INTRO – Hi everyone, welcome to the ADCET Podcast – supporting you – supporting students. We would like to acknowledge the aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which this recording is taking place and pay our respects to the elder’s past, present and emerging. In this podcast episode, Matt Brett chats to Professor Marcia Devlin. Make sure you check out our show notes for links to the reports and research discussed in this episode. Enjoy.

MATT:  Hi. I'm Matt Bruce and you're listening to another edition of a series of podcast conversations hosted by ADCET, the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, and also supported by the NCSEHE, the National Centre for Student Equity and Higher Education. I'm on the advisory group for ADCET. I'm an Adjunct Fellow with the National Centre, and among other things, and the Director of Academic Governance and Standards at Deakin University, and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne.

Today I am absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to chat with one of my former teachers, Professor Marcia Devlin, an outstanding co education leader, educator and researcher. Marcia has occupied executive and senior leadership roles at Victoria University, RMIT University, Federation University Australia, Open Universities Australia, the University of Melbourne and Deakin University. Marcia has over 300 publications that have accumulated well over 4,000 citations. Professor Marcia Devlin, welcome to this humble ADCET podcast.

MARCIA:  Well, thanks very much, Matt, for having me and that's made me sound very old. I feel like adding, some of those leadership roles weren't for very long periods of time but I'm delighted to be here and delighted to be speaking to you today.

MATT:  And I'm so glad that you can join us. I want to first kick things off with a focus on research and your research record, and in perfect description of your research would be that it begins with equity and some publications around the shock of students transferring from TAFE to higher education. It takes a bit of a detour into some really highly cited work around teaching and assessment in higher ed and then returns to equity in more recent times. So that's a, kind of, lifelong interest in equity and in research and I wondered what is it about equity and higher ed that stimulated this long-term interest.

MARCIA:  Yeah. So I'm accidentally in higher ed. I actually trained as a primary school teacher and that was my interest. Education has always been very important to me in my life. My father was a teacher and because he was a teacher he was able to facilitate us migrating from Belfast in the north of Ireland, where we were when Civil War broke out. So I've seen and lived the experience of education and changing lives and changing lives for the better and my dad was then able to bring out his brother and his parents as well, so it changed lots of lives.

The equity is probably because, you know, I'm an ex-Catholic from Belfast in the north of Ireland and I was acutely aware of inequity from a very young age. I was very aware of my parents. I was seven when we came here. Especially my mother being very distressed at having to leave her home and her family because it was very difficult for Catholics to exist and to live and to get jobs and to be safe in Belfast at that time.

So I've thought about this a lot. I have this very strong sense of what's just and what's fair and when I accidentally ended up in higher education, I could see that there was some inequity and there was some injustice and it fires me up and it just makes me very cross and I just ended up working in it because I had to do my bit for personal reasons, I guess, essentially to address that. So, yeah, that's a long-winded answer but, yeah, it's about the injustice and the unfairness. I just - I can't tolerate it.

MATT:  I might pick up on some of those things a little bit later in the conversation, Marcia, but it's probably worth saying that Australia has never had the same, sort of, intentions as was evident in Ireland but it's - not to say that we've got a perfect track record when it comes to inclusion for people of the Catholic faith. So you've had some stand-out contributions to the field. In your, kind of, research back catalogue you've got - you've introduced into discourse the whole notion of sociocultural incongruity. You've researched the criteria for effective teaching. You've done some, sort of, ground-breaking work around plagiarism as well. Is there any of those or any of the other work that you've done that's a real personal stand-out, one that you're most satisfied with?

MARCIA:  Yeah. Definitely the sociocultural incongruity. I went to university from a working class background and I went to the Australian National University which, you know, is quite different socioculturally and I felt very stupid, and I've worked out I am not stupid, but it took a long time to work that out because I felt that I didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand what people were saying. I didn't know how to be a successful student and I've come to understand that's because there was an incongruity between me and my background, my ways of thinking, my ways of being and those of the university.

And, you know, here I am again. I get cross quite a lot. I was cross about the fact that I was made to feel stupid, and that's also driven my interest in, you know, equity research and practice improvement. So that, you know, people coming behind me didn't feel that way because it's unnecessary. It's unhelpful. It didn't help me to succeed and when I came up with that concept, I think it was around 2010, 2011, I thought it's a really nice way to not blame the university because that's, kind of, what I'd been doing in my head. Not blame the student, which a lot of people do. Now we've got poor quality students. I can't abide that term.

It's such a terrible thing to say about human beings but there's an incongruity between a student from an equity background, for example, and a university, which has very high sociocultural capital and, you know, then the incongruity, to resolve that, it's a joint responsibility and it's a joint venture between the student, who has to learn to do things in a certain way, and a university that needs to accommodate and, you know, possibly, hopefully make some changes and, you know, you sort of talked about the effective teaching and assessment being a detour, but actually for me good teaching can address those issues of incongruity and can address, you know, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to learn, you know, in an equitable way.

So it wasn't actually a detour. It was a, I'm a teacher and I understand - I'm a primary school teacher. You don't teach subjects to primary school kids. You teach them to learn. You know, you're not a science teacher. You're an everything teacher. So it's about facilitating learning and some of the best teachers I've met in higher education are primary trained, and I don't think that's a coincidence because you really learn how to facilitate learning. Whatever the age of the child, whatever the subject matter, and so effective teaching is absolutely crucial to that bridging of sociocultural incongruity, in my view.

MATT:  Along that theme of these things all being entwined, is plagiarism just a manifestation of that incongruity that people have not maybe yet picked up on the expectations and the rules of the university in how they complete their assessment, et cetera?

MARCIA:  Absolutely. So, you know, this notion of, you know, using other people's work and citing it is just a bizarre, you know, western construction. It is bizarre and I remember learning about it, you know, at the ANU. Just thinking, what is this?  What is this nonsense?  You know, in non-Western cultures, some non-Western cultures the notion of individual ownership of ideas is just incomprehensible and that's one of the reasons many international students struggle with it and, you know, get caught, you know, "plagiarising". You know, they don't understand the very notion of an idea belonging to one person.

So, yeah, I went off on a bit of a bender about plagiarism for a while and then I got accidentally known as an expert in plagiarism and I found myself speaking all over the world about it. It was quite bizarre. But my fundamental interest in it is not about plagiarism per se, it's about the injustice and the unfairness of expecting people to understand and follow rules about a bizarre, you know, alien concept that we all think here is completely normal. It's not. It's - yeah.

So that was the plagiarism and people still ask me for copies of papers and just two years ago I was in Hong Kong giving, you know, a series of workshops about plagiarism, and it's always about teach people - if you're going to insist on this in our education system, and we do in Australia, teach people how to do it and why they're doing it, you know, and it's very hard to understand these number rules and putting brackets and dates and all this kind of thing if you don't fundamentally understand why you're doing it and - you know, it's again about education. About giving people the tools they need to succeed, whatever their background is. So it's a different form of equity, addressing equity.

MATT:  I'm not sure if you would count this as a failure of your teaching of me or something else but I've got to confess that if there's one thing that does my head in for any bit of work that I do is it's getting the italicisation and the commas and the full stops and brackets right for referencing. I find it incredibly difficult personally.

MARCIA:  Yeah. So there you go. You're one of the brightest people I've ever met and you're struggling with it so, you know, I rest my case, you know, and we expect first-year students operating in their second or third language from a different cultural background, where individual ownership of ideas is not a thing, to understand in their first assessment six weeks into their course how to put the things in itallics and, you know, and all the things you're struggling with at your stage. So, yeah, thank you for making my case for me.

MATT:  You mentioned your original training is a, sort of, primary school teacher and I don't think this is the case. It's probably a close generalisation but there's probably hierarchy in education where the early childhood educators are maybe not seen as important as the primary teachers, and maybe not seen as important as the high school teachers, and maybe not seen as important as the senior high school teachers. So there's a, kind of, prestige to mention to that which does flow through to higher education and in higher ed it's research that confers the prestige.

So you have been able to thrive on all of the commensurable measures of research, research income, publication, citations, are the attributes that have made you a good researcher, are one and the same that also made you an effective higher education leader?

MARCIA:  Yeah. I think that's a really, really great question and, you know, you gave it to me beforehand, and thank you as I had an opportunity to think about it. I've never thought about the alignment between those two things before but I do think there are three ways that they intersect. So both require, on the one hand, strategic thinking, and on the other hand, attention to detail, sort of, at the spectrum of - you know, the two ends of the spectrum of thinking.

You know, the big high level, what's the purpose of this, what's the intent, and then right down to the details of which bit goes in the itallics and the et al and the numbers, et cetera, and everything inbetween, and I think good higher education leadership is the same. There's a bit of a hierarchy there. You know, people will often say, I'm not a details person as if, you know, because my thinking is higher than that, my mind is on higher things, but actually both are required and if you're not a details person you become unstuck at some point. So to be a good leader you need to have your thinking across that breadth from high level to "low level".

The second thing, I think, where there's alignment is persistence and determination. I'm really determined and I'm very persistent and in research that's absolutely required and, you know, we were chatting earlier before the podcast about doing a PhD and, you know, the challenges of that, but gee whiz to finish it you've got to be persistent and you've got to be determined, and whether that comes from an innate interest in the subject matter and/or, you know, bloody mindedness and I've just got to get it done and/or, you know, you've got to tick a box sometimes to get on with your career, you have to be determined and you have to persist and when things go wrong, which they always do in research and leadership, you've got to have resilience to overcome that.

And the third thing, I think, that aligns the two research and leadership is you really have to enjoy working with other people towards joint objectives. There's, kind of, a bit of a myth around, you know, star researchers being, you know, lone rangers. You can't do research on your own and if you don't enjoy working with other people and other people's personalities and all the challenges that go with that, you won't succeed in research because it's the joint group endeavour always in one form or another, and leadership is all about leading people, you know, it's all about getting people engaged with a vision and, you know, resourced and motivated and inspired to work towards whatever the organisation you're in's objectives are.

So, yeah, as I said, I'd never thought about that, Matt, I think, but they're quite similar, in terms of the sorts of attributes that one needs and, you know, one has to enjoy, particularly the working with people, I think, to be good at both.

MATT:  Each of them are really quite sophisticated cognitive demands on individuals. You know, as you say, the big picture, the detail, the people, you know, trying to make all that, sort of, happen in seamless harmony can't be easy and then you've got other things. You've got family. You've got a life. You've got friends. You've got all types of distractions in life that need to be balanced and a colleague once made a quip to me around, sort of, fence and equity in the academy, that being an academic is maybe one of the most flexible jobs in the world.

You get to work about 70 hours a week and you can choose how you spend that 70 hours, time, place, day, et cetera. Is there any truth in that, in terms of the work demands of leadership and research and is there a fundamental inequity involved in that, when it comes to higher education?

MARCIA:  Yeah. So definitely true. Absolutely. You know, if you want an easy life and, you know, to work to rule, academia is probably not the place to meet that professional objective. But, I think - you know, I've been in higher ed for 30 years. I've rarely met an academic who doesn't - willingly to some extent, and there's always a limit, and many go beyond that limit unfortunately, but willingly to some extent work beyond the 38 hours. You know, it's about the passion for what you do, whether it's education, you know, and the related student care and guidance, research, leadership, whatever it is.

So, yeah, the 38-hour week, I often wonder about that. You know, I've been involved in negotiations of enterprise agreements. It's a nonsense. We all pretend, you know, that that's the only hours we work, but I don't - your second question was, does it underpin a fundamental inequity?  I don't think we, in the academy, see it that way, otherwise we'd do something else, wouldn't we?  I mean, we must see it as - well, it might be inequitable to, what?  To people who don't work in the academy, but the privileges of working in the academy are so significant. You know, the freedom, inflexibility, the ability to follow your passion, you know, the freedom of speech.

You know, I've got friends who work in other sectors, they're not allowed to speak out about things. They're not allowed to say what they think and if the boss says, jump, they say, how high?  And if they don't say, how high, they can lose their jobs. We have enormous privileges in higher education, as well as huge demands and very long hours, and I think, you know, having said that, I'm conscious things have changed again recently. They've been changing for years, and more and more is demanded from academics and from leaders, although I think leaders are quite privileged, so I'll probably focus more on the academics. And, you know, it's becoming less - the privilege is less obvious and the hard work is becoming more required.

So I see the sector and the profession changing quite a lot, so maybe people will start to make different decisions, but long hours are par for the course and - but I think most people - the good outweighs the bad, in terms of being able to follow their passion, whether it's education or research, publishing, engaging with other intelligent, thoughtful people who are also trying to change the world in positive ways. You know, there's a lot that's good about it as well.

MATT:  There is a, I suppose in broader society, differences in the amount that - of time that people are devoting to, you know, the domestic labour, for want of a better term, where patterns of promotion for - through the academy, there's an obvious, kind of, gender skew with more males, sort of, progressing through to, kind of, professor - professor level than females across many disciplines. I suppose I wondered whether or not that, sort of, 70-hour a week is much easier to be filled by people without, kind of, family life responsibilities, et cetera, than others or is there a fundamental, sort of, sexism to even the logic of that question, Marcia?

MARCIA:  I don't think your question is sexist. I think you're pointing to the sexism that's really obvious. I'm actually - you know, I'm trying to decide now whether to stay in the sector or to try something else at this point in my career. So I'm writing a book on sexism in the academy. It's a practical handbook for women, on how to navigate the sexism. It's really obvious. I've now looked at the figures and they absolutely support what you've just said. You're 30% less likely to get to the professoria, including aspro and professor, if you're a woman. That's outrageous.

Women are concentrated in A and B. At C, men take over a little bit and then the men get all the senior jobs. If you're a woman, you've only got a 25% chance of becoming a vice chancellor. If you're a woman, you've only got a 25% chance of becoming a chancellor. Not everybody wants to be a vice chancellor or a chancellor, but they're the most senior roles and the most obvious and the role models for all the people in the academy, so you can't be what you can't see.

75% of vice chancellors and chancellors are men and, you know, two-thirds of the professoriate are men. It's outrageous and it is sexism. Yes, women have babies. Yes, women breastfeed. That's a very small amount of time. You know, the labour usually goes on for, you know, a number of hours, not days, and you might breastfeed for a few months, but by the way, you know, babies can be fed breast milk through a bottle. This is all in my book and I'm just - you know, this is right on my mind at the moment.

Just because women biologically give birth to and breastfeed babies doesn't justify lifelong career limitations. So this book is about what to do about that and, yes, structural change and, you know, structural barriers need to be removed. They're not going to be anytime soon. So this is for women, what to do in the meantime. But if you sit back and trust the system and think it's fair, you'll end up stuck at senior lecturer and that might not be what you want. So this is a forewarned is forearmed, here's some things to think about book.

MATT:  I look forward to reading that, Marcia, and hopefully there's some good advice for men in there as well, to step up and do their share of -

MARCIA:  There is.

MATT:  - things that have been, you know -

MARCIA:  Yeah.

MATT:  So a book is on the way. Fantastic. You've also played - occupied some fairly senior figure head roles around gender equity in higher education. So you could probably touch on why some of that work is so important but can you share any reflections or observations around how some of that work has come about and the, kind of, impact that it's had.

MARCIA:  Yeah. So, I mean, it's back to my earlier comments about, you know, just not being able to tolerate injustice and unfairness and, you know, especially when we're talking about gender, inequity. I didn't realise till quite recently, I'm a bit of a slow learner sometimes. I didn't realise that things were happening to me or not happening to me because of my gender and when I finally woke up and realised, it was just such a shock, because I had blindly been going along thinking - well, not even thinking about it, just assuming, you know, things were fair and decisions were made on the basis of, you know, capability and performance and track record and so forth.

When I started to discover that there are different rules for men and women in higher education, I was just flabbergasted. You know, no man I've ever known in a leadership role has been talked to about his style being too direct and they need to be a little bit more, you know, nurturing and, you know, coaching, rather than, you know, directing people, but most senior women I know have had that conversation. One has just had it this week, you know, and rang me to say, "Oh my god, I've just had the style conversation". I said, "Welcome to leadership".

You know, women are expected to be nice and nurturing and not be, you know, the things that are associated with good leadership in men, which is assertive and dominant and make decisions. So, I mean, you might open up a big can of worms here, Matt, on gender equity, because I'm in this book space, so the way I've approached the work is, you know, with this sort of determination and that I spoke about before is and, you know, reading who's your audience, and your audience is academics, very smart people, they want evidence. Putting the case, making the argument.

The work I did with Universities Australia Executive Women, we did two really good pieces of work in a two-year appointment. One was a sponsorship guide for how to sponsor women, because mentoring is one thing but sponsorship changes the game, where you actually select someone and sponsor their career and provide opportunities for them. And the other one was a recruitment guide, for how to make sure more women are making it into the short-list of leadership positions, in particular, you know, to change the game there. So, yeah, I'm not sure if I've answered your question, but now I've got all emotional and upset about gender equity, which you're not allowed to do because that gets used against you.

MATT:  There was a time when gender equity was a little bit more prominent in higher education policy than it is today, you know, when fair chance all first came out. Yeah. It was one of the equity groups and that's favoured across time and one indicator of that was when universities in the early 2010's had to fill in these mission-based compacts and their social inclusion targets and my review of university choices in that sense was not one of them chose gender equity as a priority when they had the option to do so, and I suppose that gets to a question in the, sort of, trade-offs between all the other, sort of, equity groups, is gender genuinely a lower order priority or is it a continued sector blind spot that we need to lift our collective game about?

MARCIA:  Maybe it's both, I don't know. So when you did that review and not one university chose gender, do you mean was it the student equity groups or was it, you know -

MATT:  Yeah, the student equity group. So to get access to social inclusion, performance-based funding.

MARCIA:  Right. Right.

MATT:  You, sort of, had targets and one was low CS and you had the choice of choosing one of the group and many chose Indigenous, many chose regional, but not one chose gender as their option - sorry, you know, not one out of 40 odd universities sort of thought it was serious enough to put it forward as their key issue.

MARCIA:  Yeah. So that's not surprising but obviously very disappointing and I don't know what the reason is. There's lots of reasons given for this and it's, sort of, a shrug of the shoulders, there's nothing we can do about it. You know, this is just - universities are a microcosm. These are the things people have said to me, universities, they're a microcosm of society. You know, society doesn't favour women, it favours men and so, you know, it's all too hard and we've tried lots of things. You know, we've tried to get female students into engineering, for example. We've gone out to schools and it doesn't work, so give up.

So I don't know if it's a lower order priority or a blind spot or, you know, what's the word when you just don't have any - an apathy, you know, about this and also a defensiveness. I've tried to raise this issue, obviously, numerous times. There's lots of male vice chancellors and male chancellors, any chance I get, and there's a defensiveness and a sort of, "Well, I've" - you know, one said to me, "Well, I've appointed you, haven't I?" Yes, good, step one - well, one step. I can't change the world. We have to do that together and, you know, gender pay gaps being examined and the problem is there's too many women at the low levels in the administrative area.

So once vice chancellor actually suggested that we, you know, try and swap out some of those, you know, hue four and five women and put some hue four and five men in and that would help us with the gender pay gap, kind of missing the point completely. So I think it's a whole lot of things, Matt. It's low order priority, sector blind spot, apathy and a, sort of, you know, it's too hard and, you know, we've done all we can and go away and stop being annoying. So it's still a problem, I think.

MATT:  And not far behind gender in the equity group popularity stakes is disability and we see that in recent policy times where a performance-based funding formula, sort of, came out and disability performance was missing. We see that also with the new IRLSAF, the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund, where the main equity groups, according to policy are, sort of, there and funded but disability sits on the side. Do you have any thoughts as to why disability, you know, may be like gender or for different reasons has that lower prominence in policy and funding?

MARCIA:  Yeah. I mean, I've got one idea which is - it's interesting reflecting on these questions for myself, why am I interested in these things and, you know, the Minister at the moment is from a regional background. He's made no secret about his desire to address inequity between regional and, you know, city universities and students and outcomes and so forth. Low SES has gathered traction, which is great, so he's aware of that and Indigenous, you know, in the same way. But I bet, you know - I don't bet. I think if you ask people - if you ask people what they thought a university student was, most people will think of a very attractive young person who's fully able, bodied, able-minded, lying on some green grass in front of some sandstone buildings.

You know, there's this kind of image of what a university student, you know, it bears very little resemblance to the majority of university students, but a lot of the people making the policy, you know, the Ministers, the people ultimately responsible had that experience at university. I don't think many policy-makers, senior politicians, have much experience of disability and I think if you asked - it would be very interesting to ask them, close your eyes and imagine a disabled person, what do you see?  I think I would bet actually. A lot of them would see a person in a wheelchair and then they'd say, we've put ramps in everywhere. That's taken care of.

You know, disability is such a complex nuanced concept and, you know, to understand it, as you know, Matt, takes decades really and I think the people who are driving the policy and picking the strategic priorities just don't know enough and so there's a challenge for us and an opportunity to increase their awareness and their understanding of what having a disability looks like, means and why it's important to address.

You know, it's always the way that, you know, there's competing priorities. But, you know, you can do some very powerful things. Like some of the things that have been done in the Indigenous space with professional development, you know, really immersive, indepth profoundly life-changing experiences for leaders within universities about what the experience of Indigenous people is around racism and, you know, their history, their future thinking, et cetera. If the same sort of thing could be done with people with disabilities, let by people with disabilities, I think it could profoundly change people's thinking, but that's really big picture and a pie in the sky at the moment. I just don't think people with disabilities are on the agenda and in the forefront of the thinking of the people making the decisions and that's a big challenge, but like I said it's a big opportunity.

MATT:  Does that, sort of, feed into this notion of sociocultural incongruity as well, where if the dominant view of decision-makers of the student is the young attractive person on the grass in front of the sandstone building, does that embed and entrench an incongruity for everyone that's not like that?

MARCIA:  I think it does. I really do and, you know, you think about all the Ministers, you know, the ultimate decision-makers and they drive the thinking. They choose the priorities. You know, they're all - well, with some exceptions but usually from, you know, upper middle class families. They went to a sandstone university. They did a law degree or an arts degree, you know, and life's worked out pretty well for them. It's very hard, you know, from that privileged position to be thinking about people who haven't had that experience.

I mean, it's almost impossible. Yeah. So I do think there's an entrenched problem there and an incongruity, but it's not - it's not insurmountable, you know. There are things that can be done. They're not being done at the moment. You know, Minister Tiernan has moved from, really, a very laser like focus on regional only to, you know, widen it out a little bit. So there's hope, you know. I think, you know, could he widen it out a bit more?  Probably. You know, but it needs some concentrated work and a bit of luck.

MATT:  What one gender equity initiative that's got some attention in recent times is the fairness one, initiative. Many institutions have put forward mentoring as a, sort of, key plank or a key component of demonstrating what they're doing in relation to that and I can, sort of, see elements of that with Indigenous and even with disability as well. So as a leader, as an educator, as a researcher, notwithstanding, you know, encouragement to fit into the gender stereotype of the nurturing, sort of, caring and less directed, how have you approached your mentoring?  You know, I've observed the way that you've been a tremendous mentor and - I'm just trying to think of the word that you used before but -

MARCIA:  Sponsoring.

MATT:  - but really - yeah, sponsoring some of your PhD, kind of, graduates to, sort of, progress in their career. Is that something that's just you or is that a, sort of, conscious deliberate attempt?  Any thoughts?

MARCIA:  I can't help myself. I just - I can't help myself. You know, some people call it bossing people around. I just boss people around the whole time because I just can think of things, that if I just shared this advice with them or this suggestion with them, I try not to be too directive, you know, because I need to be nice and nurturing but I do say, "Oh, for goodness sake", sometimes, "Pull your finger out and do this", "Why wouldn't you do that?", "Don't you see what's going on there?", but I can't help myself.

So the other day I asked somebody I'd mentored for a year, a woman, whether she - she kept saying, you know, that the advice I'd given her had changed her life and was really good and, you know, great and everything. So I messaged her and I said, "Could you just articulate for me in a few dot points what advice I gave you that was helpful, because I just talk", and, you know, I mentor a lot of women. They find it very helpful. They tell me that a lot. "What did you find helpful?  What did you not find helpful?  What would you like more of?", you know, "If you your time again with me, what -", and she said, "Oh, I can't possibly write it down. I need an hour's meeting with you". And then she prepared all these notes and she went through them all and read them all to me and stuff and it was, you know, stuff that I have now absorbed as obvious, and I wouldn't even think to say it. That's part of the reason why I'm writing the book. Before I forget all these things, I'm going to write them down and give them to women.

So it's back to that, it's not fair, Matt. It's not fair that women miss out on things and they miss out because they're women. It's outrageous and so, you know, the mentoring for me is about helping as many women as possible to navigate those obstacles. Overcome them, get ahead and make things a bit fairer. Otherwise the world is just never going to change and the next lot of women coming behind me are going to have the same problems, or they might even get worse, you know. It's got to change and it's got to change by as many people as possible, you know, understanding what's going on and, you know, having some ideas about how to overcome it.

One of the things I always say to women, the last time I spoke to women in leadership things, 350 women and it was like, "What's the one thing you'd say to everybody in this room?" I said, "Everybody in this room" - all women - "needs to apply for a leadership role. Go back to your job and apply for the next level up. You'll all think you're not ready, but I'll tell you if you're a bloke you wouldn't think you're not ready. You'll just apply anyway. Even if you only meet half the criteria, go on". Everyone was, like - "All right, so go back and do that". And then there's 350 more female leaders in the world at the next level up and then that - you know, that changes. "And tell everybody around you who's a woman to apply for a leadership role".

You know, so the mentoring for me is just - you know, sometimes it's generic and general. I've just said something I hope some women listen to and take notice of. Sometimes it's in a concentrated form. But I do think the game changer is sponsorship. I don't sponsor many people because it's a much more invested thing for me. You know, I'm busy. I do lots of things. I help lots of people, mentor lots of women. But every now and then I'll sponsor one and you spot one that's really got a lot of potential and you can see that she's going to have trouble because she's female and because she's not nice and nurturing and all the things she's supposed to be, quiet and demure and, you know, a bit like a Mother Theresa.

So it's a dilemma for women because you can't be like that and lead. It doesn't work. And I'll pull her up and I'll get her promoted. You know, she'll get herself promoted. I'll help her and I'll actually sponsor and get some skin in the game because it's a bit of a risk for me, as a sponsor, you know, if it goes wrong. You're tied to that person. But you select very carefully. You sponsor very carefully. That is the most satisfying thing because that woman can then help hundreds of other as well. So it's about a collective lifting, mentoring, sponsoring where possible and bossing as many people around as possible who will listen to you.

MATT:  Fantastic advice. I think - I can't claim to be in the same zone or league as you but the observation that many, many females will wait until they tick every box before they think they're ready to apply for a job or for a promotion, et cetera, it needs to be challenged in a way that you so eloquently encourage others to do so.

One of the things that I didn't mention as part of your CV at the start of the conversation is that you are on the Board of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. So this, as I understand it, sort of covers all forms of education in the State of Victoria. So early childhood, Catholic, state, private, a huge responsibility, but huge opportunity as well. Are you enjoying that role?  Do issues of inclusion, sort of, feature prominently in the discussions at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority?

MARCIA:  I have to say, I absolutely love this role. It is absolutely wonderful. So I'm on the Board and then I got put on the Executive on the Board and then on the Project Control Board for delivering VCE and VCAL in 2020, during the pandemic, and then the Audit Committee and then I was Chairing the Audit Committee. So, you know, it's - I'm in danger of becoming my full-time life and, you know, I joke about that with the Chair and with other members of the Board. It is just such a privilege and such a wonderful opportunity and I enjoy it so much.

Yes, inclusion does feature very prominently in VCAA work. So, first of all, the people that work - people on the Board and all the sub-committees, but the people who work in the VCAA, it's a huge organisation, are the typical, kind of, people you find in those organisations who care passionately about education and care passionately about equity and opportunity and success and so forth. So even where it's not being discussed directly, there's an underlying assumption about those things being important.

Recently we've been working on the consideration of educational disadvantage, the CED, which is a new process for this, you know, unique year during the pandemic for VCE students and how each individual student's circumstances will be considered and taken into account in calculating their, you know, scores and outcomes, that sort of numeric outcome. And, my goodness, it's just been extraordinary and, you know, such careful thought and consideration to all aspects of equity but including, you know, health and mental health, as a separate, you know, distinct part of health, and the different impacts that the Coronavirus pandemic has had on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who might, for example, have living circumstances.

Where there are a lot of people living in the house where people may have had Coronavirus, where people may have lost their jobs, where students themselves have had to take up greater family responsibilities or take up employment opportunities because, you know, one or more of the breadwinners in the house has lost their job and just such deep well-informed evidence-based educative and educated conversations about those things and decisions made on the basis of those conversations that really do, as far as is humanly possible, address, you know, inclusivity, inequity and, you know, all the related matters.

So, yeah, it is, it's a joy. It's an absolute joy. I've been on it for nearly three years and, you know, it's a paid government Board job. I felt guilty for the first two years because I'd go to meetings and, you know, it's pretty smooth sailing. It's very well organised. Everything's great. Occasionally there was a little hiccup or something, something went wrong in the exams last year and it was a name of a cafe used in the exam that was very similar to a real cafe and the real cafe owners were going to sue and, you know, but I felt guilty because I got paid and I didn't do very much and I actually tried to step off the Board at one point.

I met with the Chair and I said, "I don't think I'm adding any value". He said, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. You know, your strategic thinking is really helpful and, you know, like - ", and he pointed out to me where I was helping, so I stayed on, tried to feel less guilty about collecting this money but this year I've more than made up for the previous two years where I didn't do very much because, talk about the hours and the intensity, but it's a joy. It's a hundred per cent joy. I feel very privileged to be on it. Yeah.

MATT:  2020 has certainly been a year out of the box. So you're now sitting at the pinnacle of education in Victoria. Every kindergarten, every primary school, every high school. Did you have any sense when you first embarked on your primary school training that you'd be overseeing education for the entire state?

MARCIA:  No, but I have to say my sister recently sent me some DVDs and she'd translated some videos that we took when - I've got a 24-year-old and a 22-year-old. When the boys, they're young men now, when my sons were babies, one was just born and one was two, we'd taken some videos in the old fashioned way on a video camera and she'd got them translated into DVDs and we were watching them - no, actually that's not true. It was even before the children were born. It was a different DVD.

Anyway, there's this film evidence from when I was in my late 20's, yes before I had children. And we're all - the Seven Up! series was on. Do you remember that Seven Up! series where they went into people's lives every seven years and saw what they were doing and one of my young cousins who had turned 14, and we were talking about what would be happening in seven years for her, what would things be like when she was 21 and, you know, videoing it and then we went around the room about, "What are you going to be doing in seven years?" We were all female, all young women, all talking about what we might be doing.

And I had just finished or was just finishing my Dip Ed and, "What are you going to be doing, Marcia, in seven years?" And I said, "I don't know. I'll probably be Director of Education or something", ha ha ha, we all fell around laughing. I found it so shocking to watch it a couple of weeks ago and now in my mid 50's going, ooh. So I would have said, no, I didn't think I would be overseeing education over the entire state, but my 28-year-old self was going, yeah, yeah, I'll be in charge of everything. Half joking, you know, because I do have this sign in my head that says, put me in charge. This has happened my whole life. Every since I was a teenager and went and got a casual job at the supermarket and the next thing I'm in charge of all the casuals. I'm, like, how did this happen? So I didn't think I'd be overseeing education for the state, but I'm not surprised because this, sort of, just seems to happen.

MATT:  You said before the advice you were giving to a simple crowd of 350 women about, sort of, leadership, kind of, roles. Would you give your younger self the same advice that you gave them or with accumulated wisdom and insight from your career, would you have advised your 20-something-year-old self to do things differently, with the way your career has played out?

MARCIA:  You know, I was thinking about this this morning in a lot of depth. No, I wouldn't. So one of the things that's happened to me in my career is I have moved a bit and the reason - one of the reasons I've moved a bit, in terms of changing jobs, is a moral compass and just an absolute and utter intolerance for any snifter of things that are wrong or unethical. It's a bit of a problem, right, because, you know, I've been asked in job interviews, you know, "How come you're only in a certain organisation for, you know, a short period of time?" And it's always related to something where I've said, "This isn't right. I can't work here. I can't do this".

And at the end of the day, and at the end of my career, which might be now, you know, with higher education. I'm just trying to decide what I'll do next, and will I get another job, the number of times I've moved and the, sort of, changes in my CV. I would not change anything. I would say to my younger self, do exactly what I've done, which is stick to your principles always, because at the end of your career and at the end of your life, and when you're on your death bed, you know, you're not going to be proud of yourself for putting up with - I'm trying not to say rude words during this podcast - for putting up with crapola. You're not going to be proud of yourself for tolerating and thereby condoning poor behaviour and unethical behaviour. You're not going to feel good about that and it's not the right thing to do.

So, you know, my father used to always say, "Do the right thing". That was always his advice, "Do the right thing", and that has just driven me my whole life. You know, really regardless of the consequences to your career or your reputation or your - you know, there's things that don't really matter because at the end of the day how can you - is your - have you made contributions in your life that have made other people's lives better or not, and if you haven't, what are you doing?  You know, that's what's driven me.

So I would have said to my 28-year-old self, "Yeah, become the Director of Education, but don't do it just so you're the Director. Do it so that you have a positive impact on hundreds of thousands of children's lives through, you know, making their education better. Not because it sounds good and you can boast to your, you know, friends and - what sort of friends would they be if they're impressed by that anyway", you know, so I'd say, "Yeah, do everything and be proud of it", and that's how I feel now so.

MATT:  Whoever has influenced you to get to that point would be very, very proud of you, I expect, Marcia, and, I suppose, kind of linking back to your earlier thread in the conversation, is that sense of the right thing, how much of that is, kind of, violence in Ireland?  How much of that is your Catholic background?  How much of that is maybe your mother and father's strong, sort of, guiding hand on those things?  Are you able to put your finger on that or is it just a - maybe a bit of everything?

MARCIA:  You just broke up a little bit there. So one was mum and dad. One was Catholic background. What was the first one?

MATT:  Ireland and, kind of, the violence in Ireland.

MARCIA:  Yeah. Yeah. That's - well, it's probably all three, I guess, but, you know, ultimately, you know, parents have a very big influence on children, right, so, you know, and my parents were really good - my mother's still alive. My father was a very good man and my mother was a very good woman and they do the right thing and my mum was telling a story the other day. I can't remember the content of it but, you know, she had the opportunity to do something slightly dodgy and she didn't. That's right.

My father had a hip operation and he had a disabled sticker. This is relevant to this, Matt, this is great. And, you know, he could drive into the disabled parking spot because, you know, he had this thing. Anyway, he recovered from that operation very quickly and didn't really need the sticker but he had it anyway and he used to say, "Well, I'm a cripple. You know, I'm a terrible cripple. I'm an old man. I'm a cripple. So I need to park here", but really he was having a joke because he could walk perfectly well and he didn't need it.

Anyway, my mother was going somewhere one day and she knew the parking would be really tough and she said, "Well, maybe I should take your disabled sticker", and he said "Well, you can take it if you want". And she said, "No, I don't think I will. It's not the right thing to do". And he said, "That's right, Angela. That's not the right thing to do". And I just thought, that's such a story of my parents. Right. They dabble with this evil idea of misusing the disabled sticker on the car and in the end they reject it and they compliment each other for their good decision-making.

So they're the people that raised me and I think it's mostly that. It's just mostly - you know, I've got a very strong sense but my mother said I had it from a very young age, about what is right and what is not right and she said, "And you always chose what is right". I have to say, I sound a bit arrogant, I have made a lot of mistakes and I've done some bad things, like I'm not perfect, but I really try and really strive to do what my parents would want me to do, which is the right thing. Don't use the disabled sticker. That's not the right thing to do, even if it is more convenient and it's not hurting anyone, you know.

MATT:  I doubt whether you would be sitting on the Board of the Curriculum and Assessment Authority, had you been accumulating a series of egregious mistakes over your career or whatever mistakes would be minor in the scheme of things, in my view. You, sort of, mentioned before, and in the intro, you've worked in a few different institutions. Are those institutions, kind of, spammed eye poles of higher education. You've worked in those that are maybe face-to-face, those that are probably online, metro, regional, research intensive, maybe teaching focused, high equity, kind of low community participation, semester carousel block model. Is the fundamental of equity there across all of those variants of higher education or does each context have its own, kind of, sense of equity and inequity that needs to be carefully managed and worked through?

MARCIA:  Look, I think the latter, Matt. I think my experience has been in some places genuinely care about equity more than others. There's no doubt about that. And I've observed it's quite often, not entirely, but very much the senior leader in the place, you know, the vice chancellor and maybe some of the deputy vice chancellors and whether or not they care about equity. That really makes a difference. So it's also the culture of the place. It's also the location. It's also the mission and, you know, some universities are proudly there to address equity in the community in which they're located and elsewhere, and that is their mission and that is what attracts people to work there and the whole place is just imbued with this sense of, this is what we're here to do and it's a great thing.

Others, you know, it's lip service and it's impossible, really, for them to address it in any real meaningful way because that's not why they're there. They've got a different mission and, you know, it's about different things. I'll try not to be critical of any universities here, but it's very nuanced. I don't think it's one equity across, you know, 220 campuses or whatever. That saying is, I think, it very much depends on - yeah, the mission of the place, but also the people who are in it and how much they develop and sustain a culture of genuine, you know, focus on equity.

MATT:  Across those variants, Marcia, is there any one that's, sort of, stood out as being more beneficial for students and, particularly, variants that are more accessible for students with disabilities in your experience?

MARCIA:  I would single out Federation University Australia for one university I've worked in that really did have a genuine focus for a variety of reasons, and also in a different way Open Universities Australia. So Open Universities Australia had a very high proportion of students with disabilities, which the Executive Team there found very interesting and curious and why would that be. It's, sort of, you know, obvious in one way, although we never, while I was there, didn't research it or ask about it, although Cathy Stone, I don't know if you're going to interview her, would have some good insights on to - into why that was the case. She also worked there with me.

But Federation, first of all, there was a researcher there who had a stutter and his research was on students with a stutter and, you know, he kind of gave me the ontro into the way in which that organisation, really, prioritised, you know, in a way that I hadn't seen anywhere else, particular students with disabilities. Federation has a connection with IBM in Ballarat and IBM deliberately select, recruit students with autism and have a program to support them in the workplace and they are fantastic. Coders and - I don't understand IT - but, you know, the sort of work that they do they're at IBM. These students are people with autism and Asperger's and they're very well supported, so they're not just left to flounder but actually to facilitate their success. They're just two examples off the top of my head and I hadn't heard of programs of that size and depth before I went there. There are probably other examples as well that I can't recall right now.

At Open Universities Australia, we never got to - and I didn't understand because I wasn't there long enough - what - why there was so many students with disabilities, why the proportion was so high, but there was certainly something about online offerings, this is in 2012, that was attracting students with disabilities and assisting them to, both access higher education and succeed. It was probably to do with the format and the online, because it wasn't as common then as it is now. Yeah. So they'd probably be two stand-outs.

MATT:  IBM, it's good to give them a shout out. They've been nurturing and have a track record of deliberately, kind of, recruiting and supporting graduates with disabilities for well over 20 years. It's great to know that they're still really active in that domain. You mentioned earlier in the conversation that excellent research, excellent leadership requires, you know, the strategy, the eye to detail and the collegiality. One of my former colleagues - actually one of my former managers and one of your former colleagues, once made comment about your exceptional writing skills, which I think for anyone that's read your work would attest to the quality and the clarity of your writing.

So I assume that's something that might sit neatly in the middle of the strategy, the collegiality and the, kind of, eye to detail. I, sort of, wonder, is there something you were always good at?  Were you always a great writer?  Natural talent was a hard labour?  Is it something that you were taught?  Can it be taught?  I'm still looking to improve my own writing, given my own English as a second language background.

MARCIA:  Well, first of all, I'd say your writing is outstanding and I've always said that to you, Matt. I remember when I was teaching you we changed the assessment for you so you didn't hand in an assignment to me. You wrote a journal article and submitted it to a journal and I'm pretty sure that got published, so I think you should not be so modest. In terms of mine, I have always written. I learnt that from my father. He kept a journal. He wrote in it every day and I've kept a journal, and I don't write in it every day, but I sometimes write 10 pages in one day and then I don't write in it for three days or whatever, but I'm 55 and I've kept a journal since I was 11.

I have a deal with a friend of mine. If I die, she has to come over and burn them all because nobody needs to read that stuff because it's just crazy lady stuff, but writing, you get better at it by doing it is my point and keeping a journal, you write a lot and - yeah. So I think there's always some natural talent in writing. One of my sons has graduated as a journalist and he's an exceptional writer and it's so wonderful to read his work. It just - it does kind of flow out a bit naturally but, you know, we're all born not able to write, you know. It's not an innate skill. It has to be learnt and, yes, it can be taught. Like anything, I can't draw to save my life, and no offence to - it's probably your daughter who drew the pictures behind you, but they're better than my current state.

When I was a primary school teacher, I was for a very short time, I used to draw things on the board and then the kids had to guess what it was and, you know, they'd sometimes be able to guess 10 and I'd have to say, "It's a dog. Obviously it's a dog", but they've said, you know, giraffe and monkey and, you know, computer and, "No, it's a dog". So I'm good at writing but certainly practice, you know, really does improve things and even now I publish things. I published something a couple of weeks ago in Campus Review on the future of university teaching and I found some mistakes in it later and went, oh, no. I'm cringing.

So it's a constant effort, you know, and you can always improve and it's a bit like anything, a bit like exercise or whatever, if you don't do it for a while you get a bit rusty. So, you know, if anyone is looking to improve their writing, I'd just say do more of it and put it out for public scrutiny, you know, publish it on LinkedIn, publish it wherever. You know, give it to people to read and, you know, take the feedback, but I think it's both. A bit of talent but a lot of practice. A lot of hard work.

MATT:  So a bit of cultural arms for ADCET listeners out there, sort of, get writing and get those journal pages written. I might, kind of, end it there, Marcia, but I might, sort of, give the final word to you. Do you have any advice to listeners who might aspire to be like you?  To be, kind of, leading positive, inclusive change in Australian education?

MARCIA:  Yeah. It's one of the chapters of my book, the advice would be, get an attitude. So this is advice I'm giving to women because if you sit back - a lot of people who work in equity are really nice people. Right. And that's a compliment. Right. They're people who see injustice and who want to dedicate their time and effort and goodwill to improving things for other people and that's a great set of attributes and qualities. But, you know, as my book says, nice girls don't get the corner office.

If you want to have influence and you want to change things, you've got to be a bit bolshie. You've got to have a bit of an attitude. You've got to be a bit cross about the fact that things are not fair and - not in a whingy way, not in a blamy way, you know, you've got to get the nuance right about the tone but, you know, channel that feeling of injustice, channel that crossness, channel that, you know, desire to make things better and, you know, step out and take a few risks. You'll get slapped down. You'll get things said about you, you know, that might happen but at the end of the day, do you want to make a positive difference or not?  And if you do, you know, sitting quietly in the background isn't the way to do it.

Now, that said, you've asked about leading positive inclusive change, there's lots of ways to lead. There's lots of people I've worked with for a very long time. Jade McKay is one example. Jade is a very quiet, very reserved outstanding researcher and writer, and Jade and I worked together. You know, and I'll do the forward facing stuff and shout out about the world and go in the media, whatever, but I couldn't do a lot of what I did if Jade hadn't done the very meticulous, careful research in the background.

So she's a leader, although she'd be horrified if she heard me say that, I won't tell her about this podcast, but in a different way. You know, she's making sure that the person who is out talking to the world is well-informed and has her facts straight and has had help to think through what the arguments are and what the nuances are. Jade helped me with the sociocultural incongruity concept, in that she did the background research and wrote and annotated a bibliography and, you know, gathered all the essential things that I needed to read in order to understand what was going on in coming to developing that concept. I couldn't have done it without her.

So, you know, leading things is not a solitary - there it is again, working with people. But don't be shy, is the way I'd end. That's easy for an extrovert to say but, you know, step forward to do your thing because everyone can make a positive change but not by being quiet and passive. You've got to take a bit of action, I think.

MATT:  I think with those final comments, Marcia, and an example of that mentoring and sponsorship in action, it's a good point to leave it. Hopefully listeners have enjoyed today's conversation. Marcia, thank you. Thanks for your wisdom, thanks for your candour and fingers crossed that all VCE students in Victoria this year will benefit from the, kind of, hard work you've been putting in place to make sure that the level of disadvantage they might have experienced has been ameliorated through all the careful work of the VCAA and all your colleagues. Thank you, Marcia.

MARCIA:  Thank you very much, Matt. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

OUTRO:

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