

Transcript – The importance of innovation and future thinking

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speaker: Ann Davidson

Alana MacLeod: 0:17

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 talking about the importance of innovation and future thinking among students and graduates of all subject areas and educational backgrounds. I'm Alana MacLeod and today I'm joined by Ann Davidson, Enterprise Programme Director at the Scottish Institute for Enterprise. Ann, thank you for joining me today.

Ann Davidson: 0:40

Pleasure

Alana MacLeod: 0:41

Are you able to tell us a little bit about the Scottish Institute for Enterprise and the Scottish Innovative Student Awards?

Ann Davidson: 0:47

I can yes, the Scottish Institute for Enterprise, or SIE works with Scotland's students, and that means all students studying at Scottish universities, to help develop their innovative capacity for workplace innovation, and possibly new venture creation. So really, that's our sort of core aim, if you like, is to develop innovation skills in Scotland's students, and probably more importantly, develop innovation skills that prepare students for future job roles, job roles that we know probably don't exist yet but given the pace of change, there's going to be new roles emerging so it's very much a case of helping students meet the push of the present, if you like, but also develop skills that will address the pool of the future.

Alana MacLeod: 01:39

So yeah, focus on is innovation and future thinking, why is this so important now more than ever?

Ann Davidson: 1:46

I've alluded there to the pace of change. Before, we could wait decades to see disruption across different sectors, and that disruption was here before we knew it if you like, but now given the pace of change around technology, scientific breakthrough, changes in consumers behaviours and attitudes and needs, we can see disruption happening to different industry sectors in a matter of months, not just years or decades, and students have to be prepared for that. The mindset that accompanies the development of innovation skills for example the ability to scan the environment to

be agile thinkers, to be able to deal with ambiguity. All these skills are very necessary to make sure that you can deal with that pace of change, and you're not just adapting you're somebody who's thriving in that pace of change not just surviving.

Alana MacLeod: 2:45

Absolutely and actually that covers what I was going to ask next about, you know, why is this important for students and graduates, I guess, the disruption, it does lead to opportunities it creates challenges but it leads to opportunities as well, doesn't it?

Ann Davidson: 2:57

I think that's it, that's one of the key things that we work to develop with students whether they're looking to develop their innovative capacity for workplace innovation where employers of seeing come and help us engage with the pace of change and spot those opportunities, or whether you're spotting those opportunities for a new venture that you think this is not just a flash in the pan. This is a new venture that's got some longevity, I'll still be here in five years time. It's very much, that sort of mindset around embracing disruption you know every risk if you like is also an opportunity. And it's really just starting to develop that mindset where actually there's something here there's a real opportunity for me to use this disruption to my advantage, disruption is not necessarily a bad thing. I just have to feel comfortable with it I have to embrace it. And I have to be able to identify what that disruption means for me and where the opportunities lie for me in that disruptive landscape.

Alana MacLeod: 3:56

Yeah, I mean it's so important for our students and our graduates to be aware of that. Now, I wanted to ask you because if I remember correctly, that you have a really interesting career journey, do you want to tell us a little bit about how you got to where you are today?

Ann Davidson: 4:09

I can, yes. I started out by studying law and I practised as a lawyer for a number of years doing criminal defence work. I then decided that I was going to go back to university, and I did an MBA. And then I went to work for the Institute of Chartered Accountants developing their professional development programme, their CPD programme for their members. I then went back to university again. I like to learn. And I then went to work for an organisation called the WS society which is based in Edinburgh, looking at professional development of young lawyers who had just come out of the university and we're studying their traineeship, and that sort of led to where I've now been coming up for 10 years as of January 2021. In that last post I started working with young people who were facing, not quite as bad a period of disruption caused by COVID-19, but certainly in 2007-2008, we entered the financial crisis that everybody talks about and law firms were one of the hardest hit sectors. So I was working with people who had spent four to five years at university, starting to think about other opportunities - what did this disruption throw up for them? What were their transferable skills? It also meant that I had to turn its head some of the traditional training offerings that we'd offered young people so I had to be quite innovative in terms of the training that I offered

them, particularly moving into things like mindset development, and identifying key strengths, not just here's my legal skills but actually start thinking about what else they have to offer holistically, as a person across different sectors. And that's really what led me to my current job. I had been working with young people to help them develop mindset and innovative capacity, and to look at things with fresh eyes to scan the environment and think, what else is out there for me, what else could I do?

Alana MacLeod: 06:12

That's amazing and it's actually something that we speak to our students and graduates about a lot you know graduation it's a marker in time it's not the end of the road, and so many people choose to carry on learning either formally or in the workplace, like you said to do CPD. So we always want to say you know your experience at college and university in terms of education it's not necessarily your last and like you say change is constant it's inevitable that you know you evolve and you move on to different things and you find out more about yourself as you go, so that's very interesting. Thank you. In terms of SISA, the awards, they offer opportunities for students to become recognised as future thinking and innovative as we've covered, how can students at UHI get involved?

Ann Davidson: 06:53

For SISA certainly go to our website, www.sie.ac.uk. You'll find information there about SISA and what I would suggest is sign up to SIE's newsletter and that will keep you up to date with what's happening with SISA. Now of course because of the current situation with COVID-19, we are looking at putting the first level of SISA, future thinker, online. Also speak to your careers department, with us putting SISA level one online we're looking to make that available to people within UHI, to roll over to students. We're also looking at putting SISA level two online now SISA level two is normally a face to face day, at a multi disciplinary national day where students from all over Scotland come to work in teams on one of the UN sustainability goals. We're still planning to run those days after Christmas, but we are looking to provide students with the opportunity to do SISA level two online in digital teams, which I think could be an interesting thing to add to your CV. If you've done SISA in a digital setting both level one and level two, I don't think it is necessarily weakening the award for you, I think is giving you a whole new set of skills that once you do SISA level one and two online, you might like to reflect on. Also speak to your course modular leader. Sometimes we credit existing modules and courses at UHI, so check with your module leader to see if your module is accredited for SISA level one, and your module leader will guide you through how to get your SISA level one on the back of your existing studies. So, I think what I would say at the moment is sign up for our newsletter that will keep you fully engaged. Now also, I believe this podcast is going out to the beginning of August. I think that will give you time to take part in SIE's festival of innovation, again you will find details of that on the website address that I gave you, we've set a challenge to students, looking at the future of learning we're looking for students to submit a short video about what they think the future of learning is going to look like. So draw on all your experiences to date in terms of how you completed your course how maybe you've communicated not just with lecturers but friends and family, and have a think about entering that challenge there are some prizes to be won. Some of the best ideas will get the chance to pitch to an online conference of academics and students in September. But actually if you do that challenge that will also qualify you to get your SISA level one certificate before the next academic year starts. So three ways: sign up for our newsletter,

speak to your course leader, when the new academic year starts, speak to careers but also look at SIE's festival of innovation to see if you might want to spend some time over the summer, taking part in that challenge I mentioned, it will look great on your CV.

Alana MacLeod: 09:54

Brilliant. Thanks Ann for that that detailed overview it's great and I know we've been working with module readers to try and get more and more accreditation of modules, so hopefully that will continue into the new academic year. So, you've touched on it there, a little bit, about the importance of SISA for CVs, for skills development. How does SISA recognition, help students to stand out when they're applying for jobs what makes it attractive to employers?

Ann Davidson: 10:22

What makes it attractive to employers, is it gives employers insight into your mindset. And also, more importantly, how you will perform and behave in the workplace. So if you do SISA, it's three levels. Obviously we've talked about SISA level one, and SISA level two, SISA level three is an online application which you do after you've got SISA level one and level two. And each of those three levels is, yes it's a micro credential, it says to the employer here are skills and competencies that I have gained by doing SISA. So for example if we take SISA level one and level two competencies we're looking at things like problem solving, opportunity recognition, good teamwork, good collaboration good negotiation, whether that's face to face, or a digital platform. And it's very easy to say this is what I have, this is what I can bring to the table as an employee, I have these competencies. Here's how I'll perform as a problem solver. Here's how I perform when I'm doing opportunity recognition. Here's what sort of performer I am when I collaborate and I communicate. And that to me is what employers are looking for, not just what they have here the skills but how they will use those skills and competencies in a workplace situation. And again, if somebody is thinking about new venture creation. Think about how investors might look at you. They want to know how you will perform as an entrepreneur, using problem solving opportunity recognition. So for me, that's the key thing about SISA is, it's not just here's what I have. It allows you to demonstrate to employers and other stakeholders. Here's how I will perform and behave with those skills and competencies.

Alana MacLeod: 12:12

Absolutely and yeah it's the reflection and articulation of the skills developed, and that helps students to communicate that isn't it to employers. So, I mean we're in a very strange situation right now in terms of education homeworking the entire economy has been flipped on its head given everything that's happened during and post COVID-19. What advice would you give to students and graduates who maybe feel a little bit uncertain about the future?

Ann Davidson: 12:39

I would say to graduates uncertain about the future, have a clear sense of purpose. Now I know that sounds very lofty in the current climate, but don't lose sight of the fact that you possibly have an

idea of the impact you want to have, what you want to do, where do you want to work, what sector do you want to work in, what sort of people do you want to work on, who do you want to help, etc. Don't lose sight of that. I alluded there to this idea of what you have, your skills and competencies, your how, build some narrative around that in terms of how you will use those skills and competencies in the workplace. But there's also a little interesting book out there called start with why by Simon Sinek. And it's this idea of you know how you're going to perform in the marketplace, you know what you're going to bring to the table in an organisation, but try and have what I call a North Star, a compass. What direction do you want to go in, where do you want to have an impact and I know that sounds fairly lofty in the current climate where you're just thinking, where can I get a job. But I have found over the last few years using all my sort of career journeys, is that I've always worked in training I always know that I want to train to educate to have an impact on people's minds, skills and skills development. And I think if you have that overarching framework of why, what's my sense of purpose, what do I value, what you then start to do, is being able to identify interesting things that you want to get involved in. Interesting projects, interesting contacts that you want to build up, have a coffee with, or just have on your LinkedIn profile, interesting articles that you want to read, interesting books that you want to read, interesting events that you want to attend, and that's the interesting thing now about COVID-19 there's a really good opportunity to do lots of free webinars, interesting things in your own time. Usually free of charge, without having to travel. And I find if you start to do that, it's a bit like skimming stones in the water, it starts to create ripples. And also, if I can allude to Steve Jobs he talked about that as well, is start sort of populating your canvas with lots of different dots, and suddenly things start to join up. And that's what I find is when I've moved on from different careers is because I've started to throw lots of stones in the water and there's ripples starting to happen and then suddenly patterns start to appear. And then suddenly things become quite clear and then suddenly a job appears on the horizon and you think, Oh, that makes perfect sense. So I hope that makes sense what I'm telling the students there. Don't just focus on getting a job yes that's important, but don't lose sight of the bigger picture and the impact you want to have, the sense of purpose you have, and really start to look for people who are like minded, different sectors, build networks, read articles. Look for free webinars, through those students into the water and look for ripples. And, you know, yes it's a difficult time. But, to me that's the best advice I can give you is to narrow your focus keep it as broad as possible. Still looking after yourself, still looking to get a job, still looking to get some money coming in, but don't lose sight of what you want to do and start building up a network some knowledge around that. I think not to detract from the disruption we're going through, but I think Alana you raised the point earlier that disruption does bring opportunity. You may think, Oh gosh, where am I going what's happening and that applies whether you know you've still got a period of study to go or whether you have graduated. I think the key thing is to look after yourself. And that's really important. know, take time for good mental health to relax. Easier said than done, I know but as you know I am a great fan of yoga and meditation, and that is really vital look after yourself, good health. And, you know, if you have that clear head, do see the current period as, not just a risk, but also opportunity, I know that's easier said than done. But, use the time to start thinking about what you have to offer to build up, a narrative around yourself to be able to tell your story. Think about how you can add some depth to your CV. And also I would spend some time looking at how companies are adapting to the current crisis, not just yourself, but think about how other organisations are adapting. Are they having to change their business model? Do you think it's going to be long term changes, so for example we know that Primark suffered in the current crisis because they had no online service offering, and other companies were able to turn around and suddenly go online, very very quickly. So that's what I'd say to you as well is you know don't just think about how am I going to get a job, how am I going to adapt, scan the environments really take some time to look at how different organisations

responded, how their different business models adapted. Do you think that adaptation is going to be here for the long term that they've suddenly gone, oh, this is actually not a bad way for us to operate. Look at Made Brave, they were really interesting in terms of how they maintained a media presence during the current crisis, look at some of the big event companies some of how the festivals and conferences were put online, the new platforms used the new software used. So you get this feel of what's the direction of travel of a client or company you know what that company has gone through in the last few months, and are able to talk about that interview. So I hope that makes sense.

Alana MacLeod: 18:26

It absolutely makes sense Ann, and actually our careers team at the University they say action changes things, so you know actions to do like you say reading, attending events, making connections and networks they're really wasted and normally they'll lead to an outcome or maybe further down the line, they'll lead to something which is a really useful starting point or opportunity so no that absolutely resonates with what we try to get across as well.

Ann Davidson: 18:52

Picking up on your action point Alana, what I would like you to sort of think about is that, qualifications don't define you. They're important, but also just to pick up on the point I made about adding some depth to your CV. Think about what else defines you in the job market. Besides your qualifications. Yes they are incredibly important, but add to that, what we've talked a little bit about in the podcast is how you use your qualifications or how you will use your qualifications in the job market. And this may be a bit odd to say in the current crisis, where you know we're all working from home or we're at home. But think about what would get you out of bed in the morning. And you know what's going to get you to work, and that's more than just your qualifications so it's what defines you. And think about it in this terms, it's not just what's going to get you out of bed in the morning, but why would somebody care that you do? Why would an employer and the teams that you're going to work with an employee or a graduate role setting, think about why people really want you to get out of bed in the morning they care that you do. So that's just something maybe you've got this time to look a bit of breathing space to think about what else will define you in the graduate marketplace, or if you're going to set up a new business of your own.

Alana MacLeod: 20:10

Fantastic. Absolutely Ann, thank you. All that really remains to be said is thank you so much for joining me today and telling us more about SISA, and your journey, and the importance of innovation and future thinking across all sectors and subject areas. To our listeners, thanks for tuning in. And just a quick reminder that after completing your qualification at UHI, you are a graduate for life and that means that you can access careers and employability guidance at any point, students and graduates can get in touch via the Future Me system, which is targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk, or by emailing us at careers@uhi.ac.uk so just visit the website for more information.