



Citation for Professor Toni Williams

Doctor of Laws (LLD)

8 September 2023, 1.00pm

President and Provost, I beg leave to present Professor Toni Williams, Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

Professor Williams is an internationally recognised legal scholar who has also made significant contributions to higher education leadership. Her scholarship draws on diverse analytical frameworks, including critical and institutional economic analyses of law, socio-legal theory, feminist theory and critical race theory. She has published widely in the fields of consumer finance regulation, social and financial inclusion, economic development and gambling regulation.

In welcoming Professor Williams to Girton College, Cambridge, where she took up her appointment as Senior Tutor in October last year, the Mistress-elect Dr Elisabeth Kendall drew on the College's watchwords – 'Pioneering, progressive, fearless'. These aptly describe the exceptional scholar and inspirational leader and mentor we are honouring today.

Professor Williams gained a BA in Jurisprudence from the University of Oxford in 1981. Strongly supported by her parents, she was the first one in her family to go to university, the first in her school to go to Oxford. She has said this meant it was a 'sort of magical idea to be able to go to university in the first place – it was seen as an enormous privilege. I think access to education is an enormous privilege and I suppose a large part of what I've been concerned about throughout my career is expanding that access to education, giving other people access to that information and privilege.'

Her first academic appointment was as a lecturer in law here at UCL in 1984 but alas, we lost her quite quickly to Canada, where she spent the next two decades at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University in Toronto.

In the early 1990s Professor Williams was appointed to a provincial Royal Commission in Canada that investigated systemic racism in the Ontario criminal justice system. The investigation spanned police contact on the streets, through the prison system and beyond, into release and resettlement in the community. The resulting reports, written by Professor Williams as research lead, had significant impact, leading to the implementation of numerous recommendations.

In 2007 Professor Williams returned to the UK and joined Kent Law School, becoming Professor of Law and then Head of the School from 2015 to 2020. At Kent both her research and her leadership proved transformational. She revamped the Master's

programme, infusing technical subjects with theoretical, social and legal approaches, including bringing critical race theory and feminist theory to consumer finance. The research infrastructure she developed at the School saw it make huge strides in global research impact and reputation.

While at Kent Professor Williams co-led a three-year Inclusionary Practices research project exploring social and economic inclusion policies in Europe, Latin America and the digital domain, funded by the British Academy's international partnership and mobility scheme. This work had huge impact on the field of inclusionary and exclusionary financial practices.

Her scholarly work on this, and her earlier fearless work on the Commission while in Canada, led to collaborations all over the world. She has held visiting positions at the University of Wisconsin Law School, the University of Toronto Law School, City University of Hong Kong and the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil.

Professor Williams's work has been published in Brazil, Canada, Australia, the US and the UK. In the consumer credit field she has been a pioneering scholar, pushing boundaries and opening up debate on fundamental principles in credit and consumer law. The unifying theme of her work is her use of contextualised methods to carry out systematic critical analysis of the law's relationship with social justice.

In 2020 Professor Williams became Director of the Division of Law, Society and Social Justice at Kent and part of the University's Executive Leadership Team. As a leader, she's described by colleagues as 'inspirational' and 'exceptional'. Supportive, collaborative, compassionate and fearless - and above all a superb mentor over the years to many people.

One colleague said: 'Everything good about being an academic I owe to her. Her commitment to social justice and equality informs her leadership style just as much as her scholarly work. She puts people where they can flourish.'

Another told us: "She manages to blend incredible tact with outspokenness – all done with humour, patience and deep respect for people's differences of opinion and practices."

I am reliably informed that she will be 'cringing with embarrassment' at these accolades and indeed at today's celebration of her achievements!

They don't end there. Professor Williams is one of the UK's very few black women professors in law. As a member of the Black Female Professors Forum, Professor Williams is changing that unjust position for Black women in education. She has been living and leading the kind of change that we should all be working towards in the academy.

Thus at Kent Law School, Professor Williams established an Academic Coaching for Excellence programme to support students from a BAME background. In 2020 this had significantly reduced the attainment gap for BAME students at the School.

In the same year a photographic exhibition honouring the country's Black female professors was shown in London. It comprised portraits of 40 professors across a broad range of subjects and was entitled 'Phenomenal Women'.

Professor Williams was rightly among them: 'Pioneering, progressive, fearless – and phenomenal.'

President and Provost, in recognition of her outstanding scholarly contribution to her field, and of her inspirational leadership in higher education, I have pleasure in presenting Professor Toni Williams, Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.