

Book Review / Compte rendu

Axelrod, Paul, Trilokekar, Roopa Desai, Shanahan, Theresa & Wellen, Richard (Eds.). (2013). *Making Policy in Turbulent Times: Challenges and Prospects for Higher Education*. Queen's Policy Studies Series. Montreal, QC, & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN: 978-1-55339-332-0.

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Making Policy in Turbulent Times: Challenges and Prospects for Higher Education grew out of a 2012 gathering of scholars and administrators who sought to examine the production of higher education policy in rapidly changing political and economic contexts. Such an intervention is timely, given that it has arguably become common sense that higher education systems around the globe are undergoing considerable reorganization, public defunding, and even crisis (e.g., Newfield, 2008).

The book is organized into five sections, the first three of which provide country-specific conceptual and historical studies of the higher education policy-making process in the West. This includes Michael Shattock's study of policy drivers in the UK from the post-WWII era through to today, and a chapter by Lesley Vidovich about the tensions between local versus global priorities, and weighing quality and equity considerations in Australia.

The latter two sections of the book feature chapters with a more explicitly transnational and comparative focus, including two different applications and critiques of the convergence thesis: Bjørn Stensaker examines competition and co-operation in global elite university networks, while Chuo-Chun Hsieh and Jeroen Huisman provide a comparative study of the effects of the Bologna Process on quality assurance in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK. Both studies suggest that the strict binaries of the convergence thesis can obscure the complexities of local distinctions and adaptations to international policies and trends.

Notable among the book's contributions is a conceptual framework for understanding postsecondary education (PSE) policy creation in Canada, offered by the volume's editors. They explicitly eschew proposing a "grand theory," in favour of carefully mapping a comprehensive, bird's-eye view of the myriad actors and contextual forces that influence PSE policy making, both directly and indirectly. This breadth is impressive and could serve as an important supplement to more focused analyses of particular actors and influences.

Although many chapters are implicitly grounded in the assumption that a primary purpose of higher education is to serve "the public good," different authors appear to have

different understandings of what the term entails. Thus, David Dill's chapter, dedicated to asking "which public? and for whose good?" (p. 296), is an important inclusion, although restricted in its emphasis to the regulation of academic quality.

In their chapter, Creso Sá, Merli Tamtik, and Andrew Kretz examine Canadian federal research funding agencies' use of evidence and academic experts in making award determinations. By highlighting these agencies' role as intermediary organizations between government, industry, and researchers, the authors underscore the need for higher education scholars to be more precise when considering the role and influence of "government" in research and research policy, as these agencies are both of and apart from the government.

Ian Clark and Ken Norrie also focus on research, but from a different angle. Taking seriously concerns expressed about the declining quality of teaching in Canada's post-secondary system, the authors argue for the need to respond pre-emptively to the threat of greater public funding cuts. They critique universities' reluctance to produce research about their own inefficiencies, and elaborate upon a number of factors that contribute to this resistance, including:

faculty incentives that privilege research over teaching, a university culture that encourages extreme specialization and a preference for theory over practice, the role of faculty associations, the design of governance systems, an institutional aversion to differentiation, and lack of interest in higher education research by university associations. (p. 203)

They close their chapter with an ambitious proposal for an "improvement-oriented research agenda" (p. 189) to guide the possible reorganization of Canadian higher education institutions.

Clark and Norrie therefore touch on a number of contentious subject areas, and in so doing they enter a dynamic, ongoing debate with fellow scholars of higher education. Against Clark and Norrie's reading of the higher education landscape, and as they themselves point out, many are suspicious of calls for reform that emphasize greater efficiency, economistic notions of public accountability, and greater governmental and administrative influence in existing governance structures, which could further diminish institutional autonomy and academic freedom, respectively.

Glen Jones's chapter also takes on a timely and contentious issue, examining the politics that surround efforts to reorganize postsecondary education in Ontario toward greater institutional differentiation. In particular, he emphasizes the contrasting positioning of colleges and universities in this debate, arguing that "institutional differentiation within the college sector involves expanding missions through deregulation, while institutional differentiation within the university sector means restricting missions through regulation" (p. 112). Apart from teasing out the jostling interests of different players invested in this issue, Jones's observation is an important reminder not to flatten analyses about the "postsecondary" or "higher education" sector without considering the varying interests by institutional type.

Claire Callender's chapter is one of the few contributions to draw connections between higher-level policy changes and the experience of university students. Cataloguing 30 years of changes in state financial support for higher education in England, it provides a thorough accounting of the government's shifting position on regulation and public financing and considers how this has affected student access.

Meanwhile, in the only chapter to focus exclusively on higher education in a non-Western context, Qiang Zha and Fengqiao Yan offer a study of higher education policy in China, with an emphasis on the social and historical contexts of the government's 2020 Blueprint plan. They conclude that the plan's state-driven, top-down approach will be inadequate for fostering the kind of innovation and creativity that the plan itself seeks to support.

Nelly Stromquist's chapter on globalization links international changes in higher education to neoliberal reforms and a ubiquitous contemporary concern for adapting to the "knowledge society." To do so, she draws upon, adapts, and applies Carney's concept of "policyscapes," which "recognizes the role of ideology and economic power in the diffusion of educational policies" and goes beyond nation-centred analyses (p. 222).

Stromquist's work is one of the few pieces to substantially engage with the broad trends that characterize the nebulous "turbulent times" that inspired the conference and subsequent book. Indeed, if recent experiences with shifting policy and reduced public funding for higher education were the impetus for the book, many contributors appear equally committed to teasing out a more general understanding of the role of various influences (both individual and institutional) in the creation of higher education policy. Thus, the book will likely have significance beyond the immediate moment.

In particular, the book is a fitting introduction to higher education policy making for practitioners who work at the nexus of university administration and government. Chapters by Sheila Embleton, Harvey Weingarten, and Judith Woodsworth, who recount their experiences as university administrators, may strengthen the appeal for this audience.

While Jane Gaskell notes there are "many different lenses" available for considering policy, including "historical, political, economic, narrative, structural, Marxist, feminist, poststructural, and much more" (p. 407), the majority of contributors utilize theories and methods drawn from traditional literatures in organizational theory, public administration, sociology, and liberal political theory. No text can comprehensively cover higher education policy studies. At the close of the text, Gaskell suggests, "Like any good academic discussion, this book ends with questions rather than firm conclusions" (p. 416). In particular, a question from the back cover of the book bears repeating: "Can higher education policy-making be imaginatively theorized?" The book's editors and contributors not only pose this question, but also provide a fascinating set of initial answers. In doing so, they have started an important conversation.✦

References

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