



Profile

In conversation with Douglas Robb

Born: 1970

Married: To Lucinda.
My children are Miranda (16),
Hector (13), and Fergus (10)

**Schools and University
Attended:** Birkenhead School;
University of Edinburgh;
University of Cambridge

First job:
1994, Teacher of Economics,
sports coach, Assistant
Housemaster at Prince Edward
School, Harare, Zimbabwe

First management job: 2002,
Housemaster at Oundle School,
Northamptonshire, UK

First job in education:
Prince Edward School, Harare
(as above)

Appointed to current job:
2014

Favourite piece of music:
Nimrod from Elgar's Enigma
Variations

Favourite food:
Cassoulet

Favourite drink:
Red wine, or gin and tonic

Favourite holiday destination:
Kenya – we go every
couple of years

Favourite leisure pastime:
Shooting

**Favourite TV or radio
programme/series:** Radio 4's
Today programme

Selected epitaph:
Spoke Milligan's
I told you I was ill!

Q You hit national headlines earlier this year when you described the current 'snowflake-generation' of pupils as having a growing sense of entitlement, though not entirely due to their own fault. "They have been advised to smile first; they have had credit and loans on a plate; they have been overly mollycoddled; and they have been overwhelmed by a strange combination of fictional sit-com characters, reality TV and social media stars, who paint a picture of perfection to be achieved. They have even been encouraged by governments to believe that they deserve 'more' than their parents and grandparents had." What did you make of the reaction your piece generated?

A I was quite surprised at how passionately people responded – both in defence of young people (to my chagrin, as I hadn't intended to ascribe any blame to young people), and going too far the other way and bemoaning young people. Of course there are plenty of young people who don't identify with the description of having an entitled approach to finding work, and by no means do I think all young people are the same. But I do think that generalisations are useful and, if we want to consider emerging trends and how best to adapt to them in order to prepare young people for the world they will enter on leaving full time education, we need to look at overall trends rather than individuals' stories alone.

It was also fascinating to experience first-hand the extent to which online media can feed a frenzy about something even when it seems to be taken out of context. A lot of the headlines referenced the term 'snowflake' when it hadn't been used in my original piece and, in turn, messages were left underneath online articles or on social media platforms that made it clear that the authors hadn't read the article in question before commenting. We all need to be careful to avoid giving reflex responses to reading headlines, rather than reading an article in its entirety, taking the time to reflect on how what we've read fits in with what we already know, and responding in a measured way.

Q You read Politics at University, and taught Economics at schools here in the UK and in Africa. You are well-placed to discuss the likely impact of Brexit – on the number of foreign pupils wishing to attend UK boarding schools, on the ability of UK parents to pay for an independent education, and on the recruitment of talented teachers?

A The 'likely impact of Brexit' is really the multi-billion dollar question as none of us can be certain of what the impact on the economy will be – and of course, if the economy suffers then we would worry more generally about the affordability of fees and the costs of running a UK boarding school. That said, shortly after the EU Referendum we did see quite an emotional reaction from our European agents – we hope we have reassured them that there is no negative sentiment toward anyone from other parts of Europe in the education sector and certainly there have been no great ripples in terms of student admissions. We don't have many European teachers at Gresham's either and so although it will be cause for concern if individuals' ability to reside in the UK was impacted by Brexit, the school as a whole does not rely on large numbers of staff from Europe and so in that respect we are not overly worried about the impact of Brexit on this school.

Q One of your interests outside school is US politics. What do you make of Donald Trump's style of Presidency. Is he a good role model for your students?

A It is not possible to say that President Trump is a good role model because of what we know about his morality and behaviour.

Q You were head chorister when at Birkenhead School in the 1980's. Gresham's has recently opened a substantial new music facility. What has music brought to your life? Do you still participate?

Douglas Robb has been head of Gresham's School, Norfolk, since 2014. He was previously head of Oswestry School, Shropshire.



A Music is one of my major passions, especially choral music, and I sang regularly for 10 years as a boy. I don't participate as regularly now but I recently surprised the audience at a school concert by performing with Nicki Kennedy, professional soprano and the wife of our Director of Music, John Bowley, having been coerced into doing so by Nicki. Thankfully it went down well but it was slightly unnerving performing after not having done so for some time, and alongside a professional!

Q You are a keen sportsman, and coached rugby for a while at Fettes College. Rugby is a sport considered overly risky by some parents: how do you re-assure them that it is a game worth playing or are you able to suggest equally beneficial alternatives?

A There are risks associated with all sports – just think of footballers' knee injuries – so it would be wrong to say that other games are 100 percent safe. There will admittedly be more broken bones in rugby, but so too are there enormous benefits to be had from the game, and I am an extremely passionate advocate of these benefits.

Q Pupil and staff mental health and pupil well-being have been propelled to the forefront of the school agenda in recent years. Whilst no-one would dispute the value of early intervention and pastoral care in potentially serious cases, could it be that some young people might find more beneficial to work through the normal traumas of growing up rather than start to believe they have 'issues' which demand specialist third-party attention?

A No. The environment in which young people are growing up now is so vastly different to that which earlier generations experienced, and there

is no need to leave them to work things out for themselves. I don't subscribe to old-fashioned notions of leaving them to it and expecting them to keep a stiff upper lip – we've got to have specialists, and back up staff, who have access to sophisticated resources. Cutting corners, and budgets, in the short-term only exacerbates underlying mental ill-health in the long term, with potentially lifelong repercussions for the individual, as well as their families and friends.

Q The accuracy, or rather inaccuracy, of exam marking and the whole issue of re-grades has damaged the reputation of GCSEs and A-levels among parents, pupils, and employers, leave alone teaching staff. Have you noticed increasing momentum towards your sixth-form IB offering?

A We have noticed a growing popularity of the IB Diploma in our Sixth Form, but I wouldn't say this is as a result of the damaged reputation of GCSEs and A Levels from remarking. I think it is actually as a result of the credibility and value that the IB programmes provide and not only for the most academic pupils, but for pupils across the board, as it offers greater flexibility in terms of subjects, and a different way of working that is more appealing to many learners.

Q Gresham's shares its music and outdoor facilities with the local community and other schools. This type of partnership is advocated by the Charity Commission as clear demonstration of charitable status. What other benefit does it bring to your school and its students?

A I think many independent schools are bored of being instructed to engage with maintained schools by the Charity Commission, especially when we choose to do so already, in an

authentic way, and take great pride in doing so. The greatest benefit for pupils both at Gresham's and at the schools we partner with is the human interaction – casting our net wide to share experiences with more young people creates more well-rounded individuals. The opportunity for older pupils to develop as leaders during these activities is an added benefit – for example during three weeks in the summer holidays our Lower Sixth pupils will be providing voluntary support at week-long residential activity camps that we are running at Gresham's for pupils from maintained schools.

Q Who, or what, inspired you to get into teaching? Do you still teach?

A I don't teach at the moment although I do still do some Economics tutoring. I came to teaching by a stroke of luck. I lived in Zimbabwe after university and I wanted to be able to remain there so I needed a work permit which I was granted to teach. I realised fairly quickly that I loved it and have never looked back.

Q Gresham's was founded in the 16th century. Recent alumni have included James Dyson the engineer; Christopher Cockrell inventor of the hovercraft; the composer Benjamin Britten. You are therefore the guardian of a long and distinguished tradition of excellence in education. For what would you most like to be remembered among the Gresham's family 100 years from now?

A I'd like to be remembered for running a happy school with happy children.

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