



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

MICHAEL JOHN STEPHENSON OBE

2 MAY 2024

MICHAEL JOHN STEPHENSON: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni, and honoured guests,

Michael Stephenson is a leader in business and technology, a committed friend of the University, and a champion for the North East. Over more than 50 years, he has invested his time and talent in advancing research and commerce – from biotech to noodles!

Born in Gilsland and brought up in Newcastle in the 1950s and 60s, Michael started out as an apprentice with Reyrolle & Co. in Hebburn, working on switching gear for power stations. At the same time the ambitious youngster took evening classes in electrical engineering, completing an HNC. Following a lecturer's recommendation, he moved to a small firm making transformers and transduction equipment. There he met his wife Susan, whom we are delighted to welcome this evening. However, Michael also tells me that he quickly realised there that engineering would always be more poorly paid than sales management – it was ever thus! – and so began a career in business leadership.

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Michael joined Joyce, Loebel & Co. – the company co-founded by one of our most distinguished engineering graduates, Herbert Loebel – producing pioneering instruments that measure properties of biological molecules like DNA and haemoglobin. By 1969, the business was exporting 70% of its products and had spawned 45 other companies. Michael was to inherit and add to that tradition of innovation for prosperity.

Joyce, Loebel became part of Vickers in the 1970s, and Michael rose to senior roles in the UK and US, eventually becoming divisional president. I understand that, at the time he was appointed to the Vickers board he was the youngest person to have held such a position. It must have been long, hard work, but weekends had been taken up with a different kind of labour – he built his first house, by hand, from the ground up, over 21 months!

Although Michael had a global career, his affection for our region stayed strong. He and Susan returned from the US in the early 1980s when Michael founded his medical diagnostic business, Helena Biosciences Europe, which, like his house earlier, he built from the ground up. It is a hugely successful business, developing and manufacturing diagnostic products and exporting to over 60 Countries.

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Under his leadership, the company twice won the Queen's Award for Export Achievement and today it is thriving with manufacturing and research remaining here in the North East.

Michael's wider business creativity has been sustained over decades. He has founded and led dozens of start-ups, from tech businesses, e-commerce and recruitment agencies to a noodle company based at Haymarket metro and aimed at students! He has led many initiatives that have helped businesses, education and research in the region. One of the most impactful was the "Finance for Business North East Fund" which under his Chairmanship, created 4500 new jobs and safeguarded 3600 more in our region, investing £160m in over 900 companies – many linked to the University – securing £300m in private funding. He tells me, though, that the real highlight was pulling together the great team that delivered it.

Small wonder that, with all these achievements in and for our region, Michael was created MBE in 1994 for services to export and in 2007, like Herbert Loebel before him, created OBE for services to business in the North East.

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Michael has long supported higher education. His relationship with our university took off in 2008, alongside preparations for the 175th anniversary of the Medical School, at that point headed by Prof. Day. The hot topic was finding spaces to support healthcare start-ups. Indeed, Martin Cox, our Strategic Advisor on Business and Enterprise, tells me that for a decade or more his annual review forms all said, “see if you can get some business incubators built”. When Michael came on the scene, he catalysed the North East business community to help form candidate plans. Later, with the City Council’s leadership, that work resulted in the Biosphere building on Newcastle Helix – one of the triumphs of the former brewery site and now at the heart of a burgeoning £1.5bn life sciences ecosystem.

Another highlight was his contribution to efforts to develop the former Newcastle General Hospital site over a decade ago. Michael – following his *modus operandi* – reached out to the business community to build – largely *pro bono* – a first masterplan to show us what might be possible. Incidentally, in doing so, he seems inadvertently to have commissioned Chris Day’s own son – then in training at Redbox architects – to develop some masterplan drawings, which Chris keeps under his desk in King’s Gate! They express the aspiration and originality of the Campus for Ageing and Vitality.

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CAV was not realised, but we kept going, and its DNA carries on in the Health Innovation Neighbourhood for which we're delighted to say planning consent was granted last week.

Not everything is bricks and mortar. In about 2010, Michael became a Visiting Professor in Biology here. Prof. Angharad Gatehouse recalls the strength of his support to our Masters programme in Industrial and Commercial Biotechnology at many levels including hosting students at Helena Biosciences, providing prizes, aiding overseas recruitment, and Chairing the Industrial Advisory Board in Biology.

Michael had a formal role as a member of court from 2013 to 2022, but I suspect that he is less driven by set-piece committees than by the opportunity to use his energy, networks and influence to bring people together. Many of his contributions have been outside formal structures.

Angharad says that Michael is very straight talking, Chris that he is "direct" when he needs to be. Our Registrar Emeritus, Dr John Hogan, says that "Michael always struck me as immensely positive - a person who wants things to succeed".

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His sense of humour and balance have helped him to get the message across even when it is unpalatable. Over more than a decade and a half, Michael has been a constructive, supportive and critical friend to us. The best kind of friend.

Chris Gibbison, Michael's friend of over 40 years, tells me that, beneath the surface of the successful business pioneer, Michael has always wanted to be in and alongside the medical profession, where he could have a direct impact on helping people. "Whenever the opportunity arose", says Chris, "wherever we were in the world, Michael liked nothing better than to spend an evening with eminent medical people discussing the latest advances in medicine and patient care." I hope we can find some eminent medical people for him this evening!

Michael's passion has always been weaving people together: scientists, businesspeople, students and teachers, medical professionals and patients. If we are a university for anything, it must be for that.

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Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of his commitment to us, our people and our region, his distinction as a business leader, and above all for his friendship, I invite you to admit Michael John Stephenson OBE to the Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor J S Fitzgerald

Senior Public Orator

2nd May 2024