

Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy

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BOOK REVIEW

DEATH OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY? UNCERTAIN FUTURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

REVIEWED BY

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Wright, Susan, & Shore, Cris (Eds.) (2017). *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy*. New York: Berghahn Books. Pages: 350. Price: 34.95 USD (paper).

The volume is a result of an international research project entitled “University Reform, Globalization and Europeanisation,” funded jointly by the European Commission and the New Zealand Ministry of Research, Science and Technology in which researchers from three universities, Aarhus (Denmark), Bristol (UK), and Auckland (NZ), were involved. Questions the consortium was trying to answer were: (1) if processes of higher education reform in the European Union, in particular policies towards global competition and privatization, were a model for other regions; (2) how academics engage with such reforms; and (3) how do these processes affect their conduct, their work and their ideas of the purpose of universities.

Seven trends are identified in the introductory chapter (written by the editors) that, they contend, are eroding the purpose of public universities and their principal missions, teaching and (basic) research. The first of these developments is “disinvestment in universities” with the (intended) consequence of profits for private providers. Evidence is cited from the UK, NZ, the US and Chile where direct state funding for institutions and students had declined to an important extent while student tuition had steeply increased at the same time.

“New regimes for promoting competitiveness” among universities both nationally and internationally are identified as another trend towards privatization. The attention paid to rankings has surged as a consequence and various indicators are used to measure the quality

and productivity of institutions, departments and supporting units. This development is closely linked with the rise of an “audit culture.” This phenomenon is not limited to higher education, as demands for greater transparency and “accountability” have been applied to several other public institutions such as health and welfare. The consequence of performance and output audits is that institutions tend to focus their interest and activities primarily “on ‘what counts’ to funders and governors rather than on their wider professional ethics and societal goals.” (Introductory chapter, p. 5)

Further trends towards privatization are described as “administrative bloat” and “academic decline.” The authors cite statistics for the extraordinary growth of the number and status of university managers and administrators while, at the same time, the number of full-time faculty has decreased. Offices for marketing, diversity, sustainability, environment, fundraising, etc. have been newly created or expanded, and administrators are now the new ruling class of universities. Most of the new functions of managers and administrators are not, according to the authors, to support the work of the faculty, but to increase productivity, competitiveness and the generation of outside funding. In particular, this last activity has become central to the new “entrepreneurial university,” a term that describes the need to raise funds from the outside to compensate for falling revenues from the state. Such revenues, or “income streams” from external sources entail various forms of partnership with industry, the

commercialization of intellectual capital, and the need to attract a growing number of international students who pay “full fees.” As to the latter, Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK are the countries that attract the largest numbers of international students. Canada also belongs in this category.

The editors' final argument for the decline (“death”) of the public university is that higher education is no longer seen as a “public good” but as private investment which is justified by the idea that individuals invest in themselves to increase their chances for better jobs and higher income upon graduation and should therefore pay a larger part of the cost of their (post-compulsory) education. The consequence of this policy is the massive increase of student fees and the replacement of student grants by loans. Students are thus seen as “consumers” who pay for the increase of their own human capital.

The volume contains four parts with 15 chapters, some of which were authored by academics from the institutions that collaborated in the above-mentioned project. Although there are a couple of chapters whose authors deal with the Danish situation, the bulk of articles are focused on the UK and New Zealand. None of them deal with the project's first research question, namely if there is a European Union policy on higher education reform towards privatization that would serve as a model for member countries and for other regions. This would have been of interest as the so-called “Bologna process” has indeed promoted some of the neo-liberal trends identified in this volume while, on the other hand, stressing the special nature of education as a public good. On the whole, governments of all countries are rethinking and reorganizing institutions of the welfare state including higher education with different priorities and emphases. The EU is no exception. While Britain, for example, has changed in the direction of private mechanisms of financing and governance, Norway and Germany still have no tuition fees. So, while reports of the demise of public higher education are clearly exaggerated, there are trends in some countries in that direction.

For Canadian readers the arguments for the changes described in this volume sound quite familiar even if the Canadian reality is somewhat different from the situation in the countries described in this volume. The “privatization” of public institutions is specifically true for the UK and New Zealand, while Denmark's development has been different in several respects. Thus, the far-reaching Danish university reforms of 2003 were accompanied by

significant increases of university budgets and the main changes concerned primarily the organization and governance of universities.

Canada, like the UK and NZ in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of university organization (with exceptions in Quebec), has a solidly financed public university sector which is one reason why private secular universities do not play any significant role. While similar trends to those described in the UK and NZ can also be observed in Canada—for example, the massive increase of student fees and loans, and of numbers of managers and administrators at the cost of faculty—others are not, or not to the same extent. Among the several factors that explain this difference is the existence of two non-government institutions: the strong representation of the academic personnel (the Canadian Association of University Teachers—CAUT) which is vigilant, and sometimes belligerent, when universities are introducing changes that appear to violate “academic freedom” and institutional autonomy; and Universities Canada, the organization representing all public and private non-for-profit universities that requires certain organizational features and strict adherence to quality assurance.

University (and welfare) reform is not a single event but a constant process. Because of that, the developments in other countries, especially those that share similar traditions of mission, organization and governance, are of interest. For this purpose, this volume is quite useful.