

BOOK REVIEWS

The economic analysis of universities: strategic groups and positioning, by Susan Warning, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2007, 202 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 1-84-542833-4

This book proposes to examine the strategies adopted by public universities in response to the increasingly competitive environment in which they operate. The author's main objective is to offer an interpretation of the alternative choices made by institutions with regards to their teaching and research policies. The book has a strong reliance on the economic analysis which is made clear by its title and reinforced by the references included in the bibliography. This may legitimately lead some readers to consider that many important extra-economic driving forces of higher education policies are overlooked. However, the book offers some interesting insights into the specific position of public universities within an increasingly differentiated higher education system. Their strategies are examined at the interface of economic and management fields within an econometric model of competition and performance applied to higher education. This model is then empirically tested in the context of Germany.

The following will focus on three of the many aspects and objectives of the book which are interrelated and complementary:

The author's conceptual approach combines management and industrial organisation theories. The first model relates to universities' positioning with regard to two crucial strategic variables: teaching quality and research quality. According to this model, clusters are formed according to universities' preferences to invest in research or teaching. Interestingly, the study shows that returns from investment in research are substantial for high-ranked universities seeking to preserve their reputation but are negligible for low-ranked universities whose increased effort remains unnoticed by employers and potential students. A second model describes how, in the context of a more diversified offer, universities are engaged in an intense competition to recruit students who seek to take advantage of high-quality teaching but also to benefit from a high-quality research environment. At the interface of the two models, higher education institutions are parts of a three-stages game: choice involving teaching quality and research quality; decisions about student support levels; and students' decisions.

The models conceptualise interesting relationships that offer valuable insights on current policy trends. Firstly, they point out the growing heterogeneity within the higher education system and the ascendance of institutional strategies at the expense of national ones (is it really as unproblematic as this?). The models also identify potential tensions between teaching and research activities. This can especially explain the differences between the desire expressed in policy documents to bring synergies between research and teaching and the tensions emerging between the two in practice. Finally, the identification of different strategic groups among universities is particularly relevant in understanding emerging themes and debates around the processes of diversity (or inequality) within the higher education system.

This model of strategy and positioning of universities with respect to teaching and research is interesting but a few comments can be made. One may regret that the premises of the model consider teaching and research as alternatives rather than complementary activities. Another issue is the choice of indicators to evaluate research quality and teaching quality that are supposed

to contribute to productivity in universities: the measure of quality through spending on personnel and buildings is problematic and the measure of its impact also raises difficulty. Another potential criticism relates to the fact that the chosen theoretical framework and its assumptions tend to overlook important social, political and cultural interpretations of higher education policies which impact on strategic decisions at the institutional level.

An important aspect of the book is the author's attempt to test the models. This is preceded by a particularly valuable quantitative overview of German higher education. The empirical orientation is crucial because it contributes to articulating the model with historical change, thus revealing some interesting aspects of the structural transformations of the higher education system. For example, the historical picture reveals that German higher education is more diverse than one would have imagined. The recent evolution seems to indicate that the existence of different strategic groups based on their positioning is not a new but an accelerating phenomenon. It may be interesting to develop similar studies elsewhere in order to compare and contrast national trajectories.

The book addresses interesting research questions with strong relevance to higher education policies. The models clearly engage with crucial policy dilemmas over the level and the use of government funding in higher education, the level of competition and diversity (or inequality) among institutions and their impact on global performance. One could argue that the economic perspective cannot be the sole parameter of higher education analysis and reforms. However, there are some interesting lessons to be learned from these models provided that they are connected with other issues in relation to social justice that are not taken into account by economic models. The reading may be therefore quite difficult for non-economists and terms like 'product of higher education' may hurt sensibilities; but some of the results generated by the research are worthy of consideration.

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Music, informal learning and the school: a new classroom pedagogy, by Lucy Green, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, 213 pp., £45.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-75-466242-6

In music, as in other domains, a fundamental question asked by learners is 'what does this mean to me?' This question is particularly salient within the context of secondary school music classrooms, where young people's experience of formal music education may not resonate with the informal music-making practices they encounter and identify with outside of school. This book documents the implementation of a project that aimed to bridge this evident gulf between the informal and formal, fostering young people's engagement in music by bringing informal learning practices into the classroom context.

At the heart of this project were the principles of pupil autonomy, self-directed learning and peer learning juxtaposed with the idea of learning by imitation. Lucy Green provides a step-by-step theoretical and practical analysis of the pedagogical strategies employed, whereby informal learning practices of popular musicians were applied in a classroom setting. Many 'real-life' examples drawn from project participants are offered, demonstrating the pedagogical methods and principles that are discussed.

I hesitate to use the word 'innovative' when describing individual strands comprising the learning model presented in this book; the ideas of giving pupils choice over the curriculum