Book Review

The Audacity to Reform: The impact of Clark Kerr's vision in history and what we can learn in dealing with the rising demand for higher education†

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The Audacity to Reform: The impact of Clark Kerr's vision in history and what we can learn in dealing with the rising demand for higher education

The late Clark Kerr, one of the great leaders and thinkers of American higher education in the 20th century, shaped the landscape of higher education in the United States, starting with California, where he lived and worked. When he was the President of the University of California (UC) (1958–1967), he formulated and led the implementation of the California Master Plan of Higher Education (California State Department of Education, 1960) in response to an urgent need for higher education reforms in the 1960s. The Plan aimed at providing universal access to higher education and diversity in the choices of institutions available to all Californians. This was achieved by defining the methods for allocating funding and missions to colleges and universities. He moved on to head the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1967–1973) and the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1973–1979). There, he was fundamental in developing sophisticated new tools and concepts for the study of higher education policy, which made a great impact on higher education and education policy in the United States and beyond.

This book is a collection of essays written by academic leaders and scholars who worked closely with Kerr, or had personally experienced the impact of his reforms. These essays are not just tributes in recognition of Kerr's life and work, they are also an attempt at examining his ideas, the impact and influence of his reforms on the United States and Europe, and a retrospective analysis of the weaknesses of his plans, unveiled through the unfolding of history.

Rothblatt begins, in Chapter 1, with a personal account of the late Clark Kerr, setting the tone for the rest of the book on the person Kerr really was to those close to him. On the surface, Kerr seemed like someone who was "easy to remember" (p. 5). He had the temperament of a scholar, reserved in his manners, unpretentious and always focused on his work. Yet, beneath this simple man was a very complex character, with "two voices" (p. 14) constantly informing his decisions: one was the voice of a labour economist concerned with the

industrial needs of society, while the other was the voice of moral conscience. Kerr mediated frequently between these two “voices,” in search of a balance which would fulfil both demands. One could discern the presence of these two “voices” underlying every decision he made. The Master Plan is one such example, an innovative solution balancing the voice of meritocratic admission standards on one hand, and the egalitarian voice of universal access to higher education on the other.

Levine discusses, in Chapter 2, Kerr’s work at the Carnegie Commission and Council. Upon his dismissal, Kerr was immediately invited to lead and launch the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. In both the Commission and the Council, Kerr led his team to identify present and emerging problems, prepare solutions, and alert the relevant publics on various higher education issues, such as the effectivity and integrity of academic programmes, the resources available to higher education, and the performance of colleges and universities. Kerr was instrumental in leading both the Commission and Council to develop new tools and concepts to better study and formulate higher education policies. For example, the Commission coined the term, “stop out,” as a refinement of the term, “drop out,” referring to an emerging trend where students left higher education with the intention of returning. This refined concept, like many other new concepts, gave the Commission and Council greater sophistication in studying current and emerging problems, and to formulate better policies.

In Chapter 3, Callan examines the historical context giving rise to the California Master Plan, the rationale behind the policies, and its slow dismantling over the years. Kerr formulated the Master Plan in response to pressing needs “to expand the enrolment capacity of colleges and universities” (p. 62). He grouped the state’s public colleges and universities into three sectors, each with their own distinct missions and criteria: (1) an elite sector for the top high school graduates; (2) a mass access sector admitting the top third of graduates; and (3) a universal access sector offering transfer and vocational programmes available to all graduates. The Plan was a success and remained unchanged for years. However, in 1978, the Californian electorate voted to reduce taxes and limit government spending. This placed harsh restraints on higher education spending, leading inevitably to severe budget problems. This revealed a fatal weakness in the plan: it lacked adaptability in the face of changing circumstances and political pressures. The Master Plan was eventually dismantled over the next 50 years, as colleges and universities reduced their enrolment numbers to balance the rising cost of attendance.

Chapters 4 to 7 are dedicated to the comparative study of how other American states and European countries responded to problems similar to those California faced (such as the need for mass higher education, equal educational opportunities, funding, and mission differentiation), and whether Kerr and the Master Plan had any influence on their higher education policies.

In Chapter 4, Breneman and Lingenfelter argue that several American states were influenced by Kerr in "advancing the role of rational planning, based on social science research and extensive empirical data" (p. 101), yet they were of different minds about adapting the Master Plan to their respective states. Some states, like Texas, were unable to emulate the Plan at all due to vast differences in their higher education structure and organisation. Other states, like Virginia, tried to establish their own Master Plans, but they did not agree with Kerr's stringency over mission differentiation as they feared that it would lead to greater stratification in society. Hence they allowed mission creep[1] into their plans, in varying degrees.

In Chapter 5, Shattock argues that the defining difference in Britain resided in the processes used to reach decisions on structure. Since the very beginning of British higher education reforms, the education structure had been "reacting to pressures as they came up," (p. 125), addressing deficiencies in the system as conditions changed, thereby evolving with a flexibility which the California Master Plan never had.

In Chapter 6, Neave argues that France did not consider the Master Plan. Higher education reforms in France are shaped by the doctrine of a "Republic One and Indivisible," (p. 133), and the fundamental values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Thus, policy solutions were thought out in the context of the general interest, and construed in ways vastly different from that of the Master Plan.

In Chapter 7, Nybom argues that the Northern European universities had exercised a certain degree of neglect and arrogance (p. 164), and as a consequence, failed to change in the last 50 years despite attempts by concerned politicians. The rapid expansion of existing institutional and organisational forms could not accommodate the massive growth of the higher education system. This ultimately "led to a crumbling of the value system of the traditional European University" (p. 179).

[1] The term "mission creep" refers to a gradual shift in objectives during the course of a military campaign, often resulting in an unplanned long-term commitment ("Mission creep", 2016).

Tapper and Palfreyman describe, in Chapter 8, how Kerr founded the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC) to explore the possibility of developing a strong commitment to undergraduate education within the context of a research university, as Kerr noted that American universities were giving "decreasing attention to the provision of quality undergraduate teaching" (p. 187). Kerr structured UCSC as "a residential university with colleges at its core," providing a "vibrant socio-cultural environment" for undergraduates (p. 190). The collegiate ethos faded away quickly soon after its implementation. This exploration revealed "the inherent tension between the demands of the high-status research university and the provision of quality undergraduate education" (p. 203). It seems almost impossible to reconcile the two within the same institutional base.

In the last chapter, Gardner argues that to better understand Kerr's term as President, it is essential to understand the world he inherited and operated, shaped by his three most influential predecessors. When Kerr took office in 1958, he inherited a daunting portfolio of problems from his predecessors. He had to resolve stalled negotiations between the colleges and universities on matters of governance, mission, admissions, and funding; decide on the direction of the existing UC campuses in light of the three new campuses; and continue the work of decentralising UC's governing and management system. The Master Plan should be understood as Kerr's attempt to address these problems in an unrealistically short period of time.

While a large part of this book is focused on the state of California, four chapters are dedicated to the comparative study of the other American states and European nations. Many of these authors note that these Western states started with a similar set of problems (namely, a sharp increase in demand for higher education to meet the aspirations and economic needs of their respective states), but they each chose solutions that were constrained by the structure and politics of higher education unique to their states. While the contexts are definitely different from the US and Europe, Asian countries, like Singapore, are now facing a growing demand for higher education. The comparative studies provide rich lessons for academic leaders and educators on the successes and failings of different approaches, and the limitations imposed by different higher education structures.

Also of great interest to academic leaders is the seeming incompatibility of a research university and its commitment to quality undergraduate education, as revealed through Kerr's experiment with UCSC. In Singapore, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) are research-intensive universities with a commitment to quality undergraduate education. These universities have, in recent years, attempted to incorporate different elements of the college model into various undergraduate programmes.

Singapore also opened the Yale-NUS liberal arts college within the context of a research university. There is so much to learn from the analysis of Kerr's failures and missed opportunities in his efforts at setting up UCSC. For example, Tapper and Palfreyman (in Chapter 8) note that when colleges are set up within the context of a research university, it is the university that provides the wider institutional context, and more powerful values and interests that would conflict with "college allegiances and the attractions of undergraduate teaching" (p. 203). The authors suggest that this might be due largely to the lack of a separate model of governance and a college model that does not embed itself fully with the values and interest of a research university. Whether Singapore's universities will succeed with its implementation of the college model in its undergraduate programmes will depend largely on how it attempts to negotiate this tension between the two sides.

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Jonathan Sim is a Research Officer in the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is co-producing a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Confucian Philosophy with the Dean of the College. His research interest centres primarily on classical Chinese philosophy, but his interest extends widely to other areas such as the comparative study of Chinese and Western philosophical traditions, ethics, political theory, religion, and the philosophy of science and technology. He was invited to speak, at the 2015 Financial Times Smarter World Summit, on the ethical and philosophical implications of emerging technologies.