



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

ROBERT JOHN WILLIAMSON

8 MAY 2026

ROBERT WILLIAMSON: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker,

ROBERT WILLIAMSON is the Chief Executive of the Community Foundation, the North East's largest philanthropic organisation and, over the years, he has generously given his analytic skills and passion for community engagement to the service of our University.

Researching Rob's achievements for this oration was a rather dizzying experience. Even though he is still in his mid 50s, his curriculum in the voluntary and philanthropy sector is impressive: his early career was spent working in homelessness shelters and charities and this frontline experience shaped his desire to drive forward policy and action that could change lives.

Prior to joining the Community Foundation, Rob spent six years as Director of Policy and Communications at Northern Rock Foundation, then the UK's largest corporate donor. He also held roles working on charity funding for Newcastle City Council, has served on the board of the network body for UK Community Foundations, and as a trustee for several charities in North East England. He cooperated with the BBC for many years as Chair of the Appeals Advisory Committee and was appointed as a Deputy Lieutenant of Tyne & Wear in 2021.

I told you the list was impressive; no wonder he received an OBE for voluntary and charitable services in the New Year's Honours 2024.

Rob's lovely husband, Neil, is here tonight to share in this wonderful celebration, and it was thanks to him and the chat we had over coffee, that I managed to look beyond the accolades and see the real Rob shine through.

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The youngest of four children, Rob was born in Warrington but soon moved to Leeds and developed a deep-rooted attachment to the region, so much so that he considers himself a proud Yorkshireman through and through. Now a great uncle to numerous great nephews and nieces, Rob's five nieces and surviving siblings, Gwyn and Ian, still provide him with a regular excuse to visit God's own country. Neil told me that Rob's parents were instrumental in giving him the foundations of his work ethic and always supported and encouraged him in his choices, nurturing his sense of ambition.

A humanities man at heart, Rob enjoyed studying Latin, literature, languages –learning Spanish later in life- and has a passion for theatre. I am reliably informed that he performed in several school productions, but I have not been able to procure photographic evidence, alas! He read history in York, although much of his time there was spent involved in the student representative body and the student newspaper. It was here that he honed his strong sense of social justice.

Having met the love of his life, Neil, about 20 years ago, they had to endure over a decade of what I like to call telegamy: living apart and traveling back and forth, between Edinburgh and Newcastle in their case, to be together as much as possible. Happily, Neil and Rob married almost exactly 10 years ago and Neil, eventually, moved to Newcastle to be with his husband upon getting a job in Hexham. They share a dog, a gorgeous wire-haired Dachshund called Otto! Believe me: the world is divided into two categories: those who have a dog and those who have a sausage dog...

And I should know!

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Neil also tells me that Rob is a great cook and a real lover of good food and that he is a mean dishwasher stacker too! Not much more you can desire, is there?

Rob arrived in Newcastle for work after university, and his sense of place helped him embrace his adopted home with enthusiasm and the passion that defines him. He once said that it is by “nurtur[ing] philanthropy *within* and *for* local communities” that we can discover what he calls “the magic of community foundations”. Under Rob’s leadership, the Community Foundation endowment has tripled in value, and it has exceeded £185m in total grant-making. To put it into perspective, that’s enough to feed 300,000 children every school day for a full year, almost every child in the North East.

And he does it all with panache and dedication: Sonia Waugh, the Chief Financial Officer of Community Foundation, tells me that he is an “excellent boss, approachable, extremely hard working, caring and a great leader.”

The Community Foundation’s mission statement speaks of building “a thriving, generous and inclusive North East today and for generations to come by inspiring philanthropy, investing in communities and influencing change”, all sentiments echoed in our own values of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, as well as Social and Environmental Justice.

What really defines Rob, I discovered, is his integrity and dedication to the ideal of community life and everyday philanthropy. This is the foundation of Rob’s work, but also of his life, and the choices that define him, especially his inclusive approach, very much aligned with our University's core values. His commitment to our institution is longstanding, as Rob served as a lay Court member and chaired the Court Steering Committee from 2016 to 2022.

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His contribution has been invaluable as he deeply influenced the way in which the university reaches, connects and engages meaningfully with stakeholders. Rob's leadership and his unwavering commitment to providing meticulously analysed solutions have guaranteed accountability and integrity and allowed the University to pursue values appropriate to its charitable objectives.

Chancellor Dharkher, it is so evident that Rob is a caring, dedicated, passionate man with the happiness and wellbeing of the community in his heart. For this, and in recognition of his invaluable services to the University and to philanthropy, I present to you Robert Williamson, to be accepted into the Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Dr Laura Leonardo

Public Orator

Newcastle University

8th May 2026