

Book review of "International Perspectives in Higher Education: Balancing Access, Equity, and Cost"

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BOOK REVIEW

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BALANCING ACCESS, EQUITY, AND COST

REVIEWED BY

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Delisle, J. D., & Usher, A. (Eds.) (2019). *International Perspectives in Higher Education: Balancing Access, Equity, and Cost*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. Pages: 256. Price: 33.00 USD (paper).

Jason D. Delisle is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington, DC public policy think tank. He has spent most of his career on Capitol Hill, inside and outside of government. He has deep policy experience on the US federal student loan programs. Alex Usher is president of Higher Education Strategy Associates, a Toronto based consulting firm. Similar to Delisle, Usher has experience with Canadian student aid programs from his time at the Canadian Millennial Scholarship Foundation. Both editors have a working knowledge of the mechanics of student grant and loan programs in their perspective countries. I think this practical, mechanical experience is a nice value-add to this book's Introduction and Conclusion and the chapter contributed by Usher.

This edited volume is focused broadly on higher education finance – notably student loans, grants, access and tuition policies. Folks drawn to the title or the graphic on the cover may be a little bit disappointed. Although this book is undoubtedly global, it is not generally on international perspectives in higher education, but rather more narrowly focused on funding and finance policy in higher education. The book is absolutely global but does appear focused on the American reader with references throughout the volume to US examples. This works well, as most of us have some peripheral knowledge of the US context.

There are two sections in the book. Part one is five chapters, each focused on a trend, theme or hot topic in

higher education finance. The topics covered are: free college in Europe (Jon Marcus), tuition and cost-sharing (Bruce Johnstone), global and US private higher education (Daniel C. Levy), access policies (Anna Mountford-Zimbars), and student loan systems (Usher). Each of the chapters provides an excellent overview of the topic at hand with references to global and US contexts. Each is well researched with a lengthy list of endnotes and sources. Part 2 of the book is three international case studies focused on individual countries: Chile (Andrés Bernasconi), Australia (Vicki Thomson), and Brazil (Dante J. Salto). Each chapter provides national context and has some interesting political history that helps explain the contemporary higher education landscape in that country. However, I am quite sure each author struggled to squeeze a generation or more of political history into a few pages. For most readers, not familiar with domestic politics in each of the countries, it can be a little dizzying.

The central argument of the book is that “Foreign experience can often provide insight, but it can rarely drive solutions on its own” (p. 181). The editors aim to ensure that readers are familiar with the limitations and trade-offs of various higher education financing solutions. Researchers and policymakers can and should be aware of international perspectives to improve the quality of their policy analysis and the development of policy design. However, the book provides the caution that there are no silver bullets in higher education policy.

Chapter after chapter describes the *trade-offs*. This is an important takeaway. As governments struggle to balance their budgets, higher education funding is under increasing pressure. Free higher education is expensive, and most governments find it is not sustainable. Outside of the US, there continues to be growth in private higher education. Both Brazil and Chile encouraged the growth of private higher education to absorb demand while limiting the impact on government budgets. All of these public policy decisions are, of course, steeped in domestic politics, which is not always rational.

A few key threads span chapters and national contexts. The world of policy is a minefield of trade-offs. One cannot make a public policy decision without some (unintended) consequences. Throughout the globe, there is a general trend toward cost-sharing in higher education. That has meant marked increases in tuition and fees in many countries over the past several decades. Throughout the chapters and around the globe, research shows that however well-intentioned, free tuition policies most benefit those from higher socioeconomic status groups. Those from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds are more likely to attend and in some regions more likely to finish higher education. Governments spend precious resources to fund the higher education of those who are able to pay. To control spending, systems may need to restrict access using secondary school grades or national exams which may keep lower socioeconomic students from participating. Reading this book firmed my opposition to free tuition to which I was previously uncommitted. There are many convincing examples presented in the chapters that illustrate that free higher education does not achieve access goals and, in fact, has the opposite effect.

There are several things I like in this book. It challenges US-centric viewpoints. The book presents a nice cross-section of countries and examples, all with nice contrasts and connections to the US as a reference point. For example, private higher education around the world is overwhelmingly lower-tier, in contrast to the US elite private universities. The second piece this volume does very well is present a warning to all the higher education reformers and tinkerers. American higher education reigns supreme and is the focus of emulation and acclaim around the globe. Do not risk borrowing a neat idea from Europe that could have unintended consequences. Levy makes several pointed arguments in his chapter on private higher education. His warning to

policymakers is not to mess with a good thing. He concludes his chapter “major reforms should not be considered without understanding the risks they may pose to unique private and public national treasures” (p. 65). The US system is not without challenges, but continues to be a global leader.

Scholars and practitioners committed to increasing higher education access will be disheartened to know that, despite national variation, a country’s primary and second education systems have a tremendous impact on higher education participation. Several chapters in the book also describe how important parental education is to higher education participation. Unfortunately, a range of higher education policies have failed to remove these systemic societal barriers.

It is hard to imagine three national case studies presented and not one of them being China. The size, scope and growth of Chinese higher education is hard to ignore. I can imagine the comparisons would have been challenging but valuable. I think it is a bit odd that we received two case studies from South America, yet not one from Asia, Africa or the Middle East. One or more national case studies from these regions would have rounded out the book nicely.

The book can be a little repetitive. However, this is part of the convincing narrative. Throughout the volume and around the world are examples of trade-offs. A system cannot merely borrow the components of other systems in isolation. The book does not blame globalisation or neoliberalism on higher education shortcomings, but provides a pragmatic analysis that begins to describe complicated systems with nuanced national contexts. We all benefit from learning more about higher education policy decisions in other countries — not so we may borrow the ideas, but instead so we can understand the outcomes and trade-offs.