

Transcript of 'Sustainability Transformation in Universities'

Season 2, Episode 38, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

How do we learn better? What role do academic institutions have in this, and why is it so important for sustainability?

In today's episode, we're speaking about the essential role of universities and brokering systems change and how different organisations are working towards this.

[Theme music]

Paul: Jan, you're also one with a background in both sustainability and in education, aren't you?

Jan: Yes.

Paul: But is there a book coming up yet?

Jan: [laughs] I always...

Paul: ...it's all a façade...

Jan: ...no. I always worry when you ask me a question, I don't know what's coming next.

Paul: So was that a yes? Was it a qualified yes or a Yes.

Jan: It was a yes, but perhaps accidentally because I've done sustainability at universities, teaching and then helping in some respects and being on committees, but it's not been like my core expertise.

So, like I'm not a sustainability manager at a university.

Paul: No, no, no. But you know a bit about sustainability.

Jan: Yes...

Paul: ...a little bit? A tiny, tiny, tiny, little bit...?

Jan: ...okay, I see what you're saying. Yes, I know lots about sustainability. Thank you.

Paul: Right. Um, yes.

But do you know [laughs] about how to embed sustainability within a whole higher education establishment?

Jan: No, that's a really specialist job, and I think it's a very exciting job as well as being a very tough job.

Paul: You wouldn't like to give it a go?

Jan: Aah...

Paul: ...you've got a few years until retirement, you know, quick career change...

Jan: ...steady on, man, steady on. [laughs]

Well, there are people who do that as their job. So that'd be an interesting job to hear more about.

Paul: What do you think they need to do?

Jan: I don't know. Let's ask. [giggles]

Paul: You're not gonna guess? [Jan laughs] This career change that I've got planned for you is really not gonna work out, is it?

Jan: It's not. Well, but if I, after the, ask me again at the end of the podcast and I'll see.

Paul: Right. I will ask you at the end of the podcast. So we ask someone else in the meantime, then, all these...

Jan: ...good idea...

Paul: ...these awkward questions...

Jan: ...good idea...

Paul: ...that you don't want to answer...

Jan: ...exactly.

Paul: Who shall we ask?

Jan: Alex Ryan.

Paul: Yes. Let's ask Dr. Alex Ryan, someone who has a background in sustainability leadership and education for sustainable development.

She's got a track record for shepherding transformational sustainability in higher education, so [whispers] she'd have been able to answer these questions. [Jan laughs] I bet she can answer all the ones about your research as well.

Jan: Oh, easily, easily, easily.

Paul: Alex is the director and founder of Learning Energy and also an Honorary Professorial Fellow here at the Pentland Centre.

Jan: No, we're really pleased to have you with us, Alex, and, and you know, so welcome to the podcast, but also welcome to the Pentland Centre.

Alex: Ah. Thank you, Jan. Thank you, Paul.

It's an absolute joy and a nostalgia trip to be back today and doing this with you because as you know, I did my master's and PhD at this university...

Jan: ...oh, that's...

Alex: ...this building that we're in smells exactly the same [Jan laughs] as it did when I used to come in here with a fevered brow, sent on missions by my supervisor to swot up on this, that and the other.

Paul: And we were talking just as we were walking up to the studio Jan, and discovered that we both actually studied here at the same time...

Jan: ...aah...

Paul: ...and we have possibly different memories of what was known as the short-term loans of books. Mine being of the fines I inevitably picked up when I forgot I had a book on short-term loan and returned it too late.

Alex's been of using them and making use of them.

Jan: Excellent. Well that's nice you've got that crossover point.

And indeed, Alex, you've done all sorts of things in your professional career and so, um, I wonder if you'd tell us something about that varied background within the university sector and your professional journey along that route.

Alex: Yes, I will do my best. It was very squiggly. It was definitely squiggly. And it's funny because of course sustainability is like a great big gobbling monster, and it incorporates so many things, which is why people do struggle with it because of the breadth and depth of the subject matter.

And no, I can't answer all your questions either, um, but maybe one or two. Um, and so for me, I've had a few different intersecting points in my academic journey that have all contributed to how I see sustainability, and how I see the change process, and how I see what's important to help that.

I think you have to always start at the roots, actually. And I look to my parents, um, for a, a little ingredient that actually started me on either journey.

My father was a chemist and was working in, uh, a business that became one of the big green, you know, international stage leaders, but back then, of course, like all other, uh, chemical companies was not green in the slightest, when my father was working there, and he became very concerned about pollution and found himself in a real tense point in terms of quality management, commercial interests, and the pollution into the ecosystem that he was very concerned about.

So his take on life gave me a little insight into that intersection of where the crunch of this triple bottom line really cuts in. Meanwhile, I had a mother who was a speech therapist and a fantastic service leader, so I learned a massive amount from her about how you drive a new professional specialism and practice into an existing system.

She was in an allied health profession, one that was very feminised and very marginalised in the expert elite system of the medical world. And so she learned and taught me a lot about how you fight for resources and space and, and buy-in when you are bringing something new into a system.

So I learned a lot from my mother about leadership for change and then, you know, academic, academically wise, I did my undergrad in linguistics, and that got me awfully interested in interdisciplinarity.

I remember being switched on by learning about the Great Vowel Shift in the medieval period, and how things like trade in London at that period of time and what was going on with trade, and what's happening in the mouth, physically in the mouth, where do you have space for a new vowel production sound in your mouth? How do those things come together?

This was extraordinary illuminating having to think about those connections, and connections is where sustainability really plays its hand. So this interdisciplinarity started to switch on for me, and through doing linguistics, I got interested in representational frameworks and metaphor and the work of Lakoff and Johnson, and that narrative piece.

I also got interested in cybernetics and the work of Gregory Bateson came into my purview at that time through discourse analysis. And then 20 years later, of course, I'm working in sustainability where lots of people love Gregory Bateson because of his Levels of Learning, um, which is really, really important to how we think about sustainability as a learning and change process.

And then I went and, uh studied post-grad in Religious Studies. So I got really interested in belief and culture and the global perspective on all of this. And I was doing that, as I mentioned, I was doing that here at Lancaster, where actually, I found Lancaster as a postgrad to be a real hotbed of thinking about environmental change and particularly the social-implementation aspects. How does science and policy and society come together to try and do this stuff?

Um, so I was really exposed to a lot of interesting thinking there. And meanwhile I was working in my own research on the embodiment theories. And uh, Paul, you, you do know that I did a strange PhD on the globalisation of Chinese martial arts, but that's another little side story.

But all of that got me into the paradigm change stuff, um, because I was working into the challenge to dominant knowledge foundations and paradigms. In this case, in in the medical context and the public health agenda.

So all of these little trails have been kind of noodling me towards what became my, my working life in, in sustainability in the higher education sector. Uh, I was a researcher-practitioner as a PhD student, so that automatically was drawing me into a, an ongoing fascination with the application of knowledge.

Not just knowledge for its own sake, but the application of knowledge for good. And I went on and taught Religious Studies with the Open University. Which really spoke to me a lot about education for empowerment of people.

Jan: That's fantastically interesting.

Paul: And there's so, so many diverse threads there as well. Yeah. You're cybernetics, Chinese martial arts...

Alex: [laughing} ...I know, right...?

Paul: ...the Great Vowel Shift. [to Jan] I could tell you were particularly interested in that one.

Jan: Well, the Great Vowel Shift. [laughs] I wish I had vowels, but I've only got the double E to offer any conversation...

[general laughter]

Paul: A kiwi with a double E.

Jan: Exactly. [laughs]

Paul: I remember vaguely learning about the Great Vowel Shift when I did uh, English language at A level, but we only barely touched upon it. I think you probably had to study a degree level to go into it more in depth.

So I knew it existed, but I couldn't [whispers] I cannot remember at all what it was about.

Jan: Well, let's not get distracted on that, 'cause there's too many... [general laughter]

Alex: ...'cause I can't remember either.

Paul: Hang on. I've got a script here that says we're spending the next half hour [Jan laughs] talking about nothing but the Great Vowel Shift.

Jan: Well, I think we need to return to that opening question.

So all of those threads, Alex, brought together. And that then you have applied it in the, in the context of, um, helping universities think about how they address sustainability challenges...

Alex: ...yeah...

Jan: ...and I really like the way you talked about your, your mum and like a specialist role into an existing organisation, where, where there isn't the space. So that's a really...

Alex: ... that's the interesting one, isn't it...?

Jan: ...yeah. That's a good place maybe to start, um, telling us about that, that part of your working life.

Alex: Yeah, so post um, PhD and being into my sort of career bit of my life, I was working in teaching and learning development at the same time as I was having my teaching life with the Open University. And this would be about 20 years ago.

There'd been some, some work going on by that point for sustainability in higher education and what could that mean? But at that point, 20 years ago. The UN began a decade of education for sustainable development initiative that lasted for 10 years.

And that initiative really started to help raise the profile to this agenda. And that was when I started to get involved. And at first of all, I was, um, working for what was then called the Higher Education Academy, and they started to really investigate how could we build capacity within the sector for this educational agenda.

So I got involved in some capacity building projects at that point, they, and we were exploring some things like interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning for sustainability. And what would it look like if, as a whole university, you took this matter seriously in a corporate way and built strategy and goals around it and started to try and change culture and practice within a university, what on earth would that look like?

So I did some of that capacity building work, and then I - through that work - got an invitation to join one of the first sustainability teams that was being set up by my former boss, a brilliant global specialist on this, called Daniella Tilbury.

And she was setting up, um, a sustainability team to run what was one of the first, um, cross-business sustainability strategies in a university. And she brought me in to be her sidekick, doing the curriculum change part of the work.

So I did that for a while and then about 10 years ago, stepped into the Director job and did that for about eight years or so. So, you know, I, I'd sort of mentored colleagues, I'd run an education for sustainability strategy, then had oversight of both the brainprint bit and the footprint bit, and how to drive that change within a university.

And along the sides of that, I'd done a little bit of pedagogical research here and there, and helped contribute to some sector frameworks and benchmarks and so on. So I've sort of had a lot of facets of how I've come at this agenda.

Jan: And one of the things that I always think about universities is that they are, they're kind of like orchestras...

Alex: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...everyone plays...

Paul: ...go on...

Jan: ...no, seriously now... [laughs]

Paul: ...I'm interested to see where this one's going.

Jan: Follow along.

Alex: Yeah, I like this one as well. Yeah, go on...

Jan: ...so, so people are really good at playing their instrument and you employ them 'cause they're really brilliant at playing the flute or the violin or whatever.

Um, they, they need to make music together, but, but because they're sort of really passionate about their, their own instrument, it's quite hard to coordinate them to, to make music together.

So you have orchestra conductors, or you have section leads or whatever, but still there's this waywardness of the individual actors who are gonna do their thing. And so actually orchestrating everyone to come together and play the same tune is actually really tough.

But the thing is that because you want universities to be thinking about the cutting edge and trying to do very different things and trying to be innovative, if everyone lined up and followed along, you probably have not got a very flourishing and functional university as well.

So, so I really do not envy the job of university managers, 'cause you've got this concertina the whole time of people going, well, I'm just gonna do what I'm gonna do. And you think, well, that's great, but can you do this as well and follow us along here.

So when you're asking people to follow along a sustainability trajectory that might, for example, require them not to fly to that conference that they find absolutely central to their academic identity, then you're on, in for a bit of discord and...

Alex: ...absolutely...

Jan: ...clashing of cymbals and various things. I think I've stretched the metaphor as far as I'm going to stretch it.

Paul: But are you in this orchestra?

Jan: Yes.

Paul: French horn? [Jan laughs] Violin? Tuba?

Jan: Flute.

Paul: Flute, Alright, yeah, a flautist. Okay, fair enough. What's the VC, what's the vice chancellor...?

Jan: ...well...

Paul: ...is he the conductor, or is he like the lead solo ...

Jan: ...well, he might be the head of the strings perhaps...

Paul: ...oh, right...

Jan: ...but also the orchestra leader is not always the person that you think the orchestra leader is, as well.

Paul: Yeah, that's why I was thinking, 'cause the conductor isn't necessarily the person who's in charge, are they?

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Paul: Yeah.

Jan: So, so anyway, it's a bit of a tortured metaphor... [laughs]

Paul: ...it really was by the end of it, yeah, yeah.

Jan: But, but there is an essential uncontrollability to a certain extent of universities, which makes being somebody who's trying to help them address sustainability challenges really tough.

Alex: Yes, absolutely. And I actually love the orchestra metaphor as well. I think it's a real cracker and I could maybe try and torture it slightly further...

[Jan laughs]

Paul: ...look what you've done...

Alex: ...by saying that you are not orchestrating an orchestra, you're not conducting, sorry, an orchestra based on a piece of music that they've already seen. The discord comes because you are challenging them to dance to a different tune. And maybe sometimes even to put that instrument, put the triangle down and get up and perform a new interpretive dance that you've never, ever done before...

Paul: ...we've gone from an orchestra to a dance troupe...

Alex: ...I know, right...?

Jan: ...keep up, keep up... [all three talking at the same time - inaudible]

Alex: ...this is the point. It's not what you have trained yourself to think it's going to be.

When you've got a bunch of, a community of specialists that are used to having a often privileged platform to pursue their own passions, to sit within the paradigm they were trained into, they start to naturally think that their expertise is going to carry them beautifully forward along this road.

And then sustainability comes along and says, your specialism is, your specialism isn't quite enough...

Jan: ...yeah....

Alex: ...we need you to be more than this. We need you to do something different, and it's not something you've even thought about exactly before, because we're gonna ask you to think about this from a very different angle, and an angle where you need to be thinking more for the common good than your self-interest.

You know, Charles Handy was interesting. He used to always compare universities to an Athens city state, with all these different interests and people rocking around all over the place. And of course that is the case quite often in the cultures of universities. But sustainability asks people to articulate their music towards that larger, different tune.

Jan: So we, we, I, I want to say...

Paul: ...have you finished with the orchestra? It sounds like we've gone on to three four jazz now this is, uh... [Jan laughs]

Alex: [joking] ...no, I don't want jazz, thank you, Paul. Stop it. Don't be weird. [Jan still laughing]

Paul: That's what it sounded like when you got there. [Jan still laughing]

Alex: No, we don't want, we don't want any jazzers...

Paul: ...some improvisational jazz quarter performing in a Chicago speakeasy.

Jan: We, we may have to give up this metaphor 'cause it's clearly ruffling...

Alex: ...I can't cope if it's gonna go into jazz, sorry...

Alex: ...feathers.

Jan: So in your experience in this sort of this reorganisation and bringing people along and, and new topics and different ways of thinking about old topics. What's worked well to actually, the very best universities have managed to do that either for a period of time or in a particular topic area.

So what, what looks super, from your perspective?

Alex: Yeah, that's a really interesting one because of course you see, as you've watched this, so as I've watched this over the last 20 years, you can see certain universities have been very flagship and very wonderful and very brilliant at very particular things.

Maybe some are doing a certain incredible research. Maybe somebody's got phenomenal carbon initiatives on their campus. You know, people have done specialist flagship things in different parts, um, and it's all great. It's all contributes to role modelling, how we can do this and what the art of the possible is.

And it can be simplistic to say, well, you know, the ones that are brilliant have got just one campus rather than lots of campuses, so all their operational impacts are easier to handle. Or the ones that are brilliant have got a big budget. They can, they've got a team of 25 people working on sustainability.

There's only a few of those universities in our country. Most of them have only got one if they're lucky...

Jan: ...yes...

Alex: Um, but those are all sort of simplistic ways of coming at it. I think for me, what works best is that those universities that have really taken their strategy into a deeper place, where it is a learning-based strategy and they are thinking about organisational learning and the collective mindset of the humans who are in that organisation.

So, you know, you see a lot of chat these days about every job's gonna be a green job. We are not just going to be, you know seeing specialists who do infrastructural work on carbon, or who are supply chain specialists. Everybody in every job as the future rolls along is going to have to think a little bit like this, and that's the case.

And so within a university, you want to be getting that to happen right across the board. And the only way that you can get that to happen right across the board and for any person that works in the organisation to understand their contribution and what their day job needs to do a smidge differently to contribute.

The only way to get that thinking happening is to develop people professionally, and do the learning and change piece with the workforce. So I think the universities who have pursued their strategies with that in mind have been the ones that we are actually have more traction and more longevity to the work that they're doing.

And we're in a time of financial crunch. So, hey, having a strategy that can hold on is what it's all about at this moment in history,

Paul: Is it always the same universities that are pushing ahead or do you see some universities push ahead and then maybe fall back? Others come to the front?

Alex: Yes! Yes. There's all sorts of wiggling about, and chops and changes that go on because, you know, universities are, are organisms like any other, they have moments in the sunshine and moments of despair. Or moments of getting sidetracked, or maybe moments of going slightly round in circles for a little while and not particularly advancing. So, you know, I think all of this stuff happens. Yeah.

Paul: Does it tend to happen in cycles within the whole university sector as well...?

Alex: ...mmmm...

Paul: ...are you seeing universities suddenly have big pushes across the board to advance sustainability and then maybe fall back a little bit? And if that is the case, is it fit in any ways with what you might see in wider agendas across business, and across the world?

Alex: Yes, so there's definitely plenty of similarities, I would say, as to what's happening within the university sector on sustainability compared to other sectors. So there's definitely a financial crunch at the moment. You know, there's a lot of chat about is sustainability dead? Is it in recession? Is it having a terrible crisis and in therapy?

You know, there's a lot of that going on at the moment because we, for my take on it, is that we have been advancing towards that ideal. And, hey, I'm a linguist, right? I always start on sustainability. It's an abstract noun like love. And justice and democracy and all these other things.

So it is a star on the horizon that we're all advancing towards. And as we advance closer to that triple bottom line, implementational reality, obviously the cost crunching is getting tougher now. That's the moment in the game.

I personally don't get too despairing about it 'cause I think this was inevitable. That's a sign that we're doing it, right, the fact that it's getting crunchier. But what that does mean is that in all sectors, there's a really interesting conversation for me at the moment about how trying to fix the system and parts of the systems is not necessarily getting us over the next change hump.

And the next change hump is about the cultural change and the mindset. The sort of soft power piece of it all, which people find a bit more difficult to get purchase on. So it tends to get sidelined and people go back to trying to fix isolated parts. But that I think is a conversation that I am seeing more and more in all sectors.

Definitely seeing it in the university sector, but you, you also asked other little fads and fashions and things that go on and, you know, there definitely are. Um, you know, we've seen more of a focus on carbon, particularly since the Paris Accord and so on.

You see consequences of that in, you know, particular thematic approaches to education, which not my preference, because they're a bit too specialised. I prefer the big picture of sustainability as a learning provocation for the

curriculum. Um, the other one that kind of, I find it interesting as a real double-edged sword is the Sustainable Development Goals.

You know, that has been a very particular fashion that has had great purchase in all sorts of sectors since they were launched 10 years ago. And you know, in a university setting, they can be marvellous for getting senior buy-in and attention onto the agenda. They can be fantastic for things like partnership working where you're trying to find the co-benefits.

Double-edged sword though in the curriculum because they kind of get people easily caught on a disaggregated knowledge and topics and contents version of sustainability education. And people get stuck going in one particular door on one topic, and forgetting that you're supposed to be learning about the whole house, all the doorways, the corridors, the garden, what's the weather like, and, an endlessly and advancing set of questions.

So the SDGs, um, when it comes to education, they can be distracting by, first of all, focusing on knowledge. Whereas sustainability education is about the application of that knowledge, it's about building human capability. And that's about a learning process, and a learning journey, not just a particular outcome or a particular topic. And, you know, the, the, the sort of awkward consequence that can happen, which you see in the league tables.

By the way, congratulations, because I know in one of those league tables, Lancaster has just done quite nicely for itself on the sustainability section. But it's interesting, these big league tables have picked up the SDGs. One of them in particular has picked up the SDGs and rolled with it.

It's great, um, but you, you end up with a bit of a badging things at a superficial level on teaching and research that, and that's been a bit of a fad in the sector. And it sort of takes you down the McNamara fallacy road of substituting quant proxies for something that's a little bit more difficult to measure.

And so that, for me, is where those sorts of approaches that box the agenda off and over-categorise them in, it just sort of almost reinforces silo thinking sometimes. So you have to find a much clever way to get at the learning agenda and the multiplier effect of what you can do when you do that well.

Paul: So it's nice to see that even though, I don't know if Alex has previously heard my views on rankings, that she certainly echoes them and doesn't put

that much steady necessarily in them. Jan I know that throws your whole research into benchmarking into question. [joking] But you know, whatever...

Jan: [mock defensive] ...it doesn't, it doesn't.

Paul: ...That's, it does, it definitely does....

Jan: ...it's a good view....

Paul: ...all dodgy. [Jan laughs] Uh, is there a possibility, do you think, for the university higher education sector to maybe be a leader in change for other industries as well?

That the type of people working within HE, and maybe the academics who've got that drive and desire to sort of push what sustainability means and how it can be adapted within their organisations maybe make them the, the potential to be a, a leader in this?

Alex: I think the university sector does have a really, really important, uh, role to play. But I wouldn't use the word 'leader'. I would use the word 'broker'.

Because the brokering of relationships that are more focused with a transformative intent, but want to work in a flat and democratic, an inclusive way, with other sectors and other organisations and other social groups is the angle that I think where the universities could really play a special role.

But that does rather require them to not perceive themselves as the expert. And of course, we are inheriting a tradition of universities that have perceived their outwards relationships as one where they will bestow their bounteous expertise upon the society around them.

And of course we are looking with sustainability change to move right away from that kind of an approach. And that kind of sort of almost brings me on, I wanna just nigger back into your question about what happens when it's done really brilliantly.

There's a piece that I think really hasn't had enough attention in how universities have gone about sustainability yet, which could be absolutely magical if we take it forward.

And that's the piece around culture, faith, decolonisation, and the, the wider communities and ways of thinking and believing, and getting all of those groups of society into this agenda.

It's been an agenda that can suffer from a bit of green groupthink. It's been an agenda that has perhaps naturally been dominated by STEM disciplines, by the green disciplines, by the green skills and infrastructural agenda.

And there are other subjects and researching agendas in our academic map that have a profound part to play in showing us how to have a critical and transformative approach to this agenda, and that really involves us seeing where the global justice piece comes into this.

And an equitable and democratic way forward for all of this that really moves us quite a long way from some of our inherited knowledge and western paradigms that are individualistic rather than collective, and that deprioritise certain forms of knowledge.

So there's a whole big game there still to play, I think.

Jan: And is that what you, when you talk about the cultural mindset, is it that piece then, that it is actually about deeper values and ways of seeing the world and thinking about our relationship to it, and then the relationship of an, of a, of an institution and its local community and the threads of impact across, you know, whole global communities as well?

Is that what you're getting at there?

Alex: Yes. I suppose I am getting at different ways of, of thinking about impact and benefit really. And I sort of say those words to you, Jan, knowing you're an accountant, you're probably a lot better than I am...

Jan: ...but maybe in a narrow way, rather than a holistic way.

Alex: Well, you wouldn't be doing the job you are doing if you were a narrow thinker on this now would you? Come on!

But you know, you, I, I know will be very aware that actually in the field of how we report corporately on sustainability, we need to be thinking quite differently about how universities could be telling the story of success.

You know, there, there was a really interesting piece that, uh, AdvanceHE put out recently called Measuring What Matters, um, with Carol Adams, who, who kind of had a, a real look at this and, you know, pointed out a few things about how universities report on their academic and financial performance.

And, you know, you would be able to say better than I am, but when you look at how they could report on sustainability and do that in an integrated way,

you start to think about different goals, different indicators, different ways to talk about benefit. You know, what benefit for whom and why, and where does that lead?

You know, if you, if we say one of the most invisible indicators that we just don't report on yet, and we almost don't know how to even start, um, in, in one of my projects we, we made a little start at it with a project called Anti-Greenwash Education, but that's another story.

Um, but what we were trying to do is ask the question if we tried to report on curriculum change how would we even start to, what would, what on earth would we measure? What's the sweet spot between all the variable things that different courses do and the big idea of sustainability?

Where's the sort of the sweet spot where you capture something common amidst all that variety, so that you could then report? But if you found your way down that road, you could be reporting on the volume of humans you are sending out into different workforces and industries as a quantitative number, but with a real depth of intent about it, and showing what a difference you're making to the human capability for change in lots of sectors.

So thinking about really, in my background, slightly boring things like reporting and numbers, I'm not very brilliant at those. But thinking about those differently is where sustainability really plays its cards.

Jan: And I think oftentimes when you hear academics talking about their working lives, they, they do acknowledge because I, I think it is, you know, pretty, pretty true as well, that actually who we send out and what, what our students do in the world and how they do it is actually that, that's the, that's the big game.

That's, you know...

Alex: ...yeah....

Jan: ...the really big impact. And also where there's been maybe quite a lot of transnational education, although clearly there's less now than there used to be, actually that, that's a global impact and that embeds itself in all sorts of places.

Alex: And again, with all of that, when you, when you look at transnational, we, we are not looking at, well, people will come to us to learn. We are like, what can we learn from them though?

Jan: Yes, yeah.

Alex: You know, we quite often, we, you know, when we look at how we work, you know, cross borders, cross countries in a learning way with other universities and students, we may be talking and learning with people who are much more front and centre impacted by environmental damage than we are in the UK right now.

So we can learn from them, and our learning methodology needs to reflect that. And likewise, we need to loop that way of thinking. Back into our own organisations so that we think differently about what are our corporate priorities? Where are we gonna spend the money, where's the innovation needed?

'Cause we've got a lot of work to do to get over the own, our own silos and boxy bits in universities where, you know, we duplicate efforts sometimes and we, we don't always think in a unified manner as a shoal of fish, you know, about which direction we are going.

Jan: Yeah. That's something we got from the Malaysian podcast as well, is really hearing that there were other, there are places where we could learn a lot from.

Paul: Let's come towards a conclusion then, Alex, and just ask the final question. We always like to ask people what's giving them hope and inspiration.

What are you seeing in this space when it comes to higher education and sustainability that's making you positive for the future?

Alex: Yeah, it's interesting. I love the way you assume that I'm hopeful and positive. I mean, and I don't, I'm not saying I'm not, but I think, you know, [Jan laughs] I'm philosophical and realistic and you know, I'm just an ordinary human.

So obviously I'll feel hope and despair on any 10 times a day, on any given day of the week, like anybody else, because you know, the things that we're up against, obviously in the world are daunting and difficult and dangerous, and they continue to be so and they will continue to be so.

Um, but finding a balanced perspective on the comings and goings of all of these agendas is, is something that gives me courage to act, I think, and courage to continue rather than hope.

I suppose my belief system's very deep in my T'ai Chi practice, so I like to be balanced, I like to look at the, the sort of complementary forces that are going on, and just have a situated ethics and root into what I think is the scenario and make a decision and make a move from there.

But the bit that, you know, to come back to your question without dithering any further, the bit that does give me hope is actually the focus on mindset and capability.

And for me, the analogy there is like, you know, I hear a lot of people, I like the boats. I'm going away from the orchestra and onto a boat now. So I used to have this argument with my Vice Chancellor sometimes. Uh, even in, in, in management meetings about, do we wanna make the boat go faster or do we wanna make ourselves better sailors?

For me, I want to be a better sailor. I want to change my mindset because if I spend all my time trying to fix my boat, I'm trying to fix that boat, but the tide's still gonna be what it is, the weather's still gonna be what it is. You know, sharks are still what they are, et cetera, et cetera.

If I become a better sailor though, and do the mindset shift thing, then I'll be sailing along and I could either, you know, spend me time obsessing about all those sharks, or, you know, trying to steer the boat really fiendishly through the water.

Or I can read the weather, and I can see where the wind is and I can stick me sail up so that my boat will actually get carried on, and I can put my feet up and have a glass of prosecco or something. And that will enable my boat to go faster, but I can have a lovely time while it's happening. Quality of life, which of course is key to sustainability.

So for me, that little analogy is, is the interesting one. And I think more people are gradually starting to arrive at this idea that we've got to move the mindsets in order to intervene at a paradigm level and a system level, which is what Donella Meadows would always be talking about in terms of system change for sustainability, and stop trying to do the more obvious thing, which is to fix the broke-y boat.

Paul: Well, I don't think we need to fix the broken boat of this podcast. I think it's been a great conversation. Thank you very much for joining us, Alex. It's been wonderful.

Alex: Thank you.

[Theme music]

Jan: Well, that was metaphorically a good time.

Paul: It was only metaphorically a good time? [Jan laughs]

Jan: It was also a good time. [laughs]

Paul: Hang on. I, I, I'm sure that when Alex hears that, having just left the studio should be delighted to know that it was only metaphorically a good time.

Jan: That was a good time of metaphors. I think it's, it is really, it's really nice to, you know, some of the pictures that she painted for us. I particularly liked, you know, how to be a great sailor rather than to obsess about your boat.

Paul: I don't know. When we got talking about both boats and orchestras, all I could think of was the Titanic going down and the band playing on.

Jan: [laughs] Well, one would, would, might be able to argue, with some evidence, that that is the tune of the moment.

Paul: Yes. The whole world is the Titanic. Yes...

Jan: ...yes, indeed...

Paul: ...and we're just slowly sinking. Yeah, well there were lots of very interesting things though about what Alex has seen. And it's good to see someone who has been involved in sustainability within higher education for the best part of two decades, and she's obviously seen lots of changes over that time, lots of different attitudes, lots of coming and goings of trends and stuff, and just to see how she has observed that happening, being involved in that happening as well.

Jan: And I think to, to take the words that she said, she talked about, uh, creating the capability and courage to act and to, in that action, to be brokering relationships with transformational intent.

I think those, those that, that string of, of, you know, being courageous about acting, brokering, and transformation. I, that was really, um, inspiring, I think,

Paul: Yeah, understanding how universities can't just believe they're gonna go out there and preach to everyone and everyone will wrap it up and love it, but

yeah, rather they're going out there and being brokers, like you said, and helping businesses. But also learning from them, and it being a give and take relationship and positive exchanges on all sides, and the fact that there is the potential for great benefits there.

But also the reflection that just like the rest of the world and of business universities are gonna be affected by what's going on within the political sphere, and the fact that the tide might turn one way or another, and there might be different attitudes at different times towards all these various different aspects of sustainability.

Jan: Yeah. But I think, um, the university sector, um, certainly has grasped the mettle of this in, in many different ways. I think they're, the UN decade that she mentioned, um, really caused a bit of a step up, which is why the UN have these decades of, of action.

Yeah, I can see some of the things that she's talking about in our own institution, um, with our, our sustainability manager who is, who's focusing a lot more on those conversations and thinking about how people think about what their role is.

Paul: And it is interesting to hear Alex say as well that you might think that the really big universities with lots of money have got loads of people working on this. But she's saying that's not necessarily the case. Some of these really big universities with millions and millions and millions have still only got a very small team addressing it, which is a bit depressing.

And I think this may be why when at the end you ask for the optimistic view and Alex is having to say, hmmm, who said I was optimistic? [Jan laughs] Yeah.

Jan: Yeah. But also what we heard from, um, Katherine Ellsworth-Krebs and what's it's like to be a sustainability manager in a business, I think came through here as well.

So that was, that was brill.

Paul: Yeah, it really was. And one last thing, rename the Pentland Centre for Love and Justice in Business.

Jan: Oh wow. That's electrifying.

Paul: Well, as, they were the two words that Alex thought of that went alongside sustainability, would be love and justice as the abstract nouns.

So you could be this Pentland Centre for Love in Business, although I'm pretty sure that the police would eventually be knocking on your door wondering what kind of activities you're up to.

Jan: [laughs] No, I really like the Pentland Centre for Love and Justice in Business...

Paul: ...yeah, yeah...

Jan: ...I think Steve Kempster would approve of that as well with his Good Dividends ideas.

Paul: Maybe next Valentine's Day you can rebrand yourself for a day.

Jan: We're gonna steal that idea. Thank you.

Paul: Well, that's it for this week, but we'll be back next week for our penultimate episode of series two.

And we're gonna be talking to someone about biodiversity again, and getting a whole different aspect on that.

Jan: And biodiversity is such a large subject area and a place where we can dip in on many different ways. So this will be a another interesting angle again.

Paul: Yeah, we'll be having Mike Burgass with us from the company Biodiversify, talking to us about various different interactions between businesses and biodiversity, and that's gonna be a really fascinating chat.

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

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]