

The New Inclusive Campus with Moira Fischbacher-Smith (Transcript)



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Chris Congdon: The University of Glasgow is actually the fourth oldest university in the English speaking world. It was founded in 1451, and while parts of the campus might make you feel like you walked onto a set of a Harry Potter movie, it really is leading the way in terms of its approach to higher education, sustainability, and inclusion. So how is it that this university that's more than 500 years old is actually having really new ways of thinking about learning? We wanted to find out welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm with our producer Rebecca Charbauskki.

Rebecca Charbauskki: Hi Chris.

CC: Hi Rebecca. Can you tell our audience about our guest today?

RC: Today's guest is Moira Fischbacher-Smith. She's Vice Principal of learning and teaching at the University of Glasgow. Her focus is literally on transforming how learning happens. She's been at the university for quite some time since 95, but she took on this new role in 2019 right before the pandemic. So how's that for timing? She's also the LGBTQ plus champion at the university, and she thinks really deeply about the impact higher education can make in people's lives and in the global community.

CC: Yeah, I also found her pretty pragmatic and I think she has some really good advice for how to bring pedagogy, technology and the physical environment together to create really good learning experiences.

RC: If you're listening and you enjoy this conversation with Moira, we'd love to ask you to share it with a friend or a colleague, especially if this is a topic that they're interested in.

CC: Yes, thank you. Moira joins us today from Glasgow, Scotland. Thanks so much for joining us today, Moira.

Moira Fischbacher-Smith: You're welcome! Thank you for having me.

CC: So you're in charge of teaching and learning strategy at the University of Glasgow, which as I read that title, it feels like you're in charge of everything because that's what universities do. So we'll talk about that a little bit. But first, our organizations have worked together for a long time, and so when we were thinking about organizations, people who are making a difference, university of Glasgow came to mind for us, and I was just wondering if you could tell our audience who maybe are not as familiar a little bit about the university and the students that you're serving.

MFS: Sure! The university is quite old. We're described as one of the ancients. We were founded in 1451. So we've been around for quite a long time, and we are the fourth oldest university in the English speaking world. And for people who haven't, I'll give you a visual image of the university. One of our oldest buildings, the Gilbert Scott Building, if you've been to Paddington train station in London, was designed by the same architect. It's a stunning old building. And many of our students think of it as the Harry Potter building because we've got a spire, we've got turrets, we've got all of that. It is really iconic and beautiful, and we're situated really near a park. So it's a beautiful setting. You immediately experience that kind of tradition. We have some very famous alumni, so let me think. We have Adam Smith, who many people will know of as a philosopher, an economist. He was a professor here and we've been celebrating for the last, well, almost a year, the tercentenary of his birth. So 300 years ago, born in a very small village in Fife, I believe in Scotland.

CC: Yes! I studied in my economics class.

MSF: Oh, there you go! So now he was one of ours. So too was John Logie Baird who invented the television. He was an academic here. Einstein has an honorary degree from Glasgow. So a few names your listeners will have heard of. One I thought you would be quite interested in, because I think we'll pick up on this later, is James McCoon Smith, who was the first African American to receive a university medical degree. And he came to Glasgow in 1837 having been rejected from a number of US institutions. And not only did he become a medic, but he became dedicated and committed to abolishing slavery. So when we opened our new learning and teaching building, we named it after him. And then maybe one last one is one of your Princeton colleagues, professor Sir David McMillan, who is a chemist. He studied chemistry at Glasgow and in 2021 won the Nobel Prize. So there's just a little handful of some of the people associated with Glasgow.

CC: Well, that's a lot to be proud of. Now, I know just from the stories that you've told in the past, education might've been very accessible to students who've come from families with economic means. But it sounds like actually you've really focused on growing and diversifying your student base, right?

MFS: Absolutely. I think when it comes to making education accessible for people, this is a huge part of our mission, and it's an important part of the values of all of the academic staff and all of the professional services staff who work at the university. Glasgow itself has been quite an economically challenged city over the years, and so we've got a big, big commitment to what we call widening participation. So making sure that students from areas of high economic deprivation have equal opportunity to access education and fulfill their potential. And that's really important to us. And that includes supporting students who are care leavers and who are part of the care system. And of course, we have lots of international students, and that includes a number of students who are on scholarships because they're maybe refugees, fleeing war torn countries and so on. So we can maybe explore more of that later, but that is a very important part of our ethos as a university and our mission around inclusivity.

CC: Let's talk a little bit more about your strategy around inclusive educational environments, because I think there's a lot that we can learn whether listeners are educators or within the world of business. Can you tell us a little bit more? I just think it's really interesting because universities touch lives in so many ways and change lives in so many ways, but this focus that you have on inclusion I think is just a really interesting one. I'd love to hear more about your approach there.

MFS: When we started to develop the current university strategy, we did a lot of consultation with colleagues and with students and a whole range of other stakeholders. And one of the things that came out was that in our previous strategies, we just hadn't had the people focus that I think was important to us, but it hadn't been as explicit a part of the strategy as it could have been. So our current strategy very much is about people, and it was also very clear from our consultations that values matter a lot to people, and it's what really motivates our colleagues and our students. So a values-led strategy emerged as something that was important to us. And when we did our consultations on the learning and teaching strategy, that same ethos was reflected in those consultations – that valuing education, valuing educators, valuing our students, and valuing that diversity of our student and staff population was really important.

So we really tried to incorporate that into our strategic thinking. And the documents that you might read, I mean, I guess there's a question. Writing on a piece of paper doesn't make it real. Okay. I suppose it's probably useful to see a little bit more about how we enact that. One expression of that commitment is that in the university we each have, well not quite each, but a number of the members of the university senior leadership team are champions of one of the protected characteristics that we have in the equality legislation.

CC: Could you talk more about that?

MSF: So, I'm the university's LGBT champion, and my responsibility there is to work with colleagues in people and organizational development – our human resource colleagues. And together we promote an environment where students and staff are not discriminated against on the basis of being members of the LGBT community. And so we have other senior leaders or champions for gender, disability, age, religion, race, mental health, and we have our refugee champion.

CC: Wow, that's great. I always find sometimes that talking and thinking about inclusive design can maybe feel a little theoretical. How is this really making a difference in somebody's lives? But you have an example of somebody that you've worked with, Jamie, that was really a great tangible example of how this has made a difference. Can you tell us that story?

MFS: Jamie Dalgety is a student who graduated this year and who, if you look up some of our social media, you'll be able to hear from him directly. We feature students every year at graduation, and we've had a number of students who've come through what I talked about before, our widening participation program. So Jamie is someone who from the age of six months until the age of 21, so all of his childhood, his school education, he was, I don't know exactly the arrangements he had, whether it was foster care or homes, but he was supported by a range of people who obviously saw his potential and believed in his potential, but my goodness, the barriers he must've had to overcome, the challenges he must've had to overcome. And when we interviewed him at graduation, he just glowed with an incredible sense of achievement, and he was so proud of himself and so emotional and his high school head teacher was there. And I think one of the things about this is that our widening participation team, they have colleagues who have a specific responsibility for care leavers. So Dan Keenan is one of those individuals, and he builds a relationship with these students before they come to the university and he supports 'em and he keeps in contact with them. And just that continuity, that stability, that reference point, someone who understands their background, someone who understands all of the things that might go on in their lives and can help support them whilst they're at university, has been absolutely crucial. So yes, Jamie has been widely celebrated, and I think everyone who's worked with him has been hugely impacted by his own story, but also by what he represents for so many others who don't necessarily get the start in life that you would want for them, but who can nonetheless, with the right support achieve.

CC: That's an amazing story. Thank you for sharing that. And I'm going to make sure that I go out and find the social media posts so I can actually see a little bit more about that. The other thing I just wanted to get your sense of, we see in our research with younger generations, so people who would be at the age of being at university or just kind of recently coming out of university that they're very concerned about making sure that the organizational values around things like inclusivity, sustainability, et cetera, that they align with their own personal values. And I'm just wondering what kinds of generational trends you are seeing with incoming students. Is that similar? Are there different things we should be aware of?

MFS: I would say that it's true that students who are coming to university now really are very values driven. I think they're very conscious, particularly of things that are happening around the world. I mean, they've gone through the pandemic, they've seen wars, they're hugely committed to sustainability, very worried about the climate crisis. So without a doubt, we are seeing that. I mean, one of the things we've said in several of our graduation speeches over the last couple of years is that it's been working with our students and indeed I would say quite a lot of challenge from our students that we developed our sustainability strategy, and I believe we were the first university to declare a climate emergency. So that type of thing, it really does come from that conversation with students from trying to understand what matters to them and to our colleagues. So yeah, very much. And even as we've been rethinking our catering strategy and designing our buildings, they very much want to know, are we making investments that are based on use of materials that are sustainable? Are we taking approaches that build in that awareness and understanding of that context? And we think about the extent to which we can use those decisions as educational opportunities.

CC: You also talk a lot about bringing together pedagogy, culture, technology in place, like thinking about these things in a very holistic way to create a better educational experience. Following along with the stream of the conversation so far, maybe we could start with culture and talk a little bit about what are some of the cultural differences in education and what does that look like at the University of Glasgow?

MFS: Well, I would say that over the last, well of course we have had a pandemic, but even before the pandemic, I would say one of the things that we had an amazing opportunity to do differently, and not everybody has that opportunity to do things differently, but we had an opportunity to invest in new study spaces and new learning and teaching environments that we thought, well, what are the features? What's the kind of experience we want students and staff to have? And I think that alone was quite a cultural shift, just even asking that question rather than defaulting to the estates team to say, equip us with some new teaching spaces or put in some more seats in the study space. So we were already trying to think differently, and our library team was hugely inspirational here. They had a really can-do attitude to just try something and see what happens. And if students use it, we'll do it more. And if they don't, we won't. So there was kind of some experimentation there, but we really took the opportunity to stand back and say, if we're going to redevelop our teaching spaces and study spaces, what should that be like? Who can we learn from? And so we went and looked at other examples and worked showcases and a whole range of others. So I think just even stopping and asking that question was a big cultural shift. And then I think another shift was the person who was leading all of this work. There were a couple, we had a new head of estates who said, we need to think of a campus as a whole, as an integrated experience as something we want the public to come onto the campus. We don't want railings that keep everyone out. What does that whole way of thinking mean? So we had multiple strands of changing how we think, changing how we view the whole campus experience for all of our stakeholders. And then I think the other big part of that conversation was bringing not so much students – we have a tendency to speak to students a lot anyway – but certainly bringing students, but also bringing our estates team, our IT team, so our technology, our people, and our campus experts together with staff at a really early stage to shape that vision together and not to have a siloed approach to thinking about our future educational spaces. Just those things alone and that declaration that we did want to do things differently started to kind of change the culture. And that fed through to thinking about, well, what's the service model we want for students? How do we change that? And thinking about traditional banks or traditional companies where you phone and they'll say, press one for this, press two for this. I don't want to do any of those things. I want to speak to somebody. We said, well, how do we make it more going into the Apple store rather than that kind of traditional thinking? So we played around with a lot of those sorts of ideas, and that began to shift our thinking. And there are practices and our policies and our culture, I think.

CC: Let's also talk about technology because the last few years I think there's just been a lot of debate about digital learning, how that should happen, whether it should happen. And I'm interested in what approach are you taking at the university in terms of thinking of do you have a digital learning strategy?

MFS: I think there are two aspects to that. One is technology in the round and one is technology and education. And I would say that we've done a lot of thinking about technology generally on the campus. How do we make sure we have pervasive wifi? How do we make sure we don't have fabulous support in a brand new building and not in another one? So I think there's an underlying foundation if we've had to think about what that investment looks like in terms of learning technology. We used to have a digital education strategy. And then I think as we've kind of matured through the pandemic, if you like, and really thought, well, how do we design spaces that work digitally and physically? It's become much more integrated. And my personal philosophy on this is that digital is now a part of everything. There's very little that students do that doesn't involve some engagement with the digital device or with submission of something online. So we need to think about integrated environments. And on one end of the spectrum, we may have students who never come to the campus and are wholly online students, and that experience needs to work for them. And on the other end, we have students who are here all the time doing object-based learning much of that, not yet digitized and may never be. So it has to work across that whole blend, but have a coherent digital infrastructure that works equally well for all students no matter what programs of study they're doing so that they can use our services, engage in their assessment, find their learning resources, access their eBooks, all of those sorts of things in a coherent, consistent fashion. And I think that's achieved through integrated strategies rather than seeing digital education as something separate.

CC: Yeah, that makes so much sense, particularly when you think about your overall inclusion strategy, having equal access to the same kinds of tools and things that students need for their learning is so important. So when you've worked on a project, I know about this new learning hub and we were talking about that a little bit earlier. You've talked about the role of place and I want to get to place as well. And I'm really interested in what things you've learned about the role of place that you would share

MFS: A number of ways I could start to answer that. I think I might start with something that was really important to us very early on in the design of our new building. We have had other buildings since, so I probably shouldn't call it the new building, I'll call it the James McCoon Smith Learning Hub. And that was the idea that we wanted the campus to be a sticky campus. And I know that's an expression people tend to use, and it's an interesting one, particularly when we've now post covid move to much more hybrid ways of working in the world. But we have lots of students who don't have suitable spaces for study at home or wherever they happen to be living and for whom making friends and having a connection and having a community is really, really important. And if we get that right at the start of their studies, they're much more likely to be successful. And part of that is having places where they feel they can go, where they feel they can dwell, where they feel comfortable. So 'place' was really important. We wanted our new learning hub to be somewhere that students could come in and they could spend a big part of the day there. They could cycle in and have somewhere to store their bicycle. They could bring their own food because buying food can be expensive somewhere. They could heat up something. So we have self-service kitchens with microwaves, and we wanted to try and make sure that we offered that very holistic support for them so that it would be worth coming to the campus and worth staying on campus. And by doing so, they could meet with their friends and build those relationships. I think the other thing is we also wanted to have spaces where students could be alone, but among other people so that they didn't feel lonely, but they could do that kind of personal study. So we have group areas where people can work as groups or people can just work among others. And we thought a lot about what that meant for the physical layout of the building. And then we have other areas for very focused study. And of course, going back to the point about inclusivity, we thought very much about accessibility as well as inclusivity. One of my colleagues used a good expression, which is that making spaces accessible is not the same as making them inclusive. And I think the example was just because somebody can have access to a playground doesn't mean that they can take part in all of the different facilities that are there. So we thought a lot about, well, what does that mean if you are a neurodiverse student, do you need quiet spaces to go in the room and outside of the room? So we were trying to think of place in all of those different dimensions.

CC: Well, first of all, it sounds like you guys are really engaging in an inclusive and holistic way of thinking about your campus. And I'd like to know, as you think forward, it sounds like you've really just made some great progress there. When you think about engaging students going forward, are there big challenges that you feel that you're still working on? What's the next thing I think that universities should be thinking about?

MFS: So I think some of the things, we have a learning and teaching strategy that we developed with the students and with our colleagues, and a number of things came out as being really important in those discussions and that we want to work with students on and are working with students on. And in part that's really around giving students the opportunity to work across disciplines or work with students from other disciplines, some combination of the two to really think about how they can address some of these world challenges that we face around climate change, sustainability, health inequalities, all of this kind of aspect. And there are ways in which our societies are becoming really quite polarized. How do they function in a way that helps to break down some of these barriers? How do we enable them to develop the skills to debate and to discuss really difficult topics? So I think these are some of the areas where we are trying to work with them to build their confidence to help our colleagues. So when we discussed it, I talked about being an LGBT champion, we've done an understanding racism report. These are challenging topics. There are topics people worry about saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. So I think a lot of what we're talking about is how do we really enable students to engage in those kinds of conversations and to make a real difference wherever they happen to end up after they've graduated, but also during their time at the university and to talk about difficult things. I think that's one of them. I think another one is about understanding how you can rely on information. I mean, there's so much information out there in the world. How do you test it? How do you know that it's been verified? How do you use it effectively? How do you engage with the ethical and appropriate use of artificial intelligence in the workplace? And then, I mean, that's a whole other podcast, but these are the kinds of things and around skills, just making sure they have both that set of disciplinary skills that they need as experts in the topics that they're studying at university, but the ability to then communicate and work across other disciplines so that they can function in integrated collaborative environments, which is what the workplace needs them to be able to do. I think there's some, I could probably carry on, but there's some of the things that we're working with students on.

CC: It just makes me feel like maybe all of us need to go back to university a little bit to learn some of these skills about being able to have those healthy conversations on a diverse range of topics and be able to move those conversations forward in healthy ways, trying to figure out what information we can trust and being able to feel confidence in. And it's a lot of challenges and I'm just so amazed that as a university you're trying to take all of these things on because it really is important to society and to the world. Before we let you go, I do want to ask one question that we've been asking all of our guests this season because we're thinking very much about how each of us can have an impact on the world. So can you tell us more about a story of someone, a group, a place, or anything that you feel has made just a positive impact on people or the planet in recent years? What's a good story?

MFS: I mean, I think I am fortunate enough to work with so many amazing people. It's really hard to narrow it down. We've got colleagues who were massively involved in developing Covid vaccinations, who served in the National Health Service, treating people, and who still somehow managed to teach our students. I have colleagues who work in Sub-Saharan Africa on projects to try and help build sustainable communities and work with local populations. It's very hard to pick an individual or a group from such an amazing list. And as I mentioned, we have some Nobel Prize winners. I could pick any of them. And I feel like that's where your question is leading. But when thinking about this before we started to speak today, unusual, the way it may seem, I really did actually want to single out my colleagues in IT services because when we went into lockdown, and since the whole world has changed, and we have teams who delivered laptops to people's homes who came in when everyone else was staying at home during lockdown, they managed to simultaneously keep 35,000 students studying online when we had never done anything like that. And when these students were in a massive crisis worrying what was happening to their families back home, when we had colleagues who were working at home trying to school their children, and there were colleagues and our technicians and our IT colleagues, they kept lab classes going. They converted them to being delivered online. They supported us to do exams so students could graduate. They had never done anything at that scale before. They weren't equipped to do that. And they managed to create partnership with the health service, the Lighthouse Laboratories for testing, covid testing. They managed to create a helpline for students and get volunteers. Students who served on those helplines throughout 24 hours doing exams across the world, supporting in their own time zones, students who would otherwise not have completed their degrees, were incredibly anxious, and they coached them through getting through their exams. They coached them through competing online. I just think I appreciate that is somewhat invisible in some respects, and that we tend to draw attention to the research that changed the world, and we have so much of that. And I could go to the website and give you so many stories, but these things wouldn't have happened over the course of the last few years in my opinion, if it hadn't been for that core team who kept us going and who kept the research and teaching going at a distance with no chance to pilot or practice what they had to do and with their own family crises and situations going on. So they're my people.

CC: What I love about that story is it just underscores that you don't have to be a Nobel laureate to make an impact on the world. You can be somebody in a department that maybe feels like an unsung hero at work, but if you think about it, that work has a multiplying effect on so many other people and enabling other people to realize their hopes and their dreams. And so everything that we do, each of us as individuals can have an impact. So I love that story and thanks for sharing it. Mora, thank you so much for being here. Mora, we're going to have to ask you to come back another time because I'm sure we're going to have to talk about some of the topics that you're wrestling with. But thank you for today.

MFS: You're very welcome.

Announcer: If you are interested in creating lifelong learners, Steelcase Learning is here to help discover the latest research on engaged active learning and get ideas for creating spaces that encourage collaboration, movement, and connection. You can sign up for a virtual tour of innovative learning environments at steelcase.com/wblearning.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. So Rebecca, what's up next week?

RC: Next week, we are talking to an expert about community at work, a topic. I know you care a lot about Chris. I do. We spoke with Christine Perth who collected data from 20,000 employees, and her data is pretty compelling. She says that they found nearly two thirds have no sense of community at work.

CC: Which is really tough.

RC: That's a big number. She makes a really powerful argument for why we should care about that. And she also tells us about six pillars of community that are going to make an impact on creating a better day at work. She's full of really compelling data, but she's also full of really interesting stories from CEOs and coaches about how that data comes to life. It's a really good episode.

CC: The data is really a good way of helping to understand why this is such a big issue, and we really hope you'll join us for it. So if you enjoyed this conversation, please rate or review it so more people can find it. And please visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on more workplace research insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox. So thank you again for being here, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.