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Transforming Higher Education Institutions

Changing Higher Ed Podcast 152 with Host Dr. Drumm McNaughton and Guest Dr. Madeleine Atkins - How to Attract and Inspire Under-Represented Students: Lessons from Lucy Cavendish College

Welcome to Changing Higher Ed, a podcast dedicated to helping higher education leaders improve their institutions, with your host, Dr. Drumm McNaughton, CEO of the Change Leader, a consultancy that helps higher ed leaders holistically transform their institutions. Learn more at changinghighered.com. And now, here's your host, Drumm McNaughton.

Drumm McNaughton
Thank you, David.

Today's guest is Dr. Madeleine Atkins, president of Lucy Cavendish College at the University of Cambridge in the UK. Madeleine's background is diverse and includes public school teaching and senior positions at Newcastle University, including pro-vice-chancellor. In addition, she has served as vice chancellor at Coventry University, chief executive of the UK's Higher Education Funding Council, and now she's president at Lucy Cavendish. Madeleine's passion is for first-generation students. She joins us today to talk about what Lucy Cavendish is doing, especially on how it's become the first University of Cambridge College to reach the goal of admitting 90% of its freshmen class from public institutions.

Madeleine, welcome to the show.

Madeleine Atkins 01:20
Thank you very much for the invitation. It's a real privilege to be joining you today.

Drumm McNaughton 01:25

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It's my privilege. I'm honored to have someone with your background, especially a woman Rector. Is that the correct title?

Madeleine Atkins 01:41
It's president as it happens, but it is the same thing.

Drumm McNaughton 01:45
Same thing? Very good. Well, thank you. You're the first female president at one of Cambridge's colleges. So congratulations to you. And welcome.

Madeleine Atkins 01:57
Thank you very much. It's an honor to be on the show. I'm looking forward to discussing some of the issues we have in common across our two countries.

Drumm McNaughton 02:06
Thank you. I'm fascinated by your background. Give the audience a bit of how you came into this position. It's very unusual. In the US, we're finding more and more women taking over the leads in colleges. But it's quite different in the UK, as I understand it.

Madeleine Atkins 02:30
I started my professional life as a high school teacher. Indeed, I did a short spell working in a bilingual school in Washington, DC, which taught me a lot about educating young people ages 11 through 18. I then did a Ph.D. after four years of teaching in high school. My doctorate was on how young people from different minority backgrounds get tracked into other avenues of progression beyond high school. From there, I went into higher education at a university's education department. But, again, I was committed to looking at what was happening in our schools and what we could do to improve the chances and achievements of students from certain groups. And that's been a passion that I live right through today.

In the meantime, I have held several senior positions at universities. I've been a university president and worked for the government as the regulator and funder of universities in England. I did that for four years, which taught me a lot about the politics

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of education and policymaking in higher education. From there, I was fortunate enough and honored to be offered the presidency of Lucy Cavendish College. So here I am.

Drumm McNaughton 04:16
Well, that is an incredible background. And I do have to ask. Was the bilingual education in Washington American English and British English or something else? No, I'm sorry. I couldn't resist.

Madeleine Atkins 04:33
No, it was Latino Spanish and English.

Drumm McNaughton 04:37
That's very interesting because here in the US, so many more Latinos are coming to university. We have a designation over here, HSI, which stands for Hispanic Serving Institution.

Madeleine Atkins 04:53
Fascinating. Yes, I can see how that has developed over the last 20 years—it must be, at least—in the US. Very interesting.

Drumm McNaughton 05:01
It is. What do you say about Cambridge? It's 800 years old—the top university in the world. Now you're admitting women. When did you start admitting women there at Cambridge?

Madeleine Atkins 05:20
Oh, 150 years ago.

Drumm McNaughton 05:23
Okay. So you beat us again?

Madeleine Atkins 05:29
Well, we always like to say we educated John Harvard.

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Drumm McNaughton 05:34
That's a good thing because you're still higher ranked than Harvard University.

Madeleine Atkins
I don't think those comparisons are very helpful in the end.

Drumm McNaughton
No.

Madeleine Atkins
Absolutely, phenomenally great universities.

Drumm McNaughton 05:51
Oh, absolutely. You can pick the top 100 universities in the world, and they are all excellent. That is such a neat thing about how universities transform individuals.

Madeleine Atkins 06:09
Absolutely. Also, by tackling some of the really difficult issues in our society for humankind and our planet, we are hopefully bringing forward positive change that we need to see. So, yes, it's about transforming people, our societies, and the things we know are difficult to get right.

Drumm McNaughton 06:35
I couldn't have said it any better. It's so important that these things happen to you. What I'm interested in is that at Lucy Cavendish, where you are now, you're the first Cambridge College to admit over 90% of your first years from state schools. That's a significant change.

Madeleine Atkins 07:02
Yes, that's right. For Cambridge, historically, that's a huge change. All the colleges have been trying to improve access for underrepresented or traditionally excluded students. But we are by far and away the most diverse college in Cambridge. We have by far and away the highest percentage of intake from government or state schools, as we call them.

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Drumm McNaughton 07:29
That is not unlike what we're doing here in the US, with many first-generation students and minority-serving institutions.

Madeleine Atkins
Absolutely.

Drumm McNaughton
But back in the ’60s, you were mostly legacy admissions, were you not?

Madeleine Atkins 07:48
So, were we predominantly admitting from private schools at that time? Absolutely, yes. Some private schools had tied places at Cambridge, so only students from those schools could take those places. That, of course, is now completely gone.

Drumm McNaughton 08:08
That's very nice. We struggled with that in the US, and many leading institutions have legacy admissions. But we’re moving away from that. Without going into that too much, there are some lessons that US institutions can learn from what you're doing over there and vice versa. What are you doing to ensure students succeed when they get in? The last thing you want to do is admit somebody and then they aren’t successful.

Madeleine Atkins 08:47
Yes, that's absolutely right. It’s one of the most important considerations in all these issues. So, we start with high schools that don't have a great tradition or history of sending pupils to the UK’s top universities and are in areas of considerable social or economic disadvantage. We know from the US that we have some similarities here. These towns used to have a manufacturing base, but that manufacturing has gone to South, East, or Southeast Asia. Or, they are coastal communities that have fallen economically behind the rest of the country for various reasons. Or, indeed, they are high schools that serve minority ethnic communities that are historically excluded, often by tradition and history, from universities and cross sections of demographics.

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So we start by looking for schools that fit those criteria. Then, we work with those schools' teachers and counselors, as you would call them, to say, "You have very bright young people here with potential. How can we help you and them improve their grades?" That's because, at the end of the day, the biggest problem for many of these young people are not getting the grades they need for the top universities. So, we talk to the high school teachers and counselors about that to understand the backgrounds and lives of these young people so we can identify how best to support them and give them more educational input.

That's been a learning curve. This may seem to some of your listeners and followers very obvious. And we may have come to this realization late. But, for example, many of these young people cannot access the traditional ways universities perform outreach. They can't go to summer schools because they're looking after younger brothers and sisters, or it's a single parent bringing them up. Maybe the parent has a disability, and the young person almost certainly has a part-time job, which is essential for the family finances, particularly now with the rising cost of living.

We had to start by understanding what works for these young people and how best to improve their grades more deeply than before. This includes giving them challenging and stimulating online workshops that take their schoolwork to another level and enable them to get the grades they are capable of achieving because they have the potential but haven't been because of all these other circumstances. So that's been the basis of our thinking.

Of course, the circumstances vary across different parts of the UK, and we have tried to refine the program. This is a free online program. We know from research that a single intervention doesn't do a great deal of good to raise grades. So we're using research findings to shape that program. Every fortnight, there's a workshop with academic subject teachers who understand both the high school curriculum and university demands. They lead, frankly, teaching sessions with these students online. They set work, challenge them, stretch them intellectually, give them more extension materials, and so on.

Listening to high school teachers, one of the things they often feel very frustrated about is that they don't have time to give enough attention to their brightest pupils. Their

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schools are in difficult neighborhoods. They have 101 pressures on them. They don't have the capacity to provide these extensions, challenges, and passions for their subjects for these young people.

Drumm McNaughton 14:01
I think this is what you call your Academic Attainment Program, is it not?

Madeleine Atkins
Yes, it is.

Drumm McNaughton 14:07
Let's unpack some of that because what you're doing is very revolutionary. The first thing is identifying these students from backgrounds who would not normally attend college, and you're doing more than just saying, "Come to Cambridge. We'll take care of you here." You're driving their own academic achievement and academic attainment through these online seminars every fortnight, every two weeks. See, we even use fortnight over here in the US from time to time. But you do this with them repeatedly to not only raise their academic achievement but to get back to them believing in themselves and thinking, "Yes, I belong here."

Madeleine Atkins 15:06
That's absolutely right. And, of course, they're drawn from 180 high schools across the country. So these students meet people like themselves with similar backgrounds, who also have a determination and a passion for the subject. That is self-reinforcing for these young people. They may not have many others around them in their high school who have that kind of academic approach or academic desire. But, in this way, they meet up every fortnight with many others who share what they're trying to do. This also gives them a sense that they're not alone and that it's okay to want to improve their grades and to enjoy history, physics, or whatever it might be. And it gives them a sense that they can engage and learn with other people like them, be exposed to more ideas, and have a great time, intellectually and academically.

Drumm McNaughton 16:07

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The other thing with that belonging piece is, as you said, identifying with people around the country who do this is something I have yet to hear. What I have heard about over here in the States are university affinity groups that give students that sense of belonging ahead of time so that they come in and already have that sense versus having to be—for lack of a better word—convinced that they belong there.

Madeleine Atkins 16:45
Sure. We have a boot camp within the program—Roundabout Now—where we work with these young people on which university and course will resonate with their ambitions. So, they get some career guidance there. Then we have a boot camp in the summer, where we help them make the most competitive application to universities that they can so that the top universities look at their application. This way, they get a fair chance to demonstrate what they can achieve there, their enthusiasm, their passion, and what they can bring to the community. So, it's important we have those bookends around this program. We're not just focusing necessarily on Cambridge, or Oxford and Cambridge. It's what course will serve your career ambitions, what you now find exciting academically, and what you can do to make the best possible application.

Drumm McNaughton 17:54
That's really important. I want to come back to that. But before we talk about those online courses every fortnight, who teaches them?

Madeleine Atkins 18:04
We select fully qualified teachers. Almost all of them have had experience teaching in high schools and top universities, so they understand the bridge between the learning you get in high school and the demands of learning in a top university environment. So they are teachers.

Drumm McNaughton 18:31
How do you fund this? This is costly to do, correct?

Madeleine Atkins 18:35

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No, you're right. We are very fortunate. We have philanthropists who are passionate about what we are trying to achieve and who agree and share our values and ambitions here. We have benefited from philanthropic funding. This is not funded by the university or by the state or government. This is supported through philanthropy.

Drumm McNaughton 18:57
That is neat to find folks to do that. There are several foundations here in the US that would be willing to do the same type of thing.

Madeleine Atkins 19:06
Sure, you have some fabulous foundations that are focused on these issues. I'm sure that that would be a very rich seam to explore.

Drumm McNaughton 19:19
Moving on to the other book end of your program, where you get potential freshmen ready for applying, I heard something said about mini exams. Please help me out here.

Madeleine Atkins 19:46
I'm desperately trying to do that. So, it is true that applicants have to take some other tests before they come through for an interview at some of the top universities in the UK or for some subjects like medicine. Part of what we do when working with these young people online in the summer and helping them put their applications together is taking them through the whole process. It's not just telling them how to get the documents in, but sharing what kind of tests there might be, giving them some ideas about those, and some practice. We also talk to them about interviews and what interviewers are looking for. This includes giving them some mock practice interviews as well. So, you're quite right. Those are steps along the way.

Drumm McNaughton 20:49
You're preparing them to not only do the work at the college level and feel like they belong but also to be able to submit the applications to their desired colleges. So, there's step one, step two, and step three. It's not, "Hey, we got you here. You're on your own."

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Madeleine Atkins 21:14
No, that would be pretty hopeless. If these schools encourage their students to enroll in a certain kind of program, and it doesn't work, the student doesn't get an offer from a good university or the university of their choice. It's very dispiriting. It's very demotivating. For the high school teachers and counselors, they may well then feel it's not worth the effort. It's therefore very important for schools that have very little experience in putting students through this process that we work with their students every step of the way. And we work closely with the teachers.

Drumm McNaughton 22:02
I suspect that working with the students, especially with the teachers and counselors, is critical in this process.

Madeleine Atkins 22:10
Yes, absolutely. It's a partnership.

Drumm McNaughton 22:14
So, they are no longer prospective students. They're incoming freshmen. There has to be a process that they do afterward. You have your normal orientation when they get there. But for these students, you have Bridging Week, I think is what it's called.

Madeleine Atkins 22:35
Yes, that's right. We work through the summer before the fall when they will start as freshmen. We run online surgeries, Q&A sessions, and other similar programs. I think many universities do that. But it's important because it allows them to ask what might seem like dumb questions to them, but that still worries them.

One out of four students is the first in their family to go to university or college. So, there's nothing much in the family background to draw on. Instead, they imagine all sorts of things about being at university, some of which are right and some not and need to be addressed.

Then, we bring all our freshmen in for what's called Bridging Week. We aim to do three things there. A lot of this is based on some excellent first-year experience programs

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from the States, which I've been familiar with for some time. First, we want to show them they are working at the level Cambridge requires. So we give them a small group teaching session. We call those supervisions. At Oxford, they're called Tutorials. It's the same thing. They do an essay or problem sheet and receive feedback during that week. At the end of the week, they know they are good enough for Cambridge or Oxford and are working at the required level.

Part of the impostor syndrome issue is the sense of "Well, I was pretty bright at my school, but now I'm at Cambridge or Oxford. Oh, gosh, everybody around me is cleverer than I am. I will have to work in my room 24/7 to justify my place there. I'm not up to it. Am I good? Will I let my family down or my school dad?" So we need to address that right up front about your academic ability and your ability to do the work to a standard that is fine. So that's number one.

Number two is what I think every university does, which is to get social networking going. By the end of the week, they have worked in many different groups and met just about everybody. They're beginning to find the people they want to be friends with. They've cooked together, gone out together, and done many other activities together.

Number three addresses something that may seem strange. Everybody imagines Cambridge as a kind of campus. But it's not like that at all. It's a city, with the university and college threaded through it in various geographically complex ways. So, by the end of the week, we want our students to know where they're going to have their lectures, where the lab is, where the libraries are, where the market is, and where the discount supermarkets are so that they feel like they have agency, can find their way around, and feel empowered to make Cambridge work for them. So that's the third objective.

Drumm McNaughton 26:03
I'm going to toss one other out there. It's something that I have observed. Every university and every college has its own traditions. They have their own language. So, I will bet some of that goes on in your Bridging Week.

Madeleine Atkins 26:21

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Sure. Yes. Right. The word “supervision,” for example, has a specific meaning. In Cambridge, it's a small group session of one, two, three, or four students maximum. Every week, you have to do an essay, problem sheet, or some other piece of work like a case study. People toss these terms around. And for the student, it's quite bewildering. But I'll tell you something, which shows I get it wrong a lot, too. We're a college that’s outward-facing and prides itself on having a broadly representative student body that’s representative of society. We're not a Harry Potter college, if you know what I mean. We don't have turrets, courtyards, staircases that move in the night, broomsticks, owls, or anything like that.

Drumm McNaughton
That's Oxford, right?

Madeleine Atkins
Yeah, you got it. Quite a few students believe that's going to be the environment they're going into. It’s not like that at Lucy Cavendish. I’ve suggested to the students that they don't have to wear gowns at formal meals if they don't want to. And they said, “Oh, no, Madeleine. We want to wear gowns. We want to have candles on the dining room tables and so on. This is Cambridge.” The image that a place can get is quite interesting.

Drumm McNaughton 27:59
You have the Sorting Hat in your office, right?

Madeleine Atkins 28:02
Oh, absolutely, I do. Yes, absolutely.

Drumm McNaughton 28:08
Well, this is such an incredible program that you have put together. I’m sure there are a lot of takeaways here for US universities and vice versa as well. When we get off the recording today, I will share a couple of university contacts doing it well over here.

Madeleine Atkins 28:30

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Oh, that would be brilliant, really magic. It's the sharing that helps drive the innovation forward and gives someone a different base for evaluating, refining, and challenging ourselves to do this better.

Drumm McNaughton 28:47
The two that I'll share with you include Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, president at Amarillo College. It's a two-year institution, but they have done some incredible things. The other is Dr. Steven Katsouros, the former dean of Arrupe College, which is part of Loyola University Chicago. They have done some amazing things as well. So I'll share that contact information with you.

Madeleine Atkins 29:14
That would be great because we're always interested in forming partnerships, finding foundations, and sharing good practices with other organizations that are keen to take this agenda forward. So, yes, that would be first-rate. Thank you. My pleasure.

Drumm McNaughton 29:31
There's one other thing I wanted to ask you about because we're getting very close to the end of our time. I knew this was going to happen, and I'm so sorry. You have a new initiative. It's a collaboration with Queens College, where US students come over.

Madeleine Atkins 29:50
We are looking at that. It's not yet operational, but obviously, we hope that it will happen. This is CUNY, which houses, as your listeners know, several borough colleges with ethnic minorities and first- and second-generation immigrant communities. Queens claims it has the most diverse borough of any property in the States, which has many characteristics similar to the schools we are working with. So, we share the same mission in a sense there. So, yes, we were gracefully received by Queens and were hugely grateful for their hospitality and interest, and more generally, with CUNY overall.

Drumm McNaughton 30:46
When will this program formally kick-off?

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Madeleine Atkins 30:51
We're waiting as ever to see how the philanthropy comes in. The suggestion is that we will start with CUNY, and indeed we're delighted to work with others, and it will be around the one-year Master's programs. In the UK, a Master's program is just one year. In the States, it's normally two years. As a college, Lucy Cavendish is very focused on bringing students from underrepresented communities all over the world to our college, where they can take Master's courses, particularly those courses that are focused on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. That's very much a part of our mission.

We find that a very diverse student body at the graduate level is a great learning group that will provide an immersive living and learning experience for all of them. We have about 80 countries represented at the Master's level, and we try to encourage students to work across disciplines, particularly for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Most of those require a multidisciplinary approach to find practicable and implementable solutions. So that's very much our focus.

Again, we are seeking philanthropic support because many of the students who will be future leaders in these communities have a lot from their background that can contribute to the understanding of these issues and add even more to finding ways to implement innovation sustainably, rather than just a project, which happens for a couple of years and then fades away. For that, we need to bring students from often low-income backgrounds in and across to Cambridge. And that's where we need philanthropy behind the fees.

Drumm McNaughton 33:02
Once you've got it up and going, let's have you back on the show, and we'll talk more about this one.

Madeleine Atkins 33:09
That would be a pleasure.

Drumm McNaughton 33:11

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As we always do, Madeleine, we wrap up with two questions—the first of those being three takeaways for university presidents and boards.

Madeleine Atkins 33:20
Oh, my goodness! I don't think it's my place to give advice in that way. But what I would say we have learned is, first, start with where the student is rather than assume that, historically, we should go on doing the same thing over and over again,

The second thing we've learned is the data. We really have to get high-quality data and analyze it well to understand the emerging trends, the picture, and how it's changing. So having 13-year-olds in high school differs from having their 18-year-old elder brothers and sisters. It will change. And the best way of handling that is by having great datasets and interrogating them well.

For us, the third thing has been learning from elsewhere. In our case, it's looking at great examples of the first-year experience in the States and saying, for example, "What is it here that's working fantastically well? How can we adapt it for our situation and deliberately go outside the normal run of comparators to look at completely different situations in a new way?"

Drumm McNaughton 34:48
Those are great takeaways. Thank you. So what's next for you? What's next for Lucy Cavendish?

Madeleine Atkins 34:53
As I said, we are focused on expanding the graduate student population across the globe, including the US, and further addressing the UN SDGs, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Cambridge is a world-class global university. We are focused on these difficult problems for humankind and the planet. We need a more diverse graduate population, and we need to get the skills, advanced knowledge, research, leadership, and development to address those. So, we are looking for more philanthropy and focus here on that agenda.

Drumm McNaughton 35:45

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Well, that's great, Madeleine. Thank you so much for being on the show. I've thoroughly enjoyed our conversation, and I truly look forward to the next time we get a chance to talk.

Madeleine Atkins 35:55
It's been a real pleasure, and thank you so much for asking about Lucy Cavendish and our experience. I look forward to further conversations with you and others in your higher education institutions.

Drumm McNaughton 36:09
Very good. Thank you. And as we would say, across the pond. Cheers!

Madeleine Atkins 36:18
Indeed. Cheers!

Drumm McNaughton 36:21
Thanks for listening in this week. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Madeleine Atkins, president of Lucy Cavendish College at the University of Cambridge in the UK, for sharing her insights on what Lucy Cavendish is doing to ensure their freshmen are successful.

Tune in next week for my conversation with Dr. Olgun Cicek. Olgun is an expert in overseas higher education and quality assurance and will share with us how US higher ed institutions can boost international enrollment by building overseas campuses. Until next week.

37:02
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