Higher Education (2021) 81:1371–1374
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00641-z

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Ashwin: Transforming university education: a manifesto—a review

Bloomsbury, 2020

Sioux McKenna[1]

Accepted: 5 October 2020 / Published online: 17 October 2020
© Springer Nature B.V. 2020

Recent articles in the popular press suggest that COVID19 has catapulted higher education towards revolutionary change. Students can use their techno savvy to pick and choose the courses that will best prepare them for graduate-level employment. Online teaching means that anyone can access knowledge at all times. And transferable skills can be developed through a series of videos and quizzes. What a time to be alive!

But of course, those of us who are committed to higher education as something bigger than workplace training find such claims unsettling. Many academics have a deep sense that in a post-truth era where 'he who shouts loudest has the most power', the need for meaningful higher education is greater than ever. Translating that deep sense of unease into a cogent discussion of the purposes of universities for society is no simple task however and so, while some of us feel a need to 'push back', it is not entirely clear what we're pushing back against or how we should go about this.

Paul Ashwin's book provides us with just the kind of thinking and language to undertake this important work. The text is eminently readable and does not require a degree in education or sociology to understand and enjoy. (His application of 'generic skills' to the task of writing a shopping list brings a kind of laugh-out-loud moment not typically associated with academic texts.) The style is, as the title promises, a manifesto. It is written in simple and convincing prose devoid of jargon or the interruptions of academic referencing. A small gripe is that the use of endnotes for these out-of-text references and comments requires paging backwards and forwards for those, like me, who want to follow up on them. What a pity footnotes were not used.

This book is wide-ranging in its focus. It tackles student-centeredness, graduate premiums, credentialing, quality assurance, big data and rankings, and yet it offers a coherent engagement with these and many other contemporary issues. The coherence is brought about by the consistent application of one central idea throughout the book. That is that the value of higher education for both the individual and for society is that it brings the graduate into a transformational relationship with knowledge that changes their sense of who they are and thereby makes possible their doing all number of things in the world.

✉ Sioux McKenna
s.mckenna@ru.ac.za

[1] Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

This transformational relationship to knowledge brings lifelong benefits that undoubtedly include economic ones such as preparedness for the workplace. But the current dominant view of higher education through an economic lens alone, Ashwin argues, narrows the scope in dangerous ways. Ironically, it reduces higher education's potential to bring about economic benefits for the general public and even the individual graduate. As Wheelahan (2007, 2009, 2010) and others (for example, Young and Muller 2013; Maton 2014) have argued, if programmes focus on providing access to immediate workplace skills but not to the underlying principled knowledge, then they are short-changing students and restricting their future opportunities. Wheelahan (2010) warns that educational experiments aimed at making knowledge more accessible by stripping it of its principled and often abstract nature in the name of widening access have not served working class students well at all. Ashwin simply calls this 'dumbing down' because it reduces the likelihood of individual transformation taking place.

At a time when employability discourses are ubiquitous, this book's call to refocus on the educational purposes of higher education could be positioned as either foolish or radical. But Ashwin is not calling for us to ignore the reality that many students engage with university study to acquire a job or to achieve social mobility, often for their whole families. He repeatedly argues that the economic value of higher education is important; it is just that trying to understand university education through the lens of its economic benefits tells us exceedingly little about what quality higher education looks like. The book elucidates the mess we get into when we obsess with metrics as proxies for university processes and purposes.

For example, the correlation between social class and higher education success and the correlation between social class and employment opportunities are hidden when we draw on a simplistic understanding of higher education as an economic good. Privilege is regularly mistaken for ability, and prestige is equated with quality. The dominance of these misunderstandings has, Ashwin argues, undermined the transformational possibilities of higher education and potentially reduced it to performing the function of social selection; indeed, such forms of higher education are often better at reinforcing social divisions than transforming them. Ashwin argues that while higher education is never wholly reproductive or wholly transformative, it can only serve the latter more than the former if we develop a strong sense of what the university is for.

The notion of transformation is a contentious one. In my own country, the term has been used to mean both the changes brought about in the individual through their engagement with structured knowledge and the changes to be brought about in a fractured society through having university-educated critical citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Ashwin uses the term transformation in three ways in the book—the two just mentioned and the call to transform the university sector itself so that it better serves society by focusing on its educational purposes.

The ways in which the book challenges what Ashwin terms 'pernicious myths' demonstrates how we came to understand higher education as a means of providing a premium for our paying customers through credentialing individuals for the workplace. In a country such as my own, South Africa, with a pre-COVID unemployment rate of 30%, the enormous financial benefits accrued by graduates are not to be dismissed. But this is not an either/or debate. Rather it is only through a clear focus on transformational relationships with structured knowledge that the educational purposes of higher education (including the added benefit of work-readiness) can be met.

Ashwin suggests that graduate premiums are often a reflection of income disparities rather than any intrinsic link between education and employment. Given that South

Africa has one of the greatest Gini coefficients in the world, perhaps it is not surprising that our students enjoy significant graduate premiums (Cloete 2016). It is sensible for students and parents to question what financial benefit they will receive from a higher education, particularly given the massive student debt that plagues young people in the USA and increasingly in the UK and elsewhere. But as Ashwin points out, just one of many problems that arise from looking at higher education through this lens is that it assumes that the value is always economic and that students who leave without the degree enjoy no benefit from their time in higher education. In a study I was part of, which included interviews with 'drop-outs', we found a very different scenario with those students who did not, for a number of reasons, complete their studies enjoying numerous benefits from their years on campus (Case, Marshall, McKenna, & Mogashana, 2018).

Ashwin challenges the binaries of many debates about higher education, such as that academic leaders are either managerial bureaucrats thwarting academic freedom or are heroic agents of efficiency. We need to be cautious of such beguiling narratives which serve to polarise people and flatten nuances. Similarly, Ashwin dismantles what he calls the 'moral panic' about graduate versus non-graduate jobs and the idea that there should always be a direct link between subjects studied at university and later employment. Such thinking makes formative degrees seem less valuable and also leads to confusion and disappointment by parents when their Law and Engineering studying children move into other fields. But surely it is a sign of the success of the qualification if these graduates are able to make meaningful contributions to society in a number of related fields. Furthermore, a higher education can make you more employable but not necessarily make you focused on contributing to the public good; indeed, an understanding of higher education as being entirely for economic purposes arguably makes it more likely that graduates will contribute to the public bad.

Foregrounding the educational purposes is fundamental to the transformational goals of higher education and is no simple task. It entails carefully designed curricula that take students' backgrounds and needs into account; it entails having a clear understanding of the structure of the target knowledge, how it is built and the purposes to which such knowledge is placed; it entails understanding that access to structured knowledge (and the literacy practices through which the knowledge is spoken and written about) all need to be made explicit through the teaching, learning and assessment. These issues are key to social justice because they allow parity of participation for all.

I enjoyed the deliberations about whether all academics need to be active researchers as this is an age-old debate. Ashwin suggests that while not every university teacher is going to be working in the field of knowledge production, they do need to be sufficiently steeped in the discipline and aware of the conversations happening at the frontiers of their field to help students navigate their own encounters with knowledge.

A significant implication of this book is that the term 'university education' should be reserved for those programmes that bring students into a transformational relationship with a structured body of knowledge. In a very differentiated sector, this may mean thinking carefully about how programmes that are very vocational in nature do indeed achieve this.

Even deeply committed academics will find aspects of this book challenging. I found myself looking back over 30 years of teaching in higher education and asking: Were my classes sufficiently focused on making explicit how knowledge is structured? Did I create opportunities for students to not only access such knowledge but to challenge it? Have the students with whom I have had the honour to work enjoyed sufficient transformational opportunities?

Ashwin indicates that 'The intention is to contribute to the reinvigoration of debates about the educational purposes of higher education'; in this the book is an undoubted success.

He also indicates that for him the measure of the book's success will not be in how many people agree with it, but the extent to which it informs ideas. I think the convincing and carefully built nature of the book make it likely that many will agree with it and I sincerely hope that a great many will engage with the ideas it provides.

References

Case, J., Marshall, D., McKenna, S., & Mogashana, D. (2018). *Going to University: the influence of higher education on the lives of young South Africans*. Cape Town: African Minds.

Cloete, N. (2016). For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured. *South African Journal of Science, 112,* 3–4.

Maton, K. (2014). *Knowledge and knowers*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1997) *Higher Education Act* (Act No. 101). Government Printers: Pretoria

Wheelahan, L. (2007). How competency-based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge: a modified Bernsteinian analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28*(5), 637–651.

Wheelahan, L. (2009). The problem with CBT (and why constructivism makes things worse). *Journal of Education and Work, 22*(3), 227–242.

Wheelahan, L. (2010). *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: a social realist argument*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Young, M., & Muller, J. (2013). On the powers of powerful knowledge. *Review of Education, 1*(3), 229–250.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.