Peter Westley

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Pro-Vice-Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

It is a great honour today to welcome Peter Westley as Fellow of Birkbeck. Westley was born and brought up in large family in Calcutta, coming to London only in his mid-teens after the death of his father. As the eldest son, he gave up school after his O-levels to help support the family. Starting at the Institute of Education (where he met his beloved wife), he took his A-levels and then further qualifications by attending evening classes while working full-time. He qualified as an accountant in 1982 and, since that date, had dedicated his working life to ensuring the viability and stability of the colleges of the University of London. He started out at University College London (UCL), before spending 16 years as Deputy Financial Director at the Institute of Education (that is, where we sit today, now rebranded as the UCL’s Institute of Education) and then – to our great benefit – 20 years at Birkbeck.

How did he come to join us? It was 1994, and Westley was being interviewed for the job of Finance Secretary at Birkbeck. At that time, our Master was the formidable and remarkable Tessa Blackstone. This is how I imagine it happened:

The then-Master told him that she needed a financial secretary who not only had an accounting degree, but could also “do my worrying for me…. I have lots of things to worry about, but I want someone else to worry about money matters”. Westley (at least in my scenario) accepted this condition, but asked, “How much is my salary?” The then-Master named a certain sum, at which Westley said, “Wow! How can the College afford to pay me so much”. “Ahhhh”, replied the Master, “That is your first worry”.

Of course, I am making that story up, but there is a serious point to my story. For twenty years, Westley has been central to Birkbeck’s financial success, even survival. He did the worrying. Westley joined us as Finance Secretary and when he retired was Director of Finance. The job is an arduous one. He was responsible for all aspects of the college's finances, including financial planning, financial accounting and control; organizing and managing the Finance Department; ensuring compliance with all statutory obligations and external financial reporting requirements; and liaising with internal and external auditors.

He did all this during a period of financial turmoil not seen since the 1980s. We all remember some of the headlines.

February 1995, “Fearsome Trader Moved Markets but Failed Maths” – when Nick Leeson brought down the investment bank, Barings – banker to Birkbeck as well as the Queen.

March 2008: “Lifelong crisis spreads as ELQ decision forces further closures” read the headline in the THE after the Higher Education Funding Council for England decided to no longer fund students holding equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ). Birkbeck was one of the hardest hit by government cuts of £100m: we lost 38 per cent of our funding.

And still it comes.

2012: Armageddon was again predicted all over the Higher Education sector when fees soared to $9,000. Part-time student numbers went into free-fall due to fee increases and loan aversion.

 Throughout all this, Westley walked the tightrope with an effortless competence and a deftness that was all the more remarkable because of his calm confidence. As our current Master (and not my imaginary one) told me, Westley “always had something up his sleeve so that the financial situation always turned out better than it had appeared to be”.

Importantly, Westley was always more than Birkbeck’s financial administrator. He believes in our mission and is passionate about higher education. Indeed, in the late 1990s, he immersed himself even more deeply in the Birkbeck student experience by deciding to update his technical knowledge and skills by studying for a BA in Accounting and Management at the College. His professors remember him as very committed, punctual, engaging, and diplomatic on all occasions. Intellectual arguments were entered energetically, but in a logical fashion. His enthusiasm for his studies was said to have set a high standard for others to follow. I am told by one of his lecturers at that time that one day a student in the professional accounting class asked how the techniques and concepts being discussed could be applied at Universities. Unthinking, this lecturer pointed to Westley with the words, “well, tell them how you do it!” Westley was so obviously embarrassed on being “out-ed” that the lecturer admitted that he never had the guts to ask him another question the entire course. Nevertheless, Westley graduated with a First, which is fortunate for I would hate to think what a disappointed Financial Director could do to Birkbeck’s finances.

 In talking to colleagues about Westley, I was struck time and again by their warmth. He endeared himself to staff and colleagues alike by his unfailing sense of humour. Indeed, I am reliably told that he has a vast collection of mildly risqué jokes, but no-one would tell me even one of them. He was Father Christmas at Christmas parties and, even if he cruelly refused to don the white beard and red Santa outfit, he doled out Secret Santa presents with a recklessness that was out of character for a Financial Director.

He is a traveler, with a fondness for America and marketplace bargaining. He likes a glass of red wine, with a steak or Indian curry. He is a family man, with 2 sons and 1 grandchild (and other forthcoming in June). I am told from a good source that he has a knack of sending his grandson to sleep when others fail – the greatest talent of all for a grandfather. He does the accounts for a charity connected to a local Catholic Church. More surprisingly, he is passionate about avant-garde world cinema. The more gory, esoteric or just plain off the wall the better. If you want to see him animated, try talking to him about Passolini’s Salo or gruesome Japanese or Korean gangster and horror films.

There is an unkind joke often told about financial directors and it goes like this: “Why did the senior accountant cross the road? Because he looked in the file and saw that is what they did last year”.

Nothing could be further from Westley modus operandi. His eye was always on the long issues. He is fiscally cautious but also financially sharp. Never content with merely balancing the budget, he made surpluses. He successfully negotiated a one million pound VAT refund to the College, for instance. He was indispensable in the negotiations over Stratford, where his quiet ability to get on with people and convince them that change was in everyone’s interest was crucial. He was never loud or aggressive. Rather, he listened, thought-through proposals, and then pitched sensible propositions. When he retired, he left everything in a healthy condition.

Birkbeck has benefitted from his service, his inspiration, and his financial acumen in the past twenty years. Our gratitude to him is overwhelming. We are immensely honoured that he has agreed to be a Fellow of the College.