

Book Review

Ashwin, P. 2020. *Transforming University Education: A Manifesto*. London: Bloomsbury.

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By 'manifesto' Paul Ashwin means to both alert us to flaws in the current Higher Education (HE) system and also to propose how things can be done better. This is what he does through highlighting, to his mind, the current dominance or two big challenges for HE: its increasing economic orientation and the related issue of university rankings. In opposition to these trends he proposes that HE should rather focus on expanding and transforming students' knowledge and their worldviews. Having such a renewed focus is about developing both the individual and also their contribution to society more generally, which may include contributing to and gaining from the economy. But, as he argues, having the economy as a primary focus distorts the purpose of higher education. As other reviewers have pointed out (McKenna, 2021) the book is most accessible and well structured, with handy summaries and a clear and developing argument about the purpose of higher education. It is also interesting when it challenges 'myths' about HE such as the panic over over-qualification, economic premiums, and the development of generic skills. That does not mean to say that the main argument is commonplace, it involves a sophisticated call for attention to the knowledge make-up of different disciplines, and how best to make these accessible to diverse groups of students. In so doing he draws on Bernstein's (2000) work on knowledge structures and the importance of making these transparent to students and the related concept of 'powerful knowledge' as opposed to just knowledge of the powerful, contradictory concepts put forward by Muller and Young (2019). Bernstein's and Muller and Young's arguments were that knowledge within disciplines is relational rather than being constituted by disparate pieces, and access involves knowing the 'glue' that holds these pieces of knowledge together. In Ashwin's analysis, disciplinary knowledge also needs to be made meaningful to students through outlining its relationship to work, society and more broadly to the students themselves. How curricula are to be structured to highlight these relations, and so allow access by diverse student bodies, is central to Ashwin's argument, which hints at Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), though how this is to be developed at university is not fully explored in the Manifesto. Ashwin (2020: 125) does, however, acknowledge that currently accepted bodies of knowledge may reflect particular historically dominant trends. A better, future PCK would then involve a



sophisticated understanding of who the students are, what they bring to the academic table and an openness to divergent views developed within disciplinary teaching practices. There is, in addition, a veiled critique here of current academic teaching staff. Though they may be attuned to critically and creatively working with disciplinary knowledge, they are less able to use these abilities in curriculum design.

Ashwin's call for developing coherent and relationally-orientated curricula, with an emphasis on who the students are, are some of the core principles he believes should underpin quality higher education. Developing and delivering high quality curriculum is, furthermore, ideally a continuous collective process – amongst academics themselves and between academics, students and society. These principles underlie and support what Ashwin believes should be the purpose of HE, to assist students in seeing the world differently and perhaps more richly. It is about understanding themselves and their relationship to society so that so that they can understand themselves in new ways for future actions (Ashwin, 2020: 67).

It is against this purpose and principles that Ashwin turns his attention to the three big thrusts in the field: a focus on the market, aspiring to a higher international university rankings and the rise of quality assurance mechanisms. Though acknowledging that students do need employment post-university, having this as a focus distorts the fundamental educational purpose of a degree. Rankings cobble together disparate qualities and quantities, and serve mostly to cement the elite positions of some universities, rather than paying attention to quality of teaching and student learning within different departments (this reviewer has second hand experience of one of the top-ranked universities in this country in which undergraduate teaching is undertaken by senior students with not an academic in sight). Furthermore, quality enhancement mechanisms typically do not engage with student transformations.

As a staff member in a vocational/professionally-oriented university, the *Manifesto's* insistence on universities' having a higher purpose than preparation for employment was initially quite hard to accept. However, in working with staff across my own and other similar institutions, in addition to developing employable graduates, I am aware of their desire to develop more thoughtful and critical students who can contribute to improving society in general. Perhaps, more generally, as the *Manifesto's* author suggests, pressures on universities to improve graduate employability and incorporate current trends such as a focus on online learning, the implications of IR4/5 and 'decolonization' may be more productively viewed through the lens of student transformation.

Though the book is aimed at encouraging academics and leadership to re-engage in a more critical manner with the purpose of the university, it is also a useful resource for students of HE, in particular those studying towards the GCert/PGDip in HE.

Reviewed by

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References

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