



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

HEIDI MOTTRAM

8 MAY 2026

Chancellor Dharker

Heidi Mottram leads an organisation on which millions of us depend, and which is, understandably, under a constant, critical public gaze. She responds to the tension between demands for growth and the needs of our environment, not with defensiveness, but by building creativity, inspiration and optimism in those around her. She has shared those qualities freely with us in the University for over a decade.

Brought up in Leeds and the first in her family to go to university, Heidi often credits her parents, her husband Tim and children Jonny and Beth for their support, so it is a pleasure to welcome Jonny and Tim to the King's Hall this evening.

Heidi studied Geography at Hull. Her ambition to become a national park ranger was thwarted by a lack of funding, so she joined British Rail as a trainee in 1986. It seems that customer experience was in her DNA. Tim recalls their summer jobs at TGI Fridays in Dallas, where Heidi won a "Wow pin" and a bottle of wine that probably cost more than the meal the satisfied customer had ordered.

British Rail was no stopgap, and Heidi's father had taught her the power of graft: she coupled trains, wound points, managed stations and even designed a train. After nearly 25 years on the railways, she was Managing Director of Northern Rail, running 2500 trains per day before moving to Northumbrian Water Group in 2010, the industry's first female CEO. At NWG, she leads more than 3000 people providing water and sewerage services to 4.5 million of us in the North East, Essex and Suffolk.

HEIDI MOTTRAM: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Under her leadership, the group has lived out its values, appearing on the global “World’s Most Ethical Companies” list at least 14 times. Advances in service, affordability, infrastructure and environmental leadership have been underpinned by a culture of curiosity and discovery so strong that NWG this week became the first water company in the world to reach the demanding new ISO standard for innovation management.

It’s not always done with a serious face, as anyone who, like me, has spent a few days in a tent at NWG’s Innovation Festival can tell you. A kind of “Glastonbury with Sprints”, it combines rigorous innovative thinking with inspiration from the arts in an unpredictable atmosphere. I remember interrupting my own exquisitely serious workshop on systems engineering to do a comedy improv about fatbergs! It’s a heady mix with serious outcomes. Over nearly a decade, the festival has generated ideas worth around £50m per year and has engaged 23,000 people from 40 countries. Among its flagship innovations, the National Underground Asset Register now operated by Ordnance Survey is bringing a £1.5bn benefit to the economy. The festival succeeds because it connects us, weaves us together, and there it bears, I think, Heidi’s imprint.

Louise Hunter, the Director of Customer and Corporate Services at NWG, tells me that Heidi is almost never found behind her desk. Her favourite thing is getting to know the people in the organisation. She combines business drive with a supportive empathy that helps colleagues to be their best. Louise says that “We all absolutely love her”, and values the non-political, un-siloed environment Heidi has created. For all this, Heidi is still a CEO – and that means competitive. Louise says that any competition will get her going, and losing will really upset her.

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Tim describes one occasion when she took part with her dad in what she believed had been billed as a competitive 10km run, only to find that it was a 10 mile one – it must have been infuriating, but she soldiered through. People give her energy.

Heidi is conscious that she benefitted from opportunities, advice and mentoring along the way and wants to give this back. She knows that she has been fortunate – and not everyone is. Beyond the water sector, she has given time and talent generously to national, civic and community organisations, from the Royal Anniversary Trust, the Local Enterprise Partnership, the CBI, Kielder Water & Forest Park Development Trust, Castle View Enterprise Academy and Northumbria Blood Bikes.

Heidi's actions show commitment to higher education as a way to write new futures – for individuals through teaching and learning, and for society through research and innovation. She has been a key supporter of our University for many years and served as Vice-Chair of Council from 2017–2023. She contributed notably as Chair of the NUSU Partnership Committee, which fulfils the oversight required by the 1994 Education Act. Her inclusive, approachable attitude was critical to its success, bringing together two very different organisations and groups of people – helping them understand one another's cultures and motivations.

As Vice Chair of Council, she helped shape the University's refreshed strategy in 2018. Our Registrar Dr Colin Campbell remembers that Heidi "cut through the KPIs" to ask how the strategy would feel for those who would have to deliver it. Both Colin and our Pro-Vice Chancellor for Business, Partnerships and Place, Professor Jane Robinson, tell me that Heidi remains a trusted but challenging mentor and friend to many here.

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From those around her, I have the impression that Heidi is the opposite of an entitled CEO. She has received many honours since her Wow badge – the OBE in 2009, CBE in 2018, and several honorary degrees. She will not feel entirely comfortable with being singled out this evening, but I hope that she will feel the Fellowship is something more – a public declaration that we share the same values, walk the same path, and are glad that she has become part of the very fabric of the University.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her sustained commitment to public service, to the power of people brought together, and to the power of a university to transform lives, I present to you Heidi Mottram for admission to the Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald

Senior Public Orator

8th May, 2026