TOPcast Episode #150: A Global, Holistic, 360 Degree Perspective on Online Higher Education

Narrator: When you know what you want for the future, you need the present to line up with your goals. UCF Online offers more than a hundred fully online programs in healthcare, engineering, criminal justice, and more so you can get to your future and beyond.

(Musical Intro)

Tom: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning…

Kelvin: And the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning…

Tom: I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello again, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello again, Tom. Last time I saw you, I was in the same room with you…

Tom: I know.

Kelvin: Or a simulacrum.

Tom: [Chuckle] It was my clone that I send to conferences to do podcasts and presentations while I stay home.


Tom: I like to think it's a much more interesting version of me than I actually am. [Laughter] Conference Tom, I ship out and drop him off at the airport, and he goes out and has a good time. He can stay up later than I can.

Kelvin: Now, there's a whole other being replaced by an artificial life form. The threat's real. Now, I need to go back and see that. What was that? Wasn't there a Michael Keaton movie or something where he's just got all these clones?

Tom: Yes. I think it was called “Multiplicity,” or something?

Kelvin: Something like that, yeah. [Laughter]
Tom: And he clones himself. And the one that's a copy, of a copy, of a copy is named Steve, and he's a poor quality. He's got mental challenges. It's very funny.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's an older movie, but it's probably worth a re-watch in this artificial intelligence age. [Chuckle]

Tom: It is. Maybe. Well, I for one, welcome our robot overlords.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: Just for the record.

Kelvin: Vintage pulp fiction deep cut shout out now. When I was a kid, I read this pulp fiction novel that was probably more advanced subject matter for my young years. I don't remember the author's name, but it was called The Duplicated Man. And it's basically that premise. It's in the future, and you get these duplicates, but the duplicates are informed by other people's perception of the actual person. So, it's a different angle on the... I don't think it was that good of a book, but I've always remembered it for some reason. So, maybe the people who did “Multiplicity,” they probably stole the idea.

Tom: Yeah. Drop us a note if you know either the movie or that book.

Kelvin: That's right. There you go. But that's not why we're here. [Laughter]

Tom: No. Next time we see you, we'll give you a device sticker.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right.

Tom: Why are we here? Kelvin? To drink coffee, right? And to commiserate.


Tom: Wow.

Kelvin: MTV debuted in 1981.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. That's cool. “Video Killed the Radio Star,” right? Wasn't that the first video that they played?

Kelvin: Oh, that sounds right. That sounds right. It was all kind of things. 1982, ET phones home. Says it right here on my mug. Good to know. Thanks for joining us. This is the ‘80s podcast. That's right, but…

Tom: [Laughter] So, what's in that ‘80s mug?
Kelvin: In my ‘80s mug, Tom, is some flashback Panera coffee. I don't think I've had any Panera coffee since I was in Orlando, and we had an event down the hall from my office here earlier today. The packaged-up Panera is right over my shoulder here. If you're watching the video recording, much to producer Tim's chagrin, "Get that product placement out of the shot." [Chuckle] "But Tim, that's part of my shtick." And I thought that the packaged-up Panera flashback coffee might not be a bad choice for today's episode. So, you'll have to see if you can find a connection there. What are you drinking, and can I find a connection in your cup?

Tom: I am done with what I was drinking, so it's gone at this point, but it was nothing special. [Laughter] It was Dunkin’ pumpkin spice latte flavor.

Kelvin: Again, with the pumpkin spice. Again, with the pumpkin spice!

Tom: Actually, not latte, but it was pumpkin spice. 'Tis the time of year. Kelvin.

Kelvin: I guess so.

Tom: So, it's not thematic for me, but yours, so maybe something in the word “packaged.” You said it twice. We are going to be talking about a comprehensive package of things today. So, I don't know, maybe something there. Feels like a bit of a stretch though.

Kelvin: And the flashback.

Tom: You did say flashback. And ‘80s.

Kelvin: Flashback.

Tom: Okay, so flashback maybe.

Kelvin: Maybe not so much the ‘80s, but the flashback. [Chuckle]

Tom: Maybe I get the flashback. Okay. All right.

Kelvin: All right. See what you got.

Tom: All right. So, the flashback is because you were talking to an old colleague of ours that used to work with us.

Kelvin: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Tom: So, should I inform our listening…

Kelvin: Please do.
Tom: Or potentially viewing audience.

Kelvin: If anybody's still listening to us, blather on at this point. [Laughter]

Tom: Made it this far. You're in for a treat, because Kelvin, you recently interviewed our colleague, Dr. Safary Wa-Mbaleka, and Safary is currently an Associate Professor of Leadership in Higher Education at Bethel University in Minnesota. Previously, he held administrative leadership positions at Adventist University of Africa and has worked and taught at several other institutions around the world; I know in the Philippines as well. He has spoken at more than a hundred conferences in more than 20 countries and has published more than 80 books, chapters and journal articles. He is also by coincidence, the lead editor of the forthcoming book, the SAGE Handbook of Online Higher Education, which may be relevant to today's conversation.

Kelvin: Indeed, indeed so. Indeed, so. Safary is a great colleague. I sent him a link, we actually mentioned Safary back in Episode #7 because we are drinking some coffee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is where Safary was born. We make mention of that in the show. In the interview recording, we'll put a link in the show notes, which was, I think that was our first TOPcast live. Actually, it was Episode #7 back in 2015. How about that?

Tom: If you say so, I believe you.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: So, is there anything you want to say about the interview besides that before we jump to it?

Kelvin: Yeah, Safary's great. If you ever get a chance, talk to the guy, read his stuff, invite him to speak. What a wonderful... I call him, “Doctor Dr. Wa-Mbaleka” because he's got a PhD, EdD – I mean, how smart is this guy?

Tom: Well, and also one of the nicest, most knowledgeable guys you're going to want to talk to.

Kelvin: Absolutely. But we don't really explicitly mention it in the interview. I was trying to stay on the other side of the mic, but I'm a co-editor on the book as well with our colleague Leni Casimiro from the Philippines, try to have a rounded it out global editorial team. And I would try to sell you the book anyway. But the reality is, as an editor, if somebody buys a book, I eventually get a percentage of, a percentage of, a percentage of, a percentage of, a percentage of a penny or something. [Chuckles] So, I wouldn't want you to think I don't, but I would sell you the book even if I didn't because I think it's a good product.
Tom: Agreed, yes. As somebody who doesn't make a dime off the book, but who contributed to it, I agree. I think it's well worth a read. So, with that and the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Safary Wa-Mbaleka.

(Musical Transition)

Kelvin: Hi, Safary. So glad to see you and have you on TOPcast today.

Safary Wa-Mbaleka: It's my pleasure to be here, Kelvin. It's so good to see you after so much time over the years. [Chuckle]

Kelvin: Yes, likewise. I think we've actually talked about you before on the podcast. We do this little coffee connection thing, and I think at one point I think I brought in some coffee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and I think your name came up.

Safary: Oh, wow. That's quite interesting because indeed I was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, so that's quite interesting that you are to taste the country from Congo. [Laughter]

Kelvin: That's right. I'm pretty sure I'll have to send you a link to that, but that's not the reason that we were going to have you on and talk today. You are the lead editor on a book that is newly out as we release this episode. It is a book in the SAGE Handbook series, and I thought before we got into the book itself, maybe not all of our listeners know about the SAGE Handbook series, and I know you're very familiar with the SAGE Handbook series. [Chuckle] So, what is the Sage Handbook series and how have you been involved with that, and why do we need a The Sage Handbook of Online Higher Education?

Safary: Yes, I've been involved with SAGE Publications for the past, I would say four years. The first project I was working on was the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in the Asian Context. And as I was finishing that, immediately I saw the need that we had for online higher education because that was the middle of COVID-19, and everybody at that time I was back to Africa to serve in Africa, and the challenge was real.

I remember being involved in a national committee to establish national standards for online education and university setting, and basically the structure was not in place. Everybody was trying to find knowledge and expertise on online higher education, and expertise was highly limited. And this was not unique to Africa. As you read the literature, you'll find that it was common to many countries, I would say outside of the United States, many universities were caught and unprepared, and everybody had to move quickly online to be able to survive.
So, this raised the need for a new handbook that would be one stop where people can learn most of what they need to be able to operate online. From the faculty to the administrators, to instructional designers, to the technology people, to accreditation people, quality assurance. We needed something that is just one tool that will help everyone, and look at it from the international perspective, not just the American perspective. Because a number of books that we have on the topic are written in the United States, but they’re not a hundred percent applicable to the world outside. So, that's how this idea came up.

Kelvin:  
No, that's great. The SAGE handbooks, here's my lay person attempt at articulating this, but you correct me if I'm wrong. They're big books, they're lengthy books, and they attempt to be comprehensive, and each chapter is not so much zoomed in and narrow. It has something unique to offer, but tries to catch that topic from a lot of different angles and be practical. Is that right?

Safary:  
That is correct. I would say every handbook must be comprehensive on the topic. The central topic, and in this case, was online higher education. So, it had to be very comprehensive. So, SAGE requires that a handbook must have at least 36 chapters.

Kelvin:  
At least 36 chapters?

Safary:  
At least 36 chapters, and so, that's how it goes. I think in this one, we had 50 chapters. It is quite huge, a large wealth of knowledge. And yes, there's usually the tendency to have the practical side and the research side in handbooks as far as SAGE is concerned. Although personally, I'm working now on my third handbook, I always want to do a lot more of the practical side because I really want to put something practical in the hands of people, so that they can use that, implement that immediately, in relation to the topic that we're working on. So, the handbook that we had was a lot more practical than the theoretical.

Kelvin:  
Yeah, I think about scholarly practice. I think there's a scholarly framing. It's not a completely popular focused book, but practical within that scholarly context.

Safary:  
That's correct.

Kelvin:  
I think that's right. Now Safary, let's get real for a second. Are you asking all of our listeners to go out and personally purchase this very large, more than $20 book? Is that what you're asking people to do?

Safary:  
[Laughter] Well, on one hand it is ideal, although I understand how expensive 50 chapters can be, and this comes from I think more than 100 contributors from several countries. I lost count how many countries were involved in this project. This is a monumental project. Yes, it is a little pricey. So, the primary way of getting a copy is to ask your librarians to actually purchase a copy because it's fairly expensive.
But if your life is always online, you're a director of online education, you know that this is my life, this is my primary role, it won't hurt. It'll be a good investment if you can get your own copy, but at least make sure that your library gets a copy or two copies. Some libraries may get more than one copy, and that is very, very helpful because there's a lot of gems that are packed in that handbook.

Kelvin: I'm at a new institution as you know, and some of our listeners know in my office where I'm sitting today speaking with you. If I were to go right out the front door, I'm in the library and fortunately straight out my little door, I go right into the education section. And so, I went looking not too long ago, and I strolled through the stacks of the library, and I ran across several SAGE handbooks on related topics, topics related to higher education, or public-school education, and so forth. And indeed, they're hardcover, and they're thick, and there they are on the library shelves. [Chuckle]

And I thought, "Well, look at that. I hope that our library will purchase this book." [Chuckle] And I wrote the dean of the libraries and I said, "Would you please consider?" That's what our listeners can do. They can reach out to their library dean or director and say, "Would you please buy this? It will help our community.” And then you can check it out for free. Or as Safary says, you can invest your money and get this significant book. So, that's the end of the commercial part of the podcast. [Laughter] But give us a taste of this, Safary. You've said broadly international perspective, and you've said 50 chapters, but what can our listeners expect to find in this book?

Safary: This book, it really covers all the different dimensions of online higher education. We start by defining it. We go into instructional design issues, we go into programs, how to plan online programs, how to ensure that we have quality and online classes and online programs, accreditation. We go into evaluation, assessment, how to grade, how to teach online, how to provide student support, how to help students conduct research, how to set up online laboratories, how to deal with technology, how to support students with technology, with their registration, with enrollment, how to market their online programs, how to make sure they have access to quality library resources because we're dealing with the online higher education. So, it's a holistic dimension, I would say a 360-degree perspective of online higher education.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think that's great. And you have one whole section that is geographically or geo... I don't know, geo something.

Safary: Yeah.

Kelvin: There are geographical constructs of, "Here's the American perspective on online higher education, here's the European perspective…”

Safary: Correct.
Kelvin: So, sometimes it's not just an individual country, but a region. But what did you see as you looked across those chapters? What kind of takeaways did you have, knowing that you wanted a more representative international view in such a handbook? As you reviewed those geographically oriented chapters, what themes did you see?

Safary: Some of the things that I learned, which was not really surprising, was that each region had a different level of online higher education. We had a chapter on the United States, one on Canada, because we assume they had really gone far with their online education. But we had one chapter in Europe, chapter with Asia, one on Africa, one with the Central and Latin America. And you could see that different regions have different challenges. And so, understanding these challenges, if for example, somebody was asked to go and to be a consultant in places like this, then they have an idea what is happening. And each chapter they would talk about the different bodies of research or communities, of practice that were in the region that were kind of strengthening online higher education. And of course, there was research coming from those places telling people exactly what was happening.

And I thought that was a great contribution because for us here who are in the West, we have the tendency to just look at online education and think only about the United States, for example, for us who are in the United States. But if I'm presenting now at a conference, and it happened to be in Dubai, I can just quickly look at the chapter that came from the Middle East, we had one chapter in the Middle East and see, “Okay, what are the things that are happening there so that my talk will be much more relevant? If I'm asked to go and teach a class there, what should I actually know?” So, I think this was a major contribution of the regional chapters telling us what is happening in those regions.

Kelvin: That's wonderful. As we begin to wrap up, I wonder if you might dream a little bit and think with us and encourage our listeners to think along with you. Where do you want to go with this? I mean, do you think we need to have more of an international perspective? And if so, how do we pursue that? What are you hoping to see next, spinning off of this book?

Safary: [Chuckle] One thing that I can imagine coming up hopefully in the next few months is to have a summit on online higher education where we are going to bring the community of practice from all over the world. Since online education doesn't have any geographical boundaries, let's bring this conversation together. We'll be just a one-day summit where we are going to look at online education from different regions and address some of the pressing needs.

For example, online assessment. Everywhere I have worked, I worked in Asia and Africa, and also here in the US, online assessment has always been a challenge. And so, we have topics like that, that I want us to discuss and bring people in a live session where we are going to have this discussion. And another one, I'm
working with another handbook that we focus on instructional designers specifically because we have come to realize that this is a major area if we want quality online higher education.

Kelvin: Well, that's wonderful. We'll love to share more of what you're doing in both of those spaces with our listeners and in the future as developments unfold. So glad you're able to join us today, Safary, and telling us a little bit about this important work. And hey, TOPcast listeners, you should go out, and we'll put a link in the show notes. You should grab that link and send it to your library director or dean. Take a look at the table of contents and the reviews yourself, and talk this up in our community. It is a great international perspective on our core field of online higher education. Thank you so much for joining us today, Safary.

Safary: Thank you so much, Kelvin. It was a pleasure to be with you today.

(Musical Transition)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your interview with Safary. I enjoyed listening to that.

Kelvin: Yeah, he's a great guy. And of course, he's got one of those voices that's just smooth, like butter. I mean, he could say anything. He could give me bad news. I'd listen to him probably.

Tom: Yeah, friends of mine who are from Africa and the Caribbean. I find those accents just so musical, and I could listen to them talk all day long.

Kelvin: But yeah, listening back to that again, I really hone in on this global aspect of the book, and the work, and all that. And I was guess quite taken with, I think Safary maybe did it two different times. He framed up pitches of why you might pull the book off the shelf if you had access to it. But they're very practical pitches about why would you reach for this book. But they were all related to our connection to the international community. Maybe you're going to teach a student who's from somewhere else, or you're going to consult in another country, or you're teaching an online class, or presenting at a conference in another country. The handbook would be a good starting place, he says.

Tom: Yeah, agreed. I do like the practicality of it. I mean, you did underscore the fact that it's not bereft of research. There's research in there, but there is a real practical aspect to it so that, it is a handbook after all. And so, for people who are in a kind of administrative or even an instructional design-ish kind of role, but I think it's mostly geared at the administrative level. There's a lot of useful, applicable information in there that you could use right away.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think so. I will say that there probably is something in there for everybody, and especially if your library had it, or whatever, and you wanted to flesh out something that you're not as well-versed in. I like how Safary put it,
"holistic, 360-degree perspective" I think he said. I think that's not bad, but I keep getting stuck with this thing. And I wonder what you think about this. You and I've talked about this a few times off mic, but how much do our North American or maybe Western generally listeners really know about online education around the world? It seems like to me, I mean, just going through the editing process, reading lots of stuff from lots of people, from lots of places, there's always stuff to learn, for sure.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that we do have a kind of American-centric lens through which we look at education. And it makes sense, right? And within that, there are sub lenses between public and private and other kinds of different slices of education. But there are nuanced differences around the world. In our chapter, we wrote about the North American context, American context, and we talk about the federalist structure of education, where the states run higher ed with some very vague funding oversight in the federal level at DC.

But in other countries, there might be a ministry of education that is much more controlling of what happens at individual school levels than happens here. And if you're not used to that, I don't think you have an appreciation for the impact that that can have on policy and practice at an institutional school level, and the difference between public and private. I remember being in Brazil at a conference I was speaking at, and having the conversations with people from other countries, and this was a group of private schools that were together, a consortium that I was speaking to.

And they were basically saying that the public schools are the premier schools in Brazil, and the public schools are the ones that get all the state funding, and the best students go there. And the private schools sort of have to be scrappy and kind of compete. And it was almost an inversion of here, where it's the private schools that tend to be at the top of the elite hierarchy in the United States. And I think every country's going to be a little bit different in that way. And I think this book, one of the unique things about it, the values of it, is that it does bring a truly global perspective, and that's rare these days.

Kelvin: No, that's right. And I guess we'd be remiss if we allowed you, dear listeners, to think that this is only about kind of a treatment around the world. We did not get into all the depth. We'll put a link in the show notes to the table of contents and to the publisher's website. 50 chapters, 50, count them. 57 sections. [Chuckles]

Tom: There's something in there for everyone. Yes.

Kelvin: More than 600 pages in this book. I mean, there's a lot of stuff. [Chuckles] There’s a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff. But it's good. I like it. You should buy it. No, you shouldn't buy it. You should ask your library director to buy it. [Laughter]
Tom: Yeah. Have the library buy it, and then that way everybody can take advantage of it, right?

Kelvin: That's right. Shall I try to put the plane on the runway, Tom?

Tom: Yes, you should.

Kelvin: So, by way of summation, we might say that our world might be smaller than ever before, thanks to digital networked technologies, but as online education professionals, we run the risk of being overly provincial still if we don't attend to the experiences and insights from colleagues around the world. As I like to say in a lot of different contexts, we are better together.

(Musical Outro)

Tom: Absolutely. That's great. It was great to hear from Safary. Maybe we can get him in person one of these days. That would be awesome.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: All right, until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.