DEPM 604 - Management and Leadership in Distance Education
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Study Group 3

“Interview with Dr. Alan Tait”
, March 11, 2015 at 1:00 PM Eastern

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>> FORTUNA  So, first of all, I like to say that we are just a little bit intimidated by your stature and we really appreciate you doing this for us. I'll be doing the interview today. My name is "Jeep" (like the car) Fortuna

>> TAIT Yep, Hello.

>> FORTUNA  ...and I calling from Washington DC and I'll let the rest of the team introduce themselves and where they're calling in from.

>> TAIT Very good. Understood. That's just fine.

>> FORTUNA  So Terry, he probably already knows you, why don't you go?

>> KLEIN  Okay. [LAUGH] This is Terry Kline and I'm calling from Maryland.

>> TAIT  Hello Terri.

>> MITCHELL  Hello, sorry. Oh, sorry. This is Becky Mitchell and I'm calling from Idaho.

>> TAIT  Hello Becky. Sorry.

>> JOHNSON  Greetings from Trina, Trina and I'm calling from Maryland.

>> LESHOCK  And, last but not least, this is my voice. My name is Dana Leshock and I'm calling from the great state of Texas. Thank you very much for joining us, Doctor Tait. We really appreciate it and it's an honor.

>> TAIT  Great. Great now, great, great pleasure, Dana. I'm happy to support you.

>> FORTUNA  Great. As graduate students in the DE program, your published work as an essential reading, especially, those volumes that shine a light on the importance of student support in DE, so there's no surprise to us that you provided in your own words a values-led academic leadership for the OU as it's Pro Vice Chancellor – a role that in the University's words, ensures that "faculties have plans
for maximizing opportunities for student growth and income generation, which is astounding because that traditionally, is not the role of the university, but further, to ensure success in that regard, you reached out and had an employer engagement strategy and it worked. According to independent sources, in just 2009 alone under your leadership 81% of all OU undergraduates were employed six months after they graduated. And, 92% of all the graduate students. Now that's quite a success story. And, in stark contrast to what we experience here in the United States. So, our first question to you is, DE programs often struggle with student retention and motivation. How was it that you, as the Pro-Vice Chancellor, did you inspire or motivate your faculty to continue to create new and updated curriculum that is engaging for current students. And that's obviously with met with so much success?

>> TAIT Well thank you for that question, [um] Jeep. I need to just give you a little bit of context, I think, to start with.

Those are very, very high employment rates after graduation, reflect . . . I'm very happy to take some of the credit for the University that you're offering, but, also, of course, a great majority of our students are in employment when they join us. Because they're adult part-time, adult part-time students so what we're not doing is taking students straight from high school and then making them employable. Most of them are already in employment. So that isn't quite the extraordinary achievement that you might think it was. What we hope we do for the majority of our students is to . . . some of them joining the workforce for the first time, that would be a minority frankly. Probably not more than 15%.

>> FORTUNA Ah . . .

>> TAIT Some of them gaining promotion within their current careers. Sorry, I can't give you statistics, to, to demonstrate the two evidences and some of them changing careers. So we know all those things happen. And for some people, of course, for some people in the UK, at least until recently when the fee system changed to be much closer to yours. Some people studying simply for the pleasure of to fulfill themselves as people rather than to be looking for professional or livelihood outcomes.

So, um, the achievement isn't quite as great as you might have thought it was. Just goes to show how dangerous statistics can be. However, it is true that in my time As Pro-Vice Chancellor, I've worked hard to introduce employability as a more explicit and conscience part of our curriculum design. So, there many parts of the curriculum, of course, but often difficult, there are ahead of the curriculum where, like the business school, like computing, like social work, like teaching, where that is that is
expected. But it was more difficult with faculties of humanities. The faculties of the humanities are our largest single faculty. So those are people who aren't studying courses that are explicitly vocational at all. [INAUDIBLE] much of that is true, and they're not quite the same degree. And in training, I had to try – I wanted to try to engage those academics in discussion about the sorts of employability skills that were embedded in those areas of thinking. I’ve had some success with that, although I won't, I won't pretend that it was altogether easy, nor altogether successful.

But it is my firm belief that everybody has to earn a livelihood. And that for the majority of students, certainly for adult students but also for young people too, we need to help people to do that. What I, what I don't think is necessary, is that everybody has to study significantly, or simply the vocational subjects, like management, or business studies, or computing.

I, I actually think there are a lot of very important employability skills in the humanities, like critical thinking, the ability to write persuasively, to argue persuasively, etcetera, etcetera. But we, we, we received a major grant from government, something like four million US dollars, to work on employability in our curriculum. So it was an important area of work in my time. Of course, our work was supported by many people, not only me in a leadership position.

>> FORTUNA Right. And, employability is for any nation, an economic concern. But, I want to zero in – because I understand that the Open University is vastly different than our distance education university, because most of our undergraduate's do not work. But did anyone resist you in this initiative?

>> TAIT Yes. [LAUGH]

>> FORTUNA Yeah, what was the most astounding one that perplexed you? What was that all about?

>> TAIT I think academics are, by, tends towards being deep, narrowed people. Who have a very deep, deep knowledge of a narrow area.

>> FORTUNA Right.

>> TAIT And, that's what most doctoral study takes you down. So you become an expert in a small field, but you become deeply expert in it. And so to say to somebody who's main focus of research
was 17th century English history, “I want you to think about how this course is going to help your students become better employed or differently employed”, was a difficult conversation because after, they didn't know anything about that and secondly, they didn't want to learn anything about it. What they wanted to talk about was 17th Century English history.

>> FORTUNA Exactly.

>> TAIT So, so, I think, so that's, that's, that was the nature of, of the difficulty really. It's, it's like, it's I, it's the same issue with them moving into having teaching digitally supported and digitally enabled, taking better advantage of the digital technologies. The expertise doesn't necessarily lie in your core academics, if you decide to do that.

>> FORTUNA Okay. And I'm just first before we move on to the next question and I really appreciate the insight that you're giving us because we're studying of course leadership specifically in education. When the, when the history professor said you know, what concern of that is mine, how, what did you say back to them and try to bring them into the thinking.

>> TAIT Sorry, can you repeat the question there, Jeep?

>> FORTUNA Well, I'm just curious, because that's what I suspected your, your challenge would have been to academics, who are experts in their field. What then you know employability, what does this have to do with English literature? When you've got any kind of a response like that, how did you reply to that individual?

>> TAIT Well, there, there's sort of an array of tactics, none, none of which are original on my part. I think you'll find them in most textbooks. First, practically, you look for allies. Secondly, secondly you look for worth, you look to fund projects and so you say, “I'll give you some money if you'll do this project”. “Oh, yes, we’d like some money” So, the Dean says, “I'd like some money”, so they, they, they'll run a project in your area.

I try to bring student voices in so, I try to bring demand in. So it wasn't just from the top down, it was also driven bottom up, until the students began talking about it. Of course, for the students, it's important. So there are an array of things. But, of course leadership – you, you, you have to be very careful you can, it's an elastic relationship with your colleagues.
>> FORTUNA Yeah.

>> TAIT By which I mean you can, you can, pull them along with you, but if you pull it too far, it will break.

>> FORTUNA Yeah.

>> TAIT And, that they, you know, he's gone off down on some funny loop we're not following him down there. So it's an elastic relationship and you just have to know how far you can pull, how far, you know, how hard you can pull any particular time.

>> FORTUNA Okay. Very good. And we really appreciate that because, yes, it is “textbook” and we've read about these different strategy and concepts. But, it's good to hear it from you that they're actually employed.

So here's my next question. On a similar vein, to all your leadership, whether it's been Eden or the Consortium, what strategies have you employed successfully to steer an organization in the right direction when you knew it needed to change? Can you give us an example?

>> TAIT Well, it's at risk of repeating myself with it, Jeep.

>> FORTUNA Well that's fine. But . . . [CROSS TALK]

>> TAIT When you develop an insight, when you've got to change direction. When you begin talking about it with people who are close to you, and, you say, “I think that we have a problem there. Uh, “What do you think about this?” And then people will correct you. You know, you can share with the people you’re close to and sometimes they'll say you know, you know, “You're mad, you're barking mad”. “You're completely wrong about that”. And, sometimes, they're right of course. And, then it's possible that they'll say, “Yes, yes, yes you've got a point here”. And, then you begin to work it out. As I say you look for allies. And then, you begin to look for ways to make people want to change. The key to change, one of the keys to change, is to get people to want to change. It . . . it’s painful change, especially in the academic community is . . . is . . . , I'm not saying it never happened, but I always felt defeated, if in the end, I had to impose change, because it means you haven't done your job properly.
So getting people to want to change, getting people to say, “Yes, you know, you're right.” “I haven't I thought about that, you're right”. Or getting enough of them to say that is the real key to change, I think. So, it's a lot about advocacy and persuasion and being, you know, being around people.

And, and being trusted, so that people. You know, if you sit, when I was dean, I'd go around, I used to call it walking the floor, I'd walk around the building every day and I'd sit down with somebody new and I'd say look this is what's on my desk and I'd like to share it with you.

I used to often learn new stuff, of course, because all sorts of people have insight on all sorts of levels in the organization and also, you know, my organization may begin to trust you. They'll say, “Oh, yes, I met the dean last week”. “He's, he's, he's quite interesting, actually, blah, blah, blah.”

>> FORTUNA Right.

>> TAIT So, you build that trust.

>> FORTUNA So, apparently you're right up there Jack Welsh, the infamous chairman of General Electric who's leadership style, like yours, was to manage by walking around and talking to people.

>> TAIT [LAUGH] Well I think there's a lot to it, as a matter of fact, Jeep. Yeah. Yes.

>> FORTUNA So, let me ask you. In your experience, because you've gone all over the world performing different leadership roles, what do you think is the biggest challenge to distance education now, particularly on the business side? Where do people get it wrong? And where do people get it particularly right?

>> TAIT The biggest single challenge, I think is student assistance and success, but it's probably student propelled. So, we've had some shocking cases in the states over the last five to eight years at some of the private for profit colleges, that's really tarnished the reputation of eLearning, once again. So that I think is an essential question. And it's not, it's not only about the quality of Distance and eLearning, it's also about the sorts of risks you take in student's admissions. So if you're, if you're recruiting into an elite university you, you know, you might accept 10% of people who apply to you. So . . . so you’re selecting the very best qualified students or students usually with the most social and
intellectual capital. But, when you're working with distance learning, you generally trying to include sorts of people who find it difficult to be included otherwise. That's something entirely worthwhile, but much more risky – an educational challenge.

So, you know, you're not to confuse apples and pears here, we're trying to do different things from Harvard and Yale and Princeton, etc. Nonetheless, we have to have a responsibility to support our students properly and to recognize, you know, their backgrounds and their needs. But, that's a central thing to me.

The second biggest challenge I think is in brand recognition, because the reputation of Distance and eLearning is often not strong. Sometimes because of very problems we've just been talking about. Other times because of the snobbery, if you can afford snobbery, on the part of educational institutions.

The third area I'll mention, if I can go in threes – is, I think, managing the transition into the digital world, I think is very, very important skill and [INAUDIBLE] the digital revolution, as it’s been going on in the UK. We're twenty years old now, and we're not through it yet.

And, there's also been exciting stuff that's still to happen. So, I think a leadership approach that engages thought, pretty essentially, is important.

>> FORTUNA Right. And, I assume you're good friends with Sir David Putnam.

>> TAIT David Putnam was our chancellor until recently. Rather recently. Yes, yes. I knew him certainly.

>> FORTUNA But he's, as I understand it, a crusader for the digital age in education.

>> TAIT Yes.

>> FORTUNA Thank you. What, what do you find to be the most difficult part of being well known as a leader in Distance Education, personally?

>> TAIT Well, I don't think I'm that well known. I love you. [LAUGH] I don't think of myself of having rock
star status, Jeep. So I don’t ever, I don’t have any problems at all. I’m very happy to sit in the back of rooms and listen, don’t always have to go up there and talk.

>> FORTUNA So I understand, but yet you go to China to help their system out.

>> TAIT I did, yeah.

>> So, yeah. So, you know, the people the world over people look to you for guidance. And how is that for you? And is it a challenge for you to be regarded, that way?

>> TAIT Yeah, no I really enjoy exploring new contracts and yeah, offering advice, I mean I can offer advice as different as China where a third degree of modesty.

>> FORTUNA Right.

>> TAIT Mm-hm, you can easily misunderstand what's needed. I mean Chinese culture is always changing, changing with the time pulse. It's, it's very different from, from British way. I think also we must tell the [INAUDIBLE]. So you go with, yeah, modesty. I, I, I, I enjoy it enormously.

>> FORTUNA Okay good. Well I'll go into the next question then - I was worried that may have been a little redundant. But one of our team members found your article on leadership development for distance in learning you published in 2007. And in that article you described leadership in Distance Education as an “uncomfortable place to be”. Why, why did you say that?

>> TAIT Well, I think it's because you have to have a commitment to educational risk. So you come in, likely, I think, into distance learning, because you don't regard the current educational systems as adequate. So you're trying to change things and that's uncomfortable. You're dealing with the application technologies in education, and the digital revolution in particular, and that's uncomfortable. You can get that wrong, you can make serious mistakes, as well as getting everything right. And you're dealing with adult students lives, which is a hell of a responsibility.

>> FORTUNA That's true. You may have read in your paper that one of our beloved colleges known throughout the United States, Sweet Briar, was closing its doors, so it's kind of the antithesis of, you
know, distance education is growing here in the States, and some of the brick and mortars are struggling.

>> TAIT Yeah.

>> FORTUNA Do you see, here, again, it can be national diversity here, but do you see DE coming more and more to the forefront in the future?

>> TAIT Yes, I do but I, I'd qualify that. So, I think we're passed the tipping point in both your society and in mine. Online and Distance learning is seen as, you know, something strange and odd and bizarre and marginal. I think in particular post graduate level, it's becoming mainstream. But what I see, what I see, as developing very fast, is digitally enabled education on campus.

So, I think, actually, this is uninhibited, very challenging, a very interesting topic for your students to study, because I think the old definition, which was so sharp, of our campus based education and distance learning are becoming unstable. So when you, if you're sitting on a campus . . . But first of all, I forget the numbers now, but in the States, I forget the percentage of, percentage of campus based students who are taking online courses. So then, they're mixing their modes of study. So people aren't thinking of themselves any more, “I am a campus-based student” or “I'm a distance student”. They're actually mingling their modes of study. So, that's one thing that's happening. But, secondly, a lot of online learning and a lot of media being used in campus based teaching.

And students, you know, what's happening on the campus isn't the same as what was happening on the campus 20 years ago. It's not only that Distance and eLearning that has changed. So, a student . . . I mean, almost all campuses have learning management systems. Twenty years ago, only distance learning had LMS. Now, all campuses have LMS systems. They're getting their resources from them and putting their services on them and they're talking to the lecturers. So the sharp distinctions, I think, are breaking down.

>> FORTUNA Yeah, that's true. Okay, so I think each of us might have an opinion on this question, but we're curious how you will answer it. Do leadership roles in DE differ from those of traditional face to face universities, the brick and mortar?

>> TAIT Less than they used to. But still to some extent, I mean I think this is, this is not a true story,
but it’s, you know, it used to be said about presidents or vice chancellors of campus-based universities is that the chair of the board would say to them on their first day, “Your main job is to make sure you leave this university as you find it”, you know, things were stable.

>> FORTUNA Right.

>> TAIT They didn't want change; they didn't need change, teaching them change in 200 years. They wouldn't expect it to change in the next 200.

That isn't true anymore on campuses. I also think there's a . . . there’s a much more competitive character to postsecondary education than there used to be, and that goes across the field with campus-based and distance and e-learning. So I think the two disciplines are coming together. Where I think there are still differences, but their differences are Distance and eLearning also, are our institutional values that drive institutional leadership.

So, my experience is [INAUDIBLE] and B is, primarily in conclusion and of participation of, of, of communities probably, more difficult to be represented in these institutions. And, that's less true for the classic, research-based universities. And, that's true, that's true.

>> FORTUNA Alright, so, those are our questions that I think that we provided you ahead of time, but I just want to ask the team if they want to do, any follow up questions over all with any of them. Team?

>> ORNATE I don't have any questions- At the time, but I really, really appreciate all your time

>> KLEIN We appreciate your time. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

>> FORTUNA Alrighty then, so, if there are no follow up questions, again Dr. Tate, we so much appreciate it. And we're going to spend weeks [KLEIN LAUGHS] picking every word apart and creating insight. So, thank you very much.

>> TAIT Okay. Great pleasure talking to you all online. Good luck with your work.

>> KLEIN Thank you so much.
>> MITCHELL Thank you, Dr. Tate.

>> LESHOCK Thank you so much.

>> FORTUNA Bye, everybody. [SOUND] Good job, everybody.