

BOOK REVIEW

Meyer, H.-D., St. John, E.P., Chankseliani, M. & Uribe, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

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*Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice* is an edited volume that aims to address the central question of how and why we can promote policies for fair access to higher education (HE). It takes a fairly common view of equity, exploring fair access in terms of racial, socio-economic and rural/urban background. The chapters on China and Georgia also consider fairness in the context of political favouritism and nepotism. The book's primary focus is on access to HE, in other words, academic preparation, selection of students and affordability of HE. To a lesser extent, the book also explores the question of how to sustain *participation in* and *completion of* HE among disadvantaged groups.

From the outset, the editors make it very clear that the purpose of the book is to counter a neoliberal narrative. They wish to open up a space among HE researchers and practitioners to learn about and consider alternative models for HE. The book aims to do this by giving us a systems-level perspective on HE policy, comparing post-WWII systems with current ones, and comparing systems across continents and political contexts. It does not, for instance, examine fair access policies via institutional behaviour or particular intervention programmes. The resultant 'bird's-eye view' of HE systems provides us a comprehensive and empirically rich entry point to a discussion on fair access to HE, with an attempt to include some non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) experiences as well. Although the book is pitched as a critique of the neoliberal model of HE, it nonetheless adopts a consistently pragmatic tone. This is evident in the way the discussion on fairness (*justice*) is framed alongside the policy-making concerns of improving quality *vis à vis* global competition (*excellence*) and funding constraints (*efficiency*).

Before launching into the country case studies, the book first addresses theoretical understandings of justice in HE. In line with the approach described above, this discussion is anchored in concrete notions of justice. For example, Heinz-Dieter Meyer's chapter argues for an institutional-comparative approach (Sen, 2009) to reasoning about fair access to HE, as it "focuses our attention on the manifest and remediable injustices in a particular setting..." (p. 16). The context of race, class and HE participation in the U.S.A. provide a

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backdrop for the next two chapters. Lesley Jacobs presents a case for the use of affirmative action policies, based on the ideological argument that diversity in HE is a positive, societal “plus”. Edward St. John, in turn, highlights a historical precedent for fair access policies even in the libertarian political climate of the U.S.A. He uses ample statistical data to demonstrate that equitable access to and full completion of HE were only achieved with serious political commitment and state funding, most notably via the GI Bill of 1944 and the Pell Grants introduced in 1972.

Having established that fair access policies are both justifiable and historically precedented, even within neoliberal traditions, the second part of the book moves on to illustrate the successes and failures of national equity policies through a survey of nine country case studies – Finland, China, Colombia, Korea, Germany, Georgia, South Africa, Brazil and Australia. The central theme that emerges is the tension between concentrating limited state resources into pockets of excellence (for instance, the Chinese or Korean solutions), or spreading the resources thin for the sake of regional equality (for instance the Finnish or German models). Another recurring theme is the need for *political commitment* as an important precursor to adequate state funding. The case of Finland illustrates this very clearly. As Marja Jalava points out, an equitable distribution of access to HE across the heavily polarised urban/rural nation was only possible thanks to significant political support. The Agrarian League political alliance was able to lobby the interests of the non-elite metropole, while the strong leftist movement advocated against a vocationalisation or proletarianisation of HE. The result was the establishment of new research-based universities across several provinces.

It is laudable that the book also includes a third section dedicated to the student voice in countering neoliberal HE policies – even if the conclusions drawn are rather gloomy. Oscar Espinoza and Luis Eduardo Gonzales recount the mass social support for student protests in Chile. This support stemmed from the high burden placed on families to cover HE costs (79.2% of total expenditure on HE in comparison to 14.4% from the state, p. 243). Even with such a broad support base, it was still very difficult for the student movement to challenge the neoliberal status quo. In the American HE context, Anna Schwenck reveals how a discourse on “excellence” has drowned out demands for a just and equitable society. It appears that even in California, the home of the Clerk Kerr HE “Masterplan” to promote social mobility, funding cuts have altered policy discourse and forced a wedge between students and HE management.

The final section of the book (Part 4) ends on some concrete policy recommendations. In the first chapter, the editors conclude that we urgently need evidence to counter the neoliberal model. They argue that current funding mechanisms rely more on “ideological arguments” than on an “evidence-based discourse about fairness” (p. 284). This book can be seen as one such concerted effort to make an evidence-based case for fairness. In the final chapter, Edward St. John and Heinz-Dieter Meyer propose a 10-point list of what a fair access policy might involve. They concede that, if market models and loans are to be used, we need to at least temper their most serious ramifications for disadvantaged groups, such as using loans only as a last resort and making repayment terms lenient.

Reflecting on the ‘call to arms’ in this book to collect more data on equity issues, it is promising that there are on-going attempts to do just that. For example, the Global Equity Index project is attempting to chart a global map on inequality in access to HE (Atherton, Dumangane & Whitty, 2016). An example of a country-level initiative is the Siyaphumelela project in South Africa, which strives to use data analytics to improve student outcomes.

The conclusion of the book is perhaps somewhat disheartening, however, as it focuses on ‘what can be done within a neoliberal funding model’ rather than returning to the initial discussion on *ideological* arguments in favour of fair access policies. For example, it would be helpful to explore the way in which the social justice dimension of HE is often explicitly linked to national development plans in low-middle income contexts, and its potential to fuel fair access policies. Nevertheless, *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective* is a timely book that makes an important contribution to the field of HE studies by offering an empirically rich exploration of fair access policies.

### **References**

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