# Transcript

**Podcast episode 1 – Tony Mackay knows the power of networks and partnerships**

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the [Bastow](https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/) Podcast – conversations with big-thinkers about the big questions in education and leadership today. I’m [Angela Scaffidi](https://senateshj.com/our-people/angela-scaffidi/).

It’s very difficult to define the role that [Tony Mackay](http://ncee.org/who-we-are/our-people/leadership/anthony-mackay/) plays in education globally. ‘Educational influencer’ is probably the best description we’ve come across. Tony has participated in and led some of the most significant work in education in recent decades. He’s advised organisations, governments and school systems on almost every continent and he’s a leading voice in global education policy, practice and research. Tony recently stepped down as CEO of the Centre for Strategic Education, in Melbourne, and has taken up the role of President and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, in Washington DC. We’re very lucky to have Tony with us today. Welcome, Tony.

So, Tony, you’ve had a storied career in education. Can you share some of the highlights of your leadership journey and, possibly, even some of the lowlights?

**TONY MACKAY:**

Yes, I can. It’s lovely to be with you. Thank you very much for the opportunity. The highlights? It has been quite a lengthy journey because I think about education over the last several decades and I came into it in the…probably, really in the 1970s and there was a real sense of promise about the way in which education would contribute to people’s lives and the importance of education, not only for, obviously, individuals, but for communities and for our society. So there was a time, I think, when people were very invested in what, I guess, we might call the ‘learning game’, as a way of being able to ensure that all young people were being adequately prepared for what was quite clearly going to be a very exciting time, over those few decades, as you go into the sort of next century.

Now, that feels like some time ago but, if you go back to that point, there was a real sense of anticipation and promise about it. But, I guess, what I’m reflecting on there is an amazing attempt, I think, to ensure that learning is now for everybody, that we are much more productive, that we are now what people sometimes refer to as ‘learning a living’. There’s a real sense that this is what we need, learning societies. And the challenges that we’ve now got about the future of humanity, the way in which we think about artificial intelligence, increased digitisation, globalisation, most people, it seems to me, are saying if learning was very much the promise of the time that I’m referring to, toward the closing decades of the last century, it’s absolutely the imperative as we go into the 21st century, well into the 21st century now.

There’s been an opportunity to work across all areas of education over that period of time so, I think, from classroom to system has been a real privilege for me because it means that you’ve got perspectives at every part of the learning system and not just in Australia, which has obviously been my base, but I’ve had the good fortune to operate across multiple geographies. And, I think, to bring the three perspectives of policy making, of research work and of practice together, pretty much, I think, are driven by an absolute passion for innovation and ultimately, now, I think, a stronger desire than ever that we not only improve our learning systems but we transform them to be far more adequate and fit for purpose. That really has been the joy of being involved in this game.

**ANGELA:**

So, any sort of lowlights or bumps along the way as you’ve had that extraordinary journey over 40 or so years?

**TONY:**

Yeah. Um, I’d say a huge number of bumps! (laughs) But I think I’ve always seen this - and I know this sounds a little, perhaps, too rosy – but I’ve always seen this as being the fantastic challenge. I guess the perspective I’ve brought to bear has often been the perspective, I think, of the politics of education. So, my sense has always been how do we ensure that we are able to broker, to negotiate, to network, to make the gains where you can and how do you try and create a set of conditions that are more ‘ableing’, more enabling of the kind of change that you want?

So, I think, I’ve not lost the kind of passion and the energy and the ambition for the change. It’s a long game. You’ve got to be prepared to take some of those incremental improvements as you go. You have to be prepared, I think, to get the knockbacks. But, I think, if you’ve got that sense that we really are moving our learning system forward - and there’s evidence that we are doing that - that keeps you pretty motivated.

**ANGELA:**

So, collaboration, cooperation seem to be sort of an important part of the way you work. Who are some of the influencers for you? Who has influenced your thinking along the way?

**TONY:**

Do you know, it’s just huge, in terms of the kind of network of colleagues, I think, and it’s interesting that we talk collaboration and then network, for me, because, um my sense is this, that you can have a vision and a mission but for it to be alive, it has to be shared and that suggests to me that you can’t do that without deeply getting into relationship with others and feeling a sense of common purpose. So, all of the people that I’ve met in education and related fields, and I have to say, I think that my interest, my stimulus, the catalyst, the people who have influenced me have come as much from young people, educators, business people, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, community leaders.

So, for me, because learning’s everybody’s business, I’ve had this disposition, predisposition to want to always connect with people who are leading, I guess, what we might call ‘social endeavours’, public endeavours for the common good, in a whole range of different enterprises. So, I’ve learnt a lot from people in related fields but certainly from education, a sense of building that network of people who operate at multiple levels within the system. And then, it strikes me that you can’t do that without thinking about all of the stakeholders, all of the people who have got a stake in this work and there’s not much point in pretending that they will come on the journey, help you influence the journey, help you to drive the direction of travel unless they are genuinely co-creating and co-owning it.

So, if you don’t collaborate, then you’re in a mode of operating which is unlikely to be particularly helpful or to achieve your objectives which is, after all, a collective objective, yeah? I’m not saying that that doesn’t require leadership and it doesn’t require coordination and it doesn’t require an enormous amount of being able to draw together people with common purpose – it does. But if you can’t build the coalitions, the alliances, the networks, it’s impossible to be able to drive the work forward.

**ANGELA:**

It’s interesting. I’ve often heard you referred to as the ‘great connector’ and I can see now, um, why that matters so much. You talk about that idea about collective purpose.

**TONY:**

I think I’d put two parts to this - one is that I’ve always seen the nature of the work, you know, as being good work, not being a do-gooder. Like, it’s fundamentally good work and to do good work you, I think, have got to invest in others to do that work collectively in a way that simultaneously grows deeper understanding through relationship and gives you a deeper understanding of self. So, there’s a real sense in which the work itself is both deeply personal and deeply collective.

But then, the other point I’d say is that I’ve got a pretty healthy dose of ‘how do you get things done?’ Let me make this clear. I’m not, in a sense, underestimating or undervaluing the importance of the connectivity for its own sake, for relationships for their own sake. That’s vital and it gets you somewhere. And if you can figure out ways in which that collective endeavour can be further supported by playing - and I’m using ‘politics’ here, not in a partisan political sense, political party sense. I’m using it in the process of how you get things done - that, to me, has been the excitement of the work.

**ANGELA:**

Mm. It feels like a series of ands rather than ors. It’s the ‘and’. Yeah.

**TONY:**

Do you know, that is amazing you say that ‘cause, I think, if I talk to friends who know me well, they’ll always say I’m a ‘both/and’. You know, how do we make sure we keep both of these things going here? The ‘either/or’ has often been, I think, a kind of stumbling block. When you think about the curriculum, here we’ve got this argument about to what extent we are overestimating the importance of general capabilities and to what extent we need to reassert the primacy of the disciplines. We’ve had this conversation, right? It’s not either/or. It’s both/and, right?

**ANGELA:**

You talk about a sort of learning ecosystem being a sort of core component of effective learning systems. What does this mean for our understanding of leadership, in particular?

**TONY:**

Maybe the best way of thinking about this is when people think about ecosystems, they think about biological systems or social systems or mechanical systems, yeah? I think what we’re saying is it’s more in the space of an emerging system where multiple players come together in order to provide, support each other in learning in ways that will meet the needs of individuals, right, and also groups.

Now, if you continue to have a view of the world which tends to be top down, in terms of systems and structures, or if you only think about it terms of bottom up, right, and then people have been talking a lot about the lateral, a way of trying to capture the essence of this is that now young people’s needs in learning will require an enormous amount of support and always have but now that we’ve got high aspirations - there’s excellence and equity, we want them to move to higher and higher levels of capability, we want them to ultimately navigate their way through a pretty tough world, a challenging world but also exciting and so therefore their wellbeing is really important, how would you bring together all of the players that can support you in that?

Now, often those players have been within the kind of unit of the school with the family and then with the community wrapped around it. I think people are now saying – I said it before – there’s many other players. And if you think about the new learning players, not just simply the technology companies and the way in which ed-tech is actually moving into the field or the way in which you think about formal and informal learning or 24/7 learning, I mean, like, learning is all pervasive. It’s everywhere. And so, what you want is a system that allows young people to connect with all of those stimuli but then they still need to be helped in their navigating of that. Who are going to be their coaches, their teachers, their mentors, their counsellors, the people who will actually help on their journey? What services do you need at what particular time, right? What expertise do you need? You need a more differentiated workforce, you need allied professionals.

So, you need an ecosystem, I think, that allows you to get more players into the learning game to support young people. So, an ecosystem is a way of thinking differently about who the players are, the supply and demand side, more personalised services. But, by the way, a PS. We’re not going to be agnostic in this ecosystem about ‘anything goes’. There’s plenty of people who actually are out there ready to exploit, right, for profit purposes, the learning game. I’m not talking about that. I’m still talking about public education systems for good, how do you redesign that?

Now, the quick PS on that is to say the role of government has to change. This is not about government so much being the provider, the regulator. Sure, there still will need to be appropriate regulations and accountability. But this about governments actually enabling, brokering, creating conditions for people to come into this work and to help us, ‘cause otherwise, the dream of equity is a dream.

**ANGELA:**

I do love your PSs, Tony, as we go. So, if you were a leader in a school now, or in a school network, where do you start?

**TONY:**

Right! That’s…that’s really interesting because I think you simultaneously have to be a leader within the context of your community and that community, I’ve already indicated, I think is beyond just simply that learning environment. It’s the wider learning environment that involves young people, their families, their carers, community leaders, agencies. So at one level, it strikes me that your leadership is still of that particular community and if you want to talk about that as being a ‘school’, that’s great – the ‘school community’ - but it’s an opportunity to think differently about your boundaries and as a leader, you’re leading that community for young people and you understand what your fundamental responsibility is.

That is about, for me, to capture it, it’s that learning process will mean that, “I’ll be graduating young people who are much more adequate than they have been in the past to be able to pursue their own lives, their passions, their interests, to contribute to their own communities, to contribute to the collective wellbeing as well as actually making sure that their own wellbeing is being seriously looked after.” The two things are connected, yeah, so closely. So, it strikes me that that’s number one. That’s just sphere of influence as a leader.

And I think therefore you know that you have to be adaptive. Things are constantly changing. You’re right at the centre of one of the most incredible times of change, yeah? And if you can’t think about that complexity and handle it, make meaning around it, get greater coherence for people, be a sense-maker, communicate that before other people start sending messages about what you’re doing, right, then I think your capacity to lead that community is going to be frustrated.

So, from that point of view, it strikes me that it’s really important for educational leaders to think about those communities. But they are now required to do that not just for their own community but in relationship with others. So, when you think about networks and clusters and we got all sorts of conversations going on here in Victoria around the way in which we’ve always been a highly decentralised system but we’re reinvesting in the notion of regions and the way in which we have clusters and how we work together. You want all, right, to be working really strongly toward common views and values about what is a really strong education system.

So, you’re going to have to be in relationship to others through your networks and it strikes me that that kind of leadership is really important, leadership, one, very much within that community, leadership, two, within your network but leadership, three, is actually about the system, the wider system. And so, if you’re going to be coming into this game now, as a leader… And, by the way, I don’t want to sound like this is overloading you. I think it’s a privilege to know that your leadership is connected to what we see as being a really strong public education system and you’re contributing at all three levels, system as a whole, what we might regard as being the network basis of this and then, within your local community. That’s fantastic.

**ANGELA:**

And so, in achieving those things and thinking about the sort of outcomes for the students, your ability to adapt, et cetera, what would be… If a school leader’s listening today and they say, “That’s great advice. I’m going to kind of start to adapt the way that I do what I do,” what might be some of the early markers to say, “Yep. I’m heading in the right direction here.”?

**TONY:**

Bastow has been, I think, really thoughtful about the way in which it thinks about leadership, right, and just recently, we have not only been developing the kind of three levels that I’ve referred to, but we’ve said, “How can we learn from other systems who are working in this space, other leadership centres?” So we’ve pulled together now, close to ten leadership centres internationally, right, and we’ve created a network, we’re talking together about what are the leadership capabilities that we need, how would we get stronger leadership development and learning, how do you get the right enabling conditions so that, in fact, leadership of the kind that we’re talking about can grow and thrive?

So, it’s fantastic work and all of those systems, just to name a couple of them… We’re here in Australia, we’ve got New Zealand, we’ve got Canada, got the UK, we’re connecting in with OECD is doing work in this level, we’ve got global north, global south, right? It’s a fantastic conversation. Two things came out of a question around impact, which is another way of addressing ‘what would you do?’ Because, ultimately, you want to say, “How do I get the greatest impact through my leadership?”

So, one is I’m constantly wanting to know whether or not my leadership is growing the capacity of the profession who, in turn, are in the position where they can influence the learning outcomes for young people. So, I always want to know that there’s a through-line between my leadership work, ensuring that I can have the strongest, most positive learning environment that is the most supportive and enabling of a profession, to be able to do the essential work in partnership with young people, with their parents and others.

But I’d just say one thing, before my second category. The one thing is this – if you can’t build, as a leader, the deep professional knowledge of those that you’re leading as well as your own, then I don’t think you’ve got a chance of being able to have that level of impact. If you can’t get the profession to be stronger and stronger, in terms of the quality of their decision-making, which is a really tough game when you’re talking about all young people that you have in your care at various moments, right, and if you can’t work together really strongly, peer-to-peer in networks, I don’t think we can achieve that kind of impact. So that, to me, is a guidance about the way in which my leadership should be enacted.

The other is me as an individual. I have got to constantly grow in my own leadership capacity. When you think about the kind of general capabilities they’re talking about now - critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, character – like, that’s…we will need to model all of that, as leaders. And I love the view that says what is it that essentially is different between a human and a robot, right? And people have said, one, cooperation, yeah, two, communication, three, empathy. Now, it just strikes me that you’d have to be able to demonstrate your leadership in that essentially human way and that means constant attention to your own growth.

My PS on this one is, people who talk about ‘transforming learning’, transforming learning environments, transforming learning systems, that don’t transform themselves, I think it’s going to be a bit tough. The transformation business starts with you.

**ANGELA:**

It’s another ‘and’.

**TONY:**

It’s another ‘and’! (laughs)

**ANGELA:**  
It’s another ‘and’. Um, so who are the sort of trailblazers in this work? Who’s doing it well that we could look to and say there’s some lessons we could learn?

**TONY:**

This is where it becomes very difficult because - I’ll give you two categories, OK? We’ve just begun a major international project between OECD and the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington DC. We have seven countries that we’ve identified who want to think about the future of learning in an AI world, to use that language, right? Now, these are the ones that are already at the peak of their game. So just to run through them... Against the current metrics. The PISA type metrics, right? So, we’ve got Estonia, Finland, we chose British Columbia – it could’ve been a couple of the other provinces in Canada – then we’ve actually got Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong.

Now, this group of countries, their directors general are saying, “We want to get together and think about what the learning system’s going to look like in another 10, 20 years,” right? That’s where they’re up to. That’s where we are finding some fascinating dialogue about the way in which they… They’re not saying, “We’re giving up on getting some further incremental improvement out of the current paradigm,” but they’re saying, “What’s the new paradigm? We have to think. We have to redesign our learning systems for a different world.” So, there’s huge inspiration that comes from that.

The point I make, by the way, is they’re also thinking differently about implementation. You know, this goes back to the ecosystem idea. They’re thinking very carefully about who are the stakeholders, how do we actually manage to get them involved in this work, how do we build capacity, how can we get faster work taking place, right? So, it’s very interesting conversation, even in the current paradigm, let alone the new paradigm. So that’s point one.

Point two would be … a McKinsey report a few years ago did a fascinating study on going from awful to adequate to good to great to outstanding, right? So apparently, you have to go through these stages. The truth is that, in fact, you can leapfrog. Now, this is a debatable area but just to sort of toss it in as a bit of a stimulus. The global south is not waiting now, to go from adequate to good. They’re trying to figure out how do they use all of the knowledge. And it’s knowledge ecosystems, innovation ecosystems as well as local learning ecosystems. How do you do this work so that you can leapfrog and use everything, from your communities through to the most advanced technology, right, to be able to help you transform your learning system faster? Because otherwise, if we think about the sustainable and ultimate goals, we’re not going to get there.

I can’t recall a time when the discourse, the debate, the dialogue about learning has been so intense. If I think about a time now, that’s the equivalent of the shift that I was experiencing in the ‘70s, it’s now. This is the moment where people, I think, are saying learning is the fundamental challenge that we have and just to kind of capture the significance of it, this is learning at all levels. This is learning for global sustainability, this is learning for the sustainability of our own societies and economies, this is learning for the relationship between ourselves and all others and it’s learning for a deeper understanding of self. To me, this is the moment where learning and the way in which we think about the future of learning is going to be so crucial to our own sustainability, globally and, obviously, as a human race.

**ANGELA:**

So where do you think that today’s leaders might struggle in making this shift and how can we support them through that?

**TONY:**

I think the struggle is probably around purpose. OECD has been, over the last two years, engaged in a major conversation about 2030 and it’s brought many, many countries together to think about the way in which we might develop our learning systems. The question, I think, that leaders face is how do I handle the essential purpose of our education system to grow and develop young people at the same time as dealing with all the conflicting demands that they will be facing, and very different views about a new, emerging world of work and therefore ‘learning a living’.

So it just strikes me that we have got so many changes that are taking place to economy, to society, to the way in which we think about our democracies, to all of the pressures that so many of us are engaged with at the moment, that this is the time when leaders, educational leaders, I think, will need to be very clear about the essential purpose of their work.

**ANGELA:**

So, for leaders who are listening today, what information they need to be engaged with or the people they need to be talking to? How do they engage to be able to make this shift?

**TONY:**

I think about this, perhaps, in three categories. It seems to me that the leadership of education, if we’re thinking about that more broadly – and that can be at any level, yeah – is one that requires you to think about the partnerships, all of the stakeholders who are involved in this work. I do think that the level of partnership and stakeholder engagement is just fundamental to the leadership challenge. The reason I’m really pushing that argument, it’s because the kind of movements that we’re looking for here are more ‘movements’, they’re more coalitions, they’re campaigns. You know, to get people’s hearts and minds, to make the kind of shifts we’re talking about today, will require leadership of an order that can do that kind of work.

Secondly, there needs to be a level of public awareness about this so there’s advocacy for this work. It’s public work. It’s work on behalf of the community. You are a leader, not just of an institution but I think that when you’re in the learning game, there’s a real sense of the public becoming seriously engaged in this discourse. That’s…that’s quite challenging because that requires a knowledge base, to be sharing information, to be communicating intensively, to be educating each other as we go through this work.

And then third, I think you need to get political commitment. I am thinking about seriously engaging in discourse that means that those people who are in positions of political power are responding to the needs of their community.

**ANGELA:**

So, Tony, tell us about your new role in the US.

**TONY:**

Well, for the last couple of years, in addition to, obviously, the fantastic work in Australia and New Zealand, I’ve had the great opportunity to work with a number of the global organisations, OECD, UNESCO and others, and it’s also meant that I’ve spent a little more time in the US and I’ve been an adviser to Washington DC based organisation, the National Center on Education and the Economy, and I’m now taking on the role as CEO/President of that organisation. So, this is a very interesting opportunity, I think, to connect some of the global partnerships that we have and, obviously, strong links between Australia and the US and, clearly, through OECD links as well. The organisation has been there for 30 years and it has two major divisions to it. One is that it’s pre-eminent in the work of comparative education. It has been studying high-performing learning systems for the best part of 25, 30 years.

So, there’s a huge amount of knowledge that has been gathered and we’re continuing to do that work and often in partnership with other global organisations. And that is used, not only to share internationally but, actually, then to bring that knowledge and understanding into the US, which has a very complex education system, as you know, and the way in which the US thinks about education and how they gather international knowledge and understanding, um, and then adapt that to their own states and districts is a fascinating process. So that is a brilliant challenge to be associated with.

The other is that it’s the largest provider of executive development programs, leadership programs in the US. So it’s in 25-plus states, where it works with principals who are in post but in the early stages of their careers, and provides an executive development program, not training but much more in terms of…inspired by the military, by knowledge around leadership from the military, from business schools, from the corporate sector, bringing that work together and helping leaders of schools to think about how they can, in the terms that we’ve been discussing, seriously improve the work of their own what they call ‘buildings’ but also the wider system and redesign the system in ways they think are going to be far more powerful to get improved outcomes. But in addition to that, we’ve been launching programs with superintendents of states and working with district teams.

**ANGELA:**

Sounds like a very exciting opportunity, good for the US, good and hopefully an exciting opportunity for you and hopefully some learnings for us back here in Victoria and in Australia.

**TONY:**

Yeah, I just want to say thank you very much. This has been a wonderful opportunity to have a conversation, it’s been a delight.

**ANGELA:**

Thank you, Tony. It’s been a wonderful conversation. PS, it’s been wonderful.

**TONY:**

(Chuckles heartily)

**ANGELA:**

Thank you.

**TONY:**

Thank you.

**ANGELA:**

Thank you for listening to the Bastow Educational Leadership podcast. If you’ve enjoyed this conversation, why not tell your friends and colleagues. And join us next time! You’ll find episodes on the Bastow website, and you can listen or subscribe wherever you find your podcasts.