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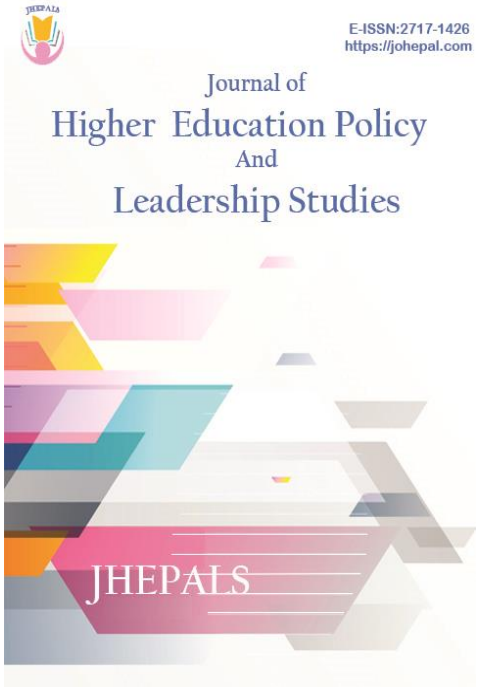

Policy and Universities in the UK: Interview with Prof. Damien Page

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Interview

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Damien Page *

Before joining Buckinghamshire New University in 2023, I had various roles in advertising and recruitment. I began my education career in Further Education, working as a Lecturer at Lewisham College teaching English and communications before moving into leadership, overseeing a diverse set of courses, from Access to entry level construction as well as leading e-learning innovations such as the Academy of e-Business.

I then joined Linking London Lifelong Learning Network at Birkbeck, University of London, forging progression routes between FE and HE and commissioning teaching and transition innovation projects, before joining the University of Greenwich as a Senior Lecturer in post-compulsory teacher education. After progressing to Head of Department of Education and Community Studies, I was then appointed as Dean of the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University, creating a strategy founded upon social justice and inclusion.

I then became Dean of the Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing at the University of Wolverhampton, a full member of the university Executive, as well as being the Executive Lead for research and Knowledge Exchange. I'm also an active researcher specialising in organisational behaviour in education settings.

https://www.bucks.ac.uk/about-us/our-staff/damien-page

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Page, D.

Interviews with globally recognized scholars within the realm of HE policy and leadership give us a novel and new chance to learn from wealth of knowledge and expertise which, in most cases, are from years of enormous and continuous research.

JHEPALS has the honor and privilege to publish an exclusive interview with Prof. Damien Page as the *Deputy Vice Chancellor of the Buckinghamshire New University (UK)*, a world renowned HE leader with extensive research and leadership experience; and passionate about advancing excellence and innovation in teaching, learning, and knowledge exchange, and fostering a culture of inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment across the university.

We are sure that Prof. Damien Page's insightful, illuminating and critical responses enriched with her academic/ leadership experience in higher education and global cooperation will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

As an eminent Higher Education leader; what facts and figures are important to you in the field of Higher Education Policy? We'd be pleased to learn your critical point of view about these facts and figures.

Answer:

Externally, data concerning the skills needs of the UK are crucial. As a university intricately linked to developing skills, accurate data of the national and regional needs of employers it is vital to ensure we create a highly relevant and applied curriculum. Internally, we focus on the core student outcomes: how many students continue their studies from year 1 to year 2, how many complete their degrees and how many proceed into 'graduate employment'.

Question #2

How do you see higher education policy makers in terms of knowledge, field expertise, experience in university education and a correct understanding of the realities of the higher education system?

Answer:

This extent to which governments understand and engage the higher education sector varies depending on which political party is in office. Under the last government, there was a 'hostile environment' concerning universities that proceeded from an ideological set of beliefs: that there were too many students entering higher education; that universities were

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too 'woke' and left-wing; that university courses were not sufficiently aligned to the economic needs of the country; that universities stifled free speech; that UK universities admitted too many international students. Since the Labour Party won the election in the summer of 2024, there has been a noticeable change in rhetoric to a position of support and encouragement for UK higher education. For example, the government has clearly stated that international students are to be welcomed in the UK and that the current funding methodology has created financial instability in universities. We wait and see what policy changes this might lead to but there is cause for optimism.

Question #3

How do you evaluate the way higher education managers deal with the subject of education policy?

Answer:

In my experience, the majority of senior leaders in HE are well attuned to the importance of policy as it shapes every aspect of our operation. As organisations, we set strategy that seeks to take advantage of the opportunities offered by policy change as well as adapting to changes in regulation and legal frameworks. As complex organisations, every element of a university is impacted by a wide range of policies, not just educational: consumer regulation; sustainability and environmental policy; financial regulations; intellectual property law. As such, we need to ensure we are continually connected to policy agendas and engage with relevant groups who seek to advocate for universities.

Question #4

Is there a conflict of interest between the policies established and communicated by the macro level of higher education and the universities at the operational level, which act as policy implementers? If your opinion is positive, point out some cases of conflict of interest.

Answer:

Sometimes, depending on the government in power at the time. Free Speech provides an example – the previous Conservative government argued that there was a crisis on campuses concerning free speech and that universities stifled some voices, most notably right-wing speakers and those who held opinions that diverged from what was perceived as a liberal hegemony. Yet, despite there being little evidence of a widespread censoring of free speech, the government appointed a 'Free Speech Tsar' and sought to introduce legislation that would prevent universities from 'no-platforming' speakers. While

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universities invested a great deal of time and money in preparing for this legislation, the government lost power before it could be implemented.

Question #5

It seems that internationalization of higher education is a dynamic and evolving landscape in the UK. What are the current trends of international students' mobility and related policies in the United Kingdom?

Answer:

The UK had seen increasing numbers of international students for a decade before the Conservative government gained power on promise of reducing migration numbers. Despite international students contributing around £49 billion to the economy, the government forced through legislation that prevented the majority of international students from bringing dependents which drastically reduced international numbers and damaged university finances. The current Labour government have been far more welcoming of international students and have promised to retain the 2 year post-study work visa but have not re-introduced the policy of allowing dependents. As such, while we are seeing a small increase in international student applications, numbers are unlikely to grow to previous levels.

Question #6

How do you define a leading international university in the context of UK? What are the focal characteristics of a leading international university in the age of artificial intelligence?

Answer:

One that is engaged in the agendas that matter, a university that seeks to continually create positive impact in the communities we serve and the industries we work in. A university whose students enter and improve professions, whose research provides benefit, socially and economically. In terms of AI, universities have to ensure that our students are able to use the technology to enhance their understanding and their knowledge without losing that which is most human: creativity and imagination. Universities also need to ensure that our students understand the limitations and inherent biases of AI, understand how it reproduces stereotypes and discrimination.

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Question #7

How do you portray the social responsibility of universities in the UK? Can the leadership of today's universities play a robust role against the inequality in the production and consumption of knowledge or equal access to quality higher education for all?

Answer:

Universities have a key role in ensuring that we provide graduates who are equipped to challenge discrimination not only in their respective fields, but also in society in general. University leaders have to ensure a high standard of responsibility for ensuring equity of admissions and equity of outcomes, create cultures that welcome and celebrate students from under-represented groups and ensure that behaviours and practices are constantly evaluated for bias and inequity. That also means that leadership itself must be inclusive and model the behaviours and practices that must be present for inclusivity to be authentic.

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