

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**George Fallis, (2013), *Rethinking Higher Education*, Kingston: Queen's University School of Policy Studies. Pages 314. Price: CDN \$39.95 (paper). ISBN978-1-55339-333-7.**

Reviewed by Daniel W. Lang, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto.

If Charles Dickens were to review *Rethinking Higher Education* he might begin by saying it was the best of recent books on higher education, and the most demanding of those books to comprehend fully. George Fallis is smart. He takes the call for evidence-based policy seriously. When difficult problems require difficult solutions, he does not cut corners. He assumes that serious readers do not want to cut corners either. This all is to his credit and stands as a good reason to read this book. It is worth the time, the thought, and sometimes the discomfort of having to have second thoughts about conventional wisdom.

Let's begin with an example of conventional wisdom's being turned upside down. Access is old-think. Attainability is new-think. *Rethinking Higher Education* is not the first time that Professor Fallis has persuasively argued that Ontario's goals for participation in higher education have already been met, and that further growth in the rate of participation is neither realistic nor necessary. In other words, Ontario has already achieved universal participation. In fact, according to Professor Fallis' analysis, actual university and college capacities exceed demand for them. He makes this argument by carefully and objectively re-analyzing data that have been readily available for some time, and by acknowledging certain inconvenient facts. For example, the high school graduation rate will never reach 100 per cent; some potential students will for good reason forego participation in higher education. From this frank and thorough appraisal he concludes that the "rethink" priority for the future should be attainment. Colleges and universities should redirect their priorities to the improvement of rates of retention and graduation.

It is true that *Rethinking Higher Education* is mainly about Ontario. A reader with knowledge of that province will get more from the book than a reader with less familiarity. Nevertheless, all readers can learn a lot from the approach that Professor Fallis takes to analyzing evidence. The shift that Professor Fallis proposes from access to attainment, again as an example, is illustrative of the analytical value of the book. A chemist might call the approach a "metabolic pathway." In the case of the demand for access in Ontario, Professor Fallis goes beyond the usual boundaries of higher education research by following a series of inter-related steps, each step affecting the next one, and so on. Thus the reader

is invited to think about the entire age-group that precedes post-secondary entry, and the entire labour market for that population. This is an analytical lesson worth learning.

Professor Fallis reminds readers that there is something called “liberal education.” He wrote more extensively about this in his previous book, *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy* (2007). His critique is not the usual nostalgia for some past golden age as personified by Mark Hopkins and a student sitting at either end of the same log. Instead he invites us to rediscover the modern value of liberal education. In more particular terms what he has mainly in mind is the branch of the liberal arts that in other times was called “general education.” Of particular importance is his identification of the liberal arts as separate in curricular terms from individual disciplines, as Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins might have done. He is advocating curricular and non-departmental structure as a universal foundation for all programs. In this context structure is liberating instead of confining. It invites a different notion of what a department is, and what a program is. Professor Fallis observes, without approbation, that the organization of undergraduate instruction around departments is an isomorphic impediment. However he stops short in two important respects. He would not require that students take the liberal education program that he proposes. Nor does he go as far as some in questioning whether or not the department as the central building block of universities has become an anachronistic impediment to curricular reform. Readers might find this surprising because the logic of his arguments can lead to those conclusions.

Much of Professor Fallis’ analysis -- of undergraduate education, of graduate education, of research, of professorial workloads – centres on the power of isomorphism. This in his view explains why higher education in Ontario and in Canada generally looks the way it does. It also explains why differentiation has gained little traction among universities. He concludes, one might reasonably suspect, with some resignation and frustration that only government intervention can repel the otherwise ineluctable force of “look alike” behaviour. It appears that he would advocate a return of the Ontario Council on University Affairs, or some body like it, to design an authentic system. He does not go so far as to argue that a buffer body such as this would have authority. He sees its role as definition of a vision. Nor does he favour intrusion of government into institutional autonomy. He likes contractual agreements, presumably between government and universities as more or less equal partners. Research he would set aside with its own metric for differentiation. Yet the reader cannot help but wonder whether or not when all these “rethinks” are put together that what he really has in mind is compliance or coercion to which he refers in another context. Given the history of the several commissions, task forces, invited papers on differentiation that he cites, all of which have died quiet deaths, Professor Fallis might be right. All that is left is political coercion.

The reader, who will admire *Rethinking Higher Education* overall, might on three points take Professor Fallis to task in his call for reform by force of system centralization. The first is that Ontario, like many other jurisdictions, is driving its universities to PINO status. Can a government enforce a system design as a minority partner in financing that system? Another way of posing this question is to ask whether regulatory power, as distinct from fiscal power, can deflect the power of isomorphism. The second is that in certain important respects Ontario does not look like other jurisdictions. Professor Fallis with the care and skill of a pathologist dissects the ways in which university professors use their time. He concludes, probably correctly, that while the 40-40-20 standard divi-

sion of time between teaching, research, and service is not appropriate for all universities or even all disciplines there is not much that can be done to change it, presumably even within a redesigned and enforced system. This, however, is a standard that is not found in other systems, for example in the United States. Other jurisdictions allocate funds for research infrastructure in fundamentally different ways than those deployed by Canadian federal and provincial governments. Other jurisdictions compensate faculty in different ways. Third, the reader might recall Professor Fallis' discussion of mimetic coercion and ask whether or not it is realistic to presume that public universities and their faculty within centralized systems will ever by their own volition measure their success against their system siblings instead of against universities globally, private as well as public. Professor Fallis himself observes that international competition is the over-riding factor in improving university performance.

Let's assume it could be done, what would Professor Fallis' vision of a new system for Ontario look like? First, he would reiterate his analytical proposition that the province has already achieved universal participation. The system need not be designed with access as a priority. The funding formula should not reward growth. In terms of how university faculty actually spend their time, however, the formula should be adjusted to recognize the respective costs of instruction and research based on institutional mission and size. Universities in turn should account for the costs of research and instruction separately. Second, the binary structure that separates universities and colleges would be maintained, as would the fundamental features of their original mandates. Professor Fallis' model evidently attaches little importance to transfer between the two systems. Instead, and next, each of the two systems would be differentiated into two sub-systems. For the colleges this would mean a group made-up of the existing group of Institutes of Advanced Learning and Technology (ITALs). Instead of the current limit of 15 per cent, ITALs would be allowed to have as much as 30 per cent of their overall enrolment in applied baccalaureate programs. The other group of colleges would be defined by the original college mandate but without the authority to award applied baccalaureates. Both categories of college would expand their activity in applied research. Both categories are defined by mandate.

For universities there would also be two sub-systems: "doctoral/research" and "master's/bachelor's." To some readers this might look like the California system. But the sub-systems are not independent of one another in terms of governance. They are two parts of one system. Professor Fallis' to his credit takes pains to explain the benchmark metrics by which universities would be assigned to each sub-system. Although he identifies the universities that would be in the "doctoral/research" group he seems to allow for the possibility, based on the benchmark metrics, that a "master's/bachelor's" university could move to the "doctoral/research" group, and *vice versa*. Unlike the college sub-systems, the university categories thus are defined by measurable performance. This is essentially the device proposed by the Bovey Commission in 1984, albeit for a somewhat different purpose.

Few books have addressed higher education with as much clear-eyed intelligence, analytical rigour, and respect for evidence as *Rethinking Higher Education*. Professor Fallis might not persuade every reader to agree with his recommendations for reform, but he will make everyone think harder and better about what needs to be done, and why. ♣