



Vol.7 Special Issue No.1 (2024)

# Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

## Kaplan Business School's student-centred approach: An interview with Professor James Adonopoulos

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### Keywords

Emotional intelligence;  
humane teaching;  
kindness;  
leadership;  
learning environment;  
student centricity;  
international education.

### Abstract

In this wide-ranging interview, we explore the perspectives of Professor James Adonopoulos, the Academic Dean of Kaplan Business School (Australia) – one of the most reputable tertiary education providers in the field of business, globally recognised as the Business School of the Year for international students in 2023. This interview delves into Prof. Adonopoulos's academic strategies, initiatives, and practices that have culminated in a supportive and nurturing learning environment and a humane approach to teaching.

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Addressing topics related to kindness and student centricity, Prof. Adonopoulos highlights the importance of discourse-based workshops in contrast to unidirectional lectures and explains how his national team of more than 600 teachers are engaged and equipped with the skills to cultivate an engaging learning environment. Prof. Adonopoulos argues that technical skills are insufficient for the modern workplace which demands that graduates also possess a formidable set of ethical standards, emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence. He provides examples from his experiences at Kaplan Business School where he has led the creation of an inclusive, supportive, and psychologically safe academic culture that supports the emotional and intellectual growth of faculty and students. The proactive embrace of emerging technologies and the pursuit of disruptive innovation are additionally discussed in this interview with insights shared on what it means to teach and prepare students for the contemporary business world.

### Article Info

Received 1 March 2024  
Received in revised form 4 March 2024  
Accepted 14 June 2024  
Available online 18 June 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2024.7.S1.5>

## Introduction

**Aleksandra Vojinovikj (Aleksandra):** At the very beginning, allow us to congratulate you on your contribution to Kaplan Business School's (KBS) most recent global award – 'Business School of the Year' for international students. This is on top of KBS becoming Australia's ninth self-accrediting authority (in Australia, a self-accrediting authority means that a higher education provider is permitted to accredit some or all of its courses of study; see Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency of Australian Government [2022]), as well as numerous awards and acknowledgements for the quality of teaching, student support, learner engagement, graduate outcomes, and student employability. All of that speaks volumes of the innovative and progressive approach to education at KBS. The education industry needs to learn from such reputable organisations, making this a particularly timely interview. Can you describe your initial reaction upon learning that KBS was named 'Business School of the Year' at the PIEoneer Awards in 2023?



Figure 1. Professor James Adonopoulos.

**Professor James Adonopoulos (J.A.):** It was a mixture of emotion, surprise, and pride. I was there with our executive director, Steve Knussen, and my colleague, Alex Reeman-Clark, who was likewise a colleague of mine at KBS back in 2016 when our institute was not as highly regarded. Back then, publicly available government data revealed a discomfiting gap between our aspirational vision for quality education and the reality at the time. However, since then, our net promoter score has tripled such that it is now consistently above plus 50, higher than almost every Fortune 500 company; likewise, we are now officially ranked as one of the top two business schools for postgraduate teaching quality. So, we have well and truly overcome the

challenges we confronted in 2015 and 2016. Being at the ceremony in London was therefore validation for us that our many difficult decisions were ultimately successful.

The second sentiment was surprise. I genuinely did not expect us to win when considering the calibre of the other global finalists, so it was an absolute surprise to know that we were named the best business school for international education in the world. The third sentiment was pride, which stems from the fact that doing work that we know has a consequential impact on students is one thing; however, having that work recognised at a global level is something altogether different.



Figure 2. Professor James Adonopoulos (on the left), accepting the award for the 'Business School of the Year' at the PIEoneer Awards 2023. Source: The PIE Partnership (2023).

**Athena Valassas (Athena):** For those who are unfamiliar with your institution, could you provide a brief overview of KBS's history and core values?

**J.A.:** KBS started with just one campus over a decade ago and has grown over the years from an institute offering just a few courses that were relatively indistinguishable from the rest of the higher education sector to the inspirational institute we are today, which genuinely leads the sector. What I mean by inspirational is not just about awards. I am talking

about the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when so many higher education providers around Australia and the world were shutting down programs, we were launching postgraduate Business Analytics courses, with hundreds of students enrolled in that first year and thousands ever since then. In a similar vein, when other institutions were shutting down their campuses in the midst of COVID-19, we were opening our Perth campus in Western Australia, with thousands of students having since enrolled.

As a school, what we represent is more than just typical business studies. We present a genuine national footprint as the only business school in Australia with campuses across the five capital cities as well as a sixth on the Gold Coast (the new KBS Gold Coast campus – has opened in early March 2024, with the first classes commencing on 18th March 2024; see Kaplan Business School [2024a]). Our courses now expand beyond the traditional business courses of an MBA and a Bachelor of Business to encompass, as mentioned, not just analytics but also IT, which we launched last year.

*We are one of Australia's biggest institutes of higher education, certainly among the most trusted and respected.*

We're trusted and respected because we're a self-accrediting authority. This means that, of the 150+ institutes of higher education in Australia, we are one of only nine that TEQSA, our regulator, trusts with the accreditation and reaccreditation of their own programs, specifically business programs in our case.

**Aleksandra:** What do you believe sets KBS apart from other higher education institutions in terms of educational philosophy?

**J.A.:** The one key differentiating factor we have deliberately reinforced is our *supportive and nurturing learning environment*. That was never an aspirational vision because it was something we already were, unambiguously, based on official government data.

That explains why nearly every decision at KBS is authentically based on whether it will further reinforce our ability to be supportive and nurturing educators for students.

*The learning experience is more than just what happens in the classroom. It encompasses every touch point, from when students first apply online to the way they're greeted on campus by our Student Experience personnel. It extends beyond their interactions with staff to include the ways in which we continue to support and nurture their development even after they graduate.*



Figure 3. Aleksandra Vojinovikj (one of the interviewers) teaching a class at the KBS Sydney campus. Source: Kaplan Business School, (2024b).

This is what fundamentally differentiates us. Other providers could state they support their students, but we have accumulated substantial evidence to prove that claim – not just awards but independently collected data such as sector-wide benchmarking, the International Student Barometer, and official government rankings.

You would know this personally, Aleksandra, since you were once an international student of ours. Coming to a foreign country where you don't know the language, where you're far from your support network, away from your loved ones, and confronted by unfamiliar customs and teaching methods is really quite overwhelming. To go through all that and still graduate successfully is only possible if you are enrolled with a supportive and nurturing educator like Kaplan Business School.

We have thousands of students who come to Australia and enrol at public universities under the assumption that there's a positive correlation between research-based rankings and student experience. But, as verified by the Australian Financial Review (Bennett, 2023) in November 2023, the higher an institute ranks in research, the lower its ranking for student experience. That's why they so often end up enrolling with us instead.

### **A humane approach to teaching**

**Athena:** In a world that is increasingly interconnected, students need more than just academic knowledge. This includes fostering empathy, tolerance, and understanding of global issues. Students should be encouraged to appreciate diversity, engage in cross-cultural dialogues, and develop a sense of responsibility towards the broader global community (McDonald, 2000). How do you define a 'humane approach to teaching', and why is it important in



the context of international education?

**J. A.:** So, what does 'humane' mean? It means, in its simplest form, the ability to recognise that the person in front of you in the classroom is not just a student; it is not just someone with a student ID or someone who is Asian, Greek, or Brazilian. What you have in front of you is a human being. And if there is a human being in front of you, it essentially means they have emotions, experiences, thoughts, ambitions, flaws and shortfalls, skill deficits, strengths and talents; they are a fascinating and complex individual deserving of respect.

*So, if you're going to teach in a humane way, the only way to do that is not by being teacher-centric. It is by being student-centric.*

It is, therefore, not humane to walk into a classroom and act as though you are the one on show as the teacher. The people who must be on show are the students, and this means oftentimes slowing down to observe what is happening in the classroom and to notice what is not being said. It's so important to be cognisant of people's facial expressions, to observe if they're paying attention or transfixed by their phone, or if they're being participative or passive in a team activity – there are so many complications. To be humane necessitates that skill – the skill of observation – to see what an ordinary lecturer at a university would not be able to see. When you are facilitating a classroom activity, you are not using those ten minutes to browse your phone and review your notes. You are as engaged in the activity as the students. When you are speaking to students, you are not just focused on what you are saying; you are focused on how they are reacting because communication is reciprocal – the ultimate definition of communication is the exchange of understanding. The only way you can ascertain whether the exchange of understanding has occurred is when you, as the communicator, have received something back from the recipient to confirm they have received it in the way you intended. That is not going to happen unless you are observing their reaction.

**Athena:** Prioritising students' well-being, individual needs, and cultural sensitivity is an important part of incorporating a humane approach into the curriculum and pedagogy. In addition to meeting students' academic requirements, educators may foster an atmosphere that values diversity of thought, sensitivity for others, and a well-rounded education for everyone (Waddock, 2016). You already mentioned some relevant examples that speak of this approach. Could you share some more examples of how this approach is integrated into the curriculum and pedagogy at KBS?

**J. A.:** There are dozens of examples, but I will focus on the one that I'm confident has been most impactful for us, and that is what we call the *ten-minute rule*. The ten-minute rule was born out of our acknowledgement that lectures are the most pedagogically unsound method of instruction.

We, therefore, abolished all lectures and tutorials and replaced them with interactive workshops. But to ensure the workshops are facilitated consistently, we've engineered a

series of cognitively stimulating activities within our slide decks that reinforce the learning outcomes, with each of those activities aligned to the AQF or Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2021). They are designed to be more intense or more complex based on where the course is situated on the AQF. Since these activities are embedded within the slide decks, there is no additional work our teachers need to do beforehand. There is no need to prepare their own activities. They just facilitate those we have already designed for them. This has been one of the more consequential pedagogical methods we have adopted.

*Dialogue is very different from lecturing. It means the teacher is engaging in a meaningful and substantive conversation with their students. The teacher triggers different parts of the students' brains as they try to figure out an answer to a complex activity and interact to better understand a particular case study, which makes it a far more thrilling and engaging learning environment.*



Figure 4. Facilitating an in-class activity at KBS. Source: Kaplan Business School (2022).

In my early years as Academic Dean, numerous leaders across the higher education sector warned me about our strategic vision for KBS's academic function, especially in regard to our universal expansion of the workshop-style pedagogical method. I remember being maligned for abolishing lectures, and one of the more prominent arguments was that students from some regions would hate it because it's the antithesis of what they were used to in their home country. But our net promoter score skyrocketed across all nationalities when we introduced this format, thereby disproving the advocates for the status quo.

**Aleksandra:** You emphasised the importance of engaging in conversation with students. It has been argued that the successful teacher attempts to see things from the student's perspective, embracing kindness built on a foundation of moral values (Aspland & Fox, 2022). One way to look at humane education is as a proposed mechanism whereby positive treatment of other humans may be taught (Arbour

et al., 2009). In what ways does your faculty embody this humane approach in their interactions with students?

**J. A.:** You must be very careful with whom you recruit. When we introduced this teaching method in 2017, we had to adopt a phased approach, course by course: We started with our MBA, which was, and still is, our biggest course (our MBA at Kaplan Business School is the second biggest in Australia in terms of enrolments; there are more students enrolled in our MBA than almost any other in this country). Our revised process began with a mandatory audition. Our faculty members needed to demonstrate that they could facilitate a classroom exercise in a genuinely student-centric way – which we then gradually replicated across our other courses over the following trimesters.

However, that audition is not the only answer: the other part of the equation pertains to the pool from which our teachers are sourced. We learnt, for instance, that sourcing teachers from academia can backfire because if those teachers completed their high school studies, went straight to university, completed their bachelor's degree, then promptly progressed to their master's, and still remained at university until the completion of their PhD, meaning the only career they've ever really known is that of an academic, well, that makes it harder for them, in our experience, to truly relate to our students. Because what matters most to our students, and indeed what matters most to us, is whether our teachers' qualifications are complemented by substantial and relevant work experience that enables them to incorporate personal examples and stories in their teaching – because that's what our students find most engaging.

### **Creation of an optimal learning environment**

**Athena:** Having talked about student-centred teaching, it is inevitable to consider the learning environment – the establishment of an educational setting that not only facilitates intellectual development but also fosters the emotional welfare of students and promotes a comprehensive approach to learning (Korpershoek et al., 2016). What strategies do you employ to create a learning environment that supports the emotional and intellectual growth of students?

**J. A.:** It must begin, I feel, with supporting the emotional and intellectual growth of our faculty. Since we are directing our faculty to teach in a supportive and nurturing manner, and we have specific performance metrics in place that evaluate them on whether they are indeed teaching in a supportive and nurturing manner, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to make sure we are exercising the same approach with our faculty members – for them to feel as though they are being supported and nurtured by us, not just emotionally, but intellectually. Since we expect them to be observant of students in the classroom, we have to be observant of them as our team members. For example, if their behaviour or body language suddenly changes, or they express a remark that feels odd or they send us an email with an uncharacteristic tone, or they are suddenly off sick with an unconvincing explanation, it's very important that we check in to see if they're okay.

*There are so many factors that signify that someone is emotionally struggling. My team of Academic Directors and Academic Heads need to identify those instances and respond immediately with the kind of supportive and nurturing style we expect our teachers to deliver to our students.*

For example, our Director of Academic Learning, Vanessa Stafford, and her colleague, Fiona Tang, ensure professional development sessions are made available for our staff on an almost weekly basis. And we have hundreds of resources that we have developed which can be accessed asynchronously. Staff can even book themselves in for a coaching session whenever they feel one is required. They're also entitled to the potential reimbursement of funds when they complete professional development activities of their own accord. They can also get extra funding to pursue a doctorate if they are employed on a permanent employment arrangement, which is, incidentally, a majority of our faculty on a full-time equivalent basis. So, my answer to your question about preserving and encouraging emotional and intellectual well-being is to ensure that all the above is being implemented. That's when there is a greater likelihood for it to then flow onto our students. If it does not occur for our staff, there is zero chance of making it happen for our students.

**Aleksandra:** This aligns well with the presence of kindness attributes in the learning environment. Research suggests that compassionate teachers foster learning environments which are more equitable, supportive, and conducive for learners of all capabilities and backgrounds (Tan, 2022). It has been noted that humans inherit a biological bias towards kindness, compassion, cooperation, love, and nurture (Goleman, 2006; Kagan, 2016). Some of these are part of the Kindness Curriculum for which you are a vocal advocate (Kindness Factory, 2019). What does your faculty do to incorporate the kindness attributes in the learning environment? How does your collaboration with the Kindness Factory™ reflect the learning environment that you create at KBS?

**J. A.:** The Kindness Factory is very close to my heart – I was the one who developed the twelve kindness attributes that constitute the Kindness Curriculum. I devised them based on research I had performed on the underpinnings of kindness which encompassed a review of all the credible empirical literature of the preceding ten years.

When we established the Kindness Curriculum two years ago, we set a very ambitious goal of having it integrated within 2025 schools by the year 2025. It is not yet 2025, but there are already more than 3500 schools that have adopted the Kindness Curriculum. So, yes, I am very proud of that. I am also proud that my colleague, Alex Reeman-Clark, our General Manager of Student Experience, has established Kindness Week, which means that every year, we have hundreds of our international students armed with Kindness Bingo cards as they perform random acts of kindness in the community. I am further proud that we're establishing



the Kind Company certification and that we are the first pilot company testing that it is workable, which means demonstrating that we are actively practising kindness with our staff, our community, our clients, our students, our students, our environment and so on.



Figure 5. KBS student ambassadors and staff are promoting Kindness Week on the street in Sydney, Australia. Credit: Kamashi Pokhrel.

that's not humanly possible, hence the importance of this team-building initiative which also meets a second purpose, specifically that our staff have asked for greater connection among their colleagues with whom they rarely interact or even see. We established this about a year and a half ago, and it involves me facilitating a team-building event that has nothing to do with academic learning but is instead simply an opportunity to interact. On each occasion, there is a different kindness attribute that constitutes the theme of the team-building event. The first one was focused on empathy, the second was on gratitude, the third on collaboration, and so on. I try to design some kind of activity related directly to the kindness attribute. We also have an Academic Awards program every trimester, which includes a Kindness Award with the peer-nominated recipient and they can be anyone within our academic function or external to it.

**Aleksandra:** You are an advocate for embracing and integrating technological breakthroughs in the education space, which is reflected in the way KBS approaches generative AI, for instance. However, the overall teaching approach at KBS is student-centred. How do these two co-exist?

**J. A.:** To oppose new technologies is the antithesis of student-centredness. Just in the past year, following ChatGPT's explosion, generative AI has permeated every aspect of industry and society. We, therefore, have an obligation to make sure that we are embracing it. Not just teaching it but genuinely embracing it even in our own daily practices. Otherwise, it would be negligent of us because we would be neglecting the human beings in our classrooms who are going to be entering workplaces with employers not just expecting but demanding they know how to utilise this truly transformative technology. If we have students graduating from KBS, and they have not been exposed to generative AI extensively (this means a majority of students' assessments permit the use of generative AI and that in the classroom, KBS educators are teaching students how to use this emerging technology), then we are cultivating graduates who are unlikely to be sufficiently employable. There are about three dozen experiments just this year that we have trialled at KBS specifically related to generative AI, which is why we are known across the sector as genuine leaders in this respect. That reputation is reinforced by my leadership of a GenAI community of practice on behalf of our peak body, IHEA, Independent Higher Education Australia, which attracts dozens of participating institutions, complemented by a set of guidelines I've authored that have been distributed across the independent sector so that other providers of higher education can similarly replicate our success with generative AI.

*As a higher education provider, it would be inhumane not to embrace generative AI in absolutely every possible respect throughout teaching and learning if the ultimate aim is to strengthen students' employability.*



Figure 6. Kind Company certification badge. Source: Kaplan Australia (2023).

To answer your question more directly – “What do we do in terms of the academic function?” – we genuinely embrace the kindness attributes in our day-to-day operations. For example, I facilitate a national online team-building event every trimester, which has been important for several reasons. One is that when I was appointed as Academic Dean in 2015, our national faculty numbered approximately 50 teachers, but we now have more than 600. So back then, I knew everyone's face, and I knew everyone's name. Today,

## Curriculum design and development

**Athena:** The conversation on the employability of graduates requires the exploration of one more topic: the curriculum. To provide students with a thorough and useful education, it is essential to establish a curriculum that encompasses a combination of theoretical concepts and practical, real-life applications. This approach ensures that students not only acquire academic knowledge but also develop the skills necessary to apply their learning in practical and professional contexts (Witt et al., 2019). How does the curriculum at KBS reflect a balance between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications?

**J. A.:** Well-embedded systems and audits and review checkpoints are critical – but ideally, never in any subject would we ever teach a student a theory without that theory being complemented by a real-life example or a relevant case study. Sometimes, it might be an anecdote, an industry exemplar, a consultancy firm’s analysis, a governmental policy, a case study or anything else that brings that theory to life such that it demonstrates to students the way in which it can be immediately incorporated in their work. Importantly, these are embedded within our slide decks to ensure they are conveyed consistently, irrespective of the teacher or campus.

*Talking about academic theories is easy. But translating those theories into engaging examples that resonate with students is an altogether different skill but that’s how you get students to pay attention in class. Academic theories are rarely perceived as relevant by students unless you can find a way to relate those concepts to their own world.*

Another example related to relevance emerged via my own experiences teaching our MBA’s core leadership subject for five trimesters. I ensured that I removed any references to our students becoming a CEO or an executive because that isn’t a realisable objective for a majority of students at any institute of higher education. We, therefore, focus less on the teaching of those very senior skills and more so on the very different skill set required to be an effective team leader or middle manager which is much more relevant for students.

In a similar vein, members of our academic management team, particularly Vanessa Stafford whom I mentioned earlier, as well as Adam Murphy, one of our Academic Heads, are pioneering the updating of our slide decks to ensure genuine diversity in our case studies and selection of images. This means our students are increasingly seeing people in our slides who look like them, be that in terms of their gender or ethnicity, thereby reinforcing that such accomplishments are potentially realisable for them.

**Athena:** Promoting the cultivation of empathy and ethical decision-making abilities in students is essential to foster the development of responsible and socially conscious corporate leaders. This holistic approach prepares future

business leaders to navigate the complexities of the business world with a strong sense of responsibility and social awareness (Parks-Leduc et al., 2021). In what ways are students encouraged to develop empathy and ethical decision-making skills alongside business acumen?

**J. A.:** This was important to me even before I started working at Kaplan, even before I was an academic. I remember acutely when the global financial crisis happened, I was reading an article that ended up going viral because the title was something along the lines of “Are MBAs and business schools responsible for the global financial crisis?”. The author’s argument was that business schools, and particularly MBA degrees, are responsible for the global financial crisis, because they predominantly teach the profit imperative – the commercial motive. If that is the predominant message you send, of course catastrophes like the global financial crisis will occur. Hence, why our MBA was the first, and I believe still the only, MBA in Australia that mandates the completion of two particular core subjects, one of which is titled ‘Emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and diversity’. The other is titled ‘Governance, ethics and sustainability’.

The other way is that ethics as well as emotional intelligence are two of our seven graduate attributes, which means every single course comprises curriculum and assessments that are mapped to both ethics and EQ.

**Aleksandra:** As you’ve just stated, KBS’s flagship MBA program is one of the first to embed core subjects within the curriculum that integrate concepts of emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and diversity. What are the implications of designing a curriculum that embodies emotional and cultural intelligence, motivation, and leadership? How does this contribute towards shaping the future business environment, noting that emotional intelligence enables leaders to generate excitement, optimism, and passion for the job ahead (Goleman et al., 2013)?

**J. A.:** It sends a very important message that technical skills are not enough, knowing how to read financial statements is not enough, being able to develop an organisational strategy is not enough, and understanding how to trade across borders is not enough. None of that is enough. Underpinning the success of all of that has to be the sociocultural element, such as social awareness and relationship management.

*When our students graduate, it’s crucial that they enter the business world knowing it is not just the balance sheet or strategic plan that matters; it is also the interpersonal element that is oftentimes the most consequential for their ongoing success.*

One of my favourite quotes is, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts” (Mason, 2013) – that’s a critical message we convey to our students. For example, our MBA has just one quantitative subject as a core subject. Just one specifically related to finance and economics. So, what does that implicitly tell our students? It tells our students that, yes, of





Figure 7. A graduation ceremony at KBS. Source: Kaplan Business School (2024c).

course, it's essential to understand the principles of finance and economics, but there is a lot more they also need to know if they are to experience holistic success in business and, indeed, throughout their careers.

### Student support and engagement

Athena: You spoke of the importance of being observant, which also implies being aware of students' struggles. Assisting students who may be struggling educationally or emotionally requires a compassionate and multifaceted approach. Caring and comprehensive strategies are necessary to assist those who may be experiencing personal or academic difficulties (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). How does KBS support students who may be struggling academically or personally?

**J. A.:** The comprehensiveness and effectiveness of our student support mechanisms, especially throughout the pandemic, explains why we became recipients of the Student Support Award at the global PIONEER Awards. We have, for instance, academic learning advisors in our Academic Success Centre who can meet with students one-on-one or in groups to assist with any aspect related to study skills. We also have counsellors at our campuses as well as a national network of teachers with whom students can meet even if they're not students of those teachers.

However, there are two other factors I feel are particularly impactful. One is that when someone is struggling, it is not just a question of the support service to which they can be triaged.

*Our approach to interventions is anticipatory, which means that we do not wait to intervene until the student is on the verge of failing. Of course, we still intervene at that point, but our priority is always to draw on the insights generated from predictive analytics as a more reliable method of identifying the likeliest risk factors for low progression or high attrition so that we can attempt to rescue students before it's too late.*

Therefore, we have dedicated intervention officers in each discipline who are remunerated to contact and proactively support students who miss consecutive classes, fail to submit an assessment or fall into any one of a number of risk categories we monitor on an ongoing basis, such as those that pertain to age, disability, stage of degree, First Nations ancestry, delivery mode, and so on.



Figure 8. Student experience personnel at KBS. Source: Kaplan Business School (2024d).

The other factor is that we fully subsidise Sonder, a mobile-based application that students can easily download for 24/7 support. This means our students can request that Sonder track their journey home if they are feeling unsafe, for example, or for mental wellness reasons whenever they need to connect with a qualified counsellor.

**Aleksandra:** Now, we would like to move on to another topic of which you are a relevant authority. You specialise in employee engagement (Adonopoulos, 2016). What are the most important lessons learnt from your research on employee engagement that we can apply to student engagement?

**J. A.:** There is probably one thing worth mentioning that many people generally do not regard as obvious. That is, when it comes to employee engagement, the number one most impactful factor is someone's immediate supervisor and not necessarily the CEO or executive.

*The one empirical truth about employee engagement is that the most impactful factors are the seemingly insignificant actions of the immediate supervisor: the little things they say and do, day to day – that is what affects an employee's engagement the most.*

Translating that empirical truth to our students' engagement necessitates identifying who, from the student's perspective, is their immediate supervisor. My hope is that they would regard that person to be their teacher. Of course, if they are enrolled in three or four subjects, they might have three or four teachers, all of whom would serve as their immediate supervisors. It is incumbent upon us to make sure that those



teaching our students are aware that the little things they say and do may seem insignificant to the teacher – but end up having the greatest significance from the student's perspective.

But it's not just about our teachers. It's also about our Student Experience team, who likewise serve as de facto supervisors, along with our campus managers, are genuinely phenomenal because they know our students by name, not by number, with authentic relationships cultivated over time.

**Aleksandra:** Maintaining that consistent environment shows a lot of integrity. Integrity is also one of the key values in developing a more inclusive and humane education that acknowledges and fosters student and staff agency (Abegglen et al., 2020). Is there room for kindness in dealing with cases of breaches of academic integrity?

**J. A.:** We are well regarded across the higher education sector and particularly by our regulator for our comprehensive approach to academic integrity, which always begins from a position of compassion. This means our first step is to focus on educating our students via a compulsory online module, learning resources, coaching and group training on how to complete their studies in accordance with the principles of academic integrity because often students engage in misconduct without even realising they are doing it. So, I think that is where kindness is best placed.

But when recidivism occurs, we have a responsibility to impose penalties that escalate with every repeated act of misconduct—since we also want to be kind to our graduates who have completed their degrees authentically.

## Leadership and continuous improvement

**Athena:** Such an approach only confirms the values you have articulated so far: empathy, compassion, and respect. The cultivation of an organisational culture that is characterised by these values is of utmost importance to establish a working environment that not only fosters the well-being of individuals but also improves their overall performance (Dimitrov, 2015). As the Academic Dean of KBS, how do you model the humane approach in your leadership and administrative practices?

**J. A.:** This is going to sound a bit contradictory, but I feel compelled to admit that I am an uncompromising leader, which is to say that I feel it is essential to convey a non-negotiable attitude toward anyone who falls short of the values I have articulated throughout this interview. This means that, if someone is falling short of those values and they are in a position of influence – especially if they are an Academic Director, Academic Head, or a Subject Coordinator – I find it very hard to convey anything other than my profound disapproval for their contravention.

The way I personally embody a humane approach is by being very open about my own shortcomings. Pretty much every week, I will say or do something I regret, but I very quickly admit I've stuffed up and promptly reverse a decision when I encounter conflicting evidence because the message that I

wish to send to my team is the importance of being humble enough to acknowledge when we make a mistake. So, if I am doing that, my hope is that others can find the confidence to do so as well. I never want to give the impression to my team that I consider myself a perfect model to follow in every respect. As recently as this week, I gave people constructive feedback that I coupled with: "I know I do this as well. This is something I, too, need to learn."

*I try to promote the kind of culture I most value by admitting that it is safe to get things wrong. I am an example of someone who does that on a regular basis and then admits it, rectifies it, learns from it, and progresses forward all the better for having experienced the setback.*

**Aleksandra:** I would like to go back to the organisational culture that you have built within KBS's academic function. The student-centred approach, which is distributed across the entire organisation, aligns well with the people-orientation dimension of organisational culture, revealing a leadership that takes into consideration the effect of outcomes on people within the organisation (Bamidele, 2022). You have demonstrated that employees whose fundamental needs are met reciprocate their leader's efforts by being more engaged (Adonopoulou, 2016). What are the implications of the organisational culture within KBS, and how is it reflected in the teaching approach?

**J. A.:** What it says is that we have the kind of culture people within which people want to work. We have extraordinarily low rates of faculty-staff attrition, for example, of approximately 4%. As a result, we are frequently approached by people wanting to work for us. So, that is one benefit.

But the ultimate benefit is stakeholder engagement – and stakeholders are not just students – stakeholders are our regulator, suppliers, colleagues, competitors, industry professionals, colleagues internationally and so on. The stronger your culture is, the more likely the members of that culture will be interacting in positive, cheerful, and constructive ways with any stakeholder, irrespective of whether they are internal or external, whether they are students or someone else. And we know we have a strong culture because our staff engagement results increase every single year. Our rate of faculty engagement is currently 92%, which further strengthens the Kaplan brand as a great place to work.

## Looking ahead

**Aleksandra:** Could you tell us how KBS will continue to innovate and maintain its commitment to a humane approach to education in the future?

**J. A.:** That is easy – because innovation is my favourite part of the job – that is actually the primary reason we perform benchmarking. In other words, benchmarking for us is predominately an opportunity to identify what other institutions are failing to do so that we can step into that

space, own it and, by doing so, stand out as a genuinely innovative provider of higher education.

*That necessitates the cultivation of a culture where people feel it's safe to innovate because they know that if their innovations fail, they will never be punished; they will only be applauded for at least having attempted to experiment with a novel idea from which they have nevertheless learnt something valuable as a result.*

That explains why, in December 2022, we won the Excellence in Innovation Award at the Association for Tertiary Education Management's Best Practice Awards (ATEM, 2022).

A globally recognised innovation of ours is our Lifetime of Learning Guarantee, which provides alumni with two unparalleled benefits. The first is lifetime access to career coaching, which means that even if students return to their home country, they can still meet with our career advisors for personalised assistance with their CV, cover letter, career coaching, interview skills and so on. The second benefit is that they can continue attending – forever and for free – the online classes of any subject of the course from which they graduated. Yes, that's innovative, but it's also an acknowledgement that we need to make lifelong learning easily accessible for our students if they are to remain employable long after they have completed their studies at Kaplan Business School.

**Aleksandra:** Research suggests that kindness embedded in the business curriculum could contribute towards instilling ethical behaviour (Day & Robinson, 2022). In what ways can KBS foster student inspiration throughout their academic journey to cultivate a humane perspective that they can implement in their future professional endeavours?

**J. A.:** A couple of ways. The first is not to be so conceited as to think that we have all the answers. It is critical to provide forums for students to come up with their own ideas and to be supported with their implementation, which is why, for example, we provide our student ambassadors with funding to experiment with innovative ideas of their own.

The second is our responsiveness to student feedback and the authenticity with which we solicit that feedback. One of the best initiatives ever introduced at Kaplan has been what my colleague Alex Reeman-Clark launched back in 2016, which is Feedback Week – it happens every trimester for five consecutive days, during which our students are saturated with opportunities to give us feedback via a number of different forums. Our response rate is usually above 50%. We read and reflect on every comment for the purpose of identifying the six or so most prominent themes for which we then determine the optimal solutions that we announce to our entire student body within a week or two. This means we have implemented dozens upon dozens of major initiatives directly as a result of what our students have suggested. Feedback Week, therefore, reinforces for our students that

they have a genuine voice and real influence which we suspect is quite rare across the higher education sector.

**Athena:** We have extensively explored the benefits, but what about the challenges? What are some of the challenges, if any, that you anticipate in implementing KBS's aspirations for a humane approach to teaching?

**J. A.:** A humane approach to teaching is absolutely not an aspiration of ours because that would imply that we're not humane today when independent evidence confirms that is definitely an apt descriptor of our teaching methods.

Our challenge, however, is to preserve that humane approach as we continue to grow in the trimesters ahead. Just in my own team, in the space of a year, we've recruited over 200 academics. That increases the pressure on us as academic leaders to make certain they're teaching in a supportive and nurturing manner, which is why we've almost doubled the number of Academic Heads and Directors so that our newest faculty members are themselves supported and nurtured by our management team.

### Closing remarks

**Athena:** How has your experience, both as a student and as an academic, shaped your perception of the humane approach in your leadership?

**J. A.:** Something that happens to many academics is that they become out of touch with what life is actually like as a student. That is why I am still, and probably always will be, a university student. Even after I completed my Ph.D., I immediately enrolled in another bachelor's degree. This means I have never been disconnected from the life of a student. I am experiencing it myself every single week, via my own teachers at the university at which I am enrolled. So, that really helps me to understand the likely receptivity of ideas from a student's perspective.

*A benefit I bring to my role and to my team at Kaplan is that I have remained connected, in the most intricate way possible, with what it is like to be a student.*

Despite being enrolled in an undergraduate course where the average age among my fellow students is 18 or 19, I feel no discomfort whatsoever. On the contrary, I possibly derive more value from the learning experience than they do expressly because of the extent to which it informs the way I operate at KBS.

**Aleksandra:** In conclusion, we present a summary of practical strategies that KBS has used for student-centred teaching and learning:

- Employ leaders and teachers with a naturally supportive and nurturing disposition.

- Always reflect on whether you're acting in the capacity of a supportive and nurturing educator.
- Keep in mind that what you have in front of you is a classroom of unique human beings.
- Ensure reciprocal communication by soliciting student feedback and consistently addressing the prominent issues they identify.
- Replace lectures and tutorials with interactive workshops that comprise cognitively stimulating activities that reinforce the learning outcomes.
- Support faculty members' emotional and intellectual growth so that they are inspired to support their students' emotional and intellectual growth.
- Embed the attributes of kindness as standard practice.
- Always innovate with the core objective of further strengthening the student experience.

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