

Ανοικτή Εκπαίδευση: το περιοδικό για την Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση και την Εκπαιδευτική Τεχνολογία

Τομ. 10, 2014



Interview with Alan Tait (in english)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/jode.9839>

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To cite this article:

Papadimitriou, S., Ioakeimidou, V., & Spanaka, A. (2014). Interview with Alan Tait (in english). *Ανοικτή Εκπαίδευση: το περιοδικό για την Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση και την Εκπαιδευτική Τεχνολογία*, 10(1), 101-106.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/jode.9839>

An interview: Alan Tait

The interview was conducted in Athens on the 11th November 2013 during the 7th International Conference in Open and Distance Education.



Alan Tait was interviewed by:

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Alan Tait

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Professor Alan Tait is Director, International Development and Teacher Education at the Open University (OU), UK. Prior to this he was Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) responsible for the strategic and operational oversight of the University's undergraduate and postgraduate courses, packs, programmes and qualifications, together with acting as Planning and Resource Officer for the seven faculties.

Alan Tait previously held the position as Dean of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at the OU. His academic career has been in practitioner and scholarly support of distance and e-learning. He was Chair of the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) NAP Steering Committee 2002-2005, and he served as President of ICDE associate member, EDEN, from 2007-2010. Prior to this, he was Editor of the journal Open Learning from 1989-1998, joint Series Editor of the Routledge Series Studies in Distance Education and Co-Director of the Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning.

Alan is Professor of Distance Education and Development at the OU and has published extensively in the field of open and distance learning, in particular in learner support. He is former Chief Editor of the European Journal of Open and Distance Learning (EURODL) and current Editor in Chief of the Commonwealth of Learning's Journal of Learning for Development. He has also worked widely in developing countries for international organizations such as UNESCO, the European Commission and the Commonwealth of Learning. He is currently also Senior Online Consultant for The Open University of China.

Recent most cited publications include 'What are Open Universities for?', in Open Learning, 2008, Vol 23:2, pp 85-94, 'Leadership Development for Distance and E Learning', 2007, in the International Handbook of Distance Education, Eds. Evans T, Haughey M and Murphy D, pp 499-512, and 'Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning', in Open Learning, 2000, Vol 15, No 3, pp 287-299.

QUESTION: In your seminar you have mentioned some skills that students need to have in order to continue in order to keep on learning. Can you please name those skills?

A.T.: So I think that what I talked in particular were the skills around the finding and evaluating of resources. So the big change that I tried to identify between second and third generation distance education was that in second generation distance education we sent all the content to the students and now we can ask students to find the content at least to some extent themselves and this is a very important contemporary skill. It should be an outcome of qualifications and the distance and e-learning is in a very strong position to deliver that skill. So the students will have to find resources. I used the example of what are the three most important contemporary approaches to marketing in today's business world. We used to say these are the three, please discuss them. Now we should say, please find out what you think of the three most important trends in marketing. And of course students will then have to learn to evaluate the resources on the Web, cause in the Web there are good resources and very misleading and inaccurate resources. It is a very important skill to be able to recognize what you find, to evaluate it and then to use it.

QUESTION: And it's the same for undergraduates and postgraduates students?

A.T.: I think it is. I think it is. I think one of the interesting things has happened over quite a long period is the way in which the skills of investigation have moved down the sector. So when I was a student at undergraduate level very long time ago research and investigation was really only happening in postgraduate level. Now it is happening in primary schools. Now we ask primary school children to find out things. So this skill of investigation I think is the one we have to incorporate to our pedagogy.

QUESTION: Why do we need an open university, if a conventional university can give distance education?

A.T.: Hmm, good question, good question. There isn't a simple answer to that. Some countries don't have open universities. Australia doesn't have an open university, USA doesn't have an open university. So I think governments set up open universities in particular when they can't see a way of delivering their capacity higher education opportunity that is needed through conventional means. And I think that remains the case.

If you look at the proportion of people who society needs to go to university and Korea and Finland are already sending something like 60% of their young people to university, the UK is now on about 40%, you simply can't build enough campuses to do that.

If you look in the developing world now, where they have achieved very high levels of primary education, there is still a lot to do with secondary education, there is an increasing demand for higher education now. They are not going to be able to meet that demand by building campuses. It's simply not possible. They can't build enough campuses. So they're gonna have to develop systems of distance and e-learning, open learning. So that's one reason why we should have open universities. But it's at the same time true that distance and e-learning is no longer done only by open universities and I think, as I said, master's level in the UK, more than 100 universities offer at least a part of their master's provision using distance and e-learning. Maybe only a small part, but they offer a part of it. And so I think there is an issue

about whether a society continues to need an open university. And my answer to that is not a simple one. I think an open university has to do some very difficult things.

It has to be first of all a university. It has to offer qualifications which are recognized in society. Is no good for our students, if we were saying well that's not a real qualification, because it comes from an open university. We've got to have real qualifications. So there has to be close to a university model for that to work. At the same time I think an open university has always got to challenge the idea of what a university is, just as we did at the beginning. I am sure that the Hellenic Open University challenged the notion in Greece about who might be appropriate to study in a university, just as we did in the UK. So I think that the open universities have to continue to challenge what a university is. And you have to get that balance right. If you get it too much wrong in one way, people would say this is not a real university. If you get it too much wrong in the other way and an open university becomes conventional and boring, people would say why do we need that one? It's like all the other universities, so what's the point? So it's a balance, a difficult, dynamic...

QUESTION: And also a balance between research and teaching?

A.T.: There is a balance. The mission of an open university as they've developed so far as models around the world and there are... I don't know how many open universities are around the world, probably 50, 60, 70 now. The mission has delivered through its teaching. But I do believe universities are places that should produce knowledge as well as transmit knowledge. And difficult to come to some areas of research, which is very expensive. So for example, if you take the big sciences, this is expensive research. The equipment that you need is very expensive. It's impossible to put big physics research in every university. It's simply not possible. But it has to be some recognition of that, I think, within a university and national research strategy. But nonetheless if you take a broader approach than just research and look at scholarship or broadly under a different kinds of scholarly activity income including disciplinary research but also other, the scholarship of teaching for example. I think every university should at the same time produce knowledge as transmit it. And clearly for an open university there are two big research areas, seems to me, which I hope a university should concern itself of and above disciplinary research. One is going to be research into widening access, participation in higher education. So I would like it to be the case that in a country the open university produced the authoritative research on widening access and also on distance and e-learning. That's the place to locate the research on distance and e-learning. That should be the authoritative university. But it's unlikely that an open university is going to be the big researcher on Physics or Medicine. That's unlikely. Yes, it depends on the subject.

QUESTION: I would like to ask you about specific skills that you think are most important for the tutor in distance education....

A.T.: Well, in the seminar on Thursday evening, I had an interesting disagreement with a colleague, a very valuable disagreement. So I was saying you need subject competence in a tutor and excellence in student support. So in other words in an open university, as I understand the model, and I think Hellenic model is very similar to my model, my own view is that a doctorate is not necessary to be a tutor. I'm sure is valuable, but is not necessary. What is absolutely necessary is a commitment to and a competence how to support students when they are working separately, when they are suffering pressure and time, how to help them explore the course materials and make sense of them. So it's a students' support skill, which, I think, needs to be excellent. It means having an empathy for adult students with

difficult lives and adult students live the pressure of family and work. It means being prepared to accept a division of labor academically, when the course materials is produced in one place and the tutor's job is to support the students with those materials but not to produce a new course, that isn't the tutor's job. So it's a different job from the conventional teacher.

QUESTION: To support the existing material?

A.T.: Yes.

QUESTION: So you said it's different from conventional teaching, teaching in a conventional university?

A.T.: Yes. Because in a conventional university...

QUESTION: You create the curriculum.

A.T.: You create the curriculum. Exactly so.

QUESTION: So in distance education teaching is more about like leading...

A.T.: Supporting.

QUESTION: Not really creating the content.

A.T.: Well, in the classical faculty use such a term, the classical open university model. I think that's true. In the US there are different distance education models, which are more instructor lead. So they don't scale, it's a large scale. Really, they are just working with a small group but at a distance.

QUESTION: How many students?

A.T.: Well, they may have 25 students in group.

And there the instructor, as I think the term they use, retains the responsibility for creating the course in many american distance teaching systems. But in the Open University model where they have curriculum construction in one place and the support of students in another and you scale by using part time tutors, I think the skills are different.

QUESTION: So if we are talking about quality teaching in distance learning and teaching, what are the key features there? What do you think is the priority in model that the teacher may not have a Phd degree for example?

A.T.: You are talking about quality in a tutorial or more broadly?

QUESTION: More broadly.

A.T.: That's a big question. I think, to put its simplest, quality is around working out accurately what it is you are trying to achieve and then seeing if you've achieved it. So for example, if you are trying to support students who don't come from traditional university family backgrounds, their families that haven't been to universities, this is a new culture for them. You have to think very carefully about how you create a teaching and learning system to support them. You have to make sure that the students come in to a course that is at a level with which they can engage for example. So there is a quality dimension around curriculum in a certain construction, so as to be accessible to students. You have to ensure in the tutor dimension of your quality that the tutors understand the role that they've got and one of this quality measure is what students say about the tutor at the end of the course. We collect feedback from our students about their experience of the course and we send their feedback back to tutors. So it's about working out what you are trying to achieve and then making sure you've got strategies in place to deliver this. That's quite a general picture.

QUESTION: One more question about tutor-counselors. Could you refer some methodologies or best practices for staff development, academic development? If you may have implemented some methodologies...

A.T.: I think if you look at tutors when they first come in the university, for the first time. I think one thing you have with this induction is understanding this different teaching role. What is a tutorial role? Otherwise people will come and think with a study group or in a classroom I just behave as I normally do, when I teach in my other university or my other college that clearly isn't appropriate. So you've got to induct into the particular role. I think you've got to help them understand the sort of issues the students will be facing, in particular the pressure of time for all students in the universities. I think that's a very very big pressure for students. Of course they manage their families and jobs as well as studying. So I think tutors have to be sympathetic and understanding of that. I also think you have to help tutors develop what we've just been talking about the shorts of skills tutors need to have. So if you take someone who leaves school to go to university at the age of eighteen, universities usually assume rightly or wrongly that the students have the skills to make progress in the university. If you are taking a student of twenty five or thirty there is a gap of being away from education. The students will have either to learn these skills for the first time or relearn them. I think tutors need to understand that. So there needs to be an understanding which is both empathetic and sympathetic but also very practical. So giving feedback in assignments tutors need to make sure the feedback he or she is giving is helping the student learn what the skills of studying are, at a metalevel, I think.

QUESTION: So you think tutor teaches only when he gives feedback on assignments and maybe during tutorials?

A.T.: These are the two major roles.

QUESTION: What happens then in face to face meetings? Should the tutor teach in a traditional way the content of the course, should he suggest deadlines on students' work, should he offer a timetable...?

A.T.: Well, I think all those things are very appropriate. What a tutor doesn't need to do is to say this is the content of the course, because the student has that already. So I think all the tasks you defined are very relevant in an active way.

QUESTION: Do you think OER could play an essential role to staff development of tutors?

A.T.: Hmm... I have never thought about that. Why do you ask this question?

QUESTION: Because I explore this field of OER and their impact. ... Do you think resources can play a significant role?

A.T.: Yes, I think you know a lot more about this than me!!!