

UCEM in conversation with... Mary Curnock Cook – Episode 10

Andy Youell: I'd like to start by asking a fairly broad question about the state of higher education in the UK right now. Where do you think it is?

Mary Curnock Cook: Well, there's about a million angles that I could answer that question on but if I was thinking of the mood and morale of the sector, I feel that's probably a bit low at the moment. I think it's been punished across the sector for different reasons and different types of organisations, but I think it's had a pretty rough ride during the pandemic.

There is a sense of optimism now that students are coming back on campus and things are getting back to some kind of manageable normality, but I think the big challenge for the sector is to get back on the front foot. I feel we're a bit browbeaten at the moment. The media beating up the sector week after week, usually about online learning, actually, and not realising how much investment and how much sophistication has gone into working out how to deliver teaching and learning to students online, in person, and a mixture of the two.

I feel like the sector needs a bit of a boost right at the moment. I'm very worried about the potential strikes which I think could be very damaging coming on top of the privations that all the students have suffered over this period and on the whole, have been incredibly resilient and stoic about it. I think if we have a bunch of strikes now disrupting teaching and learning and assessment, I think that would be really difficult to get through.

AY: It has been a really challenging narrative, hasn't it? There's been the pandemic and all of the issues that that surfaced but there are longer term challenges as well. The whole narrative, for example, around student debt is really difficult for the sector right now I think.

MCC: Yeah and it feels a little bit as if the sector's holding its breath. We're led to believe that this October, with the comprehensive spending review, that we will get the full response to the Augar report about what the government intends to do about fees and funding. There are various people predicting what they think might happen next, but I feel like once the sector knows what the settlement is going to look like, it'll be able to move on and actually plan with a little bit of certainty about what the financial underpinning of the sector is going to be. Without that, it's really hard for universities and providers to plan anything more than term to term, year to year.

AY: Yes, and as you mentioned, coming out of the pandemic, there are some huge challenges facing institutions at the moment with that, aren't there?

MCC: Yeah I think so. The media narrative that universities have been able to save money because they're not delivering lectures online really worries me. When I see the investment that some universities have made in trying to make the best of a really difficult situation, it's quite astonishing.

AY: Higher education I've always found really interesting. It seems to be a sector very much that measures itself in terms of prestige and actually some quite traditional ideas of what higher education is and higher education teaching is and you mentioned the extent to which the pandemic has pushed forward the online agenda. How do you think the online agenda will play out now?

MCC: I think there's probably two camps. I think there's one camp, which I find worrying, that believes the sector will breathe a huge sigh of relief and go back to how it did things before. My more optimistic viewpoint is that actually there is such positive learnings because

universities have had to deliver online learning and online assessment particularly, and I really hope that some of that is brought into optimising how students learn and how we teach them and how we give them the skills to learn independently. That's where I think technology can play such a huge part.

Obviously, it's different for institutions like UCEM that are fully online anyway - I think there are some challenges around that - but for the traditional sector, the big ask is that they're able to take the good that the learnings from the pandemic and project that forward because I think, if they can do that, it'll be better for students in the end.

AY: Yes, I'm really interested in the extent to which this whole issue in higher education parallels with companies and businesses across the UK which are also coming to terms with a return to the office or the return to more traditional modes. Do you think higher education can learn from businesses or do you think businesses can learn from higher education on this experience?

MCC: That's an interesting question. Undoubtedly, the world of work and how people work and how companies interact with their employees has changed enormously over many years and all of that got kind of amplified and accelerated, I think, by the pandemic. Do I think higher education is fully ready to kind of step into a modern world? Probably not, because higher education is very different to the corporate world. Traditional universities are very different, not least because of the democratic governance structures that underpin the model so my sense is that universities will always operate slightly differently.

The interesting bit will be the extent to which colleagues want to come back into the office and return to the old days. Have colleagues actually found positives and benefits from being able to work more from home? How will the university sector respond to a more hybrid type of working? I'm sure that's on everybody's agendas at the moment.

AY: I'm sure, and it must have huge implications for the traditional universities in terms of campus life and the campus experience?

MCC: I think for a long time now - certainly since 2012, when the fee model meant that universities were basing their income on being derived mainly from fee-paying students - there's been a lot of emphasis on investment in the physical estate. I wonder whether we'll see a shift in balance towards investment in the digital estate.

I think a lot of universities have still got very shonky IT. There are some very big technology teams working and much of that cost and effort is probably keeping the trains on track and doesn't leave much headroom to do development work to work on a more refined digital agenda.

AY: Mary, you've had a hugely distinguished career in higher education, taking on many leadership positions and you are now a Commander of the Order of the British Empire [CBE]. You have a wealth of experience to draw upon, so what advice would you give to someone starting out in their career today?

MCC: I always think of careers as being in two parts. Partly the role you play, so, in my case, let's call it general management or senior leadership and then the other part of your career is the sector that you play it in.

Now, in my case, I had senior leadership roles in biotechnology, the food industry, the licensed retail sector, and it wasn't until I was 40 that I got the education bug and realised that that's really what I wanted to do. That's when I thought I want to exercise my skill, I hope, as a senior leader in the education field and that's when I first started taking quite

deliberate steps to make that possible; not least, by the way, by getting myself a degree which I thought would be helpful in getting into a senior role in education.

So, I think sometimes the mistake made when people are advising people about careers – let's take law, for example - is do people realise all the different ways that you can exercise your skills in the legal profession? It's not just in-house or working for a law company, it's not just in the courtroom or on the high street, it could be that you work as an in-house lawyer at a company like UCAS or the University College of Estate Management, or could you be an in-house legal in the pharmaceutical sector or would you specialise in intellectual property or risk management?

So, law is a knowledge base but there are multiple ways that you can exercise that. So, my feeling is start out, try a few things out and don't worry if you don't find your way until a few years after you've graduated.

AY: And careers have changed enormously, haven't they? My father retired from the same company he joined 55 years previously, and that was the norm for that generation. But now there is a lot more flexibility and the rise of portfolio careers. Would you advise a young person to go into a portfolio career?

MCC: Well, I think it's a genuinely viable option for young people. It used to be for old folk like me once you'd stepped off the executive treadmill but, now, what I see is a rise of a professional gig economy where people can very readily market themselves and their skills to multiple clients and multiple employers. So, they might have a main hustle, a secondary hustle and a side hustle all running in parallel and perhaps be founding their own startup at the same time. I think of them as the 'no-collar workers' as you only need a decent laptop and a broadband connection to get started in some of these fields.

I feel it's also put a very different slant on the fear or the idea of being unemployed because lots of people can find ways to earn money through project work. There are websites where you can offer your skills and I think the onus is on higher education providers to equip their students to understand that they can do this and give them the skills to make the most of it. I've had five jobs in my career and now I look at CVs and you see that people are doing multiple jobs, they're moving more often, they're constantly looking for new skills, new experiences and perhaps also things have changed after the pandemic as well.

AY: Yes, so this idea of working in a discipline but working in many different industries and carrying that with you, it makes the decision about the subject of study for young people a really important decision, doesn't it? So what advice would you give to young people when thinking about their subject of study?

MCC: I'd almost flip that round and say that the onus is on universities to make sure that it doesn't matter what you study, they'll make sure you've got some of those foundational skills that will get you through a multi-faceted career.

Having said that, for students, I still think doing the subjects that you're best at and that you enjoy most is the best way to get successful grades and progress. Because if you go to university thinking: 'oh well, I must do something kind of boring but important because it'll get me a good job', you then have to spend three whole years, maybe even four years, studying that subject. If it isn't your passion, if you're not interested in staying up all night arguing the toss with your peer group, if you're not interested enough to read all the reading that you're supposed to do, how are you going to succeed and enjoy it?

I still think follow something that you're really interested in and good at, and then demand from your university or your provider that they give you the other skills as well.

AY: That's really sound advice because the world has too many boring but important people and what we actually need in the world is people who inspire and people who can lead. Who or what inspires you?

MCC: Oh, bloomin' 'eck! So this sounds a bit weird to say, but my dad in a funny sort of way because he wasn't ambitious for me. He probably thought that I would marry someone and never work - I'm that sort of age, Andy. I loved him dearly and I miss him terribly, but you know he said to me when I was little: "oh darling, you know men are more intelligent than women". As I went through my career I'd come home and say: "oh dad, I've got a new job!", and he'd say: "when are you going to get a proper job?" He said it thoughtlessly and no doubt with love, but it always kind of spurred me on really to prove him wrong and I think by the time I ended up in UCAS and all his friends were ringing up for advice about their grandchildren, I think he took a slightly different viewpoint of it all.

AY: That's marvelous, absolutely marvelous. Mary, it's been a real pleasure having a chat with you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

MCC: Well, thank you. It's wonderful here to be at University College of Estate Management and I've really enjoyed our chat.