

Transcript – Promoting the importance of the message ‘look up, look forward, be in the know’

Host: John McLuckie

Guest Speakers: Iain Eisner, Helen Anton

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. In this episode we'll be finding out more about the university's careers and employability centre through the centre's manager, Iain Eisner and the career and employability officer Helen Anton. My name is John McLuckie, and I'm joined today by Iain Eisner and Helen Anton, welcome to the podcast.

Helen Anton: 0:37

Thanks, John.

Iain Eisner: 0:38

Hello John, good to see you.

John McLuckie: 0:42

Thanks very much for taking part in the podcast. We're going to be talking to you both about your roles within the Careers and Employability Centre at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Do you want to just introduce yourselves and say a bit about how your career journey has led into the role you're undertaking today?

Iain Eisner: 0:54

Yeah, I can. I don't know how long you've got though John. You know, my career journey is very similar to many other people these days, in terms of it can be a little bit haphazard at times and a bit exploratory at times as well, so nothing is linear anymore. I don't think working within the University or working with the Careers Centre that I'm exempt from that in any way. I'm exactly the same as everybody else. So I've been with the University for just over two years, so relatively new to the University but I enjoy my role, it's a good role. I suppose how I came here is part of a longer conversation but I'll try to cut it reasonably short for you and for the listeners because there's a lot of things that have happened. On a personal I did a degree, I'm not going to say when but a number of years ago, and I did it in sociology and politics and quite enjoyed that. I had no idea what I was going to do with it at the end to be honest, it wasn't really something I was thinking about. And then you get to that point when you have to move on and make some decisions, I didn't really know what I was going to do. I had a sister, an older sister who worked in people development and the skills development side of things and she introduced me to this role of working in career development and I thought if my sister's telling me to do it, it's going to be good. You've got to listen to your older sister and all that, so that's what I decided to do. And that was a number of years ago and I worked as a careers adviser for a number of years in schools and with adults and things like that as well, and

it was good, I enjoyed it, but I started to think there was maybe more to the job than I was experiencing. I started looking further afield for what was going on elsewhere around the world in terms of career development. I started to get more interested in the development side of things, so I moved into a new role which was working on developing careers services rather than actually delivering them. I did that for quite a number of years but it just got to the point that I just started thinking I don't know if I actually want to continue in this role for now and maybe there's other things that I could be doing, and at the time, the organisation I was with was starting to restructure and there were opportunities shall we say to move on. I decided to take one of those opportunities and come out of this sector for some time. And I didn't really have anything to go to at the time but I just felt it was the right thing to do, and I think sometimes that following your gut, following your heart, being instinctive is as much a career development, career management tool as anything. You know, when you're struggling to work out what to do, the expression is follow your north star because that's your guiding principle. I just felt it was the right thing to do and from there I spent a few years just, whether you call it the wilderness years I don't know, but I was doing a few other things. So I worked as a postman for a year, it was great, loved that, getting paid to go to the gym effectively. I got very fit doing that. I went into recruitment for a while, that was also quite an interesting role but not one I particularly liked, looking at all the other roles I'd had it was probably not one I liked the most at the time. Then I went into funeral directing, I became a qualified funeral director and did that for a couple of years as well. And since then I also had to make some decision about that as well but I ended up coming out of the funeral procession and ended up driving buses for a couple of years, I got myself a bus licence, worked for Citylink and drove up and down to Glasgow and Edinburgh and also round the town in Inverness. I love driving, always have done and wondered if I'd ever end up doing some kind of driving at some point in my career and I did. But then an opportunity came up with the University and I had been here for six months as a maternity cover and I had quite enjoyed working for the University and the role I had been covering came up as a full time opportunity. And again, I'm thinking, it's going back into the world of career development, is that what I want? But I knew the University was quite an exciting place to be, they had plans for the centre and it wasn't going to go back into a traditional way of working, and I'd have an opportunity to work with a great team and develop a really good, contemporary career development service and that's why I ended up deciding to re-enter the profession and come back in and I have no regrets whatsoever at all.

Helen Anton: 4:45

My own journey, I think, probably like the vast majority of people, I didn't really have a plan. I didn't, I left school, not really knowing what I wanted to do and kind of went from in one direction, turned a corner went in a different direction. It took quite a long time to kind of find what I felt was the right direction for me and, when I first left school the first thing I wanted to do, I grew up in the Black Isle. And first thing I wanted to do is get as far away as possible really from the Black Isle, which I think is perfectly natural. A lot of my friends went straight off to college and university but I didn't take that route. I went off to Italy and I was teaching English and au pairing out there for a couple of years. And then I came back and restless still. And got a job down in Devon and worked down there in a sort of antiques business, doing antique furniture, restoration and lots of general bits and pieces in the business. And that was a great time for me and it kind of then made me think a little bit more about what I wanted to do and what direction I might go in. I came back after that and I had considered doing a kind of course in sort of furniture restoration, but I didn't take that route and ended up going to college in Edinburgh doing photography and Media Studies. And then I left that

and got a job as a picture restorer and picture framer, did that for a while. And then just kind of by accident, I applied for a course that was being run through Lewis Castle College back in the day. And I did that, and that was a kind of looking at kind of rural development, community development, and particularly with a focus around tourism. So you see all my, all these different routes that I've taken, they don't really connect. But for each, each journey that I took, I built up a whole kind of range of skills and knowledge and experience. So I knew I wanted to do something sort of creative. And I also was very interested at that point, despite wanting to leave the Black Isle with such speed when I first left school, I was really interested in local community development and Rural Development and at that time, tourism, rural tourism and kind of diversification into tourism was really becoming quite a big thing in the Highlands. The Highlands was becoming much more of a destination for that kind of slow tourism, I suppose you'd call it now. So I did that course through Lewis Castle College, European funded course. It was absolutely amazing. It was the first it was the first use really of online delivery and using email and students. There was one student in each of what was then the local enterprise company areas. So there was 12 of us all working remotely on this course and we had partners in France because of the European funding and partners in Ireland. So we did kind of exchanges and things as well. It was really a great moment and it was really quite groundbreaking at that time. This new use of technology, it was the foundation of what is now UHI, really yeah. And so it was it was, it was really a real turning point for me during that course. And actually, still, there's still a legacy of that course, we're talking 25 years ago. But there's, there's still things that happened during that course that are still kind of current and resonate now, for me, and I made lots of really important contacts at that point, to such an extent that when I finished the course, I then just set myself up sort of self employed doing a lot of, again, kind of community rural development work, doing a lot of stuff with what were then community co-ops across the Highlands and Islands and with a particular focus on tourism, developing local tourism initiatives. And that was it that was a great period, lots of funding through Leader project and things like that. So lots lots going on at that point, actually. really felt sort of making a difference, it was actually really quite a powerful time. Yeah. And it really set the foundation of, I think, kind of where we are now. And then I suppose I kind of eased off a little bit, started a family. I had my daughter and then my son, and was then looking, I guess, at getting a salaried job, I suppose, because the self employed stuff was great, but it was very inconsistent in terms of making plans for the future, you really never knew when the work was going to come. So it was quite an insecure way of working for me. And my partner at the time was working full time, so he kind of supported me. And then when we had the children I kind of thought, I could certainly maybe get my foot in the door of a proper job, and applied for a job, just at reception at UHI at their Ness Walk office and just started there and then quite quickly, in UHI I kind of progressed and started doing some sort of student support work. And then the concept of the university having a careers centre became a thing. And somebody was employed to kind of take that forward. It was a project. So it was, again, it was European funded just for three years. So I sort of supported that, and I was a careers assistant I think the term and then that was maybe 10 or 12 years ago now. So, so yes, I've been part of the careers team ever since and I've seen it develop and flourish I suppose.

John McLuckie: 08:25

Yeah, and I think your journeys show that you can reach the same destination by following quite different paths. I'm interested in finding out how you think your experiences and changes of careers throughout your journeys have helped you in the roles that you're doing now?

Helen Anton: 08:39

I think it's important. I mean, obviously, I'm going to say it's important, but I think it's less about students having that kind of clear notion of what their career might be. Because I mean, listening to my story, I didn't have a plan. I did a variety of things. And for each thing that I did, I gained new experiences and new knowledge and new skills. And actually when you put all that together, it makes it makes a really sound and strong package. So for me, it's less about saying and this will go for Iain as well. And this is very much our kind of thinking within the careers and employability team that it's, it's much less about your career. It's much more about preparing for the future and building your confidence, having more kind of self awareness and developing your own sense of who you are. So it's encouraging students to kind of look at, not their career as that kind of destination. But all the things that make you you is very important and it's trying to get that message across to students that it's about, it's about taking the chances, the opportunities while they're studying, to enhance, you know, great they're going to come out with a qualification but it's all the other I guess what people call transferable skills, and building up having experiences while at college or university that are going to help you when you go into the world of work. So it is about it's about kind of empowering students and building their confidence and getting them to recognise their own skills and strengths. And making them aware that, you know, when things happen, you think it might be the end of the world, the door closes, but then around the corner, another door will open. So it's having that kind of resilience as well, I suppose. We have a sort of message in the team that it's about that we owe it to students, which is kind of look up, look forward and be in the know. So it's about being curious. It's about being creative. It's about seeing what else is going on, and taking a chance and equipping yourself with that kind of confidence to take things forward. So that's kind of what we're about is less about giving careers advice and guidance. It's more about kind of nurturing students and making them more future fit, I guess you would call it

Iain Eisner: 10:55

I think it helps hugely because I'm now at the situation where we're meeting with students and also with graduates of the University who are facing similar kinds of decisions and choices. So being able to draw on some personal experience, it really does help because I think there's always sometimes an expectation, sometimes a student or a graduate can be looking at somebody who works for the University and thinking, well that person's always been there or that person's never had any worries or concerns or issues to deal with or decisions to make. But when you've got the opportunity to share some of your own personal journey, I think in many ways it reassures that yeah, OK, you will hit bumps in the road, but generally speaking you'll come out of it OK, and you don't always know what's going to happen next but you can prepare yourself for those eventualities without actually knowing specifically what it is you're going to do. It's about having confidence in your skills, having confidence in your networks and having confidence that things will naturally find their way forward, so having conversations with students around about reassuring and motivating and drawing on my own experience of having to make decisions at various points in my life, not just when you were younger but constantly coming back to having to make and evaluate choices to do with your career as you move through adult life and beyond and it's good that you've got that experience to draw from and I think I've had some interesting conversations with students about my own journey but also how it helps to motivate and reassure students that their own journeys will be a bit unpredictable but that's never necessarily going to be a bad thing.

John McLuckie: 12:29

You've touched on aspects of your work in terms of meeting and discussing options with students and you mentioned as well designing a contemporary careers service, could you outline the role of the Careers and Employability Centre within the university more broadly?

Iain Eisner: 12:43

Certainly, what I would say is that the service that Helen and I and other colleagues are trying to develop is one which moves away from answering the question 'what do you want to be?'. It's a well-intentioned question but it's a question which I think is not the right question to be asking people nowadays and it's usually asked by people who care about you and are interested in you, but it doesn't really fit any more because what generally are you going to be. The world of work has changed so hugely and people are having to move around from different employers, different roles, more frequently than they've ever done before, and it's much more about trying to find something that does fit with your own outlook, and your values and your personality and that might not necessarily be just one thing. When I look back on my own career, different things I've done, but it did draw from some of my own personal strengths and my own personal skills which could be transferred and overlapped to other areas, and I suppose that's one of the main things we're trying to create a contemporary service around. One of the great questions we do ask our students is who do you think needs what you've got to offer? And that's different from asking somebody, what do you want to be? And it's very much about trying to get people to reflect more on what they have and what they offer as a package and thinking where that might find a natural home rather than focussing on a job title which can mean very little these days to be honest. So we're very much about encouraging students to be open-minded, to develop resilience and to look at the world as a place of opportunity rather than threat as well. I know that even during this current crisis that we're in at the moment, opportunities will eventually start to reappear and the world will reappear and present different kinds of opportunities, so very much a service that actually asks people or advises people not to see their career as a problem to be solved but as an opportunity to open up and look, and not necessarily to make a single choice but to make a good choice depending on where you are at the moment, but also bearing in mind that you may well have to revisit that again, two, three, four years down the line. So, your career path is an unfurling one and not predictable at times and also you can plan it to an extent but not overplan it because life has a habit of coming in and pushing you in a different direction sometimes.

John McLuckie: 14:53

Absolutely and I was going to ask you about how you see the role of the Careers and Employability Centre in terms of how UHI operates across the network of Academic Partners and also how the centre is able to adapt and respond to new circumstances.

Iain Eisner: 15:02

Yeah, again, I think that's a good question given the circumstances. When you look at our lives, we spend a huge amount of our time at work and even though it may be different kinds of jobs throughout our lives we do spend an awful lot of time in the workplace, and so it is really important I

think that all of us invest time in that. Sometimes you think about how much planning goes into going on a summer holiday for example, or something like that. And yet how much time do we, and I include myself in this at times as well, how much time do we actually dedicate to actually planning and looking at navigating and managing our own careers. So I think it is a really important aspect of a student's journeys to periodically reflect on that and I think that's where Helen and I come in as a team to support students with that kind of support regardless of where they are. Helen and I are both based in Inverness but that's just because that's where we live. We support and have great conversations with students depending on wherever they are and I include not just in the Highlands and Islands, whether it's Shetland, Orkney, the Western Isles, Elgin, wherever, it doesn't matter, but also beyond that the University of the Highlands and Islands has students from all over the world, and all of them can access the careers support services that Helen and I offer. So we can have conversations with people wherever and I think that's where our service has maybe had a bit of a head start in terms of helping to support students through this particular period because ours is a virtual service. Helen and I will meet students face to face and we can, but that's not always possible because of the nature of the geography so we will meet people and email and phone, Skype and Webex and Teams and all sorts of different technologies can be used. So wherever a student is or wherever a graduate is they will have equal access to our services. And obviously, given the crisis that we're in at the moment, other universities, not just the careers teams, but specifically the careers teams as well, they've had to adapt to all this way of working, whereas Helen and I have been doing this for ages and it predates even before I arrived on the scene, so we've not noticed a huge difference in terms of how we actually operate because it's how we do it anyway. But going forward, we don't know what the world is going to look like when we come out the other side of this. It's going to be different and we can start to think about how it might be different but how it will actually be different we won't know until we're there. So the role that Helen and I and colleagues across other universities too are going to have is just trying to support students through this uncertainty again, hoping that we can interpret opportunities for them and encourage them and motivate them to think confidently about what they've actually personally got to offer, what their contribution could be in this new world, whatever it is going to look like. It will bring challenges but career development is a challenge for everybody regardless, it is a positive challenge that we all have to deal with at various points in our lives, and it's funny because Helen and I have been reflecting on this quite recently, even before the pandemic had struck, a lot of our workshops and presentations that we do together have been around how change, how chance, how complexity affects people's career development and unknown factors, unknown things could come along and play as much of a factor in how somebody's careers develops as some kind of plan that they've put into place. And we've been talking about preparing for these unknown things and not being thrown off guard too much and being resilient and then suddenly this huge COVID crisis hit, and we were just sitting there thinking this is the kind of thing that we were actually talking about. We couldn't predict it, we can't plan it but it has happened and we have to respond to it in some way, and there's going to be a knock-on effect in terms of how we manage and navigate our careers going forward on the back of that. So the world of career development is constantly moving, it's constantly changing, it doesn't stay the same, it's not about what you want to be. It's about how are you going to manage, how are you going to navigate, do you feel equipped for that, how can I become equipped, who is going to help me. And that's the kind of work that Helen and I do with our students and our graduates and we enjoy it, it's a great role to have.

John McLuckie: 18:45

Now you've both been with the Careers and Employability Centre for a number of years, has there been a particularly interesting project or series of workshops that you have enjoyed delivering?

Helen Anton: 18:54

There's sort of been a variety actually, it's difficult to kind of choose one, I suppose to kind of setting the Career Centre up when it was within a project with Anne Aitken who's now retired. That was that was really great to be a part of that because we very much had a blank sheet of what we thought was best for our students, I guess, and what we thought was best for the kind of ethos of UHI because we are different. And, you know, it was trying to kind of it was setting up a careers service that was going to kind of reflect those differences as was going to encourage students to kind of think differently about things. So that was, and luckily, Anne and myself and Iain, all have that similar kind of approach to that it's kind of quite a contemporary approach to careers, and career delivery and support. The chaos theory is often referred to with careers and stuff happens in people's lives, that they hadn't anticipated and it's just being able to deal with change and chance and the complexities of life and not being too kind of rigid in your in your approach. So that was quite an interesting time. But that whole, that whole foundation that Anne and I kind of set up it still rings true now with the messages that Iain and I put out. The work that we have been doing with the curriculum development employer engagement officers has been quite valuable as well to the team, because they have opened doors that Iain and I or the careers centre wouldn't have been able to open without them. And I mean in terms of developing relationships with staff, engaging more in a more kind of structured way with staff and and increasing our visibility amongst staff as well. So that's been a really important development within the careers team was having that the curriculum development employer engagement officers and they work with employers to try and meet the needs of the curriculum going forward. A big part of that is looking at things like placement opportunities and internships and mentoring and all the kinds of things that we want students to do while they're studying and that needs that kind of employability support around that kind of package as well so it's not just about developing the curriculum, it's ensuring that the students are supported and encouraged and nurtured through that as well.

Iain Eisner: 21:04

We are a careers and employability team, careers and employability service so our workshops and presentations are around that but the topics within that can be quite varied, so on the one hand we deliver what you might class the traditional workshops and presentations around things like CVs and interviews and what-not, because these still happen, they're still important and obviously we make them up to date and fresh because video interviewing has been coming and is now going to get even bigger going forward, and the roles of psychometric testing and self-assessment centres. So we'll do workshops around all of that, but we also do things around about resilience and confidence, strengths and skills, or sometimes we have an analogy about having a rucksack on your back. You go through life, you've got this rucksack and it's filling up with skills, strengths and networks and contacts, so we do workshops around about topics like that, in terms of what have you actually got in your rucksack and can we unpack it and see what's in there, and that helps students to understand what they're developing, what skills they're learning at university, what skills are they learning from other aspects of their lives, what are their natural strengths and those kind of

workshops are really quite good to do, so we do a mix of workshops in terms of employability, getting a job, that kind of things, but also about personally developing yourself and looking at that side of things. But we're also open to ideas and so we work really well with other colleagues across the partnership, we work well with HISA and if somebody has an interesting idea that they want to put a workshop on and they're not sure. Maybe they're thinking that some of their students are suggesting they would like a workshop on this particular topic, who's going to do it, well sometimes Helen and I might be able to do it, so we're quite flexible in what we deliver.

John McLuckie: 22:43

That's fantastic and just as a follow-on question, what have you got planned next for the Careers and Employability Centre?

Iain Eisner: 22:49

I know it's been with us for about a year now but it's still relatively new. For so long, the service here at the university careers centre operated without any kind of online platform that students could interact with, to be the link between ourselves and our students and graduates, but now we have it and it's called Future Me, which is this online platform that the university now has that students can interact with. And they come into Future Me and they interact with Helen and I, they can book appointments, they can book events, they can apply for jobs and volunteering opportunities. It's a great source of being able to interact and access that kind of help, and that's been a big step forward for the centre because it makes us far more visible and far more accessible I think, but there's so much more we can do and new things are coming through all the time in terms of what we could do next with this platform. So Helen and I are looking and we're quite excited looking forward to the new year in terms of the new things we'd like to put in there, because we've got it set up, it's functional, but it's operating at quite a basic level but good level, but we're now at the stage we've got the confidence and we've now got the resources to move forward and make it even better, so it's going to be constantly moving forward. I think that's the most exciting part of our work at the moment and we're looking forward to where that's going to go.

Helen Anton: 24:01

I think yes, Future Me will have a big part to play in how we go forward because ultimately we want to have student support practitioners across the partnership using Future Me as well as just Iain and I. At the moment it's really just in terms of the support to students, it's only really if a student wants an appointment, they've only got the choice of Iain and I at the moment. So it would be widening that out across the partnership in an effective way so that students whether they're based at Shetland College or Argyll College, they can, yes, they can come to Iain and I if they want specific advice and guidance, but they can also make appointments through their local students support people. So I guess the rollout, the kind of second phase of Future Me will be a big thing going forward. Because you know, the university has invested in this tool, and we need to ensure that as many students are using it or engaging with it. So going forward, I think that will be a big direction of travel. And I think also in the shorter term, we're doing a lot more work with the students' association with HISA. One of their officers now has a kind of employability remit in her role. So we now have a strong link in with the Students' Association. So we're going to be doing quite a lot of

work with them. We're going to do a kind of series of kind of touch point sessions and workshops and things with the Students' Association throughout the academic year, whether that's an induction or maybe before exams in October, and we'll develop a series of workshops that are timely for wherever the student is in their studies. So we can share our knowledge and suggestions on what they should be doing at that time in their studies to maybe help them further down the road in terms of their own employability. So closer work with HISA will be really useful, I think, going forward, because it's again, it's a door we've been knocking at for a while, with some success, but now that we have this kind of somebody with that as part of their role, it does make it a lot easier. So, there'll be a lot of work with HISA, which is great.

John McLuckie: 25:57

Excellent and I guess just as a final question. How can students find out more about Future Me and access the range of support that the Careers and Employability Centre has to offer?

Helen Anton: 26:06

Yeah, I mean, there's a couple of ways really. Probably the easiest way is on the MyDay portal when students log in. There's a tile on the student facing page of MyDay and it just says Future Me click on that, and you simply, all students have been automatically uploaded on to Future Me. So they're all in the system. So the system will recognise their UHI username and password. So they simply log in that way and it will take them to a dashboard, where they have the options to book an appointment book on to events, upload their CV for support and view the jobs in the job shop. And so it's, from the user's point of view, it's a very clean, easy to navigate system. So yeah, and also we're going to be doing quite a lot of work early in the next academic year to encourage students, just to remind them, increase the visibility of Future Me and what it can do for you and working as well with staff to promote our messages not just around Future Me but also the messages of Look Up, Look Forward, Be In The Know and try encouraging students to kind of engage and interact with the Careers' Service.

Iain Eisner: 27:05

I think it's just to reiterate the fact that Helen and I would like to think that we're quite approachable people and I'm sure we are. This is not a job to us, we really enjoy what we do and we enjoy meeting students wherever they're at, whatever they're bringing to us, and through a conversation with a student or with a graduate all sorts of things come up and crop up. And that's good because career development invades all parts of our lives and I think it's quite important to make that point. Don't think of Helen and I as the traditional careers individuals, we're not like that at all. We will work with you, we'll talk to you, we'll laugh with you, we'll coach you, we'll motivate you, we'll reassure you, we do all of these things and it's something we enjoy doing so please come and meet with us. We'll enjoy meeting with you and we hope that you'll enjoy meeting with us as well.

John McLuckie: 27:55

Helen Anton and Iain Eisner, thanks very much for joining us on the podcast.

Helen Anton: 27:59

Thank you John

Iain Eisner: 28:00

Thank you John and been good to speak to you.

John McLuckie: 28:03

We hope you enjoyed this podcast and please check out the other episodes in the series. To our students, remember that after you've completed your qualification at UHI you are a graduate for life and that means that you can access careers and employability guidance whenever you need it. Students and graduates can get in touch via the Future Me platform at targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk, or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk. For more information please visit the UHI website and search careers.