**Keynote 3 – Let’s Talk About PQA, Mary Curnock Cook (MCC) OBE**

**Biography:**

* Previously Chief Executive at UCAS – left 2.5 years ago
* Involved in lots of sector boards and advisory groups
  + Open University
  + Student Loans Company
  + United Learning
  + The Access Project (chair)
  + The Dyson Institute (chair)
    - Degree apprenticeship provider, new to the sector
  + Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)
  + The Student Room (TSR) Enlitened
* MCC advised delegates it’s really valuable to get involved in sector discussions if you can get support from your institution. There’s a lot out there!
  + E.g. school governor, advisory groups etc

**PQA: Context**

* Vote in the room – ‘what do you think about PQA?’
  + Most people think PQA is a bad idea
* ‘PQA a bit like a bad dream. Recurs throughout the year’
* There are always reports released saying how PQA will be great in supporting WP students, admissions policies
* Lots of negative publicity around unconditional offers has reignited discussions on PQA being the solution
* There is an assumption in the school sector that current system (conditional/unconditional) is somehow bad for equality, WP etc
* PQA is also ‘apparently’ a solution to help with the discrepancy in reliability of predicted grades in schools/colleges
* Worth noting there are currently 2 x Admissions reviews taking place in the sector
  + Office for Students (OfS)
  + Universities UK (UUK)
    - No results revealed as yet in either. Both taking place at the same time seems slightly counterproductive
* Likely will mean HELOA colleagues will be involved in providing evidence/data/insight into these in your institutions

**Unconditional offers**

* Have been very toxic and divisive for the sector
* The narrative around the sector is universities being very complacent in use of unconditional offers in marketisation
* ‘Bums on seats’ narrative has spread sector wide. Universities ‘are only focused on bums on seats’. Leads to a negative tone for external people looking into the sector
* Lots of useful data in [2019 UCAS End of Cycle report](https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report)
* Nearly 40% of 2019 applicants received some form of an unconditional offer
  + Approx. 25% of these – conditional unconditional
* Sector has been towing the line on how these support WP but in reality this isn’t the case
* This has all translated into much more focus on PQA

**PQA – A brief history**

* Swartz Review in 2004 – VC at Brunel at the time
  + Recommendation to set up a group to implement PQA
  + This was set up but nothing happened. Only thing to come out of this was Adjustment which is still hardly used as a function across the sector
  + Universities were dead set **against** PQA, school sector were very **for** PQA
* Students at the Heart of the System – David Willetts, 2011
  + Similar time in the sector as the UCAS Admissions Process Review in 2011/12
    - UCAS mapped what PQA would look like
    - Response was **broadly negative** again towards PQA both from universities and schools

**Why do people want PQA?**

* Unassailable logic of ‘it just makes sense’ of people out of the sector looking in without assessing actual practicalities
* Common arguments
  + Fairness of under-predicted grades – vast majority are over-predicted
  + It’d be better for disadvantaged students
    - Probably needs more discussion
  + Everyone would know where they stand
  + Everywhere else in the world does it

**What do we actually mean by PQA?**

* Does the A stand for admissions? Applications?
  + We pretty much already have the admissions one due to people not being confirmed until they have their results
  + Australia is always pointed towards as a PQA system but it really isn’t
    - Only similarity is they don’t get conditional offers
    - Apply pre-results and then very complicated allocation system
    - Ranking system based on results

**Is PQA a solution looking for a problem?**

* Over 92% of applicants get an offer
* ¾ get into first/firm choice
  + This isn’t a system that isn’t serving people well
  + Vast majority are going to the university/course that they initially wanted
* Predicted grades does work for vast majority
  + Data Scientists can show and prove it’s actually more accurate than people think
* Conditional offers motivate students
  + Makes people stretch towards achieving higher grades
* Unconditional offers demotivate students
  + Performance usually lower than anticipated
* Applicants have a lot of time to make informed choices
  + Open days, accommodation, student finance etc
    - Plenty of options if anything goes wrong
    - Schools/colleges free to concentrate on small numbers of students who need support during Clearing
    - All this evidence shows PQA being the solution doesn’t really stack up

**Main arguments against PQA**

* Timetable
  + ‘Universities just should start their academic year in Jan’
    - This just wouldn’t work and this was rejected by UCAS
  + UCAS model was more around having exams slightly earlier (end of April/early May) and push university start slightly later (mid/late Oct)
  + Would students actually do their research earlier? Probably not
    - Schools would really struggle to nudge students to do anything without current deadlines pushing this
* Transactions
  + Approx. 400,000 school leavers who need:
    - advice and guidance
    - decision making support
    - finance applications
  + 5 applications each means 1.7million applications
  + Just by having results doesn’t automatically means students will go ‘ooh yes I know where I want to go’
  + All within approx. 6-8 weeks.
    - When they’re on holiday!
  + Feedback from parents
    - They want to go on holiday too! Not sorting son/daughter’s HE journey
  + This would be all after students have left school
    - Really would be an issue in families where HE isn’t pushed/preferred/a motivation
    - Currently these are being supported (in theory) by their schools throughout the process
  + One big Clearing
    - Still not the best moment in the Admissions cycle so why are we saying let’s just have one big Clearing?
    - We already have PQA. It’s called Clearing.
  + University planning and budgeting
    - Financial sustainability a big conversation in the sector
    - The idea of going through the whole year without any idea on projected figures, demand for courses etc
      * How do you then plan staffing, resource, accommodation, investment
      * MCC thinks this would results in poorer student experience because of the lack of planning universities would be able to do
      * It would just need to universities making unofficial offers, setting up waiting lists etc which really doesn’t help anyone given lack of visibility, transparency.
      * Would probably lead to lots of regulations having to be implemented

**Could the wider system be improved?**

* Number of choices?
  + Nope, students don’t want more choice. Most genuinely think there’s 1-3 universities they’d actually go to. They actually want narrower.
* Ranking of choices?
  + Ranked all 5 choices at the point of application
  + Most people think this isn’t a good idea
* Parallel vs sequential (e.g. UCAS Extra but all year round) applications
  + Would this serve students better? Probably not
* General conclusion is any new idea with such a big system like this is you stumble on major challenges quite quickly
* With population growing over the next few years, this might result in higher popularity in Insurance choices
* Fixed conditions
  + If you give a conditional offer, that’s actually a real hard condition. No acceptance if they’re not met.
  + All you’d end up doing is pushing people into Clearing
* Oxbridge dates and rules
  + Could this not just be moved to January
  + Applying to Oxford or Cambridge seems unfair but removing this would just mean students all have both on their application so limits choice to maximum of 3 other places

**Final message**

* Be careful what you wish for
* Given the current admissions system was set up in the 1960’s, it shows the amazing foresight shown by people at the time
* It is slightly frustrating that the basic process can’t be improved but tweaks along the way is good
* Possibly a future where UCAS is more of an admissions engine
  + Competitors with new tech (e.g. Coursematch) may be able offer an alternative but probably won’t help conversation around student choice
* Our lives would basically become HELL.