

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

International Women’s Day 2021 series

Episode 4: Leading through the pandemic: Vice Chancellor Buitendijk on the challenges of overwork and perfectionism

Speakers: Professor Simone Buitendijk and Dr Cheryl Hurst

Cheryl: Hi, and welcome to the podcast. I’m Dr Cheryl Hurst, I’m a postdoctoral research fellow with the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change.

Simone: And hi, I’m Professor Simone Buitendijk and I’m Vice Chancellor at the University of Leeds.

Cheryl: I’m going to start the podcast with a few questions about Professor Buitendijk as a leader at Leeds, before we get into some bigger topics. So, to start, since beginning as the Leeds Vice Chancellor in September of 2020 you’ve had a notable presence online which is not typical of people in your position, you’ve been active on Twitter, blogs and, of course, podcasts like this one. And there is also an informal and even familiar tone to your posts, what has led you to this choice in leadership style and voice?

Simone: Yes, it’s a really good question, Cheryl. I think two things: one is that I’ve always wanted to do this and it’s easier to decide how you want to communicate when you’re the boss because if you’re, sort of, one or two levels below and the leadership above you is not really into this kind of communication, I think it’s a bit harder because it gives you different visibility to other people. So, it felt a little easier for me in this new role to just decide that’s what I wanted to do.

And I think the second element is that I was very keenly aware that I needed to make myself known and make myself visible and communicate to everybody in the Leeds community differently than I normally would have done, because I stepped in in the middle of the COVID crisis and we weren’t really on campus a lot. And normally I would have physically visited departments and walked around and spoken to people and just things formally and informally in meeting rooms and halls etcetera. And that was now completely impossible. So, it was also a conscious choice to make sure that people would be able to get to know me.

And I think with so much in the COVID crisis we were finding out things that we actually like that we're doing because of the crisis, but we notice work better than what we did before COVID. And I think this, for me, is one of those things. So, I'm not going to stop once the COVID crisis is over and we can meet each other physically again, I think I'm going to be more, sort of, hybrid, or blended if you wish, in my approach. But I'm really enjoying my Twitter comms with people and getting messages back and I think there is a very low, yes, low key way of getting to know lots of people in the community. And similarly, with podcasts, I get a lot of very positive comments from many people who seem to feel like they are getting to know me, and that's exactly what I want.

Cheryl:

So, like I said, I've been reading your blogs and many of your blog posts revolve around this idea of perfectionism and overwork and the importance of slowing down, which is, of course, now more relevant than ever. So, there is one line from one of your blogs called stepping off the hamster wheel, how a limited perspective can obscure the essential, and I'm just going to read out, so, "I believe there are problems with the way we are defining success and rewarding certain behaviours, and by 'we' I mean Vice Chancellors and Presidents, and other people in leadership positions in universities everywhere in the world." What specific practices need to change or can be changed in order to see a new definition of success and, kind of, to break down those paradigms that keep us on the hamster wheel?

Simone:

Yes, Cheryl, I think we need to break down lots of practices and as we're doing that build new ones, and maybe we should first build new ones before we break down existing practices because people always get a little nervous and fearful when you start breaking down things that they're used to and that they feel are important for them personally or professionally. So, when you just say, "We're no longer going to do this," I think it's hard to make people change. So, I think what we need to think about is what other behaviours do we want? Yes, what is academic excellence, what does it look like? How do we define it? And I think if we start redefining it and being more broad and less rigid I think we'll find solutions and we can grow them organically.

I think nothing can ever change overnight when it's so incredibly ingrained and so part of what people have grown up with and are used to, and for the successful people in academia, they feel like they are successful because of those practices. And they often

don't, themselves, realise how narrowly defined they are. I always like the saying, "Fish can't see water," and I think we all suffer a little bit from that, that we're so in this system that we don't realise, actually, what we're doing to each other and ourselves.

So, I think what leaders need to do is they need to have that broader perspective, maybe they should be outside the fish tank for a bit every now and then and, sort of, look at what we're doing inside. And then slowly start introducing different ways of looking at what we value, what we reward and what we incentivise. But of course, also then what we disincentivise, and I think that can only be successful when it's part of a bigger vision of a sense of what universities are for, and I think if we start trying to change universities, we need to explain to the people within them why we're trying to change. So, if you just say, "Okay, from now on we're going to use different criteria for promotion," without explaining why, without explaining that ultimately, we all benefit from different criteria for promotion, I don't think you're going to be very successful.

So, I think, actually, one of the reasons that so many Presidents and Vice Chancellors, yes, don't embark on this path to change is that they themselves often aren't aware enough of, yes, what we're doing to each other and the level of suffering. I'm using that word often when we talk about academic work and studies, and I'm not using it lightly, I really think there is suffering inside of academia. And what I find even worse about the fact that it's there is that it's self-inflicted and to quite a degree, I think, completely unnecessary, it doesn't improve our performance, our outcome. On the contrary, I think it actually is in the way of true academic excellence.

Cheryl: I definitely think that's true, and I think that when you speak to people who aren't in academia, as an academic, it helps you, kind of, put things into further perspective and as an early career researcher, there are many days that I think, "Oh, I haven't done any work today," because all I've done is prepare my classes, I wrote a blog post, I had an interview with the Vice Chancellor, but I didn't write a paper and thus, I didn't work today.

Simone: Yes, exactly.

Cheryl: So, speaking about that, I guess, is there is a challenge facing academia right now, certainly with the pandemic, is that breakdown of barriers that demarcate home life and work life

and, coming out of the pandemic, what do you think needs to be done to build those boundaries back up to get that work/life balance going?

Simone:

Yes, I don't know whether everything is bad, I think we need to talk to one another and we need to be careful not to go 180 degrees back and say, "Okay, now we're going to make everything the way it was before COVID." But of course, also be careful not to keep everything the way it is now because I think we all hate certain elements of our life right now, but I think secretly or not so secretly there are also elements that we like. And, of course, they are not the same for everybody, it depends on your stage in your career, whether you have children or want to have children or not, it's very different for me than it is for someone your age.

But I think having that conversation with each other and finding out what it is that we enjoyed in the new way of COVID working and what it is we didn't enjoy, and how we can build stronger communities by being more flexible. Because I think before COVID, a lot of employers felt like employees shouldn't be working from home because clearly, they weren't productive, and I think the employers' minds have changed and we realised that some employees, actually, are more productive. And of course, there are people who can't work from home, who have to be at work just to do their work and then it's a whole different situation.

So, we need to make sure that we don't create all kinds of inequalities, and I just read an interesting article, I think it was in the Financial Times about teams, and how important it is not to bring part of the team on campus or in the office while the other part is working from home because there's good evidence that people who are in the office with the boss and able to stick their head around the door have an advantage over the workers from home. So, it's better to have an entire team either work from home and converse on Zoom or Teams and then bring them into the office other days. And, of course, what does office space look like? That's going to be interesting too, apart from do we need to socially distance if we leave that out of the equation for a bit. I think if we're not in the office every day between eight and six, we can probably use our office spaces quite differently.

So, I think we'll have, if we're smart, and if we don't just completely switch back, we'll find that, yes, we need to think

hard and find a really good hybrid. So, I'm sure that also people with young children enjoy the fact that they don't have to commute every day into the office and leave at really early hours and sometimes just are able to drop the children off at school or at day care and walk five minutes to their home for the day of work. But it also means we need to equip people's home working situations, make sure that it's actually healthy to do it, so yes, there are loads of things to juggle. But I think it's a nice challenge to think about and keep the good and ditch the bad as quickly as possible.

Cheryl: I definitely agree, and there is certainly that... I think it will take a few months to find that right balance between what works and what doesn't, and we're going to see those consequences like that study you said. Because we know that even from people that take flexible working arrangements and stay at home, they miss out on those informal networks.

Simone: I don't think it's going to go back completely to pre-COVID, I can't imagine we'll want to give up things that we like better.

Cheryl: So, to go back a bit on what we were talking about with this overwork idea, academics and professionals were certainly working in overdrive. We are trying to not only do too many things, but we're trying to do too many things incredibly well, and it's unsustainable. You know, in my own words I would say that something's got to give, but we're all working within that system that regards this commitment and this elusive idea of perfectionism that you touch on in your blog posts, and you personally have become successful in this system, what were some of the defining moments in your experience, and what do you hope to change for the people coming up after you?

Simone: Yes, I don't know whether there were any defining moments, I think it was a whole set of things. Certainly, the fact that I was a single mother for a while and was juggling, actually, writing my PhD with taking care of two small children by myself, was extremely painful and difficult and lots of nights that were far too short and I felt I had no choice, I needed to do it, and yes, it's probably a good thing I did it because I don't know whether I would have had this job if I hadn't completed my PhD. But just thinking about what that meant for me, physically and mentally and it was really too much.

And I think what started dawning on me, but over a period of many, many years is that what we're telling ourselves and each

other we need to do isn't written in stone. If you start... I think what changed my mind was when I started going up the career ladder and was able to look at it from a bit more distance, and not be so in it that it really felt like there was only one way to do it, and I needed to produce, I needed to write, I needed to do all those things that clearly were asked from a young researcher. And I think I started to realise how many of these outcomes are so poorly defined, and how some of these outcomes aren't probably even what we think are really all about. And yes, so that's happened to me over the last, maybe, ten, fifteen years.

So, when I was your age, I was in it and I had very little awareness of how unhealthy it all was, and maybe when you're younger you don't realise what a toll it takes, and it's only when you start getting older you think, "Why are we all doing this?" But it's harder to change it when you're not in some kind of leadership position. So, I think it gradually came, and also with my own personal development, just starting to wonder how I could reduce my own stresses and what the things were that drove me to be so perfectionistic, and a lot of that had nothing to do with work, it was just part of my upbringing, the Netherlands is quite a Calvinistic country and there is this huge work ethic that my parents certainly put into me and my sisters. So, I think when I started seeing the personal as more professional and started climbing the career ladder, yes, I allowed myself to ask questions without just doing it.

And, yes, I think if I look at it now from, of course, clearly more advanced leadership position, I think a lot of what we're telling ourselves and each other we need to do isn't that clearly defined, it's just a sense that we need to do it. And I think one of the most difficult elements in academia at the moment, and many, many, many other workplaces, is the sense of competition, is the ranking, is the fact that we're always competing against others.

So, if we all drive ourselves completely crazy, if we all produce, produce, produce, more, more, more and there is actually lots of evidence in terms of research publications we are producing more and more and more and more and it still isn't stopping, yes, we're never going to win because everybody else is also doing more and more and more. And so that sense that it's never enough, and that we really need to stop and pause and wonder what academia is about, why are universities on this planet? What is their most important role? What are their values? What

can they do for the world? And is that best reflected in an academic output in terms of publications? And even if the answer is yes, then still – and I don't think it is, actually, you probably agree with me – but even if it's yes, then still what is a good publication and why are certain publications not as important for the rankings than others are? And why are certain people writing publications not getting the same credits as others? And then when you start looking at all of that you realise that a, it's probably not the best outcome that universities should be using for their societal impact and their importance.

And secondly, there is huge bias in the way we value academic outputs and publications, and there are certain voices, certain people who just don't get their voices heard, who don't get the credit, who are not visible, and that's both within universities, between universities, but also globally, if you look at the output of the global north compared to the global south, there is such disparity. And that's not because global south academics by definition are less excellent and less good and less driven than global north, absolutely not. It has to do with opportunity, it has to do with visibility, and it also has to do with bias in the way we judge their outputs, and we rank them, and we look at what they're doing.

So, I think we're doing the planet a disservice by the way we're now framing our production. And, to make it worse, we're doing ourselves and our communities a disservice, we can't even say we're working so hard for the common good, I think we're working so hard just because, just because we feel we have to.

Cheryl:

You've touched on a lot there that is very central to, kind of, my perspective of academia and what I first loved about academia, and the big one is competition. And I think I've noticed that there's kind of a scepticism or cynicism about leaders and people who are successful, that there are either people who want to support you or people that think, "Well I suffered, so you should suffer too." And finding that balance, I think, and personally I've always tried to mentor and help, but in the back of my mind there's always that idea that these are the people that I'm going to be competing against for jobs, for grants, and there is that little part of you that thinks, "Right, well, if I help them is there going to be enough of the pie to go around for me?"

Simone:

Yes, no, and that's where... we haven't touched on that yet, it's very important that when we try to change, we don't just tell

individuals they need to change. I don't just tell individuals they need to change, in fact I make sure that it's a systemic approach as well. So, what I want for the University of Leeds, and I think every university should want, is to find good incentive systems and to make sure that people like you who are inherently inclined to help others and to mentor actually see that rewarded.

So, you don't even have to ever have that tiny nagging voice in the back of your head that maybe you're enabling your own competition, but you know that your university actually wants you to be doing that. And there are lots of ways we can make sure that happens, if we think about rewarding group work instead of the individual PI who is so important and more important than everybody else. But if we look at research as a group activity, and if we think about it much more long term and not going from one grant proposal and funding round to the next, and there is also, sort of, a breathlessness that we were introducing into academia which is not conducive to good research.

And that is something that is coming when you listen to UKRI and Ottoline Leyser, I'm not sure what her official title is, but the boss of UKRI, she is very, very clear about her wish to change from, sort of, PI-led to a research ecosystem with younger people also having opportunities where you're all part of this bigger pie and you can relax a little bit. So, for me, everything we can do to make people relax a little bit, and don't feel like they have to fear for their lives every day they get up. And it's so unhealthy. And again, it's not the way to actually do the kind of work that universities are good at. I mean, we're incredibly powerful, potentially, as networked research and education institutes in tackling global challenges and really driving global change. And we're so busy with ourselves and our place in the rankings and it's actually quite sad. And of course, that then permeates into the university community as well.

Cheryl:

I'm very fortunate that I had a very strong mentor during my PhD, Professor Jennifer Tomlinson at CERIC who always told me to take time to just think about things, you know? She said, "Just go for a walk and think, you will never have as much time as you do right now," you're right that that breathlessness makes you think that you don't have time, you just have to produce and produce and produce.

Simone: That means we need to stop chasing the rankings and chasing our own h-index and all these other things that I think are, yes, not very helpful.

Cheryl: Get off the hamster wheel.

Simone: Get off the hamster wheel.

Cheryl: I have one final question that relates to academia in the future. The ecology of academic life has changed in the last year, we're not able to go next door to office and say, "Hey, what do you think about this idea?" but there have been worthwhile changes, you know, the recognition that working from home is possible like you said, online learning is considered more valuable than I think it used to be. What are you most excited about as we try to settle back into this world, and you are a leader of a university post-COVID? What excites you?

Simone: I'm very excited about the possibilities of digital transformation. So, I think there is a wide open field to move into, and I'm truly excited for the potential for digital, and there is so much now in terms of the innovation and the technology. If you think about AI and immersive technology and simulation studies. We can really do so much more in an online space than we could just five years ago. So, if we use that and if we harness the technology, and if we keep thinking about the humans at the centre, I think we can do amazing stuff. So, the scale is amazing, and actually the quality can be really good as well if we do capture what is different and good and we make sure we bottle that up and focus on that and we grow it and we train it and I think we can become very good at keeping the human connection, furthering it with the use of online technology.

And I personally have been to two conferences that would have been held in Pretoria before COVID, there is no way I would have been able to go because it was in the first months of my tenure and I would have never gone to South Africa for that long after I just started, and now I was there as part of the discussion, super exciting, I met the Vice Chancellor at the University of Pretoria, I feel like I really know him now even though I've never met him in person. And I think... and that's just a conference on Zoom, it wasn't even high tech or anything. But that's what I'm really excited about, how we can bring everything universities have to offer to the world, including the global south, and can really start building bridges and creating a really exciting online community where lots of stages and the differences can

disappear, where we can really co-create and not just, sort of, neo-colonial... really bring our knowledge to the world.

Cheryl: And, like we've discussed, if we can keep the good and move on from the bad and have a critical perspective on what we change and what don't change, we will be in a good position moving forward.

Simone: Yes, I think that's actually a really good, sort of, metaphor for how we should lead our lives.

Cheryl: Thanks so much for joining me on this podcast, and thanks to the listeners as well, it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you, Simone.

Simone: Yes, thanks Cheryl, it's been a real pleasure and, yes, let's have a coffee when you're back on campus. Bye.

Cheryl: Thanks for listening and we'll see you in the next episode.