Structuring mass higher education: the role of elite institutions

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BOOK REVIEW


This book is a collection of essays providing a historical perspective on the development of the systems of higher education globally and in a number of countries specifically. The countries covered in the book include the USA, the UK, Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden), Latin America (wholesale), India, China, Germany, South Africa, the Netherlands, Poland, France, Australia and Japan. This book is the first in the ‘series of projected dozen volumes’ (p. ii).

The central theme of the book, defined by the authors, is ‘to analyse how national/regional systems of higher education are adjusting structurally to the current pressures for change’ (p. 57). The theme is explored in the two parts of the book. The first part provides broad brush reviews of the social, economic, demographic and political environments that have shaped the systems of higher education in the USA, the UK, Nordic countries, Latin America, India, China, Germany, South Africa, the Netherlands and Poland over the twentieth century. The second part gives a more in-depth account of the history, modern trends and challenges faced by so-called ‘elite institutions’ in the USA, the UK, France, Australia and Japan.

Although the book does provide an ‘international comparative perspective’ (p. i) on the systems of higher education in a wide range of countries, its emphasis reflects the current balance of power within the academic world and is thus disproportionately biased towards ‘The Anglo-American world’. Such bias is predetermined by the focus on elite institutions, that ‘[g]iven the cost of becoming and remaining a “world-class” university... are at present concentrated in the wealthier nations’ (p. 207).

Three essays are devoted to the USA, two to the UK and one to each of the countries mentioned above. Four Nordic countries share one essay, despite the recognised ‘significant differences between the higher education systems and social structures’ of these countries (p. 58). Latin American countries are all covered in a single article.

The book’s annotation claims that the essays included in the volume are ‘extensively researched case studies covering a wide range of countries’ (p. i). Although the width of coverage is undeniable, I would argue that the words ‘case studies’ have been used here in a very broad sense. The articles for the most part are very thorough and systematic reviews of existing literature on the history of the development of the systems of higher education.

The major weakness of the book from my point of view is the lack of coverage of higher education systems in Eastern European and post-Soviet countries. Given that these countries are those that ‘have had to face more turbulent shockwaves’ (p. xxi)
than most other states in the past 20 years, and particularly given the rich heritage of the Soviet system of higher education, which has sustained a flow of talented researchers into the ‘world-class’ Western universities long after the collapse of the Soviet statehood, such omission seems hard to justify. One may hope that as this book is the first volume in a projected series, this topic will be covered in future volumes.

The book does reach its stated goal of providing an international historical perspective on the development of higher education systems. It will be of interest to higher education policy-makers, researchers and students. This book is a good starting point for anyone interested in researching modern higher education systems and their development over time.

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