Patterns of the University

Inevitably, the structure of this book has had some arbitrariness attaching to it. A different structure could have been adopted for the volume; equally, even within the present structure, some of the chapters could happily have been placed in different parts of the volume. Such a level of openness and choice in the allocation of the chapters is inevitable for all of the chapters embody themes that criss-cross the volume. Just some of the large themes contained in this volume have been the following (the authors cited alongside the themes are simply indicative):

- The dominance of the economic sphere in the contemporary shaping of the university (Morley; Díaz Villa; Dall’Alba);
- The performative turn (Waghid; Masschelein & Simons);
- The university understood as a set of spaces (Standaert; Masschelein & Simons);
- The university as a global phenomenon (Morley; Chen & Lo; Peters, Giertzen & Ondercin; Díaz Villa; Standaert);
- The common good and the public sphere (van Wyk & Higgs; Nixon; Peters, Giertzen & Ondercin; Masschelein & Simons; Chen & Lo);
- Multiple knowledges (Wheelahan; Morley; Díaz Villa; Standaert);
- The need for a theory of knowledge (Kavanagh; Maxwell; van Wyk & Higgs);
- Sacred and profane knowledge (Masschelein & Simons; Morley; Wheelahan);
- Wisdom (Kavanagh; Maxwell; Dall’Alba; Nixon);
- The possibility of a recovery of liberal education (Rothblatt; Wheelahan; Chen & Lo; Standish);
• Critical reason (Waghid; Maxwell; Masschelein & Simons);
• The digital revolution (Rothblatt; Morley; Peters, Gietzen & Ondercin);
• Distributed, networked universities (Rothblatt; Peters, Gietzen & Ondercin; Standaert);
• Openness (Peters, Gietzen & Ondercin; Díaz Villa, Chen & Lo);
• Re-covering teaching (Waghid; Wheelahan; Standish; Nixon; Masschelein & Simons).

This is but an abbreviated list of cross-cutting themes in this volume. The mutuality and interconnections across the chapters are considerable (to which the index is testimony).

There is, it is apparent therefore, a complex patterning to the contributions here. A crude summary might be along the following lines: globally, the university is being incorporated into “knowledge capitalism” (Murphy, 2009), a process that is closing off spaces for the university such that its dominant activities—teaching, research and public engagement—are being steered in that direction. And yet, there remain spaces for more emancipatory and publicly-oriented stances on the part of the university. Wisdom, care, purpose networking, sustainability and openness are just some of the ideas offered here that imply that spaces may even be opening anew for the university in the twenty-first century. The very “hybridity” and “liminality”—to pick up two concepts from this volume—are opening new spaces for the university. It is not necessarily the case that the spaces of the university are being closed; or at least, even amid closure, new spaces may be opening. The university has not yet been suffocated.

Responsible and yet Poetic Anarchism

There is a further theme among the contributors, both explicit and implicit, that of responsibility (especially evident in the chapters by Gloria Dall’Alba and Louise Morley but surely implicit in several of the other chapters). To point to new spaces and the possibilities that they afford could point to an unbridled anarchism that, in turn, could lead to the “callousness of prestige” to which Morley refers (after Bousquet), in which the university sector becomes even more stratified. The entrepreneurial age, the coming of “knowledge capitalism,” could seem to invite an academic free-for-all. And this free-for-all would be a global competitiveness, with the academic landscape dominated by universities that were both epistemically and economically powerful. Global inequalities across nations would be not just mirrored but exacerbated by global inequalities across universities.

However, the theme of responsibility pulls the university back, steadies it, and gives it pause for reflection as it ventures forward. “When possibilities are opened, we press ahead into an emergent possibility, thereby negating and foreclosing other possibilities.” This reflection of Dall’Alba’s is crucial here. There are no value-free or neutral options. In choosing to go in certain directions, some further
possibilities are opened but others are truncated and even eradicated. Except at the
price of bad faith, of pretending that it has no options, therefore, the university
has to choose; and to understand that it chooses among the options before it.

But on what basis is the university to choose between its options? It will do so
on the basis of its values. It might be tempting to talk of “the value background”
of the university (cf. Barnett, 1990) but now, in an unstable world, with a myriad
of challenges befalling the university and options opening for it, we should per-
haps rather speak of a “value foreground.” That is to say, the values by which a
university steers among the thickets and attempts to carve out a line of direction
for itself needs—in the twenty-first century—to become much more transpar-
ent, both to the university itself and to its hinterland. Here, I think that we are
indebted to Mario Díaz Villa who provides us with both a detailed set of axioms
that might inform the idea of the university in the twenty-first century and a set
of principles that provide a general specification of a university that fulfilled the
axioms. I believe, too, that the axioms and the principles reflect much of the
spirit of the university that percolates much, if not all, of the contributions to this
volume, those axioms and principles reflecting values connected with democracy,
pluralism, dialogue, the public realm and openness.

The idea of responsibility, it might be felt, has a particular role to play in curb-
ing the excesses of economic and instrumental reason. And so it has. But it is
crucial to notice that it also comes into play here in quite a different way. I stressed
in the Introduction that ideas of the university appropriate to the twenty-first
century required imagination. Leaping out of the immediate situation in which
universities find themselves and fashioning ideas afresh requires bold imagination.
The imagination itself needs to be anarchic. But the imagination needs also to be
conditioned by appropriate values and principles. The imagination itself needs
also to be responsible.

The relationship between the imagination and responsibility takes on no less
than three quite different forms, therefore. In the first place, imagination can help
to furnish possibilities in the situation that is immediately before a university.
It can discern possibilities for seizing the moment, for exploiting the moment.
Here, as stated, responsibility then becomes a brake, a dampening of the worst
excesses of unbridled knowledge capitalism. This university would be realizing
a soft form of knowledge capitalism. But, then, and in the second place, imagina-
tion can help in going beyond the surface order of things, to discern possibilities
that lie beneath. Here, responsibility becomes a way of the university’s flower-
ing. Through imagination and responsibility jointly combined, a new kind of
university can be glimpsed that does justice to values that challenge the establish-
ment. Third responsibility then comes in to steady the ship, to exert a realism on
proceedings. It denies the possibility of an undue fancifulness, avoiding a castles-
in-the-air mentality. It becomes quite hard-nosed, as flights of fancy are brought
up against the realities of the world. The contributions in the fourth part of the
volume are precisely of this character, especially the final chapter—by Michael
Peters, Garett Gietzin and David Ondercin: there one sees a specific vision of possibilities for openness tempered by both an understanding of modern technology and fair rules of the game over intellectual copyright.

The offerings in part four of the book are “simply” indications of this combination of imagination and responsibility at play. And “play” here in two senses: play as in the ludic, in the form of a free roaming of the imagination as it explores the possibilities afforded by the spaces of the webs (Standaert) in which the university now finds itself. Here, there is a playfulness—and even as we might put it, following Kavanagh, a “playfulness” as the university hold new and even awkward possibilities up to society; and play in the sense of a give and take, as there is “play” in the bending of tall structures. Here, their play, their flexibility allows them to survive in the otherwise harsh and very real exigencies of the environment in which they find themselves.

The ideas and the possibilities for the university of the twenty-first century, therefore, call for, as we may put it, a responsible anarchism. The university needs desperately a kind of anarchism, able to step outside of its presenting situations and imagine quite new possibilities, even at the risk of offending its sovereigns (Kavanagh). In the process, too, it must allow itself to forge new “conceptual grammars” (Morley) that speak to quite radical ideas and values that disturb the existing order. And that anarchism needs to be carried forward tinged with a due responsibility, lightly anchoring the university in the realities of the day. Then, new concepts may just give rise to new kinds of action in the world that seriously take account of the world; that even disturb the world but yet are feasible in the world. Its utopias would be feasible utopias (Barnett, 2011). To begin with, however, what is required is the exercise of the imagination. A new poetry of the university is now needed; nothing less. Such an exercise is not easy: it is extremely demanding for poetry comes with its rules and conditions. At some level, the poetry has to be intelligible. Even poets have to live in the real world.