

## **PRESS RELEASE!**

### **UNIVERSITY OF EXETER APPOINTS NEW CHANCELLOR**

#### **Floella Benjamin OBE, Hon D.Litt (Exeter) is to be the University of Exeter's new Chancellor**

Floella, 56, is a broadcaster, actress, writer, producer, and an active worker for the welfare, care and education of children throughout the world. Although best known for her work as a children's TV presenter on iconic programmes like Playschool and Play Away, she began her career in the theatre appearing in many hit West End shows, and in television dramas including 'Within These Walls', 'Bergerac' and 'Gentle Touch' as well as British 1977 Cannes Film entry 'Black Joy' where she was critically acclaimed.

Today she runs a successful TV production company and is an active Vice-President of Barnardo's. She led a twenty-year campaign to create the role of Children's Minister, which achieved its goal in 2003. She was Chairman of the Women of the Year Lunch for five years and Chairman of BAFTA -Television. She is a member of the OFCOM Content Board, a Millennium Commissioner and President of the Elizabeth'R' Commonwealth Broadcasting Fund. Her broadcasting work has been recognised with a Special Lifetime Achievement BAFTA and an OBE. She has recently created the 'Touching Success' initiative which aims to mentor and help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. She is an honorary graduate of the University of Exeter.

Said Floella: "It's a great honour to be appointed Chancellor of the University of Exeter. I have always tried throughout my career to make a difference to the lives of young people. That is my mission and passion, so the chance to become closely involved with a major university is a wonderful opportunity to continue that work."

Floella Benjamin is only the fifth Chancellor to be appointed by the University of Exeter since it was created in 1955. She succeeds Lord Alexander of Weedon, a leading barrister, who sadly died in November last year. The Chancellor is the ceremonial head of the University, presides over degree ceremonies and acts as an adviser and mentor.

Exeter's Vice-Chancellor Professor Steve Smith said: "We're delighted that Floella has accepted this role. She has a close association with Exeter. Her son was a student here and she is also an honorary graduate. We have all been deeply impressed by Floella's commitment to helping young people reach their full potential and in helping them to see life from others' perspective. That's what we're here for as well, so we are looking forward to a successful partnership."

One of six children, Floella was born in Trinidad. She came to England as a child in the early 1960s, when her family settled in south London. She left school at 16 with the aim of becoming Britain's first ever black woman bank manager. She took the first step by passing the Part One Banking Diploma but then changed direction and became an actress and children's TV presenter. Her entry into life in Britain as a black schoolgirl was a challenging experience, which she describes in her book 'Coming to England' and its award winning television drama adaptation.

"I was standing next to the wall when some boys came up and spat strange words at me, words that I had never heard before but from their faces I knew that they were not nice. They were words that told me that I was different from them and that they felt my kind shouldn't be in their country. I looked at them, confused and baffled. What was 'my kind' and why shouldn't I be in the country I was brought up to love? The land of hope and glory, mother of the free? I began to feel angry and violent ... I didn't let them make me cry though. That was the day I realised that in the eyes of some people in this world I was not a person but a colour."

The book has now been in print for ten years and the educational edition is used extensively in schools. The production company Floella runs with her husband Keith Taylor was commissioned by the BBC to make a children's drama based on the book. This won a Royal Television Society Award in 2004.

Floella has produced hundreds of programmes, mostly for the audience she loves best - children. They include 'Playabout', 'Jamboree' and her Channel 4 production 'Hullabaloo' which won a major award in the USA. When she is not producing TV programmes for children, she produces lifestyle and cookery programmes, including 'Caribbean Kitchen' and 'Africa on a Plate', and documentaries such as 'Statues and Monuments'. She has also written more than twenty children's books as well as a definitive guide to Caribbean cookery.

Floella has run the London Marathon for the last 8 consecutive years raising thousands for Barnardo's as well as the Sickle Cell Society. She is a Cultural Ambassador for the 2012 Olympic Games.

**The University of Exeter has around 13,500 students and 2,700 staff. It has two campuses in Exeter and one near Falmouth in Cornwall. It is currently engaged in an investment programme in excess of £140 million. More than 130 new academic jobs have been created in the last year. The value of research grant awards rose by nearly 70 per cent last year.**