Generation Connect Podcast

Episode 2: The future of education through the eyes of youth

With Luke Cavanaugh and Prince Zain El-Hashemite.

Hosted by Arissandra Egorova (Aya)

Transcript

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Intro: Hi Everyone! Welcome to the Generation Connect podcast co-deigned with youth for youth. The ITU Generation Connect initiative aims to engage global youth alongside the leaders of today's digital change by empowering youth voices in the digital development dialogue. Tune in every month to listen to inspiring stories of youth all across the world on the power of technology for sustainable development. Get involved by joining our global community of future leaders shaping the future of tomorrow.

Arissandra Egorova [Aya]: Hello everyone and welcome back to a brand new episode of the Generation Connect podcast, co-designed with youth and for youth. My name is Aya and I'm part of the Generation Connect team from ITU, and I will be your host for today.

With this episode, we are continuing our first mini-series on the topic of digital learning and digital employment. And today, we will be raising a very important question, which is how should the future of education be like?

As we have discussed in our previous episode, the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed challenged traditional education systems, all around the world, questioning their relevance with regards to the new global context and as some may suggest, possibly opening the way for more radical transformation of the way we learn.

To discuss this topic today, I am joined by two amazing guests, Prince Zain and Luke Cavanaugh, from the Generation Connect Visionaries Board. Welcome everyone and thank you so much for joining us today! For our listeners today could you introduce yourselves in a few words, where are you from, what are you studying, and how do you feel about discussing today's topic?

Zain El-Hashemite: Sure, so my name is Zain, I grew up in northern New Jersey just outside of Manhattan. And currently I'm a senior in high school but starting this fall I plan on studying quantitative finance at Stevens University in Hoboken.

And my main interests have always been more finance and business related just because that's something I grew up around, with family members working in that industry, and everyone in the family always you know switching off my morning cartoons to look at the market, see what they're doing, so just something I always grew up around, something I always had around me.

And, in terms of outside interests, I make music. I play the guitar; I've been making music for close to maybe seven years now. Just messing around with like digital production and bunch of different genres, learning Some instruments on the way.

And in terms of how do I feel the future of education should be, I think that it should remain the same, but continue to lead in an unbiased way. Tell the truth, and just leave it at that, leave it up to the classes to discuss that and see what they come to as a conclusion, rather than delivering conclusions based on material. That's how I feel the future should be.

Aya: Perfect, Thank you! What about you Luke?

Luke Cavanaugh: Yeah, So, thank you so much for having me today, Aya. So, I'm Luke Cavanaugh, I'm from the United Kingdom originally but I'm currently based in Beijing. So, I'm a recent graduate of the University of Cambridge, and currently studying on the Schwartzman Scholars Program at Tsinghua University and that's a master's in global affairs and a leadership development program.

So, outside my course I also run a think tank focused on connecting young people in Europe and Asia and I've done quite a bit work in that policy space. And also, as you mentioned, sit on the ITU's Generation Connect Global Visionaries Board, which has been great fun and also really, really interesting and important to empower young people in this way and I think that having benefited first from a British education system and now an American system in a Chinese context, I'm really interested in how the future of education is being shaped across borders. So, I look forward to chatting to you both today.

Aya: Thank you for coming and sharing your experiences with us. So, you both have very different academic backgrounds and also interests, and as students, I believe you're both uniquely placed to discuss your own vision and perception of how education for youth should be like in the future.

So, since we're talking about education, I would like to hear a little bit more about yourselves and your education, how is your academic path like them, more importantly, as a student, how did your perception of education and learning change over time and over your studies?

Luke Cavanaugh: So, I'm currently studying in China and doing a Masters in global affairs and what this looks like in practice is a third of my time is spent studying China and the future through a Chinese lens. A third of it is spent studying big global issues and then the third of it is that leadership development program that I talked about. But it sort of comes from an undergraduate degree in English literature and you may think there's sort of a disconnect between the two.

But I think there's three things that like have guided and continue to guide my own educational journey, and I think in terms of what's changed well, maybe this is a continuity.

I think breadth was always really important to me, and I liked what Zain was saying about sort of throwing a load of information out there and letting the class decide themselves. Because I think making connections between issues and between sectors was something that really appealed to me.
So, when I chose to do English, I was doing so because I could use literature as a lens to study politics or philosophy, or whatever else I decided to do.

I think the third thing is that being a humanities student, I've always been in favor of flexibility and freedom in education as well to sort of go off down independent pathways and I guess we could talk a little bit later about like research and some of the skills that builds as well.

Aya: So, based on your personal experience you've just shared with us, is there anything that you liked or didn't like about your curriculum? And how relevant do you think this model of teaching is for tomorrow's new generation of students?

Luke Cavanaugh: Yeah, so, definitely! I think the curriculum, or at least my experience at university level of the curriculum, I've always liked it because of the breadth and the flexibility.

So, both of my undergraduate degree and now, I've really appreciated the time to go off and do independent research and build big scope in my ideas. I think it's also given me a lot of opportunity to go out and do things outside the formal constraints of the curriculum. And I think that, for me, like my time at university was as much educational outside of the program. So, having the opportunity to found the think tank I talked about earlier came from an idea that I had in a class and then and then took that outside.

And in terms of how it could be improved, I think that one challenge that the humanities in particular is facing at the moment is this idiom of stale, male and pale, and this was particularly something in literature degree of continuing studying dead white men, and how do we break beyond that. I think this is something that I spent time at Cambridge sitting on diversity and inclusion boards and thinking about how we can include more women and more ethnic minority writers.

So, I think that's a big change that we're starting to see, conversations being had about in a curriculum, and is definitely something that's going to speed up over the next few years.

Aya: That's really interesting! It would be great to hear also from you Zain. Do you agree and how is your experience like?

Zain El-Hashemite: Yeah, I definitely agree with how he just mentioned that there should be more inclusivity in education and how more people from different ethnicities, different genders should be included in education and talks about history.

And in terms of my own education, I've seen that, I've experienced the same things he has, and you know, in terms of how it prepares today's students for the future, in talking about my public school in my town, I would say that doesn't do nearly as well of a job as it should, in preparing students, whereas I'm lucky enough to go to a magnet school, and the difference is night and day.

So, me obviously being more financial, I believe that students should have a deeper financial education. And how to you know invest, how to protect themselves against certain financial crises, so that in the long run, they can be protected and it's not one group of people who have this protection, who have this knowledge, it should be more widespread.

So, in my education I've learned how to do taxes, which is something that I can definitely say that the public school doesn't teach.

Aya: Oh yeah, it doesn't teach you that.

Zain El-Hashemite: So, I think that's something important that should be taught, maybe not to a full extent, but to some level, and I think a deeper understanding financial education could really go a long way in the future.

Aya: Definitely. I also sometimes have this impression that education doesn't really move with the times, I don't know if you have the same feeling, but the world keeps changing and evolving, and so I think our curriculums should change too! So that they can better equip you with the right skills to thrive in the future.
So, in our previous episode, we have discussed the impact of Covid-19 on education, and especially the transition to online learning, which was very difficult for a lot of us. And in a way, I feel like it also forced our educational systems to finally evolve somehow, become a bit more digital. So, how did you experience this transition in the last two years and how do you feel about it? Do you think online learning is something that could replace conventional education, like in a classroom?

Zain El-Hashemite: So, I'll be happy to start on this one, because this is Something that I experienced for over a year and a half. The quickest transition into it was very rough. It wasn't really as streamlined, as it could have been but, understandably, it was a really quick shock.

So, the first year was rough, there was no face-to-face learning, it was all just kind of digital, just Zoom, emailing, texting and that was pretty detrimental I'd say. I was luckily able to make it out pretty well, but I know other people who had a really rough time. And then in my junior year last year, I was completely virtual.

And while that was better, I think the main part of going to a school is like the interaction between others and learning like just those soft skills that you'll use in day-to-day life. Just like the random questions that get yelled at in class that nobody unmutes for to speak about in Zoom, that lead to a whole discussion in the class, that really lead to other topics being learned that weren't intended to be learned. So, I feel that, well online learning could be used for maybe a short-term thing, I don't think it can be a long-term solution.

Luke Cavanaugh: Yeah, I agree with a lot of what Zain has just said, I had experience in my second year of university of this transition to virtual university and I remember, we were sort of April, May, maybe June 2020 and Cambridge was the first University in the UK to announce that they would be doing online teaching what was the 2020-2021 academic year.

And I just remember it was sort of front-page headlines in the UK, and here we are sort of almost two years from then and there's no sign of it changing.

So, one thing I'm really interested in in the field of education is like these massive online courses and this idea that this never really took off in the main, that is something that people do, but they sort of do it as an additional thing, and I think one of the steps towards a future education that we might see is a lot more of this sort of thing being done as a first and foremost university degree, because I think there's a lot of financial barriers to traveling as well.

And what I'm seeing at the moment on my program is that there's some of us in China and then some of those all around the world, but haven't been able to travel, but are still participating, just as much in the academic side of the Program. I think it's not perfect and all the points that Zain raised, I would really echo in terms of the random spontaneous questions, the chats with friends to and from the classroom, the five minutes behind speaking to the lecturer or teacher, it's certainly not as easy but I also think there's no excuse anymore to hide behind, not collaborating across the world and perpetuating educational inequalities now that we've seen that it is so easy to do our education online.

Aya: What do you think would be the lessons that can be learned from the impact that Covid-19 had on education, if we were to continue digital learning?

Luke Cavanaugh: Over the pandemic, we were involved via the think tank STEAR with doing a lot of research projects on policy papers and things online and what we did is we worked with cross continental teams. So, we had researchers writing in Vietnam and China, and Germany and the UK all at the same time. Like that has brought a confluence of different ideas from all over the world, and suddenly like never before you can have four worldviews working out what the similarities are what the differences are, and I think that the lessons that can be learned, is how easily that can be enabled. Nowadays we're talking to each other from Beijing from New York, and from Europe and we've managed to just all hop on a zoom call, and there's no reason to suggest that this can't happen in all different intellectual and educational forums.

Aya: What would you say Zain, do you agree?

Zain El-Hashemite: I would say that everything that we just kind of mentioned, it shows like a divide. Not really a divide, but a difference of views between someone who, like me, who is in high school versus someone who, like you guys is in university. So, my main like trifle with that was that it was weird not seeing you know the friends that I went to school with for two years prior.

And Luke, you mentioned how it brought people from thousands of miles away together to create something more powerful than you could have done as just a single person. So, I think that's a fantastic thing that I actually hadn't thought of.

So, I think in terms of the lessons we can learn, while we can't forget that you know human interaction is very important, the points that Luke made, how it is now easier to get an education that's more open to everybody, I think that's a fantastic thing that we should continue with.

Aya: And actually those educational platforms, offering classes and even degrees online existed even before the pandemic, it just appears that they grew in importance because of the Covid-19.

So, based on your personal projects and experiences, do you feel like education so to say, is mostly acquired through schools or not only? What would you recommend other young students like us to complement or complete their initial formal education?

Zain El-Hashemite: I would say education and learning comes from kind of every walk of life. So, it's not just like you know, going to school and learning how to do a long division or learning how to code per se. I think education is also in the form of learning how to speak to others, learning how to treat others, how to deal with certain situations, how to think on your feet.

So, I think there's like the you know the book smarts and the street smarts. I think that everyone should have a certain level of both.
You can't just leave behind knowing how to think on your feet. I think that's another large part of education that's kind of, I won't say overlooked, but you don't know that it's happening, it's just something that comes to you and that stays with you.

Aya: Definitely, definitely.

Zain El-Hashemite: So, I am the founder of the Y4X Movement, for gender equality in science and kind of just generally all walks of life at this point. So, I would say that just starting that initiative and meeting the people I've met through it and seeing the impact that it has made has really just let me understand that there's more to life than just like where I am now. Like Luke said, there are other people across the world, who can really come together to create something stronger, larger, more beautiful really.

And in that I've learned like collaboration is really important, so a team effort will always lead to a greater sum. And that's something that I plan to continue to use in the future.

Aya: That's amazing, thank you so much Zain! So, Luke, you've talked a bit about your experience in think tanks. So, how do you feel it brought value your formal education and would you recommend this experience to other students?

Luke Cavanaugh: Yeah, So, definitely. To answer the first question, I have a really interesting relationship between my academic interests and professional interests in terms of the fact that my research interests ended up being informed by the other things I was doing in my life, rather than the other way around.
And I think working at think tanks and already sitting on the board of one or two think tanks have allowed me to form some really good connections with people across the world. My co-founder of STEAR the organization I now run was a Vietnamese guy studying in Europe and then I ended up sort of applying to go study in Asia, so there was that crossover and that's grown into a think tank with 70 young people working across 33 countries today.

And I think the reason that I'd probably recommend getting involved in these think tanks is just because of the like-minded community that allows you to be a part of. And I think that without already having that preexisting community of other think tanks that I've worked in and sort of made really good connections and teammates in, I wouldn't have been able to transfer those academic interests across.

So, it's really interesting here and Zain's comments too about his own organization, because it sounds like there's a lot of learning going on both from an academic perspective and obviously feeding back into science, but also in a non-academic perspective, that's been born out of the people that he's meeting too.

Aya: Definitely, I can see that you have both learned and accomplished so much also outside of school so, in that case, if we are able to so easily learn things outside of the school context, what would be this role of the school, then, as an institution, and what does what more does it bring to the table according to you.

Luke Cavanaugh: I think like there's a lot to be gained from going off and forging your own path and also sort of sitting, and reading, and researching on your own, but I think what schools can do is like drop the information on you and then allow you to discuss that in a forum. I think it goes right back to sort of education thousands of years ago and the Western world with Greeks sitting around in a forum and talking about the topics that they'd have the information given to them and they were just there to discuss it. And I think that at its best, particularly at university level, that's what I found education to be. So, I think it provides a platform and a space as much as anything to sort of debate and discuss these issues that we're presented with every day.

Zain El-Hashemite: I totally agree with that. So, I would say the most I've learned from school is in like what Luke just said, it's in those just discussions, those debates. You really learn, like other people's perspectives and other views on something that you may have not thought of before.

Aya: So, there's actually a quote that I came across that I think could explain your visions of schools in a very beautiful way. It's from the OECD Future of education and skills 2030 Project. And it says something like this:

"Schools are not just schools. Schools need to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, for technologies that have not yet been invented and to solve problems that have not yet been anticipated."

And then it ties in with your idea, by saying that:

"Schools need to equip students to thrive in an interconnected world, where they need to understand and appreciate different perspective and worldviews, interact respectfully with others and take responsible action towards sustainability and collective well-being". And I think it really reinforces what you were saying!

Zain El-Hashemite: Yeah, I definitely agree with that, because a lot of schools just lean on traditional education of just the bare minimum, that the State requires, whereas other schools will lean harder on education of the future, education of, like you said, preparing students for positions that don't exist yet.

And I feel that the students who are able to go to those schools will end up in better positions in life, they will end up knowing what they want to do, they will end up in more secure jobs. So, I feel that what you just said is exactly what should be done.

Aya: I think, schools also help students to know what they want to do in life and what direction they want to take. However, a lot of people say that education is not so much of a fixed place anymore, because of mobile phones and Internet. So, education is more about, it's more about what you, it's more about the actions you take to learn.

And a lot of people say it's thanks to technology. So, I would love to know what would be your take on technology and ICTs and how do you think they can help keep innovating the we will learn. What would you say?

Luke Cavanaugh: Yes, So, I think there's something really interesting in thinking about the content, as well as the delivery of education and I wanted to come back to what you're saying about training people for jobs that don't exist yet, and I think that we're seeing a really big shift and maybe Zain will be much more knowledgeable than me on this.

In terms of the sciences and I think that that's where there's a big shift in education and like what are we preparing people for as we're on X technological frontier and industry 4.0, etc. But I think the humanities are broadly being protected from this side because it's still discussing ideas and much more sort of abstract from that perspective.

So, there's an interesting tension between the sciences and humanities, to that end, but I think all teaching is being affected by technology just in terms of the delivery of these platforms.
So, whether it be online content delivered through videos or data tracking or again like online platforms, where you can host study notes and study resources and that sort of thing.

And I think it's been interesting and I'm sure Aya, you're of a similar age that, over the course of our education, I'm not sure Zain whether this sort of technology was already there, but I've seen tools been developed that I look back now, particularly with language learning and think, five years ago, tt wouldn't have been that easy.
And it's exciting to see where that's going to go over the next couple of years.

Aya: Yeah, I totally agree. During the Covid-19 pandemic, my university has implemented so many online tools that I think in a way, really enhanced our learning and helped us actually get through the pandemic easier. So, this really has made a difference, so, I believe that there are very positive things about how technology could improve education or accompany education along the way.

So did anything like that happened to you Zain during your education?

Zain El-Hashemite: Yeah, so, in my high school we've always been more technologically advanced than other schools in the area and we've always been using things like Google classroom. I think over the course of my education, from like my first-grade education, like Luke said it's always been part of my generation's.

I started out in the first-grade learning how to use Microsoft Office, learning how to use digital editors and all that stuff. I'm learning how to code right now, I'm learning… Yeah, it's definitely changed from people who are older than me, from what I've heard from them.

Aya: So you really learned the whole Google Suite at school?

Zain El-Hashemite: Yeah, we've actually been using the Google Suite, at least I have, since my sixth grade, so, six years ago now. That0s been something that's been a part of my education for a while, at this point.

Aya: I mean, I think that's so valuable, that's such a valuable skill, because well personally, I don't know about you Luke, but I have never learned the Microsoft Suite at school at all. And it's something that we were kind of expected to know, the school never provided us with such skills, and I think the fact that it does now, that you get to use those tools that are so important now, it's great! And I wish I learned that about 10 years ago.

Luke Cavanaugh: Yeah, so definitely! I think it picks up on another important role of school that maybe we haven't discussed is like to instigate a lifelong learning, because I think talking about a lot of these technology advances, I mean, at some point we've got to leave the formal education system, but innovation won't stop and there's a danger be left behind, if you're not continually prepared to keep learning.

And I think school is supposed to instill you with the values and work ethic to sort of keep up to date with all these trends. I think we've been lucky enough to see and benefit from the values of like

learning these technologies that exist today and there's just a case of keeping up with that as progress and innovation happens.

Aya: think Zain you mentioned that before, it also helped make education more accessible and inclusive for people around the world, and at the same time, you know the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that it's still not accessible to everyone, everywhere.

So, I think it's crucial to give everyone the same chances when it comes to education, because it also means giving everyone the ability to thrive in the world of tomorrow.

Thank you so much again for coming on the Generation Connect Podcast, and sharing your inspiring stories with us. I would like to ask you one last thing very briefly, so, with the upcoming Generation Connect Youth Summit, if you could say something to a world leader today, based on what we discussed today on education, what would you like to say?

Zain El-Hashemite: I would say that transparency is key. That transparency shouldn't be overlooked and should be something that's always integrated into the education. Facts should just be told, straight as they are and I think that's like a very important factor in differences in education around even just my own United States, depending on the area of the country you'll learn different things about the same story.

I think that if everyone were to learn, you know same facts and come to their own conclusions, we could have more educated discussions.

Aya: What about you Luke, what would you like to say?

Luke Cavanaugh: I think I'd just remind them of the power of education to build bridges across nations. I think being one of the only British students being fortunate enough to be in China right now, it's sort of made me all the more aware of how much the UK-Chinese relationship depends on education and educational transfer that just hasn't been possible.

And I think like I just push to see that resumed as quickly as possible, but also in ways that weren't possible before. So, we've talked about how technology can influence this as well, but I think now is not a time to slacking off just because we're all locked in our own home countries, but actually to double down and forge new educational connections across different countries.

Aya: Absolutely! And lastly, I would emphasize the important role of youth in education now because they will become the leaders of tomorrow. And now is actually an incredible opportunity to rebuild better and anew.

Outro: Thank you for listening to our podcast! You can find all the podcast episodes on the ITU Generation Connect website. And if you don't want to miss an episode, subscribe to us on Soundcloud, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. Thanks again, and see you next month for a brand new episode of the Generation Connect Podcast.