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**Alexander, F. King, and Kern Alexander (eds.). *The University: International Expectations*. Montreal and Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002. Pp. xi + 138. CDN\$27.95 (paper). ISBN: 0-7735-2249-2**

**Reviewed by Anthony Potts, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia**

The two Alexanders have produced a timely, provocative, and stimulating book that engages the reader. Their edited collection examines colleges and universities in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The book details the evolution of the university, issues of university autonomy, performance accountability, human rights, financing, and the effect of technology. The foregoing issues are of course highly relevant for those who work in higher education or seek to understand it.

The book comprises ten chapters written by leading writers who are actively involved in dealing with the issues the book raises. The various authors rightly state that the problems and challenges raised by the book do not have simple solutions but they hope that their contributions will provide insights, options, and alternatives for those leading and working in universities and colleges throughout the world.

The book focuses on prevailing issues and expectations that confront college and university leaders. Moving from the general to the specific, the book starts with the questions of the “what and why” of university existence and the purpose of universities and their relationships with their host countries. What is the fit and proper relationship between the university and the state and how much freedom should the university have? How might universities respond to social and economic changes that challenge society and permeate university cultures? How can universities overcome their own inherent inertia and conservatism? Such questions frame the overall structure and focus of the book.

Within this broad focus, the book raises key questions within the context of existing national systems of higher education. The centralization of decision-making and the usefulness of alternative organizational structures are explored, as are questions of the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of educational services and the university’s responsiveness to the taxpayer and the student. The book reinforces the fact that, like it or not, universities operate under the constraints of the public’s expectations which demand maximization of resources along with higher and higher levels of performance and greater quality and quantity. Questions

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of how to deal with the issues of ever-increasing costs and public versus private institutions are also examined.

In addition to dealing with these important issues, the book also examines how the human rights are directly and appropriately of concern to universities and how universities can advance human rights and what they will need to more effectively respond to such important areas of concern in the future. Coupled with this discussion are legal concerns and how universities now face challenges from the law in more effectively discharging their duties. Lastly the book discusses the place of technology and information in this, our network and informational society, and the overall experience of higher education when improving college and university instruction. Again, the book looks at the legal issues that the Internet poses for universities and those who lead them and work in them.

I suspect each reader of *The University* will have their own favourite chapter and I too am no exception, so readers should read the book in its entirety. However, some of the chapters struck a particular response with me – perhaps due to what was occurring around me at the time of my reading the book. In Australia, there was recently released yet another federal government report on the future structure and funding of university education. With this background in mind, Kern Alexander's chapter on the object of the university raised the perennial question of what should be the "object of the university." Kern argues that first and foremost, education is a fundamental right and that the development of knowledge is the prerequisite for a decent civilization. Consequently, higher education should oppose "contracting the spectrum of knowledge." Kern Alexander suggests that the central control of educational objectives restricts learning and the production of rational thought. Strong words indeed but perhaps governments and policy makers in Australia at least would do well to dwell on them. Kern Alexander continues that university education should have as a major objective the breaking down of the barriers of class and moderating intergenerational privilege. One wonders how far universities do in fact achieve this. The debate on this point rages in Australia at the moment but one can become very gloomy about how far Australia has gone in achieving this goal. Perhaps we have achieved the opposite of what Kern Alexander suggests and universities do little for the less advantaged.

Don Aitkin's chapter complements that of Kern Alexander. Aitkin argues that the reason for the longevity of universities as institutions is due to the fact that they have learnt to adapt to contemporary needs. However, while adaptation and change by universities has occurred, many academics have normally resisted this. One can ask the question of how many inside universities have vigorously resisted many of the changes that Kern Alexander or the other writers suggest need to be affected? How many inside universities have railed against attempts to make universities more efficient, accountable, effective, and more representative of wider society in terms of student intake? What has been the basis of their resistance and how rational has it been? Those inside universities may see themselves defending the essence of the academy but how much of their defence has been based on self-interest and preserving a pleasant way of life? Aitkin is quick to point out that many of us who work in universities are our own worst enemies. He writes "loftiness about other places and other disciplines, usually in the absence of much knowledge of either is one of our besetting sins as a profession. It flows from uncertainty

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— and also from the long time spent investing in one's human capital, which makes other disciplines and other universities appear as competitors rather than as colleagues." Aitkin writes of how he can remember "the scorn of those at Sydney and Melbourne for the people setting up new institutions at Kensington ('the Tech', or 'the shop') and Clayton ('the farm'). Ten years or so later, there was united disdain for Macquarie ('just a teachers' college') and La Trobe ('more professors than students')".

Aitkin suggests that rather than fill our times with such blinkered and pointless thinking, those who work in universities need to see change and adaptation as a natural process and to take charge of the process themselves. In so doing, we need to capture the interest and imagination of our communities not as monopolists of knowledge and credentials but as institutions with our sights set on the futures and on what will be necessary in that future. Like Kern Alexander, Aiken argues that those who work in universities need to capture the essence of their university, with its particular purpose, character, and virtue and "reinvent those for the future." While acknowledging that reinvention is a hard thing to do, Aitkin notes it has to be done and in fact the last fifty years has seen almost continuous reinvention.

Having concentrated on just two of the authors and their respective chapters in *The University*, I feel guilty that I have not had the time and space to deal with other equally stimulating and useful contributions. Readers are urged to read the whole of *The University*. It will be time well spent for the book is easy to read and filled with much that is entertaining, provocative, and useful.