Alternative Universities: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education
David J. Staley, 2019
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I was really excited when I got the copy of *Alternative Universities*. What could be timelier in an era when the civic purpose of the universities –or our institutions of truth (Arendt, 1977: 243)— are being questioned and when academia is being threatened by a combination of forces, including aggressive neoliberal policies, increasing commercialization and global upsurge of authoritarianism? Many have demonstrated that universities are going through an existential crisis under this new setting (Giroux 2014; Brown & Carasso, 2013), often referred to as academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004) or the enterprise university (Marginson & Considine 2000). Some have analyzed how these transformations affect the students and faculty to whom the university belongs (Ergül & Coşar, 2017). As Ronald Barnett (2011), one of the author's sources of inspiration, once pointed out: universities have arrived at the existential moment where they "have to decide how they are to be" (p. 16).

To address the issue and move beyond the crisis, we need an alternative vision of the future of higher education (HE) and this book proposes ten of them. However, readers should be cautious about the word "alternative" here, and in the title of the book. Readers of this Journal will be disappointed if they are looking for truly progressive, feasible and assertive alternative university models that challenge the market-driven principles and ethos of neoliberal HE; propose fundamental reforms to rediscover the civic purpose of university; and which question - rather than simply deliver (or deliver better) - the demands of buyers, industries or governments. However, Staley's proposals may appeal to those who tend to take the current neoliberal restructuring of academia for granted, and those who are interested in competitive business ideas for educational start-ups that may better survive in today's technology-driven global knowledge economy.

The book introduces ten business models, which, in the author's words, are blueprints of new universities that can be built as alternatives to the existing models. *Part I: Organization* brings together three chapters that deal with the question of how universities should be organized to address serious challenges posed by technology-led transformations in HE. The first model (Chapter 1) is *Platform University* (PU). The author suggests that the term "platform" here is similar to the one in business, whose sole objective is to facilitate interactions between "buyers" and "sellers" (e.g. Airbnb). Based on a horizontally structured and self-regulated learning environment, PU offers a "permeable" environment for its students and faculty. Chapter 2 introduces *Microcollege* that can be established by one professor and twenty students. The location of the college is of particular importance, Staley warns, because it reflects the pedagogical scope of the institution. For a programme that concentrates on

biology or agronomy, a farmhouse might be ideal, while others can be located in different places depending on the professor's expertise. Chapter 3 presents *The Humanities Think Tank* (HTT): A policy-oriented research institute that harnesses the humanities' wealth of knowledge and methodological power to provide government officials, policy-actors, corporations or NGOs with deeper analysis of social issues. The ultimate aim is to influence policy and practice. Led by group of experts, HTT works around a number of areas such as culture, religion, health, gender, technology, environment as well as other issues raised by the audience targeted. The core argument is that, although the humanities are powerful in making sense of the world around us, the way it is currently organized within traditional university limits the potential of the discipline, diminishes its place and threats its future. To address this, HTT locates humanities back where Staley feels they originally belonged: outside the university.

Part 2, *Apprenticeship,* comprises two imaginative models. *Nomad University* (NU) (Chapter 4) has no stable physical location; it "is nowhere and everywhere" (p.83). Faculty and students pursue nomadic academic life, travelling and reassembling frequently for different project proposals around the world. The rationale behind is simple: The contemporary global economy requires flexible and truly independent professionals who are ready and equipped to work under short-term contracts in different countries; therefore, strong sense of cosmopolitanism is an essential skill for graduates. The discussion continues in Chapter 5 through *Liberal Arts College* (LAC)*,* which, in author's words, "is designed to align education and workforce development skills" (p.99). The LAC is reminiscent of liberal arts in medieval university, in that it focuses on broadly defined seven skills rather than specific subjects: Complex problem solving; sense making; making; imagination; multimodal communication; cross-cultural competency; and leadership. Once a student shows her fluency of these skills, LAC matches the student with a potential employer.

Part 3 deals with another essential ingredient: *Technology*. Chapter 6 introduces *Interface University* (IU) and reflects on the question of what happens if humans and synthetic intelligence (e.g. computers, AI) harness on each other's unique skills and think together to solve problems. The core argument is that humans will not get replaced by machines; instead, with a pedagogical approach that builds the skills of humans and machines together, they will produce a better outcome than humans or computers could possibly do alone. As expected, coding is a fundamental part of education along with other common courses such as history, philosophy and ethics of technology. Chapter 7, *The University of Body* (UB), imagines a HE landscape where the body (and the sensory way the body retains information) is an integral part of the learning experience.

The last part (Part 4), *Attributes*, opens with *Institute for Advanced Play* (Chapter 8): A learning environment where play is an end in itself, rather than a pedagogical tool for learning more serious subjects. In this creative setting, play is taken very seriously as it represents the highest form of learning. Business may find the innovative and playful ideas generated by IAP useful for their purposes; yet, this is *not* the goal since there are no predetermined "goals" in IPA, where, just like in children's world, "play is a process of aimless curiosity" (p.163). In Chapter 9, we come across *Polymath University* (PU), where students major in three disciplines. The core argument is that an innovative thinking stems from the ability of creating connections between

seemingly unrelated disciplines, such as education-political science-art or finance-astronomy-religious studies. The philosophy is to think "simultaneously as an architect, as a sociologist, as a poet" (p. 178). Contrary to interdisciplinary studies where different branches of knowledge are combined into one programme, in PU, it is the student –not the disciplines— who is multidisciplinary. Rather than mastering the broad knowledge of three disciplines, students learn to work on the intersections of them at where innovative ideas emerge. The final model is *Future University* (Chapter 10): An academic site where people who wish to think and act ahead of their time meet. Students are taught to work and imagine with scenarios through a variety of techniques such as case studies, trend analysis, sense-making, cross-impact analysis, science fiction prototyping or environment scanning.

Borrowing from Barnett, Staley defines his business models as "feasible utopias" (p. 14), each with a potential to be realized. However, the book does not present sufficient content or in-depth discussion for the models introduced. Instead, the readers are left with a collection of business ideas that fails to adequately address the question of how these models will be implemented, and more fundamentally, how they will tackle the ongoing crisis in HE and constitute serious alternatives. Of course, the answer depends upon, by and large, how one defines the crisis. Those who consider university as part of service industry might take the current global crisis as a challenge or even an opportunity to explore novel business models to deliver "marketable" products and university experiences to attract potential "customers" (students, corporations, military, etc.). This book is a good example of such an approach. However, there are also those who refuse to see universities as factories or education as a commodity. For them, what really poses existential threat to HE is the corporate, neoliberal model of university, which represents "the ultimate expression of a disimagination machine which employs a top-down authoritarian style of power, mimics a business culture, infantilizes students by treating them as consumers and depoliticizes faculty by removing them from all forms of governance" (Giroux & Samalavičius, 2016). If the university is to survive, we will have to rediscover its purpose in society; restore its dedication to the pursuit of truth regardless of constraints; and continue to insist on fundamental reforms and progressive strategies that will not only replace the current model of neoliberal university with progressive alternatives, but also address the damage it has caused.

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