

As the title implies, this book aims to confront the issues presented by the shadow education system by increasing awareness. This short volume provides a taster and good starting point for some very important yet neglected issues that need to be given further attention. Various government responses are presented assisting policy-makers and planners to identify appropriate action to suit their own circumstances (14). The clear structure and helpful layout (including featured text boxes, graphs and charts) assists the reader to navigate through this complex topic. This book will deservedly find a place on the shelves of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners working in this field across the globe.

Notes

1. Now the Department for Education (DfE).
2. On 6 June 2007, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, announced a major two-year Making Good Progress Pilot from September 2007. The pilot trialled new ways to assess, report and stimulate progress in schools. Part of the pilot included the introduction of 10 hours one-to-one tuition in maths or English for pupils struggling to make the expected progress in KS2 and KS3.

References

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Educational opportunity: the geography of access to higher education, by Alexander D. Singleton, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, 203 pp., £62.07, ISBN 978-0-7546-7867-0

This book explores ‘the multiple dimensions of social, spatial, and temporal processes which shape access to Higher Education’ (185) and the social inequalities in access to higher education. What distinguishes this book from others on the topic is its emphasis on the geographic manifestations of these inequalities through its use of geodemographic classifications to analyse higher education access and participation. Geodemographics – not actually defined anywhere in the book – is the description of people according to where they live, derived from the study of spatial information.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first two set the scene and discuss the geographies of access to higher education and educational data sources, tools, and profiling techniques. The next few chapters focus specifically on the use of geodemographics analysis and classifications in higher education to assess the effectiveness of widening participation policies and trends in access to higher education, including data on the role of schools.

According to the book’s introduction, the book evaluates the socio-spatial implications of changes in higher education and ‘presents a systematic spatial framework for widening participation and extending access in an era of variable fees.’ (1). It shows how higher

education data and other publicly available data sources can be combined to enable higher education institutions to analyse more thoroughly their student intake. This would allow them to move away from a piecemeal analysis to 'institution-wide strategic and geographically linked market area analysis for existing and envisaged subject and course offerings' (1). Such an approach could help higher education institutions fulfil their widening participation agenda, extend access, and improve their institutional marketing.

Singleton examines pupil educational trajectories and investigates socio-spatial inequalities in pupil attainment, in entry requirements for different subjects of study and in university recruitment/selection criteria. He develops a new method of measuring inequalities in higher education by integrating multiple national education data sets using a range of recent innovations in data mining, geographic information science and quantitative human geography. Specifically, Singleton develops a geodemographic classification of higher education outcomes, and a tool that integrates school and university admissions data to enable higher education institutions to implement targeted strategies for increasing participation and widening access.

The book has some interesting findings, most of which will be familiar to those steeped into the literature on access and widening participation. The book interestingly questions the accuracy of various benchmarks and indicators used by policy-makers, including HEFCE and HESA, to measure levels of higher education participation, and to allocate widening participation funding and to access benchmarked performance. Much more could have been made of the implications for policy of Singleton's findings.

The main drawback with the book is that obviously it is based on the author's PhD thesis. Of course, that in itself is not a problem, but in this case it is because the author has not adapted his work sufficiently for a more general audience. Indeed, it is completely unclear who this book is aimed at, and who is the primary audience. It is far too specialised for undergraduate students concerned about unequal access and participation in higher education. Moreover the messages are not always clear while the contextual introductory chapter and other material on higher education and policy are sometimes weak and out of date. It might be useful for students studying geography interested in geodemographics and social-economics. However, the author specifically wants to promote the greater use of geodemographic classifications and to 'systematically integrate and bring relevant data together for the benefits of higher education stakeholders' (186). No one would argue that more information is potentially helpful and a new approach to analysing inequalities in higher education access and participation is always welcome. However, it is unclear how these stakeholders – potential students, universities, and schools – could use Singleton's approach in practice, without possessing rather sophisticated analytical skills. This is not a layman's guide to the use of geodemographics. Several chapters of the book are fairly technical – no doubt an important requirement for a PhD – but of questionable value for those in universities responsible for marketing their courses and who do not possess a rather specific skills set. So while the geodemographic perspective does add value to the whole issue of access to higher education, I wonder who will find this particular book an invaluable guide?

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