

Transcript – The Changing Labour Market

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speakers: Charlie Ball

Alana MacLeod 0:01

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. I'm Alana MacLeod and in this episode, we will be talking to Charlie ball, Charlie, would you like to introduce yourself?

Charlie Ball 0:14

Hi, I'm Charlie, I'm the head of higher education intelligence at JISC. Now, that won't mean a lot to most of you! JISC are the huge higher education sector body responsible for infrastructure and support. For example, we own all the computer networks and provide all of those kind of things. And in that capacity, I am the labour market specialist – the labour market nerd – and my job is to do all the labour market research that underpins careers and employability work, and a whole bunch of other things. You might notice that I am not Scottish, I am originally from the north of England, which is where I'm based, but I've worked for a very long time with AGCAS Scotland. I've worked a lot on Scottish Labour markets, I developed the first 'What Scottish graduates do' and one of my particular interests is in rural labour markets and so the University of the Highlands and Islands, which is, to my mind, the most interesting university in the country with the most interesting student body is a university that I've worked with quite a bit.

Alana MacLeod 01:34

Thanks Charlie, it's great to have you with me today. Look forward to chatting about all things labour market intelligence. Before this podcast, I actually put a call out to students and staff to submit any questions that they have for you, so that we can shape this interview around things that people across the university really, really, want to know. So you're perfectly poised, given your introduction, to explore some of the questions that have been submitted. You've not seen these questions ahead of time, which I think is worth mentioning! So we're putting you on the spot. But if it's okay with you I'll just jump right in. So I'll maybe start with some questions related to something that's obviously had a significant impact on us, and the lives of everyone, COVID-19. Some geography students put in a really good mix of questions actually, one of them being: it's no secret that the economy sucks at the moment because of COVID, is there something that I can do to help myself get the job after lockdown ends?

Charlie Ball 02:27

At the moment, the most sensible thing you can do is think about the experiences that you're having, there's this kind of idea of going on that this group of students who are experiencing COVID-19 are uniquely disadvantaged. Now, your experience is going to be radically different to a lot of other students. But, as in all things that are positives and negatives, you have gone through and experienced a whole set of circumstances that no student before you has experienced. You've dealt with it, you'll have gone through it using resources, and, you know, sharing experiences and thoughts that no student before you has done. And the point is that everybody in the economy, everybody in the country, has gone through the same sorts of things. So instead of thinking, Oh no I've missed out on my lectures and I've been stuck indoors for weeks...think about: Did you talk to your friends? Did you form a support network? How did you cope? Because believe me everybody at

work at the moment, everybody in Britain, is thinking the same things, and employers are getting together and say well we know students cannot have had the same work experiences, we know that all students have not had internships or work experiences, or even just their weekend or weekday jobs, but what they have done, is they've managed to navigate one of the most serious social and economic impacts that we've seen in our lifetimes. How have they done that? What did they do? And what did they learn from that, that they'll be able to take into work? Because everybody's been through that process and not everyone has done it as well as others, so you don't need necessarily to have learned six new languages, and the viola, during lockdown. All you might have done is helped friends get by. I've talked to quite a lot of students who've had, for example, virtual quiz nights. And actually, that ability to demonstrate and receive support, that empathy, that willingness to reach out and be reached out to, is going to be hugely important in the future, because employees have learned that the wellbeing of their employees is paramount. A lot of them talked the talk before the pandemic, But now, a lot of them have realised that it's absolutely vital because businesses are a web of people and personal interactions. And fundamentally that's what it comes down to. Your whole way of doing business only works if that web of personal interactions works effectively. And if you can demonstrate that you can be an effective part of that web, you are going a long way towards demonstrating your ability to get jobs. Things have changed; the rules have changed. You don't need to have shown them that you set up a successful entrepreneurship and changed the world by the age of 19, you need to show that you can help support other people.

Alana MacLeod 5:10

Yeah, some really great points there Charlie. And that, I mean that's exactly what we're trying to get across to students, they can make the most of this time – doesn't necessarily have to be life changing or hugely innovative, it's about the small things.

Charlie Ball 5:22

Yeah that's right, you don't want to say well yes but the whole lockdown point Animal Crossing, unless your islands really good! But at the same time, people are realistic, nobody's going to forget COVID for a very very long time. All conversations at work, how do we support the wellbeing, how do we keep people mentally fresh, and keep them all on an even keel, and we are not going to forget this. The legacy in terms of the workplace...crucial changes...a lot more graduates will be working virtually in the future. But the large majority of graduates are working at home, and employers have said that is going to continue, that's going to be the status quo. Here at JISC, I've been in the office four times since last March, that was always to pick up stuff, and we've been told that we're all home workers now, and we'll be home workers for the future. And there are a lot of businesses where, to be honest, you can work from home, who are making that percolation and many of you at University of Highlands and Islands will graduate and you will work virtually, and actually, that would be a particular benefits to students from rural, from remote, from peripheral communities, like yours, because it means that businesses are well aware that they want a more diverse workforce, and that's not just in terms of skin colour and disability status, that's in terms of outlook, background...and UHI students have an enormous amount to add. So, if you're a business in Glasgow who have two potential employees, one of whom is from Glasgow and the other way is from Thurso, that Thurso student brings something extra to the table that the Glaswegian student might not necessarily offer. And they know that you can work there, because you don't have to travel there, you may be able to go there once a month. You only have to navigate Scotrail or the A9, and that means that you will be able to bring something...your Orcadian students and your students from Lewis, and your students from the west coast, will all be able to bring something particular to the table, so...COVID is going to change the way that we work and everybody's going to remember it

Alana MacLeod 07:17

Charlie, the creative industries have been substantially hit and we have got a lot of students who are studying the creative industries in a range of different subject areas, how quickly do you think the creative economy will bounce back, and how students and graduates, get involved in the recovery phase?

Charlie Ball 7:34

That is an excellent question, and I think it's very realistic. The creative industry has been absolutely clobbered. Comfortably the worst affected of all the major graduate recruiting sectors, or probably one of the worst affected sectors of our economy. Probably the hospitality industry has been hit worse. Half of all employees in the creative industry are currently furloughed. Yeah, I know – half! And over half of all creative businesses are currently shuttered, and not doing any business at all. It's obviously especially hit the self-employed people, because even if work is going on, it's extremely hard to monetize it. There is the concern that this might represent a structural change in the creative economy, but counterpoint is – and the one that I will make very strongly – is that creative people are well, extremely creative. And the other thing that's very clear, is that when people are not able to access the fruits of the creative industry, they really come to value them. So, there is an awful lot of pent up demand, and when lockdown is lifted, people are desperate to go to concerts and gigs, cultural events...people are desperate to go to the pub, obviously...but you know they're desperate to listen to music and consume art. And, a lot of people are willing to pay for that. So, I think, once lockdown is lifted, you'll see quite a rapid bounce back in the creative industry. I can't promise it will get back to where it was, in 2019, straight away, but I think people will value what they've got. They will go to shows, they will go to gigs, they'll consume music, and also some of the ways that creative types have managed to find ways to monetize their work during lockdown will also persist. It will probably take a little time for the creative industry to get back to where it was, a year or two I would say at the outside. There are going to be fewer opportunities for the time being. Very energetic, very entrepreneurial, creative people who are willing to take risks, or let's be candid, have the resources that allow them to take risks, will probably make some inroads into new markets. But, it's also worth stressing that your talents are highly prized, and especially now, people who are adept communicators, which creative people are, are adept at influencing and persuading through media. You know if you're a musician, you are adept at evoking moods and emotions, and these are all actually highly prized skills in the modern workplace, in the economy. There's always this feeling that if you go work for a corporate gig you're selling out in some way. Yeah, but on the other hand you could just see as a day job, because you're making use your skills and actually in some ways you will hone them. Yeah. Because, whilst the image of the artist starving in a garret is quite a common one...and I always have to point out that, you know, the common stereotype of the creative is not the well paid, creative with a steady job...it is unfortunately artist starving in the Garret...and whenever I'm talking to your policy makers who say, well, you know, arts graduates don't make a lot of money so perhaps they should look at something else...I have to tell them, yeah, they know that going in! That is not what creative people are motivated by. You still have to pay the rent fundamentally at the end of the day, you still have to buy your groceries. So, look for ways to make money. There are a lot of businesses out there, particularly small businesses and community based businesses will want communicators, and there's no shame in a marketing gig, particularly if you're adding something to communications, there's no shame in doing that kind of work and your skills are very well suited to it so do that while you're tiding over. If you're a 20 year old looking to graduate or a 22 year old who's just graduating and wondering how to make money, bear in mind

you're going to be working until your 60s. Taking a job to build up a few quid while you're practising your craft is a very honourable way to go about things, and it pays your rent!

Alana MacLeod 10:42

That's great Charlie, thank you. Really good insights. Now, the next question I've got for you is very difficult but interested to hear your thoughts. How long lasting do you think the effects of COVID-19 and Brexit will be on the labour market, in general?

Charlie Ball 11:24

I think there will be permanent changes in the labour market as a consequence of both of them. I do appreciate you gave me at least 15 minutes before we had the first Brexit question! Both are going to be permanent.

Let's be candid, Brexit has already caused, and is likely to cause, a permanent change in Scotland's relationship with the United Kingdom. We'll go no further than that as things stand. But I think we all have a good idea of what direction things are moving. So obviously, that will be a pretty permanent, pretty profound change. The Scottish graduate labour market is already somewhat different to the rest of the UK's anyway. It has become steadily more different, and the Scottish graduate labour market would probably weather separation from the rest of the UK, whether it be formal or informal, better than the rest of the Scottish labour market. That is the first thing to say. The major legacy of COVID is likely to be, at least in the interim, for graduates, there are a few changes...

The first is, a lot more work will be virtual, as I've covered, and that is likely to be a net benefit, particularly for UHI students. It will make it easier to get jobs outside of their home communities but not necessarily mean they have to leave them, and that's very important if you're grounded in a particular place and have a particular identity, this is something that the university system the UK have traditionally been quite poor at. But if you're grounded in particular place or a particular identity, for example, your Gaelic speaking students, you will no longer have to leave your Gaelic communities to get work. If you want to, that option is still there, and I know that's also a driver for some of you students, but many of you are very community rooted and will not have to do that.

What most businesses are moving towards is a hybrid model of home working and office working. So you'll work at home, three, four days a week, or three weeks of the month. But for some of you, like me, it will be you'll go into the office once a month for team meetings. So that will be the profound change and probably the most profound long term consequence of COVID. In the medium term, we have seen changes in the retail and hospitality industries, and actually the way that's going to affect students mostly is there'll be fewer opportunities to do term time work and holiday work, until things settle down. Again, hospitality, as I mentioned along with the creative industries, there's a lot of pent up demand. Everybody wants to eat out and stuff like this, and go on holiday and things, but it will take a long time for the industry to get back on its feet. It's going to take a little while for the creative industry. Although my gut about the way the creative industry deals with difficulties is that it always emerges at the other side, and there'll be new things that the desk-bound nerds like me will not have foreseen, because the creative arts people are the most creative people we have, and they will find a way. They're incredibly good at coming up with new ideas and new ways of promoting their arts and crafts and that will also change. Oh and actually, one other thing, I would imagine we'll see a step change in demand for certain industries. So, it will become a lot less politically and socially acceptable to underfund health services. That's a very clear message. Teachers, I believe, will be more valued, but certainly by parents who have been home-schooling! At this point, on the video version, is me giving 1000 yard stare...about home-schooling...! But, teaching

has had a focus and certain industries, like the farmer industry, which have traditionally been strong in the UK but have had a bad few years, have really come back quite strongly. So, we'll see those changes, but I think the most profound change as a consequence of Covid is virtual working.

In terms of Brexit, it's changed a lot of our relationships with our closest markets, and the time that I'm saying this it's the 15th February, and it's clear that importing and exporting has become a great deal more difficult. That is an issue. It's clear that the financial services sector is being hit quite hard because of loss of passporting rights. Again, my gut is that ways will be found. The creative industries is incredibly good at creative solutions, but the UK financial industry is absolutely amazing at finding ways of making money. So my suspicion is that, within a month or so, they'll have found wizard wheezes, that will help him make money and that will have a benefit to Scotland, because you know although we focus a lot on the London financial industry, Glasgow and especially Edinburgh have a very, very strong financial sector. It's also worth stressing that that is a big price to be gained if Scotland severs its relationship with the United Kingdom. My feeling is that Edinburgh in particular stands to gain a great deal from that, in terms of the financial industry. And yeah, long-term, let us be honest – the likelihood of Scottish independence is much greater, and, with all that will entail, for all of us in the United Kingdom...I think that will be a profound long-term effect of Brexit. I think that a lot of the affects we've got now will be mitigated but it will be over the long-term. We have to accept that aspects of the UK economy and aspects of the Scottish economy will be smaller and it'll be harder to do some things. But, some things will be brought in-house as well. Supply chains will shorten, particularly in manufacturing, and that will require businesses being creative.

The other thing to bear in mind about Brexit, is...there are areas of the workforce, mostly graduates, where we have typically not trained enough graduates. Engineering is a particularly good example. Scotland is better at this than the rest of the UK, but still Scotland does not trade enough engineers to meet its own demands, and what businesses have done for the last 30 years is they've gone to Europe to recruit engineers, and that is much harder now. So if you're a Scot, thinking about tech and engineering, actually – and I'll say this very quietly – you might not see the demand for your services and your skills has diminished as a consequence of Brexit. We have such a shortfall in good quality techies, and particularly in engineering. The fact that we've closed off access to engineering talent from Europe, may not be a negative. I'm not going to say necessarily it's going to be a net positive, because we don't know what the effects in the engineering sector will be, but I would say that if, you know, if you're a Scottish mechanical engineer, I would not say Brexit has necessarily damaged your chances of getting a job.

Alana MacLeod 16:48

That is very interesting, and actually one of the questions I had, sort of as a follow up, in relation to Brexit – the B word – was, is Brexit likely to help or hinder graduates in some subject areas, and are there new opportunities that could come?

Charlie Ball 17:02

This is always the case, its' swings and roundabouts, let's...let's take a very stark example, but actually one that's very important for Scotland – Geology. We produce world class geologists in the UK, have a long tradition of it, and our geologists are globally very sought after and a lot used to go to Europe to work, and obviously that's a lot harder. And particularly with downturn in the oil and gas industry, which traditionally recruited a lot of geologists. It's probably harder now for geologists to get a job here because globally geologists are in demand. You probably need to look further afield, I mean if you're if you're a Scottish geologist, there's a big demand for jobs still in Australia,

and if you want to go and work in a very hot hole in the outback, then there are great opportunities out there. You know, emerging markets...but geologists tend to have some of the most dangerous jobs in the world because they tend to go in straight after civil wars are finished, to prospect for minerals, traditionally Angola in the last few years, the former Russian Republic, North Africa, Somalia, because often a lot of local conflicts are over prospecting geological rights. When the five way civil war in Angola ceased, the first people in were Shell. So, geology is one area where I think things might get more difficult. Business and Financial Services, it remains to be seen. The UK economy depends on an awful lot on them, depends an awful lot on trade and services. I don't expect things to get easier in the short term for that sector and I don't expect to be more opportunities to the consequences of Brexit, but...! Engineering, I do wonder whether things will necessarily be worse for engineers or IT specialists as a consequence of Brexit, because, and health care for that matter. We've traditionally imported a lot of people from overseas, but the UK has made that more difficult just in general. And, as a consequence, we probably in the medium term, probably be a premium for homegrown workers. So, it may not necessarily be worse for graduates in that area. One group of people it will obviously be worse for, is people who want to work in Europe, and actually like hit Scotland quite keenly because that does include Ireland, and traditionally there has been a lot of links between Scotland and Ireland in labour market terms, particularly on the west coast, and it will be harder. But, I think the will, and cultural links, will find a way to jump through more hoops. It's just frustrating, but people will still be able to do it. Likewise, on the East Coast strong Scandinavian links, and on the islands. It will be harder but it will still be doable. Over time, Brexit will fade into a steady background hum, unless obviously it causes a change in Scotland's in regard to its status with the United Kingdom, in which case, we will be going to a very different area. But, for the time being, Brexit will make some roles in short supply. But, it's worth stressing that the impact of COVID is significantly greater than the impact of Brexit right now.

Alana MacLeod 19:35

Okay, yeah, that's very interesting actually, em...

Charlie Ball 19:39

We didn't choose to impose COVID upon ourselves!

Alana MacLeod 19:42

No, we didn't! actually one of the questions that I had was about Erasmus, because obviously it's no more, and it's being replaced by the Turing scheme and one of our students asked, is it likely to present the same opportunities for students as Erasmus did?

Charlie Ball 19:57

It remains to be seen. I'd like to think it will, is my diplomatic answer. The system is not running yet properly, so...we won't know. Erasmus is a really, really big loss, there are no positives to losing Erasmus, not at all. There is no getting around it. Would the Erasmus students have lost out? 100%. And it's a crying shame. We'll just have to see if the Turing scheme is good, but at the moment the Turing scheme is words and not actions.

Alana MacLeod 20:23

Yes, we have to just wait and see, don't we? Yeah, now...next question! You touched on this, so... obviously another political movement, that's a potentially massive significance to us here in Scotland and to the future of the UK as a whole is Scottish independence.

Charlie Ball 20:38

Yeah, so I think I've mentioned this already! We can't get away from it, we've got to front it head on. So hit me.

Alana MacLeod 20:44

Actually, I think you have covered this to a point. Do you think an independent Scotland would have a positive impact on graduate employment in Scotland? You already mentioned that our market is quite different...

Charlie Ball 20:54

in the short term will be a massive, massive, shock to the economy. So, Scotland will take a significant short term shock. Glasgow and Edinburgh are both very strong graduate labour markets, not in just in absolute terms. in Scottish terms. but actually in relative terms Europe-wide. Both very strong labour markets, and would weather, the shock of Scottish independence, pretty well I reckon. And I say shocking just in an economic term ,that's a neutral phrase. Where we would struggle would be the smaller towns and cities, in particular. It will be difficult for Dundee, for example. Depending on state of the oil and gas industry, it will be difficult for Aberdeen. I choose those two towns in particular, not just because their university towns, because they have relatively good labour markets. Areas that are on the periphery, that are remote in local contexts, like Inverness, will probably be less affected. Although, it will, you know, it will have an impact. Then over the medium term, I think, despite the rhetoric, one might assume an independent Scotland would join the European Union relatively rapidly. You will then see staff see a mitigation of that shock. To be candid, you would see movement of some business from England to Scotland. Typically, in financial services I suspect. They would start to shed some aspects of employment to Scotland. However, you will also see, and again, I think we have to be candid here...you will also see an actual border between England and Scotland, and that will be a profound shock for everybody and it will have a very significant effect on the economy of both.

Alana MacLeod

Yes, and again like you say, you know...things are changing. This this is back in the press now, you know, it is picking up momentum so...

Charlie Ball 22:39

You'd see a very weird situation between Scotland and Northern Ireland at that point, because Northern Ireland would effectively be sandwiched between two parts of the European Union.

Alana MacLeod 22:47

Yeah, absolutely.

Charlie Ball 22:50

But I'm afraid I'm a data researcher so I'm not given to doing predictions. With my realists head on it's very hard to see the United Kingdom remaining in its current form. You'd see a big shock, and things will be hard in Scotland for a little while, but, you'd cope. Glasgow and Edinburgh would pick up a lot of slack, you'd get closer relationships with Europe, cultural and historic links between the islands and Scandinavia would probably thrive. So, we'll have to see.

Alana MacLeod 23:15

Yeah, very interesting.

Charlie Ball 23:20

It is, it is very interesting. We have to confront it, though, and it's the right question to ask at the right time. From a personal point of view, I will no longer remit of Scotland, which would be shame for me.

Alana MacLeod 23:27

We could maybe keep you in a retainer Charlie! Keep you involved...

Charlie Ball 23:30

You never know! An independent Scotland might look attractive to Manchester, Newcastle and Liverpool. An independent Scotland is a much bigger change to all our lives than Brexit, and I think the magnitude of change is not really digested in England. The debate has been very live in Scotland for some time, but in England, I don't think we've confronted it. The effect on England would be immense.

Alana MacLeod 23:51

Yes absolutely. Now, you've actually covered off quite a few of the questions that we received about changes in the market, will rural Scotland be disadvantaged, that type of thing...I think you've well covered that.

Charlie Ball 24:03

I am covered by the fact that I live rurally, my interests are rural labour markets, and I've worked very hard over the last few years to promote the value of rural graduates and rural students. But I do perceive that an increase in virtual working will be to the advantage of rural communities, the one disadvantage that they might experience, depending on their point of view, is you may see more movement *into* rural communities particularly of affluent people, which can be a concern. Particularly if it drives cost of living. But, in general if you are on Lewis, and you want to stay rooted in your community, virtual working offers the opportunity to do that. And that's especially important in parts of the country that have particular cultural history. So if you're observant on Lewis and you're concerned that your faith will make you stand out in other parts of Scotland which I know is the case for some people on Lewis, because I spent some time there myself, you don't need to worry. If you want to stay in a Gaelic speaking community, you may be able to do that as well, and so on and so on...

Alana MacLeod 25:00

Yeah so there's definitely opportunities that have come from this, and yeah...I think we should all take advantage of them where we can in that respect. Now, one of our programme leads was interested to know if you felt whether the time was right for a young person to start up a business, in terms of opportunities and challenges.

Charlie Ball 25:19

Entrepreneurship is very challenging at the moment, and the data that we have on the self-employed is not tremendously positive, but bear in mind there is a minority – but an important minority – of the self-employed that are basically in that position for reasons outside of their own

control. They're effectively on zero hours contracts, or they've been put on freelance contracts, to reduce employer costs.

At any time a great disruption there's opportunity. It's as simple as that. And, if I'll be honest, if you can see a light at the end of the tunnel, if you're willing to gamble that restrictions are going to be lifted in the next few months – and I think that's a reasonable gamble to take – actually now, setting your business up so that it's ready and raring to go when lockdown is lifted, is actually a pretty rational move if you're ready. If you know what's in store, you've got a business proposition. If you think you've got a market out there and you're ready in particular to set a business up knowing that it might have a restricted market for the next few months, you might need to do the legwork in terms of publicity and PR and marketing, but that it might be ready in summer, when things get better than yeah, now's not a bad time. It's certainly better than it was before Christmas, for example or last summer was not a good time to start a business, but now I think we're starting to get to the point where, particularly if you're trying to exploit the market that you think will open up post lockdown...yeah you want to be starting those businesses now, rather than as lockdown lifts. You know, you might get first mover advantage, you can't guarantee that it'll work, but if you've got an entrepreneurial mindset, I don't see why not to be honest.

Alana MacLeod 26:43

Yeah, there's light at the end of the tunnel.

Charlie Ball 26:46

This is an interesting thing about this pandemic. It's not like normal recession; it's quite short, for example. It might not feel like it, but most recessions last a lot longer than this. They're also not as deep. But also, the other thing to bear in mind is recessions generally tend to, in the same way that they actually tend to start relatively slowly compared to this pandemic, it's often not easy to tell when a recession ends. You'll be able to tell when this ends! Everything is going to come back at once. So, in the same way that we saw rapid drop off in the economy, you're going to see a really rapid comeback. The month that lockdown is lifted is likely to see the largest monthly GDP growth in the UK on record. It's worth stressing that. It's all going to come back in a big rush. We're not going to get back to where we were, post pandemic straightaway, not this year, possibly next year. But considering the few months that we've had, the month and months after lockdown are going to seem like you know Mardi Gras. It's gonna be Fiesta time, a huge surge in economic activity, and there's going to be a lot of business being done.

Alana MacLeod 27:45

Yeah, exciting. Hopefully not too long to wait, my goodness!

Charlie Ball 27:49

The novelty has really worn off.

Alana MacLeod 27:52

It sure has! It wore off last summer! Ok, no that's great Charlie, thank you. There's a few more questions before we wrap up, one of the last ones I'm going to ask you here...this is from the Students Association at the university. How can UHI best support our students and graduates throughout these uncertain times?

Charlie Ball 28:10

I mean the crucial thing at the moment, and thing that businesses are all doing and the thing that I'm hoping UHI is doing with staff is just making sure everybody's okay.

Alana MacLeod 28:18

Checking in, yeah.

Charlie Ball 28:19

Checking in, and really that's the best thing you can be doing for your students now, making sure people are okay. Making sure everybody feels part of a community and part of a group, and that they're not alone, and that they're not being left to navigate these choppy waters alone.

In terms of preparing them for work, the really big change and one of the ones UHI are going to be amongst the best placed institutions to deal with, is as I say, preparing people for new virtualized workplace. And that's the whole gamut of workplace, so recruitment is taking place online, assessment is taking place online, interviewing is taking place online, a lot of work is taking place online...so just prepare people for the fact traditional ways of working, you know, go into an office nine to five, five days a week. That isn't happening anymore. I mean, obviously, if you're training to be a nurse, you are still going to be working in a hospital. That's not changing. If you're a social worker, that's not changing. But even in manufacturing, even in areas where you think they're quite hands on, a lot of work is taking place virtually. Yeah, if you're a construction worker, you're still going to be on site. You can't dig ditches and build bridges virtually, but you can do the design work and the project management virtually, and that is happening. So, I think that's the crucial thing. Reassure them that in the end, it will all be okay.

Alana MacLeod 29:35

We'll get there.

Charlie Ball 29:36

We will get there, but it's also worth stressing that people have been incredibly resilient. On the quiet, we've all as a group and as a society coped with this better than you might have feared. I think if you'd said back in 2019, oh by the way we're all going to be locked down in a pandemic for over a year...I think most people would have assumed it would turn out worse than it has! Pat yourself on the back, you've done brilliantly.

Alana MacLeod 30:04

Yeah, yeah. The university is doing its absolute best to check in and you know...we are different!

Charlie Ball 30:07

And I think I think that's an advantage UHI have, in that you've dealt with a lot of the questions that a lot of institutions around the UK are now wrestling with. You've already dealt with them, you've already looked at them, you live them day to day, and I think your institution has done an excellent job of adapting and I think your students will benefit from that. If you're a UI student, you're at one of the institutions that were already best placed to cope with the circumstances that we're in, and have dealt with it admirably, so you know you have some significant advantages over some of your peers at other institutions.

Alana MacLeod 30:39

Yes, I suppose, because of the size we've been somewhat more adaptable, and...

Charlie Ball 30:42

Some of the larger universities in the UK have found it hardest to deal with this. I'm not going to name any names, but some of the very large urban universities have found this really hard.

Alana MacLeod 30:54

Yeah. So, I have a few questions which didn't really fit into a category of COVID-19 or Brexit or anything like that, but equally very, very, valuable to explore with you. Given your experiences, and considerable knowledge in all things employability and labour market, the first question I wanted to ask from a student was: I've been told to leave my age and date of birth off my CV before, because employers don't always want to hire young people, but the fact is, I'm a young person. How can we compensate for bias like this?

Charlie Ball 31:24

Employers are like the rest of us, they come with a full range of weird quirks! I wouldn't leave my age and date of birth off, because besides everything else, when you stick your CV in and said I've done this, that, and the other, and I was at school then, and I was at university then, it's pretty obvious how old you are...

Alana MacLeod 31:38

The power of deduction will give you away!

Charlie Ball 31:42

Yes, the power of deduction. There's no point.

It's difficult to say, I appreciate there's more of a risk, and particularly when you're you're dealing with quite scattered job markets like we do with the UHI. I'd say, an employer that behaves like this is not necessarily an employer you would want to work for. An employer that comes equipped with strange views of his potential employees is one to be wary of, but if you are concerned that an employer doesn't want to recruit young people – and I will say up front that actually we see more of an issue of employers not wanting to recruit older workers than younger ones – but as I say it does depend, particularly if you're a small business that has largely recruited from a, like a lot of small businesses, a relatively small core of people, then you will be nervous about going outside that core of people. So you know, if you're a small businesses that's largely recruited from a population of experienced middle aged people with a particular mindset, or concept, then yeah...going for a 21 year old will seem a little uncomfortable, for *them*. It's just like everything else about yourself. Put employers at ease, explain to them how you can do their job, and how you can relate and work with them, and hopefully it won't be a problem but we have to be honest, in all walks of life, there are employers who have weird biases.

Alana MacLeod 32:58

Yeah, you know, some of them might be looking for someone who is slightly older, but you know, some of them might be enthused by a younger applicant.

Charlie Ball 33:03

That's right. I think in general, a thriving viable business is not going to turn down younger workers and of course the traditional graduate recruiters are very keen on younger workers, because they understand that if you're joining at 21...if they can keep you till your 30s, then you'll be managing, and you provide a long term legacy for the business. But yeah, I mean I've come across more businesses...if you're a group of people who, you know, work together in your mid 40s and you all know one another and you need to recruit and suddenly a 21 year old comes up. That's going outside their comfort zone.

Alana MacLeod 33:37

Disrupting the balance, a little bit.

That's right. But, that's their issue and I don't think that your age will be a barrier to you, in most cases, it's more of an issue for the over 50s. And just to make the point, it's actively illegal to discriminate on grounds of age.

Alana MacLeod 33:51

Yeah, so it shouldn't be happening.

Charlie Ball 33:53

It shouldn't be happening.

Alana MacLeod 33:57

Yeah, thank you, Charlie. That's really useful. Now being mindful of the fact that many are fast approaching the end of their courses at the moment. I mean we are in, you know, mid-February already...what is a big mistake that graduates make when they're looking for employment straight after they finish their degrees?

Charlie Ball 34:09

There are obviously a bunch of mistakes, but the biggest one is very simple: I'm looking for my dream job and I'm not going to go for anything else. You don't know what your dream job is. You're in your early 20s, you're going to be working for the next 45 years. You don't know what your dream job is. You might think you do! Let's give you an anecdote. So, I'm going to describe somebody who I know, and let's call him Chris because that's his name. Chris, who is not me, except that it is because that's my real name. At the age of 11, I was absolutely certain I wanted to be research scientist, and I excelled in chemistry at school, and I went to university and I studied chemistry, and I took a masters and a PhD, and I became a research scientist. Didn't like it. A research scientist was, I thought, my dream job but I've never done anything else. I'd been fixated on being a research scientist. There were aspects of the job that I didn't like, and so I thought, well, what do I actually really care about? And I realised that because I'm from a non-traditional university background...you know, I come from a working class community in the north-west, first in the family to go to university....where I come from less than a quarter of people go to university still, even now! I thought, well actually what I want to do is I want to help people like me when they go to university. So, I got my PhD training and I went into private sector because I thought well what I need here, is I need to actually learn how to deal with people, clients, and so on. So I went into private sector consultancy, I thought I need three to four years in this job, and took five. And then I went into the role that I'm in now, which it turned out is my dream job but I didn't know existed until I was in my late 20s. That's a very common experience. So, don't say, I'm looking for my perfect job right now. The danger is, you might get it. You might get what you think is your dream job and a difficult experience will put you

off. Look at your first few years in the labour market as a chance to build up the skills base, because there's a decent chance you actually might get a job that you didn't think you'd enjoy that you turn out to enjoy because actually, here's the secret, it is that people you work with as much as the content of the work that you do. Working for a business that shares your values is much more important. I've lost count of the number of committed, creative types, who've gone on a personal journey where they've gone to work for a PR agency or an advertising agency, you know, to find they end up working on a project that actually fits their values. And they found that it really works for them in the workplace is really welcoming and helps. They're eight years into the job and their account managing and they found their niche. And equally, I've lost count of the the number of people who've wanted to be journalists from the year dot, and then get a journalism gig and find the job and the people they work with are not what they think and then they think, what have I done with my life. So, don't get hung up on that. You are going to spend most of your waking life, I'm afraid, as an adult, working...so it's important to be doing something for an organisation that shares your values with people that you like. That's more important than the content of the job. And the other mistake that you'll make, particularly in times like this, is just to look at the market and go there's nothing out there. There is. Yeah. Might take some work to do. It might be really hard. The final mistake to make, and you see this a lot in news reports. There are no jobs out there for graduates, I've sent 250 applications and not got a reply back. Don't do that. Send 25 good applications. If you sent 250 applications, they are going to be form filling in, they're going to be, they're going to be generic, there's going to be no love or care put into them, and employers will spot that. So, put effort into your job applications. Once you've got the trick of writing a cover letter that tells about yourself, it becomes a lot easier to do. Once you've got the trick of writing an application that's tailored to the employer that you're talking to, you will find them a lot easier to do. So, make sure that every time you write an application, you put something of yourself in it. It's hard work, it is not nice getting those rejections. You will get rejections, we all do. Everybody does. There are very few people who've got their first choice of job straight away. You will make a number of applications, you'll put yourself out there, you'll get turned down.

Alana MacLeod 38:02

Yeah, it's life, isn't it?

Charlie Ball 38:19

It's life. If you put good quality applications out there, that explain to the employer why they want to hire you. This is the crucial thing. In your letter, don't say, I can do this, I can do that, I've got experience in this and that. Make it clear to why they want to hire you. And make it clear to the why you want the job, as well. And the final thing to say is about employers, is don't put them on pedestals in terms of people. Here's the secret, if you get to interview, the most nervous person in the interview room might not actually be you. There are very few people who are very comfortable interviewers, and employers need putting at ease as much as you do. There's a little secret for interviews. The employer panel is likely to be quite nervous. Find the youngest person on the employee panel, they're probably the most junior, they're probably not interviewed very often! And, if they got you to interview, that means they think you're probably able to do the job and at this point, they want you to like them.

Alana MacLeod 39:08

Yeah, they want that connection...

Charlie Ball 39:11

They want you to like them just in the same way.

Alana MacLeod 39:12

Aaaaahhh....

Charlie Ball 39:13

Don't make that mistake of thinking they're on untouchable people on a pedestal.

Alana MacLeod 39:15

Great point, Charlie, it's true. Em...now this is quite an interesting one. If you could look back at yourself when you were still going to university. What advice would you give yourself?

Charlie Ball 39:30

Laughs. For myself? Pay a little more attention to coursework, perhaps. Also, you're never going to make it in a band, so stop trying! Don't sweat the fact you're not rehearsing enough, you're never going to be good enough. But in terms of work, in terms of the job market. I would say to the young Charlie, instead of thinking what are you good at in terms of work...think about what your values are. Think about what motivates you, and what you care about, and what mark you want to make on the world. Do some of the things in university that you started to do quite late in your university career, in particular, you know, I was a volunteer counsellor, which was hugely rewarding. Do those earlier. It'll help you grow as a person. And, you know, the coursework is important so do pay some attention to it. But actually, a lot of what you get out of university comes from things you do outside of work. And don't neglect that.

Alana MacLeod 40:21

Yeah, take the opportunities...

Charlie Ball 40:23

Yes take the opportunities. Oh, and go to the gym a little more. Well, I mean, in my case actually I only started going to the gym, it was kind of therapeutic, when I was doing my PhD. But actually, I really enjoyed it.

Alana MacLeod 40:35

Actually, linked to that, if you have one tip for our graduates today or seem to be graduates, what would it be?

Charlie Ball 40:40

One tip. Yeah. It's tempting to say, chill out, actually, you've got this, by and large, you can do this, you can do adulting! It's not a lot of fun. Sometimes it is. There are jobs there for you, you can get a job, you can make a career, you can make a good life for yourself. Look after yourself while you're doing it.

Alana MacLeod 41:01

Yeah, and I mean that's true. So obviously, I mean we have a lot of young students, but we have a lot of career changes involved at UHI as well. And that's true for them too, you know, that you can do this, it's fine.

Charlie Ball 41:14

You can do this. The university will help you. Yeah, actually, this, this is it. This is a tip that I will give. You can do this, but the university can help you, so get the university to help you as much as you can. You have resources available to you at UHI that are not available to people outside of the university system, so make use of all the coaching and the careers people, and the employability people, and the student support people, and the societies. Milk them for all they are worth! Use it all and make sure you keep the personal connections with people.

Alana MacLeod 41:45

Yeah, we do have the graduate for life offering, so you know when people are, years down the line into their career, and want to come back to us for a wee bit of help, then we're open for that.

Charlie Ball 41:55

Not every institution does that. And not every institution has the resources or the expertise, but your institution is particularly good at it. Use it, UHI students!

Yeah, Yeah. Brilliant! Thank you. So, I think we'll call it data Charlie but I just wanted to give you a huge thanks for your time. This has been really insightful, super valuable. Any final remarks before we wrap up?

Charlie Ball 42:10

I've covered most of the things, but as I say this year is gonna be better than last year. 2022 is gonna be better than this year. If you're graduating this summer, I'm not saying don't worry because obviously you need to be mindful that you will need to put care into things, but I think there's a decent chance that you will find things a lot more favourable than they were last year. If you're apprehensive about graduating, the second half of 2021 is likely to be a lot better. Do bear that in mind, but most of all look after yourself, look after your friends, look after your family, look after your networks...the ability for you to be an active functioning part of that web will be hugely important for you for the rest of your life.

Yeah, very true. Thank you very much Charlie. Brilliant! Okay, so to our listeners, thank you for tuning in. After completing your qualification at UHI, you are a graduate for life. This means that you can access careers and employability advice and 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 careers@uhi.ac.uk. Visit the website for more information.

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