

PodMag Week 24

Date: 11 June 2014

Dave:

Ok, so here I am today a beautiful sunny day actually, here in Milton Keynes, and I have come to the office of our Pro Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, Belinda Tynan. Belinda, it's really nice of you to take the time to talk to us. I know PodMag listeners will be very interested in what you've got to say. Now one thing I'm curious about is - you're not from around here?

Belinda:

No, well I think my accent kind of gives me away doesn't it? Well, I'm from Australia, and it's really a bit hard for me to say whereabouts in Australia I am from because I have moved around a bit but I would say probably Melbourne is my home town, and I came to the UK primarily for this job so I was already in the role of Pro Vice Chancellor at the University of Southern Queensland at an organisation very similar to the Open University, so it wasn't a huge leap, other than the huge air miles and relocating to another country to come to the Open University, and if I had to say that I was in my dream job this would be it. I just love being here and I just am so... probably still a bit shocked that hey I'm here and I'm doing this role because I didn't expect to be here at this point in my career.

Dave:

That is fabulous, we're glad to have you here.

Belinda:

That's very kind of you to say that, you are stuck with me anyway!

Dave:

Well we're glad we're stuck with you! The Open University is a fabulous organisation, I know you've realised that. You've been here for just over a year now haven't you?

Belinda:

That's right, yes.

Dave:

So, one of the things we've been trying to do with the PodMag and with our student connections conference is to bring our students much closer to us. What do you think about what we're doing? How do you feel that something like a student connections conference and things like a PodMag, how do you feel they fit in to the general strategy that you're developing?

Belinda:

Look, I think what you're doing is absolutely critical for how we support our students. We know on the mainstream campuses that students have all those other opportunities, they can go to clubs and societies and just hang out in the quad rooms or quadrangles, or the bars and whatever, and we don't really have enough I think that ensures students feel like they are part of the community of some kind, so this whole notion of connecting people up and sharing people's experiences about what it's like to be a student, the warts and all of that, because it's not easy, and students being able

to exchange strategies, being able to talk about their disciplines and what they're actually studying. I just think that that's absolutely critical for students' sense of belonging and their identity with the university, because I still think that being a distance learner can be quite isolating at times. I love it when I hear students say to me that they will be working away on stuff but they've got their Facebook stream running next to them or they're on Twitter with their friends so they are multi-tasking and trying to connect in a sense. So I'm really excited about your conference, I'm hoping to join in and be part of it and see what students actually do, so in a sense you're a bit ahead of the curve, you're getting in before we have actually said hey we want to do more of this so I'm just really delighted to see that you are emerging with this.

Dave:

We do like to be ahead of the curve.

Belinda:

Well you know...

Dave:

We also hope that other people are going to learn from what we are doing.

Belinda:

Could I add that what I think is really neat about what you are doing is how you are involving the students in preparing it as well and I don't think we do enough of that in a sense there's a lot of us giving things to students but having students work alongside us and prepare, because I know you have been working with students to create those little video diaries about what it's like to study and how they study and tips and skills and stuff and even in the presentations. I'll be really interested to see whether students want to do more of that kind of thing and how much engagement would they like to have with us as a university.

Dave:

Thank you, that is really interesting because what I was going to say, one of things that I follow up on that you said, when we speak to the students isolation is a word that just keeps coming up time and time again and what they want is a connection both to other students and also to the staff so when some of them come on campus it knocks them out to go into the Hub and actually bump into people who write the chapters for them, they're really enthused by that. Now clearly we've got a lot of students out there at any point in time, probably a hundred thousand people studying with the Open University, and it would be difficult to bring them all to the Hub on one day. That experience is so good for them, to actually feel connected, have you any ideas how we would be able to facilitate bringing even more students on to campus to meet their academics, to meet people like yourself, and just to feel part of the community that many of us feel when we're actually in this place?

Belinda:

Well, just thinking off the top of my head there are mechanisms I think that currently already exist for the students to be engaged with and whether or not we advertise those opportunities very well is another thing, but there is the use of conference where students can come in and academics are engaged with them, and I think I am doing a session at that this year on the learning and teaching plan for example. But there's

also the student club network and that's a really interesting network and I heard the other day that the Psychology club, for example, they hold two day residentials and so the students all come together and they do that themselves so that's not the University organising it but students organising it. I think we could use the technology, so more of these live events could be a good way to tackle the issue too. So I am really open to suggestions. I don't think we've written down the formula yet.

Dave:

Yes, one of the things that a number of students have also mentioned is the array of technology that we tend to throw at them, which sometimes is beneficial and sometimes is a bit of a hindrance to them because what they seem to really value is still the human connection. Does it worry you that we sometimes are over reliant on a technological solution to what are really very human problems?

Belinda:

Well I think it's a tricky question that one, the students are so diverse and each is quite unique and so you could speak to one set of students and they say that they want more of the face to face style of things, and more print, almost that they like to be isolated in a sense and want that, and then there are others who want to be really highly engaged and be part of the community of the organisation itself. I think it's actually a really difficult question. Is it a problem? I don't know... that we can engage in discussions with our students using a whole range of technologies because that's what we have at our disposal and because previously distance education didn't really have that. We are trying to replicate in a sense what a campus experience might be. I think sometimes we don't get that right because I'm not sure we have the right pedagogies in a sense of how to use the technologies even so there will be a certain level of experimentation from your academics and from staff as well in using those. I think we have to face just that pragmatic reality that we live in a very digital world, we are surrounded by it, we purchase online, we book our travel online, we bank online, all these things they are just part of our world. So in a sense another part of our responsibility is to ensure that our learners are equipped to operate in that world. Maybe sometimes it's frustrating but it's also about developing your digital literacy so you can actually operate appropriately in a digital environment too.

Dave:

Ok, well that's a tricky question but it's a good answer.

Belinda:

Well I think it's a hard question actually.

Dave:

It's one we will constantly be debating. We discussed at the event which I attended a few weeks ago that you organised, the vision event, and looking forward, and I wanted to ask you about that because that was a tremendous event and that was two of the best days I have spent in the OU.

Belinda:

Well, you have to say that because you are sitting here in front of me!

Dave:

No I have to say it, I have said it elsewhere when I wasn't sitting in front of you, so I actually mean that and it was very productive and we did a lot of really good work, but that's taken us forward and what I wanted to ask is obviously not everybody could be part of that event, I know we've cascaded it out to as many people as possible and trying to get everybody involved, which is incredibly open, which is what we should be, but where is it all going because we were looking ahead to 2020, where do you think we are going to be in 2020?

Belinda:

The way the plan itself is shaping up at the moment is there is probably two or three big ideas that are emerging. Currently, our production teams don't really involve students, some do, but quite a lot don't so how would students be brought into that mix to be part of it? Some suggestion too that potentially our curriculum is not treating our students as adult learners, as they are, so some of those ideas flowing through quite strongly actually which is I think quite exciting. So it's not all definite yet, there's lots of ideas and the idea is to be really open and we've got a session at the conference to talk about it more with students. We are going to use the consultative forum as well so students will get to have a say around what some of those big issues are. I think it's exciting to engage people, but at some point we will have to settle on something and not everyone will like it I'm sure but there is compromise in everything.

Dave:

If there is anybody listening to this now who thinks I know exactly where we should be in 2020 how can they get that idea to you?

Belinda:

They can send me an email, it's that straightforward, and it's belinda.tynan@open.ac.uk.

Dave:

Well that is an invitation. You will probably be flooded with emails from our listener!

Belinda:

Well it's quite surprising, I often tell people, email me, let me know, or come and have a coffee, and I rarely get the invitation, and only occasionally are people brave enough to send me the email, and I guarantee you, that if you do send me an email, you will get a reply.

Dave:

Ok, well that's brilliant, I hope you get some emails and thank you very much for your time this morning it's been really good talking to you.

Belinda:

It's my pleasure. I hope your conference goes really well.

Dave:

Thank you.