

Book Review / Compte rendu

Zgaga, Pavel, Teichler, Ulrich, Schuetze, Hans. G., and Wolter, Andrae (Eds.) (2015). *Higher education reform: Looking back – looking forward*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. Pages: 430. Price: 72.95 USD (hardback and eBook).

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This substantial book is the eighth volume in the Higher Education Research and Policy (HERP) Peter Lang series, which employs comparative international perspectives to study higher education systems in transition within rapidly changing environments. “The series intends to explore the impact of such wider social and economic processes as globalization, internationalization and Europeanization on higher education institutions...” The four editors are firmly anchored in Central Western Europe scholarly experience and traditions. Their substantial jointly authored Introduction concludes that “there are many more challenging questions for higher education research than appear at first sight,” before going on to explain the genesis of this book in the series of Higher Education Reform (HER) workshops held annually from 2003 in the three northern continents. Today there are many “book-of-the-film” type volumes that, part of the contemporary HE research business, reproduce from an often heterogeneous set of conference papers presented (heterogeneous to capture wide contributor participation) a loosely linked and not overly satisfying volume. This book is different. It draws not on last year’s fest. Instead it is written thoughtfully and selectively from papers first aired at the 2011 and 2013 HER workshops in Berlin and Ljubljana.

A test of success in terms of series purposes is the choice of Section themes, and the coherence provided by the editors who briefly introduce each of the five Sections. These address in turn: (A) Changing Contexts and Directions (chapters by Peter Scott and two of the editors, Teichler and Zgaga); (B) Changing Environments and Missions of Higher Education (with two European chapters and one each on the Chinese and Japanese systems); three chapters that vigorously critique new managerialism under (C) Academic Freedom: A Story Whose Ending is Uncertain. A natural sequel is (D) Globalization, Privatization and the Future, from North America, especially Mexico; and five chapters on Higher Edu-

cation and Lifelong Learning. These sustain the well sourced and grounded character of the earlier Sections, concluding with a discussion of conflicting narratives on MOOCs – a subject approaching which my eyes tend to glaze over yet for me, personally and not to detract from the quality and utility of others, the most novel and stimulating chapter of all. The quality and connectivity of the whole volume make it an excellent book. There is no attempt to draw the threads together with a concluding chapter, but notwithstanding the book achieves a balance of diversity and connectivity around the Section themes. In an age of e-publishing, social media blogging, think-tank papers and other more or less scholarly material including heterogeneous conference papers struggling to present as thematic books, it is tempting to conclude that the age of the substantial hardback copy is dead. This volume suggests otherwise.

Different user-readers will find different chapters more or less close to their interests. My own preoccupation and often frustrated irritation of recent years pivots around “lifelong learning,” both as a loose, easily trivialised and often pitifully reduced idea for which carelessness of words and meanings are much at fault, drew my attention to the final Section. I also have inexhaustible fascination with chronic tension: between general trends and unique national and regional contexts; between aspiration and observation; between the internal somewhat closed world of the university and the raging demands placed on higher education by a distressed globe across all aspects of cultural, social and economic life and its eco-systems. This is expressed today as tenuously shared hope in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). How to reconcile diversity of need and institutional form with any “idea of a university” and the value of that now threatened monopoly, a high-market-value degree? The near-global triumph of what for want of a better word we call neoliberalism, in Margaret Thatcher’s words not merely an economic but more deeply a cultural revolution favouring the individual over the collective, with its underpinning faith in selfishness and competition as the engines of progress: it is no wonder that the destiny of higher education remains a focus of scholarship as well as political passion. Does “the university” still exclude tertiary non-higher post-secondary further, college and technical education? Looking both back and forward is beset with pitfalls: nostalgia, naïve utopianism, rootless speculation and generalisation emptied of meaning. Through many of these chapters, as rehearsed in the Introduction, Zgaga *et al.* offer a meta-level text on processes of reflective scholarship and the variable link to policies, politics and power inside the HEI and without. The absence of a Conclusion is intelligent, not slothful; these and other themes of the maturing 21st century are a restless work-in-progress. As to whether it is a tale of progress or of degradation we will each continue to differ.

I conclude with the final Section: lifelong learning (LLL) and the engagement of higher education institutions and systems with their local regions and countries as well as “globally.” I would have liked to hear more about the impact of the global market in students, staff and knowledge, and the effects of the ever-expanding world rating and ranking industry, on intra-national diversity and the capacity of each HEI to choose and lead. I would also have liked more about “Europeanization” than a mainly European and North American-authored volume might be able to achieve, as deep persisting imperialism takes new cultural as well as economic forms. None the less, this introduction and its five chapters provide rich thought-provokingly material. The veteran Ulrich Teichler writes “after decades of declamation” of moving to lifelong learning HE. Before this, Wolter cites the

trenchant assaults of Roger Boshier on the reductionism inflicted on LLL by the “neoliberal project.” As we scan the world in 2016 do we see this passing its zenith? Anna Spexard scans the current state of realization in Europe and Andrae Wolter considers new target groups in Germany.

Maria Slowey addresses the chronic access-equity question afresh in terms of age-friendly HE and intergenerational equality; this is surely one of today’s truly critical issues, and manifested in the new economic inequality and political alienation of the young, and the political double surprise of Sanders and Corbyn on either side of the Atlantic. Maureen McClure’s concluding chapter on MOOCs is especially refreshing. It penetrated the prejudices of this reviewer with a fresh approach; for example, instead of looking just at how MOOCs will shape HE, ask how HEIs will shape MOOCs. She notes neatly (p. 388) the difficulty “when people across institutions held contradictory positions both simultaneously and without self-awareness.” She shows how MOOCs differ each side of the US-Canada border, and asks about their role in regional and national economic development, and as tools for civil society action. Their future, she concludes (p. 397), “will be limited more by the imaginations of the users than their designers, as it will be users who will drive needs for innovation and marketing.” 🍁