

Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Iacobucci, Frank & Tuohy, C. (Eds.) (2005) *Taking Public Universities Seriously*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 650. Price: 55.00 CAD (paper).

Beach, C.M., Boadway, R.W. & McInnis, R. M. (Eds.) (2005) *Higher Education in Canada*. Kingston: John Deutsch Institute for the Study of Economic Policy, Queen's University: Published in cooperation with McGill-Queen's University Press. Pages: 600. Price: 90.00 CAD (cloth); 49.95 CAD (paper).

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An immediate reaction to first glimpses of these two volumes might be to classify them as 'twins' of a sort. Dealing with many of the same themes, almost identical in format and size, and having very similar geneses and production histories, it would not be hard to imagine one being mistaken for the other. Closer scrutiny reveals significant differences and distinct emphases but this initial impression lingers if only in the form of a common evaluation of "a topical and significant publication in the field of contemporary Canadian Higher Education".

Both books have their roots in academic conferences held in 2004. The Queen's publication emerged from a two-day meeting in Kingston in February on the theme of "Higher Education in Canada". The focus

of the Toronto gathering, held at the University of Toronto in December, was, "Taking Public Universities Seriously". Both meetings were of the standard 'six sessions spread over two days' format. An initial session considering both external and internal perspectives served as an overview of the "issues" and "challenges" related to the themes. Subsequent sessions dealt with more detailed analyses of selected subsections of these general concerns. Attempts at some form of synthesis by discussants or panelists characterized several sessions in the later parts of the meetings. The structures of the resulting publications mirror these histories almost exactly. Hence, we have two substantial tomes, each containing some thirty 'papers' of varying lengths and degrees of formality, presenting prospective readers with approximately six hundred pages of reflections in six sections on the current state of, and some future possibilities for, higher education.

Having noted these external similarities it is the case that with respect to content the two books are more complementary than duplicative. The Queen's publication is, in several ways, more focused than the one from the University of Toronto. Its Canadian content index is high, and it deals very largely - not surprisingly given the institutional location of its editorial team in the John Deutsch Institute - with economic and fiscal considerations. A considerable majority of the contributors to the volume are based in departments of Economics in Canadian universities or are employees of Statistics Canada. The Toronto gathering included a broader range of participants, from both geographic and disciplinary perspectives. It had more international participants including ones who gave detailed and valuable insights into recent experience in Asia and Australia, as well as the United Kingdom and the United States, jurisdictions where the Queen's meeting also had representation. There were several - certainly more than this reviewer had expected - contributions to the Toronto volume from the home institution's Faculty of Law. All this is only to say, in one sense, that what we have in these publications are some of the fruits of the labours of two organizing committees and editorial teams who have done a first-class job of planning, implementing and documenting two academic meetings on themes that happen to be closely related.

In attempting some sort of overall assessment of the contributions of the two books one needs to be quite clear about one's assumptions regarding intended audience. At a national level there are certainly dozens,

and perhaps hundreds, of specialized academic gatherings every year. Few of them have as a byproduct the publication by a national-level publishing house of polished, widely accessible documents of the sort represented here. It seems reasonable then to have higher-than-average expectations of 'extended readership' for these volumes than one would have of the more typical volume of annual proceedings. From this dichotomous 'insider/outsider' perspective the two books have different strengths and weaknesses. From an insider perspective the Queen's publication is particularly strong. It is a volume in a highly regarded and extensive ongoing series and it can take its place there secure in the knowledge that to a small and clearly defined group of academic specialists it will, for some time, remain as a key document with respect to the central issues of an important social field at a particular point in time. The Toronto volume fares less well from an insider perspective. It speaks to a broader community and it lacks a clearly defined context. It does not constrain itself to any declared geographical boundaries and seems to be something of a 'one shot' effort. It would be hard to see the professional community of scholars of higher education in another country, such as the United States, seeing it as a paradigm-shifting work.

Moving to an external perspective the value judgments shift considerably. The tight focus of the Queen's volume now becomes something of a liability. For the interested layperson the technical barriers to full comprehension of several papers are formidable. Looked at from a non-specialist set of criteria the Toronto volume fares considerably better. Its more extensive geographical considerations and a broader range of disciplinary perspectives would seem to make it more appealing to a general readership. Having said that, it is still fairly heavily skewed toward an insider perspective. It is just that the insider perspective here is somewhat more broadly defined than it is in the case of the Queen's volume.

To push this point somewhat further let us postulate a socially concerned reader who is, her or himself, outside of, but knowledgeable of, and concerned about, recent developments in post-secondary education. As a marker of sorts we can position said reader as sympathetic to, but not entirely in agreement with, the views of Jane Jacobs (2004) in the third chapter ("Credentialing Versus Educating") of her book *Dark Age Ahead*. Or, to identify some possible concerns more precisely, consider

the following passage by David Ehrenfeld (2002; pp.188-194), a conservation biologist from Rutgers University. In a section from his *Swimming Lessons: Keeping Afloat in the Age of Technology* entitled "Universities and their Communities", he cites remarks he made to a major American foundation:

I was struck by the extreme scarcity of exciting, innovative, *useful* proposals coming out of the major research universities ... second tier research universities are no better; they are all scrambling to copy the bad models ahead of them. ... The problems that the universities are doing little or nothing to address - either in teaching or in research - are those that we must confront if our civilization is to survive. They are materialism in our culture; the deterioration of human communities; anomie; the commercialization (privatization) of former communal functions such as health, charity, and communication; the growth imperative; exploitation of the Third World; the disintegration of agriculture; our ignorance of the ecology of disease, especially epidemic disease; the loss of important skills and knowledge; the devastating decline in the moral and cultural-intellectual education of children; the impoverishment and devaluation of language; and the turning away from environmental and human realities in favor of thin, life-sucking electronic substitutes. Far from confronting these problems, universities are increasingly allying themselves with the multinational commercial forces that are causing them. The institutions that are supposed to be generating the ideas that nourish and sustain society have abandoned this function in their quest for cash.

There are, I know from personal experience, many faculty members at contemporary universities in all parts of the world (this fact resonating strongly with one of the common themes of these volumes, namely the global nature of the majority of the issues they consider) who are largely

in agreement with Ehrenfeld's views. These perspectives are minimally represented in these publications (the paper by David Dyzenhaus [Law/Philosophy, University of Toronto], "The Case for Public Investment in the Humanities" in the Toronto volume perhaps qualifying as the strongest candidate for an exception to this general statement). To the extent that this is the case it would seem to foreshadow major difficulties in making future progress with many of the concerns identified in these volumes. Many aspects of the future of higher education in Canada will be played out in a battle for the hearts, minds and taxes of Canadian citizens in a protracted battle with rising health care costs. To the extent that the two dominant images of tertiary education in the public mind remain those of the 'party-animal' young (undergraduates) and the self-interested old (faculty) engaged in the lukewarm pursuit of jargon-infested arcana, the future is not bright. One might see, therefore, the current volumes as having missed an opportunity to address these concerns more directly.

There remains one other quite interesting aspect to these publications deserving of comment. It is the question of whether these books are really necessary in today's world. Put bluntly it sounds quite negative. It is not intended that way, for the question is not equivalent to asking whether these meetings and accessible documentation of their proceedings is of value. They clearly are. Unlike books of this type published even five years ago, each of these volumes has substantial support material available online through the two publishing houses. So the question really is about the value of the physical/print version of the documentation. At this point there are some differences between what is available online and what appears in the printed version of the proceedings. But the differences are relatively small and one suspects that over time they will, for publications of this type become even smaller. In many ways the Toronto online materials, which are the more substantial of the two, give a better sense of the nature of the social/human side of the event than do the printed proceedings. The editorial and production teams of both meetings have worked very hard - the introductory sections written by the editorial teams are among the strongest parts of each volume - and very quickly. There may, however, have been a price paid for this rapidity. Despite professional presses and hardworking editors these two volumes are, first and foremost, sets of proceedings. As such they exhibit the strengths and weaknesses of the genre. The human side of meetings often benefits from having a wide range

of types of contribution. To have a long and detailed paper from a specialist researcher followed by a short set of observations by an experienced but very busy administrator can be very productive. The mix in hard print is less felicitous. The Toronto collection suffers particularly badly from this stylistic *mélange*. Many papers are followed by Notes and References, some by one or the other and a few by neither or by a bibliography. Occasionally pointers (such as the asterisk following the name of the author of the paper starting on page 226) appear to lead nowhere. In this latter case the website comes to the rescue and the place of that particular contribution in the wider scheme of the meeting seems much more clear than it is in the book (at least to this reader). If one considers the Toronto web version of its conference to be representative of the contemporary state of the of internet based documentation and the Queen's materials to be approximately one stage behind that, one need only imagine one more stage of progress before the online version of proceedings will be at least the equal of a printed version in almost all respects. At the moment one can still argue for the continued production of expensive and cumbersome pulp parallelepipeds because of library policies or of the existence of technologically unenthusiastic members of the academic community. This situation seems unlikely to last much longer.

References

- Ehrenfeld, D. (2002) *Swimming lessons: keeping afloat in the age of technology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jacobs, J. (2004) *Dark age ahead*. Toronto: Random House.

