

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Paul Axelrod, Roopa Desai Trilokekar,
Theresa Shanahan, and Richard Wellen, eds.
*Making Policy in Turbulent Times:
Challenges and Prospects for Higher Education*

Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series,
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. 250 pp.

Donald Fisher, Kjell Rubenson,
Theresa Shanahan, and Claude Trottier, eds.
*The Development of Postsecondary Education
Systems in Canada: A Comparison between
British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec,
1980–2010.*

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 446 pp.

Peter MacKinnon
*University Leadership and Public Policy in the
Twenty-First Century: A President's Perspective.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 190 pp.

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If journalism is the first rough draft of history, books like these—a conference volume, a collection of papers from a major research project, and a presidential memoir/analysis—are the second drafts. But these drafts are polished, the quality of the analysis uniformly high. Government policy choices through time are being documented and data are being collected; the patterns are being identified, causality argued, international commonalities and local specificities discussed. Although most of the papers have a time horizon too short to constitute history (with the exception of the Fisher et al. book, which examines the period 1980 to 2010), taken all together, these books are a second draft of history. And of course, in history, there is no final draft.

The three books are quite different from each other, but are unified by a focus on post-secondary education (PSE) policy and by a focus on Canada, in an international context.

The Axelrod et al. book, *Making Policy in Turbulent Times*, is an anthology of eighteen papers presented at a conference organized by York University's Faculty of Education. The conference was part of the concluding activity of a SSHRC General Research Grant held by the editors of the book, "Making Policy in Post-Secondary Education Since 1990." Broadly speaking, the research project and the book both ask the question: how is PSE policy made? The four editors have a lead paper, "Making Post-Secondary Education Policy: Toward a Conceptual Framework," that asks what the roles are of politicians, voters, and the media; of students and professors; of policy networks and of advocacy by the leadership of colleges and universities; and of research regarding the effectiveness of policy options. They set out a conceptual framework drawing from the public policy/public administration literature, captured in a schematic diagram. In the schema, a policy decision is made by a decision-maker, who is influenced by both direct and indirect determinants. The direct determinants are: people, power, and position; internal and external environmental determinants; and mass media and public opinion. There are many indirect determinants, including networks and lobbying, timing and alignment, and research. The authors interviewed Canadian policy-makers and stakeholders, both federal and provincial, about four domains of policy: funding, research and development, accessibility and student assistance, and internationalization. They conclude that "rather than proposing a grand theory, we suggest that policy-making, a highly complex and frequently chaotic process, is affected by a number of determinants" (56).

From this background, they invited academics from Canada and many other countries to analyze PSE policy and how it is made. There are papers dealing with British, Australian, Irish, and Chinese higher education policies and several European and global surveys. The papers are heterogeneous, dealing with different aspects of PSE policy. One paper, by Michael Shattock, provides a comprehensive history of the development of British higher education from 1945 to 2011, providing an excellent complement to the Fisher et al. volume.

Most of the papers are consistent in spirit with the conceptual framework, but most go beyond asking how policy is made to describing the policy choices and analyzing how the PSE system changed (or did not) as a result of specific policy decisions. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the conclusion—that policy-making is a complex and often chaotic process, with many determinants—is upheld. And worryingly for academics who seek to contribute to public policy, their research does not seem to have much influence on government decision-makers.

Perhaps the methodology of close examination of policy choices through interviews with policy actors can mislead us, giving too little attention to structural forces, such as globalization or neo-liberal ideology, as determinants. Structural arguments would suggest that PSE policy is converging internationally in high-income, liberal democratic countries. Some papers support the convergence thesis, while others argue that “individual nations and institutions have found ways to negotiate these pressures and reflect unique cultural and national goals” (3). As we move from second to later drafts of history, we will no doubt gain a better perspective on the roles of policy actors versus structural forces.

The Fisher et al. book emerges from the work that a Canadian team of researchers conducted, as part of a larger international study, on “the impact of educational policy on the performance of postsecondary education (PSE) systems in Canada, the United States, and Mexico ... The purpose of the larger study is to illuminate the relationships between policy environments, the process of decision making (‘rules of the game’), and performance of PSE systems” (3). The Canadian team conducted case studies of the evolution of PSE policy from 1980 to 2010 in three provinces: British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. The book presents these case studies, each immensely detailed and rich in data.

The work describes itself as “policy sociology,” part of the new sociology that emerged during the 1980s. This new sociology seeks to offer critical research, “that [goes] beyond description and understanding to include explanation” (4). The new sociology has two strands: one in the interpretive tradition focusing on discourse analysis, with Foucault as a starting point; and the other in the structuralist tradition “using classical theorists like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as well as the current theorizing of Bourdieu” (4). This book’s case studies are in the structuralist tradition.

The provincial studies are followed by a chapter called “Trends across the Three Provinces: Similarities and Differences.” Despite the often chaotic, disjointed incrementalism of policy-making, common patterns emerge. Over the period from 1980 to 2010 in the three provinces, the case studies identify five themes dominating PSE policy: accessibility, accountability, marketization, labour force development, and research and development.

The authors state that “By far the most important priority in the development of PSE policy since the mid-1980s is the desire to create more access to the system. While the emphasis has varied between different governing parties, successive governments in all three provinces have developed a clear consensus on this issue” (298). In this, the authors agree with the “old” sociology expressed by Martin Trow in his still-famous paper written over forty years ago, “Problems in the Transition from Elite

to Mass Higher Education.”¹ Trow defined elite higher education as educating from 0 to 15 per cent of the eligible age group, mass higher education as educating from 16 to 50 per cent, and universal higher education as educating over 50 per cent of the eligible age group. He asserted:

In every advanced society the problems of higher education are problems associated with growth. Growth poses a variety of problems for the educational systems that experience it and for the societies that support them. These problems arise in every part of higher education—in its finance; in its government and administration; in its recruitment and selection of students; in its curriculum and forms of instruction; in its recruitment, training and socialization of staff; in the setting and maintenance of standards; in the forms of examinations and the nature of qualifications awarded; in student housing and job placement; in motivation and morale; in the relation of research to teaching; and in the relation of higher education to the secondary school system on one hand, and to adult education on the other.²

Canadian higher education grew by over 50 per cent between 1980 and 2010 in the cases studied and now has higher education attainment rates of about 65 per cent among the 25- to 29-year-old group (40 per cent university and 25 per cent college). We have grown enormously and moved beyond mass to universal higher education. These case studies, and indeed many of the papers in Axelrod et al., can be viewed as analyzing the details of Trow’s assertion.

This great expansion must be paid for; and again, common patterns emerge. In each province, total government spending (in real dollars) on PSE has risen substantially; the provinces made a major financial commitment to ensure expanded access to PSE. But the increased government funding did not keep pace with the growth in student numbers and thus real government spending per full-time equivalent (FTE) student has fallen. The declining government support per FTE was offset to some degree by raising tuition. And as a result, students pay an increasing share of the costs of undergraduate education. Unfortunately, the case studies do not tell us whether total real funding per FTE (government plus tuition) has risen or fallen. We do know from other work that in Ontario total real funding per FTE was about constant for universities, but declined for the college sector.³ Unfortunately also, the case studies do not report how student assistance changed over the period. In fact, assistance (in the form of grants) increased significantly so that net tuition did not change much and has fallen in some cases. This helps to explain why participation rates in PSE rose significantly even while tuition was increasing.

There are always competing priorities within government, always other expenditure areas competing with PSE. The case studies also reveal similar patterns of how these competing priorities played out. Between 1980 and 2010, PSE spending as a share of the total budget rose and then fell, finishing with a slightly lower share. Primary and secondary education spending rose as a share of the budget in BC and Ontario, but fell in Quebec. In all provinces, the highest priority was clearly health,

with health's share of the provincial budget rising steadily and strongly.

The PSE sector often bemoans its declining share of the provincial budget; but it remains a protected priority, along with other education and health. To show the contrast, over the period, the rest of government spending outside these priorities fell from 53 per cent to 34 per cent of the total budget in BC; from 49 to 40 per cent in Ontario, and from 36 to 27 per cent in Quebec. It is no wonder that (often ignored) public infrastructure is demanding attention today.

The case studies identify research and development as one of the five themes dominating PSE policy, but treat it in only a cursory fashion. Perhaps this is understandable because the case studies are at the provincial level, whereas major changes in research policy occur at the federal level. But in so doing, the case studies fail to highlight research policies as a major shaper of post-secondary education systems, especially the university sector, in Canada since the mid-1990s.

Research has always been a responsibility of Canadian universities and Canadian professors. Until the early 1990s, the majority of external funding for university research came from the three national granting councils of the federal government: the Medical Research Council, established in 1966 (now the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, CIHR); the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), established in 1978; and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), established in 1978. (Of course, the funds from government grants and tuition also support research by paying for professors' salaries, for space, and for libraries and computer systems.) The councils had various programs but the core program of each made research grants on topics chosen by the applicants. The applications were judged by peers on the basis of the academic merit of a proposal and the track record of the applicant.

But beginning in the 1990s, the federal government dramatically expanded its support for university-based research: federal support increased by fourfold in the decade from 1997 to 2007.⁴ This increase is far larger than the percentage increase in student numbers, in total government operating grants, or in tuition. The increase came in part by increasing the budget of the three granting councils; but more significantly, it came by layering a new suite of programs on top of the post-war model. The major new programs were the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Canada Research Chairs Program, Genome Canada, the Indirect Costs Program, the Networks of Centres of Excellence, and the Centres of Excellence for Commercialization. As Fallis states:

These initiatives were supported explicitly because of the applications the new knowledge would bring, most especially because of the contributions to the economy. The new research funds were targeted at topics and disciplines, especially in science, technology, engineering, and medicine, that were thought most likely to yield economic benefits. There was a particular emphasis on research in medicine and biomedical science that offered the double promise of improvements in health and economic benefits. Under the new research agenda, the research findings should be commercialized. And furthermore the

university should take a new explicit responsibility: to encourage and manage the application and commercialization of its research.⁵

It was a radically new research agenda, expanding and transforming the research function of Canadian universities.

The two most important PSE policy decisions of the past forty years have been the commitment to expanding access to higher education (including decisions about how to pay for it) and the commitment to expanding support for university-based research as part of developing an innovation-based economy. The same is true for most Western countries. Michael Shattock's paper in the Axelrod et al. volume concluded:

The two main policy drivers in British higher education throughout the period were the pressure of the demand for places and the decisions required to enable the expansion of student numbers and of higher education institutions to be paid for. In the 1980s, a new driver appeared with the recognition that the growth of the modern knowledge economy demanded investment in university-based research so that questions of research concentration, on both scientific and fiscal grounds, came to introduce a powerful new structural agent in the development of the higher education system (10).

Almost all the authors in the Axelrod et al. and the Fisher et al. volumes are professors at universities; they are inhabitants of the PSE system that they study. And they are a particular type of inhabitant, focused on university teaching and research. Perhaps understandably (but perhaps also worryingly), their position brings a certain perspective into their analysis. Although the nominal topic is post-secondary education, the discussion is mainly about the university sector rather than the college sector. Their analysis carries a tone of the university besieged, fiscally squeezed, diverted from its true mission, and buffeted by outside forces, especially government policies, over which they have little influence. They assert that the universities are no longer serving the "public good" (according to their own lights). But there is virtually no mention of policy choices that have benefitted professors, for example, with declining teaching loads and increasing faculty salaries. The authors seem unaware or untroubled by this insider perspective.

The professorial perspective grants the university little agency—little power to shape its own destiny and little power to influence government decisions. A strong counterbalance comes from the voices of university presidents, of which Peter MacKinnon's book on universities and public policy is a significant example. In contrast to many countries, particularly the United States, Canada has had few university presidents who have written substantive analytical reports of their experiences, reports which have become part of the scholarly literature. MacKinnon has broken with the Canadian tradition of reticence—and it is to be hoped others will follow.

MacKinnon begins by describing what he saw as his primary task: charting the strategic direction for the University of Saskatchewan. (Two former university presidents, Harvey Weingarten and Judith Woodsworth, who contributed papers to the

Axelrod et al. volume, also saw this as their primary task and speak in similar terms about the role of the president.) MacKinnon had three broad strategies: “The first was a commitment to the best national and international standards of medical-doctoral universities.” The second “committed the university to identifying areas of existing strength and investing in them so as to establish their pre-eminence.” And the third “was an affirmation of a sense of place. The province and the university were established two years apart, the latter as one of the foundational institutions of the young province” (19–21). MacKinnon believes that universities have agency, and must position and differentiate themselves in a competitive world.

His second task was to lobby the provincial government, hoping that it would better understand the needs and aspirations of the university, and to secure better financial support. He was successful on both counts. No doubt in a small province like Saskatchewan, the president of the flagship university can influence government policy. But there can be little doubt that universities, through their presidents, have had significant influence on government policy in every province. Indeed, Canadian governments have shown respect for the autonomy of universities and sought their counsel as policy was being made. Universities have supported the expansion to universal higher education; they would have preferred to have real funding per FTE remain constant, but failing that have lobbied and been granted the ability to raise tuition (within certain limits). And universities, particularly the medical-doctoral universities, have lobbied hard to achieve the great expansion of research support.

MacKinnon’s third task was to put in place the internal planning, budgeting, and governance structure to achieve the strategic directions—and then, of course, to carry out the strategic plan. MacKinnon’s reflection on this task is insightful and provocative. For example, he argues that boards of governors should be allowed to set fees, without any limitation from government; that faculty unions too often interfere with the academic functions of senate; and that many professors accept the comfortable status quo and resist the pursuit of pre-eminence. MacKinnon’s account leaves little doubt that the university is a powerful policy actor: decisions about PSE policy and the outcomes of these decisions have been shaped by the actions of the university.

Together these books offer different analyses and perspectives on post-secondary education policy in Canada. They are insightful and valuable in their own right today; and they will be important secondary sources when the next draft of history is written.

Notes

- 1 Martin Trow, “Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education” (Washington: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973).
- 2 Ibid, 1.
- 3 Ian D. Clark, Greg Moran, Michael L. Skolnik, and David Trick, *Academic Transformation: The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: Queen’s Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 82-83.

- 4 Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), "Momentum: The 2008 Report on University Research and Knowledge Mobilization" (Ottawa: author, 2008).
- 5 George Fallis, *Rethinking Higher Education: Participation, Research, and Differentiation* (Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 179.