

A true Stevo Ranger: an Interview with Rob Lynes

When I sat down with Professor Rob Lynes, I didn't have a clear picture of where this conversation would lead, but intended to use the questions that our readers submitted to find a natural theme. As we spoke, a picture of what he wants to create with our college developed, as I understood how his global background in cultural relations is woven into his career at Durham.

Stephenson College shouldn't be a 'that college', instead it should be a place where everyone is pushed to excel in all aspects of their lives and have a sense of belonging. I got the sense that Rob truly believes in the project of Stevo, that there is an ideal vision for our college to be unique and that his intended legacy will hopefully leave the college as an institution where students are proud to have attended, something which I am and believe others are.

1. In Brief, what was your pre-Stephenson career and how do you feel this set you up for your current role?

Rob's background before coming to Stevo seems extensive, enthralling and almost film-like, however I'm sure he would be modest compared to my assertions. During the Cold War, Rob was stationed in Berlin, working for the intelligence services, a fact very interested in and imagined James Bond-esque missions against bold men with white cats. This is, of course, unlikely but I'm a fan of taking imaginative liberties. He's been all over the world during his 25-year span working in international cultural relations, ending this chapter in India, but also working in the Middle east, Asia and all over Europe. Upon finishing his globe-trotting career in 2018, and looking for a change of pace, he began to work with street children in Calcutta. It was during this time that he was approached by head-hunters for a possible role at Durham.

2. What was your reaction to being head-hunted for this role?

Working at a University wasn't a path he saw himself taking, however the combination of being a College Principal and Pro-Vice-chancellor of Global Durham interested him. With this role, he could continue and combine his passions of global connectivity and education, fitting his past experiences and providing knowledge key to being successful.

With 7-8 rounds of interviews and a high calibre of competition, he was happy to be offered the position and get to work.

3. What specifically directed you to Stephenson College?

Rob was presented with 5 Colleges to choose from: Trevs, Mary's, South, Hild Bede and Stevo. He says he chose Stephenson due to the uniqueness of the opportunity, with the move from Stockton meaning both parties, the College and principal, would be new to Durham, which I'm sure an English student may consider poetic.

He knew Stevo was a relatively new College, and coming into a completely new setting would result in a lack of identity, something Rob was keen to address. With all the upheaval of moving locations and young age of the College, Rob wanted traditions to form naturally, as Stevo is not centuries old, and can reflect the modern era of students at Durham. Through experiencing Stevo's physical existence in Durham from the beginning, Rob wanted to bring something new to the University, just as every cohort does. Identity was a huge undertone of this interview, and is something we all notice during our time with the college.

4. Do you remember having any specific/direct plans when you first began?

With aims of building up the Stephenson community, developing communal spaces was a priority in the early days of Rob's tenure. We lack regular communal dining, being self-catered, so having places for students to congregate was something he wanted to improve around college. The bar/café area was designed for comfort and socialising, creating the rustic and inviting setting many of us have come to enjoy, with Rob personally overseeing aspects of the design.

To provide students with a sense of Stevo identity and belonging, extracurricular activities were encouraged to the maximum. I truly think Rob wants students to be involved in their College at all aspects, with the JCR and College having a close relationship to facilitate this.

Opportunities for us all to sit and eat together, as with Locomotion Dinners, are something Rob wants to grow into staple of Stevo life. I think the possibility College sees in these events are vast, and a way for the entire College community to come together.

5. What's your favourite film and musical artist?

Given his time spent in Warsaw and Eastern Europe in general, it wasn't surprising to hear that Schindler's List was his favourite film. With anecdotes and quips, he revealed he's met the cast during filming, and treasures this experience.

His musical interests are broad, but he enjoys a bit of Ben Kingsley. The Yorkshire born actor and talented musician is the son of Indian parents, connecting back to the global interests of Rob. He also made me jealous with the story of when he saw Bob Dylan in concert during the 80s, a scene I would have loved to witness.

6. How much do you think COVID impacted your start to being Principal?

When COVID first shut the world down, Rob had only been at Stevo for 6 months, with the College itself only in Durham city for 18. This resulted, in his mind, with a two-year stagnation in the work of developing the College, both aesthetically and psychologically through the student community. Lockdown and a lack of students at the college allowed for the renovation of spaces, such as the bar and the famed beer garden of 2021 where we sat under umbrellas because that was the only place we could socialise. COVID delayed him attending his first graduation, something I think affected him, as this is a huge aspect of the student experience, and as our 'overseer', this is almost reward for watching us grow as students.

Even during this troubling period, there was still pride in his college and students. Stephenson was one of the first institutions to trial LFT's and release schemes, providing data to be used on a national scale. The way Stevo students reacted to, and dealt with the challenges of COVID, impressed Rob, and I gather he thought our student's resilience to all challenges is on par to any other college.

7. Do you enjoy living on-site? What are the pros and cons in your opinion?

Having lived in major cities for most of his professional life, he's used to noise. But given his career history, he often travelled for work, which results in his on-site house being a new concept in his career.

Rob spoke about some of the difficulties he faces with living so close to his work, an understandable issue. Being next to the office all day and on the physical grounds of your job, it can be easy to constantly be in a work-like mode. Switching off can't be an easy feat, and I don't think it was/is, particularly when he first started. When term is over and college spaces become quieter, he says it can be easier to have this separation, something we all deal with when not in Durham or actively thinking of our work.

A word of warning from a third year, something I'll admit being guilty of, especially in first year, is that drunken noise carries well around the College grounds. I think this is a useful piece of knowledge to have, even more so with Stevo Day in the near future!

8. Favourite restaurant in Durham?

As it turns out, neither of us have particularly sampled the Durham restaurant scene very well, and this part of the conversation became me reviewing different brunch locations before settling on River View as my favourite spot. I'll refrain from making this piece an extensive advertisement, but I love that place and will go bankrupt before declining a Sunday brunch trip there (the Durham student within me coming out in force). We did agree that Zen is a great choice of dinner location, although I haven't eaten-in yet. So, if you want a Principal's recommendation, Zen has it! I think Spags may need to be missed sometimes and other menus at least tried, blasphemy I know.

9. Do you think the college accommodation price rise will impact Returners and the next cohort's experience at Stephenson and the University at large

Rob knows that all aspects of student life are going to be impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, with the rise in fees contributing to this. The college want to help in any way they can, with increased financial and advisory help. I think the college do care about students and are limited, but staff, including rob, are trying to limit the impact on students where they can.

10. Given the recent rebranding of Wylam, how important is it for Stephenson to be connected to its roots?

When Ustinov College lived on our site, the building of Central, Platform 2/3 and all of the offices was called Fisher House, but when they left and Stevo moved in, there was no rebranded name for the building.

Rob wants the college to be connected to its North-Eastern roots and namesake. George Stephenson's home village is called Wylam, and his metre is spoken of regularly at dinner events, so Rob thinks it's only appropriate for our main building to host that name. It's thought that Stevo should celebrate its history, and with our connection to the city, it's good for students to understand the local area and be integrated to the wider community.

11. What's been the highlight of your time as Principal so far?

Rob's first Fresher's week will stick with him, being the first cohort he welcomed to the college. He got to witness this first group go through their entire higher education, face the struggles of uni and a pandemic, before graduating last summer. I saw the pride he has in these students and know he's happy to have contributed to their time here.

12. Overall, was moving from Stockton a positive for the College?

Overall, he thinks it has been beneficial for us as a college, and I don't we'd be the same if the college hadn't moved.

13. What would you say is Stephenson's place within the College system?

Rob doesn't want the college to be known for a specific thing, or be a "that" college, as he wants us to thrive in all areas. A point I understood but needed convincing on, as I've spent my time at Durham with the colloquial knowledge that each college is known for something in particular, with Stevo, predominantly in my first year, being considered somewhat irrelevant. But this overall excellence is a good point for our college. We can thrive in many areas, not limiting the scope of our impact on Durham or the wider world, so any interest or talent can be fostered,

14. Favourite JCR event you've attended or seen advertised?

He very much likes the events and role of the JCR within College life, thinking the events put on are of high quality whilst being well thought out. The events of the JCR are key, in his mind, to connecting the Stevo community. Again, with our lack of daily dining, events need to be appealing as to bring a wide range of people back to college, and he seems proud of the effort our JCR puts in.

Rob knows of the extra effort our Stevo students need to put in to come up for JCR and college events, and understands that events need to garner interest in order to get students to come. Regularity, Rob says, is an important factor in maintaining the community at Stevo.

15. Can you give us any sneak peek into any upcoming plans for the college?

Rob seems excited for the changes to college dinners, such as the connection dinners that will be run at reduced costs compared to other events.

The prospects of a new Stephenson only gym where Platform 4 (the old computer room) used to be seem exciting. This would be take pressure off the limited space in our shared gym and he thinks should be in use by the end of the year.

Another exciting prospect is the development of an outdoor bar/café space like the one we used to have, but with better seating and an improved environment. This would be good for the post-exam fun of the final term, and I'm certainly hopeful for its revival.

One of Robs favourite parts of the job is his interactions with the students, and when he hosts afternoon tea where ideas for the college can be discussed openly. Having been here for over 3 ½ years, I think he's approachable with ideas, and encourages any student, regardless of participation around college, to come and chat with him.

16. What do you hope your Stephenson legacy to be?

From my conversation with Rob, I think his ideal legacy is clear: to create a college where people are proud to attend and want to be, whilst providing students with the tools and attitude to be successful in all their endeavours. But he made clear that the college shouldn't be considered to be his alone, it's a collaboration with all students and staff having a huge role to play.

17. Finally, what's the best College at Durham?

Sticking true to his diplomatic nature and wanting for Stephenson's integration into the college system to be as smooth as possible, he doesn't think that there is a best college. He's proud of Stevo and the students, and believe collaboration between colleges is key to developing our identity and traditions.

Although he doesn't have a favourite college, from his development and love of Stephenson College, it's clear Rob is a true Stevo Ranger at heart.