

## John Bernard, Hon DLitt

Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Orator: Professor Helen Wheatley, WIE Academic Director

Chancellor,

I am delighted to introduce our honorary graduand, the renowned Spoken Word Poet: JOHN BERNARD.

John is a Coventry-born poet, rapper, writer and mentor to young people. His work explores themes of social justice, youth empowerment, faith and purpose, urging individuals to make an active contribution to the creation of a more just and equitable society. In particular, John reaches out to young people, empowering them to find their own voice and express themselves through poetry and music.

Leading creative workshops, and collaborating with schools, youth organisations and community groups, he focusses on building self-confidence and mental well-being – all the more necessary since the pandemic, which has left many young people feeling isolated and disengaged from public life.

John's belief in enabling young people to find their voice is rooted in his personal experience: orphaned at the age of 11, in the Young Offenders system by 15 and on the edge of gang culture by 17, he managed to turn his life around by finding purpose in an arts-based career. 'The reason I am doing what I am doing today and not in prison is because someone empowered my voice,' he explains.

A recent testimony to the success of John's work was an event here at Warwick Arts Centre in May 2024, where young people inspired by John's workshops read or showcased their work in a public performance. He instils bravery and honesty in everyone he works with.

John has established himself nationally as a standout performer in the realm of Spoken Word poetry. He has won many awards and has taken part in prestigious events across the UK, including the Shambala Festival, Radio 1's Big Weekend, the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022, and the Formula 1 Grand Prix at Silverstone in 2023. He has appeared on BBC Radio, in programmes such as Radio 5 Live, BBC 1Xtra and Radio 3's 'The Verb'. He has also had two monologues published by Oberon Books, in a collection of original audition pieces for actors of colour.



However, he remains devoted to his birth city of Coventry. He has become known as the city's voice for the young and is an influential figure in the vibrant Coventry urban alternative music scene.

In 2021, he was commissioned to write a performance piece for 'Coventry Moves' – the opening ceremony event of Coventry's year as City of Culture – and from 2023 to 2025 was Coventry Poet Laureate. He has been part of our own Coventry CollaborACTION initiative, facilitating an opening workshop to discuss our vision for Coventry's future. He also supported our 'Lost Museums' research project, has been involved in creative workshops across the University and has been the creative mentor for Warwick Arts Centre's Youth Leadership Collective. In June 2024, he delivered a poem commissioned by the University to launch its 'Words for Wellbeing' project.

When I asked my colleagues to describe what working with John has been like and what it has enabled us to do in the University, they told me: 'John has a rare gift for bringing people and ideas together, building a genuine sense of community wherever he goes. He supports with kindness, integrity, and heart, and his influence continues to be felt in the work we do at Warwick'.

Another said 'John's commitment to giving voice to others is an inspiration. We all could do with being a bit more like John!'

So, John is certainly no stranger to this University. It is a great pleasure and an honour to welcome him back today for this formal celebration of his inspirational art and work.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, JOHN BERNARD.

