

## Book Review

Australian Higher Education: Research Policies and Performance 1987-2010, by Frank P. Larkins, Melbourne University Press, 2011, 330 pp.

The increasing trend of public policy involvement in research development reform initiatives and its control over the higher education research and professional activities have been discussed growth theories (Neumann and Guthrie 2002). As such, these moves and transformations require a brief definition of inputs to ensure these activities are visible and measurable. As a result, policy chase though performance has grown in popularity among policy makers to achieve the desired results and objectives (Dougherty, Jones et al. 2014). In the last two decades, Australian higher education went through several major policies reforms and structural changes. Larkins captures all these major policy moves and changes in his book “Australian Higher Education: Research Policies and Performance 1987-2010” and provides detailed information.

The book is organised into five major parts comprising 11 chapters. The focus is on three major policy reforms and five main themes. In the introduction, Larkins discusses the book’s main objective: to analyse the Australian higher education research policies, its impact and provides detail summary of the book in the context of research policies reforms initiated by different Australian governments and its effects over a period of 23 years (1987-2010). Part 1 themed “research polices reforms” begins with an outline on the a aims of research, its benefits and highlights the major role of two key bodies that guide the respective Australian governments in allocating funds to universities and concludes by highlighting the role of several funding agencies that support particular research disciplines at that time. In chapter two, the focus is on one major reformed initiated, i.e. the establishment of “Unified National System” and its objectives, requirements and directions for institutions and its transformative effect on the management of higher education. The chapter further presents critique, debate and responses of the institutions on these reforms. It concludes by discussing the reforms introduced under the “labor policy reforms 1992-1996” as well as issues related to accountability and improving quality of higher education. In chapter three, Larkins narrates the coalition’s higher education policies reforms from 1996-2007 where higher education was faced with financial constraints and the institutions were urged to be increasingly self-reliant on funding by improving at the enterprise level and charging higher fees for both national and foreign undergraduate and postgraduates students. However, government cutbacks and

reforms insulated research and research training activities and the authorities agreed to provide research funding to achieve higher research performance and the development of knowledge that could also help in achieving the objectives of “backing Australia’s innovation ability plan”. In chapter four, research policy reforms initiated by the Rudd Labor Government in 2007 is summarised as well as an analysis of the traditional research quality framework with some critical justification; thereby, a new quality issuance “Excellence in research for Australia” was announced. The reforms were namely, significant increase in the funding for institutions with the agenda of transforming high education and establish a framework for innovation that boost Australian international economic competitiveness.

Part 2 begins in chapter five detailing several research training policies formulated between 1994 and 2010. It details the reviews and recommendation on several relevant subjects including supporting universities in commercialising knowledge and collaborating with industries. The second theme is on national and overseas scholarships and funding offered to research students with the aim of increasing research output in higher education institutions that could support national research efforts. Chapter six reviews a wide array of research funding programmes and reflects on multiple integrative subject matter of research grants programmes, fellowships funding and schemes provided by major Australian government research funding bodies and agencies. It examines the collaboration by Australian universities with others and encouraged to be more entrepreneurial by achieve the two fold objectives of promoting innovation and commercialisation of the knowledge that benefit society as whole while raising more funds from non government sources.

Part 3 begins in chapter seven and discusses intellectual property rights under the major heading of policy and practice advice, national principles of IP management and also sheds light on that topic from the perspective of universities. In chapter eight, the central point of discussion is on the costs involved in undertaking research project and the guided framework. The chapter also highlights the national competition policy and benefits of research to individual and society at large with positive impacts.

Part 4 begins in chapter nine and explains the policy framework and the “Australian code for the responsible conduct of research”, while guiding a researchers to conduct their research in accordance with highest ethical standards.

Part 5 begins in chapter ten where Larkins narrates the funding trend to the universities by a wide range of local, national and international bodies and the performance outcomes while providing national and international ranking of the universities and staff profile. The last chapter, Chapter 11, is a snapshot of the major developments in the period captured by the book. The chapter concludes with future policy reforms and considerations.

Larkins also provides detailed information on Australian research policies and performance from 1987 to 2010. The coherent and interconnectedness of the chapters make the book an interesting read. There is useful information and information on research policy initiatives, reforms as well as the role of political parties which have different perspectives, attitude and mind set that on the whole provide an interesting blend of policy implications. The book also highlights essential elements for policy making including fundamental transformation of higher education institutions and work practices, research output, research training and quality, the ability to attract external research inputs, teaching and student satisfaction. However, there are some minor weaknesses and structural inconsistencies in the book. For instance some chapters have introductory headings while others do not and more importantly, some chapters do not have sub level headings particularly where it is required, for example, the objectives and guidelines of “Unified National System” which should have a sub level heading.

I would like to address three issues related on the later part of the book, i.e. “performance” that I believe the book could have covered better. There is a lack of discussion on the interface between the research policy reforms and performance, though this was indicated in the title of the book. The main aim of author was to information on two major themes: first, the transformation process of Australian higher education while looking inot the most constructive way to conduct research to achieve socio economic objectives. Second, the book provides an overall picture of the output and performance of different regimes that instituted different reforms in various periods in the last chapter, giving an impression the reforms represent a single policy framework over the entire period covered in the book. As the readers read the book, for a variety of rationales including, taking constructive lessons, grasping knowledge on most appropriate research reforms and resource allocation; as a criterion for a notional status-ordering of the universities; for assessing the viability of, and maintenance/discontinuous of academic units (not clear) (Neumann and Guthrie 2002).

Second, funding allocation and providing framework in order to achieve the objectives as major motivation of the Australian research policy initiatives, were not only selective, for example, types of research, research questions to be addressed, types of research students but also leads to separation of the role of teaching, research and most importantly the commercialisation of knowledge resulting from the research. Although the author wrote two chapters on the commercialisation of knowledge and the need to be self-reliant in funding a chapter four discusses the importance of increasing funds for innovation and to boost Australian international economic competitiveness. Such implementations deserve close consideration in terms of performance measurement. However,

there is inconsistency in how the author employs the terms “marketization” and “performance measurement”. A performance measurement would be more appropriate if developed on the following factors such as market models and business accounting for the delivery of public sector goods, services and innovations (Olson, Guthrie et al. 1998), domestic service and product innovation patents (Yaisawarng and Ng 2014) or a criteria on the performance of individual, departmental and university levels (Parker, Guthrie et al. 1998). Therefore, the above mentioned factors using a performance measurement criteria will most probably help provide a better insight to the reader to link academic activities and tap the into the educational resources.

Finally, while funding allocation is awarded based on high research output and is highly competitive, it would be good to institute some managerial and structural changes at the university level to achieve the desired level of performance without discouraging the wider role of academia and scholarships (Neumann and Guthrie 2002). In fact, under traditional funding criteria, higher education institutions have little incentive to focus on teaching and student learning focusing on what they consider priorities including graduate education, research productivity and research outputs (Burke 2005, Aldeman and Carey 2009). As performance funding seeks caused to alter and shifts in institutional behavior and would resulted in some managerial and structural changes in order to accomplish greater efficiency and productivity ( unclear) (Dougherty, Jones et al. 2014). Certainly, the Australian research polices and reforms made during that particular period and discussed extensivelyh in this book do consider the above managerial and structural change in the universities. The last section on performance is measured on the research output performance and does not explore managerial and structural changes in the universities that resulted from these reforms. The book will in fact increase the interest and insight of the reader on these topics.

In short, the book provides detailed information on the research policies and brings to the core Australian research policy reforms initiated in last two decades and their impacts and outputs of. The reader of the book will benefit from critical information on the research policy reforms. I believe, the later part of the book could have been better written if other relevant performance measures with evidence have been elaborated.

## References

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