**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.