UCL Remarkable Stories\_Mouhssin Interview

[00:00:00] **Gia:** We are UCL and these are our remarkable stories. My name is Gia Lulic, and I work in the Organizational Development team at UCL. In each episode, I will be in conversations with our UCL guests as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences, and life lessons.

[00:00:27] **Gia:** In today's episode, I'm so excited to chat to Mouhssin Ismail. UCL alumni, regional director, and executive principal. Mouhssin gave up his career as a lawyer to become head teacher at London Newham's Collegiate sixth form, and made the school a huge success in his community.

[00:00:52] **Gia:** We'll start with a little bit of a recap of your professional journey and what inspired you to give up working as a lawyer and to become a head teacher.

[00:01:05] Firstly, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this. So yeah, as you said, I started off as a banking and finance lawyer, and it was really exciting.

[00:01:13] **Mouhssin:** I was doing all the things that I really wanted to do, really interesting deals, really high-profile deals that were in the press. As a child, I was always interested in law. I watched all the programs around that. I was fascinated by it, so I always felt though that was my chosen career.

[00:01:28] **Mouhssin:** But when I started working in the legal profession, I found out there weren't too many people like me. And by that I mean, my background in terms of social class. Most of my colleagues and peers either went to a grammar school, which is a selective school or went to a fee-paying independent school.

[00:01:44] **Mouhssin:** And I noticed at that point my educational state education, wasn't as rigorous or robust, as some of my peers that I worked with. And at that point I decided that I wanted to do something about it. And it was about two o'clock in the morning when I was drafting a banking and finance deal that I thought it was enough. I went home, drafted my resignation letter without having actually secured a job with a school or a PGC course.

[00:02:06] **Mouhssin:** Went and handed it into the senior partner at the firm. And that's my journey into teaching.

[00:02:12] **Gia:** That is so inspiring. Tell me about where you are now and in terms of timeline, how long ago that was?

[00:02:20] **Mouhssin:** So I'm currently the principal of the new Collegiate sixth form, and Director of Standards for the Multi Academy Trust called City of London Academy's Trust. So I left the legal profession in 2007, 2008.

[00:02:32] **Mouhssin:** I had one ambition when I did leave, which was to be a principal of a school. I had in my mind, how I thought education should be done. I also started to reflect on the type of education I had and also the young people that I went to school with immensely talented individuals, but probably lost their way along their journey.

[00:02:53] **Mouhssin:** And I started to see that it probably wasn't the young people themselves, but the structures and the systems and the type of education that we were given and the ambition and aspiration that was lacking, that my friends had, for a number of reasons. Partly because they grew up in middle class families and their parents had sharp elbows and they wanted them to do really well, which was great, but lots of us didn't have that.

[00:03:15] **Mouhssin:** So I always felt that the school and reflection had to be the surrogate middle class parent who had to provide all of those opportunities. And that's what I wanted to do. So the school set up in 2014, so when I left the legal profession, it took me about six and a half years from leaving to becoming a head teacher.

[00:03:34] **Mouhssin:** I was quite pushy along the way, applying for senior positions within the first year or two, which a lot of people thought I was a bit crazy for doing that. But again, I said I had in my mind exactly what I wanted to do. And then the NCS opportunity came up. I was, rejected twice for that role.

[00:03:50] **Mouhssin:** Saying I didn't have enough experience. they couldn't find anyone else, so in the end, they got back in touch with me and I took the job and now the NCS is regarded as one of the best schools in the country.

[00:03:58] **Mouhssin:** And we are routinely sending students to Oxford, Cambridge. We've sent the first student from East London to MIT and Harvard and Princeton. First one to Dartmouth on four scholarships of 250,000. And prior to that, there hadn't been a single student from Newham who had progressed with some of those universities.

[00:04:17] **Mouhssin:** So to be able to say that played a small part in being able to create an institution that allowed young people from the second most disadvantaged borough in the country to attend some of these universities is just phenomenal. And we also have a strategic partnership with UCL, which is great.

[00:04:32] **Gia:** That is so inspiring, and it sounds like you kind of reached your goal within a very small timeframe. I wonder what was the message that you wanted to pass along at the school that you felt was not really communicated to your peers who didn't seem to be getting as far?

[00:04:53] **Mouhssin:** The motivation and drive behind trying to do that was I already had a relatively successful, but still early career law. I made the conscious decision to give that up and I did that because I was adamant and I believed in my bones that there is talent in areas that some people have written off. And using poverty as an excuse as to why some students, can't achieve.

[00:05:16] **Mouhssin:** And I was sick and tired of hearing that kind of narrative. And I think I had firsthand experience because I went to these schools that people are talking about these dysfunctional schools in deprived areas. And I had these friends who may have been excluded or didn't take academic study seriously.

[00:05:33] **Mouhssin:** But on a social level, when you had conversations with them, they weren't stupid. They were highly intelligent people. The teachers or the institutions of the system didn't cater or create the aspiration for them to succeed. It's almost as though if you wanted to study, great.

[00:05:47] **Mouhssin:** If you didn't, we'll process you for five years and then well done for getting through an education system, whatever grade you got. And I think for me it wasn't that, it was the idea that actually we are not going to process underachievement and we're not going to accept that you don't want to study because education intrinsically is fascinating and interesting.

[00:06:05] **Mouhssin:** And teachers have to make it fascinating and interesting, so I think it's about rethinking how we did education. I think the second part is the aspirations and the expectations. Again, I had teachers who inspired me.

[00:06:16] **Mouhssin:** I had a fantastic English teacher, but they never talked about going to Oxbridge. They never talked about going to American universities. They never talked about becoming a corporate lawyer. I never went to see a law firm. Many of those things were because, I hate to say it, but my typical Asian parents who you're either going to become a doctor or a lawyer.

[00:06:33] **Mouhssin:** I wasn't very good at sciences, so it was law. But there wasn't that kind of push and drive. So for them to say to you, well, why can't you do that. Rather than asking why me, why not you?

[00:06:44] **Mouhssin:** And then it's setting the bar really high. We still at school, at the NCS still have students sometimes emailing or parents emailing, saying there's too much homework being set, or there's too much work being expected of our students, or our children.

[00:06:56] **Mouhssin:** But I'm pretty clear when they come for our open days on our website, that if you have aspirations to go to the best universities, we are going to provide you with the work ethic, the environment, and the structure to be able to do that. Yes we support them all along the way, but I say to all the young people that I'm never going to lower my expectations of them.

[00:07:12] **Mouhssin:** They have to come up to our standards rather than us dropping down to theirs. And that again, comes from my own experience of school. I felt as though, okay this is tough. The kids can't do it, or the young people can't do it. Let's choose an easier text for them to be able to read because they struggle.

[00:07:27] **Mouhssin:** Rather than saying, no, this is the text we want you to get, this is the support we're going to put in place, but you are going to be able to access this because those kids that Eaton, Harrow, and all the private schools are reading this text. And I think that changes the mindset of young people. And you only know what you know.

[00:07:42] **Mouhssin:** If I was getting a C grade and everyone else is getting D's and E's in my little small universe, I thought I must be doing really well. Again, it's about teachers bringing that to the table and exposing the differences that exist and then giving young people the choice. What kind of life do you want going forward?

[00:07:57] **Gia:** Yeah. So much about changing this mindset is about the everyday experience that students have. Do you have a special training program for the teachers at your school, or are you hiring people with a particular philosophy that kind of fits in with yours?

[00:08:16] **Mouhssin:** We do hire teachers who have a similar philosophy. Who believe in social mobility, who believe there's no ceiling to achievement. But then you need to be able to provide the training and the professional development to be able to show teachers the way to teach, how to teach.

[00:08:31] **Mouhssin:** And also my role as principal is to constantly push back when teachers say, this student's finding it difficult, or I'm not sure about this young person, or I don't think they might be strong enough to go to Oxbridge. And my role always is to say, I disagree with you. Everyone has the opportunity.

[00:08:47] **Mouhssin:** You don't think they're at that position at the moment, but you don't know. And I think what's happened over time is those students who some teachers may have thought weren't strong enough initially, have got offers. That demonstrates that you can't write any of them off, any student off.

[00:09:04] **Mouhssin:** You just don't know what their future holds for them. And whilst you may believe at this particular juncture that they're struggling, but that doesn't mean they're not going to be able to make the grade going forward. And it's those kinds of stories that really inspire me, that young people who think at this particular point aren't strong enough to get in.

[00:09:22] **Mouhssin:** And you have those honest and robust conversations with them. I'm not saying you shy away or you cope the truth with some veneer, but you then give them the tools to be able to do that. So yeah, I think it's a combination of CPD, professional development, high expectations and constant training to ensure that they are successful in meeting the high aspirations we have for the teachers as well.

[00:09:39] **Gia:** You mentioned before that your parents expected you to do... either be a doctor or a lawyer.

[00:09:46] **Mouhssin:** Yes.

[00:09:46] **Gia:** What was their reaction to you telling them that you wanted to become a head teacher?

[00:09:52] **Mouhssin:** I think there's two parts to that question. The first one was, where does that come from? And I think I benefited from having migrant parents who came to the UK to better their lives. And that constant reinforcement that the advantage you have in the UK is that education is your way out of poverty. Education is your way for social mobility. No matter what your background, everyone gets a chance.

[00:10:15] **Mouhssin:** And if you're talented and you take advantage of the opportunities, there's no reason why you can't go to some of the best universities and then access the professions and then obviously that changes your life. So my brother and I had that constant reinforcement from our parents, although they weren't educated themselves. They valued education, they valued teachers.

[00:10:32] **Mouhssin:** They respected teachers. So we had that push. For my father when I became a lawyer that was a huge thing. So when I decided to jack in and say I'm going to become a teacher, he decided not to speak to me for a period of time, thinking I was making the worst mistake ever.

[00:10:48] Didn't understand why I was doing it. So for me, that was quite a difficult period, but again, I believed in what I was doing. I didn't want to get to the end of my life and think to myself that I've just sat in the office and you don't feel as though you are really enriching your soul or you are making a significant contribution to society, or you are adding value.

[00:11:08] **Mouhssin:** And I think if my father saw the results today or the joy on some of these young people's faces when they've gone through difficulties, you've supported and helped them and they've achieved what they wanted to do, and then you know, they're the first in their family to go to Oxford for example, or they're the first in their family to go to MIT on four scholarships.

[00:11:24] **Mouhssin:** You might not be there for the rest of their journey or their life, but you know that they're going to look back when they're 50 or 60 and realize that it's such a monumental moment for them and how that's going to change their entire outlook on life and their families. So to do that for hundreds and if not thousands of children, I don't think you can place a monetary value on that.

[00:11:42] **Gia:** And what does your father say now?

[00:11:46] **Mouhssin:** They value teachers and they respect teachers, but I don't think they value the profession. I don't hold that against them. I just think it's a cultural thing. My father still, if you asked him what is the greatest profession, he'll say engineering because you make stuff.

[00:11:58] **Mouhssin:** But there's beauty in art, there's beauty in, literature. But again they're not exposed to that so they don't appreciate that. So I don't really hold that against them. They've always wanted the best for their children, and they sacrificed immensely.

[00:12:10] **Gia:** It sounds like you got over that hurdle quite easily. It's obviously like it was a bigger drive in you not to… because I know my parents were like what are you doing?

[00:12:19] **Mouhssin:** Yeah. I think my personality is such that if I make a decision and I've sat and thought about it and I've contemplated what I wanted to do, then I'm full steam ahead. If it works out great. If it doesn't, I'm not the kind of person who's going to dwell on it.

[00:12:31] **Mouhssin:** I think that was the best decision I could have made at that particular time. And even if it hasn't worked out, there's a learning and a lesson in there for me, which is going to make me grow as an individual, but either professional or personally. And I think sometimes you have to go through difficult periods to really enjoy the successes.

[00:12:46] **Mouhssin:** And we had that with the school. We had some really difficult periods at the start, like anything when you're setting up a new school.

[00:12:51] **Mouhssin:** But the amazing thing was that I had such amazing colleagues who were in the trenches with me. And I think that camaraderie that you built, it's just phenomenal. And that relationship, we might move on after that in our own careers, but that sense of loyalty.

[00:13:05] **Mouhssin:** And you really know what people's values are and their character when their backs are up against the wall. And I learned a lot about myself, but more importantly, I learned a lot about others. And my respect for lots of my colleagues grew immensely over that time. And I think that's one of the things again, when you look back, yeah, you might have succeeded in certain professions and jobs, but it's those relationships that you form with other human beings.

[00:13:28] **Mouhssin:** That you remember and you talk about and you reflect on when you catch up with people you may have not seen for 5, 10, 15 years. It's those moments that stay with you forever, I think.

[00:13:38] **Gia:** And what was the biggest challenge to get to this huge achievement of… I think I've read that it was like 95% of students.

[00:13:47] **Mouhssin:** Yeah.

[00:13:47] **Gia:** Which is just remarkable.

[00:13:50] **Mouhssin:** Well, where do I start? I was employed in February, which is late, and I had to open the school in September and all teachers have to be employed by 31st of May. So I didn't have much time and there was no students, recruited at the time, and no teachers in the building was still a building site.

[00:14:05] **Mouhssin:** So I had to persuade all the parents and the children and the staff to come and join me on this. But I had no building to show them. I had no results to show them. And it was merely extending a hand and saying to them, you need to trust me on this, and if you want to come on this journey, it's going to be amazing.

[00:14:21] **Mouhssin:** And thankfully, quite a few of them did do that. But then within the first two months, I had the local authority knocking on my door, the director of children's services saying to me, oh by the way, Mouhssin, we know we recruited you in February and we know you've been tight and you've done really well to get the school set up.

[00:14:37] **Mouhssin:** And you've got the first cohort of students. But unfortunately, the school's illegal. So local authorities can no longer set up schools that they weren't able to then, which mean that they had to give it up to another Academy Trust. They'd missed that process, which means that the school didn't exist.

[00:14:53] **Mouhssin:** So now I have to go and tell my staff by the way, the school doesn't legally exist. But that's my point where what I was saying earlier, they stuck by me. And they didn't jump ship. And then again together, we managed to get through that period, which was a very difficult period because the local authority cut finances for us.

[00:15:09] **Mouhssin:** So at one point, I remember I had to go and borrow paper from a local school because we couldn't purchase paper because we didn't have any finances. We were running around to make sure staff were getting paid, because there were blocks on the school's finances. So the day for salary was coming up quite soon and we were working behind the scenes frantically to make sure, cause that would've been a disaster if you just said we were legal and then staff not getting paid.

[00:15:34] **Mouhssin:** That would've worried everyone and mortgages and the rest of it. So yeah, there was some interesting and dark nights of the soldier during that period.

[00:15:42] **Gia:** At any point did you feel like this was a big mistake or?

[00:15:47] **Mouhssin:** No, I don't think I did. I now had 25 members of staff who decided to join me. I've had all these students who I've made promises to. I just felt I had a deep sense of obligation, and a sense of loyalty to these people to make this work.

[00:16:00] **Mouhssin:** So there was no way I was going to walk away from this voluntarily. They would've to carry me out or they'd have to get an external person coming in telling me that this is not going to work. But there is no way that I was going to work. Because it goes back to my character and my values.

[00:16:12] **Mouhssin:** When I saw how these colleagues of mine and what they gave up, and the uncertainty that, and the ambiguity that they were in. For me to be able to turn around and say, oh, by the way, just to let you know I've got a job somewhere else and I'm leaving you halfway through after you've left your jobs to come and work for me.

[00:16:26] **Mouhssin:** After I've tried to persuade you and gave you the whole spiel about why social mobility is so important and these young people need us, I think that would've, gone to or talked to my values and my character and I wasn't going to allow that to happen.

[00:16:41] **Gia:** And what would you say is your proudest achievement? What's the thing that you are personally most proud of about this journey?

[00:16:48] **Mouhssin:** I think what I'm incredibly proud of is to see how the mindset has changed in Newham. And I think that's in large part because we've managed to be able to persuade students that irrespective of your background, your future is not set. And I think as you started to see, 95% of students getting offers for a roster of universities, 30 to 40 students getting into Oxbridge every year, five offers for Ivy League.

[00:17:13] **Mouhssin:** The conversation within the borough, the aspirations of young people and their families has changed. So to be able to be a part of that cultural, educational renaissance, if you like, within, Newham, it's been extremely rewarding. I still remember trying to persuade parents to come to the NCS and then Newham was a borough where you would settle first as migrants and then you would move if you made some money to a local borough from away from us.

[00:17:42] **Mouhssin:** So this parent had left the borough. As was the journey if you, became financially secure. the kids wanted to come to us and I had a frank conversation, and I still remember her words. Mr. Ismail, we left Newham to go to another borough, and now you're asking us to come back. And at that point I realized it was too early on to be able to say because we had no results, and now we've got applications from these boroughs in the, hundreds if not thousands, trying to come into Newham which they'd left because it was a second most deprived borough in London.

[00:18:15] **Mouhssin:** So again, to have that cultural shift and that change has also been remarkable and rewarding. And it's also the borough that I grew up in. I was born in Newham and when my father came to London, he lived about five roads away from where the school. So I have a deep connection to that place. So it did hurt me when people were talking this way. So it's now great to say, you've left, but now you want to come back to the borough that you decided it wasn't good enough. It's now good enough, isn't it?

[00:18:38] **Gia:** That's incredible. Is there anyone throughout this journey that you looked up to? Anyone that was like a role model or anyone maybe that you met that really of ignited that fire in you?

[00:18:50] **Mouhssin:** I think there's two parts to that. There's lots of fights and battles I had to win. There were lots of people who outwardly, talk about social mobility and talk about advancing education. But when you actually come to seeing or trying to get things done, they tend to put roadblocks and they try to create impediments along the way.

[00:19:10] **Mouhssin:** So there were lots of those robust conversations. And I think that's one of the things that I learned that you can't take no for an answer they need to push, because ultimately young people get one chance at this and they don't have any advocates. And we are there, we are the greatest advocate.

[00:19:23] **Mouhssin:** Second part, there was a couple of people. So first a guy called Dave Ace, who is my line manager and at my old school and a mentor. I think he got what I wanted to do. I think you meet people in your life that they just understand you, they understand what your ambition is.

[00:19:40] **Mouhssin:** And rather than seeing that as a hindrance, they do everything they can to support you in trying to achieve that. It's just that they want to be on the journey and see you succeed. So I have a lot of admiration for him for doing that. I still turn to him for counsel and I know I'm going to get an honest and transparent and candid response, which is always what I like. Another person called Bushra Nasir, who was, the first Muslim head teacher at Plashet school. And again she was amazing. When it was difficult periods, I could just pick up the phone and speak to her.

[00:20:07] **Mouhssin:** Didn't matter what time of the day it was, she would constantly check up and see how things were. Because a former head teacher knew the challenges, had all the battle wounds as well to go with it. So again, those two people as well.

[00:20:21] **Mouhssin:** And I think the chair of governors at the NCS, several of them have been phenomenal. Really supportive, and given up a lot of their time to support the school.

[00:20:29] **Gia:** It's so important to have those people who actually see you and they just support you. And I think in so many ways you are now that person for, a lot of those kids who maybe just take for granted the limitations, and it's amazing that you're changing that. So what is your drive now that you've achieved that? What is continuing to drive you? Or are your aspirations now bigger? And where do you hope it's all going to go?

[00:21:01] **Mouhssin:** I think what we managed to achieve at the NCS in such a short period of time. Opening in 2014, the first set of results was in 2016, and now we're in 2022. So it's not a long period of time in terms of the trajectory of the school and success that it's had.

[00:21:13] **Mouhssin:** So I think for me, I've always been keen on advancing social mobility and also going to places where people have said it can't be done or it's challenging. And I said at the start, I have this innate belief that irrespective of your background, there is talent everywhere. And it's our obligation to unearth that, that talent and ability.

[00:21:34] **Mouhssin:** So I'm going to be moving to the north of England, in a new role where there is deep pockets of deprivation, unlike Newham which has good links to London. Some of these places don't have strong links to major cities. And they face other challenges. So that's going to be my next challenge to go to places in the north of England where traditionally called cold spots for social mobility, where they may have had intense deprivation, where schools have been judged, requires improvement or inadequate for pretty much their whole history.

[00:22:05] **Mouhssin:** And I'm going to try and see if I can try and raise the aspirations in those schools and see if we can deliver an outstanding education for those young people. That would be another area where people say it's challenging and difficult and I want to see whether it's possible to do that.

[00:22:20] **Mouhssin:** I might go there and fail and people might say to me, well I told you so, but if you don't try, you just never know.

[00:22:26] **Gia:** And what is your biggest fear around that? Or are you just like, if it happens, it happens.

[00:22:32] **Mouhssin:** Yeah, I think I've got to the age now where I don't really care too much about that stuff now.

[00:22:35] **Mouhssin:** As I said at the start, I think every opportunity that you go through in life is a learning experience. It also teaches you stuff about your own character and your own values, and it tests your own character and your own values. Because I think it's easy to say, I'm somebody who does X, Y, and Z, and my values are X, Y, and Z.

[00:22:52] **Mouhssin:** But when you're placed in a situation where your values are com could be compromised, what decisions are you making about in that moment? What decisions are you taking to either align with your values? Or may compromise your values. So I think that is also interesting to learn about yourself and you need to talk a good game, but when it comes to it, do you actually value those things?

[00:23:16] **Mouhssin:** And then it might require you to reflect and change and look yourself in the mirror, and reflect on what kind of human being and person you are. So I think for me, that whole journey, is just fascinating. And look, don't get me wrong, like anyone, I'm not sitting here saying that I don't suffer from imposter syndrome.

[00:23:32] **Mouhssin:** I think everyone at some point in any career, any walking life or in any situation thinks to themselves, am I good enough to be able to do that? What are they going to think of me? Is that a stupid question? I don't believe for a second that, anyone hasn't gone through that, and I'm no different to that.

[00:23:48] **Mouhssin:** But I think what I've learned to do is to silence those voices over time. So when they do come up I say, what's the outcome? I let that dominate my thinking and therefore just stay where I am. And to me, that's not a tenable position.

[00:24:00] **Gia:** Has that become easier over time?

[00:24:02] **Mouhssin:** Easier in the sense that I recognize it. And I have mechanisms, mental sort of models, and mechanisms in my head to deal with that. So the easiest one for me that I use all the time is, if I'm afraid to say something or do something or take risks. I always think to myself on my deathbed, would you be more concerned that you didn't take the chance or you took the chance and you failed?

[00:24:27] **Mouhssin:** And for me, on my deathbed, I'd be more annoyed if I didn't take the chance because I don't know what would've happened if I took the chance and it failed. At least I can look at myself in the mirror and say, you gave it a go. You were brave enough to many others wouldn't. You tried, it failed.

[00:24:42] **Mouhssin:** That's part of life. So yeah, I think I've developed sort of models or sort of mental modes, if you like, or my own voices to counteract the other voices that happen when you are having that internal talk. Or maybe that's just me.

[00:24:58] **Gia:** No, I think it's one of those things I feel like because you were successful in quite a few things throughout your life. So I wonder if that imposter syndrome thing is like, of course it comes up, but you are like you again. Because I do think that imposter syndrome and that fear and that doubt is really what keeps someone's life quiet.

[00:25:18] **Gia:** So it's one of those things that's maybe not often talked about.

[00:25:21] **Mouhssin:** Yeah.

[00:25:21] **Gia:** But if we could just get past that limitation, I think we'd all be taking more risks.

[00:25:27] **Mouhssin:** I think it's hard not to have your confidence dented, but to go from sort of failure to failure without experiencing some success, you end up having some sort of doubt in your ability.

[00:25:37] **Mouhssin:** And I thought about this for a while, if the NCS didn't do well. After all the effort and hard work, would I still feel passionately that I can... or would my mindset change? But I think you can't let those thoughts come into your head. It's not so much about the success or the outcomes, it's the process.

[00:25:54] **Mouhssin:** As long as you focus on the process and what you are learning from it, then maybe that particular point. You're not having success, but that's giving you the skills and the tools to be able to move on to the next thing. And you might not experience success for another 20 or 30 years, but all of those little micro experiences is preparing you for that moment that when success actually eventually comes, that it's because of the experiences that you've had along the way.

[00:26:17] **Mouhssin:** And I think if you can stay in that moment whereby you are recognizing that it's about my own development, personal growth, and successful will come because I believe strongly in it and I'm doing something I'm passionate about. Then I think maybe that's the way in which you, manage those trials and tribulations along the way and you maintain that self-confidence that you talk so eloquently about.

[00:26:37] **Gia:** I imagine that when you were going through your journey, you are like, I'm going to give this the go and if it works out.

[00:26:43] **Mouhssin:** Yeah.

[00:26:44] **Gia:** And if it doesn't, obviously you're focusing on those things that you gained. Was there anything about your own personality or character that surprised you in this journey?

[00:26:55] **Mouhssin:** You always think of that you are a certain way, or you would like to think that you would behave a certain way in certain situations. So I think I'm pleased that, I didn't compromise it in my values along the journey. And I stayed true to myself. I think that's really important for me.

[00:27:09] **Mouhssin:** Whether you're successful or not, I think who you are as a person, and those experiences as we talked about, just determined that was important. Covid for me was another period or episode, which really challenged leaders in every sphere of domain. And one of my strengths is if I have to get something done, I worry about it, but not worry in the sense that I'm anxious about it, but I need to get it done. I can't switch off from that until it's completed. That's an advantage and a disadvantage for.

[00:27:40] **Mouhssin:** But I think what Covid has taught me was that uncertainties is a happy place because in education at the time, you couldn't operate for prolonged periods of time because there was so much uncertainty every single day. And to be in that heightened state, which I can do for a particular period of time because I need to get the job done, and then you can switch off and relax and the rest of it.

[00:28:02] **Mouhssin:** But to be like that for a year and a half or for two years, it's impossible. So I think that part for me, I learned about myself. Which was great because of revelation, because now I can just walk in and think, Covid happened and we survived.

[00:28:14] **Mouhssin:** I was sitting up to nine o'clock waiting for the Secretary of State to send the guidance for the next day. We walk in and say, so how's it going today? Whereas before Covid we'll be stressing all the time about what we're going to do. So uncertainty, ambiguity, almost became my friend.

[00:28:29] **Mouhssin:** I just lived with it and, all the leaders that I knew learned to live with it. And I think that's quite liberating, because the sky's not going to fall down, you're going to get up the next day and do the whole thing again.

[00:28:39] **Mouhssin:** So it gave me that sense of ... I think liberations is probably the right word.

[00:28:46] **Gia:** So you basically overcome imposter syndrome and ambiguity, uncertainty. I'd say that's going to be very inspiring for all of our UCL community for sure. It definitely is for me. So I'm a bit obsessed with like our power to alter our mental state and cultivate our experience through imagining our mind. Do you have any kind of rituals that keep you in a certain state of mind where you are more positive than negative or do you meditate or do any of that stuff?

[00:29:20] **Mouhssin:** No I don't meditate. , but I see the world as a journey. I see the experiences as a way of testing my character and my personality and my values, and whether I can stay true to that.

[00:29:30] **Mouhssin:** So again, like I said I've got, mental modes, mental models, that allow me to deal with difficulty and challenges. So to be able to go through an episode or difficulty and then to be able to stand in silence and contemplate the vastness of the world or the greatness of the universe. And to understand that I'm an insignificant being on a huge planet almost means that I shouldn't take myself too seriously.

[00:29:54] **Mouhssin:** And also I have a loving and supportive family that understand what I'm passionate about, understand what I'm trying to achieve, and they make it easier for me to be able to do this.

[00:30:03] **Mouhssin:** So I think it's a combination of rebalancing and having the support of family members to be able to just try and fulfill something that you feel strongly and passionate about. And you know I see my two kids, one of my sons at my school, he started this year.

[00:30:16] **Gia:** Oh, amazing.

[00:30:17] **Mouhssin:** I always said, school needs to be good enough for your own children before you start, telling other people to come there. And I believe that, so when time came for my son to come to a school, why wouldn't I send my own child there?

[00:30:28] **Mouhssin:** And again, I think family members respect and understand that. We want our children to go to other educators and we want them to be able to inspire them. We want them to be able to be devoted to their journey. So why wouldn't I want that for the other 700 students in my school?

[00:30:43] **Mouhssin:** Their parents, their family have ambitions and dreams for their children. Like I have ambitions and dreams for my children. Like my parents had ambitions and dream for me, and when I look at them, their parents have sent them there, and I'm a custodian of their futures. So I take that as a huge responsibility on my shoulders to make sure that I'm doing everything I possibly can to give them every opportunity to succeed.

[00:31:06] **Mouhssin:** The last thing I would want any of them to say is that they didn't find that the head teacher of their school was passionate or cared enough about their future. If they don't take advantage of the opportunities that's on them. But they can't blame me for not giving them the opportunities. So I see my job as doing that and ensuring that they have those chances.

[00:31:27] **Gia:** You make it sound so easy. That's what's really fascinating because I think so many people struggle with the whole kind of life work balance and I guess it's important to have support and a cohesive kind of vision to be able to sustain that.

[00:31:43] **Mouhssin:** I genuinely believe strongly and passionately that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve adults who care about them deeply and immensely to be able to create institutions, be they civic institutions, education institutions, that doesn't resign them to a future because of their family background.

[00:32:05] **Mouhssin:** I just find that abhorrent the concept of the idea that just because you were born into a particular family, that the state at least shouldn't give you an opportunity to be able to improve your law. Whereas if you were just out of coincidence born into a middle-class family, you would have all the trimmings and trappings of a middle-class family and there will be…no one would be questioning whether you should go to university or not. It's just a done thing. So for me, that seems deeply unjust and inequitable. And we live in a country where you can make a difference to these young people, but it's how passionate and how much people want to come together.

[00:32:43] **Gia:** For our students who are listening who are just like starting out in life and they've got their own aspirations, is there any piece of advice you could give them about going on a journey that's maybe not being done before or what would you do with all the experience you had?

[00:32:59] **Mouhssin:** You need to be brave and bold. And you need to challenge when people say it can't be done, you need to believe in your ability. And you need to trust the process.

[00:33:09] **Mouhssin:** You really have to ask yourself that on your deathbed, what kind of legacy do you want to leave? Do you want to be the person who is doing the nine to five job every single day? Which is fine. That's a decision that you've made.

[00:33:21] **Mouhssin:** Or do you have something that you feel that you can contribute to society in the world? And if you do, then we are not going to know the profound impact that it's going to have unless you go out and try. And if it does work well, all of us are going to benefit from it. So I would say go and do it.