

Transcript of 'Universities and Sustainability'

Season 1, Episode 15, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business, here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan we're back, and today we're going to be discussing an issue very close to our hearts. Because we're going to be talking about sustainability at Lancaster University.

Jan: Well, talking about sustainability is one thing, but walking the talk is another, and our guest today is helping the university walk the talk, and has lots of insight for us to make sense of.

[Theme music]

Paul: Yes, because we're joined by Dr Georgiana Allison who is the Head of Sustainability here at Lancaster University. A big job, lots of responsibility, I'm sure.

So, let's get this straight you're the Head of Sustainability here at Lancaster University. It sounds like a very important role - lots and lots of things that you need to be doing. Can you tell us a little bit about it, what the job is, and what your background is?

Georgiana: Yeah, very acutely feeling that sense of, of responsibility, um third, third working day back, a whole year ahead.

I've sort of come back home really. I grew up in a village not far from Lancaster, and then went to University in Leeds, and then stayed there for 20 years, so when this job came up I was still working in Leeds, but I always wanted to sort of come home.

So, I didn't really, I didn't really ever have a plan career-wise and I've done all sorts of weird things, um including a stint in the police, got my PhD when I was pregnant or my daughter was very, very young. Um, so that was uh interesting.

But my career started off in a sort of similar role but in a more junior position. So I've sort of come back home in in multiple ways really. I've started off in environmental officer role in the estates and facilities department, and then it sort of I moved off into other things, worked for a Local Authority, and construction, and then went into lecturing, which I really enjoyed.

So I am used to hearing the sound of my recorded voice, and I'm not completely put off by it [Jan and Paul laugh] so that's, that's a strong start. Yeah so, so this, I was, I was teaching before I came here so I literally finished teaching in Leeds at 5:00 the night before, um and then started here at 9:00 the following morning.

And it, it was a lot of the language is very familiar. The scale of the job is huge. I'm, for the first time in my career I'm pushing on an open door, that's, you know, sometimes I'm not quite ready to be pulled through the door, [Paul laughs] I'm sort of still getting myself together and, and getting my thoughts together.

And there's a lot of ambition, there's a lot of enthusiasm and there's a lot to do. Um, and I've been here 10 months and I'm sort of only just really now starting to understand what it is, um or what the job specifically here requires. That sort of, that contextual stuff um is now really just starting to come through.

Jan: One of the things I think's really super about your journey here is it's been a hybrid one. And we, we kind of Imagine people start off one place and keep on going, but most of us wiggle around, and so I like the wiggleness of what you've just described to us.

In terms of the when you had the lecturing role and you're looking at research about how organisations become sustainable in the things that they do and good practice, have you found that's easy to bring that forward and does that inform your role at the University?

Georgiana: Yeah, it does actually. Funnily enough, this morning I've been writing some lecture slides for a guest lecture I'm doing in a, in a month's time in LEC. It's sort of like the, the baseline I suppose of, of my practice, it's like where I go back to. Okay, so what do I know, and, and what does what does research tell us, what does science tell us? But then, of course, you can have scientific consensus and that doesn't account for human behaviour.

So, it's, it's a really good foundation and, and I use it every day, either knowingly or unknowingly. I guess the best bit about my wiggly career, as you quite rightly described it, is that there's been so many similarities in each of the organisations I've worked, but the differences are so important. And it's those differences that make the job really, really interesting and really enjoyably challenging.

But always you can go back to that academic sort of position of, yes I can see that, that framework being played out.

Paul: It's interesting because we quite often talked to academics who are still academics, who want to have impact in practical ways in various organisations. So you're able to take what you've had as an academic and actually apply that in a role outside of academia. Does that give you a unique kind of perspective, do you think? Especially when you're working in a higher education establishment.

Georgiana: Uh, potentially yeah. I mean, I don't really see myself as being a proper academic. I know I've got the qualification to, to suggest that I am, um but because I started off in a very practical, grounded, applied place and I got my PhD in the middle of it all, in the middle of motherhood as well, or the start of motherhood, and I'm back. I'm, I'm sort of back in HE. It's sort of a bit like a sandwich.

I'm just using everything I've, I've gained through my career to be as effective as I can be in this role. Sort of using all the skills and the experience and the, the mistakes and learning, and all of that to try and shortcut a bit of, shortcut that where possible, but then also not take for granted either.

I think that, I think one of the, the biggest mistakes you can make as a sustainability practitioner, which is what I call myself, I call myself a generalist, is to sort of assume you know the answer. Because the context is always changing.

So as soon as you assume you know everything, you've lost. That's what I've enjoyed about my career is that there's always been something, whether I've wanted it or not, there's always been something to keep me on my toes and to keep me learning.

Paul: With regards to this role, this current role at Lancaster, what is it involving? What are your main parts of your job, what are you trying to do with regards to sustainability here at Lancaster University?

Georgiana: A lot. But mainly to sort of create a, a message or, or simplify the message, in that it isn't just a facilities thing. That's where it started, and I totally understand where we've got to. So, so for instance when my career started, a lot of the environmental jobs were all about risk, and risk management and legislation, and all of that sort of thing.

And, and so it, it made sense for the job to be held in Estates and Facilities, 'cause that's, we were, we are sort of the, the guardians of the estate and we were ultimately responsible for the risk. Now, I think there's still that, that sort of hangover of, of people going well that's Estates' job, that's Facilities' job.

So my, my job is to change that, and, and make it much more sort of accessible term, that more people feel they can relate to the term more, therefore they can see how they, a difference, and then also it's ,it's understanding what that difference is.

So we've spent a lot of time over the last year really examining our impact from a carbon perspective. Now I don't, I don't like using carbon as the sort of catch all term for sustainability, and I don't, I don't think it's the most engaging term either, but what's been really interesting is that as we've looked into our, our carbon impact actually 80% of our impact is through our procurement.

So actually that makes it everybody's business, immediately. So it's been, it's mainly, it's been about changing the message, simplifying the message. So that it's not, it's not seen as a technical thing, it's not seen as something that's done over there.

It's something that actually happens in every lecture theatre, every office, every, yeah, in everyone's day every day. And then I think a lot of it as well is has been about trying to shepherd, and that's a term that my, my boss uses, I'm seen as a bit of a, or he sees me as being a, having a shepherding role, so that there's lots and lots of stuff happening all over the place and it's trying to get a handle on that and, and think right, are we focusing collectively on, on the most impactful thing?

But sometimes impact doesn't always match with, or relate to, interest. So where we can have the biggest impact, actually could be through something

very, very boring and it doesn't generate a lot of interest. So it's about getting that balance between what is interesting to people, what people really care about as well, because interest and care are two different things and, and trying to unify and, and streamline all of this collective effort into something that we can actually start to really feel like we're, we're moving forward, if that makes sense.

That's a very convoluted way of saying [Jan and Paul laugh] we're doing lots of stuff and I guess my, my role is about seeing the way ahead, understanding and, and trying to take everyone in the in the same sort of direction.

Paul: What attitudes have you come across, across the university towards sustainability? I guess you're dealing with it at such a large, central level, you'll be dealing with the big organisational part of the University. But not just at a central level, also you must come across individuals who are working on different little areas. So what, what sort of attitudes have you come across?

Georgiana: Positive, exclusively really, um, if I've come across anything other than positive I've forgotten about it, and that's another sort of trait I've, I've developed over the years of just having to be extremely resilient and forgetting the bad days, and just, and just focusing on the, on all the, on the positive attitudes, and, and the people who are willing to help. And I've I'm generally working with the willing.

And I think that, going back to the, the previous question about what it is I'm doing, I'm working with people primarily at the moment who have come to us to say we want to do more. And that's come across, that's come from faculties and um departments, so that it's not just, it's not it's, it's not just one thing which is great there's people all across the University who are wanting to work with us.

Positive. Positive attitudes. Genuine curiosity about wanting to understand more. I think as well that comes from a, a general increase in awareness and use of the term. I think there is, there is still, as I referred to earlier, this hangover of it being an environmental issue and or a facilities issue.

So there's still that. I can, I have keenly felt that and heard that, but that's not a problem, because it is still part of the answer it's, just not *the* answer. And, and so I'm just, I suppose I've, I've heard a lot of people wanting to um understand how their individual department can make a difference, and then there have

been people who have, have been quite passionately uh wanting to understand how the University can do more on certain subjects.

So there's, there's that sort of interest and then there that that values, yeah, personal values being coming through as well.

Jan: I loved your distinction between interest and care, because I think that's really very important, and without wanting to pigeon-hole this part of the conversation in an environmental aspect and, and particularly in carbon, I do wonder about the wind turbine which is large and evident and, and I think engenders pride in people's minds when they know this is helping to, you know, fuel the energy needs of the University. But also that there, um development is a solar farm to go with that as well. So, you know, two technologies that help reduce the carbon footprint.

And I suppose my question about them is, is more of a general one. Does having something visual like that, that you can see and make sense of and see the connection between the things you might care about and the things that are being done um to help exercise um you know that care, do you think that matters to be able to, you know, seeing, believing in this particular context?

Georgiana: Absolutely. There is definitely a place for making our campus more resilient and that's, it's, the carbon, the carbon stuff's quite complicated. So there ultimately, there will be positive carbon impacts in a few years. Not immediately, because we've got to go through all the procurement and, and I've spent quite a lot of time over Christmas thinking about the maths of that, and it's made my head hurt.

So yes, it is important, but it isn't sustainability done. And I think that's, I've been thinking as well about the, the marketing side of this, and, and how we talk about the solar farm, and how we engage people in the motives and the benefits of the solar farm. So the motives to get the solar farm in the first place, and then the benefits of having that here.

So it isn't sustainability done, because we have to remember why we have a campus in the first place... [laughs]

Jan: ... yeah...

Georgiana: ... and, and it can be a little bit of, it's sort of a bit of a strange quote to use, but I remember reading years ago in the, in the sort of throes of a PhD literature review, reading a quote that said, it's a lot of sustainability

stuff can, can be likened to sort of the icing on the cake, and people forget about the cake. And you can't live off icing, so what about the cake? And the cake is the campus, the cake is the reason that we have the campus in the first place. So what is it that we're, we're teaching in classrooms, is where we can be most sustainable and, and where we can have the greatest impact.

So yes, a solar farm is so, so important for our business resilience and, and our ability to spend money wisely, so not spending it on a very expensive imported electricity but being able to generate it ourselves, sure. My sort of baseline position is why are we here, what is the reason of us being here in the, in the first place?

Paul: I guess what I'd ask that ties into that relates to our civic University agenda, and how the solar plant, the wind turbine, might help demonstrate that we are a really important actor when it comes to the local community, and so we're leading the way and showing what can be done as a large employer, or an organisation that's recognised within the region here.

Does it help in that regard? In showing, oh, the University's doing this. That's a positive move with regards to sustainability and it's, it's clear and obvious to people outside of University who maybe do just think about things such as green energy and carbon footprints when it comes to sustainability.

Georgiana: People are so unpredictable. What, what you think, what you know or think is a good thing will always upset someone. So you, you have to do what's right, primarily, for your organisation. That should be the motive. What is right for the university is to improve and increase our business resilience and, and climate resilience.

I'm sure there will be people and, and groups and communities locally who, who might draw inspiration for what, from what we're doing here, but as you say it, it's there's a danger of it becoming that sort of that, that sustainability is reduced to an environmental issue only.

And I wonder if people consider the sort of, the reason, as I say the reason for us being here. What are we doing in classrooms, do people think about that? And, and actually I was thinking about the question that I knew was coming about this. I've always been, as I said I'm not a very good academic, because I've always been quite interested in doing the job. I've always, I've always sort of done it. I've thought about it a lot, and I've done a little bit of research but I've always really got stuck in and, and done it.

And, and strangely the job that taught me the most about sustainability was being in the police, and being a police officer. Because it, when you go into a house where there are adults living independently but they don't know how to use a toilet, for example, or there's a child without a bed on Christmas day. Any number of horrible things that are happening.

And, and not just horrible but, but really sad things that are happening,, you've got to I guess ask the question of when you're talking about sustainability, what is it that you're talking about? And it's ultimately the sustainability of, of humanity. It's not about the planet. The planet will be absolutely fine.

But when we have people living in in appalling conditions within our local area, and I know it's happening in in the Lancaster and Morecambe area, then sustainability should become a, it's a human problem. And the way that we treat our, our most vulnerable should be a very, very good indicator of how sustainable our society is.

So I think there's, there's more work, I know I've gone off on a bit of a tangent there, but in terms of our civic role, I think I would be interested to know how much of, how much our students understand about the local community. That transient student population. I was a student in Leeds, so there were thousands of us. Because I stayed there so long I got to know the city very well, but if, if my family hadn't have emigrated to New Zealand when I was in my first year of University, I probably would have come back to the Northwest. And I probably wouldn't have got to know Leeds or West Yorkshire at all.

So how much of, of our, how much do our students get to know our area and, and what do they learn about our area, and how much of that is integrated into their curriculum?

Paul: That ties wonderfully into something that we discussed with Jekaterina Rindt a few episodes ago where she was talking about the work that was being done on the I-Connect project which relates to the Eden Project coming to Morecambe, and how they'd taken students out there into the environment, and be able to experience the journey between Lancaster and Morecambe.

The, also, that I know they studied things in Morecambe like the Market Hall there, being able to get to know people and learn about the community, and the importance that people like you Jekaterina and other researchers in the school put into students actually knowing about what's going on here, rather than they're just visitors who are here for two, three years and have no

connection to the area and then they go away again. Having them to get to know a bit more about what's going on on the ground.

Jan: And what I really liked about the stories that she told us is that I was cycling along that same cycle route that she was talking about in, in the previous podcast, and I saw it quite differently this time, which was kind of interesting because she, she was really talking about, you know, as a visitor how you might get between two places, but I realised it's also a, a community corridor.

And, there are housing on one side, there's a whole variety of supermarkets on the other. Saw people out there walking their dogs, going for a bike ride, um walking with their kids, but also loads of people coming back with shopping bags. And so that access to food that's enabled by that corridor would seem to me as being really important as well.

So it was, it was lovely to cycle along there and, and see it with different eyes. And I suppose that's one of the things I like about sustainable development thinking is it asks, it invites you, and again you have to have the interest and the care, but it invites you to see things with different, different lenses, and to see the world in a different way as you might have before.

Paul: And especially if we can build that into more of the curriculum, so that it's not just the occasional programme or people making a special effort to do it but it's seen as a natural flow into the curriculum, that everything should include that kind of aspect to it. That would be a wonderful thing.

And that would very much fit in with what you're saying there, that all students have that appreciation for the, the environment, and I use that in the broader term of environment, that surrounds them here in Lancaster.

Georgiana: Yeah. And it, and it, it sort of, it would help to remove, potentially help to remove that sort of, uh ivory tower mentality that I think exists, not just in Lancaster but in every, in every city, particularly a small city. I know that the same thing exists in Durham, um with much feeling, having lived there for a few years.

And it might also, you know I'm a first-generation university student. It, it's, for me, I don't, I think there was always the expectation that I would go to university, and my first ever work experience was here at Lancaster University

in the, in the mid-nineties when I was working at the weather station for a couple of weeks.

I think, had it not been for my mother's encouragement, I'm not sure if I would have gone, to be honest. So it's, it's, Lancaster University felt very far away and also very remote to anything that I had come across before, so I think it's, if we can make the, the University more accessible and feel more inclusive to those from any background, that can only be a good thing, because that's what sustainable, sustainable education is all about.

It's about inviting, as you said Jan, it's inviting more perspectives, it's widening participation and it's valuing not just knowledge but, but feelings and um experience.

Jan: Keeping on the theme of valuing, um there are now HE rankings, I mean we've talked about rankings before, and [laughing] Paul is rolling his eyes and, and not looking...

Paul: ...shaking my head, sighing internally, thinking yes we've come back to rankings again, it had to happen...

Jan: ...I can't, I can't fault your response to that but, but there are now rankings and I think over the New Year there was, you know, universities were classified as first class, 2:1, 2:2 which is a, you know, kind of clever way of putting them in.

So ranking bodies appear to be paying a bit more attention to sustainability, um do you think that's a positive thing and are they paying attention to sustainability in all its form, or is it a bit narrow? And what, what kind of, you can be controversial at this point if you like, because I see a glint in your eye [laughing] that you might wish to say something...

[general laughter]

Georgiana: ...I do not have a poker face, I have been told this many times.

Firstly, I think it is a good thing. As soon as it becomes standardised and integrated into through existing frameworks and measurements it becomes normalised and, and therefore more people think about it, more people talk about it. That can only be a good thing.

It, absolute, they absolutely do influence activity or, or attention, I suppose, at the University. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. My colleague

Natalie has summarised this for me very nicely. I'm not going to go into it here, but each of them look at slightly different things, and each of them have strengths and weaknesses.

I think we have to treat them with caution though because they all fall into that trap of, of sort of oversimplifying potentially, or they, that they don't, they themselves don't necessarily oversimplify it, but the way that they are reported on and then interpreted, there is a danger of oversimplifying what is a very ,you know, what is the wickedest problem. The, the wicked problem of sustainability.

So rather than, rather than integrating league tables separate and, and compartmentalise and categorise, and that's the opposite of what sustainability requires. By finding evidence to satisfy the, the category requirements you're then repeating the sort of mistakes that have got us into this mess in the first place. So I think the failure to see connections and patterns in the world generally makes league tables and competition inherently problematic.

So I think they're useful, they can be a useful indicator of where we might need to work on. But actually are they themselves just perpetuate, perpetuating that sort of change within changelessness are we just seek, are we, are we seeking evidence to satisfy a league table without asking ourselves what is it that we're actually wanting to achieve here?

Paul: I don't know if you noticed Jan, but a lot of the points that Georgiana was making there seems very similar to the points I was making about benchmarking and rankings tables and the, the issues I had with them. So I'm glad I'm not alone in that. And I knew I wasn't alone in that, but it's good to hear because my worry with things like these rankings tables is you act for the purpose of doing well in a ranking rather than acting and doing what you should be doing, and what is actually bent, for the, for the better. For the, the planet in this case, and for the human race in this case, overall.

You're doing these things because you want to be ranked number one in the world for having the best solar panels, or you're doing it because you want to be ranked number one in the world for having the best litter-picking programme, not because you actually are aiming to have a better planet overall.

Jan: What are the tough challenges for higher education? 'Cause it's implied in quite a bit of what you've said already, but it might be nice to sort of pull it out and look at them specifically.

Georgiana: I think we are, I read a, when I was doing some prep while I was poorly last week, I was re-reading some PhD stuff, and I came across the quote of, of, we are, we're using 20th century thinking for 21st century problems, and also we're educating students for a future that no longer exist.

I think the, the challenge for HE is to reconcile which of the competing, and I'm going to be slightly controversial here and say competing 20th century priorities that we still um perpetuate, and really consider how we can be fit for purpose for the future that is coming.

So we, we try and do a lot of things, um like anything, like with farming there is an increasing need to diversify to remain financially sustainable. I think HE has done that like so many other sectors, but fundamentally it goes back to what I said at the start, which is why are we here, and, and what is it we're teaching, and, and why are we teaching I,t and I think that's that's a challenge for all education. Are we doing a bad thing better or ,or do we want to do a better thing all together?

Paul: I'd like to end though on a positive note. I'd like you to, what's positive, what, you know, what's giving you hope for the future? What's making you think actually, yeah ,we might be going in the right direction?

Georgiana: My appointment has given me hope...

Paul: ... is that just on a personal, you're getting more money in your...

[Georgiana laughs]

Paul: ...or are we talking about on a wider scale?

Georgiana: On a wider scale. I mean, this, this, I've got friends in similar positions in the sector, and we all started together in, in those very junior roles, never imagining for one moment that 15 years later we might hold these 'heads of' roles.

Those roles didn't exist 15 years ago, they simply didn't. We were buried within structures within structures. Um, literally litter picking. I, I was, was thrown in a skip at one point in my career...

[Paul laughs]

Georgiana: ...so I think...

Paul: ...I hope that doesn't indicate anything about the quality of the work you were producing during that period... [everyone laughs]

Georgiana: I, I did it with a smile on my face, so it was fine. I think, so I think the sector and, well it's not just the sector, is it. These roles now,, um and sustainability is in is in almost every single job, if not explicitly, then implicitly. So, so the fact that there is more awareness and more interest and more acknowledgement of the need to do something gives me hope.

I really miss lecturing for, for that much more frequent and much more tangible, sort of reason for hope where you see a student's attitude or,, or you read their attitude or you see it in their face. You see you see the light bulb go on and, and you, and you think right, well if I've done nothing else this academic year then I know that that student or group of students have changed their perspective on what they think sustainability means.

And I also think, and I, I am going to quote Princess Leia here... [everyone laughs]

Jan: ...hurrah, thankfully...!

Georgiana: I mean, I am, even though it's been a hard, it's been a hard graft, you know doing sustainability practice for 20 years has been really, really trying, but I think, I must, I must be an optimist, I've got to be.

I think she says something like 'hope is like the sun. If you, if you don't believe it until you see it then you'll never make it through the night'.

Paul: I'm worried now that all the Star Wars fans are going to just email in and, and bother us. [whispers] They won't, they won't...

Georgiana: Send them to me because I'm, I'm a massive Star Wars nerd.

Paul: I would normally have a Star Wars t-shirt on, I think I did last time we did recording but I don't today so, otherwise I, I would be with you on that. I can't remember the exact quote either, it's fine.

Jan: But I think the, the feeling is there, and we understand the feeling. So I think there, there's several things that really came home to me from our conversation.

Firstly, well it's always lovely to talk to somebody with an Aotearoa New Zealand connection, and really sorry your, your folks moved, but it's just one of those things. The other thing I liked is the distinction between proper and proper academics, I think we should make a campaign for improper academics, 'cause they sound like the, the bee's knees. I heard 'eat more cake', but that might have just been me...

[Georgiana laughs]

Jan: ...uh, don't focus on the icing, focus on the cake. [Georgiana continues laughing]

Paul: Were you drifting off into some kind of weird daydream halfway through, through this episode?

[Jan giggles]

Paul: [in daydream voice] Eat more cake, yes, we eat more, more cake. Why, why isn't there cake in front of me? Cake, cake, cake...

Georgiana: Didn't Adrian say drink more beer, I think? Wasn't that the takeaway from...

Jan: ...I think I can see a theme coming on here. But the other thing I heard which I think we might come back to in a, in a Q&A podcast at some stage, is that you talked about wickedness. And that's a very particular description of a particular set of problems, and I also like your distinction between 20th and 21st century thinking.

So thanks for those prompts because I think that will, that will come forward into some future podcasting as well.

[Theme music starts]

Paul: Wicked and improper. If ever there were two words to sum you up, Jan...

[Jan laughs]

Georgiana: ...I, I thought you going to say Georgiana, because actually...
[laughs]

Paul: ...we've only just met, it would be inappropriate, yeah...

[Georgiana laughs]

Paul: Thank you very much.

[Theme music]

Paul: I've learned lots of things about this University, lots, lots of positive things, some things that make me think, yeah, that kind of fits as well. But, yeah, lots of positive things about where we're going, and it's really good to hear that.

Next time we're gonna be joined by two more people are gonna be telling us about things that are going on within this University, because we'll have, uh Brian Gregory and Salma Atcha here in the studio, talking about the Entrepreneurs in Residence network here in the Management School.

How entrepreneurs treat and understand issues around sustainability, and how that network helps feed into the Pentland Centre.

Jan: Brilliant, I look forward to that. I don't know if it's twice the pleasure or double the trouble, but we will find out.

Paul: [Jan giggles throughout] If you've met either of them, it's the latter, and I, I'm worried for our sanity, for the bleep button, and for various other things that we've not had to worry about for, during the recording of this series. I'm sure we'll be fine, Jan.

Until then if you do have any questions about any of the issues raised within any of the episodes of the Transforming Tomorrow podcast, please do email pentlandcentre@lancaster.ac.uk.

But until next time, I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]