

Interview with Professor Paul Ashwin

Paul Ashwin is Professor at Lancaster University, UK. His professional interests include: quality of university teaching and education; development of education programs; relationship between higher education research and education policies. Being a special guest of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers at the 6th International Conference Rethinking Students: Ideas and New Research Approaches, Paul Ashwin presented his plenary paper Why would going to university change anyone? The role of knowledge in transforming students.

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Professor Ashwin, what can you say about students' engagement and their academic achievements?

Paul Ashwin: I think they are related. In the UK the “What works?” research programme found the two crucial things for students not dropping out in higher education in the first year was to have a sense of belonging in their institution and to feel engaged with their studies (see <http://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-final-report/>). The two things go together. So in a way there is a clear link with those two things.

A sense of belonging on its own isn't enough, you need to think about what it is the students feel they belong to. So you can have a sense of belonging to your institution and that means that you love the bar. You could have a sense of belonging to your institution and that could mean that you are a key member of, let's say, the canoeing society. And the point I was making and what's coming through in our research is that obviously on its own that's not a problem but unless parts of what students feel they belong to is their educational experience, unless what they think going to university means is related to their degree programme and the knowledge they are engaging with in their studies, then they don't change and develop the sense of who they are and their relation to the world.

It's one of those things that sounds completely obvious when you say it: of course — if you don't engage with your degree programme, why would you change? But it's one of those things we don't tend to think about when we are talking about students' experiences of higher education, or my point in the talk — when we think about quality we don't often use measures that tell us about those things. For me there is an important research question about how we capture those things and understand them but we also have to think how all of this translates into policy. If we just publish research saying it's for the people to make sense out of it then we haven't done enough. We know

about learning processes: you learn by reinterpreting; what you do is you create your own understanding of the thing you are looking at. As a researcher I think we also have a crucial role to play in helping policy-makers to come to an understanding of how we can say some things that are important, but we can't say them with the level of accuracy that you can, for example, measure time. There is no point in pretending that we can measure things with lasers when what we actually have has the accuracy of sledge-hammers.

I can remember we had an ex government Minister for Education come to Lancaster to give us a presentation He said: "The key question education researchers should be answering for me is: what is the optimum number of students in the classroom?" To me as education researcher that is a stupid question because the answer depends on who the students are and what you are helping them to learn. It does not make any sense to ask it as a question that has a single answer. My initial reaction was: if this is the kind of question you are asking, then I am not going to talk to you. But now with more experience, I know that to say to a politician 'what a stupid question' is not enough. What you have to try to do is engage in a discussion with them that helps to change their sense of what would be a more sensible question that gets to the things they are worried about. I think it's finding a path between giving politicians what exactly they want or giving them nothing they want. That's not easy and is going to be met by much more failures than success but it's worth struggling to do it. We have the responsibility to deal with those matters thoughtfully and not simply do what's easiest and most convenient.

What is the student's role in this process?

The whole movement towards student engagement and their involvement in curriculum design and institutional management is something that I am very supportive of. In a paper I wrote recently with Debbie McVitty "[The meaning of student engagement](#)" we argue that literature on student engagement is a conceptual mess at the moment because student engagement means so many different things. So we are trying to set up a conceptualization that looks at a degree of student engagement. Does student engagement mean students being consulted: "We are going to do this — what do you think?" Does this mean students are being engaged as partners: "Ok, let's discuss it together". Or does this mean students being the leaders: "How we are going to do this?". We also have different objects of student engagement. One object of student engagement which is normally ignored is student engagement with knowledge. And my argument would be that is the core engagement they have and all their other engagements are predicated on the assumption of their engagement knowledge.

Another form of engagement is engagement with the curriculum development, but only on the assumption of their engagement with

the knowledge. Then the third object of engagement is the development of communities. In a way our argument excludes some things, because we are saying: unless you are engaged with knowledge you then can't build the university community. So for me that's where the role of students is—we have to recognize that they are in higher education to gain an education and to engage with knowledge. So when they are engaging in curriculum development and community building they are doing it as people who are together in education otherwise you just end up as students sounding like managers. That's sort of what happens with students if you remove them from the fact that they are engaged in a degree programme. You need to recognize that it is their engagement with knowledge that leads them to the other forms of engagement.

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