise, guidance and financial support plays a vital role in sustaining Birkbeck's mission.

From mentoring our students to supporting scholarships and research, your commitment helps Birkbeck students access their studies and prepare for life beyond graduation. As a lifelong learning institution, forging and sustaining these relationships is central to who we are.

This edition of BBK reflects a core theme of Birkbeck as a force for change. Throughout these pages, you will meet alumni, staff and students whose work is tackling today's pressing challenges. Their stories demonstrate the distinctive impact of a Birkbeck education and the difference our community makes locally and in the world.

Professor Sally Wheeler
Vice-Chancellor, Birkbeck, University of London



REPRESENTING ALUMNI

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Edwin Lerew (BA Politics and Government, 2017) did not experience university in the conventional way. When he began his studies at Birkbeck, he did so alongside his mum, Samiya, and their shared journey culminated in graduating in the same ceremony. Today, he works as an academic and administrator at King's College London and is bringing his experience back to Birkbeck as alumni governor.

"Not every day a mother and son study together but no qualms were had," Edwin reflects. "She'd talk about how I was embarrassed to have her around but I was proud. It made us closer. We could talk politics and she illuminated me on a lot of concepts."

It is one of my life highlights to graduate with my mum and all my friends."

Edwin's route to Birkbeck followed a period of uncertainty. After dropping out of the University of Roehampton, he found himself disillusioned with education and grappling with unemployment. Around the time of the coalition government, he developed a growing interest in politics, which would soon become an academic and professional focus. Birkbeck offered a route back into education that aligned with his circumstances.

For Samiya, her Birkbeck studies had a lasting impact. Gaining a degree gave her greater authority as an activist and political thinker, leading to her establishing the Cosmopolitan Democratic Party in Somalia before

her sudden passing in 2021. "She'd found herself locked out of the system," Edwin explains. "After her degree, those barriers came down." Edwin is now planning to install a memorial bench on campus in her honour.

"We'd learn as much from our classmates as our professors."

What continues to define Birkbeck for Edwin is that barriers between cultures and generations are non-existent. He remembers: "We'd learn as much from our classmates as our professors. The environment was international, as well as intergenerational, giving us depth perception that we wouldn't get otherwise."

At Birkbeck, Edwin also worked as a student caller, raising funds through two telephone campaigns. Those conversations gave Edwin insight into the strength and diversity of Birkbeck alumni as well as the value their support can bring to the university. Hearing these perspectives reinforced his belief that alumni are vital stakeholders in Birkbeck's future - an outlook that shapes his approach as alumni governor.

After completing his degree, Edwin continued his studies with a Postgraduate Certificate in Text and Performance, delivered in partnership with Birkbeck and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. The course allowed him to explore political thought through performance and language, developing analytical and creative skills. Alongside his role at King's College London, Edwin is also a writer and political satirist.

As Birkbeck's newly-elected alumni governor, Edwin sees the role as an active responsibility to keep the authentic student experience at the heart of institutional decision-making.

Committed to the founding mission, he is focused on ensuring Birkbeck continues to expand access to higher education for those who might otherwise be excluded.

MY FIRST YEAR AS BIRKBECK'S PRESIDENT

.....
Following her inauguration as Birkbeck's 17th president in April 2025, Baroness Shami Chakrabarti spoke of the "power of education to change lives" and her hopes to "champion the work of Birkbeck." A member of the House of Lords since 2016, Baroness Chakrabarti is a Labour Peer, human rights lawyer, campaigner and Privy Counsellor. She is also the author of three books and has a deep interest in higher education.

A year on from her official appointment, we spoke to Shami to hear her perspectives on Birkbeck, the wider landscape for higher education and the work she will be carrying out to raise the College's profile and advance its interests.

Two years on from our bicentenary, what aspects of our history do you see as still relevant?

I think it is obvious to people, both inside Birkbeck and increasingly outside Birkbeck, that its model and mission are more relevant than ever. In particular, this concept of lifelong learning and of widening access to education, to everyone who wants and needs it, to be able to fit it in around work; and our commitment to that. That is very quintessentially Birkbeck and what Birkbeck's been known for. That's why I'm really proud to be president.

As you reflect on the first year as president, what has made you most proud to be part of the institution?

Well, it's a graduation day so why don't we start there. I was talking to Sally Wheeler, our Vice-Chancellor, and she asked me for my thoughts on what makes our ceremonies special. They're not too big, they're not industrial, and so it feels very personal. There's an element of spontaneity. It's partly Sally's style



"Birkbeck's model and mission are more relevant than ever"

because she's a crucial part of setting the tone. You feel how personal and special the celebration is. Rightly so, given the sacrifices people have made, how much harder the journey is for many Birkbeck students.

Looking forward, what are some of your plans as president, and what do you see in Birkbeck's future?

I think that under Sally's leadership, we will go from strength to strength. I hope there'll be more public recognition of Birkbeck's achievements and understanding of Birkbeck as an institution.

Personally, I'd like to do as much as I can to help and support Sally and colleagues in that, in that messaging, and in that celebration. I'm going to do a podcast for the Students' Union and I'd like to be involved in more events. I want to do everything I can to support and to be part of this wonderful community.

What do you see as some of the higher education sector's greatest challenges?

Of course, finance is always a

challenge, but as Sally demonstrates so well, we innovate and keep true to our values and our mission, because that mission is so relevant. And these are challenging times for our students.

Some campuses in the world, in this city, in this country, have been challenged by so-called culture wars and heated disputes about various issues. The campus is not an ivory tower. And certainly in central London, you're not in an ivory tower. But if we stay true to our values, we will navigate all of those challenges.

Do you think the higher education sector needs to change in any way, and how do you see it changing?

It needs to be flexible, it needs to be humble, it needs to be curious. It needs to have an open mind, not do things a certain way, because they've always been done that way; and it needs to innovate.

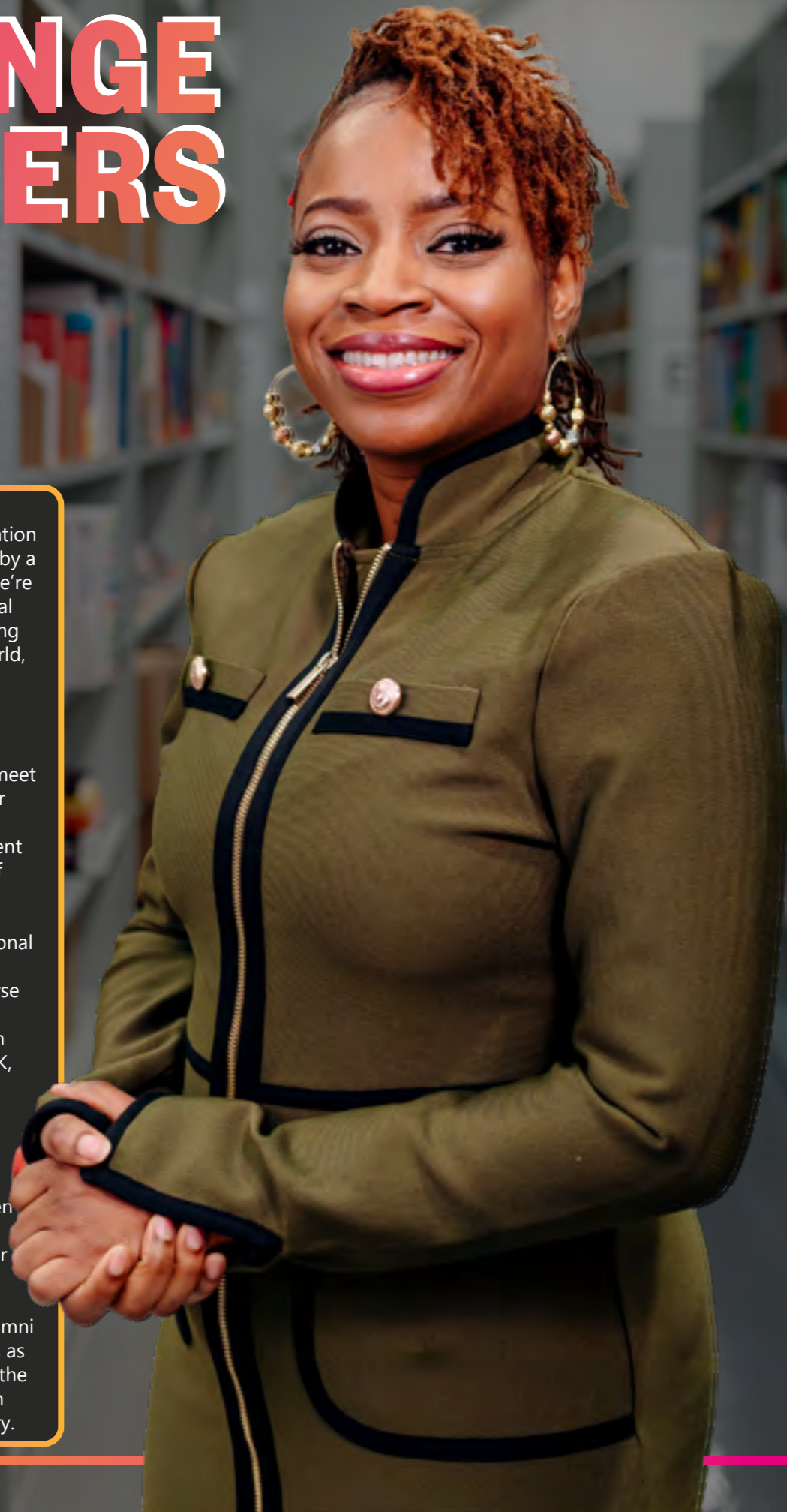
Higher education is such a gift and should be a fundamental right, as well as a gift. I think people understand that here. And that understanding is the secret sauce.

GLOBAL CHANGE MAKERS

Birkbeck has always attracted people who want to use education as a force for progress, driven by a desire to make a difference. We're spotlighting some of our Global Changemakers, who are carrying Birkbeck's mission into the world, shaping industries, influencing culture and tackling today's pressing global challenges.

Over the next four pages, we meet Morten Hummelose, founder of the Frececo Foundation, whose career bridges investment and philanthropy in support of human rights, education and the environment. Tricia Tuttle, Director of the Berlin International Film Festival, is championing independent cinema and diverse voices on a global stage while Abi Daré, pictured, who is from Nigeria and now lives in the UK, has become an internationally bestselling author whose powerful storytelling amplifies unheard voices and explores themes of justice, gender and climate. The photo of Abi, taken by Ruth Towell, shows her in her role as Alumni Ambassador for Book Aid International.

Their stories show how our alumni are using international success as a force for good, proving that the impact of a Birkbeck education reaches far beyond Bloomsbury.



WRITING IS MY LOUDING VOICE

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*Celebrated author Abi Daré has found renowned international success since studying on the MA Creative Writing course at Birkbeck. Her debut novel *The Girl with The Louding Voice*, which she began during her studies, became a New York Times bestseller, was translated into 23 languages and is now loved around the world.*
.....

Heart-wrenching and inspiring, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* follows Adunni, a 14-year-old girl from a poor family in Nigeria, who becomes a housemaid but dreams of getting an education and finding her "louding voice". Abi's second novel, *And So I Roar*, continues the story of Adunni, who must roar in her fight for a brighter future amid the devastating effects of climate change on the lives of poor rural women.

When approaching a subject for her second novel, Abi knew she wanted to write about issues affecting girls globally and locally where she grew up in Lagos, Nigeria. She realised she couldn't separate her characters from the climate crisis and knew she had to tell today's impact of climate change through Adunni's eyes.

Unfolding over 24 hours, *And So I Roar* sees Adunni blamed for the death of a young woman, which villagers believe has caused a drought. She is taken home to land with fast-fading beauty due to illegal deforestation for a ritual to appease spirits and bring rain back. Adunni meets other girls accused of resisting genital mutilation and causing the failure of crops.

Abi said: "My duty is to humanise the facts and tell the story. What better story to tell than climate change affecting us right now? Not just that, but how those of us away from rural villages, we think we are protected, but there's always a very thin line that

runs between us and them. Climate bleeds into everything. It's like my story is an axe and everywhere it hits, it bled climate. I hit child marriage, climate bleeds out. I hit female genital mutilation, climate bleeds out. Climate became its own character in the novel."

And So I Roar won the inaugural Climate Fiction Prize, which showcases powerful storytelling that address the climate crisis and brings stories into the wider conversation about environmental issues.

Just as Adunni sees the transformative power of education, Abi too reflects on how Birkbeck was "pivotal" in her own career as an author. As an aspiring writer, she decided to pursue the MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck in 2016 while working as a project manager to upgrade her skills. She said: "Birkbeck was not too far from my office at the time and the evening classes were a really big plus for me. It was also the discipline as well - you get an MA at the end of it - so I thought I'd have nothing to lose."

"My duty is to humanise the facts and tell the story"

During her Birkbeck studies, she wrote about different Nigerian characters but nobody stood out as memorable until she recollected how families, including hers, employed handmaids as "the norm". She said: "The feedback was that I knew how to tell a story but my characters fell flat. I didn't know how to create a memorable character until I had a conversation with my daughter about childhood, chores and child labour and we talked about housemaids.

"That night, everything from childhood came flooding back and I cried. When I tried to reimagine the voices of the girls who worked with us, I couldn't hear them. That was it for me, I had to write the housemaid's story. I tried to imagine what she would sound like and just to give her a dream."

The memory of receiving feedback about Adunni's story from Emeritus Professor in Creative Writing, Russell

Celyn Jones, is one that will stick with her, Abi says. Russell told her that the story was not only good enough for her upcoming dissertation, but publishable, and so *The Girl with the Louding Voice* began. She said: "Whenever I think back to Birkbeck, that is the one memory I come back to. It was a defining moment. And the group I had with [Reader in Creative Writing] Julia Bell was amazing. We supported each other and we cheered each other on."

After finishing the book seven months later, Abi submitted it to and won the Bath Novel Awards – the catalyst to her success. She then had the choice of publishers and, once published, the book became an international bestseller, a BBC Radio 4 Book Club read and was shortlisted for multiple awards, including the Desmond Elliott Prize and the Guardian's Not the Booker Prize.

Now Abi spends her time coaching writers, speaking at events and working to provide scholarships for women and girls in underserved communities in Nigeria through The Louding Voice Foundation, established in 2023. She said: "There's always another book too. Whether it becomes a third or fourth story of Adunni's, I don't know, but writing is what I love to do. I like to keep that time sacred and write. I write to express, to question feelings, frustrations, thoughts and opinions through my characters. I want to educate and highlight. My writing is my louding voice."

Scan to watch Abi's advice for aspiring authors. Whether you want to start writing or a literary lover, Abi's journey is packed with inspiration.





INVESTING IN HUMAN RIGHTS

Morten Hummelose (MSc Finance, 1994) is combining his financial expertise with a commitment to social impact, supporting education and human rights initiatives from Denmark to East Africa through the Frececo Foundation.

When Morten Hummelose arrived at Birkbeck in the early 1990s from Denmark, he wasn't certain where his professional life would lead. London was new and exciting, study was demanding and learning in an academic setting in English pushed him out of his comfort zone. Here, among an international cohort of ambitious classmates, a direction emerged, which led to investment banking, private equity leadership and now, global philanthropy.

He said: "It was a great time of my life because of the global nature of the people that I spent time with. It was when I was inspired to go into

finance. It made me think sharply about what I actually wanted to do."

His studies abroad, while his now-wife Nanna was studying in Exeter, shaped the foundation for his career, which spanned roles at Goldman Sachs and Enskilda Securities. Morten then spent 16 years at EQT Partners, where he became Senior Partner, head of fundraising and a member of the executive committee.

Today, his mission is to align finance with positive social impact. Through his family office, Frececo ApS, and the philanthropic foundation, Frececo Fonden, he is targeting societal change. Philanthropy has been part of Morten and Nanna's lives for years, rooted in a belief that everyone deserves a fair chance, but establishing the foundation in 2024 created clarity and permanence. Human rights form the foundation's core. Morten said: "We fundamentally believe that education is, at all levels, critically important."

Morten's commitment to human rights was strengthened through his involvement with Human Rights Watch, an international organisation that reports on global human rights violations. Morten and Nanna helped to launch the Human Rights Watch

Copenhagen Committee, a network of supporters in Denmark. Morten is now chair of the committee and serves on the global board.

This experience has shaped Frececo Foundation's focus, particularly that protecting human rights must begin with educating the next generation. Among its current initiatives, Frececo Foundation is supporting programmes that expand girls' access to education in East Africa. Together with Human Practice Foundation, they are establishing the Aitong IT Academy in Kenya, a digital skills hub designed to empower young women through technology education into employment. The project provides a basic IT course, an advanced training programme, mentorship and job placement opportunities.

In Denmark, the foundation is equally focused on empowering young people to understand and advocate for their rights. HUMAN:RIGHTS, a pioneering collaboration between CPH:DOX, Kunsthal Charlottenborg and the Frececo Foundation, uses the power of documentary film, art and public dialogue to put human rights on the agenda. Through exhibitions, screenings, debates and school initiatives, HUMAN:RIGHTS seeks to inspire the next generation to engage critically and confidently in shaping a fairer society. Morten said: "The knowledge among young people in Denmark around human rights is not what it should be. We hope that in 10 years' time more young people have a perspective on human rights."

From the outset, the Frececo Foundation has been a family endeavour. All three of their children, aged 25, 23 and 18, are engaged as projects align with their passions. Morten said: "It should be the interest that drives them."

Today, Morten's work through the Frececo Foundation reflects the same determination that shaped his career. What began at Birkbeck as an exploration of global finance has evolved into a commitment to advancing human rights and expanding educational opportunity internationally for lasting change.



BIRKBECK TO BERLINALE

When Tricia Tuttle (MA Cinema and Television Studies, 1998) arrived at Birkbeck, she was already a lifelong lover of cinema. Her time here deepened that passion and set her on a path that would shape a remarkable career in film.

Tricia Tuttle was awarded an MBE in the King's Birthday Honours 2025, recognising her outstanding contribution to film. Following senior roles at British Film Institute (BFI), British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA) and the National Film and Television School (NFTS), Tricia is now the Executive Director of the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale). We spoke to Tricia about her Birkbeck memories, her career journey and her vision for one of the world's most influential film festivals.

Congratulations on receiving the MBE – what did it mean to you?

It's a recognition of many decades of doing the thing I absolutely love: connecting filmmakers with audiences and getting people excited about cinema. I particularly love the fact that the honours list always recognises those behind the scenes – writers, technicians and projectionists.

What drew you to film and to the MA in Cinema and Television Studies at Birkbeck?

I have been an eager cinema goer from the earliest age. My father loved movies and his favourite form of childcare was taking me to the cinema. When home video came out, he introduced me to the pleasures of following a line in film history through a performer. As I started to go to the cinema with friends, my tastes became more adventurous. I also began to understand that there were many career options in film beyond directing, writing or acting. I attended Birkbeck's MA in Film and Television Studies when it was a partnership with the BFI and taught by the greatest duo: Laura Mulvey, Emerita Professor of Film and Media Studies and College Fellow at

Birkbeck, and Colin McCabe, former Professor of English and Humanities. I loved the fact that this course gave me a deeper understanding of film and television history while also allowing scope for the students to pursue areas of individual interest. The most decisive factor for me was that the course included a work placement component. This led me into my first job at the BFI and into a lifelong passion for film festivals.

What is your fondest memory from your time at Birkbeck?

The range of film and TV I saw, from Michael Snow's *Wavelength* or old episodes of *Z-Cars* to the films of Douglas Sirk.

The 75th Berlinale, in 2025, was the first under your leadership. What were you proud of having accomplished and what did you find most challenging?

Getting through a first year in these politically divisive times while also refocussing attention on an incredible breadth of cinema was both my proudest accomplishment and also my biggest ever challenge.

What are you most proud of in your career to date?

Producing Charlie Kaufman's Screenwriter's Lecture at BAFTA was magical. So was putting together a tribute to director and filmmaker Nic Roeg with contributions from Stephen Soderbergh, Danny Boyle, Terry Gilliam and many others.

What can we expect next from you as you prepare for the 76th Berlinale?

More great films from all over the world and childlike ebullience over sharing them with audiences! I want our work to speak to our passionate and dedicated regular audiences. But I also want to bring in new people and show them the great pleasures of sitting in the dark and laughing or crying with strangers as we see our humanity reflected back at us with so much imagination and craft.

SUPPORTING OUR STUDENTS



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Thanks to our community's exceptional support, we can remove financial barriers for our diverse and talented students, improving access and easing hardship so they can make a success of their university experience.

.....
During the winter telephone fundraising campaign, run by the university's Development and Alumni team, student and graduate callers shared their experiences with alumni and encouraged them to give to the Birkbeck Fund. MA Modern Literature and Culture student Niloufar Vafai reflects on her role as a caller involved in the campaign.

.....
 Our November fundraising campaign was, for me, magical. With the help of our brilliant alumni, we raised £53,000, which will be distributed to students seeking access to higher education and is sure to prove life-changing. These funds provide crucial support for students in need to successfully start and complete their studies, as well as enabling researchers to sustain Birkbeck's world-class reputation.

For those who did not receive one of our calls, you may be curious about what's involved and why I chose to dedicate my time to raise money for fellow students. Birkbeck means a great deal to me. It gave me the opportunity to study a subject I love and to realise ambitions I had not thought possible. Before being accepted, I never imagined I could feel such a strong sense of belonging to a university. Joining the Birkbeck fundraising team allowed me to give something back to

the institution that made my dream possible and to see first-hand how deeply people care about the university.

Before this experience, I used to think of fundraising calls as voices coming from nowhere and I realised some people we called initially felt the same. Yet, after explaining how our student team was calling from an office together and working tirelessly for Birkbeck, they gained a clearer understanding of what was happening and the real impact of their support.

I spoke with many wonderful people, but I will never forget the elderly gentleman who said: "You are doing an important job and I am a loyal member of Birkbeck," before donating.

This campaign showed me the immense importance of each donation. It warmed my heart to see how deeply alumni remain connected to the university and to witness the dedication of those working to make Birkbeck a thriving place for the next generation to flourish.

Our campaign to support our students doesn't stop here as we continue fundraising to meet their needs.

Find out more about supporting Birkbeck's students and how to make a gift today.



A BOOKSHELF FULL OF BIRKBECK

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Birkbeck Creative Writing alumni are filling the shelves of a bookshop near you. Renowned novelist Julia Bell, course convenor for the MA Creative Writing programme, outlines her recommendations for recent and forthcoming titles by the talented community of Birkbeck students and alumni.



Saba Sams – *Send Nudes*

The short stories in this punchy, zeitgeisty book about the lives of young women – one of which won the BBC Short Story Prize – were at one point in their gestation part of Saba's MA Dissertation. I was lucky enough to see this first as a workshop submission.



Abi Daré – *The Girl With the Louding Voice*

(read about Abi on pages 6 and 7)
 A bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, this moving story set in Nigeria about Adunni – a village girl who comes to Lagos to work as a maid - is a moving and hopeful story which began life in the MA workshops. It was a real pleasure to work with Abi on this idea and to see Adunni's character come roaring into life. Abi has just published a follow up *And So I Roar*, writing the next steps in Adunni's journey as a character. Storytelling at its finest.



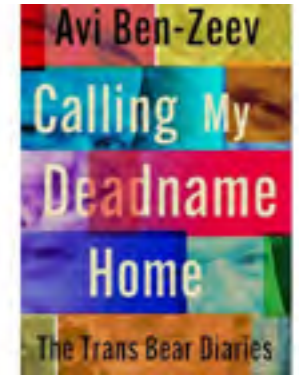
Tasneem Abdur-Rasheed – *Odd Girl Out*

The story of Maaryah who, thanks to her mother's divorce, has left her glamorous life in Dubai for the much less glamorous streets (and schools) of East London. A brilliant young adult novel from Tasneem, a British Bengali writer who has already published two books in the adult market. Tasneem worked on this during the pandemic and it was a real privilege to watch this book emerge. It's been nominated for the Carnegie Medal 2026.



David Annand – *The Dice Was Loaded from the Start*

A follow-up to his first novel – *Peterdown* – is billed as 'Howards End for contemporary London'. A satire on the generational divide and the housing crisis, I've included it because it's so great to see alumni continuing to publish and develop their careers.



Avi Ben-Zeev – *Calling My Deadname Home*

Another memoir, this time detailing the experience of a transition. This tender and insightful book takes the reader into the reality of the trans experience. A powerful testament to resilience and the importance of finding one's true self. Avi was an international student who came from San Francisco to study at Birkbeck.

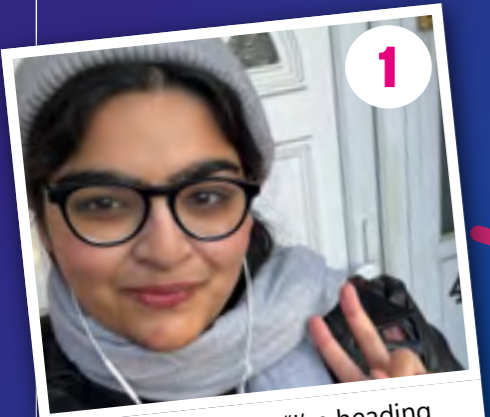


Rosie Storey – *Dandelion is Dead*

This book is going to be bigger than big in 2026. Rosie is a brilliant storyteller who pivoted from a career in tech to take her chances on an MA in Creative Writing and draft the novel she had always wanted to write. This book, published simultaneously in the UK and the US in the spring, tells the story of Poppy, who goes on a date with her dead sister's crush and asks the question: what happens when you fall in love with a lie? I think it's going to be the beach read of the year.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A STUDENT

BSc Psychology student Bhoomi Narula shares a day in her life at Birkbeck, from neuroscience research and seminars to supporting the university's fundraising campaign.



1

Leaving the house: "I'm heading out for another busy day at Birkbeck."



2

Catching the train to university: "I use my commute to organise my thoughts and look ahead to what I've got planned today."



3

Brunch with a friend: "Taking a moment to refuel and enjoy some good company before class."



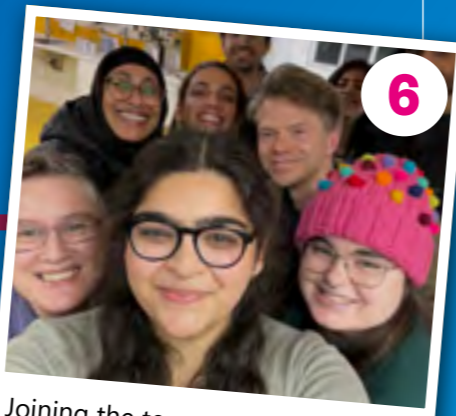
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Vestibular neuroscience lab meeting: "It's exciting to be part of research that helps us understand how the brain maintains balance."



5

Psychological sciences seminar followed by a psychology lecture: "It's a day of deepening my knowledge, from discussion in seminars to insights in lectures."



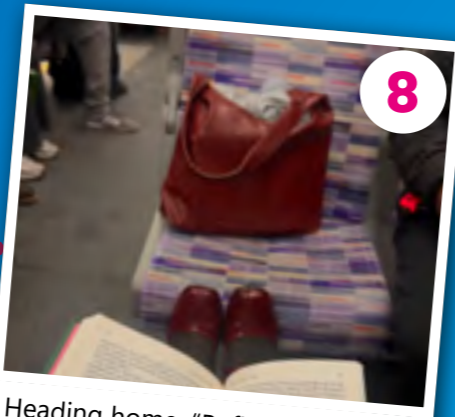
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Joining the team at Birkbeck's fundraising campaign: "I'm proud to support a campaign that makes a real difference for students."



7

Making calls: "I've really enjoyed connecting with our alumni community."



8

Heading home: "Reflecting on the day and the progress and difference I'm making."

ENHANCING HUMAN PERFORMANCE IN SPACE



Space presents a uniquely challenging environment for human survival, profoundly affecting astronauts' cognitive performance. Everyday assumptions about gravity can fall away, leaving astronauts feeling disorientated and uncoordinated. PhD student Maryam Haq led a multidisciplinary team of five students across undergraduate, master's, and PhD levels, under the supervision of Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience Elisa Raffaella Ferrè, Director of the Vestibular X Space Neuroscience Lab in the School of Psychological Sciences. They made history as the first Birkbeck team to receive support from the European Space Agency (ESA) Academy. Their research investigates how human performance can be maintained and optimised in altered-gravity environments.

Travelling to the European Space Research and Technology Centre's (ESTEC) Orbital Robotics Lab in the Netherlands, the team carried out the first-ever human experiment on the facility's robotic weightlessness platform, allowing participants to move as if they were in a reduced

gravity environment. The V-STARS project (Vestibular Stochastic Techniques for Adaptive Responses in Spaceflight) is exploring whether gently stimulating the vestibular system - the inner-ear system that helps us sense motion and orientation - could enhance spatial awareness and coordination in space-like conditions.

The participants sat on a free-floating platform while performing a verticality judgement task. Brief flashes of light appeared for just milliseconds, and participants had to decide whether the lights were aligned with the true gravitational vertical. During the task, the researchers placed small electrodes behind their ears to provide gentle stimulation intended to influence vestibular signals and support the brain's ability to interpret spatial information in an altered-gravity setting.

By comparing performance with and without stimulation, the team could investigate whether this approach might help people stay better oriented and coordinated in conditions that mimic aspects of

spaceflight.

Conducted entirely by women, the V-STARS project marks a milestone in a field where women comprise just 20% of the workforce. Maryam Haq said: "It's great to see our research translate from theory to the unique environment of ESTEC's weightlessness platform. We're testing ideas that could directly improve astronaut performance in space."

Professor Elisa Raffaella Ferrè added: "It's a proud moment for our team and for the future of space neuroscience."

The V-STARS team aims to continue pushing the boundaries of neuroscience, contributing to safer human space exploration.

MEET THE CARENA SCHOLARSHIPS



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Three students have begun their postgraduate degrees at Birkbeck as the first recipients of the new Carena Institute of Sustainable Archaeologies scholarships. Each £5,000 award supports MA Archaeology and Heritage students whose interests align with the institute's mission to foster justice-driven, environmentally aware and community-oriented archaeological practice.

The scholarships are funded through a transformative gift from Birkbeck alumnus Marc Carena, whose support enabled the institute's launch in 2025. It aims to place justice, environmental awareness and community at the heart of archaeology. As the first institute of its kind in the UK, it is a global model for sustainable practice.

From projects in Syria, Scotland and Paraguay to partnerships with the Museum of London Archaeology, the institute will establish a pipeline of ethically-committed heritage professionals. Marc, who works for Mars Incorporated and is Global President of Mars Petcare, said: "The Institute of Sustainable Archaeologies is pioneering a new area of research to engage with the past, applying ethical and sustainable practices and respecting communities, to uncover legacies from ancient history to modern conflicts. I feel truly honoured to have contributed to the creation of this institute, and deeply humbled that the university chose to name it after me."

Professor Matthew Davies, Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, said: "The Carena Institute, directed by Prof Jen Baird, represents what Birkbeck stands for: innovation, inclusion and impact. These scholarships are opening doors for talented students and helping to shape a new kind of archaeology, rooted in sustainability, justice and community engagement."

We spoke to the inaugural scholars Manon-Lucie Clifton-Lavers, Conor Murtagh and Magda Park:

What inspired you to choose Birkbeck for your postgraduate studies?

Manon-Lucie: When a colleague left



"These scholarships are helping to shape a new kind of archaeology"

to do a master's, I realised I wanted to study too, but I thought I couldn't while working. Then I discovered Birkbeck offered part-time study.

Conor: I work full-time and Birkbeck's teaching model felt like the only option for me to study. During my BA in Classical Studies, I took a couple of archaeology modules and I knew I wanted to do a post-grad but funding it was a bit up in the air until I found out about the scholarship.

Magda: I first studied at Birkbeck years ago. The flexibility meant I could do my undergraduate degree in history alongside work. Coming back now feels like returning to a community where I belong.

What drew you to the MA in Archaeology and Heritage?

Manon-Lucie: I grew up in an old Roman town where ruins were part of daily life. I was torn between Classical Civilisation and Archaeology and Heritage, but it was the focus on everyday life that drew me in.

Conor: My dissertation was on the destruction of Palmyra and Dura-Europos in Syria, and it made me want to explore heritage in conflict zones - how monuments are destroyed, looted or politicised - and what that means for communities.

Magda: Living in Hertfordshire, I became fascinated by archaeology around me, especially the important Roman site in Baldock. When I heard about potential developments on historic land, I wanted to be involved in excavation work there. Once I started at Birkbeck, I realised how much bigger archaeology is.

What does receiving this scholarship mean to you?

Manon-Lucie: The scholarship gives me breathing room and confidence. I'm deeply grateful for the message this scholarship sends. It's breaking the mould of traditional archaeology.

Conor: With cost-of-living pressures, I couldn't see how I could afford the fees. The scholarship has given me the chance to keep going.

Magda: This support will allow me to make the most of the opportunity.

How do you hope your work will make a difference?

Manon-Lucie: I want to use archaeology as a force for good through community work or research that challenges exploitative or colonial practices.

Conor: I'd like to do a PhD and eventually teach, but I'm also interested in working with UNESCO or the UN on heritage protection.

Magda: I'd like to work with local historical societies and authorities to bring community-centred archaeology to life.

REDEFINING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

“Coming to Birkbeck is defined by a sense of place and history”



.....
Many alumni remember Birkbeck as an evening university built around working lives. Diane Houston, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience), shares how that founding principle of flexibility is being reimagined for a new generation and what it means for the future of learning at Birkbeck.
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From your perspective, what are the most important elements of an excellent student experience today, and how does Birkbeck align with those expectations?

An excellent student experience can be very different things for different students; one key element of this is picking the course and the institution that is right for you. We hope our students will find many things of value when they study with us – memorable classes and teachers, the moment when their studies started to help them define their career ambitions, the friends that they made.

For many Birkbeck students one key element may be the opportunity to study at all – being able to align their ambitions with flexibility to study alongside their busy lives, whether that’s through day, evening, part-time, full-time, online or in-person teaching.

Coming to Birkbeck is also defined by a real sense of place and history. Studying in the heart of Bloomsbury, being part of the University of London attending an institution that’s nearly 200 years old, with a mission that has evolved but remained consistent over all that time.

The move into daytime teaching marks a major shift for Birkbeck. What motivated this change, and what benefits is it bringing to students?

This academic year, one-third of our new undergraduate students were school leavers, and this is set to continue. Whether a school leaver, or a mature person, most students now find that they have to combine study with work in order to make ends meet. A lot of work is no longer 9 to 5, even office work no longer means being in London five days a week. So, evening study isn’t the only answer to flexibility. Our daytime options have proved popular, as has the opportunity to choose timetable slots and combine afternoon and evening teaching.

Describe a day in the life of a Birkbeck student.

There is no such thing. Our diverse student body have very different life experiences and responsibilities. One day a student might spend all day at Birkbeck, attending classes and making use of our social and study hubs. The next they are at work and attend a HyFlex class online.

How are you ensuring that Birkbeck’s teaching remains strongly connected to its research strengths?

It’s important that our students are taught by people who are experts in their field and are doing the research that defines their discipline. There’s something about the excitement you bring to a class when you talk about your research. You might be talking about a generic concept and then say, ‘I did some research which shows...’ and you



can see students really pick up on that. That inspiration is what really makes the difference.

How do you see student support needs changing?

Across the sector we have seen significant increases in the need for support with mental health issues and specific learning needs, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia. Birkbeck is no different. By offering personalised learning plans, accessible learning resources and technological solutions, we can support students to succeed. The Student Success Team plays a very important role in helping all our students acquire the skills they need to make the most of their time at Birkbeck. A big challenge for our students is time poverty. We provide a huge amount of support - with time management, writing skills, organisation, maths etc. - but often students do not have the time to engage with all the support that is on offer. Moving more of this support online has made it more accessible, but balancing time to study with time needed to work for income is a real issue.

What have been the most rewarding aspects of shaping the student experience and what continues to drive you?

Every time I meet students, I feel incredibly motivated to carry on trying to do a good job. Their stories and journeys are so inspiring. You’re always learning from them, always thinking, ‘we could do this better.’ One of my proudest achievements is the installation of state-of-the-art Hyflex technology in our classrooms so students

can join classes online. This transformation, made possible through the support of our alumni community and grant funding from the Office for Students, builds on the work we did during the pandemic, where we took a very deliberate and thoughtful approach to online learning.

Looking ahead, the government’s move to a Lifelong Learning Entitlement will eliminate the distinction between full-time and part-time learning. This will enable students to progress through their degree at a pace that reflects their own needs and life circumstances. This fits entirely with the Birkbeck mission.

Finally, what message would you like to share with our alumni community about Birkbeck’s future and the role they can play in it?

Firstly, I’d like to thank our alumni for the support they give to Birkbeck, which has driven real change, transforming how we teach and learn.

With Birkbeck’s own Lifelong Learning Guarantee, it’s never too late to come back for further study. We’re also always looking for our alumni to be involved through mentoring, employability opportunities, placements and sharing their expertise with our students. Our students face real financial pressures and most students work alongside studying. Support from our alumni community can make a tangible difference to students’ ability to succeed. Birkbeck has always been about opening education to those for whom it might otherwise be out of reach and that mission is as important now as ever.

Leaving a legacy that lasts



Throughout his career, Ron witnessed first-hand the transformative impact of access to higher education.

He said: "I saw how Birkbeck changed people's lives, opening possibilities that they never thought would be available. These included people who had dropped out of school with no qualifications, had been in prison, were refugees or had mental health issues. I taught many who were sure they could not do mathematics but discovered that they had strong quantitative skills. I, myself, failed my O-Level in Maths and had to take a remedial course in the first year of my BA in Economics in 1968 at Christ's College, Cambridge. I enjoyed supporting students with their independent statistical projects and, over the years, interesting ones came up. I particularly remember the statistical analysis of the winners of RuPaul's Drag Race."

Continuing his legacy of supporting students, Ron said leaving a gift to Birkbeck in his will felt like "a good investment in terms of what it could do. I want to continue opening up those opportunities by giving back." Pragmatic in his approach to his legacy, he is keen to ensure it can be spent on any number of ways to support students.

For nearly five decades, Ron Smith, Emeritus Professor and Fellow of Birkbeck, has shaped students' lives. Even in retirement, Ron guest lectures and works on research, driven by the same commitment that brought him to Birkbeck in 1974 to teach econometrics and statistics. "I have never been tempted to leave Birkbeck since the students are so interesting," he said.

Widely regarded as one of the foremost figures in defence and peace economics, Ron has published more than 100 scholarly articles. Colleagues describe him as the "grandfather or great-grandfather of defence and peace economics", reflecting on the tens of thousands of students he has mentored. His work has been recognised with a lifetime achievement award from the European Consortium of Political Research. Ron said: "I learned a lot from my students. This is not surprising in an economics department which had lots of part-time students from the Treasury or Bank of England."

Your legacy at Birkbeck

Leaving a gift in your will to Birkbeck is an incredibly meaningful and personal gesture. It helps ensure that the doors of higher education remain open to people of all backgrounds, at every stage of life - now and for generations to come. For more information about leaving a gift in your will, please email legacies@bbk.ac.uk.



REVAMPING BIRKBECK'S ESTATE

HRH The Princess Royal, Chancellor of the University of London, officially opened the Birkbeck Central building in October 2025, marking the completion of a multi-million-pound refurbishment.

The former University of London student union (ULU) building was purchased by Birkbeck five years ago to meet the needs of our students in the 21st century. It was originally opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1957 for ULU to support the welfare and interests of the University of London's 25,000 students. It became somewhat synonymous with celebrity culture, with *Valentine* magazine publishing photos of The Beatles at the basement swimming pool in 1963, the Kaiser Chiefs launching their career there, and Ricky Gervais managing events at the venue prior to his career as a comedian.

Following the extensive £5million refurbishment, current day Birkbeck Central features spacious study areas and 28 new classrooms, equipped with audiovisual HyFlex technology. Dan Xuereb, Chief Property Officer, said: "It gives me immense pride to reflect on the results of a collaborative effort between our various teams to provide new and improved spaces at Birkbeck Central and to deliver on our commitment to provide sector-leading facilities at Birkbeck."

"Donors' generosity puts us in a firm position to provide students with the best learning spaces"

Professor Sally Wheeler, Birkbeck's Vice-Chancellor, said: "The generosity of our donors puts us in a firm position to be able to advance our capital projects and to provide Birkbeck students with the very best learning spaces. It also allows us to introduce technology into our curriculum, which makes it even easier for students to balance their studies with their careers, and work whilst they study with us."

A new Creative Centre for AI, to open in the summer at Birkbeck Central, will position Birkbeck as a leader in blending technological exploration with critical thought about AI's role in society.

The Centre, supported with close to £2million in funding from the Office for Students, will be equipped with specialist software for experimentation with generative AI models and tools, a multifunction space with a large LED wall enabling student collaboration, presentations, demonstrations and virtual production, as well as a sound-proofed creative production suite for both video and podcast-based content creation and streaming. It will encourage critical reflection as well as innovation, alongside digital content production and industry collaboration.

It comes after Birkbeck held its first AI Summit in 2025, bringing together staff and alumni to discuss opportunities and challenges posed by AI in teaching, research and administration, as well as the ongoing development of an overarching AI strategy for the university.

Professor Joanne Leal, Pro Vice Chancellor for Innovation and Academic Development, said: "As the world around us moves at what feels like lightning speed, it's vital that Birkbeck keeps pace. It's a logical next step for us to now be developing the new Creative Centre for AI as a space for our students to question and critically assess the cultural, social and ethical implications of AI. The new facilities will also provide opportunities for alumni and other professionals to take part in upskilling and training activity."



“I wanted to be part of the solution and to amplify perspectives we often didn’t hear about”

AMPLIFYING VOICES

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For multi-award-winning journalist and filmmaker Nadine White (BA English, 2016), Birkbeck shaped the resilience that underpins her groundbreaking journalism.
.....

Nadine arrived at Birkbeck at the time her first byline appeared in *Vision*, a free independent Caribbean newspaper, and was laying the foundations of her journalism career. She chose the institution for its academic reputation, its strength in humanities and its flexibility. She said: “Evening study allowed me to work during the day, which was really important, because I was able to pursue internship opportunities, carry out work experience, do interviews and afford my studies.”

She soon began writing for *The Voice*, Britain’s longest-running Black newspaper. Balancing work, journalism placements and study was demanding but instilled habits that carried her forward. She said: “It honed a sense of discipline in me, which has put me in good stead throughout my career.”

Growing up in Brixton, Nadine became aware that realities of Black British life, including her own, were missing from mainstream coverage. She said: “I didn’t see my experiences and the perspectives of those around me reflected in the news. News should reflect the society it serves and our society is wonderfully multicultural, comprised of people from all walks of life. Back then, I noticed that Black stories in the mainstream were often reported through the lens of negativity, like crime or entertainment, if at all. I wanted to be part of the solution and to amplify the voices and perspectives we often didn’t hear about .”

After honing her craft in the Black press, studying for a Diploma in Journalism and building a reputation for agenda-setting reporting at the *HuffPost*, Nadine made history in 2021 as Britain’s first dedicated Race Correspondent at *The Independent*. She said: “I’d long decided that I want to be intentional about telling these stories from Black and marginalised communities, so my work at *The Independent* felt like an important continuation of that. Far from it just being a job, I saw it as an important responsibility.”

Her investigations throughout her career, from exposing serious allegations within SPAC Nation church about financial and spiritual exploitation and uncovering racism experienced by Black refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine to revealing discriminatory language embedded in official government documents, had tangible impact. Policies were reviewed, apologies issued and further scrutiny prompted. She said: “To know that people feel empowered, listened to and feel that their voices are being amplified through my work, it’s the best feeling in the world.”



Nadine’s journalism has earned wide recognition. She became the first Black reporter shortlisted for the Paul Foot Award for investigative journalism, won the Paulette Wilson Windrush Award, and has been recognised by Parliament, the British Journalism Awards and Amnesty International. She was also named on the Forbes 30 Under 30 Europe list in 2021 and included in MIPAD’s global 100 Under 40 Most Influential People of African Descent for 2025 in the Media and Culture category.

Nadine’s storytelling has expanded into film with her debut documentary, *Barrel Children: The Families Windrush Left Behind*, released in 2023 to box-office success. Seven years in the making and inspired by her dad’s upbringing, she describes the project as “a real labour of love”. The film continues to reach audiences internationally and spark global dialogue on Caribbean migration, family separation and identity. The sequel, *Barrel Children Part 2: Echoes of Separation*, due to be released this year, captures the voices of parents who made the difficult decision to leave their children behind. Nadine said: “It’s been humbling to sit at the feet of our elders and hear from them what it was like. They had to grapple with their own trauma from the displacement that a lot of people experienced through migration.”

In 2025, Nadine left *The Independent* to launch her own independent platform, *Black Current News*, with the aim of spotlighting news and narratives that centre Black British experiences. The response has been swift, with rapid subscriber growth to its weekly newsletters and exclusive reports, resulting in strong online engagement.

Drawing on everything she has learned since her days studying at Birkbeck, Nadine encourages students to stay rooted in purpose: “Hold on to your reason, whatever it may be. It needs to be strong enough to carry you through difficult moments. When things get tough, returning to your why is often what keeps you moving forward.”

GETTING TO KNOW OUR COMMUNITY

Birkbeck is proud of its vibrant community, which features diverse and talented students and alumni, staff members committed to improving the university experience, and academics at the forefront of world-leading research. Get to know this community as we ask the same three questions to an alumnus, student, academic and staff member.



Dr Ken Hori

Dr Ken Hori is the Head of Education and Student Experience of Faculty of Business and Law. Prior to this, he was the Head of Department of Economics, Mathematics and Statistics. Ken has been at Birkbeck for nearly

22 years since completing his PhD. He is also a 6th Dan black belt in Shotokan Karate.

What is your favourite place on campus and why?

Lecture rooms. This is where miracles happen. Students arrive hungry for knowledge and they leave transformed.

Tell us about your best moment at Birkbeck.

It is the "Ah-ha!" moments that students have. Telling students how a supermarket can increase profit by using a loyalty card scheme and giving you a personal discount. Explaining how one man made a prestigious bank go

bankrupt, or how the oil price went negative in 2020. When students cling on to every word that you speak, that is the best moment.

What does being a Birkbeck academic mean to you?

I left my career as a quant / derivatives trader at an investment bank to become an academic because I wanted my life to mean something. The university provides me the opportunity to make changes to people's lives, and more so at Birkbeck than other places. I am proud to have thousands of students out there making careers out of what they have learned at Birkbeck.



Dale Thoroughgood

Leadership development coach Dale Thoroughgood (MSc Occupational Psychology, 2018) is the founder of Thoroughgood Development, a consultancy that

supports clients in becoming stronger leaders, building smarter teams and creating healthier organisations. Inspired to connect further with the Birkbeck alumni community, he ran a dedicated workshop last year to Birkbeck alumni on coaching strategies for personal growth.

What is your favourite place on campus and why?

I spent a lot of time in the library doing my dissertation and it's a place I remember well when I think back to my time at Birkbeck. To be around like-minded learners inspired me to hit my deadlines.

Tell us about your best moment at Birkbeck.

Graduating felt like such a major milestone and a wonderful achievement – something definitely worth celebrating.

What does being a Birkbeck alumnus mean to you?

It means being a member of an incredibly supportive and inclusive community, so much so that it's inspired me to give back and come back to Birkbeck to meet up and learn more.



Isabelle Habib

As Sanctuary Programme Manager at Birkbeck, Isabelle supports forced migrants and asylum seekers to access education through Birkbeck's Compass Project. Her work contributes to Birkbeck's recognition as a University of Sanctuary, the first higher education institution in

London to be awarded this status, for its work to provide safety, solidarity and empowerment to people seeking sanctuary.

What is your favourite place on campus and why?

I have always liked meeting students and colleagues at the Birkbeck Central Café (and its even better now with the refurb!) It is a good place to gather for a more informal meeting and the coffee is excellent.

Tell us about your best moment at Birkbeck.

The Compass Scholarship end of term summer party that we had the year following covid and lockdown. We held it on the 5th floor terrace and had food, drink,

certificates, and music. It was a beautiful gathering and was great to see so many students celebrating their success after not being able to see one another that much throughout the year.

What does being a member of Birkbeck staff mean to you?

Working at Birkbeck gives you the chance to learn a lot from those around you. I love being a part of a team of individuals who are experts in and great at what they do, but who are also passionate about making education accessible. It makes such a difference to work with motivated people and you are always inspired by your colleagues and the amazing students (especially our Sanctuary Scholars!).



Fola Ademoye

Fola Ademoye (BA French Studies, 2002 and MA Modern Studies, 2006) is a fitness and health fanatic, personal trainer, Pilates instructor and world traveller. For most years of her working life, she added in part-time studying, especially languages. Now in her 70s, she can reverse her schedule to spend more time studying and a bit less time working.

What is your favourite place on campus and why?

My favourite place at Birkbeck must be the library. Not only does it have everything I ever need for my course, the staff are incredibly knowledgeable and helpful. The environment is very inviting and just the opposite of days gone by when the only thing I remember is the huge emphasis of being SILENT. No such negative atmosphere exists in the Birkbeck library. I love it.

Tell us about your best moment at Birkbeck.

My best moment at Birkbeck was my graduation ceremony after completing my MA in French Studies. My mum came along to the graduation ceremony, and although she was incredibly shy and private, I found out that she had told the entire row in the audience about how proud

she was of my achievement.

What does being a Birkbeck student mean to you?

For years and years (18 to be precise) I have wanted to return to Birkbeck. Life got in the way and upon retirement, I found the fees were too high for me to consider returning. As a legacy donor, I attend many events every year. This year I discovered that a Lifelong Learning Guarantee discount was applied to postgraduate courses. I was so excited, I tried to sign up immediately, but I was out of the UK (my travel passion) and almost missed the deadline. Huge credit to the Admissions Team and other staff, as they kept in contact with me literally hour by hour and now I am a fully-fledged student studying for a postgraduate diploma in Spanish and Latin American Studies. I couldn't be happier.



CRAFTING HISTORY

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When calligrapher and heraldic artist Timothy Noad MBE (BA History of Art, 1997) sits down at his desk, he's continuing a centuries-old tradition that has taken him to the very heart of British history.

Over 40 years, Tim's exquisite craftsmanship has adorned Royal Charters, letters patent issued by the monarch and even coins in the nation's pockets. In that time, Tim has earned an international reputation for the precision and beauty of his craft. His work blends traditional and contemporary methods, underpinned by a deep understanding of heraldry, symbolism and natural history.

In 2022, he was commissioned by the College of Arms to design a new Royal Cypher for His Majesty King Charles III. He also designed the Stole Royal, worn by the King at the Coronation, cementing his place among the country's most distinguished artists. Last year, his contribution to calligraphy, heraldry and design was recognised with an MBE in the King's Birthday Honours. As 2026 marks his fortieth year in the profession, Tim reflects with characteristic modesty on a life's work shaped by patience, precision and a deep respect for tradition. "I was always interested in art and history," he recalls. "As a child, I

loved knights, castles and anything medieval." By the age of 12, he had joined his local heraldry society, mixing with enthusiasts many decades older. "They invited me along to evening classes with an artist from the College of Arms. I made it known to them then that I'd like to work there."

After studying calligraphy and illumination at Reigate School of Art, Tim began working in 1986 with the College of Arms, the official body responsible for heraldry in England. Today, his designs appear everywhere, particularly the design of His Majesty's Royal Cypher, a monogram that is one of the most recognisable symbols of the new reign.

"I was delighted to be asked to design it because it's such a one-off special piece of work - the last one had been designed 70 years ago," he says. "I'm amazed at how much it's used. It's everywhere - on post boxes, flags, uniforms, coins and stamps. It has become so rapidly identifiable with the King, which is something I'm very proud of. Someone from Buckingham Palace told me the King loves it and wants to use it as much as possible, which was very nice to hear."

"I've had the chance to do things that only come along once in a lifetime"

Despite this visibility, much of Tim's work has traditionally gone uncredited. "My name is often not associated with the work I've done," he admits. "It was very nice when the MBE was announced, it mentioned that I designed the Cypher and the Royal Arms and everything. I was grateful to be recognised because for a long time if you googled who designed the Royal Cypher, it would say the College of Arms. It feels like it could be a committee rather than one person with a creative mind behind the design."

Designing the Stole Royal - the embroidered vestment placed around the King's neck moments before his crowning - was one of

the most memorable experiences of Tim's career. Working from a detailed brief provided by the Palace, Tim incorporated heraldic and religious symbols into a flowing design that could be faithfully interpreted by the Royal School of Needlework. "They made a wonderful job of it," he says. "My idea was to put some of the badges on little roundels and the Royal School of Needlework liked that idea because it meant that they could sew them separately and then they put it all together. Then I designed a sort of framework to hold the whole design together - a continuous chain-like pattern."

"Watching the Coronation on television and seeing the Prince of Wales put the Stole around the King's neck was incredible and moving. It felt like a special landmark moment."

Alongside his remarkable professional success, Tim speaks fondly of his time at Birkbeck, where he studied while working full-time. "It was hard work, but I absolutely loved it," he says. "The tutors were amazing, and I made some really good friends. I'm still close to some of them now." After graduating, he went on to study for an MA at the Courtauld Institute with one of his visiting tutors from Birkbeck. "I'm sure my studies all feed in to my artistic work. I go to a lot of exhibitions and I'm always looking at other artists' work. It all inspires me."

His favourite memory from his time at Birkbeck is "a fun and sociable" trip to Florence with his classmates. Looking back nearly 30 years later, Tim describes his studies as a defining chapter in his life. "It was a really important part of my life and something I've never regretted."

As he marks his fortieth professional anniversary, Tim remains as dedicated to his craft as ever. "I feel very lucky," he reflects. "I've had the chance to do things that only come along once in a lifetime." Whether he's illuminating a charter, designing a coin or refining the heraldic symbols that define a new royal era, Tim continues to approach every project with the same care and curiosity that first inspired him as a child - proof that craftsmanship, like learning, is a lifelong pursuit.



EXPANDING WORLD-CLASS RESEARCH

Birkbeck is expanding its world-class structural biology research with the installation of a groundbreaking cryo-focused ion beam (cryo-FIB) microscope, following a £1.9million investment to enhance the university's state-of-the-art electron microscopy facility. The arrival of this advanced equipment marks a major step forward in enabling scientists to study cells in extraordinary detail and deepening Birkbeck's reputation as a leader in structural and molecular biology.

At the heart of the project, led by Carolyn Moores, Professor of Structural Biology at Birkbeck, is the cryo-FIB microscope, now housed in a specially designed laboratory at the university. It allows researchers to cut ultra-thin slices from frozen biological samples, such as cells or tissue, and examine them using powerful electron microscopes.

The remarkable piece of equipment enables scientists to see how the smallest parts of cells function in real life, revealing how diseases develop and how the body works at its most fundamental level.

The funding for the project includes £1.2million from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), £150,000 from University College London and £470,000 from the Wolfson Foundation to support essential building and infrastructure work.

Professor Sally Wheeler OBE, Vice-Chancellor of Birkbeck, said: "The project is transformational both for the field of Structural Biology and for Birkbeck, where we have an enduring commitment to world-class research and research-led teaching. The new equipment and laboratory are game-changing for research in structural and molecular biology. Thank you to the BBSRC, the Wolfson Foundation and our partners at UCL for investing in this world-leading research at Birkbeck."

Paul Ramsbottom OBE, Chief Executive of the Wolfson Foundation, said: "Birkbeck has long been home to world-leading structural biology research, which needs to be underpinned by cutting-

edge imaging equipment. We are delighted to fund Birkbeck to accommodate the new cryo-FIB microscope, which holds great promise as a method to study the molecular and cellular origins of disease."

Professor Moores, the academic head of the Institute of Structural and Molecular Biology's Electron Microscopy Facility, where the lab is based, said: "Using cryo-FIB in structural biology is what everyone is talking about and now we can really get stuck in ourselves. Our facility is already excellent but this new equipment both enhances existing projects and dramatically expands the types of projects we can take on." The cryo-FIB microscope is already supporting a wide range of studies, including understanding how muscles develop, how brain diseases progress with age and how drug resistance spreads between bacteria.

"It unlocks the ability to explore many research areas that were previously completely out of bounds"

Professor Moores added: "One of the amazing aspects of the cryo-FIB sample preparation method is that it unlocks the ability to explore many research areas that were previously completely out of bounds. Because of the specific requirements of more traditional structural biology methods, individual cellular components had to be studied in isolation. Now we can look at them working together, including the ability to visualise molecular collaborations that we had no idea existed. I'm expecting to be surprised! By enabling us to study these molecules as they work together – in what has been referred to as studies of 'molecular sociology' – we are unlocking new biological concepts."

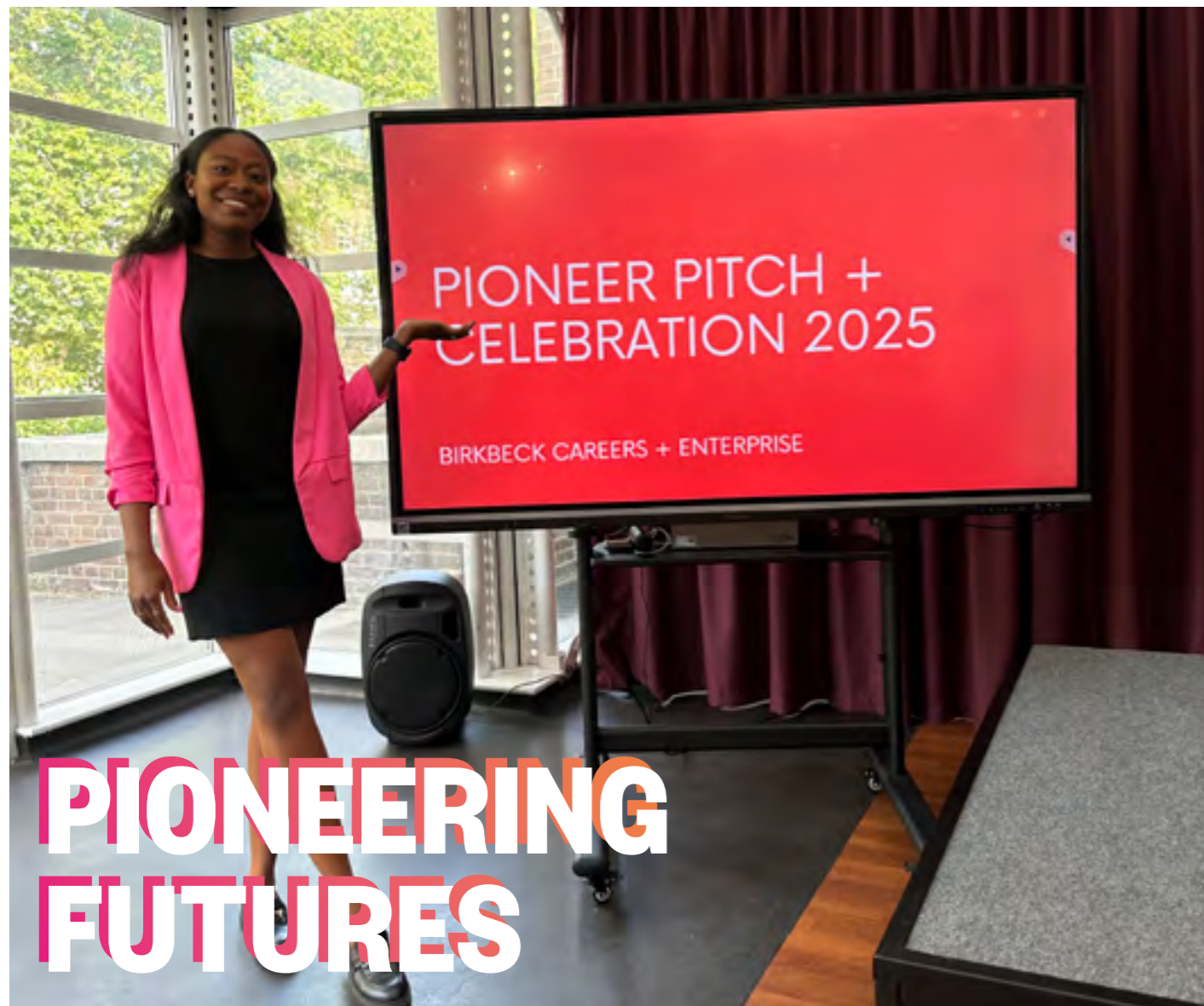
The cryo-FIB microscope is housed in a purpose-built laboratory at Birkbeck, refurbished to meet the technical requirements of this highly sensitive equipment. This includes reinforced flooring, environmental controls, ventilation systems and protection against vibrations and electromagnetic interference – all essential to ensure accurate high-resolution imaging. The facility is now fully operational and supporting researchers throughout 2026 and beyond.

The new lab also forms a vital resource for cross-disciplinary research at the Institute of Structural and Molecular Biology (ISMB), a collaborative research centre shared by Birkbeck and University College London (UCL). The ISMB brings together scientists working across disciplines, from molecular biology and bioinformatics to imaging and structural analysis.

Because there are currently only a few cryo-FIB microscopes available in the UK – many already operating at full capacity – Birkbeck's facility is helping to meet growing national demand. Researchers from across Birkbeck, UCL and other partner institutions are benefiting from easier and more frequent access to this technology. By hosting the equipment in central London, researchers can reduce travel and avoid having to ship delicate samples across the country.

The facility also represents a major step forward in how Birkbeck builds research capacity through training and collaboration, supporting early-career scientists and fostering knowledge-sharing across the UK research community.

Professor Moores said: "Because the technology is so new, the experiments are still very challenging, even with state-of-the-art equipment. Our facility has always played an important role in training the next generation of researchers and will continue to do so in cryo-FIB methods. We are also collaborating with colleagues around the UK to share best-practice and troubleshooting to collectively maximise our discoveries."



PIONEERING FUTURES

How Birkbeck's entrepreneurship programme turns bright ideas into thriving ventures.

At Birkbeck, entrepreneurship starts in classrooms, lecture theatres and at the Welcome Fair. That's where law student Marvin Afrane first discovered Pioneer, the university's flagship entrepreneurship programme.

"I saw it as a chance to learn more, to water the seed and to see what it grows into," he said. It grew into a thirst to develop his business idea, a gamified financial literacy platform for young people named FinEd Quest. His idea stemmed from noticing "a sheer lack of financial awareness" among young people when he worked as a tutor. After pitching his idea to a panel of industry experts at Pioneer's celebration event, he was awarded Best Business Idea. He has since set

up Marvellous Group, an education technology company with a mission to make financial literacy accessible, engaging and impactful.

He said: "Pitching was surreal and frightening especially alongside 14 other entrepreneurs with such brilliant businesses and concepts. One couldn't help but feel the adrenaline in the air. It was a highlight of the year."

Thanks to Pioneer, Marvin feels like his horizons have broadened as he looks to a career post-Birkbeck. He said: "There are various ways to move forward even if I don't qualify and practice as a lawyer. I would love for my business to thrive before I finish my time here. I found Pioneer to be seriously transformative and I couldn't recommend it enough to anyone who might be considering taking their own leap into business and entrepreneurship."

Every year, Pioneer takes a cohort of students from spark to strategy. Running from November to June, the hybrid in-person and online programme guides participants through building awareness of entrepreneurship, shaping and testing ideas and applying skills in practice. Students hear from entrepreneurs and industry leaders, work with peers and access mentoring.

The results speak for themselves. Students emerge not only with more clarity on their businesses but also with sharper communication skills, broader networks and, crucially, the confidence to act on their ideas.

For Carissa Gordon, an MSc Public Policy and Management student and full-time civil servant at the Department for Education, the impact was immediate. She said: "Pioneer exceeded my expectations. Alongside the fantastic workshops, this



"I found Pioneer to be seriously transformative and I couldn't recommend it enough"

programme developed a community of which I am proud to be a part of."

Carissa turned her background in special education into CS Education Consulting, a consultancy supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities. At last year's Pioneer celebration, she won Best Pitch. She said: "I was most nervous about the judges' questions, however the questions allowed them to gain insight rather than attempting to catch me off guard. I was extremely proud to win Best Pitch."

Carissa also joined the Mentoring Pathways programme and was partnered with mentor Sue Betts, executive director of Linking London. She said: "Through monthly meetings, we were able to identify my career aspirations and work on developing my skillset towards this. Some of this overlapped with Pioneer, as with Sue I worked on developing my leadership skills,

networking skills and building up the resources and resiliency needed to embark on entrepreneurship. I was able to develop my website, business cards, LinkedIn profile and even get feedback on my pitch practice. I'm considering being a mentor myself next year."

The Pioneer experience doesn't end at graduation. For Lydia Carrick (BSc Marketing, 2024), it became the foundation for a career transformation. Her idea - Apputee, a platform that guides amputees through recovery after noticing a lack of resources when her dad lost his leg in a motorbike accident - won Best Business Idea and seed funding from Birkbeck. Lydia has since secured an Innovate UK Young Innovators award and reached the finals of the Virgin Startups x Fiverr Female Founders competition.

She said: "All this happened as a direct result of Pioneer. I put the pitch practice and entrepreneurial knowledge into action at work, which helped me further my career. I started Birkbeck as a Marketing Executive and, in three years, ended up as Head of Marketing for a start-up before moving to part-time to focus on Apputee and becoming a marketing consultant." Today, Lydia returns as a speaker herself, sharing her story and encouraging the next generation.

Pioneer programme manager Jenna Dominique said: "Pioneer reflects the diversity of our students at Birkbeck, their wide-ranging ideas and has a special energy that I'm proud to experience each year. What started as a programme for a handful of students in our Business School has become the foundation of our entrepreneurial support for hundreds of students every year.

"We have a panel series in Term One, where they gain inspiration, tips and insights into businesses, before expert workshops in Term Two - where they develop their knowledge on validation, marketing, startup finance and more, culminating in the pitch series in Term Three, the programme takes every student with a business idea on a unique learning journey.

"Our speakers and partners play a significant role in contributing to the success of our student entrepreneurs, who go on to build thriving careers and businesses. The programme relies on sponsorship and volunteers and we're incredibly grateful for every piece of support. I'm excited to see the impact continue, as we look to further the support for students with a dedicated accelerator for growing businesses at Birkbeck."

PIONEER AT A GLANCE

- **Launched:** 2017/18 academic year
- **Participants so far:** 1,123 students and recent graduates
- **Annual intake:** 140 students each year
- **Community of expertise:** Hundreds of speakers and contributors, from entrepreneurs and mentors to judges, workshop leaders, sponsors and more

A MATCH MADE IN BIRKBECK



LOVE ON TAP

Recollecting how they met at the College bar, Beverly Cook and George Reeve show how the connections made at Birkbeck can last a lifetime.

It all began over a pint at the College bar – then known as Pat’s Bar – where countless Birkbeck friendships and romances have started. It was the early 1980s, and Beverly Cook worked behind the bar while George Reeve, a technician in the Geography department, was a familiar face among the regulars.

“Everyone liked Beverly,” George remembers. “When she moved from HR to work at the Students’ Union, I saw her more. We met properly over a drink at the bar.”

Friday nights, with live music organised by Beverly, were a highlight of campus life and it wasn’t long before their friendship turned into something more. Today, Beverly and George, who live in Goffs Oak, Hertfordshire, are celebrating 50 years together. They married in 2021

and have a daughter, Anna, and a five-year-old grandson, Oliver.

Beverly joined Birkbeck at 18, starting out in Human Resources before becoming Secretary of the Students’ Union and later College Secretary. Inspired by the students she met, she decided to study a BSc in Psychology. “I’d work during the day and study in the evening,” she recalls. “During the break, we’d grab something to eat and a drink at the SU. It was busy but brilliant.”

George joined Birkbeck in 1967 straight from school. Trained as a cartographer, he rose to become Senior Technician in the Geography department, managing a team of eight. “Through fieldwork and experiments, I got to know the students personally,” he says. “They came from all walks of life – that was what made Birkbeck so special.”

George also served as a Governor and University Senate committee member, and was presented to Princess Anne, Chancellor of the University of London, during a royal visit. After leaving in 1990, George co-founded Irwell Press with colleague Chris Hawkins, publishing specialist books and magazines about Britain’s railways – a lifelong

passion. He has since written several books and worked with the National Railway Museum.

“It was the people who made it special”

Beverly went on to work in the public sector on neighbourhood renewal and community development, before returning to Birkbeck to help develop a postgraduate course in neighbourhood renewal. She has taught ballet and now works as a registrar.

“I still have the itch for learning,” she says. “I’d love to do the MA in Creative Writing here one day. Learning is lifelong – if you don’t have the bug for it when you arrive, you’ll certainly have it when you leave.”

Even now, Birkbeck remains close to their hearts. “It was the people who made it special,” Beverly says. “Everyone worked hard, but we made sure to have fun too.”

George agrees: “One of the lasting effects is that we still eat dinner at 9.30pm – just like we used to after evening classes. We never got out of the habit!”

A NUDGE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

When Frances and Nooman Haque enrolled on the MSc Economics at Birkbeck in the late 1990s, they expected to deepen their understanding of the subject, not to meet the person they would build a life with.

A few weeks into term, a crowded lecture theatre set the scene for Frances and Nooman's first encounter. "If I recall, I got a job in the back from a folder," laughs Nooman, remembering how Frances accidentally nudged him as she took her seat. "I did apologise!" she replies, smiling.

Frances studied full-time while Nooman juggled work as a management consultant alongside the part-time course. They soon found themselves taking the time to meet during gaps in their timetable. Nooman recalls: "With my work, there was no guarantee that I could get to lectures. In the second year, it was easier, partly because we met and there was an extra motivation to get there, plus I took more control at work."

Frances had left a marketing job to return to economics, following a BSc at Kingston University. Both remember the high quality of teaching. "The lecturers were amazing," Frances says, recalling classes with leading economist David Begg: "He was very charismatic – he and a couple of other eminent economists wrote our textbook."

Frances and Nooman graduated together in 2000 and married four years later. They have two children, Sophia, 19, and Adam, 16. Now Chief Economist at Santander UK, Frances analyses inflation, interest rates and wider market conditions to guide the bank's strategic decisions. "Without my MSc, I wouldn't be where I am today," she says. "A lot of the theory is still the same, we're applying it all the time."



Nooman began his career as a government economist, later moving into management consulting before becoming a life sciences investor. Today he is a partner at a leading European venture capital firm, but economics remains woven through everything he does. "Economics gave me the foundation to understand what was going on," he says.

Both Frances and Nooman feel their Birkbeck experience has stayed with them, particularly the perspective it gave them on resilience, commitment and lifelong learning. "It gives you an openness to other people's experiences and the value of someone choosing to take a different path," Nooman reflects. Frances agrees: "Returning to education after having a family or time in work is why you get a real

sense of achievement at Birkbeck." It's a message she carries into her outreach work, speaking to students about economics careers and financial literacy.

For those considering economics at Birkbeck, Frances encourages confidence and curiosity: "Don't be afraid to make that change. With an economics degree, the world's your oyster because there are so many jobs out there where an economics degree can be useful. By doing a master's degree at Birkbeck, you will acquire skills that other people won't have, like commitment and time management." Nooman adds: "Make sure your motivation is right and don't feel defined by the label of 'economist'. You can use that technical experience and broaden out."



CHEERING FOR BIRKBECK

In this first-person perspective, Grace explains that she and her fiancé met through Birkbeck — in a way. They first crossed paths at a book launch in Cardiff, where Grace was studying at the time. Nick, meanwhile, was completing his undergraduate degree in Archaeology at Birkbeck. What began as a chance conversation gradually unfolded into something far more meaningful.

Nick and I got talking and landed on the topic of University Challenge, as he was managing Birkbeck's team that year. For me, this was the coolest thing ever. A year and a half later, I was watching University Challenge and Birkbeck was one of the competing teams. It reminded me of my chance encounter with Nick and the joy of meeting someone with the same passion as me. I messaged Nick out of the blue to see if he was still involved and, to our surprise, a friendship, then relationship, began to blossom.

Hearing about Nick's time at Birkbeck led me to apply for my master's - a dream I didn't have the courage to act on. We both started part-time courses, Nick in Classical

Archaeology, me in Cultural and Critical Studies. Doing our master's together felt like a new shared adventure. Netflix dates became library dates, conversations became academic discussions, we both thrived being in a learning environment again.

"Doing our master's together felt like a new shared adventure"

Studying alongside full-time work came with its own challenges but having a partner going through the same thing made it much easier. Sadly, my dad passed away during my course, and Nick was there - he pointed me to support services at Birkbeck and gave me a shoulder to cry on. I truly couldn't have done it without him.

We've been together five years and watch University Challenge every week, always cheering on Birkbeck. Now, we're Birkbeck graduates together too.

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE



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Professor Mai Sato, Director of the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, took up the role of United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2024. Her mandate has become increasingly urgent following nationwide protests that began in December 2025, triggered by severe economic conditions but evolving into broader calls for political and governance changes, which have been met with lethal force by Iranian security forces. Recent US and Israeli strikes on Iran have further heightened tensions and raised new concerns about the protection of civilians and human rights.

She is mandated to monitor the ongoing human rights situation in Iran, transmit urgent appeals to Iranian authorities and report to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. In response to the deteriorating situation, Professor Sato's mandate was renewed.

Even as Iranian authorities have violently suppressed nationwide protests, executions have continued. Mai's recent appeal to the Iranian authorities has focused on one such case - Goli Kouhkan, 25, who was on death row at Gorgan central prison in northern Iran for seven years.

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Forced into marriage at the age of 12 to her cousin, Alireza Abil, a year later Goli gave birth at home to her son without medical care. In the years that followed, Goli was subjected to physical and psychological violence by her husband while working as a farm labourer. She attempted to escape the abusive marriage, but her efforts were unsuccessful.

In May 2018, when Goli was 18, her husband beat both her and their five-year-old son. After a relative was called to help, a confrontation ensued which resulted in her husband's death. She was arrested shortly after, over allegedly participating in the killing and she was sentenced to qisas – retribution-in-kind.

Goli was due to be executed in December 2025, unless she could pay her husband's parents the equivalent of £80,000 in exchange for their forgiveness – permissible under Iranian law, which allows a victim's family to pardon someone in return for compensation in cases of murder or bodily harm. This amount, considerably higher than the recommended rate, was impossible for Goli to pay, as a woman from a deprived background with no official identity documents who has also been rejected by her family.

Upon hearing of this case, Professor Mai Sato contacted Iranian authorities, calling for urgent intervention to halt the execution and ensure full compliance with international human rights standards. In early December, it was announced that the original sum of 10bn tomans had been reduced to 8bn tomans (approximately £70,000) and that the amount had been raised through donations.

Having played a key role in raising awareness of Goli's story, Mai said: "This case exemplifies the systemic gender bias faced by women victims of child marriage and domestic violence within Iran's criminal justice system.



“This case exemplifies the systemic gender bias faced by women victims of child marriage and domestic violence within Iran’s criminal justice system”

Iranian courts failed to consider the sustained pattern of abuse or assess specific circumstances surrounding Goli's actions, and carrying out this execution would have constituted a grave violation of international human rights law. Iran's qisas law is in violation of many international standards and this needs to be addressed urgently. Iran executes the highest number of women in the world – between 2010 and 2024, at least 241 women were executed in Iran, 114 of whom were sentenced to qisas for homicide, with the majority having killed their husband or intimate partner. A large proportion of these women were victims of domestic violence or child marriage, or acted in self-defence.”

Cases like Goli's illustrate the systematic human rights violations that Mai's mandate addresses – violations that have intensified amid the current crisis in Iran. As tensions continue to escalate, Mai and her fellow UN experts have called on all parties to immediately cease hostilities and resume diplomatic dialogue, stressing that there is no viable alternative to the peaceful settlement of disputes. In a statement condemning the strikes launched by the USA and Israel against Iran, they warned “these attacks do not strike military abstractions – they strike people.”

Editor's note: This article was last edited on 11th March. Given the fast-evolving situation, it does not reflect any subsequent deterioration of the human rights situation in Iran.

WHAT OUR STUDENTS SAY

What does Birkbeck really feel like when you're in the thick of it? We put the same set of questions to four current students and their answers reveal the many different ways one place can shape a journey.



Alp Emre
MSc Sport Management
and the Business of Football
(supported by a scholarship)

Why did you choose Birkbeck?

I wanted to shape my career in football, and Birkbeck was a perfect fit as it provides a clear pathway to specialise in football-focused sports management. The Birkbeck Sport Business Centre organises many informative panels and conferences by inviting guest lecturers, which adds strong practical value to the programme. The central London location of the campus is another advantage, particularly for social life and professional career development. London offers an outstanding job market with numerous stadiums, sports clubs and sports management agencies.

Where is your favourite place on campus?

I enjoy reviewing my documents before seminars in the Birkbeck Central Café.

What three words would you use to describe your time at Birkbeck so far?

Directive, enriching, eye-opening.

What is one piece of advice you would give to new students at Birkbeck?

Manage your time effectively in Birkbeck's dynamic environment, balancing lectures, assignments, and social events.



Nada Mahdi Mohammed
MSc Marketing Analytics

Why did you choose Birkbeck?

I chose Birkbeck during a period of transition, when I was looking for a place that would challenge me academically while also understanding the realities of adult life. The evening teaching model, combined with Birkbeck's strong academic reputation, immediately stood out. From the start, I felt a sense of belonging, encouraged to bring my professional experience, personal perspective, and curiosity into the classroom. It quickly became a space where learning felt purposeful and deeply motivating.

Favourite place on campus?

The library. It's where I feel most grounded, surrounded by quiet determination, late evenings,

and people from all walks of life working towards their goals.

What three words would you use to describe your time at Birkbeck so far?

Transformative, challenging, empowering.

What is one piece of advice you would give to new students at Birkbeck?

Be kind to yourself and fully engage with the experience. Ask questions, seek support when you need it, and trust that growth often comes from moments of discomfort. Birkbeck truly meets you where you are and helps you become more than you expected.



Jacobo Rondon
BSc Marketing

Why did you choose Birkbeck?

I love the university's location, its international environment, flexible schedule, and rich history. However, what intrigued me the most were the modules offered in my course. After reading about what I would be studying over the next three years, I became even more convinced that Birkbeck was the right choice for me.

Favourite place on campus?

My favourite spots are the library and the café areas in both the BCB and Malet Street buildings.

What three words would you use to describe your time at Birkbeck so far?

Fun, flexible, and studious.

What is one piece of advice you would give to new students at Birkbeck?

Stay ahead of the game. If you have an assignment due in two weeks, start working on it as soon as possible — trust me, it will save you a lot of time and stress.



Sekulu Nyekha
MSc Social Research
(Read about Sekulu's Mentoring Pathways experience on page 39)

Why did you choose Birkbeck?

The MSc Social Research programme at Birkbeck made the most sense to my professional experience and what I intend to learn. Birkbeck's diverse community and inclusive educational system mean I get varied perspectives and networks in my classroom, while also having an active support that caters to my needs as someone who is going back to school after more than five years. I was also driven by the college's rich history of revolutionising education for the working class and women. I also really love its prime location.

Where is your favourite place on campus?

I love the library and browsing through the books there.

What three words would you use to describe your time at Birkbeck so far?

Comforting, rewarding, and balanced.

What is one piece of advice you would give to new students at Birkbeck?

Engage in an activity unrelated to your course to make the most out of your student life.

Volunteer at Birkbeck

MENTORING PATHWAYS



"I truly enjoyed the entire experience, but I found the planning aspect especially rewarding. Taking the time to prepare for each session not only helped make the meetings more effective, but also deepened my own learning and understanding in the process." **Anwarsadat Elmahal, MSc Geographic Information Science, 2003**

Mentoring Pathways gives final-year students the opportunity to engage in a mentoring relationship with alumni and corporate volunteers. These mentoring relationships provide students with guidance, advice and support as they navigate the steps to their future careers and professional development goals.

CAREERS CLINICS



"I've had very insightful conversations with my student match, and it has been an enriching experience for which I am very grateful. My student match also expressed that I have had a positive impact on them, which makes me feel proud." **Iason Mouzourakis, MA Islamic Studies, 2010**

Careers Clinics matches volunteers and students based on shared career interests. Volunteers provide one-to-one support to improve student CVs and further their career aspirations, by sharing insights into their professional journey and industry.

GLOBAL BUDDIES



"It was exciting to give back to Birkbeck thanks to the Global Buddies programme by providing assistance and support to the new generation. Thank you to the team for your continued guidance and dedication during this experience." **Amira Ben-Gacem, Economics and Finance, 2000**

Global Buddies connects Birkbeck alumni with international applicants holding an offer to study with us, to help them transition to London and settle in. The aim of Global Buddies is to welcome students to the Birkbeck community and support their shift to life in the UK.



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When Chevening scholar Sekulu Nyekha arrived in London from eastern India to begin her MSc in Social Research at Birkbeck, she was navigating life in a new country. Joining Birkbeck's Global Buddies programme, which connects alumni with international students who hold an offer to study at Birkbeck, helped ease that transition and led to a connection that neither she nor her mentor expected.

"For me, it was about wanting someone who would help me with settling in and act as a support system," Sekulu said. She was paired with Amrita Hurley, who studied MA Medicine, Science and Society at Birkbeck in 2003 and has been a Global Buddies volunteer for several years. Raised in central London, she brings both professional experience and local knowledge to the role.

Amrita said: "When you're in a new country, it's daunting. It really doesn't take a lot to make a difference, signposting, practical things or just knowing where to go."

For Sekulu, that support extended far beyond initial expectations. Amrita even connected Sekulu with her own niece, who is also studying a master's at Birkbeck. Sekulu said: "Amrita was proactive in giving me information I didn't even know I needed, even with things like signing up to a GP and helping me to understand the process of seeing a doctor. I saved the information she shared, so when things came up later, I already knew what to do."

What quickly became clear was that their connection was rooted in shared values. Both have worked in sexual and reproductive health, shaped by a commitment to tackling health inequalities. Amrita said: "I realised on that very first meeting that this was the perfect person for me to be matched with. We're doing the same work, but in different contexts and at different stages of our careers."

As Global Buddies is a one-term programme, both were reluctant to let the relationship end. When Sekulu applied to Mentoring Pathways, Birkbeck's year-long mentoring programme focused on career

development, she requested to continue working with Amrita.

"I really value the conversations I have with Amrita," Sekulu says. "I can ask her questions about my work without giving context because she gets it. I am keen on learning through Amrita's experience about navigating this topic here in the UK as someone who comes from a different cultural context. I want to learn about what type of roles and volunteering opportunities exist in this field of work and where I could fit in."

For Amrita, mentoring is equally rewarding. She said: "I feel energised. There's a sense of purpose and identity."

Scan to find out about helping our unique community.



RETHINKING PRESENCE IN A DIGITAL AGE



“These tools can refocus our attention on why live and immediate performance matters”

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With Birkbeck’s Immersive Learning Centre offering new technological possibilities, Dr Martin Young is exploring how digital tools can impact live creative practice, raising questions of presence, ethics and experience.
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For Dr Martin Young, lecturer in theatre and technology, the excitement of the Immersive Learning Centre (ILC) lies not in polished outcomes, but in uncertainty. Dr Young came to academia after working as a theatre technician and designer and has been acting as a bridge between the ILC and the School of Creative Arts, Culture and Communication.

His focus is not on replacing live performance with technology, but on exploring how immersive tools,

from binaural microphones to motion capture and virtual reality (VR), might sit alongside embodied, communal creative practice.

In theatre studies, questions of “liveness” have long been debated: does it require performers and spectators to be in the same room, or can it extend across space and screens? For Dr Young, immersive technologies sharpen those questions rather than resolve them: “There’s often scepticism around new technology but actually these tools can refocus our attention on why live and immediate performance matters.”

Rather than seeing VR as a solitary, screen-based experience, Dr Young is interested in its potential as part of a shared, sensory encounter. He describes future work combining headsets with physical elements such as touch, sound or even smell, using technology to heighten, rather than diminish, theatrical presence.

This experimentation is paired with sustained critical inquiry. In classes exploring performance and environment, students have used VR experiences centred on climate change not only to absorb content, but to interrogate how it is communicated. “It allowed us to ask: does appealing to emotion and sensation produce a different understanding than facts and statistics alone?” reflects Dr Young.

For students used to analysing form and representation in theatre, literature and media, working directly with immersive technology makes abstract debates tangible. “VR allows you to see through the eyes of another person,” says Dr Young, “but that’s ethically complicated. What’s at stake when you choose to do that? It allows us to ask what kinds of digital avatars and environments we actually want. It allows us to bring humanity’s perspectives around representation, identity and narrative into what gets made.”

Other fruitful experiments have included using 360-degree microphones. Students created immersive audio environments that encouraged them to think spatially rather than linearly,

building worlds through proximity and distance rather than scripted sequence. “Instead of asking what happens next,” Dr Young explains, “students were asking: where is this happening in relation to you? How does that change your perception of excitement or danger or empathy?”

Other workshops have explored motion capture, mapping students’ gestures and performances onto digital avatars in real time. Inspired by productions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2017 production of *The Tempest*, these experiments not only encourage students to think about new stage-craft techniques, but also to interrogate whether the act of live digital rendering itself can become something worth watching.

Looking ahead, Dr Young is developing ideas for Arts Week, the annual showcase of research and teaching held by the School of Creative Arts, Culture and Communication. One of the big ideas on the table is a one-to-one live VR encounter between performer and audience member: an intimate, hybrid experience that blurs physical and virtual space.

He is careful, however, not to frame immersive technology as a cure-all. “There are parts of my teaching I don’t want to change. I still value sitting across a table talking with students.” Instead, he sees the Immersive Learning Centre as a provocation and a chance to rethink the parameters of storytelling and how we relate to media and to each other.

“The arts are always having to justify their existence,” Dr Young adds. “But thinking about identity, relationships and how meaning is made, those are crucial questions to life. And theatre has always been a place where new technologies get tested and interrogated.” By critically engaging with emerging technologies, he suggests, creative disciplines are not chasing novelty, they are helping shape how new tools can be understood and ethically used in the future.

DRIVEN BY VALUES

“Inevitably, the values in life that matter to us are the lens through which we evaluate these innovations.”

Birkbeck research reveals what will make us trust driverless cars.

Scan the QR code to read the study.



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A new study led by Dr Benedetta Crisafulli, a consumer expert at Birkbeck, suggests that the biggest factor in whether consumers will embrace driverless cars is not the technology itself, but what the cars mean to us. Her work reminds us that even the biggest innovations can only succeed when tailored to human values in life.
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Imagine booking a taxi ride on your phone, then getting into a car with no driver where you sit and read a book, listen to a podcast or catch up on your emails while the car takes care of the journey. It sounds like the future, but whether it actually becomes part of our everyday lives depends on more than just clever engineering.

The research by Dr Crisafulli, co-authored by Professor Rodrigo Guesalaga (Universidad Alberto Hurtado) and Dr Radu Dimitriu (Trinity College Dublin), explores when and why people might choose to adopt or not a driverless car. Interviews with 54 young professionals in the UK followed by an online survey with 601 UK consumers in two age groups (25 to 35 and 36 and above) shows that people use their own personal values in life to evaluate such innovations.

Some of the interviewed professionals value the autonomy, reduced stress and anxiety, enhanced productivity, and inclusiveness offered by autonomous cars. By contrast, other interviewees hesitate over loss of control, risk of accidents, reduced enjoyment from driving, and the ethical use of data gathered by systems in autonomous cars.

The quantitative analysis found consumers aged 21 to 35 years care the most about having an exciting life and growing professionally, while their perception of risk and loss of control is not evident.

Dr Crisafulli said: “Autonomous cars are the quintessential autonomous products and they have been coming for some time. Such cars will change the way we behave in a material way. We, as consumers, know a fair bit about such cars from the press. Inevitably, the values in



“Innovations are important for companies to stay alive”

life that matter to us are the lens through which we evaluate these innovations.”

Both the interviews and the survey show that, intriguingly, people think about what autonomous cars mean for society more broadly. Dr Crisafulli explained: “People care about the values of equality and fairness in life; autonomous cars present fewer driving requirements and that opens up opportunities for people with disabilities to drive. In a way, autonomous cars have the potential to act as enablers in widening access to mobility in society.”

This research comes at a time when it can have real impact: Volkswagen is working on self-driving taxis and Toyota is developing autonomous driving operating systems. UK and US governments are trialling autonomous vehicles on public roads and are striving to regulate this space. Dr Crisafulli experienced a driverless taxi service in Phoenix, Arizona, which caused a “bit of anxiety, but then you see technology working at its best”.

Dr Crisafulli said: “Innovations are important for companies to stay alive, to generate revenue, to have a competitive edge. It’s one thing to develop an innovation, but that will only get you so far. Just as important is the adoption of the

innovation by various stakeholders, users and consumers. Our research advises managers on how to increase the adoption of breakthrough innovations like autonomous cars, and autonomous products generally. Our answer is that customer insights are key. When promoting products, services, solutions or experiences, managers are advised to talk in terms of customer benefits – in essence, what is in it for you as a customer? That’s what we have uncovered qualitatively and quantitatively in our work.”

Our research offers a toolkit for how to design and promote driverless cars, including how companies can tailor messages for audiences, promote freedom and flexibility, highlight safety features or showcase societal benefits.

Dr Crisafulli said: “It’s about talking to your prospective users and understanding how the innovation will fit into their lives. We advise gathering customer insights on personal values that matter to your target audience, so that you can design innovations and communicate benefits on the basis of such insights. For instance, when targeting younger consumers, the values of exciting lifestyles and professional development enabled by autonomous cars can be communicated.”

As Dr Crisafulli points out, this isn’t just about selling a new type of vehicle - it’s about building a future of transport that people actually want to be part of.

BIRKBECK: YOUR NEXT CHAPTER STARTS HERE

For Birkbeck graduate Nomusa Dube, lifelong learning has opened the door to a brand-new career.

After completing her BSc in Environment and Sustainability, Nomusa returned to Birkbeck to study for an MSc in Environment and Sustainability, supported by the Lifelong Learning Guarantee alumni discount. Today, she is the Climate Change Programme Officer at the London Borough of Harrow—a role she says she would not have secured without her Birkbeck degree.

Nomusa said returning to Birkbeck to study felt like “natural progression”. “Coming back to Birkbeck felt like the right place to grow both academically and professionally,” she explains.



“The alumni discount was a welcome bonus, but my real motivation was the chance to deepen my knowledge in a field I’m passionate about. Birkbeck’s flexible teaching model and supportive culture enabled me to balance a full-time job and full-time study. Birkbeck has really helped me in my personal growth, particularly with resilience. It gives you those life skills you need for a job.”

Nomusa has been supported through her studies through the Legal and General Sustainable Leaders Bursary for future leaders who can mobilise communities to play a role in building a more sustainable future. The bursary has allowed her to pay for a laptop, books and rent, which she said was “a huge relief”.

Whether you want to reskill, retrain, or pursue a new passion, Birkbeck’s Lifelong Learning Guarantee means that alumni like you will always have the chance to continue your journey with us.



Birkbeck offers graduates a discount on future courses

Birkbeck is incredibly proud to be furthering its commitment to supporting students and alumni through a Lifelong Learning Guarantee, which offers a discount to graduates enrolling on new courses.

Whether you are looking to reskill, retrain or learn something new, the Lifelong Learning Guarantee is our commitment to you that Birkbeck will continue to be open to you wherever you are on your learning journey.

All Birkbeck alumni who have successfully completed any award with us will receive a percentage discount on the tuition fee cost of further study with us, at all academic levels and including short courses and Continuing Professional Development.

The Lifelong Learning Guarantee percentage discount varies according to the course, ranging from 10% to 20%.

Alumni can apply and enrol for a course in the standard way, with the Lifelong Learning Guarantee discount applied automatically at the payment stage of the enrolment process.

Professor Sally Wheeler, Vice-Chancellor of Birkbeck, explains: “Lifelong learning is in

our DNA and the Birkbeck Lifelong Learning Guarantee will give real, practical support to students and alumni.

“The changing nature of the workforce and economy means that lifelong learning matters more than ever before. Our Lifelong Learning Guarantee will be ideally placed to take up the opportunities offered by the Government’s Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

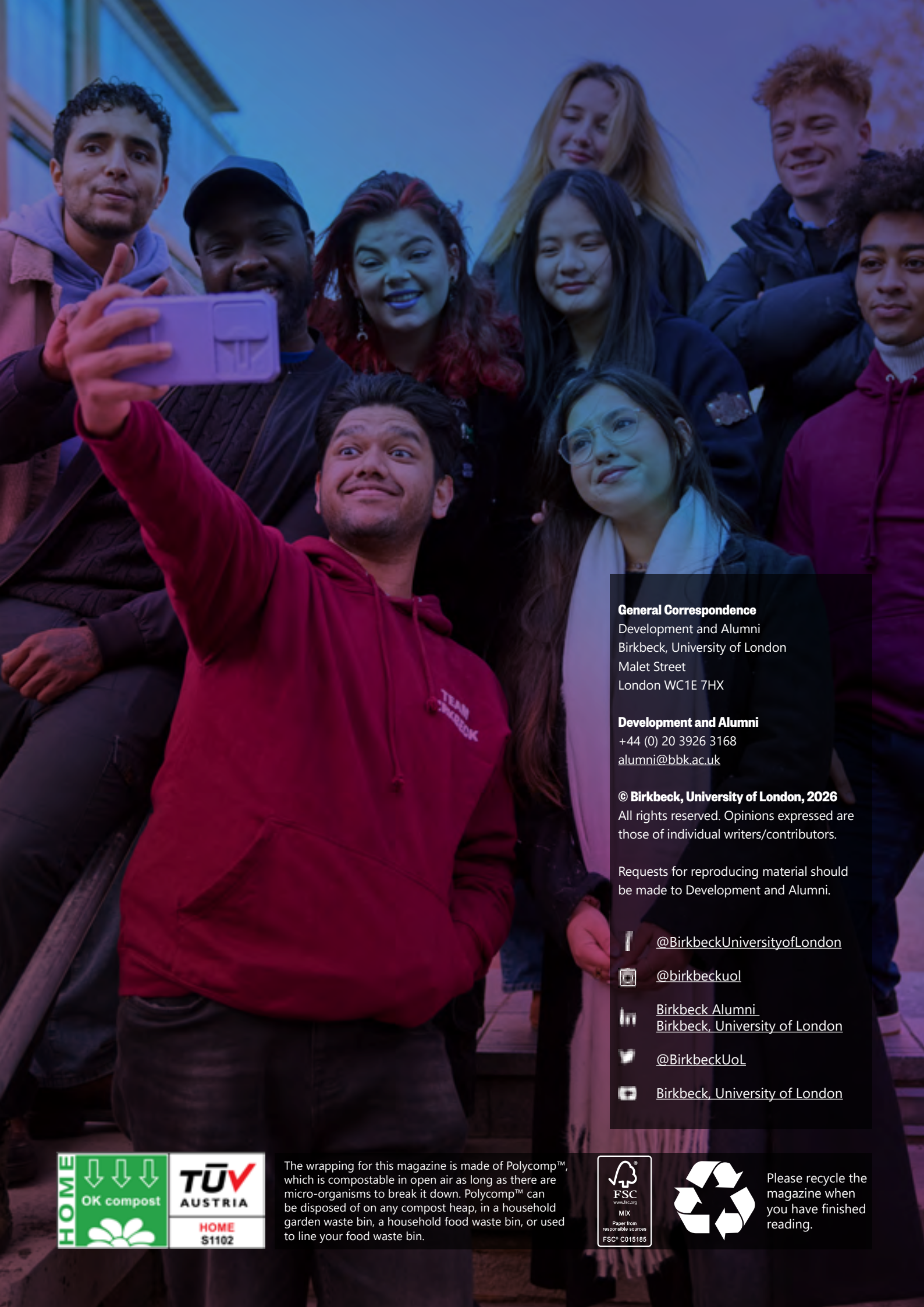
“The Lifelong Loan Entitlement will provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime, making it easier for adults and young people to study more flexibly – allowing them to space out their studies, transfer credits between institutions and partake in more part-time study.”

Learning is lifelong, and Birkbeck is committed to ensuring that its students and alumni always have access to the transformative power of education.



Scan the QR code to find out more.

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