

# XChange podcast - Episode 14 - Interview with new Provost and Vice President Academic, Dr. Hassun Malik

## Transcript

Note: This transcript was edited for readability.

[XCHANGE PODCAST INTRO MUSIC]

JASON INNIS, HOST: Hi, my name is Jason and I'm the Director of Teaching Excellence. And today I have the incredible opportunity to meet with Dr. Malik, our Provost and Vice President Academic. So Doctor Malik, thanks so much for being to meet with us. You're three months into your role as provost VP at the Polytechnic, and what a time to join us.

HASSUN MALIK: Oh, thank you so much, Jason. It's great to be here speaking with you and sharing a little bit about myself, but also about my plans and visions and excitement that I have for the Institution.

JASON INNIS: Well, we're really excited to have you here. And I know all the listeners are going to be really excited to learn a little bit more about you. So with that, let's start with your story. What experiences or influences shaped your path towards becoming a provost?

HASSUN MALIK: Yeah, it's a very interesting question. And reflecting on it, there are some key moments that come to mind in terms of witnessing firsthand the power of education, of access to education, and how it dramatically shapes the future of learners, and really shapes their ability to participate in the wonderful economic future that Canada has. And I want to maybe share a couple of examples that come to mind.

One is early in my career, there was a student who I was teaching amongst many others, and he had a serious substance addiction and was able to get some help through counselors that we have on the campus and took a number of years for him to graduate, but he turned his life around. Not only did he finish his credential, his diploma from the institution, but went on to do master's and actually completed a PhD. So really, a success story of someone who has struggled was in a really bad place. But as a result of the power of education and the support systems that we as polytechnics provide, was able to turn his life around.

And another example, and maybe I'll share just two more. Another example is of a student that I taught and you know, you teach so many students, and you don't remember everyone, frankly and don't do you remember each individual conversation in this case

around 15 years later. In fact, just a year and a half ago, I got an email from that student when I was in Saskatchewan and as the provost and said “Oh, Doctor Malik, you may not remember me, but you taught me and you inspired me to go on to do a master's program. So I not only finished my diploma, went to do an undergrad degree, and now I'm in a master's program.” She is super excited about the fact that she was able to believe in herself and make that change. So just those kinds of small pieces that that we can influence individually but as collectively to on an institutional level, because you mentioned the role of provost. One of the things that we did was removed barriers to entry into the institution. In this specific case, what we did was we got a donor to help fund for Indigenous learners, waving their application fees.

And I met a number of students as a result, when they were in the midst of the programing. Because we used to have a gathering of students from the Indigenous population, and they shared with me how they would not have applied to the institution if they had to pay for the fees, and partly is because many of them don't have confidence in themselves about the fact that they can do well, partly because of the economic situation.

They're not able to come up with the fees. You know, there's bad funding in many cases that covers the tuition, but this part is not really covered. So that individual would not have been a part of the institution had she not been able to get and just apply and say, hey, there's no risk. I'm just putting my name in. If I get in, I can figure it my way out. So there are some institutional policies that we can impact and affect and influence and help individuals come in. So I think that power of making a difference and impact in the community is what drives me in my role as a provost.

JASON INNIS: I mean, it's incredible. You mentioned the first impact that you had is you change someone's life and you don't remember doing it. And someone came back years later and said “thank you”. And then on an institutional level, you made changes that impacted an entire other sector. So that's absolutely incredible. You know, you touched on this a little bit, but was there a specific moment in your career that made you realize that higher education leadership was where you wanted to focus your impact?

HASSUN MALIK: Yeah. You know, once you realized, in my case, when I saw kind of process the impact that I was individually having as a faculty member, and then I saw as I had an opportunity to take on an acting associate dean role because my associate dean left and they needed somebody to cover for a short interim period. When I got into that and understood that what I was doing individually could then be magnified and multiplied through policy work, through institutional programing and those kinds of things that you can't necessarily influence so much as an individual faculty member. As a faculty member, you can do amazing things in the classroom, and that has a huge amount of value.

But, you know, when I saw that I could take this and expand it a little bit further in terms of the scope of influence, that really got me to thinking about the natural transition into a leadership role. How can I take my influence and help many more students that I would not be able to individually lead or impact if I was just in the classroom? So in this position that I'm in, I'm fortunate enough to have an opportunity to make a difference not only in the lives of students, but I would say now even faculty and staff, because the policies that we put in place impact everyone. So the it's the all the thing that they say in airplanes when you get in like, hey, put oxygen on yourself. And so if you think about that, if we provide oxygen to our faculty and staff and to the well-being of our community, they can then turn around and support our faculty, our students, even better. And the community members better. It's that scope of influence and trying to do the best for the entire organization and the community we serve. I think that's what drives me, and I think the transition is quite natural. Once you start thinking about the impact you can have in a much more, I would say, global manner across the institution.

JASON INNIS: I mean, it's always so refreshing to hear senior leaders, especially in the educational sphere, talk about how important students and learners are. So thanks so much. It's great to hear that. That's such an important focus for you. I'm going to switch a little sideways here for our listeners. Outside of work what are a few things that people might be surprised to learn about you?

HASSUN MALIK: There are a number of things and I'll try to keep the list a little bit short. First of all, I have a pretty cosmopolitan nature. I've lived in many different continents and have lived experiences in different cultures, and had the opportunity of growing up in Japan. When I visit Japan, which I've visited a few times since I've left it. I grew up there. So it feels like a home to me. And it's kind of an interesting feeling because I grew up in Pakistan in my very early childhood, and then I had my formative years in Japan and my undergraduate and graduate years in the US. And I've been to several parts of Canada, lived in different parts of Canada.

So when I go back to Japan, or I go back to Pakistan or even the Middle East. Because I know the culture so well, I feel like I belong to those cultures even though I am not in the cultures. It's kind of an interesting space to be. So that's one thing. The other thing I'd say probably most people don't know about me is that I'm very much a writer. I love writing, I like fiction, I write short stories. I have a book that should be coming out in a couple of months, and a new volume of fiction, so I'm very excited about that.

JASON INNIS: That's exciting. Can you share the name with us?

HASSUN MALIK: It's called "Parables". There's a series of parables. You know, maybe I have an opportunity to post a little bit about that in the future, but I think it's going to be a refreshingly different type of fiction. Maybe, even if I may use the word revolutionary in the way it's going to come across. So, I'm very excited about it. I put a lot of thought and effort into it in my spare time.

JASON INNIS: I can't imagine you have a lot of that.

HASSUN MALIK: No, I don't, but I you know, it's been a passion project. So I would say that that creative side of my personality has an outlet.

JASON INNIS: Yeah. And I learned today that you switched your major sort of three years into it. You were more science folks. You're a voracious reader and decided to switch into...

HASSUN MALIK: Into literary studies. Yes. I ended up graduating in English literature and ended up doing a PhD in that. And the irony of this in some ways is that when I started undergrad, my lowest grade was actually in English literature course because it's again an interesting learning about learning. When I was a high school student in Pakistan, the kind of learning you do is very much rote. You memorize things. And when I went into the US for an undergrad program, they asked me to write essays. I had never written essays in my life. And so, having that as a learning experience it was very tough to put my mind around as to how do you do critical thinking, how do you do analysis in a way that was quote unquote original. That was a really both a struggle but also an eye-opening experience.

The irony is that when I came out of that course and I think I made a C plus. That was the lowest grade, everything else was A's. And I was like, okay, wow, I'm never going to do that English course again. And the irony is that I found myself reading fiction and nonfiction a lot. I was very good in science and math and in physics and chemistry, and it was an interesting dichotomy. But yes, it's I think one of the lessons for me is that you need to follow away. Your heart was right, because ultimately that's what it's about. And having faith in yourself enough to say that even if this might not be the most practical field I'm going into, it's going to be okay, and I'll do all right, because that's where I want to be. So the life has a way of taking you in directions that you don't necessarily anticipate. And sometimes those surprises are the best things that can happen to you.

JASON INNIS: So true. I once applied for a course when I was in university. It was a fourth-year course. It was a creative writing course. You had to apply for it, submit a portfolio. And I got accepted and there was ten of us in the class. It was it was one of the most memorable classes I've ever had. So it resonates with me for sure. As Provost, you have a unique vantage point across the institution. Wondering what excites you most about the future of teaching and learning right now?

HASSUN MALIK: You know, it's interesting because I think that as a as a polytechnic, we have quite a unique opportunity at this point in history because it's all about contextual, right? Leadership is contextual. We have a really interesting and exciting opportunity to develop and launch new programs. I think the evolving nature of industry, but also our ability to offer degrees, master's degrees, opens avenues for us to explore and take advantage of.

The other thing is we as a crossroad of technology right now, and you know this very well because you lead that area. But this is not only for the academic area in terms of programing. You see that all across every sector of the economy. You cannot go to any sector of the economy where there is not an impact directly by technology, on the way the work is done.

So the future work is evolving quite rapidly. And so, it becomes incumbent on us as educators to ensure that students are coming through our doors, virtual or physical. Come out with the skill sets that position them for the future of work. And that means digital literacy, using generative AI, and also specific technologies that are deployed in their specific professions.

If you're in the dental program, you need to be using specific kinds of hands-on learning. That's the strength that we have as a polytechnic. So, I think that that part has become imperative for us as an institution. I think we need to think about how we not only deploy this education for our students, but also how do we get our faculty to build that skill set, because it's a relatively new skill set and we are all in this moment in time, learning both the technology, but also its quickly evolving nature.

We know that five years from now, we'll be having a very different conversation about that. Because we will know to some extent what AI's potential has been. So how do we start positioning ourselves that we help faculty deploy technology in the classroom, AI, generative AI in the classroom? Not as an add on, but as an integrated platform for learning for learners, so that students come out and are able to walk into their jobs, whether it's an entrepreneurial job or as an entrepreneur, in an institution, an organization, and are able to add value to that organization.

I think that significantly has an opportunity to enrich learning for our students, but also enrich the professionalism of our faculty who will be able to deploy their resources, their kind of creative capacity in ways that are higher value than just the grunt work that we all know. We've all been faculty; we've gone through this. We know that heavy lifting we have to do as faculty.

I think there's a real opportunity on both sides of the house, both in the delivery side, but also in the receptive side from the students. I think that this is a really, really exciting opportunity for us as an institution to leapfrog ahead of other competition that we see in the GTA or across Canada.

JASON INNIS: Really definitely an exciting time for sure. You've held senior leader roles, in I believe four different academic institutions. How would you describe your leadership philosophy?

HASSUN MALIK: It's such an interesting question because philosophy around education and leadership really evolves as the more experience you have. What I would say the best way of capturing my approach is participative leadership style. I mean that I really believe in leveraging the creative capacity of the talent we have in an organization.

So right now, and I've had the really great pleasure of meeting a number of faculty and staff from across the institution. And I'm just absolutely thrilled to see the kind of engagement and I would say pride they have in the institution, which is great in itself. But then layer on top of that talent that they have, that skill set, the expertise, the deep level of knowledge and experience that they bring.

And I think that if it's harnessed appropriately and encouraged with authenticity and with transparency, so that they feel comfortable in actually giving the best ideas, not feeling that they will be either ignored or there's going to be a blowback if they say something. Because I know a number of institutions have that culture of fear, and I think that engagement piece makes a huge difference in terms of the quality of the work and the quality of the products that we produce.

And I use product as a business term, but I know we have programing. But the more innovative our approaches are, the more creative our solutions are, the better is the quality of the programs and the experience that students have. So, I think that is what I sincerely believe in is and participative means exactly that. I want the body politic, if you will, the faculty and staff to give us their best ideas, which we can then synthesize and harness for the future of the organization.

Leadership is partly that, and the leadership is partly also thinking about the future, because, as you mentioned, perspective is important. There are many things that I see in my role as a provost institutionally, that not every individual faculty or staff member would be able to see. So that synthesis is really important to seeing all the great ideas. But what would have the best impact for the institution long term in terms of both reputation but also financial sustainability, student experience, all of those things. We talked about AI a little bit earlier. The reason that is so important is because we know where the economy and

industry is going for us to be ahead in the curve. Not everybody will buy into that. I know that maybe some people will disagree with the notion of we should do. Questions of academic integrity come up quite frequently, for instance. And that's a fair enough comment. But the question then becomes, how do we use our assessments in a way that there's a creative and critical thinking element that comes in in providing the solution?

You're using AI as a student to create solutions that are even better than you would have come up with. It becomes a learning tool and enhancement of the learning process. Coming back to the question of the philosophy, it really is around that harnessing the creative capacity. That's the best way I can frame it. Our faculty and staff, our other personnel, and then harnessing that for the benefit of our learners and for the institution and the community, larger provincial and Canadian economy.

JASON INNIS: That's great to hear. It sounds you have a real respect and admiration for the people who help contribute to the greatness of this organization.

HASSUN MALIK: Can I just add one more thing? It just occurred to me right now. One of the great paradigms that I really like to think about is the human centered design thinking paradigm. And there's a company out in California, it's called Ideo. And they've already kind of perfected this process where you do quick prototyping and it's done through an iterative process.

But what is really interesting is not only iterative. And it's called human centered because you have a lot of different minds from different disciplines working interdisciplinary into professionally to solve whatever challenge or problem that they're trying to solve. But it also has this piece around belief in the system, the process being a little bit messy, but coming out as a result with the best solution. There's disagreements, whatever. But that's democracy, isn't it? And in many ways, the best form of democracy is when you have competing voices challenging each other with their best ideas. And then synthesis that comes out is usually the best product, because you've considered all different angles and thought outside the box and being challenged, really. So having that open dialog becomes really critical in thinking about the best solution for whatever it is that you're trying to solve.

In our case, it's really about what is the new programming, what is the best quality, what is the most effective, innovative, richest way of delivering that learning to our students so that they can then thrive and become economic drivers of the of the nation. So it's such a privilege for all of us, you and all the listeners who are in their field of education, to have that impact on not only individuals whose lives they are actually directly impacting, but the larger Canadian national identity.

At this point in history, particularly when you look at what the Prime Minister Carney's positioning of Canada, you look at the geopolitics. There's no more important function that we can fill as educators, than really helping the next generation of leaders to materialize and have that capacity to deliver on the promise of Canada.

JASON INNIS: Incredible. What do you hope faculty, staff and students will experience or feel because of the work happening in the provost office?

HASSUN MALIK: What I would hope is that all of them, all the stakeholders, faculty, staff or students, understand that the institution and particularly the office of the Provost is focused on their success, laser focused. And we are in a really interesting time in our collective history in terms of both the nation and I mentioned the geopolitical realities that we are facing. But also as institutions, we are facing some tough times. It's probably historically the toughest time institutions are going through. So it's never been more imperative for the people who are in the institution to understand where the leaders' hearts are at, because that's the most important thing. And knowing that we are absolutely focused on the success of the institution of each of the faculty and staff, their well-being and the sustainability of the institution long term. And that doesn't stand by itself. Obviously, it's in the service of students, of the larger economic, I would say, vitality of the province and of Canada.

So starting with that and you know that they know that in all decisions that we make, however difficult they are, we always with the mindset of supporting students and supporting our faculty and staff to become better at what they are. I hope that they will see that we lead with heart and vision, with foresight and compassion, with value and integrity, and with perspectives that are informed, grounded in research and best practice.

And at the same time, that we are very ambitious about the future of George Brown Polytechnic. And that's what we are here for. So that kind of a synthesized whole makes the role both very exciting, but also a role that has a lot of responsibility with it. It's not a role that you walk into lightly, knowing that there's so much at stake, both for the folks who are in the institution, the students that come through the institution, and as part of the national economy and the provincial economy, because we have a major, major impact. And what the drivers of the economic success for the province in the nation are. So, I think our responsibility as educators is huge. And I hope that our office plays a role in advancing that.

JASON INNIS: It's great to hear you focus on the word heart so often in terms of really leading with the heart. And I think people resonate a lot with that when they know when they know that decisions aren't made lightly. And you said, grounded in research and long

term visioning. Really great to hear that we're focusing on the heart. Wondering who's been an important mentor influence in your career and what did you learn from them?

HASSUN MALIK: I would say probably two individuals come to mind and they're both helping me in my dissertation process when I was doing my PhD, research directors. One of them actually passed away, unfortunately, in the midst of that process. But I learned a lot from them, particularly around critical thinking and research and sifting through information to make the best analysis and judgment on things that you're trying to evaluate.

And research does that, it kind of gives you that capacity to not only gather data, but then make sense of the data you talk. I mean, in the more AI terms keep coming back to I think is important because the terminology is just in different fields, but it's essentially taking data and making business intelligence out of it, or you're making some theoretical or intellectual or ideological synthesis out of it.

I think we can discuss decisions based on data is a key skill set that then translates into all kinds of things in life, particularly in leadership roles, because you get a lot of information, often information that is contradictory, information that is coming from different perspectives, different mindsets, different histories. And how do you make sense out of them?

To create a direction and a vision and a path for us as an organization to move. And so, I think those pieces are really informed, the foundational mindset, if you will, in how I approach a decision making. Those two individuals, I think, had a lot to do with the foundational work that I've kind of always done.

JASON INNIS: Yeah, it takes a real skill to be able to distill, like you said, large amounts of information and figure out what is accurate data in terms of making those decisions. Looking ahead, what impact would you most like to have during your time as provost?

HASSUN MALIK: Frankly, at this time in history, there's so much important work that needs to be done. And the decisions that we make now are not inconsequential. They lay consequences. They make a huge difference not only in the lives, immediate impact of faculty and staff, but also in the long term sustainability and viability of the institution, the reputational pieces, etc...

So having said that, during my tenure as a provost, I would like for us to collectively, and I think the word collectively is really important. I've been talking about the participative leadership style, and I actually had an opportunity to meet with faculty in the health sciences and allied health area yesterday, and I mentioned this to them. The fact that I am only one person, the office is one office. And no one individual can have a complete influence on everything that happens. And that's important. What I meant by that is that

each of us has a leadership role. It doesn't matter what position you're in. When I was faculty, and I was faculty for many, many years, I thought of that as a leadership role because not positionally as in the institution.

Yes, I was not the president. I was not the provost. I was not adding on any of those titular roles. However, I was a leader in the classroom, leading students in their learning journey. I think collectively we have this work to do, which is to position George Brown Polytechnic as the premier polytechnic in Canada. And I would even go so far as to say globally, frankly, because of the excellent reputation that we have. I came to George Brown because of the reputation.

The institution does an amazing work in the community in helping our learners become so successful in their careers. So, I would say that would be probably the kind of my primary goal, ensuring that we are doing amazing things so that our graduates can do amazing things in their lives, for their families, for their communities, for the province and for the nation of Canada.

So, what higher purpose in calling can you have in life than to make that kind of an impact across the nation and individuals lives and their families lives and their hopes and dreams and aspirations? Because really, there's very few other kinds of fields of endeavor that has such an expansive reach into the community and to people's lives.

And we all hear about those stories of a student who has gone through high school and had one traumatic experience with a teacher who did not treat that particular individual properly or put them down and affected their confidence. And we have such a tremendous opportunity to, in some cases, reverse.

I shared some examples of that in the past. Reverse those either intergenerational trauma if it's an indigenous learner, or other kinds of traumas that people have. That's one side. On the other side of the case is like those people who really have this vision about their futures and or single mothers who are looking for their opportunity to turn their lives around, or folks who don't really believe in themselves, but they have this huge latent potential inside of them that we can then really kindle that and inspire them.

Right? So, there is really literally no other calling that is quite as, if I may use the word, noble as the one that we are engaged in.

JASON INNIS: And I have to say, having worked here since 2012, I've heard so many stories from faculty and students and employees and community members about the impacts that we have on our student success and helping them in moving into the future. So, so much inspiration that goes on there.

HASSUN MALIK: Well, absolutely. And I just maybe take this opportunity to thank all the faculty and staff who are making a contribution every day. They are unsung heroes, gender neutral term, by the way. I'm not saying heroes or heroines. They really are the unsung champions of the future of our learners. And I think approaching learners with empathy, with understanding, knowing that they're coming from different places, different stories, they have different challenges.

Having that mindset is so important, and it's never been more important than today, when we know that the realities in Canada and globally and political realities globally even more are so challenging. And many of the people have loved ones across the pond in different sectors that are currently under assault. And you go to different continents and there you can think of Europe has a problem. The Middle East as a part of Africa have a problem. Even in Asian countries we're not thinking about there are lots of challenges in different jurisdictions. And take an hour just to go over to list them. So remembering that and being partly grateful for the fact that we are in this land, that is the indigenous lands that we are guests on, and that we have had this tremendous privilege to live in a land that believes in civility, that believes in peace, and where we can actually have an opportunity to improve our lives.

And that doesn't happen every day. It doesn't happen in lots of quarters of the world, even developed worlds. There are some areas where people are not welcome. We know that. So knowing that, understanding that and then harnessing that knowledge for the betterment of the folks who are coming through the doors. Learners, but also our partners. We have lots of partners, research partners in the community who some of them help us out and work integrated learning. So those are all kind of relational pieces that we engage in, which is great for our students, great for the community, and great for the reputation of the institution.

JASON INNIS: Yeah. And you talk about partners, like our industry partners as well, the people who hire our students. Like you say, the humanity is so important in all the work that we do.

HASSUN MALIK: Absolutely. Yeah. So we talk about technology a lot, but technology not devoid of the human heart. And that's why I use the notion of the human centered design thinking methodology, because it has to be human centered. Technology is just an aid to make our lives and our jobs more efficient and the products better and solutions better. But it's not a replacement of humanity. We have to be human centered at the end of the day.

JASON INNIS: Dr. Malik, it's been absolute pleasure spending some time with you. Appreciate you taking some time off your busy schedule to spend time with us and sharing

a little bit about you and your vision and your thoughts about humanity and leading with the heart. All the best. We look forward to connecting with you again soon.

HASSUN MALIK: Thank you so much, Jason. Great to be here.

[XCHANGE PODCAST OUTRO MUSIC]