Book Review / Compte rendu

Atherton, Graeme (Ed.) (2017). *Access to Higher Education: Understanding Global Inequalities.* **London, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Ltd. Pages: 224. Price: 29.99 GBP / 47.00 CDN (paper).**

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This concise collection of papers describes access to higher education in twelve countries on six continents. The editor, Graeme Atherton, advances a central argument that in the 21st century access is linked to national identity. Resting upon the premise that policies to broaden access and promote participation in higher education are intertwined with visions of national self-identity projected into a globalized world, Atherton's new nationhood approach conceptualizes access as a non-static politicized concept which is shaped by socioeconomic and cultural forces rooted in the history and narratives of a country. The book provides a panorama of policy examples. The contributing papers provide insight from within; each author chronicles examples from their own country, describing policy initiatives situated within context.

The two papers from North America cover Canada and the United States; Mexico is absent. Wickham's short paper provides an overview of Canada's multi-jurisdictional higher education landscape. She describes policy initiatives that were designed to broaden access, types of institutions, patterns of participation, and educational achievement gaps. Ngondi Kamatuka describes the social context and demographic aspects that impact participation patterns in the United States. Using the concept of "College Fit" (p. 33) he explains why access does not guarantee success. He draws attention to low income and first generation students who have been persistently underrepresented and whose eagerness to participate makes them even more vulnerable because they, as unsophisticated consumers, become targeted by private providers who offer condensed programs and promise employment outcomes.

Of the countries that are featured in the three papers that make up the contribution from Europe, only Finland claims to have significantly reduced barriers. Tarkiainen doesn't negate the wider social structures in Finland, but he demonstrates that when values supporting education become entrenched within a nation's constitution, state authorities are

obliged to act. Examples of policy initiatives shared include Finland's Open University, the University of the Third Age (no age limits), and Summer University. European higher education reform initiatives resulting from the Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the Lisbon Agenda of 2000 provide context for the German discussion. Mergner, Mishra and Orr draw attention to Germany's binary institutional divide which continues to function as a structural barrier to access, resulting in the continuation of low rates of social mobility. In Germany, socio-economic background and family intellectual capital continue to provide privilege, and school leaving examinations act as the gateway for access to higher education, making the system resistant to change. Atherton examines access in the four nations which make up the United Kingdom. His paper shows that social class continues to be a pervasive factor, and that historical and particular social and political characteristics cannot be excluded from policy discussions. In addition to sharing data on student numbers, participation rates, and financial support, Atherton provides the reader with an overview of the Dearing Report of 1997 and other initiatives including the Aimhigher (sic) programme. He also comments on Access Agreements and recent tuition fee increases for English universities (GBP 9,000 tuition in 2012). As this paper was written prior to the Brexit referendum (June 23, 2016) readers should note that post European Union policy directions are not discussed.

Contributions from Asia describe higher education in Malaysia, India and China. The case of Malaysia is described by Crosling, Chen and Lopes, who argue that geography and economic development have resulted in a national view that the country's economic success is dependent upon intellectual capital. This nation building vision is behind the government's target of a 40% participation rate (post grade 11) by 2020. While affirmative action programs through public universities to date have benefitted the largest ethnic group (Bumiputera), increased participation for other ethnic groups has been largely through private providers. By contrast, in India, national development plans have been stubbornly resisted by social structures. Navani explains that scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and other backward classes (OBCs) continue to be marginalized. She attributes the problem to structural and financial imbalances at the organizational level, practices at the institutional level, and oppositional voices in civil society. Liu and Su describe China's goal to "build a more inclusive and harmonious society" (p. 136) through the expansion of access to disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. In China, education is highly valued and the linkage with economic, cultural, and social development is recognized. I found the discussion of access via the annual Gaokao academic entrance examination and state enrolment policy to be very informative. The routes are highly bureaucratized. The authors describe an organized process of vetting applications, sequenced through categories of institutions (early admission undergraduate programmes being the most prestigious), with targeted enrolment quotas and policies.

Gutiérrez and Abad link discussion of access with student success in Columbia. They share the example of the Children's University EAFIT, an initiative that bridges the divide between family, school, and university. The aim of the project is to improve student preparedness and break the cycle of startling attrition rates which average 41% by third semester (p. 45). Ghana's Gross Enrolment Rate in tertiary education is just 12% (p. 151). Budu describes the challenges associated with attempts to increase access in a country which, despite constitutional guarantees, has a higher education system that continues

to be persistently challenged with underrepresentation. Magopeni and Tshiwula examine access in the context of South Africa, a country with a legacy of overt systemic discriminatory policy under legalized apartheid. An overview of racialized policy, and a discussion of the schooling system that has perpetuated inequality and marginalization, are provided by the authors as examples of post-apartheid interventions, policies, and practices designed to redress the barriers of exclusion. Interestingly, some institutions are including recognition of non-academic skills and attainments when considering applications. Australia has a legacy of promoting access and equity. Heagney and Ferrier discuss examples of three policy cycles in Australia. The most recent cycle focuses on broadening access to underrepresented groups through equity plans and strategies with flexibility at the institutional level to set targets. The authors point to past successes but question sustainability in the current cycle. Who participates is still a recurring problem in Australian higher education.

I appreciated the opportunity to read this book in detail for the purpose of this review. It is highly informative and thought provoking. For readers seeking an anchor text for a comparative systems of higher education course, this is a perfect choice. It could also be used as a reader for a higher education policy course, as the lens of access provides a good point for comparison in context of policy evaluation – what works and what doesn't – the aim being to promote the best and critique the rest. What I did find underdeveloped is Atherton's new nationhood approach. I wasn't wholly convinced and found it a better fit with some countries' contributions than others. Atherton acknowledges that the approach requires more work. It does offer space to scholars seeking to advance theory and/or provide supporting empirical evidence through case specific research. Scholars choosing to pursue research in this direction may wish to consider whether using alternative lenses through which to study access, such as student success or employment outcomes, would support or refine the new nationhood approach. Additionally, they may also wish to explore the difference between new nationhood and human capital development as motivating forces for social justice.✤