

Honorary degrees for rugby medic and Chief Nursing Officer

Queen Margaret University (QMU) has awarded two honorary degrees today to two “exceptional healthcare workers”.

The first is Dr James Robson, MBE, a Scottish doctor who, as Scottish Rugby’s Chief Medical Officer, has made an immense contribution to player welfare for generations of Scottish players. He is also a physiotherapy graduate of Queen Margaret University.

Dr Robson has been part of the medical team for eight Rugby World Cups with the Scotland team and for six British & Irish Lions tours, testament to the respect with which he is held across the game and to his commitment to supporting and enhancing players’ physical wellbeing in a sport that places immense demands on their bodies. His experience and knowledge have been called upon to support the promotion of concussion awareness, and to inform research that supports player welfare initiatives, both in Scotland and internationally. He has advised on and supported changes that make rugby safer and helped develop the sport’s first Brain Health Clinic, situated in Edinburgh, which, in conjunction with the Brain Health Trust, invites former international players to have a brain health check.

In the Lions’ iconic 1997 series win in South Africa, James provided life-saving care to England centre Will Greenwood,

who suffered a serious head injury in a tour match against the Cheetahs in Bloemfontein. But it is a 2010 Six Nations match between Wales and Scotland in Cardiff which perhaps features James' proudest moment as a medic when, following an injury incurred by Thom Evans, his expertise helped to save the winger from paralysis.

Scottish Rugby inducted James into its Hall of Fame in 2017 in recognition of his service to the sport, and he was awarded an MBE by Her Majesty the Queen in the 2018 New Year's Honours. In 2024, at his final home match before retirement – a win for Scotland over England – James was given the honour of lifting the Calcutta Cup on the pitch along with the Scotland players.

The second is Professor Alex McMahon who has left an indelible mark on the Scottish healthcare system through his unwavering commitment to the highest standard of patient care. Up until a few months ago, Professor McMahon was Chief Nursing Officer for Scotland, where he demonstrated a profound commitment to the nursing profession, and to championing the interests of healthcare workers. His leadership has been characterised by compassion, integrity and a relentless pursuit of excellence during some of the most challenging times for the nation's health service.

Starting within various nursing positions in Lanarkshire NHS, his career progressed quickly. He moved to Edinburgh to work at the Royal College of Nursing, holding various development, advisory and policy positions, before working as Head of Government and Industry Affairs for AstraZeneca, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies.

This was followed by roles with the Scottish Government, which allowed him to advise and collaborate with ministers and health boards to drive forward strategic improvements across mental health and learning disability services. A series of high-level strategic planning roles followed with NHS Lothian,

where he has driven change and innovation across mental health and learning disability support, drug and alcohol treatment, and cancer care and palliative care, as well as making great strides in enhancing patient safety. Indeed, infection prevention control has stood at the forefront of Alex's priorities, and he has been relentless in fortifying our defences against infectious diseases, safeguarding lives and promoting wellbeing for patients and staff alike.

Throughout his career, Alex McMahon has worked in clinical, managerial, strategic, policy and government roles in Scotland. As a nurse working at the highest level of healthcare and in government, he has seamlessly navigated the complex intersections of the NHS, private sector healthcare, government, and the Royal College of Nursing – commanding the confidence of ministers, civil servants, NHS board chairs and chief executives, as well as senior clinicians, frontline staff, patient groups and the public.

Although he retired from his Chief Nursing Officer position, he is now Chair of the independent steering group for the review of nursing and midwifery practice learning. This review has the potential to fundamentally change the way in which we develop and deliver undergraduate nursing and midwifery programmes. He was also recently appointed to chair the review of mental health nursing in Scotland.

Sir Paul Grice, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Queen Margaret University, said: "We are truly honoured to have two such exceptional healthcare leaders at our graduation ceremonies.

"James Robson personifies the great value that QMU places on individual and collective support. His career demonstrates how intellectual curiosity and a commitment to lifelong learning can provide a pathway to huge adventures, unforgettable experiences, and deep personal fulfilment. This honorary award recognises his dedication in supporting the health, wellbeing

and development of Scotland's sports people, and those in the UK more widely."

Sir Paul continued: "Alex McMahon's collaborative spirit fosters partnerships that enhance patient outcomes and elevate the nursing profession. His delivery of world class safe and effective healthcare, and his transformational leadership of the profession, has brought different professional bodies together on a collective journey towards a healthier Scotland. This honorary award recognises his unwavering, continued commitment to patient care, his tireless advocacy for the nursing and midwifery profession, and his ability to transform and deliver change under pressure."



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PHOTO Alan Simpson



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PHOTO Alan Simpson



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