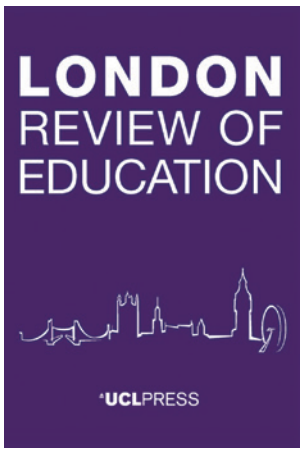

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Book Review

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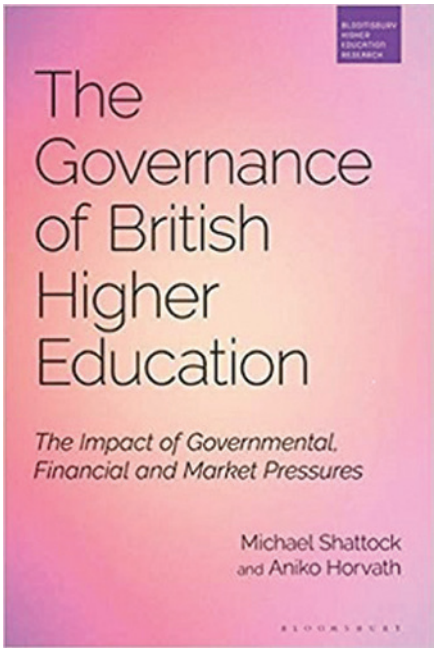
The Governance of British Higher Education: The impact of governmental, financial and market pressures, by Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath

London: Bloomsbury; 2019; 198 pp.; ISBNs: 978-1350-20593-2 (pbk), 978-13500-7402-6 (hbk), 978-1350-07403-3 (ebk)



This volume is part of the output from the Centre for Global Higher Education, and it provides a sweeping overview of the divergent and contrasting developments in higher education governance across the four nations of the UK since the mid-1970s. Its core theme is an elegy to a lost age – if not Halsey's (1982) 'donnish dominion', then at least one characterized by a degree of academic self-governance and autonomy.

Although this is a relatively slender book, it covers a considerable amount of ground and offers commendably pithy and wide-ranging insights and judgements on the effects of changes in systems governance, UK devolution, globalization, the marketization of funding (particularly in England) and managerialism, and the consequences of all of these for institutional missions, and for teaching and research. It also has important things to say about the collective representation of the higher education sector, and the case (or lack thereof) for for-profit institutions in England. No one could accuse its authors of shying away from meeting policy head on, or of not arriving at clear judgements about the relative efficacy of different policy models and trajectories.

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In taking this approach, the volume benefits from the vast fund of practical experience of one of its authors – Michael Shattock – who was for many years Registrar at the University of Warwick before embarking on a remarkable second career as a higher education researcher and teacher at UCL Institute of Education. The relatively long historical reach that is adopted in this volume is also a major plus, as it allows the reader to see how policy trends have evolved and shifted over time, rather than simply focusing on recent events. Current developments are very clearly located within a wider historical policy context.

As might be expected, a considerable amount of space is devoted to analysis of the intent, evolution and likely impacts of the marketization of English higher education, both in terms of funding systems and regulation by the Office for Students. Shattock and Horvath provide a cogent explanation of the use of the market as a policy instrument, explore the optimistic assumptions that underlie its adoption and underline the structural weaknesses potentially inherent in governance through a market regulator. The irony, as the book makes clear, is that in an era that is supposed to be characterized by the small state (at least relative to what has gone before), the reality, at least in English higher education, is that the state in the form of central government has loomed ever larger and the trend has inexorably been towards more intervention, direction and steering in teaching, research and institutional management and governance. As Shattock and Horvath argue, those who naively thought that marketization and the arrival of a student loan system would in some way free them from detailed government interference have been sorely disappointed by the results. The beliefs, opinions, whims and fads of ministers and their advisers are now more important than ever in determining the priorities and activities of higher education institutions, and the authors conclude that the result has been institutional disempowerment (43), so that 'Autonomy at the system level in England has now largely been supplanted by government' (41). This tendency, coupled with ongoing concerns over the economic sustainability of loan-based funding mechanisms, has created considerable uncertainty for those whose job it is to try to pilot English universities to success.

Following on from this, the sometimes destabilizing impacts of these changes on the internal governance structures and practices of universities are analysed in depth and show, among other things, how attempts to mould universities to conform to a business model of enterprise management are exceedingly problematic and probably impractical. Shattock and Horvath conclude: 'The business model of governance does not work because it imposes strict hierarchy on decision-making and creates a system that is over-regulated towards prioritizing accountability and caution over risk-taking. Both are bad for the future vitality of British higher education' (122). They also demonstrate how students and their representatives have on the whole (although not always) consciously refused to adopt the government's intended role for them as proactive consumers of an educational product/experience.

A comparative approach across the UK is a central strand, and the volume uses UK devolution as a policy laboratory to compare and contrast the efficacy of different models of systems and institutional governance. On the whole, English policy and institutional developments do not emerge from these comparisons in a particularly favourable light, and the volume highlights the growing interchange of ideas between Scotland and Wales as the Welsh government and other actors have started looking for fresh sources of inspiration. There is also an interesting chapter that explores how globalization is impacting institutional governance. The researchers suggest that

governance structures and practices have been slow to adapt to the demands created by a more globalized educational world.

This book will be of interest to any policymakers across the UK and beyond who find themselves in search of an authoritative, crisp and concise analysis of what is going on in UK higher education governance and of the relationship between higher education and the state. It is also of value to those who research comparative education policy, higher education policy and practice, and institutional governance, and it is an ideal discussion starter for use in teaching at master's level.

Notes on the contributor

Ewart Keep is Emeritus Professor of Education, Training and Skills at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK. He has led research on adult and lifelong learning, employers' attitudes to investment in skills, skills policy formation, and how the education system and labour markets interact. He is a board member of the Scottish Funding Council and a member of the UK Government's Skills and Productivity Board.

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