[INTRO]

Everyone has a stake in education. That’s what makes it such a fruitful subject for research – and such a political football.

The UCL Institute of Education is a major player in this national conversation – having trained more than 10,000 teachers over the past decade, while also being an unrivalled centre of educational research.

Hello, I’m Ben Stevens and welcome to a special podcast discussion – in which we’ll explore the IOE’s work and how it intersects with the wider education agenda.

To do so, I’m joined by Professor Michael Arthur, UCL’s President and Provost, and Professor Becky Francis, Director of the UCL Institute of Education.

In the latest QS World University Rankings by Subject, the IOE has been ranked as the world number one for education for the fourth year running – so, Becky, what would you say are the key talking points in the sector at the moment?

BF: Well thank you Ben. I guess if you were to ask the average headteacher, they would reply, “Recruitment and retention”, time and time again. Really we are facing major challenges in the workforce and these are real issues that, of course, threaten quality right across the country. Other issues for schools are autonomy and accountability. Globally, we have very strong accountability as well as very strong autonomy. Accountability comes in the form of Ofsted and I think that there’s a general agreement among both practitioners and policymakers that perhaps our accountability has been too strong and has precipitated some unintended consequences around fear, playing safe and, actually, a disincentive for people to go into school leadership and so on. So that’s something that challenges the sector.

Mental health issues for kids is a major issue that is challenging practitioners across the board. And, of course, the role of schools, and education more broadly, in social immobility – which is longstanding interest for policymakers. So those are just some of the many issues that people are talking about in edication at the moment

Social mobility is a prominent theme in the Department of Education’s policy agenda – so how would you both say the school system could best enable all pupils to fulfil their potential?

BF: I think this is really about equality of opportunity for high quality services. And, at the moment, in this country we don’t have that. Provision in the state system is quite patchy. It’s excellent in some areas – London would be a key exemplar – but very poor quality in some others. And we know that teaching quality particularly has the biggest effect on student success rates and that’s particularly true for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. So it’s doubly important that they access th best teachers, but they are least likely to do so. So that’s a real issue for the system.

MA: I’ll come at it from the perspective of a higher education institution, but the first thing I’d want to say is you have to recognise that the social mobility issue goes back a long, long way into very young childhood – possibly even as far back as being in utero and, therefore, the expectation that this could be solved easily is clearly wrong. This is a huge social problem and I think it’s got to be addressed across the piece.

The role of universities in all of that is, of course, to try to help as much as possible with attainment in schools and that’s where we’ve focused our efforts – many thousands of hours of input from our staff, from some of our students back into the school system, has been our approach. One of the delights about the merger with the IOE is, of course, this is their specialist area and so I feel very much more secure in the fact that we’ve got real expertise behind our interventions – that will hopefully help to address this problem – but our job is to try to help raise the attainment of those children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

How does UCL’s widening participation activity fit into this? Is there room to use contextual information in relation to prospective students?

MA: Well I think the UCL Academy is a very specific intervention that was started I guess the best part of 10 years ago now and has turned out to be a huge success. We’ve just been looking at the GCSE results for the first cohort that have gone all the way through to GCSE level and the results are truly outstanding. And when you look at that school around 60% of the pupils have at some stage in their life been a receiver of free school meals. So that’s remarkable and I’m very proud of the fact that we’ve been involved in that.

It is of course only one school and so it’s hardly going to have a national impact, so we need to think about what else we can do to help widen participation. We have been involved in national schemes, a scheme that ran with the Russell Group called ‘Realising Opportunities’ and we’ve modified that in our own thinking about how we can do more in terms of widening participation.

So it’s a combination of looking at contextual data – so things like you know, what’s the performance of the school that they are in generally? Do they come from a care background? And are they from a low-income family? Do they come from certain postcodes, the so-called ‘polo’ groups? I personally don’t like that last thing I don’t think it works terribly well in London at all. Receipt of free school meals also doesn’t work as apparently everyone in Stratford can receive a free school meal if they wish. So it’s about understanding all of that and looking for those very bright children who basically need more opportunity to develop their full potential.

So in our latest iteration of that we’ve got four departments that are running a pilot scheme of using a combination of contextual data, plus some coursework that they do with the pupils, to evaluate potential. In that scheme we are prepared to drop A-level grades by two grades. So if we were asking for three A’s, we would accept ABB. And we will evaluate that programme and see whether or not to spread it out wider. I’m reasonably confident that it will work because I ran a similar scheme when I was at the University of Leeds, I was involved in running a scheme at the University of Leeds that was similar so I think that we will find the right people, they will come to UCL and they will do very well.

BF: I think it is incredibly important that we take meaningful steps to widen participation and of course attempt to recognise the inequalities that are shown to grow through the education system. In terms of the IOE’s contribution now to wider UCL, obviously we like to think that we are supporting equality right across London and then beyond through the substantial contribution to initial teacher training that you’ve already mentioned. We have wonderful links with London schools, some wonderful networks both in terms of practice, school placement for students and so on but also evidence-based practice which is very important. And I think that as well as our links and close work with the UCL Academy, one of the things that we can support are some wonderful schemes and developing at UCL around for example academics working as school governors and so on. I think there is a lot more that we can do as academics and as university institutions to support that state education sector. But it’s wonderful that UCL is at the forefront of that.

**There is a longstanding divide between academic and vocational education. Are degree apprenticeships the way to overcome it?**

MA: Well the government has introduced degree apprenticeships, rather with a bang. They were looking for very large numbers to be recruited into degree apprenticeships and my understanding is that recruitment is way off target, which kind of says a lot. We’re not involved in this and the reason for that is quite simple – we haven’t really got the industrial partnerships that can provide that element of the apprenticeship because essentially these people need to be employed as apprentices as they study. So if you haven’t got the industrial partner then you can’t even get started.

I wouldn’t rule it out in the future. I think as we develop the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, UCL East, that there are possibilities and Engineering I know are already working with a technical college that specialises in engineering type of programmes. So, there are possibilities but I certainly don’t see it as the big solution to this long-standing perennial problem.

BF: It is really interesting to me, I think there are some quite profound issues that perhaps we don’t articulate about hierarchies of subject knowledge and so on. I do wonder what Law, Medicine and Engineering are if they are not vocational subjects and yet somehow we don’t seem to include those when we think about this vocational/academic divide.

Clearly, we need to be shaping high-quality routes for kids who don’t want to go to university but I’m rather more sceptical about some of the assumptions that we make about what a high-level, degree-level apprenticeship is and some of the things we don’t talk about in those discussions as well.

**What are the main developments on the horizon for the IOE?**

BF: Well, they are many-fold. It is wonderful that we’ve merged with UCL, our research-funding is up and we have many new exciting courses and I guess one of the key tasks for me as a leader but for our colleagues across the board, is to uphold and maintain our world-leading status.

We do have some very exciting new initiatives. One of those is the Centre for Education Improvement Science for which we have just recruited our director who will start in January, Dr Becky Allen, a very famous policy analyst and I think she’ll be a great leader for the centre. She’ll be tasked to work on education system analysis globally but also to look at learning science, where we think that we can be a global leader drawing on of course both the cognitive psychology strength and the neuro-scientific strength that exists right across UCL – and this will be another key benefit of our merger with UCL.

We are also starting a Centre for Research on Teachers and Teaching to strengthen our focus on quality in initial teaching training and pedagogy.

We have of course our estates master plan that Michael may say more about but you know this was another exciting prospect for us on merger and we have some really stimulating public events going on now including our “What if …?” series in education looking at perennial debates such as the ones we have been mentioning today but also key issues facing the world of education and they’re open to the public. So it feels very exciting at the IOE at the moment.

MA: Let me comment on the merger itself and whether or not the expectations have been realised. So the key thing I think I’d say about the merger is that both organisations have very similar values with quite significant emphasis on social justice in both, quite explicitly stated by the Institute of Education. So it always felt like the merger would go fairly well. Of course like all mergers there were significant teething difficulties and we shouldn’t ignore that but I do think we are emerging from those now and academically this was a merger that was driven by academic excellence and I think that’s worked.

The IOE felt the need to be part of a larger multidisciplinary organisation to secure its future. I think it has without doubt now achieved that. We have for example seen international student numbers double from the combined entity UCL IOE.

I always think it could have had another name the Institute of Education, it could have been called the Institute of Advanced Social Science Research, very quantitative social science excellence which is why it’s the world number one education establishment globally. So that joined together with the social science activity we have here, the combination of all the cohorts, people from the IOE joining in with the new Grand Challenges, particularly the one on equality and justice – I just look at all of that and think well that was the kind of thing that we were anticipating happening when we were effecting the merger and now it absolutely has and I could not be more delighted.