

Hot Topics Hot Seat: The Secret Life of Wonkhe

Back to the beginning with Mark Leach

In addition to Hot Topics? Coole Solutions! Coole Insight brings you these regular articles where we interview experts, professionals and commentators on a range of issues that impact on education and society.

The Hot Topic – The Secret Life of Wonkhe

It's a Monday morning in early February 2020 and the nation is waking up to begin its usual Monday morning routine before engaging with the hustle and bustle of the commute to work. In recent years, those who work in the higher education sector have now become accustomed to Wonkhe's Monday morning briefing and for many, this briefing forms a key part of their working routine and practice.

When we become used to something we often think of it as 'always being there' but the truth is, with Wonkhe, we are talking about an organisation that has grown from a twitter handle and blog to arguably **the** leading platform for policy debate, discussion and key information for the higher education sector.

In this edition of the hot topics hot seat, Steve Coole caught up with his old friend and colleague Mark Leach, the founder, CEO and Editor in Chief of Wonkhe to discuss the meteoric rise and establishment of what is now a highly respected organisation in the HE sector. We also find out a little bit more about the man behind it all and how Wonkhe came to be, so let's go back to the beginning with Mark Leach...

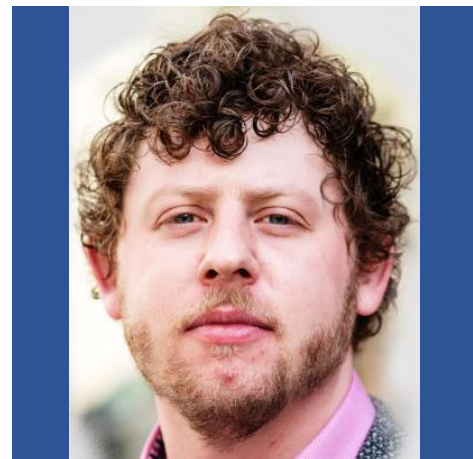
In the Hot Seat – Mark Leach, Founder, CEO and Editor in Chief, Wonkhe

Mark started his higher education journey as a Film Studies student in Kent; however, it wasn't long before his passion and interest in politics quickly took over; "I felt like I should be spending more time than I was on my course, but I simply wasn't interested enough so I switched courses and began studying politics and international relations". Despite switching to a course that aligned more to his interests, Mark still found himself questioning if he was spending enough time on his studies, and this was because he knew before he went to university that he wanted to get involved with student politics. While achieving a decent academic outcome, it was the student politics side of Mark's experience that would go on to shape his future following what he describes as "an amazing time" in Kent.

As a student Mark envisaged himself doing an internship in Westminster or potentially working for an MP in what was then a Labour government, but towards the end of his third year he had also started to build up an appetite and interest for HE policy. This combination of politics and education policy led Mark to stand for election in the students' union, he won, and as a result had given himself the perfect platform to engage in what had become two areas he was passionate about in equal measure.

As a student officer Mark had made an impression, and following a few unsuccessful interviews with students' unions for a permanent staff member role, he found himself working for a newly restructured NUS, with a new strategic approach to HE policy, and a need to re-engage with a sector where its reputation and credibility was at a low. Mark was part of the team that was tasked with changing this narrative, whilst providing more support for the then Vice President, Education, Wes Streeting.

It was during Mark's time at NUS that the idea behind Wonkhe was born, but it took a few career moves to get things going properly. What was originally a blog and a hobby for Mark had a few ups and downs as his career progressed through Hefce, University Alliance, GuildHE and was even put on ice during his time as the policy advisor to the then Shadow Minister for Universities and Science.



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Steve Coole (SC): What are your main memories of being a student in Kent?

Mark Leach (ML): I had an amazing time, student politics was a big part of my experience starting with when I ran for election to Student Council and joined the Labour club, which didn't really exist, so I got it going with help from some of the national organisers. I was also a course rep, which was arguably my most useful experience in student politics thanks to things like attending departmental meetings, faculty meetings, and getting to meet the type of people that run universities, and the politics that can come with that. I learnt a vast amount about how the university works and the bureaucracy behind it like the committee system and how I could influence it to make things better for students.

SC: As an enthusiastic Labour Student it must have been interesting for you operating in a Conservative constituency with Julian Brazier as your MP?

ML: I had a blast! Conservative students were the largest group on campus and were hard right but in an old fashioned and traditional way. My colleagues and I had a lot of fun winding them up, which wasn't all that difficult.

Getting to know Mark...

The last three books Mark read were:

- [*The Biography of Alexander Hamilton*](#)
- [*How Not to Die*](#)
- [*David Lodge Thinks*](#)

Leadership Style?

Mark believes that this is for other people to define, but says he always tries to lead by example.

Mark's friends would describe him as...

Not being their friend anymore because all his time is spent on Wonkhe and being a Dad!

What does the future hold for Wonkhe?

We are continuing to expand our lines of information and briefing services to UK HE and following the pandemic, have developed a more online events and other activity to help bring the sector together when we can't meet in person. We've also got some exciting tricks up our sleeves for the coming year so watch this space.

What does the future hold for Mark Leach?

"I don't know, but my passion for higher education remains undimmed and so for now I'm right where I want to be."

"The major tipping point was the Monday morning briefing which started in 2015. There was a big trend of information emails going out in the mornings, and I saw this as an opportunity"

SC: We met during your time as a sabbatical officer, what are your key memories from that period?

ML: One of the standout things for me was being able to take part in the national political and policy scene having been interested since the start of my student life. I had been going to NUS conference as a student since my first year (the delegations used to be really, really large so it wasn't difficult to get elected on them). One of the main things I took away from the experience of being an officer at Kent was the opportunity to build my confidence, learn about positive and negative aspects of workplace cultures, negotiations with the university and speaking at large events. The large level of responsibility at an age where you have not had to do leadership in a serious political or organisational way was very exciting and you get thrust right in. Then there is the trustee element of the role which I found equally interesting and so I went to everything, got involved in everything I could and used the time to learn. I bled it dry.

SC: NUS is an organisation that is close to both of our hearts, what are your main reflections when you think back to what it was like working at NUS?

ML: Absolutely brilliant experience overall, but with lots of highs and lows along the way. I joined at the tail end of the restructure and people were serving out redundancies, which was awkward to say the least. But as a consequence, there was no education team and that meant I had a broad ranging brief of things to do. NUS's credibility with the HE sector had gone a bit off the boil, and so it helped having me turn up to all the sector meetings and try and feed in constructively. This is what I spent most of my time doing and it was great because I met lots of policy wonks, vice chancellors, learnt about a wide range of issues at the same time. I was building my network and learning how the higher education sector worked at the same time – and I hope adding some value to NUS in its influence on student policy issues, and giving national officers points of intervention that they could use to advance their agendas.

SC: It's clear how this experience benefited you, I was in a regional team at the time, please can you tell me a bit more about how you worked with NUS' member students' unions?

ML: It seemed that the culture had previously separated out NUS' policy work and engagement with students' unions, and I was often greeted with quizzical looks from regional colleagues when I rocked up to things with slides. The London-based policy people weren't seen out on the road much in the past from what I could gather. But NUS' leadership at the time could see that this made no sense and from the start, I was encouraged to get involved with things like the summer training programmes, help SU's with their lobbying work, deliver presentations to members to help translate policy issues to non-specialist audiences in a digestible and simplified way. As the education team grew, we were then able to do more and more to brief SUs in a systematic way about what's going on and why they need to know about it. Learning to properly translate policy, to a non-specialist, yet engaged and interested audience, was one of the foundational skills I needed to set up Wonkhe years later.

SC: Please can you say a little bit about where the name Wonkhe came from?

ML: It's the higher education wonks basically, it was actually Debbie McVitty now our Editor and my long-suffering partner in life and business, that came up with the name many years before she would join the company. We were talking about wonks and fundamentally wanted whatever we did to feel like it was something different. Loads of people said I needed to change the name when we started, a lot of people thought it needed to sound more like something you might already find in HE e.g. an "institute of something" to gain any traction. But that was never going to happen - it needed to feel different to anything else in UK HE if it was going to stand out and shake things up. Today people still do mispronounce it (it sounds like wonky), but I can live with that. In late 2018, having spent years designing the logos and colour schemes etc. myself, I brought in a really great creative agency to help professionalise everything, and give us an identity that better represented who we are and our quirky nature. I was beyond thrilled with the outcome of this, and it wasn't until this point in February 2019 that the Wonkhe brand truly spoke to who we are and what we do.

SC: When you decided to set Wonkhe up as a business, what were the challenges and what do you recall from that first year in operation?

ML: After several years running Wonkhe on Sunday afternoons around my day jobs, I had an opportunity to set it up as a business in 2014. I had been working as a policy advisor to Shabana Mahmood MP who was the shadow universities & science minister and following her unexpected reshuffle, had found myself at a loose end. Debbie (then working at NUS) gave me a year to make it work on the back of her earnings and my savings before I had to get a paid job. The biggest challenges was getting the revenue moving when I wanted to try lots of different things, so I begged and borrowed around the sector and some friendly vice chancellors gave me little pots of cash or help like desk space. I was keen to keep Wonkhe.com free and open to all who wanted to use it, so didn't consider putting up a paywall, instead built partnerships with businesses that wanted to reach in to the sector – organising roundtable policy discussions, working on research etc to pay myself and then eventually others. Choosing how to spend my time was one of the big challenges of the first year – I was on a relentless mission to get Wonkhe in front of people, and build an audience but also needed to raise money so was constantly facing chicken vs egg dilemmas.

SC: How long have you been operating and what would you say were the key moments or tipping points that enabled the organisation to grow and develop in the way it has?

ML: The major tipping point was the start of the Monday morning HE briefing (now Wonkhe Mondays) which started in early 2015. There was an emerging trend out of the US of information emails going out in the mornings, and I saw this as an opportunity to set the sector's agenda for the week and keep people informed. At the time, Jo Johnson was the minister and had started a big programme of reform with TEF and those type of things, so it gave urgency to what we were doing and showed the real power of getting information before anyone else had it, along with the best analysis and commentary all turned around faster than the competition. Tens of thousands of people signed up to the briefing which hugely built our overall audience and from here I was able to build paid-for products – the first being the Wonkhe Daily briefing which then later evolved in to a much wider subscription model – with a suite of information and briefing services for the sector. This in turn enabled me to grow the business and bring in some brilliant wonks. I still edit Wonkhe Mondays every week and as our flagship product, I'm hugely proud of it and how far it has come.

SC: What would you say the highlights have been for you since Wonkhe's establishment?

ML: There are many but our events are always really thrilling. Wonkfest is beyond anything I thought we'd be able to achieve and so it's exciting to bring people together that are so committed to making the sector HE better. Getting The Wonkhe Show – our weekly podcast – going was a real highlight as I always wanted us to have one, and I'm extremely proud of what we're able to achieve with it week in, week out. Launching Wonkhe SUs was an exciting moment as Wonkhe came full circle – back to providing SUs with information about HE policy which is where I started and wouldn't have gone on to build Wonkhe if I hadn't had that experience.

On behalf of Coole Insight Ltd, Steve would like to thank Mark for giving up his time and for sharing his story with us. Whether he likes it or not, Mark is an inspiration to so many, and what he has achieved is nothing short of remarkable. Every time I think of Mark and what he has achieved with Wonkhe, it reinforces something I always say to sabbatical officers – "If you enjoy your work, you are likely to perform at work". Wonkhe is an excellent example of what can happen when you focus your energy on what you enjoy doing, and I hope this piece inspires current students' union officers to think about how they will proactively and consciously carve their future experience in a way that enables their dreams to become reality..

Mark's advice for current SU sabbatical officers...

"Don't be put off by people who hide behind bureaucracy.

Universities can often feel conservative and slow-moving, but there are always people working just as hard as you are to make change and its about recognising them as allies.

Find people who can support your agenda and find people whose agenda's you can support. University staff and academics often cry out for people wanting to help make their institution better.

It's about sharing your passion for wanting to improve things and that can happen at different levels within the university structures. Prepare to be astonished at what you can achieve".

Final notes from Wonkhe and Coole Insight

Wonkhe

- The Secret Life of Students – postponed because of lockdown – returns for an epic two day online event on 17-18 September. Doing "student experience" differently: <https://wonkhe.com/events/the-secret-life-of-students-2020>
- Wonkhe SUs is our amazing subscription offer for students' unions providing information, training, sense checking and unique events and networking. See if it would suit your staff and officer teams – drop jim@wonkhe.com a line.

Coole Insight

- Our student officer support package for 2020/21 is open to SU's for registration until the end of August, contact Steve for further information on how to join this year's cohort of 40+ student officers from across the UK.
- Got a topic and fancy taking the hot seat? Drop Steve a line (email below).