

Book Review

A treasury of tools: Navigating the complexities of international higher education

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Introduction

International Higher Education, edited by Ilona Dóra Dabney-Fekete (2024) is a comprehensive collection authored by twelve contributors namely Á. R. Dusa, A. Buda, A. I. Kun, A. Hrabéczy, B. Czékmán, G. Kováts, I. D. Dabney-Fekete, P. Mohammed, P. Gabriella, T. Ceglédi, Z. Kocsis, and Z. Demeter-Karászi, focusing on the structures, policies, challenges, and future trends within the global academic sphere. The primary aim of this work is to provide doctoral students with essential and useful information, equipping them with a rich set of tools and skills for research and their future careers. Specifically, the book is designed to aid Hungarian PhD students in preparation for the complex doctoral examination, while also serving as an invaluable resource for Master's students interested in higher education policy and research, or for anyone seeking to understand the inner workings of tertiary education (Dabney-Fekete, 2024).

The volume successfully addresses its main goal: delivering a general overview of higher education, its policies, and the nature of research, presented in a clear and accessible manner. It intends to build upon readers' existing knowledge, strengthen their foundation in forming and testing hypotheses, and encourage independent study and critical thinking. The book's comprehensive scope spans 12 core areas of international higher education, covering everything from governance structures and financing models to the complex socio-economic challenges faced by students and faculty.

Review

The volume is structured across thirteen chapters (I–XIII), beginning with foundational concepts and expanding into specific functional and comparative analyses, providing a broad, detailed examination of contemporary higher education topics. The opening chapters establish the competitive and internationalized context of 21st-century higher education, noting that research focus has shifted away from mere expansion toward issues of leadership, financing, and policy (Pusztai, 2011). Internationalization is defined precisely as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose (mission), functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003:2). This concept is posited as an unavoidable force, demanding that institutions adapt to survive in the international academic value chain and that involvement in cross-border network systems are signs of academic competitiveness. The foundational arguments regarding competitive forces are supported by Clark's model (1983), which identifies three perennial power centers in HE systems: academic oligarchy, government bureaucracy, and market players. However, critics have noted that Clark's model restricted application in post-socialist systems and failed to account adequately for non-organizational actors like students and instructors (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). This global transition has intensified competition, often measured through higher educational ranking (Chapter VIII). Rankings, despite widespread criticism for faulty interpretations, methodology, and frequently invalid data and the fundamental flaw of comparing completely different institutions, remain essential tools for institutions seeking prestige, financial support, and competitive advantage (Altbach, 2003). Furthermore, the tendency of ranking criteria to lean

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toward English-speaking institutions makes the prepotency of American and British universities apparent (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007).

A significant portion of the book is devoted to the people who constitute the university system: the students and the academic staff. On the matters of diversity, inequality, and resilience, the massification of higher education, enrollments moving from the "elite" stage (max 15% enrollment) to the "mass" stage (16–50% enrollment) (Trow, 1973, 2007) has profoundly increased student diversity, leading to issues like the reproduction of social inequalities. Chapter IV explores the persistent challenge of social background determining academic outcomes. This sociological thesis that inequalities persist due to the determinant role of family background is supported across decades of literature. Many researchers believe that higher education provides fertile ground for inequality, where it accumulates and spreads (Altbach, 2010; Kozma, 2004).

Academic resilience is defined sociologically as the ability to overcome adversity (Grotberg, 1996), or specifically, successful academic performance achieved despite socio-economic disadvantage. The OECD (2019) identifies resilient students as those in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) who score in the top quarter of reading performance in their country. Empirical research, particularly in the Hungarian context, suggests that resilience demonstrated before entering higher education is only potential, as resilient students struggle to break through the "ceiling" set by beneficiaries, students from high social backgrounds, due to limited utilization of non-curricular university advantages (Ceglédi, 2018). Concerning the academic professoriate Chapter V scrutinizes the evolving role of the university instructor (the *homo academicus* (Bourdieu, 1989)), who today is expected to function as a complex 21st-century "polyhistor." This expansion of roles, often driven by external expectations for accountability and measurable productivity, creates pressure and risks reducing the professor's traditional prestige, noted as the loss of prestige and move from the ivory tower to the life of a common laborer (Pusztai, 2011; Ramsden, 1998). Instructors often prefer research over teaching because research offers a more viable possibility for advancement in the struggle for internationalization (Höhle & Teichler, 2013). Highly engaged academic staff are considered knowledge brokers, acting as intermediaries who transmit information and maintain relationships between professional communities (Lightowler & Knight, 2013).

Chapter VI focuses on governance and management, noting that universities are complex, "bottom-heavy" organizations (Bess & Dee, 2007; Clark, 1983). Owing to the inherent difficulty of standardizing teaching and research, there is often a focus on the standardisation of skills through internal processes and norms. Contemporary reforms have been guided by the New Public Management movement (Broucker & de Wit, 2013), which, while increasing institutional autonomy, has generated criticism, including the risk of universities becoming McUniversities and undermining academic freedom (Deem et al., 2007). Regarding the connection between education and career entry (Chapter IX), work and study are increasingly becoming a "double life" for young people. Student employment can be a risk factor that increases the chance of dropout (Riggert et al., 2006), but working while studying generally accelerates the transition to the labor market and improves the chances of accessing higher-level positions (Weiss et al., 2014).

The analysis also covers financing models (Chapter X), highlighting the global trend toward cost-sharing models involving students, families, and stakeholders due to the scarcity of public funds (Agasisti et al., 2008). Higher education is presented as a "public good" or "quasi-public good" because of its non-pecuniary positive spill-over effects. Conversely, private beneficiaries should bear a larger share of the burden due to significant private benefits, such as higher wages and employment premiums. The chapter details various funding mechanisms, including the Income Contingent Student Loan (ICL) model, which ties repayment to future income, offering default protection and improving access for low-income students (Chapman, 2006). Chapter VII addresses the non-public higher education sector, noting that church-related institutions in the post-socialist region, for instance, are often financed through the church, but mainly from state budget resources. Faith-based higher education institutions are distinguished by maintaining a religious spirituality emphasized in their mission (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016). Finally, Chapter XIII explores the challenges facing higher education in developing countries, noting phenomena such as the bidding for highly qualified professionals (De Wit et al., 2013) and emphasizing that the movement of professionals is sometimes better described as "brain circulation" rather than "brain drain".

Conclusion

International Higher Education serves as a critical and well-supported synthesis of contemporary issues facing tertiary institutions, offering an insightful look at the complexities created by globalization, massification, and

market pressures. The book's primary strength lies in its meticulous coverage of theoretical concepts such as academic resilience, knowledge brokers, and university governance models and grounding them in empirical observations, often drawing upon the distinctive experiences of Central and Eastern European higher education. The contributing authors consistently draw upon robust sourcing, ensuring that the scope is broad yet concise. The volume effectively meets its intended purpose: acting as an essential guide for future researchers by not only providing necessary information for doctoral exams but also by encouraging students to develop informed, critical perspectives backed by scientific data. The topics covered ranging from the economic rationale for financing (Chapter X) to the societal impact of inequality and student employment (Chapter IX) provide a holistic and practical understanding of the field. This book is highly recommended to its target audience, the doctoral and Master's students in educational research and policy as well as to higher education leaders and policymakers who seek to understand the intricate dynamics between institutional performance, national strategy, and global trends. The comprehensive structure, detailed content, and explicit focus on preparing students for independent, high-quality research ensure its status as a vital resource in the study of international higher education.

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