Alex Malley, the charismatic Chief Executive of CPA Australia and author of the best-selling book The Naked CEO, provides a taste of life as a CEO.

This year, the UniSA Business School received a record number of entries in the Win A Day As A CEO competition, which is open to high-achieving business and law students. One of those entries was from 21-year-old Cristina Letton. Cristina has combined her study at UniSA with a position at Mott Finnis & Co. in Naracoorte. Due to this work commitment, Cristina chose to stay in the South East of the state and study a Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting) externally.

The overlap between her study and her new role immediately became obvious. “I could see in the textbooks things that I was learning at work. The textbooks and real life came together.”

Cristina plans to work as an accountant and will begin the CPA Program next year, so when she received an email about the Win A Day As A CEO competition and saw that Alex Malley from CPA Australia was involved, she entered straight away. “I would like to hold leadership roles in the future, and knew I would get a lot out of the day.”

Alex Malley is responsible for 19 offices globally, and more than 150,000 members in 120 countries through his role as Chief Executive of CPA Australia, yet he also finds time to host the Nine Network’s leadership series The Bottom Line, mentor people all over the world via thenakedceo.com, and last year released his book, The Naked CEO.

During a one-on-one chat with Cristina at the CPA Australia office on King William Street in Adelaide, Alex told Cristina that his love of sharing knowledge stems from his beginnings as a teacher. “I taught about 30,000 students at uni, and have people come up and say ‘you said this and as a result I’ve done this’ … until someone tells you there’s a tangible benefit, you don’t know — that’s a bonus. People remember the partnership you had with them, both as a teacher, and now as a CEO.”

He has achieved much throughout his career — he even interviewed the famously reticent former astronaut Neil Armstrong — and told Cristina what he loves is being able to use all the skills he has acquired through different roles. “I enjoy leading a business using a teaching ethic. It’s about knowing you and your team are on the same journey together.

“You have to hold onto your youthful curiosity forever. When I spoke with Neil Armstrong, he was as curious at 81 as he was at 30, or 13. Success is about contentment, which is about doing what you love, but also being proud of yourself.”

When Cristina asked about the average day at work, Alex says it is impossible to define. “If you can imagine, it’s like someone coming to you all day wanting your opinion, your answer, your time, your input. There’s a John Lennon lyric, ‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans,’ and that’s the CEO job — accept your plans are always derailed.

“If you like certainty and control in your life, I’m afraid you’ll have to give up elements of these. You have to trust the people who work for you. There’s no such thing as an average day.”

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Advice from the top

Alex Malley, the charismatic Chief Executive of CPA Australia and author of the best-selling book The Naked CEO, is in demand all over the world. While in Adelaide recently he made time to speak with UniSA accounting student Cristina Letton. This meeting was thanks to the Win A Day As A CEO competition run by the UniSA Business School, which gives one student the unique opportunity to experience life as a CEO and have their questions answered. Cristina received plenty of advice on starting out in her career — and making it to the top.

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This has certainly proved true for Alex, who is one of only two Australians included on The Accountant publication’s Global Accounting Power 50 List. He says although he’s never practiced as an accountant, the skills have proven invaluable throughout his
career. Thanks to the UnSa Business School, when Cristina graduates she will not only have an accounting degree, she will also have training in communication and negotiation – two skills Alex highlighted as essential for getting ahead. “You have to learn how to influence – there’s not a lot you can do to change someone else’s mind. Keep pushing yourself; find the room where you shouldn’t feel that good enough is good enough,” he said.

Alex presented Cristina with a signed copy of his book, and set her several tasks – to update her resume, establish a LinkedIn profile, and work on building networks. He also recommended she join a Toastmasters Club – a not-for-profit organisation that focuses on improving communication and leadership skills via public speaking.

Being involved with the Win A Day As A CEO competition, accounting student Cristina Letton toured the UniSA City West campus (left) including the Jeffrey Smart Building (below left, and opposite page, below). She met with Chief Executive of CPA Australia Alex Malley (below), who also held a masterclass for runner-up entrants in the competition. Opposite page: Cristina was hosted at a business lunch with Alex Malley and UniSA staff (left), and received her certificate from Pro Vice Chancellor of the UniSA Business School Professor Maria Wilson (right). Opening pages: Cristina touring the campus, and speaking with Alex Malley at the CPA Australia office in Adelaide.

While on campus, Cristina met with Pro Vice Chancellor of the UniSA Business School Professor Maria Wilson, who presented her with a certificate and flowers on behalf of the University. She also gave Cristina a copy of CEDA’s Top 10 Speeches: Women in Leadership 2010-2015. With a diverse career history in the public and private sector, including 20 years of university leadership, Professor Wilson is well-versed in what students need, and what employers want.

“Employers want someone who can work on the first day, we also want someone who can work for a whole career,” she told Cristina. “A job is the start of a development pathway; not the end of one. Graduates need to be at the leading edge of technology, but it’s critical that students gain work experience, to understand how money and business works.”

“You never know where your degree is going to take you.”

Professor Wilson advised Cristina to see her career as a series of experiences, not all of them leading where you expect. “Quite often careers start out that way. Everybody has experiences, but the people who learn from them and craft and perfect what they do because of them, they’re the ones who pull ahead.”

“Always look for more challenging roles: this will give you an idea of what you like and don’t like, but also embolden you in the core functions of a business. One of the ways to judge roles is whether they scare you a bit – that little bit of panic is because of what you don’t already know, but it’s also the potential for growth. A little growth is like compound interest – small differences over a period of time make a huge difference to a career.”

“Before you become a CEO, you need these kinds of experiences – starting something and making it work, having to shut something down, and turning something around.”

When asked by Cristina what she would do differently in her career if she had her time again, Professor Wilson gave a considered and honest response. “There are a couple of points where I thought good enough was fine, at critical points where I could have made a significant difference to others and my own career if I’d taken it further. You should always strive to do the absolute best you can.”

Professor Wilson encouraged Cristina to be aware of how she presents herself, especially if she takes on leadership roles. She said this can be as simple as appearing confident and being aware of your facial expressions, but also much more. “You need an executive presence, to look like someone that you can trust with professional decisions and responsibilities. You’re constantly being evaluated on your ability to present verbally. The quality of your work is a representation of your professional credibility and judgement.”

This had quite an impact on Cristina. “I hadn’t thought much about the psychological side of things – how your face reads or the best way of working with people in an organisation. “I’d like to get as far up as I can, and what I took from Professor Wilson was that you shouldn’t feel that good enough is good enough. Keep pushing yourself; find the room to push yourself.”

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