Sheffield, Edward, *et. al. Systems of Higher Education: Canada.* New York, International Council for Educational Development, 1978.

The cynical reader might suspect a hint of irony in such a title, and in this respect will not be entirely disappointed. In the words of Jeffrey Holmes:

> . . . the skeleton of a system exists; but the hip bone is not connected to the thigh bone and the knee bone is not connected to the ankle bone and "dem bones" lie around, waiting to hear the word of the Lord. There is, however, no Lord . . . . (p. 41)

Yet by the terms of reference of the study, the idea of "system" is a very serious one.

> An important and largely unexamined development in higher education is the emergence of systems of institutions, which are planned and managed by advisory, co-ordinating, or governing bodies poised between institutions and governments. Countries with highly centralized governments now seek to devolve responsibility on such organizations, while in other countries the effort is to move from individual autonomous institutions to more central planning and controls. In both cases, a balance is sought between the values of institutional independence and public responsibility. Problems of organization and procedure are similar but patterns of solution vary widely. The design and management of the systems are, therefore, of universal interest and merit comparative study.
>
> The central issue is easy to state but extremely difficult to answer: how can systems of higher education be designed and managed so as to assure maximum flexibility for institutions with responsible monitoring of the public interest?
>
> (*Foreword*, p.1)

It was with this issue in mind that the International Council for Educational Development undertook a three-year comparative analysis of twelve countries: Australia, Canada, Federal Republic of Germany, France, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States. The Canadian analysis was directed by Edward Sheffield, with regional studies prepared by Jeffrey Holmes (Atlantic Provinces), James H. Whitelaw (Quebec), B.B. Kymlicka (Ontario), and Duncan D. Campbell (Western Canada). In a forward written by members of the international group, we are advised that the study prepared by the Canadian team has provided a valuable element to the comparative study of higher education. This is unquestionably true, but quite apart from that consideration, the book offers an important basis for a re-examination of tertiary education in Canada. And – more praise to the chairman – it is an anthology that manages, unlike so many of its genre, to be uniformly readable and ordered, systematically exploring aspects of common concern, while at the same time allowing sufficient flexibility to explore unique regional differences.

The study is, to say the least, timely; and its contributions can be both theoretical and practical. It points to a new direction for the literature of higher education in Canada, which till now has tended to restrict its attention to what this study would refer to as "subsystems". This study, on the other hand, uses the full complex of tertiary education as the backdrop against which any analysis of parts must take place. To suggest this is not to disparage earlier work. Indeed, the present study makes us realize that if the literature has been somewhat tunnel-visioned, it has been so for good reason. Those people involved

in the various "subsystems" have quite naturally assumed that the parts have little to do with each other. Several historical reasons account for this and are explored in the study. Not least important among these have been the actions of provincial governments to separate the planning and administration of the different subsystems: universities, community colleges, technical institutes, etc. This, combined with historical biases and prejudices, proved quite sufficient to encourage an introspective stance on the part of each of the component parts.

Indeed, even now, with the best of intentions, the 'systems' are rather difficult to detect within the congeries of provincial organizations and institutions.

> The contemporary term describing this array – "system" – may be misleading. In precise usage, system connotes an assembly of specialized parts or functions acting cooperatively for a common purpose and implies criteria such as: the elements of the system are collectively aimed at mutually understood and clearly defined ends; principal direction to the elements of the system emanates from a single source; and there is evident and effective articulation between and among the elements of the group toward the achievement of the defined end. One concludes that the networks of higher education institutions in Western Canada are more aptly described as agglomerations of institutions, some closer to an eventual emergence as systems than others.
>
> (Campbell, p. 159)

But it also would be a corollary of the book that we must adopt this broader perspective. For notwithstanding the governmental machinery that has discouraged confraternity, those same political masters have in their own minds a notion of 'system' that is prompted by demands for "efficiency" and "rationalization". And although, as each of the regional reports indicates, the provinces have shown rather admirable restraint to date in attempting to impose "order" on the tertiary realm, circumstances now suggest that far more deliberate action is imminent if the institutions and organizations themselves do not move themselves from the ostrich-like stance in which their history has placed them. The study identifies various of the problems that stand in the way of changing this Thanatos-like stance: as, for example, jurisdictional jealousies, and the habit of relegating to that alien category of "they" any university members willing to "collaborate" in coordinating agencies, whether voluntary or legislative (an extrapolation, perhaps, of the older problem of faculty members being seen as selling their academic birthright upon becoming administrators). Indeed, it is suggested that the "most pervasive barriers to productive change 'are not limitations in money or staff time, as often suggested. The real barriers are subtle limitations in vision, attitudes, and expectations, conditioned as they are by present-day practices'". (p. 173)

And even when the institutions can be made to realize that the preservation of the autonomy they so scrupulously guard will be possible only if they demonstrate the ability to cooperate in systematic planning before the governments, in justifiable frustration, step in with inappropriate mechanisms, the "counter-mechanisms" available to them prove to be of limited efficacy. The study is very useful in pointing out the difficulties encountered in attempting coordination through voluntary – and particularly federated-voluntary – associations. Nonetheless, the study does indicate that even with their limited efficacy, these bodies do prove to have some impact on planning and decision-making at the governmental level; it suggests thereby that if the institutions wish to influence the evolution of

the provincial 'systems', they must learn to take greater advantage of that inevitably imperfect machinery of voluntary cooperation and coordination.

In each of the provinces, the character of such participation in influenced by the approach the government on its part has taken in setting up its own machinery. The study provides some very important insights into the implications arising from the presence or absence of "buffer agencies" (i.e., the variations on the theme of the United Kingdom's University Grants Committee), and from the implications arising from having such agencies responsible for all or part of a province's tertiary estate; and from having such agencies act in an advisory as opposed to executive capacity. This latter consideration is particularly intriguing; the suggestion is made that according the buffer agency executive status (that is, principally, the allocation of the provincial grant) may indeed have the desired effect of removing that process from the suspicion of political intrigue. But in so doing, it forces the agency into a very conservative, cautious, cost-accounting stance. If, on the contrary, its role is an advisory one, it may feel much freer to consider creative new approaches, in more open cooperation with the voluntary associations and advisory bodies in which the institutions themselves are participating. If, then, as the study suggests, "vertical" co-ordination (i.e. among the levels of the systems) is presently even more of a problem than the "horizontal" co-ordination within and among the subsystems, and if indeed a cautious extrapolation of existing structures (in financing and planning particularly) will not lead to the imaginative reordering that the present situation requires, then a re-examination of the role of the buffer agencies may well be indicated.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the suggestion that the character of those buffer agencies may in fact be going through an almost inevitable – if not specifically planned – transition, in sympathy with the provinces' ever increasing concern with "rationalization". From the role of "resource-allocator", they are anticipated to move in sequence to the role of "co-ordinator" and, finally, "planner". As Campbell notes: "what is unclear is whether, in a dynamic society, the intermediary is merely a step in a cycle – and, perhaps, a recurring cycle. Another interesting speculation is this: at what point does increasing centralization of control of higher education by government become dysfunctional?" (p. 171)

In addition to providing a basis for comparison of such issues common to each of the provinces, the study offers as well some useful surveys of unique local responses to the need for "system". Among these are included the pioneering regional co-ordinating agency, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission; the CEGEPS System of Quebec; the community college system of Saskatchewan; and Ontario's wonderland of co-ordinating agencies that at times raise fears in the reader of being drowned in a sea of alphabet soup.

Beyond the regional level, however, there is a fundamental question begged by the book's title – the issue of a national system of higher education. In his own chapters, which provides a general country-wide overview, Edward Sheffield examines the constitutional limitations on the presence of the federal government in the co-ordinating agencies of education, and the practical limitations on the work either of voluntary cooperative ventures on the part of the provinces themselves (such as, for example, the Council of Ministers of Education), or of various national associations (such as, for example, the Social Science Federation of Canada and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)). Of the first, he makes the important observation that: "However desir-

able improved internal coordination at the federal level might seem to be, from the point of view of the provinces it could go too far. Development of any agency which could be seen to assume the role of a federal office of education would spark a negative reaction from the Council of Ministers of Education and reverse the current trend toward co-operation." (p. 208) Of the last, he warns: "If the academic community does not act collectively on those occasions when a single united voice is needed, it will not be able to play its role in relations with the other two – the governmental – sectors in the national "system". It will not effectively express its interests and it will not fulfill its potential contribution to policy formulation." (p. 209) The message is clear that the elements of a national system are there, compatible with the character and traditions of the country, but that a careful and politic nurtruing to fruition is required.

In sum, despite the mammoth difficulties to be faced in effecting a "system" of the sort defined by the terms of reference of the study – a balance "between the values of institutional independence and public responsibility" – we are left with at least a muted optimism:

> If higher education in Canada seems to be fragmented, it is because Canada itself suffers from the same disability. Nevertheless, the governments of Canada and the provinces, the universities, institutes of technology, and community colleges do provide a wide range of educational opportunities for a variety of students. The enterprise is uncoordinated and consists of many subsystems rather than a single, unified system, but at the same time its decentralization enables it to be responsive to regional needs. In spite of its structural shortcomings, it serves Canada tolerably well. (pp. 209-210)

However we may view the adequacy of the present structure, we are indebted to the authors for an invaluable survey of the regional systems and the pressing issues that face them and, by extension, the nation. If they have not in fact provided all the answers, they have at least better defined the questions.

Alexander Gregor,
Professor,
Department of Educational
Administration and Foundations,
The University of Manitoba