Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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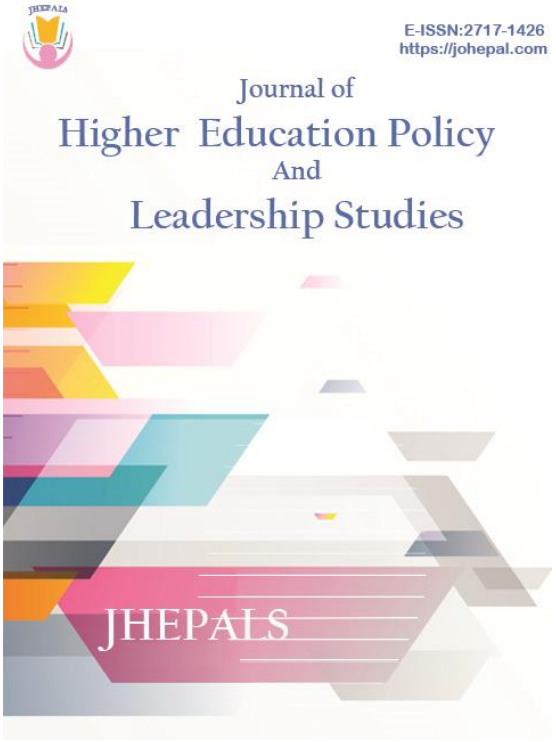

Book Review: University Governance in Canada: Navigating Complexity

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Book Review Received	Book Review Accepted	Published Online
2022/11/30	**2022/12/25**	**2022/12/31**

Cite book review as:

Jefferson, A. E. (2022). [Review of the book *University governance in Canada: Navigating complexity*, by J. Eastman, G. A. Jones, C. Trottier, & O. Begin-Caouette]. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *3*(4), 161-164. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.4.161

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.161]

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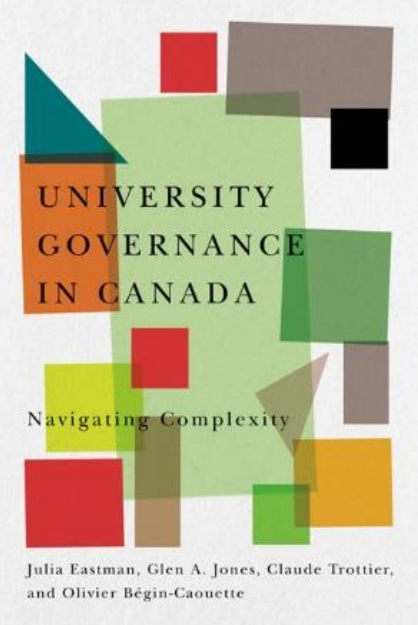
Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 3 Issue: 4
pp. 161-164
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.3.4.161

Authors: Julia Eastman, Glen A. Jones, Claude Trottier, & Olivier Bégin-Caouette
Publisher: McGill-Queen's University Press
Country of Publication: Canada
Year of Publication: 2022
ISBN: 978-0-2280-1145-3
Pages: x - 422



Alison Elizabeth Jefferson *

Keywords: Knowledge Society; University Governance; Canadian Universities; Provincial Policy; Decentralized Higher Education

In the global landscape of the knowledge society, the university is the seat of potential for economic growth through research and development, fostering talents and training the scholars of the future. In a time of rapid evolution of provincial and institutional policies and directives due events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war on Ukraine, it is more important than ever that we understand the drivers behind choices and changes made within and to our institutions and education system.

The title of this book, *Navigating Complexity,* is apt given that the authors aim to provide their readers with a comprehensive summary of Canadian higher education

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.161]

governance, which is notoriously complicated to unravel if one is not familiar. A country comprised of provinces and territories, largely de-centralized with regards to higher education, it is always going to be a multifaceted, messy subject to tackle. Yet, the four authors of this wonderful book manage to do so with great clarity and attention to detail, setting out what they intended to discuss and following through on that promise.

In the introduction and overview, the authors set expectations right from the start by outlining what they will explore in each of the three sections into which the book is structured, in addition to a discussion of the theoretical foundations upon which the book was developed. Using the *Theory of Practice* of the renowned sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986) and Simon Marginson's (2008) broader viewpoint placing education in its global context, amongst others, the authors develop astute questions surrounding university governance in Canada in the contemporary context. How do institutions meet the needs of students, industry, governments, and even society, whilst also maintaining a level of autonomy to provide sufficient academic freedom to become positive forces of change rather than reproducing social inequities? By exploring the roles of internal and external stakeholders and the mechanisms in place to "harness cultural capital" (Eastman et al., 2022, p. 8), the authors provide a detailed picture of the complexity of university governance in Canada. Acknowledging that "contemporary universities are better understood as both subject to and influencing global, national, and local forces" (Eastman et al., 2022, p. 7) compared to the French universities of the 1970s-80s upon which Bourdieu's work was largely derived, the book aptly uses its framework — as a framework, a guide, rather than a strict and structured tool to be adhered to — addresses the pressing issues of higher education governance in a contemporary setting, and the global knowledge society.

The authors begin with the history and evolution of university governance in Canada followed by a comparative case study of six universities and finishing with a discussion of Canada in a global context along with some practical suggestions, not only aimed at staff at various levels of university governance, but for future students as well.

In part two of the book, the authors address the results of a multi-case study of six large, research-intensive universities across Canada, between 2012-15. Data was derived from both primary and secondary sources, which included a systematic document analysis of government and university documents in addition to semi-structured interviews at both provincial and institutional level. What's particularly interesting about their approach to the analysis and write-up in this particular volume is the rather unique marriage of their results from both data collection methods to provide one comprehensive vault of information on each of the case-study institutions and the role of the provincial governments in each case. Taking this approach one step further, rather than providing a comprehensive examination of each institution in turn, they instead — after providing an initial overview of the histories of each institution —use the specific factors at play as their 'umbrella' term under which they then point out specific differences at specific institutions (i.e., internal governance structure, provincial policy, accreditation bodies, etc.). For example, in the chapter on trends and themes in external governance, the authors discuss what they determine as 'key aspects' of external governance, including institutional management and legislative frameworks, before turning to the role of the provincial governments in leadership, policy, and regulation, amongst others, and a discussion of individual, provincial nuances impacting

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.161]

such issues. Their key factors affecting internal governance focus on issues such as board and academic governance; academic departments; leadership and administration; faculty participation and student participation in governance; strategic planning, and budgetary processes; they then specifically reference individual institutions within each sub-section, exploring commonalities and mechanisms of internal governance. The intermingling of secondary data along with direct quotes from interview participants provides a rich, detailed picture of the governance over Canadian universities across the provinces at both the provincial and institutional levels.

For students and seasoned academics with an interest in how Canadian institutions are governed, with its complex history, hierarchies, and connections between internal and external stakeholders, this book will provide a comprehensive picture with real-life quotes from those directly involved which help to provide another dimension — the *human* aspect — to an often tiresome, repetitive overview of a dry and complicated topic such as institutional governance.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

The author received no financial support for this book review.

Human Participants

This is a book review and does not involve human participants.

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.161]

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[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.4.161]

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