

Sustainability Matters Now Podcast

Season 1, Episode 7. Sustainability and Careers: The Case for Green Career Guidance

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Hello and welcome back to Sustainability Matters Now. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really pleased to be joined by Korin Grant, Assistant Professor in Career Studies and Coaching at the University of Warwick's Centre for Lifelong Learning. Korin brings over 20 years of experience in higher education, career guidance and employability and she teaches on Warwick's Career Development and Coaching Studies programmes, including a higher apprenticeship for career development professionals. Korin is published on Green Career Guidance in the NYSEC Journal.

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exploring everything from how strategic leaders think about environmental issues in careers work to a practical framework for auditing and reimagining guidance practice for a greener world. Her most recent work has been gathering evidence on how careers professionals across the UK are actually engaging with sustainability in their day-to-day work. Korin, hello. Hi, Tom. How are doing? Great, thanks. How are you? Yeah, I'm not too bad, thank you. I wonder, Korin, what brings you to this conversation on sustainability, please? Thanks, Tom. Well, thanks for the great introduction because that really helps. And I think my answer to this...

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is probably quite similar to the answers that a lot of people would have, which is a complicated mesh of a number of things that come together and then become interesting to you. So as you say, I spent a lot of my time at work as a career guidance professional. In the last sort of six years, I've moved into an academic role and I now teach career guidance professionals, careers leaders, coaches. And with that comes the opportunity to spend a little bit of time thinking about some of the scholarly research around career guidance.

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And I knew when I was faced with undertaking some studies and a project and thinking about scholarly research, it was going to need to be something that aligned with my values. So I've always been a very strong supporter or have a really strong interest in the environment, really since I was a child. And I think I've tried to live that to some extent in my life. And certainly I'm very politically aligned with that. I've taken up the opportunity to be a citizen scientist with work, which has been really fun.

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So what I knew that I had to have something that was going to link with that. And that is where I started to come across this concept around green career guidance. The idea that we think about what is the role for career guidance practitioners when it comes to addressing climate change, biodiversity, pollution, what do we do? And the answer to that at the moment seems to be this concept of green career guidance. And I love the idea of green career guidance because it's not a phrase that most people would have come across or heard much of before.

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How would you describe it to someone perhaps hearing it for the first time? Yeah, I mean, to be honest, I probably would say, let's hope you're not hearing it forever, because eventually we'd like it to just be career guidance and that

we are always incorporating the wider world and the needs of the planet as part of that. But the idea is that green career guidance is a career guidance approach that takes account of the impact on the planet when we think about our learning and our work. And we take a very deliberately, a very broad

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definition of career. So career is what you're doing while you're on the planet. So while you're a student, that's part of your career. When you're a child, that's part of your career. As a parent, that's part of your career. All of these roles and important things that we do are how we're spending our time. And all of that has a real impact on what you do at work and how you move through life. So career guidance is about trying to think about all of those elements and green career guidance and is trying to think about them from the point of view of, how will we have

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sustainable future if we approach work in this particular way. Is it a shift more in the jobs that we're pointing people towards or a shift in how we're thinking about all jobs that there are available in careers? It's both really I would say. So certainly we should be seeing within the labour market this green economic transition or this green labour market transition. And I would say there's probably some questions about that, about how fast that's happening and the industries within that's happening.

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and also to what extent it is a just transition. If we want, you know, we often talk about a just green transition and trying to think about social justice as part of that. But there is definitely something happening in the labour market. So we want to represent that. But equally, we want to think more holistically about career and not just about the fact that a conversation about career that thinks about the needs of the planet as well as our own needs would be useful from a sustainability perspective.

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but also from the sort of health and wellbeing that it has to offer us. The fact that it could just be better all round for us to have roles that allow us to feel aligned with our values, think that we're creating a world that's sustainable, a world that's going to be nice to live in for the future that might not require this level of responsibility for the next generation, for example. I think this really interesting way of thinking about work and careers in that more holistic way. And I mentioned in the introduction that you have been undertaking a practitioner survey on

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careers professionals are engaging with sustainability. I know that that survey has now closed. I wonder, are you able to talk more about any early themes that have emerged about the way that these professionals are engaging with sustainability in their work, please? Yes, well, the survey is actually still open in some countries. It's a collaborative project across a number of different countries. I have to say the UK has been very responsive. And that's one of the reasons why it's closed here, because I've already achieved over 300 responses.

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And that's the first thing that I would say about what we're learning about UK practitioners is generally they are really positive about this idea. When they hear about it, they think, yes, this resonates with me. This is what I'm hearing from young people in schools or people that I'm working with in colleges or higher education, or maybe my individual

practice clients are talking about moving from a career in one area to try and think about a career that's going to allow me to account for the environment as part of my work. So they're very positive.

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There is a little bit around the context for that. So in particular, there are some regions or even countries where that is not landing as positively. So for example, if your area of work is heavily reliant on oil and gas industries, we're finding it harder to get career practitioners to respond to the survey. But it's also quite, quite disparate in terms of the way practice is then either deliberate or envisioned. So I think that's very interesting. We have quite consistent sustainability targets, you know,

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nationally, internationally, we sort of know we have these targets. And this is not resulting in a really consistent practice across the ground. And that might be partly because in different regions, there are different types of green labour market jobs available. But also, we're just not seeing that sort of sustained funding and sustained training, which then creates new opportunities that everybody is accessing. So there's something about there's a real lack of consistency. There's a lack of confidence, I would say for some

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career of practitioners. And that relates partly to just what do I know about the environment? So I feel like I need to be skilled enough to talk about the environment to bring this up. But also how might I deal with some of these difficult conversations? Like, do I want to bring, for example, eco anxiety into a conversation about career when it wasn't there in the first place? So there's something around that. There's also what I hear a lot from practitioners is great, I'm ready to do this. But where is the green labour market information? How do I get

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good information about the jobs that are out there for people who are interested in this particular type of work. And of course, one of things we would answer to that is, we want to think about it more holistically, but also it's fair. It's fair that you would want to have a good source of labour market information that allows you to point people in the right direction. The last thing I would say, and this is quite a big one, is there are some ethical concerns from careers practitioners. And this relates mainly to our really

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core codes of practice, which are about usually having quite a person-centred approach. So we want to be looking at what does the person in front of me want to get out of this session or this workshop or this piece of education that I'm doing. We want to be impartial or neutral and we don't want to bring something else in. And so that can be a very difficult position to hold whilst also thinking I have a responsibility to introduce the topic of sustainability or challenges in the environment to this.

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And we have got some really interesting answers to that, which I can go into. But those are the things that I'm largely hearing about is like this sort of a little bit of a lack of confidence, a bit of what does it look like? How do I deal with the ethics of that conversation? But overall, and I would say every single person who has responded to me personally about the survey has only responded to say, this is so needed, this is so interesting, we need to move this forward.

And I think from my point of view as someone who supports students in developing their careers through chemistry and in other subjects,

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Yes, it feels like something that we need to discuss more. And I was going to ask you about that difference between what practitioners believe and what they feel able to do in practice. And you kind of touched on it, but I wonder, could you speak a little bit more to that? You said there are some answers that you have for those questions. And I wonder if you could elaborate on that a little bit further, One of the big things to think about often is reflecting on our own positions in relationship to this. People are really very positive when it comes to thinking about.

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wanting to do something about the environment, wanting to make the world a better place and wanting to feel like their job, the thing that they do every day as a careerist practitioner, can allow that. And translating that into practice can be challenging. One of the things to think about is if I'm holding a position in which I'm always neutral, which I would argue is quite a difficult position to hold, then what I'm really doing is I am supporting all of the existing systems and structures.

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So that means there isn't a neutral position. So effectively, we can agree that the world is perhaps not fair and perhaps in a bit of need of our help and our concern, then not doing anything is a position still. So there's that element of just thinking, actually, you may think you're being neutral, but actually it isn't necessarily impartial and neutral. It is still holding a position. And are you happy with that position? And if we can agree, maybe not, then we need to then talk about, what are the things that could move us forward a little bit?

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And there are some fantastic resources now available. There's been a recent project that's just completed in Europe called the European Green Guidance Project. And there's a whole handbook, free tools and resources available online, which give you ways of bringing in this sort of green approach. And I'll just give you a few examples of things that may feel more achievable that will help people imagine how might this work. So for example, taking an approach to career guidance where you're really focusing on values,

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and a future focused approach, for example, will help to bring in these topics naturally. People will often want to talk about things like, I might want to one day be able to have a family, or I would like to be able to live in a place where I can have a nice walk and there's this beautiful environment or nature around me. So that kind of approach is a very common approach. We often use what's called career anchors or values to think about what do we want out of a career? And we often talk about the future.

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career is nothing if not talking about the future. It's about what's your next step. But there's also things around trying to take an approach where you are deliberately reframing how people think about things. So you're asking them to think about things in a different way. You're naming problems in a very open way. So let's talk about this particular

thing, which is a problem, and allow people to then have a conversation about it. And the other thing that there's many, many different approaches, but another approach that is very common is to

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very consciously and deliberately choose green labour market information resources to bring into your sessions. So we often are talking about, here's an example from an employer of one of the things that they said they want. Why wouldn't we always try and choose one that was that kind of profile, which would then simply raise the consciousness of these types of jobs and the types of skills, experiences related to those roles. So those are just a few ways in which we easily bring these conversations in.

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It is about sort of reflecting on your own position, thinking about how that feels and then thinking about how you might make some changes. And that's a good start, I think. There's also lots of free training that people can access, both in terms of green career guidance, but also in terms of just better understanding climate and climate change and the things that the world might need from us right now. And I think your point about the European green guidance documents and bringing those in when we're having these discussions with people and in our case with students.

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It links back to what you said earlier about eventually wanting this to just be called career guidance and not green career guidance of it being a pillar, I suppose, of that work without us having to talk about it and say, we're going to do green career guidance. Cause as you say, all career guidance should be green. We all live on the planet. We all want to live here. We all need to drink water, breathe the air, et cetera. And what I find really interesting though, I think is that in lots of conversations that I've had, it always feels like there's a slight risk that green careers end up being narrowly defined as.

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environmental jobs, either renewables, recycling, conservation, that sort of thing. How do you think we can move beyond that narrow framing to help people realize, no, no, this is a much bigger conversation? Yeah, I think it's a really important point. We are a little bit curtailed by that, because in order for this green economic transition to happen in a more holistic way, that would require a real commitment to policy and funding from the government to some extent, right?

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This is how we are seeing 400,000 new green jobs being created by the UK government is because they've made a decision to do that. There are lots of problems related to that in terms of it being sort of narrowly defined, but also we are already seeing that it looks as though some of these jobs might be more likely to go to educated males. And that's partly because of the nature or the industry that they're in. So we're seeing.

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possibly a gender imbalance, possibly a social justice imbalance, which means this idea of having a just transition, even in the UK, you we're not talking necessarily about the just transition we'd like to see across the global south and the global north. Even here, we are seeing that that is possibly not playing out the way we might like it to. So yeah, I

think it's a real risk. One of the things that we can be doing on an individual or an education level is some of the things that are happening, certainly at the university already, is trying to

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work with individuals on their understanding of systems. So we know that that is a really key sort of skill in relationship to the fundamental skills for sustainability is sort of understanding how things are linked and how they have impact on each other. So working with individuals on that then starts to pull out, well, actually all learning and all work has an impact on the natural world. You cannot get out of bed without that happening.

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And so if we believe that, then we need to start thinking about all the different impacts that we might have and how we can have better impacts and how that might change. So that's probably the big area to look at is thinking about career as being much broader. It encompasses all the things that we're doing while we're on the planet. I have that sort of approach to it, but also then all the learning and work that we do has an impact on the natural world. What does that look like and how might we change that? And I think for me, working in chemistry, I can see the clear link between

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renewables conservation and the degrees that our students are doing. But my background is in history and I think I was going to ask you how do we help students say from history see themselves as part of that conversation. But I think what you said about introducing that systems thinking approach that's what we need to do more in universities is help students realize actually almost regardless of your topic you will have a skill set that can benefit the species for want of a better term and that can fit in as part of this system and help us

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change the way that we work, change the way that we think about these things and not just see environmental jobs as I said as renewables as conservation. But I know Korin that you've written about auditing and reimagining career guidance practice for a sustainable future. I wonder what does that process actually look like for universities please? This came out of a piece of research that I did with a group of students I was working with. So they were actually mid-career individuals.

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And I was asking them, you know, what do you think about trying to include environment in your career? And out of that piece of work, I was unable to think about career guidance approaches and how we might move into a more green approach to our career guidance. And really it was just a stage of asking individuals to reflect and think about what position are you currently holding? Like look at all the different practice that you have. You have a careers fair, you have one-to-one guidance, you've got short appointments, you do coaching.

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You might do embedded employability programs. You might have a, an employability award. All sorts of different things are happening in educational institutions, but also in things like in the NHS and talking therapies in organizations where people are holding HR roles. So there's lots of different practice out there. So thinking about all

of that, what position is it currently in, in terms of trying to have an impact on change? And if it's sitting in a space where it's.

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really trying to support the existing structures, then we need to think, are we happy with that position? For me, that's the first place to be in because our behaviour will change when we are emotionally committed to climate change or thinking about the world, the natural world. So thinking about our position is probably quite important. And then trying to introduce some elements of change in order to move that needle. So can we then try to introduce

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green labour market information? Can we think about values? Can we think about the future in the sessions we're doing? How can we encourage people to have conversations that look just a little different to eventually we might find that we're doing radically different things. We might be having really impactful policies around, you know, every single placement has to be a placement that incorporates a sustainability element. Or we only work with employers at careers fairs.

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who are willing to share all of their policy around sustainability. And we simply don't invite others who don't have that policy. All of these things are things that are out there and being tested in practice in many different campuses. We've got people who are doing things like creating games for students to play that are all about trying to identify the sustainability elements within different careers. So many interesting activities out there that can be used.

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So I think it's starting by reflecting on the position that you're holding at the moment and then thinking, how do we potentially change our position whilst still trying to recognise that individual autonomy, individual choice is important, but we do want to be having that impact. Or I do, I want us to have that impact. And do you think it's more about individual practitioners themselves changing their practices or is it that bigger institutional change piece do you think that will help improve these processes moving forward?

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That's such a good question, actually, because I think if we went around and asked all career services to what extent their work is directly linked to the strategic goals around sustainability for institutions, I suspect there would be a big divide, right? Nobody's really thought that that is important. And I'm going to steal something from a colleague of mine who's working on this project in this space right now. But she had this idea of a

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What if all of our graduates, rather than us being measured on how many of them are in graduate jobs, and to be fair, we also ask if they're happy, so that's great, we do want to know if they're happy, but rather than being measured on that, what if we were measured also or instead on their impact on the planet? I mean, that would completely change what higher education looked like in terms of how we prepare people for leaving after their degrees. We'd be really focused on.

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How do we ensure that everybody leaves here with a really clear understanding of system change and climate and what their role might be in preparing a greener world? So yeah, no, it can't be down to individuals. We probably need to be more systematic, but I think there is a bit of sort of back and forth. So we can be saying, we want this, we think this is important. Why won't you help us to do this? Or will you help us to do this? And also we can be linking up with those targets because...

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The truth is there are no organizations that are neutral in this space. Every organization has already said, I really want to change. want something to happen because they've got them in their strategic goals. Like almost every single organization has got a link to something to do with sustainable development goals related to the environment. And so what we need to do is then say, okay, well, let's really test that and try and link up what we're doing to those goals. Yeah. And I think that idea of testing it is a really interesting one that I've had lots of discussions about.

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green careers before and I know lots of my colleagues have but I don't know if we've ever explicitly linked it to the university's work in the sustainability space and I don't know if that work in the sustainability space explicitly links back to careers if you see what I mean if that link is there and the question was intentionally a slightly cheeky one because the answer is both. We need individual practitioners to change practice to influence institutions and so on and so forth but I really like this idea you said of having that measure of student success I guess for want of a better term as being

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the impact you have on the world, not are you in a graduate role within six months? And it will be much harder, but that will be a much more, it feels productive way of redefining what higher education is. It's not about just going to get a job. It's about having a positive impact on the world and how are we preparing you for that, as you say? Yeah, and I think to be fair to the people that we're working with, they want that. It's not like we're asking something of them that they are not asking of us.

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Yeah. And I wonder with all of that said, what steps do you think we can take to try to build this more sustainable future through the way that we're approaching careers and work? Part of it starts with trying to encourage people to think a bit more broadly about how they define career. And if we think about it as being, you know, what we're doing in the world while we're here on the planet, then it is probably quite important to think about what impact that has on the planet and on

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the natural world and on us in terms of our wellbeing and our happiness. If we think about it from that perspective, trying to incorporate sustainability into career guidance and into thinking about the work that we do or the learning that we do, it could be the most impactful thing we do. It could be the way in which we make this problem real, which has felt unreal despite the fact that we have had this information for a long time.

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So it's been very difficult for many of us to operationalize sustainability in our lives. If we can try and do it through work or through learning, that's where we spend most of our time, or a lot of our time. We don't really want it to be the thing we do when we go home and we do recycling. We want it to be incorporated in everything we're doing. And when we're recycling, somebody else's job is related to that. That's related to sustainability.

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When we go off and go to the movies, somebody there has got a job and their job is also thinking about sustainability. This could be the most impactful thing we do in terms of the planet is given how much time we spend in these spaces. And I think for me, what I find really interesting with that is this idea of if we could have that debate about green careers when we're talking to students, it would make it easier for me when I'm teaching students about sustainability to have that clear link to what's coming next, because I feel sometimes it can be quite difficult to

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kind of ground the discussion and students can sometimes feel like, okay, but why am I being taught this again in another module, another time? Whereas if you could have it as part of that bigger discussion around systems thinking and about the impact it will have on your career and your choices in your career, you can almost see how students would benefit from that and almost be able to, it feels like it would land better, I think both with students and with colleagues who we know maybe don't see the value of teaching about sustainability throughout degrees, because it's not a conversation that we've

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We've won, we have to keep having that debate every day of this is why it's important that we talk about this. Korin, thank you so much. I think it's been a really interesting conversation on green careers and the work that you're doing and how that can have an impact on both academic staff, professional services staff, and also students at universities, both at Warwick and beyond. But yeah, it'd be great to speak to you more in future as this continues to develop because I think there's some really interesting ways of understanding this piece of work and how that will change as we

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move forward to the change in the SDGs in 2030 and what that's going to look like for green careers moving forward as well. So thank you so, much. Have a lovely rest of the day and I'll speak to you again very, very soon. Thanks very much, Tom. It's been great talking to you.