

Alternative Universities: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education

DAVID J. STALEY, 2019

Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press

280 pp.

\$34.95 Hardback

ISBN No: 9781421427416

David Staley's 2019 book *Alternative Universities: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education* asks how we might re-envision the idea of the university, presenting a series of "feasible utopias" (p. 14, after Barnett, 2011) that are, at times, radical, visionary and innovative.

Each chapter of the book proposes a different "imagining" of the university: exploring a different model of how such institutions might be conceptualised. The book is divided into four parts, which characterise key aspects of these different models. In Part I: "Organization" proposals are concerned with university models which are distinguished by their structure: "The Platform University" imagines a minimalist scenario in which the university serves mainly to connect teachers and students together; the "Microcollege" proposes that higher education might be organised into hundreds of much smaller units – consisting of single teachers and their class; and "The Humanities Think Tank" considers whether the traditional policy think tank might serve as a blueprint for an institution which brings together those working in the humanities but directs them towards identifying policy solutions.

In Part II: "Apprenticeship" the author suggests two approaches to the university which prioritise experience over theory: the "Nomad University" has no geographical base and instead allows students to undertake a series of placements, described as mini "gap-year experiences"; while "The Liberal Arts College" represents a slightly more familiar structure, but one which organises the curriculum around skills development (such as leadership or problem-solving).

Part III: “Technology” is focused on the ways in which technology might revolutionise higher education. Both the “Interface University” and “The University of the Body” focus on how technology might become core to the experience of higher education (distinct from the use of technology as a delivery tool that current universities are often relatively familiar with).

The final section of the book, Part IV: “Attributes” struck me as the most compelling – questioning what the attributes are that graduates should leave higher education with and to some extent working backwards from that point. “The Institute for Advanced Play” treats play as the primary method of studying, working, thinking and creating; at the “Polymath University” students major in three subjects from the arts/humanities, the sciences and the professional disciplines; while at the “Future University” the whole curriculum is designed around thinking about and building for the future.

Amongst the broad range of models (encompassing the ten primary chapters and a series of shorter “interludes” as well) there seemed to be a small nucleus of cross-cutting ideas which together might allow one to consider what the deeper messages are from this book. Capstone assessments; a commitment to multi-disciplinary study; project-based working; and a focus on skills development all emerged strongly as key themes from the book and as underpinning ideals were all well-argued for and conceptualised.

In the descriptions of each model I was a little disappointed that the obvious shortcomings of the proposals were not addressed at all – at no point were the potential or likely criticisms anticipated and countered, which made the argument that these might be “feasible” suggestions or imaginings a little less secure. Furthermore, I found it slightly strange that current versions of (some of) the proposals were rarely discussed or referenced (aside from a small number of notable examples) given that aspects/variants on almost all the proposals here do exist in some form.

At its heart, rather than simply presenting a list of options, the book engages in a debate around the fundamental purpose of higher education (e.g. whether that is to develop skills, attributes, knowledge or something else) that gives it a sense of depth and applicability that might

speak to a broad audience. The book could have genuine implications for policymakers and academic managers were they to read it, while it might easily serve as a way of imagining what might be possible for other academics and even students. Some of the ideas mentioned are already at least partly happening, while there is no reason why other ideas could not and should not exist sooner rather than later (especially within expanding and diversifying markets such as the US or the UK).

Ronald Barnett (2011) The coming of the ecological university. *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(4), 439-455. DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2011.595550

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680 words