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## Leading a transnational university campus: An interview with James Trotter about academic leadership and working in multicultural higher education environments

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### Abstract

In Transnational Higher Education, which encompasses teaching and learning across national borders, the necessary qualities, skills, and knowledge for educational leaders have transformed to meet changing international contexts (Morris et al., 2024). This interview considers some of these aspects from the perspective and experiences of a very experienced academic leader in higher education. James Trotter, featured in this interview, discusses his experiences from a successful career spanning over thirty years in higher education from which he retired in September 2024, and which included in the last decade an academic leadership role of spearheading an offshore transnational university campus. Dr. Trotter provides advice from a journey which started off as a teaching role to becoming a leader in academia. The interview also highlights the increasing importance of the transnational education sector in the context of higher education, of being an academic leader in a multicultural transnational higher education context and grappling with the challenges of working as a leader in a transnational context, especially ones such as Artificial Intelligence and its impacts on education.

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## Snapshot of 30 years of trajectory: Teaching to academic leadership

**Faiza Qureshi (F.Q.):** Dr. Trotter, I appreciate that you agreed to share insights and advice from your thirty years of immense leadership experience in higher education with JALT's readership. Looking back, your affiliation with Murdoch University in Perth began in the Theology Program in 1994, and since then, you have held several leadership roles, including Academic Chair of the Theology Program, Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching (School of Arts), Deputy Dean (School of Arts) and more recently, a very successful run as the Dean and Academic President of the Murdoch University Campus in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) for almost the last decade. During this period, the Dubai campus achieved a five-star rating from the local regulator, Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in the UAE under your leadership. As you set your eyes on retirement in September of this year (2024), we hope to glean your advice on leadership and working in multicultural higher education contexts, specifically navigating leadership roles in the important realm of higher education provision through Transnational Education (TNE/TNHE). To begin, could you tell us about your leadership journey and how it evolved over the span of 30 years in higher education?

**James Trotter (J.T.):** It's hard to believe it's been 30 years. I think one of the most important things to say about my leadership journey is that it started with not wanting to be a leader. I started my academic career with no intention of ever being anything but a teacher. I love teaching, and in my first annual performance review, the Dean asked me whether I would like to prepare to be a leader one day. I laughed out loud and said, well, that's not me. I'll never want to go down a path like that. Years later, we met after he retired, and I was in leadership positions, and we had a good laugh about that.



Figure 1: Dr. Trotter at the TNE campus in the UAE, 2024.

*I started my academic career with no intention of ever being anything but a teacher. I love teaching, and in my first annual performance review, the Dean asked me whether I would like to prepare to be a leader one day. I laughed out loud and said, well, that's not me.*

However, it was an important starting point for me because I valued the regular academic work of teaching, researching and supporting students. And coming from that starting place, I then saw how much good leadership made space for good academic work and, alternatively, how poor leadership makes academic work that much more difficult. As a result, I came into this with the idea that what I wanted to be as a leader was someone who created space for academics to be academics, not to be burdened with massive amounts of administration. Being an academic is important and valuable work, and good academic leaders allow that to happen. So, my journey went from being focused on teaching to being an academic chair, then being an associate dean, learning and teaching. From there, I went into being on the academic council and even served a year as the deputy president of the academic council. And from there I was involved in a variety of working parties and served a term on the university senate.

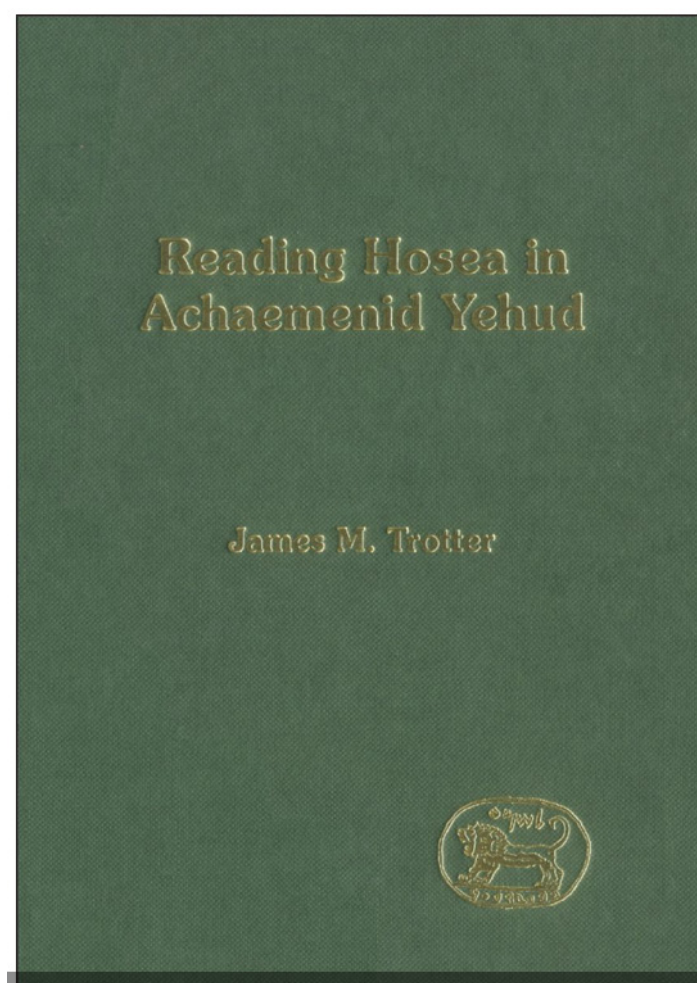


Figure 2: Book authored by Dr. Trotter, published in 2001.

So, it was a gradually evolving, expanding experience of being involved in the university's leadership in a variety of different ways. As the Deputy Dean of the School of Arts, I had the good fortune to work with an excellent dean who was really supportive and encouraged me to expand my academic experience with specialised leadership training. I ended up going to the Harvard Business School for their general management programme, a six-month programme with two intensive on-campus experiences, one four-week and one three-week period living on the campus and

attending classes every day. It was transformative. There were just over 100 people from all over the world, all from different industries. It was challenging, difficult, personally invasive, and incredibly valuable and useful, finding out things about myself and about who I am, what I can do, what I can't do. It's important as a leader to know those things, not only your strengths but also your weaknesses. Sometimes, it's more important to know what you can't do and where you need support than it is to know what you can do. The ability to see yourself clearly and know your limitations can help you avoid some major errors.

**F.Q.:** Thank you for taking us through the highlights of your academic journey. As you mentioned, it is important to have good leaders and mentors, such as the ones that you have had, to help shape one's career. Apart from having a supportive head who understood academic work, what factors would you say aided your trajectory towards academic leadership roles?

**J.T.:** All those experiences. You start out as an academic, knowing your discipline and the people around you. Of course, the university is so much bigger than that, so getting that experience of working across schools and across faculties is important. In my career, we have had schools and faculties and disciplines, I can't even remember all the different kinds of structures we've had. But working across all those different areas of the university and working with people from all those different backgrounds was really important. Understanding how the university operates, and certainly being on the academic council and on the senate, you see very different aspects of the university and its internal and external operations. You see mainly the academic side with the academic council and the larger business side of how things operate with the senate. So, that breadth of experience was important.

**F.Q.:** How did you have to adapt to the leadership roles in academia?

**J.T.:** I think business acumen was something I had to learn, but I think the most difficult part of leadership is the people part. Organisations aren't machines made up of a collection of parts operating without thought or feelings. They are composed of people working together, sometimes well, sometimes not so well. We're all human beings, and we come from different places and perspectives and have different struggles going on in our lives. There is a lot happening in the lives of people beyond the workplace. Supporting the people in the university with empathy and humanity is critical to good leadership.

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I think that was one of the most eye-opening experiences for me when I moved into the deputy dean role. Suddenly, I was aware of a whole range of things that were going on in the lives of other staff members that I hadn't been aware of before, in terms of people facing difficulties around illness, a death in their family, or other kinds of struggles that were

going on in their lives. And I was very fortunate to have a dean, Prof Rikki Kersten, who always said people come first. And when people were going through those kinds of issues, we always looked for a way to provide as much support as possible, whether it meant finding teaching relief for them or some other form of support. It was important to recognise that people were human beings first, and all of those personal aspects of their lives were more important than the job. Getting the work done was obviously important, but that only happens when people feel valued, supported, and trusted.

## **Transition to transnational higher education**

**F.Q.:** From an academic to a leader, that is quite a leap! How does that work out in a dynamic transnational set-up of an international university? TNE offshore campuses must also be a different and complex experience in terms of culture, local regulations and academic experience. Having been a leader for so long at the Perth campus and then moving to Dubai, UAE, for almost a decade now, what would you say is different about academic leadership in both contexts from the perspective of someone who has had the opportunity to work in both? TNE is a very competitive sector in the UAE, and there are tens of foreign universities here, along with more than 200 nationalities living in this very multicultural country.

**J.T.:** It's an expansion of that experience. I came in with the perspective that the people are the most important part. You try to be open and understanding. Fortunately, Murdoch is a very multicultural place to begin with. So, I already had experience working with people from a wide range of different cultural backgrounds. Obviously, not to the extent that I experienced in Dubai, where we have such a diverse population, but certainly to a large extent. Again, the experience at Harvard Business School, where more than 50 countries were represented among the students in my cohort, was a valuable opportunity to live and value diverse backgrounds and experiences. Those experiences of understanding and accepting cultural differences were important to prepare me for coming to Dubai and the rich diversity here.

At the same time, there are obviously a lot of similarities between an academic setting in Dubai and elsewhere in the world. One of the beautiful things about academic life is that you deal with so many highly intelligent, talented people. It is a rich life and I have been very fortunate to be part of it.

The intelligence and high levels of education found in an academic team are some of the important benefits available to academic leaders. You have this amazing resource to draw on. You have this talented team who will accomplish amazing things if you let them and support them. To me, a big part of my leadership is trying to get out of the way and make space for the team to get on with their work.

One of the specific issues that was different in coming to the Dubai campus, and one that I've tried to address during my time in Dubai, was that there tended to be a misconception at the home campus about the Dubai campus and the



people who work here. There was a general perception that staff in Dubai were not academics in the same way as staff on the home campus. This misconception of what the academics at the Dubai campus were like was mainly rooted in a lack of connection and interaction between the campuses. I believe that over my time here, that's changed. I think there's more collegiality and cooperation across the campuses. Staff on the home campus now see academic staff in Dubai as colleagues and peers rather than as lower down on the academic ladder. A big part of addressing those misconceptions is done by building avenues of communication and facilitating regular communication between academics at different locations.

Strangely enough, the pandemic helped in those efforts because, suddenly, we were all thrown into a world where meetings didn't take place face-to-face; they happened online using all these virtual tools. That made it much easier to have meetings across the university's three campuses, Perth, Singapore and Dubai. Having that common shared experience helped to break down some of the barriers that may have previously existed.

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We've seen that continue. There are still tools that we use after the pandemic experience that facilitate cross-campus interaction. As a consequence, the pandemic is in our shared past, but the bridges built to get through it are still present. There's a lot more interaction, conversation and collaboration that takes place across the campuses now than was true in the past.

**F.Q.:** The pandemic was quite a challenge for everyone in academia. However, in your seven years here, what would you say has been your biggest challenge as an academic leader in a transnational university setup? And how did you manage to navigate it?

**J.T.:** It's difficult to pick one. When I first arrived, we were in the last year and a half of a relationship with a partner, and transitioning then to a new partnership was very difficult.

But maybe COVID was the biggest challenge, simply because it came on so suddenly. We first started hearing about COVID in January 2020, and by the middle of April, we were teaching fully online, and we had to do that for a year and a half. Fortunately, we could see what was approaching and make preparations. So, with the strengths of the home campus, we were able to put in place training and some preparation for online delivery that helped us make a very rapid transition. We did that, and within less than a week, the government announced that we were all in lockdown and all teaching had to go fully online. So, that was a very challenging time. But, out of that came, again, some amazing

experiences. The team here used their experiences of preparing and transitioning to online delivery to put together some fantastic resources that they were able to share with university staff in Singapore and Perth. They created videos about how to do online delivery and documents about how to support students in online delivery, all while doing online delivery for the first time in their teaching careers. That just says volumes about the amazing people that I have had the privilege to work with here. That, again, went a long way towards promoting the idea that staff on different campuses are colleagues, working together and supporting each other. People in Perth and Singapore really appreciated all that effort by the Dubai staff.

**F.Q.:** Transnational Education is playing an increasingly important role in the context of higher education. Australian TNE, the context in which you have worked in an academic leadership role in the last decade, has grown by 128% between 2016-17 and 2021-22 (Riaz & Trifiro, 2024). From your perspective, what are some insights on the crucial role transnational education provision plays in the landscape of higher education?

**J.T.:** TNE plays an incredibly valuable role in a number of ways. It provides educational opportunities for students that they might not otherwise have. A number of students who study at TNE campuses might not have other alternatives. If we genuinely believe in the power of higher education to transform the lives of our students for the better, and I do, then we should celebrate and support every opportunity to make higher education more accessible to more people so that issue of access is vitally important. I think the more we can open up opportunities for higher education to people, the better. TNE helps to do that and also supports the broader goals of internationalisation in higher education.

The home campus of Murdoch University is infinitely better because of its TNE campuses. It provides international connections and intercultural experiences for the staff on the home campus that they wouldn't otherwise have. In addition, the more we can open up opportunities for students from the three campuses to be mobile and have experiences on different campuses, the better because students grow in ways that they can't otherwise by having international experiences and being exposed to different cultures and perspectives on the world. We need to facilitate that movement between campuses as much as possible. In terms of research, TNE campuses have opened up opportunities for research that would never have existed with just the home campus.

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**F.Q.:** Along with all of these opportunities and benefits for institutional expansion and the chance to share high-quality higher education, TNE projects also pose financial and reputational risks (Emery & Worton, 2016). What, in your



Figure 3: Dr. Trotter at the Dubai campus's graduation ceremony in 2018.

experience and opinion, are some of these risks and the best ways for an academic leader to mitigate them? How does an academic leader mitigate these and support the TNE campus?

J.T.: Financial risk is difficult. The biggest financial risk is making a significant investment and seeing no return; you don't get students, or, due to some unexpected event, you suddenly lose students. Often, these can be events that are outside your control, like pandemics. Suddenly, you have to adapt and learn to do things in new ways. How do you deliver quality academic programmes in that kind of environment?

Part of it is also the risk to your reputation. Consequently, you have to be constantly vigilant in terms of the quality of your staff and the quality of teaching. We have regulators who constantly look at the quality of our activities or ask about what we are doing to ensure quality. What are you doing to mitigate risk? But it comes down ultimately to what you're doing day to day on the ground with the people who

are delivering the courses. And you have to be sure that you have good, committed people who are always doing their best for the students and for the quality of the student outcomes.

Of course, the university has its processes in terms of assessment moderation ensuring that the content, academic assessment tasks and the experiences of the students are not exactly the same, but certainly equivalent across campuses. Those regular quality assurance processes are vital both to excellent outcomes and the protection of the institution's reputation.

F.Q.: Apart from the accessibility of education for students who are in TNE locations, what benefits do you see to the host countries for increasing, allowing and facilitating TNE setups?

J.T.: Research outcomes would be one. You can access expertise from the home campus and from the staff at the branch campus that might not otherwise exist without the TNE operations in the host country. Also, TNE operations provide diverse educational opportunities for the host country's population. It's not a one-size-fits-all in higher education. People need different things to start their academic journey and then move on in life and become valuable contributors to the country's social life. TNE broadens access and opportunity. Having the diversity that TNE provides, in addition to a very strong and robust national university system, adds to the social strength of the country and the possibilities for entrepreneurship, high-quality educational outcomes and the benefits of diverse perspectives.

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F.Q.: What, according to you, are some of the ways that host countries could provide an ideal environment for TNE to flourish and to capitalise on all these benefits?

J.T.: It's about creating a regulatory framework in which the branch campus, as it is here, can operate efficiently and effectively. Obviously, you want recognition of your courses and your degrees. That's an important issue because if there are problems with that, then that becomes a problem for your students and your graduates. Also, supporting research is an important aspect of support that host countries can do. Research by branch campuses can be a massive contribution to the societies in which they operate, but it doesn't happen without a framework to support it and, ideally, some kind of financial support to make it happen.

F.Q.: It seems like TNE can also play a crucial role in promoting equity, diversity and inclusion. What are your thoughts on that?

J.T.: It's both an important contributor and an area of delicate negotiation. Here on the Dubai campus, we have students from more than 50 different countries. If they were in their home country, they wouldn't always get along with some of the other people on the campus. In that way, we reflect the UAE. Most of our staff and students are guests in the UAE. We bring our different experiences and perspectives, but we also learn together and learn to get along together in our host country.

We also have a variety of philosophical and religious perspectives. Thus, ensuring everyone treats each other appropriately and fairly – and they're all treated equitably – is a delicate matter. That sense that everyone is treated fairly is a key component of harmonious co-existence. At the same time, the benefit is that people gain new understanding by being in the same classroom with people with very different perspectives. Hopefully, the result is that they learn to be accepting and live and work together in a peaceful and harmonious way.

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## Rise of artificial intelligence

F.Q.: Higher Education leaders and academics need to prioritise adopting AI while focusing on pedagogy, policy, and culture (Tan et al., 2024). Based on your extensive experience in higher education, what would be your advice for those facing this newest challenge to higher education? How do you see it playing out specifically in TNE? What are some other challenges that you see on the horizon for TNE in the higher education context?

J.T.: I think AI is one of the greatest challenges that's come along in my career. Certainly, when it comes to assessment issues and how you help students learn to use AI ethically and appropriately, that will be a major issue for the foreseeable future. Initially, many people said, 'oh, we're going to ban our students from using AI'. I think that's unrealistic. You can't do that. The fact is how they use AI is going to be part of how they navigate the world and how they work. So, saying that their time at university is going to be an AI-free time and then somehow, they're going to go out into the workplace and have to use it and engage with it: we just can't do that. Education needs to prepare students for the real world in which they will live and work. So, we have to figure out how to teach our students to use AI appropriately. And part of that comes down to reimagining assessment.

You can't just have assessment tasks where they can give the question to the AI chatbot and get an answer in a matter of a few seconds. Obviously, there will be some students who are going to be tempted to do that. The tools for detecting that are less than perfect. So, we need to figure out how we assess in creative ways that have the students engage with AI as part of creating an appropriate response to the assessment task. But also in ways that require them to demonstrate that they have an understanding of the content. Students need to learn how to ask the right questions of artificial intelligence to get the most appropriate answers, and that requires a level of understanding of the discipline. It's about training them to be critical users of AI. In terms of TNE, I'm not sure it's that different from anywhere else.

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Those same issues exist at the home campus and in the TNE environment. But we also need to figure out how to get this right because I suspect this is going to be dwarfed by what will come in the future. With quantum computing on the horizon poised to alter the power of computers in a dramatic fashion. I don't think most of us can even imagine the change that's coming with quantum computing and the power it will unleash. So, I suspect the development of AI and our struggles with it are going to look small in comparison. Imagine AI with the power of quantum computing.

F.Q.: What would you have done in the next couple of years to grapple with all these issues?

J.T.: It's difficult in the branch campus environment because we're so tied to the decisions that are made on the home campus. But what I'd like to see is a radical rethink of how we teach and assess that considers the fact that AI exists. It will continue to exist, and it will continue to become increasingly powerful and accurate.

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F.Q.: As an academic leader, what would you say is the most appropriate use of AI in research and how do we use it ethically?

J.T.: Right now, you can get some pretty crazy answers from AI and some really good ones. But that's going to change. AI is going to continue to improve. So, as academics, how do we deal with that? It's not just with our students. There are clear cases where people have used AI to write academic papers. So, we must also come to terms with that in relation to our research agendas. We all agree that presenting the work of AI as our own academic research would be wrong, but how should we use AI? What are the guidelines for the use of AI in academic research? This is another area where we are at the beginning of the process.





Figure 4: Dr. Trotter at The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education Global Forum in Dubai, 2018.

### That's a wrap: Reflection and advice

**F.Q.:** What have been some of the most memorable experiences as an academic leader across the 30 years?

**J.T.:** The most memorable experiences have been the successes of staff and students. Seeing people achieve the goals that they've set for themselves, whether it's accomplishing a higher degree or promotion or the publication of cutting-edge research. Or even sometimes, when someone moves on to another university to another academic position. You're sad to see a talented colleague leave and move to another university, but healthy institutions are places where people grow, develop, and flourish. So, you're also happy for them when they move to something that's a better position for them and step up in their career. That's one of the things that leaders need to try and create: an environment in which people flourish. When they flourish, one of the natural

consequences of that is that they will sometimes move on to other places.

That's a sign that you've created a healthy environment. If they're leaving because it's a terrible place, then obviously that's not what you want. But if they're leaving because other people see the strength in your team, that you have people who are creative and productive, and they want to offer them new opportunities, well, then you've done something right.

**F.Q.:** What's next for you after such a long and successful career in HE?

**J.T.:** There are all the stereotypical answers: hobbies and travel and a bit of relaxation. I definitely have plans to do some of those things. But I usually tell the new students in orientation that their education is going to open doors for them that they can't yet imagine. One of the most important things for them is to be flexible and open to new opportunities and new experiences. It's something I've tried to do throughout my career. So now, I'm going to try and apply it to my retirement and realise that it will hopefully be a long period of time. So, I need to be open and flexible and adapt to new opportunities that come along.

**F.Q.:** Finally, Dr. Trotter, what would be your advice to future and current academics in leadership roles in TNE?

**J.T.:** My advice would be to enjoy it because it's an amazing opportunity and experience. Sometimes, it's easy with the day-to-day work that comes along to get lost in the challenges, and there are always challenges. It's not all sunshine and roses. Sometimes, bad things happen that you have to deal with, and there are really difficult situations with students or staff. But still, in the midst of that, enjoy the experience and just be open to learning from it because there's so much that you can learn in this environment. If you keep your focus on the transformative power of higher education and on your students and staff, there will be much joy.

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**F.Q.:** Thank you so much, Dr. Trotter, and I wish you all the best for the next phase of your journey!

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