

Transcript of 'The Next Generation'

Season 2, Episode 24, 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. In today's episode, we're talking about trees. Yes, that's right. We're bona fide tree huggers now.

We're also speaking about sustainability within the educational bubble, how students engage with sustainability, and breaking down barriers between students and university management.

Paul: A key question today, Jan, how do you feel about young people?

Jan: I quite like young people. I think they, they give me a bit of hope and a, and a bit of verve and I, I feel a bit sorry for them as well 'cause the world we're leaving them with has got a bit to be done.

Paul: So you, you're, you're not of the grouchy neighbour shouting at the people as they walk past, telling them to stand up straight, et cetera?

Jan: [laughing] No, not yet anyway. Maybe it's still ahead of me.

Paul: Is, is that you're waiting for retirement to take on that persona?

Jan: Yes, indeed. Yes indeed.

Paul: It, it's quite advantageous that you are not of the all young people – [angry growl] - variety because you do work in a university...

Jan: ...indeed...

Paul: ...and today we're gonna be talking about young people and students and their attitudes towards sustainability. Because a lot of the time we've talked to people in business, we've talked to researchers, we've talked to people who've been around for many, many decades.

We've not talked to the people who, as you say, are gonna be inheriting this earth from us in, you know, so many year's time, and I think that that's a key perspective that we need to consider.

Jan: Absolutely, and as you say, in a university setting, there's a lot of young people here. Um, they're here to gain education in specialist areas, but we also hope and, you know, try to design into the, the, the estate, they might, that they might learn about sustainability as well.

Paul: Do you think we should speak to someone who has a lot of experience and knowledge about working with these young people...

Jan: ...I think...

Paul: ...and not shouting at them and going – [angry growl] - stand up straight?

Jan: [laughing] I'm really worried about your characterisation. I think this is you that you're channelling, not me. So yes, let's talk to someone who knows their business in this area.

Paul: Yes. We're joined today by Darren Axe, and Darren is the Students Organizing for Sustainability International Membership and Engagement Manager. And for a while he was the lead for Green Lancaster, and ironically, given his name, he helped grow lots of trees.

Jan: Yes, I've always found that, I'm sorry, Darren, but I've always found that quite hilarious. Um, because I'm juvenile.

Paul: I, I dare say, no one's ever dared mention it to his face until now. [Jan laughs]

Hello, Darren.

Darren: Hello.

Paul: Did you get a lot of bad jokes about axes and trees?

Darren: Absolutely. Yes, yeah, yeah.

Jan: Sorry to replicate that.

Paul: Yeah. We're nothing, if not unoriginal. [Jan and Darren laugh]

Beyond being an Axe, can you tell us a little bit about your background, how you came to be working with student bodies to champion sustainability?

Darren: Sure, yeah. Jury's out on whether I'm classed as a young person myself, I've, I've been on the planet for three decades to build on your, your point, Paul.

Um, so, um, hopefully I, I certainly can speak to the point and, and feel like I have a strong connection with young people through the work I do. So, um, yeah...

Paul: ...Pausing, Darren. Only been on this earth for three decades. I class that as young, Jan.

Jan: Yeah, me too.

Paul: Yeah, you may carry on. [Jan laughs]

Darren: Okay. Um, so, uh, yeah, I'm a Geography graduate of, uh, the Lancaster Environment Centre here, uh, 2009.

Um, and I've always had a strong interest in kind of education and pedagogies really, for sustainability. I've got a real kind of keen interest in and an eye for kind of co-curricular learning. Back to the trees analogy, more about putting them in the ground than chopping them down, for sure. And getting people hands on with kind of nature and a real focus on community building and collaborative leadership.

And yeah, it was in September 2009 that I started work with Green Lancaster as a graduate intern. Actually within a few short months of my time working within the Student Union, my role kind of accelerated and I found myself picking up the remit of coordinating the whole programme.

So that led to a whole manner of new and exciting experiences that I never sort of expected to be in that position. Sort of like aged kind of 21 just coming fresh out of, out of an undergraduate degree.

Paul: See, he looks young now. I, I can't quite picture Darren at 21. I can only imagine he looked like a baby.

[Everyone laughs]

Jan: Well, I suppose that's one of the generational things about working in University is that you don't, I don't necessarily feel that older, but the students definitely are getting younger.

[Darren laughs]

Paul: Yes. Yeah. No, I totally appreciate that. Yeah, I definitely do. I've worked in universities for less than a decade, but even in that time, the students seem to be getting younger and younger...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...I'm assuming we're recruiting 'em as foetuses now.

[Everyone laughs,]

Jan: ...that'll be the next step.

Paul: You've talked about Green Lancaster there, Darren, without, we don't necessarily know that much about what Green Lancaster does, so can you tell us a little bit about the work that it carries out?

Darren: Sure, yeah. So throughout my involvement in Green Lancaster, it was a, it was a great kind of 15 year chapter of my life, and it was really enjoyable. Uh, so Green Lancaster was a sustainability partnership at the University and the Student's Union. It was kind of set up by a postgraduate student, Tom Roberts, in 2005.

And then in 2009 when I sort of came on the scene as a fresh graduate it took a leap forward through a Catalyst grant that we received that was match funded by the institution, and this was all about a focus on engaging students in environmental volunteer work.

And from that kind of platform, we kind of co-created this community around community of practice, around sustainability, and it was all very invitational. It was about inviting students to bring their ideas for kind of systems change, rather than prescribing a particular journey upon them.

Through this kind of approach, we really created some diverse projects with hopefully some transformative impact locally, nationally, and globally. So, our student teams kind of engaged in a range of projects from creating a dedicated on-campus space for sustainability, the Eco-Hub.

This featured an organic garden, forest garden, wildflower meadows, hedge rows, but also importantly kind of a social space in a historic barn to really kind of bring people together and an educational space that kind of living the transformation through, through collaborative learning.

We did a lot of projects looking at upcycling, student belongings, you know, gotta remember that campuses are places where students live, they consume, you know, they undertake daily lives. There's a lot of equipment and material, um, that becomes redundant when students kind of leave for holidays or at the end of the year.

So we designed a great project, Don't Ditch It, that looked to upcycle those, those kind of materials and working in partnership with local charities to distribute those, but also to sell them back to students and generate kind of revenue for the organisation.

We did a lot of on off-campus volunteering with community and environmental organisations across Lancashire and Cumbria. That was great to get people out, meeting local people, working with local people on, you know, positive change projects.

And then last but not least, we designed kind of experiential learning expeditions, I like to call them, around this kind of, this kind of systems change theme, sustainability and leadership.

And we got some great exciting destinations from the kind of wild Isle of Eigg off the west coast of Scotland through to the Swiss Alps, so that was kind of some of my more latter projects around that.

Paul: And I'll just point out, I've come across Darren before, because two years ago we helped take part in the foresting of the, um, Forrest Hills, which used to be a golf course, but despite its name, didn't have so much in the way of forest, because with golf courses you have the wide fairways and stuff.

And as part of our team, we raised money for people who travelled sustainably to open days here at Lancaster Management School, money was then given towards Green Lancaster, uh, to go towards reforesting that, and so money went towards it. And then as a team, we went and planted trees. And every year, because the Pentland Centre has an annual get together at Forrest Hills, I always be sure to go and check on how those trees are going, and I'm pleased to say they're growing really well some of them, although some of them might be dead, uh, but that's the chance you take when you plant trees. Not all of them are gonna survive and grow to be mighty oaks.

None of them are gonna grow to be mighty oaks 'cause I believe they're all like yew trees and beech trees and things like that. But yeah, that's how I've come across, um, Darren and very much there is an active presence of Green Lancaster for staff and students. People definitely know it's there.

It may be a student organisation in that it started out with as part of the Student's Union, but staff very much know about it and, you know, take part in stuff with it as well.

Jan: And I approve a great deal that you go and check on trees, 'cause I think that's, that's one of the things, if you plant a tree, it's not plant and forget, it's plant and love, isn't it? Which I think is...

Paul: ...a tree is not just for Christmas...

[Darren laughs]

Jan: ...exactly, yes...

[Jan laughs]

Darren: Yeah, we, we really valued you know that, that contribution in, in the tree planting project at Forrest Hills, it helped us, um, get towards around 10,000 trees, I think, in total.

But to build on the Axe analogy, actually, um, at some point in the future we probably do wanna take an axe to some of those, 'cause we want to create a more of a, kind of a, a mosaic habitat in the long term. So, so kind of finding a way to thin them out.

But yeah, as you say, Paul, they're doing really well...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Darren: ...um, and there's a, there's even a canopy emerging on the first site that we worked on back in 2017. So.

Jan: And, and this is where it's, you know, it's again, all connected together, because when it comes to the thinning, I would like to be there with my, uh, my green carving, um, equipment in my hand and say...

Darren: [laughs] ...device.

Jan: ...can I please have some of this wood? [laughs]

Darren: Yes.

Paul: You've been down to go and massacre something with a chainsaw [Jan and Darren laugh] for far too long. And this is gonna be your opportunity.

Jan: No, just little pieces to make little spoons, that's all I'm after. So...

Paul: [incredulously] ...you, you're gonna make spoons out of the trees?

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: So one, one of the trees that I planted may one day be a spoon in your kitchen drawer.

Jan: Oh, well, if it is your tree, I'll give you the spoon. How's that for a deal?

Paul: Yeah. I don't know that honestly you're gonna be able to identify [Jan laughs] which is specifically my trees and which of the trees that have been planted by colleagues and friends, et cetera...

Jan: ...fair enough, fair enough.

Paul: Yeah, no...

Jan: ...it's, it's a thought.

Paul: Yeah, it is a thought. I, I dunno how I'd feel about having a spoon made from a tree that I planted. I'd be both happy and sad.

Jan: Well, let's see if we can make that happen. Now, Darren, I'm quite interested about like, the hub and, and the hub might look quite familiar to students who come from the UK in terms of, you know, there's raised beds, there's vegetables, there's apple trees, and those sorts of things.

What, what do the, uh, overseas students? How did, how, how did they interact with that opportunity?

Darren: Great, yeah, I mean, um, one of the really interesting components of Green Lancaster was how it managed to bring together multiple diverse communities.

And actually we found that some of our most significant kind of student engagement actually came from overseas students. And I think it was about providing a space, um, for community with a very invitational approach. So going back to that point around there being no kind of predefined, necessary outputs or outcomes, and then bring people into a nice space, indoor or outside, depending on the weather and, um, and actually discovery.

So that kind of real, sort of like hands-on with, with plants and nature and that ability to just have conversations was a, was a really sort of valuable space that the hub provided.

Um, it was outside, it operated sort of like outside of any kind of traditional social norms around the kind of UK university higher education experience.

And it was very accessible. It was within walking distance of the Alexandra Park kind of student village where there was kind of over 3000 students, and particularly with the graduate college, a lot of overseas students based there. So they would find themselves kind of walking through the space in their own time and then go, ooh, I wonder what's going on here.

And then maybe meet some fellow students doing some, some kind of gardening there or something, and you know, the rest would follow naturally.

Jan: And I really like that, 'cause sometimes if you come to a university from overseas, you actually don't get to meet very many people from the place, and so also the community outreach element of that would be I, I'm sure very welcome as well.

Paul: Now, we've talked a lot about Green Lancaster, but Darren is no longer with Green Lancaster. I'm not entirely sure if they fired him, but let's assume not...

Jan: ...no, I can assure you...

Paul: ...let's assume it was an amicable separation...

Jan: ...I can assure you they didn't...

[Jan and Paul laugh]

Paul: ...Darren, you are now with Students Organizing for Sustainability. Can you tell us a little bit about that initiative and what kinds of activities you undertake?

Darren: Absolutely, yeah. So, um, this was a, a super exciting, um, kind of career move for me that came up in summer of 2024. So it's a very fresh experience for me.

Now, Students Organizing for Sustainability is, is kind of a, a national initiative here in the UK. Um, there's two core components as a UK charity, um, Students Organising for Sustainability UK.

So this is now quite a large organisation with over 45 full-time staff. We're a spinoff of the National Union of Students and within SOS UK there is a dedicated but relatively small sub-team operating under the SOS international brand.

We have, um, an international team. So the staff team, there's two of us here in the UK and we also have three part-time kind of marketing and promotional staff based in Ghana.

And we're about galvanising and bringing together, um, a student and youth led network of organisations working on sustainability, environmental climate, and social justice.

So we're about scaling programmes and campaigns that are happening within individual member organisations, we're about strengthening the capacity of those individual member organisations that they can go further and faster, um, on the work they're doing on those, those kind of super exciting topics. And we're here to amplify and advocate and influence for systemic change through government, NGOs, corporations, et cetera.

Within SOS International, we have a rotational presidency that represents some of our core member organisations. Um, and the current presidency from 23 to 2025 is currently the All Africa Student Union. So our president is the Secretary General of that organisation, Peter Kwasi Kodjie.

Um, we also have a volunteer board who represent, um, again, some of the mem, the core member organisations and the hosting through SOS UK. And just to kind of reiterate, SOS UK is very much a sustainability and education charity, and it's all about kind of building that case for students to have the skills and attributes relevant to the climate and ecological crisis, um, and to transform the purpose of education and create a system that is fit to equip our young people and students with the skills and attributes for the, um, planetary emergency agenda.

Paul: [gently sarcastic] Doesn't sound like they do very much. [Jan laughs] A bit lazy. No, no, no, no...

From what you've already said about the stuff at Lancaster, it sounds like there's a very engaged population of students here. What have you found when you're working more broadly with young people and students with regards to their attitudes and engagement with sustainability issues?

Is Lancaster an outlier or is it very much straight, similar across the board?

Darren: Yeah, I think that's, that's really interesting. Um, I think there, with ever so many kind of contemporary issues facing any kind of sector of the population.

But if we think about students and young people from kind of living and higher education costs to, you know, the level of inclusion, wellbeing issues, career prospects, um, you know, so it can sometimes seem like there's an overwhelming number of kind of competing issues on the front line. Um, and you know, perhaps sustainability can often be seen as just one of those things.

But I think our role as kind of professionals who support the young people on this agenda is to make sure that we are, um, promoting the cross-cutting nature of sustainability and how it kind of actually knits together all of these kind of isolated or siloed kind of issues.

Um, and we, you know, we should be here to support and empower students to be able to co-design a future that, that kind of actually responds to trying to, you know, transform solutions to all of those things, through the lens of kind of sustainability, if we want to call it that.

But, you know, really the name is kind of, um, trivial. It's, it's actually the, the doing part and the creating that's important.

Jan: And in your experience, I mean, what are young people worried about with regard to sustainability? And, and I of course appreciate they'll be worried about, you know, jobs and, you know, housing or whole host of, of issues, but what, what do they really sort of hone in on when they're thinking about sustainability issues?

Darren: Yeah, I think this is, um, a really interesting one. Um, and also when we look at this kind of from a global perspective, so particularly through my role now, um, having connected with so many diverse, um, people and organisations, just in the first three months, it's really been quite overwhelming, but also eye-opening to help in answering that particular question.

I think if we look at different kind of global regions, we see sort of like emergent trends around, um, youth and students and how they're how, how they would kind of respond to that, that notion.

So I think, you know, generally speaking there's certainly been this kind of emergent feeling of climate emergent, of climate anxiety, sorry, with young people.

And how kind of an any amplification of some of the sort of changes we're seeing now in social and planetary systems with kind of warming scenario

scenarios of one, two, possibly three degrees. You know how that will really impact on their ability to live and thrive in the future if we're, you know, looking at exceeding planetary boundaries, or collapsed social justice foundations.

So if we look at Europe, we've clearly seen this emergent youth climate movement, the school strikes of the kind of late 2010s, um, and now into the 2020s in, in, how that's evolving in response to kind of various internal, external, um, kind of sociopolitical trends that we're seeing.

Um, if we look at South America, I think it's really interesting to look at that, that region and what we're seeing there is actually how young people are becoming very concerned around social environmental conflict, especially when we look at issues that are very regionally, um, specific around kind of tropical forest destruction or kind of the exploitation of Indigenous land rights.

Um, and then if we jump across the Atlantic in an eastward trajectory to Africa, where clearly there's a lot of significant everyday challenges that are being faced, from warming that's already happened, um, around desertification drought, tropical storm intensity, and the associated impacts that these are having on day-to-day life agricultural practices.

We're actually seeing in Africa this kind of really inspiring emergent youth leadership, um, and this real desire to engage in high-level political forums, um, at an kind of international level.

And that's really kind of empowering to be able to support the, the, conduit for getting youth involved in that dialogue, um, at kind of like a government and intergovernment level.

Paul: Do you see as well an understanding among students beyond environmental sustainability, towards societal sustainability, economic sustainability?

Uh, they see that it, there's, there's bigger pictures to sustainability than just, and not that it's not a huge issue, climate change.

Darren: Absolutely, yes. So I think it's still fairly fair to say that when we ask in, uh, kind of any given workshop or poll, what most people think of when they, when they, when they hear the term sustainability, it certainly still conjures up images around kind of trees and, you know, plant-based food or recycling, green transport, that sort of stuff.

Um, but I think, you know, increasingly with this, um, shift in thinking and narrative, certainly in education institutes, it's our responsibility to disseminate that out. We're starting to see this, this shift in, into kind of interdisciplinary systems thinking. You know, creative thinking around bringing people together around the kind of holistic nature of planetary systems.

And so therefore, this kind of need for people to operate at this intersectional space, um, when we talk about sustainability, so bringing together the expertise of different sectors, ensuring that we break out of our traditional kind of academic silos, um, and that we really, um, embrace that.

It's great to see that a number of institutions, particularly in the UK and I'm sure elsewhere, um, are starting to kind of jump on board with the sort of curriculum transformation agenda. Um, look at ways that they can actually redesign the curriculum, co-create curriculum with, with, with the students as well.

Um, we've got various global frameworks of course, that certainly management education will be familiar with around United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that have clearly set out the general direction of travel around interdisciplinary thinking.

But I think the next step is to make sure that actually we're not, you know, again, we're not kind of delivering or defining this thinking to people, to the students, we're actually enabling them to co-design their learning.

So we're learning with students, not, not to them.

Jan: And I think one of the powerful things that you identified there is that students can leverage universities to action.

And, um, because, uh, students, uh, the lifeblood of a university, if they're asking for things and if, uh, you know, demanding action, then they're more, you know, institutions will be open to that.

I was really struck, um, at another university I used to work for is that the, the Finance Director was being lobbied for ethical investment by the students, and he, he found me in some sort of staff context and said, they're not doing a very good job. Can you go and get them to do a better job, then I can respond.

And so I sort of, I was really encouraged by that because there was a willingness on behalf of the institution, the student voice was gonna be very

powerful, and they were asking us in the, in the, in a, you know, sort of a back scenes kind of way to create a really good demand for that.

Paul: I love the concept of you, like the equivalent of Mr. Burns releasing the hounds, the university releasing Jan, right? [everyone laughs]

[Jan continues laughing]

Paul: They're not doing anything, release Jan!

Jan: [laughing] I think, I think I was merely helping what was a, a very, very sort of strong impetus.

But are there some times where universities feel, you know, like that they can't say yes to things that a people that students are asking for. 'Cause we would hope that students are asking for the impossible, I mean, that, that's one of the nice thing about young people is that they can really push that envelope when, when we've maybe got, oh, well, can we, can't we?

They go let's! Which is a really nice, you know, sort of ethos to bring.

Darren: Yeah, absolutely.

I think, you know, um, of course it's always, you, you can feel a bit nervous at first when we're first like challenged on things, but I think what we've seen is actually that when we've given students and staff the ability to co-create and design projects, and also actually some, in some senses, set ourselves up to be happy with failure, try things out.

You know, we really start to see that, that learning flowing when we, when we enable ourselves and we, we release ourselves in that, that kind of paradox where we feel like everything's gotta be perfectly ironed out before we kind of implement a project.

And that can actually really help to break down barriers, if we say, well, we don't have all the answers as, as faculty or as managers, um, we want to co-create with you because this is, you know, a planetary crisis.

It's a problem that, you know, if we had, had all the solutions then we would've solved in 1987 when, you know, the Brundtland put report first came out.

You know, it's about that kind of really humble and kind of honest, you know, approach with students and say, you know, we're not here to tell you what to

do and not to do, but let's try and, um, experience that together, um, and see if along the way we come up with some really kind of innovative solutions together.

Paul: You talk about working together, do you ever see circumstances though, where students get frustrated with seeing that maybe universities talk in a certain way about what sustainability is, but then act in a different way? Maybe they're not living up to what they're telling people they should be doing in their own actions?

Darren: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, traditionally we would perhaps see this kind of firm divide between kind of the university and the students and this kind of campaigning and certainly through the, um, late 2010s and the first part of this decade where we saw the kind of campaigns around climate emergency, students and, and staff demanding and asking their universities to, um, respond to this kind of global call for a, a declaration of a climate emergency.

And, you know, certainly it's, it's clear to see that that still operates when we think about these, these kind of siloed workings that we have. Um, but I think, you know, it's really important to, to say that when, when we do see, you know, full representation and when we do bring students and management together in spaces to discuss and co-create, and if we're good at our communications and how, how we're designing those, those kind of spaces and being transparent about who's in the, who's in the room, we can then start to actually see, um, it's actually really difficult to, to, to come to, uh, a consensus around what to do.

Um, so if we've got everyone involved and embraced in that decision making and we, we communicate that we can actually demonstrate that we're, we're doing the best we can. You know, nobody is a, you know, absolute expert on this subject matter.

So if we do it together and we ensure that people are, um, in the space and invited into the space, then that's the critical part of the matter, and that's not happening everywhere by no means, um, and that's kind of why our organisation kind of exists, is to, is to kind of nurture that and encourage the, the, the management systems of this world to embrace that kind of very genuine, um, representation space.

Jan: And what we've talked about a bit is sort of like attitudes, planning, maybe campaigning.

And I, I wonder in your experience, um, what, what would be the highlights that you've seen of young people actually doing things for the sustainability?

Darren: Yeah. Um, I mean I think, you know, there's various things that students kind of come up with, from some of the projects that we co-designed, um, through Green Lancaster here at the University.

I think, you know, increasingly we're seeing students wanting to engage in programmes. You know, if we think back to the kind of curriculum of a university, we're seeing sort of like over 60% of students through, um, some research that SOS UK have done, seeing 60% of students wanting to see sustainability attributes embedded into the curriculum and the learning fabric of the institution. And it's great to see, as we discussed earlier, many universities and other educational, um, spaces respond to that by transforming their curriculum.

But, you know, really having the opportunity to, um, engage in these really quite innovative change programmes, organising and kind of leadership-related programs that really get students to come together, build collaborative partnerships with organisations that are particularly outside of the university bubble, get out there into the real world, experience what's going on, um, and then co-design with those organisations solutions to the, to the problems or the the products that they're trying to, to, you know, invent to, to solve these problems.

So there's been this real kind of mind, mindset shift, um, and students are helping to kind of design that, and I think that's really exciting to see right now

Paul: Let's bringing things to a close, 'cause you seem to be talking very positively about young people and students.

[Aside, to Jan] He really isn't the kind of person who's shouting at them out of his window waving the stick [Jan laughs] you know, railing against the, the next generation.

What's inspiring you about students and sustainability for the future?

Darren: Yeah, I mean, hopefully I am the kind of person who remains optimistic in this space. You know that every day there's new doom and gloom stuff around, you know, the climate, planetary crisis.

But, um, you know, I think what speaks to that the most in the, in the most positive ways that I think the, the spaces where I find most motivation is when I'm kind of in a community that is, is kind of collaboratively building solutions to, to this, to the, to this great call to action.

I think, you know, when I was working in a campus environment, it was always really exciting to, to kind of see what the next chapter or cohort of students would bring in terms of ideas.

And it was really great to support a community of student leaders and see their, their kind of student experience evolve from their first year to their third year, and how they would change and the things that they would learn and how they would learn new things about themselves.

And then when they would graduate, they would find that they were looking for. A lifestyle or a career that was completely different to the prerequisites that they entered with in when they came to the, this, the university, um, at Freshers Week.

But I think in terms of like university and education space in general, um, obviously I've spent my whole life in them. So it's important to make sure that you are thinking about everybody that's outside of that, that, um, that education bubble.

But we've seen a real shift in the narrative and that excites me more about kind of actually as much as possible, breaking outside of the bubble and engaging in the real world.

Um, through my kind of, um, my, my time at Green Lancaster, that was always the intention was to work with local, regional, and national, international, um, organisations to build kind of partnerships, these expeditions.

And, you know, obviously education is transformative. It's the space where mindsets, values evolve. So we need to make sure that these spaces are diverse, inclusive, participatory. So they, they, offer students the opportunity to define what happens in the space, not just, it's not just a product that they're being sold.

And I think on that point as well, it's thinking about education and how we actually make that accessible to all, you know, thinking about, um, SDG four, quality education, it's imperative that we find solutions at the kind of collective

level to break down entry barriers to education, particularly around cost and affordability.

I think we've seen, um, increasingly in the UK um, and across Europe, the shift towards, you know, paid higher education fees in the last 20 years. An increase in, in the kind of direction of travel of that, um, that's, that's worrying, um, in many senses. Um, it kind of defines a certain direction of travel.

So breaking down that and finding ways that we can actually, you know, make, um, education genuinely accessible to all again, is, is really important in the, in the next decade.

And, you know, we can only really expect sort of like systemic solutions, um, to emerge if the, if the learning environment itself is kind of inclusive and representative, um, of, of all kind of communities around the world. Um, you know, Lancaster is in a really exciting sort of journey on that internationalisation, um, you know, whilst I was here and increasingly now.

But yeah, you know, that real kind of piece around making sure that there's genuine ability for students to engage in education and ensure that kind of engagement is unilateral for kind of all communities is sort of important.

I think that's what's really exciting for me in terms of a challenge for the work that I'm doing, is to make sure that we can actually genuinely achieve that, um, with all of the kind of sociopolitical pressures that maybe kind of trying to push in a direction of travel that we don't want to see that perspective.

Paul: Darren, thank you very much for joining us.

Darren: You're welcome. Thanks for inviting me on. It's been great.

[Theme music]

Paul: Darren really does speak very positively about young people, Jan.

Jan: [laughs] Even though he doesn't seem to realise he's still a young person as well.

I always love talking to Darren. We worked very closely with him as the Pentland Centre when he was leading Green Lancaster. And I'm really pleased that he's, he's enjoying and thriving in his new role.

And one of the things that he said that I thought was really important, and, and he said it was such enthusiasm, um, being open to failure. And I think that's

one of the, the things that really came through that, that maybe younger people are more ready to have a go and see how it goes, whereas maybe as you get older, being open to failure might, might decrease over time.

So I love that, that willingness to say, also the willingness to say, we don't know how to do this, but let's try to figure it out together.

Paul: I think especially with the organisations Darren's working with, having those young people there who maybe don't, sometimes, you know, you don't worry so much if you fail because you don't feel the, the great responsibility, you're not gonna get fired from a job if you fail whilst doing something like that, it gives you a bit more freedom.

That's not saying they're not gonna do a good job because they, you know, they're not working full time for them. But having, yeah, that attitude to be able to say, yeah, let's just give this a go, let's see what happens. This could be brilliant...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...I remember that as a student you did, you just wanted to give things a go and see how it worked out. And if it was a failure, you shrugged your shoulders and said, right, I've learned from that, let's do something different.

Jan: Yeah, yeah, I do remember, you know the, I knew everything at 21. I've got more uncertain over time. [laughing] I'm sure I'm not alone in that.

The other thing I've found really interesting, especially as he's moved into his new role with students organising for sustainability, is these different flavours and nuance of sustainability in different parts of the world.

Paul: Yeah, the fact that different people are concentrating on different areas, have different priorities and you know, we, he did admit that the main thing that people can think of when they talk about sustainability still, if you ask them about it, is the environment, climate change.

But there's other aspects in there and how it affects careers, how it affects futures. There's so many different aspects for sustainability for these younger people all around the world than there are for just, you know, if we were to stay purely within the, the walls of this university.

Jan: And then the third thing, and I like things that come in threes, the third thing I found exciting about what he said, and, and I say this quite often myself in business settings, you know, if it's easy, we would've done it. [laughs]

You know, you're not sort of like, oh, get up in the morning, what are my plans, oh, I plan to trash the planet and disadvantage people.

So it's this, I, I quite like that, you know, if it was easy we'd be doing it. Okay. So it's hard, so let's get on with it.

Paul: I worry that you've seen into the minds of certain politicians and, uh, global business leaders with that particular statement. I'm sure that's what they do think every day.

Jan: No, even then I don't believe it. I think it's, it's a, it's a, well, in the vast majority of cases, I think I'd say is that yeah, we've, we've got a system that's creating the mess and nobody self-consciously thinks a mess is a good idea.

Paul: I think they need the visit from the ghost of Christmas past, Christmas future and Christmas present, don't they?

Jan: [laughs] I'm trying to make that into a sustainability analogy and I can't, so I, I will think, yes.

Paul: There, there's the past, the bad practice, the present, which is the transition towards the future, which will be good practice.

Jan: Ah, the three horizons.

Paul: Yes. And that is what we spoke about with Julia and Knut from IMD in Lausanne a few weeks ago...

Jan: ...yes, indeed...

Paul: So, are always in my mind, Jan, I never forget anything...

Jan: ...yes, indeed...

Paul: ...apart from my own name, postcode and various passwords for computer accounts, but that's by the by.

Jan: Excellent. So do you know who was speaking to next?

Paul: Yes. We're going to be looking at the Anthropocene again, this time with Martin Quinn from here at Lancaster University Management School.

Jan: Oh, that'll be great. It'll be a great build on Henrik Österblom's, uh, um, contribution to the podcast earlier on as well.

Paul: It will, we'll be discussing various different areas around the Anthropocene, where Martin's research fits into it, and how this new age of earth essentially, um, works, affects us, what it might mean for the future.

[Theme music]

Jan: Brilliant, bring it on.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]