

Sustainable and Innovative Leadership in the APAC region

Interview with May Tan-Mullins



While sustainability has become mainstream over the past few years, its execution has proven to be a challenge. Hence, an innovative and strategic approach is required to drive “sustainability” in a sustainable way.

As part of our “**MU APAC Sustainable & Innovative Leadership**” series, we aim to invite a leader who has demonstrated a strong sustainable and innovative mindset to drive impactful change in the APAC region.

This time, MU’s [Gabriel Nam](#) had an insightful conversation with **May Tan-Mullins**, Provost and CEO of the University of Reading Malaysia.

May, who holds a PhD in Geography and has conducted various field trips and written a thesis on environmental topics such as fishermen’s livelihoods and destructive fishing (long before sustainability became a trend), is a natural advocate for sustainability. She has chosen to dedicate herself tirelessly to the education sector with the hope of making a larger impact. In addition to her day-to-day management duties, she continues to serve as a professor in sustainability and conduct training in relevant topics.

Having worked in various locations, including the UK, China, Singapore, and Malaysia, May started as an academic researcher and is now responsible for managing the P&L of a university campus. She kindly shared her experience and views on several key topics related to education, sustainability, and innovation.

Observed Talent Challenges in the Education Sector

“In academia, especially for certain subjects, the focus can be quite technical and theoretical, often detached from real life. This leads to the general perception that we are working in an ‘ivory tower,’ disconnected from practical realities.”

“Leaders in academia typically have a natural passion for research and may not immediately be interested in administrative or management duties. Unfortunately, advanced studies often teach students how to conduct research but not how to train or mentor others, leading to leadership competency gaps.”

Observations/Opinions from May’s Personal Journey

“I have been fortunate to have had great mentors throughout my career. From the beginning, when I worked as a researcher on environmental projects, I encountered the practical reality that I could only achieve my goals by securing the right resources.”

“Those experiences prepared me to transition from researcher to senior administrator, and eventually to leading an entire university campus. Of course, it also depends on the individual’s personality and aspirations—I’ve always enjoyed the commercial and administrative aspects of my work just as much as teaching or research.”

“The ongoing privatization of higher education has also pushed academic leaders to think and act more commercially. It has led to some cases where executives from other sectors (with relevant experience) join the education field, bringing diversity into the system. As a result, certain parts of higher education are now run more like private sector businesses.”

Driving Sustainability at the Higher Education Level

“One reason I’ve stayed in the education sector is my belief in the tangible impact it can have. The higher education sector has already made significant strides in sustainability; we just need to do a better job of telling the story, consolidating narratives, and measuring our impact effectively. In doing so, universities can also enhance their reputations.”

“Indeed, educational institutions have been placing greater emphasis on sustainability, and some are restructuring to accommodate this. In my previous role, I initiated the creation of the Chief Sustainability Officer position and took on that role myself. While this was not common in our sector, it sent a clear message about our commitment to sustainability. It also opened doors for collaborations with various stakeholders.”

Importance of Stakeholder Engagement Skills to Build an Effective Ecosystem

“A significant part of my role as CSO was externally focused. This involved organizing and attending talks, liaising with government entities and state-owned enterprises on research projects, partnering with private companies on ESG initiatives, securing grants, and obtaining donations, scholarships, and internships in the field of sustainability.”

“To be successful, we need to engage with external stakeholders continuously. It’s essential to understand their perspectives and align everyone’s interests to drive the agenda forward.”

“As an educator, I believe it’s not just about imparting knowledge to students. It’s about building an effective ecosystem that helps the next generation discover their passion and excel.”

Innovation and Creativity – Key to Success for Future Leaders

“The rise of AI is bound to disrupt many traditional professions. Tasks that once took hours can now be completed in seconds by AI, making it difficult for some professions to command high margins.”

“Consequently, the education system must evolve. If it continues to emphasize rigid skill sets or memorization, AI will completely disrupt it.”

“Ultimately, the future will be driven by creativity and innovation. This is why I see immense value in subjects like liberal arts, which foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills that AI cannot replicate.”