

Vikki Burns - Starting out at university

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Intro VO: Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.

Lucy: Today we're with **Dr Vikki Burns** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/sport-exercise/staff/profile.aspx?Referenceld=9673&Name=dr-victoria-burns>) who's senior lecturer in Sport and Exercise Sciences at the University of Birmingham. Welcome Vikki.

Vikki: Hello.

Lucy: I know we're not talking specifically about your work in Sport and Exercise Sciences for most of this podcast but just briefly tell us what it is that you do.

Vikki: I teach undergraduates, I teach first year anatomy and I'm also involved in research in two quite distinct areas. I look at how stress and exercise affect the immune system and what implications that has for health, but I'm also involved in a newer area of research with some of our sports psychologists looking at the development of skills in undergraduate students and how we can use things like outdoor pursuits to develop group work skills for example and trying to understand better what affects, how they transfer those skills from a sporting setting back into higher education.

Lucy: So it's that classic thing where you go out on a kind of outward bound type day and do things with a group of people and the idea is that you learn stuff beyond just how to cross a river with a length of rope or whatever it is, but we don't necessarily know how that works.

Vikki: Absolutely. So what we're interested in is how well do they take those skills and apply them back in higher education? So does it actually result in an improvement in the way they work in groups when they're back at university and also what types of students are able to transfer those skills effectively? What can we do on the courses that make them more likely to be able to transfer those skills to university and make those courses more effective? There's not that much research looking at it systematically and that's what we're doing at the moment.

Lucy: Now you've previously been a welfare tutor and you're currently Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement for the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, which means what?

Vikki: That means that I'm responsible for looking after the integrity of the programme, so the quality assurance side of it is making sure that the programme that we run is high quality [and] the policies and procedures that we have are appropriate. The enhancement is about the student experience, about all the stuff that students want to gain out of university that are not necessarily directly contained within their academic programmes. So I look at things like induction, I help support the careers tutors, we look at the development of more general transferrable skills and how we can help our students to develop those and make the most of their time at university, hopefully leading to better qualifications, more success within their degree programme, but also the development of skills that they can use in real life too.

Lucy: Succeeding once you're here at university obviously has always been people's aim but the stakes are so high now with the competition that there is but also with the amount of money that people are going to be paying to come to university. Presumably there's a lot more pressure on you to make sure that students, once they're here, succeed.

Vikki: The introduction of tuition fees puts a massive pressure on the students because they're, as you say, they're investing lots of money, they're investing their time, but also as more and more people do degrees, the importance of getting a good degree becomes greater. It's not enough just to have a degree; that doesn't make you stand out above the crowd anymore and so it's not so much about us being under pressure, the students are under huge pressure to get as much as they can out of their time. The transition from school to university is quite a large transition. It's a different type of learning so they're going from a situation where they have small classes, teachers that have known them for years, quite a prescriptive curriculum where you need to know this, this, this and if you answer a question by saying this, this and this, you'll get all the marks, to a much more fluid, much more independent style of learning where there's not such a set curriculum, it's more about well what do you think you need to know in order to answer a question that you're set? There's a massive academic transition -

Lucy: So if students aren't expecting that it can feel like they're a bit kind of abandoned and isolated presumably.

Vikki: I think students know in principle that that's going to happen and that it's going to be more independent but they don't always necessarily understand exactly what that means for them and as you say, that means that they then feel that we're neglecting them in some way, whereas in actual fact what we have to try and demonstrate to the students is that we're supporting them in being independent.

Lucy: What are the likelihoods that the problem a student might have is an academic one or one to do with the work and their programme, the degree course that they're on, because there's lots of other things that face students for the first time when they go to university on the social side or independent living side of things, so they're probably, I'm assuming, as likely to face those kind of problems as they are with their academic work.

Vikki: Absolutely and in actual fact there's quite a lot of evidence that shows that personal reasons are a much more common explanation for dropping out of university than academic failures and usually the academic failures come along because of the personal issues that are going on. We have mature students who have families, we have students for whom they're the first generation to go to university so they're perhaps battling with families that don't necessarily really understand what university is about and what pressures it might entail. We have students who have sick family members and so on, same as any other aspect of the community would experience and all those things can impact on how well you can do your studies and your likelihood of succeeding in the degree course.

Lucy: All those things obviously have always existed alongside the whole going to university experience but with the pressure on universities that are charging full fees to increase the number of students they're taking from non-traditional backgrounds and making sure they're more accessible, how is that going to affect what you do and how the university supports these new students?

Vikki: All of the students are going to be under greater financial pressure than they've ever been in the past and that means they're much more likely to be trying to hold down part time jobs to scrimp and save in order to get into as little debt as possible and we know those things can also impact on your studies. Part time work can be a fantastic way to develop skills but if it starts to affect how much time and commitment you can give to the subject itself then that can be a problem. We know it means that students are more likely to go to their home university, so universities that allow them to continue living with their parents and that can be a real money saver and can be a great opportunity for a lot of people but it often means that students don't engage with the university experience as much as they do when they actually move away from home. The higher fees go, the more students we have who are making those choices and we know they can make settling into university more difficult.

Lucy: So how do you help those students settle in?

Vikki: Well there's two sides to it. One comes from the student, so one is giving the students as many recommendations as we can in terms of the things they can do to make it a better transition, to make their university career successful. So we always recommend to those students that they try and get involved in some of the sports clubs or the student societies and get that proper sense of belonging that you are a student at the University of Birmingham, of the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, and that means something - you care about your school, they care about you. But it also comes from the university's side as well. We have various programmes in place to support our students that live at home, students from different ethnic origins for example and from different areas of the world. We have the

international students office, we have career service, counselling and guidance, so there's lots of different structures within the university to try and support students that maybe are having difficulties.

Lucy: So what's the best advice that you could offer for the first year at university? What are the kind of top tips for making sure that those people are going to settle in and not be at risk of dropping out later on in the year?

Vikki: Certainly throwing yourself into it initially, coming to all your lectures – it sounds like an obvious one! – but it is the most efficient way of doing well and doing whatever you can to develop your study skills, so there's a lot of resources on our [university website \(http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/index.aspx\)](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/index.aspx) and elsewhere about developing independent study habits, figuring out how you're going to take your notes in lectures, how are you going to keep track of your work, building relationships here at the university and if you are still living at home or you're close by, trying to integrate your social networks. So if you've got best friends at home that you want to keep in touch with, bring them up on a weekend, get them to know your university friends so it becomes a part of your life rather than something you go away and do.

Lucy: And for those students who are at risk of dropping out or if things have got difficult, what do they need to do?

Vikki: The biggest thing is seeking support. If you do feel that you're starting not to cope with the work anymore or if you're starting to question whether you've made the right decision, talk to your tutors. I guarantee we've seen it all before. There are a lot of different support networks within the university and if we know the problems that you're having then we can make sure that we put you towards the right support networks so that you can continue successfully in your university career.

Lucy: So people need to be seeking you out, or your equivalent in their schools and departments, and having a chat.

Vikki: Absolutely. Definitely.

Lucy: Dr Vikki Burns, thanks very much.

Vikki: Thank you.

Outro VO: *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website: [www.ideaslabuk.com \(http://www.ideaslabuk.com\)](http://www.ideaslabuk.com). On the website, you can find out how to e-mail us with comments, questions or suggestions for future topics for the podcast. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Lucy Vernall, and the producer was Andy Tootell.*

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