THIS MAN SAYS MENTORING CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

It’s not about genetics. It’s about being better prepared.”

Tunde Banjoko OBE
PayIt Forward

UCL students and alumni need you: your skills, your experience and your passion. Pay it forward by mentoring young people taking their very first steps onto the career ladder.

Tunde Banjoko OBE (Urban Regeneration, 2013) was the chair of the very first UCL Connect event, which brings together alumni and new graduates. He is so passionate about the value of mentoring he has made it his life’s work. But for someone who improves the life chances of a young person every day, it is remarkably low-key about his own achievements.

On how he came to lead the organisation that would later become the skills charity Making the Leap, he says: “In 1993, there was some government funding to set up an initiative to tackle unemployment among ethnic minorities in a certain part of north-west London. The local authority was looking for someone to be at the helm. I was the man who happened to be around.”

Confidence and soft skills
Having planned to have a career in the City, he thought he’d “do it for a year or two, but 23 years later, I’m still here!” Tunde formally turned the organisation into a charity in 1996. Since 2008 it has focused on young people and building their confidence and presentation – their ‘soft skills’.

“We came across an initiative in the US that focused on tackling unemployment through changing attitude and behaviour – the ‘soft skills’ that employers had told us were important,” he explains. “We recognised that our school raising aspirations and boosting confidence could impact on educational attainment – in fact, it explains a quarter of the attainment gap. So now, we help young people develop the polish, poise and confidence – a particular way of communicating – that their better-off peers already have.

“Young people may be very capable, bright and prepared to work hard, but those from a higher socio-economic demographic present themselves better. It’s not about genetics – it’s just about being better prepared.”

This essential truth is one Tunde discovered through his own life, including his experience at UCL. “I believe London’s greatest strength is its people,” he says. “Yet there are others who are overlooked and therefore don’t reach their potential. Because of my work I was attracted to a course that would look at the problems of cities – [hence] Urban Regeneration.

“And it had to be at a top university. When I was in my 30s I was going to a lot of meetings with government advisers who were in their 20s, but they’d been to Oxford and Cambridge and were so articulate – and they made me feel insecure. I needed to prove to myself that I had a right to be in such august company! When I was at UCL I understood that those people weren’t brighter, they were just better prepared.”

Mentoring is the ultimate shortcut
And as he says to the young people he works with now: “Just because it took me 20 years to get somewhere, doesn’t mean it has to take you that long!” Mentoring, he explains, is a key shortcut that young or older people, whether at Making the Leap or at UCL, can take.

“At our training centre everyone, from the young people who take our courses to our staff and even myself, has a mentor. “For young people, it’s very important to give them access to somebody who’s been there, and can act as a point of view to their family and friends can’t. There are also things that can only be addressed one-to-one. It can be incredibly valuable to pick things up from someone who has had that experience.

“My last formal mentor had recently come out of prison and wanted to turn his life around. I was struck by how articulate he was. He wanted to do youth work and I suggested he study law, which took him aback – he’d left school at 16 with almost no qualifications. Last I heard from him he was studying politics, philosophy and economics at university!”

Tunde found his own university experience useful, not just for what he learned but also for the network it gave him access to. He passes this knowledge on through speaking at alumni events such as UCL Connect and inspiring students and new alumni at UCL graduations. “If young people are prepared to work hard they can achieve anything,” he says. “Nowhere is that more relevant than for UCL graduates, who go on to be at the very pinnacle of their professions. I say to them that wherever you are in the world, you can be proud of being part of such a magnificent institution – and it is worth staying in touch. I have friends and colleagues I’ve met through the university. One of my staff, for example, is mentored by a UCL alumnus.”

Mentoring, and being mentored, is similarly something Tunde recommends to everyone. “It’s a really good feeling to help somebody,” he says. “If what you’ve been through can help someone else on their journey then it costs you nothing.”
Thank you for partnering with UCL to achieve great things. To talk more about how your philanthropic support can transform our shared ambitions into impact, contact Lori Houlihan Vice-Provost (Development) on 020 3108 3801 or lori.houlihan@ucl.ac.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/campaign