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Book review


This collection is the fourth volume in the Commonwealth of Learning’s World Review of Distance Education and Open Learning series. It is a collection of 13 chapters from contributors from approximately seven nations but with substantial experiences ranging more broadly. The book is organised into five parts: The Policy Agenda and its Context; Inputs; Process; Outputs; and Conclusion. The chapters cover matters such as human, physical and technological resources; students’ backgrounds and needs; staffing; governance; and costs. The editors also contribute chapters that introduce and conclude the book.

The book’s title states that it is about policy in open and distance learning—although it presumably means open and distance education in that it is not specifically about learning but about education and its organisation and planning more broadly. Thus, the Introduction to the book is entitled ‘planning open and distance learning’. It soon becomes clear that the term ‘policy’ is used rather loosely and, indeed, the book could have been titled better as Planning and Policy in Open and Distance Learning (or, better still, Education).

In many respects, it is the planning and organisational aspects with which most contributors deal, although some focus more on various forms of educational/organisational practice instead.

The opening sentence of the Introduction commences thus: “Planning has a bad name, apparently standing against the individuality that education ought to foster and echoing to the collapse of the planned, command-led economies of the old second world.” (p. 3). I found this to be a surprising claim and one that is not supported in the text. Maybe it is a reflection of the particular experiences of the editors, Perraton and Lentell, but it seems that an equally strong assertion could be made that planning has a ‘good name’. Governments’ educational policy and planning appear no less voluminous and purposeful than previously, and universities, colleges and schools appear to have to plan, and be accountable for their outcomes, in much more stringent ways than before. Maybe all this planning activity gets planning a ‘bad name’; but that’s not the editors’ argument. It also seems troubling to start a book with such a negative assertion about its theme, notwithstanding the shift to open the argument about planning, and not policy. In effect, the book rarely is sharply focused on its theme, although in the final chapter, Lentell endeavours to recover the acuity, but she acknowledges that policy does not underpin the planning and provision of educational services in many nations (p. 250).

Some particular chapters are stronger on dealing with the theme of the book and provide useful analyses of their theme. In particular, the chapters by Panda (People: staffing, development and management) and Robinson (Governance, accreditation and quality assurance in open and distance education) are substantial in these respects. The chapter on Globalisation by Farrell, Ryan and Hope, was less inspiring, perhaps because it is a difficult topic to deal with in a chapter, and it is done here in a fragmented manner. Raza’s chapter on the benefits of open and distance education uses a rather dated view of the ‘clientele’ of open and distance education as being ‘marginal’ (p. 210). In many respects nowadays, the clientele of open and
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distance education include significant proportions of ‘mainstream’ mid-career professional people; therefore it seems that there was a more powerful argument to be made about the benefits than appears in the chapter.

The editors have interspersed introductory, commentary and linking pieces (highlighted with a grey background). In some cases these are useful, in others they appear to be ‘patches’ to cover gaps or weaknesses within or between the contributors’ pieces. In one instance, a significant error is introduced when it is claimed that, “Hong Kong acted vigorously by legislating to regulate offshore enrolment” (p. 177). Robinson, in her chapter, makes it clear that what is regulated is the provision of non-local courses offered in Hong Kong (p. 191). That is, courses that have at least some part of their teaching and assessment offered in Hong Kong. Purely off-campus courses were deliberately not regulated.

This book has some worthy contributions on some important and useful topics. It would have been better represented as a book about planning for open and distance education, within which policy matters could have been covered.

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