

Book review of "Postsecondary Education in British Columbia"

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Volume 50, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069656ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069656ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education

ISSN

2293-6602 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Leary, T. (2020). Review of [Book review of "Postsecondary Education in British Columbia"]. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, 50(1), 99–100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069656ar>

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BOOK REVIEW

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Cowin, Robert (2018). *Postsecondary Education in British Columbia*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. Pages: 232. Price: 34.95 CDN (paper), 96.39 CDN (hardback)

Robert Cowin provides a well-organized and comprehensive overview of the postsecondary system in British Columbia from 1960 to the current day. He systematically weaves together the sporadic research and literature on the postsecondary system to date with evidence and understanding of the political, social and economic landscapes for each of the following time periods: 1960-79; 1980-99; and 2000-15.

The first two chapters of the book provide the author's rationale for the study, definitions and theoretical underpinnings. Chapters three, four and five discuss the periods of 1960-79; 1980-99; and 2000-15 respectively. The final chapter highlights common policy trends and challenges that influence the provincial postsecondary sector.

Cowin frames the discussion about each period by using three different perspectives: social justice; human capital formation; and marketization. Each perspective, informed by policies relevant to the theme, offers a lens through which he reflects upon the status of and rationale for the postsecondary education sector at that time.

The first rationale reflects a policy focus on the fairness of access to postsecondary education and notions of social justice. Using this rationale, Cowin considers issues of access in rural and urban areas of the province, looking beyond access as only an institutional issue of student recruitment and retention, and critiques the government of the day's positioning on social justice, human rights and equity, and the development of rural

British Columbia.

The second policy rationale, human capital formation, is informed by policies that aim to support the economic benefits of postsecondary education for the province and society. This policy rationale highlights the government's use of human capital theory as justification for additional public university seats during the 1960-79 period and the federal government's priority in the mid-1980s to direct more funding to private institutions and colleges that work directly with industry – putting the labour market demands as a priority for programming and funding, a priority that is still in place today.

The third policy rationale is focused on the marketization of postsecondary education. This perspective draws upon neoliberalism, public administration and institutional theory to identify how efficient and effective governments and institutions are in achieving their identified goals. The degree to which competition was fostered between institutions or the restrictions and terms that both provincial and federal governments placed on funding during the 1960s, for example, were evidence of ways in which the government aimed to have the sector reach the desired outcome.

Cowin identifies one or two historically significant happenings in each period that prominently influenced the postsecondary system in British Columbia. He analyses each event using the three policy rationales. The MacDonald Report of 1962, the continuing education and Canadian jobs strategy movement in the 1980 era, and

the more recent developments set in motion by the 2001 provincial liberal government, referred to as "the New Era," are three of the five historical events discussed in chapters three, four and five respectively.

Cowin's reflective discussion about the evolution of postsecondary education in British Columbia goes beyond a chronological account of which institutions were established and when. By offering a detailed analysis of the political, social and economic scenes for each period, the author challenges the reader to consider the external pressures institutions have encountered and continue to encounter. Cowin identifies the sector's development from 1960 to the present day as having been one of *clear intentions* between 1960-79, to *having assumptions challenged* during the 1980-99 period, to what he terms as the *cynicism* years of 2000-15. He notes that some of the policies that once influenced the sector and then diminished have emerged again, evidence of the pendulum having swung to an extreme and then back again. At the core for each period is the provincial and federal government of the day – political mandates continue to be the most influential forces that institutions and the sector face.

The complexity of the postsecondary sector is made evident as Cowin draws attention to the ebb and flow of provincial and federal funding, the challenges of a changing labour market, the provincial, national and international competitive landscapes within which institutions try to carve out their own niche and to succeed, and the increasingly diverse student population needs and expectations. Being knowledgeable of the degree to which policy – be it political, social or economic – can alter the direction of the postsecondary education system is key to not only understand how the province's postsecondary education sector came to be but also to identify the challenges and opportunities institutions encounter now and will encounter in the future.

British Columbia, like other Canadian provinces, holds the responsibility for postsecondary education, but it has its own nuances that make it worthy of its own study. The geographic realities of the province, with a handful of larger urban and densely populated areas in the south and the rural and more sparsely populated interior and northern areas, have made it difficult to have institutions equally accessible to all British Columbians. The province's community college system and university transfer credit system have mirrored the American system more so than Canada's. Changes in the provincial

government have, as they do in other provinces, also influenced the sector's unique development. Although the book focuses on one province, the methodology used for the study is one that could easily be applied to any provincial postsecondary system. Cowin's use of theory and policy to frame his discussion ensures that the sector is understood in its entirety – politically, socially and economically. Although there will be different historical events that may have influenced the development of each province's postsecondary sector there are sure to be commonalities in policies, given the overarching influence of our federal government on the entire sector. Cowin's work serves as an exemplary contribution to Canadian higher education literature.