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Book Review: The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education

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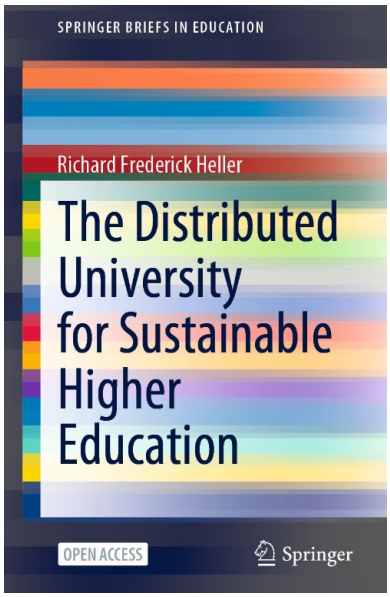

Author: Richard F. Heller (Springer, 2021, 89 pages) ISBN: 978-981-16-6505-9 (paperback), ISBN: 978-981-16-6506-6 (e-book). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6

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The author, Richard F. Heller, is an established academic with more than 50 years of experience internationally in the higher education sector. He commenced his academic career in the United States, traversing the United Kingdom and Australia thereafter. His key forte is his vast experience in multiple educational settings and contexts, ranging from small to large classes, and multiple delivery types including problem-based and online learning. In addition to his lecturing, he has held a number of senior leadership roles and is a prolific researcher, with over four hundred publications to his credit.

Since Heller's journey into academia commenced without any formal training in the educational context, his book *The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education* resonates for many academics who have transitioned from students to lecturers during their higher education journey. Heller's practical and evidence-based approach to sharing his learnings during his varied academic journey at a number of higher education institutions provides a realistic view of the proposed "distributed university."

Organisation/Structure

The book is structured into five sections. Heller commences with a narrative description of the progression of higher education from the "first to the fourth-generation universities." Thereafter, in a systematic approach, he outlines what he believes are the main challenges universities face in the current context. Section three proposes solutions that can be explored to minimise the impact of the

potential problems outlined in section two. Section four address the burning issue of funding required for an institution to sustain itself. Finally, Heller brings together the content presented in sections one through four in a comprehensive case study.

The main attraction of this book is its accurate reflection of an academic's journey in higher education, especially one without any formal degree or diploma in education. The author's regular references made to the literature, to substantiate his claims, strengthen the book. Additionally, reference to actual examples during his own tenure, clearly illustrated in diagrams (e.g., Figure 2.1 on p. 8), provides the required evidence to support his conclusions.

Heller also highlights key issues that academics face with the watering down of incentives associated with good teaching practices. Since a large portion of government subsidy is obtained from research publications, many universities have adopted a more authoritarian management style that promotes competition between and within universities, increasing bullying associated with "managerialism." Building trust is key to overcoming this.

While Heller acknowledges that all countries provide funding for the university sector, the extent of this government support varies, as does the combination of public and private universities and the reliance on student fees, all of which impact the financial sustainability of an institution. Many countries have now demanded that a larger portion of university costs should be borne by the students to help governments save costs. The author outlines that competition between universities should encourage them to improve their courses in an attempt to improve the quality of their offerings. However, the current business models adopted by universities highlight how higher education uncritically adopted emerging societal trends without considering whether they were relevant. Collaboration, as opposed to competition, is needed, and to support this, Heller proposes a new Bloom's taxonomy to include collaboration (Figure 3.1 on p. 58).

Assessment of Significance to the Field of Distance Education Theory, Research, and/or Practice

While *The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education* may have been written pre-COVID-19 pandemic, the information presented is extremely relevant in the context of the pandemic. The author highlights that the main mode of a successful university in the future will be online learning. While he acknowledges that this does "not preclude face-to-face experiences, and there are some things which can only be taught in person" (p. 63), digital transformation to embrace the fourth industrial revolution is imperative if an institution wants to sustain itself. The book transitions from problems to solutions and then addresses budget aspects to be considered before presenting key points to consider for the future of higher education. This approach ensures that the author builds a logical argument for the disruptions in higher education. Acknowledging the limitations associated with implications of a greater reliance on technology, Heller stresses, however, that "young people use the online space for so many of their activities," and so failing to "fully realise this in an educational context is misguided in the extreme, and misses a wonderful opportunity" (p. 64). The book makes a meaningful contribution to the literature on online education, research, and best practices. It stands apart from other literature in the area through its practical approach to making online education an integral part of the university of the future while ensuring environmental sustainability.

Overall Impression

I would highly recommend this book to higher education management and decision makers, as the author's pragmatic approach weaves together integral components of the fourth-generation university, including highlighting the need for collaboration, embracing online learning, considering environmental sustainability, and embracing technology to minimise the challenges associated with inequalities in access, affordability, downgrading of teaching in reward systems, and managerialism.

He proposes three new programmes. The first is the "International Tertiare (International Degree) Programme" to "reduce unnecessary competition between universities, reduce opportunities for managerialism, enhance international collaboration and the internationalisation of education" (p. 60). The second is the "Global Online Learning Programme (Australia Online)," which relies on embracing online learning as its foundation and could result in

> a wide reach across geographies, gender, levels of income and employment; costs of travel and accommodation [...] avoided, and manpower [...] not depleted during education; environmental sustainability; no evidence that e-learning is less effective than face-to-face teaching; and access to a wide range of educational resources that are freely available on the web (Open Educational Resources), reducing costs of production. (pp. 74–75)

The third is "Plan E for Education," which "questions the rationale for educational resources, produced in whole or in part through government funding, playing into the competitive business model of the higher education" (p. 78). Thus, Plan E would have three potential delivery strands: "Students access materials through the university that has produced them as per current practice, individual students could access materials for their own learning, and third-party organisations can contextualise and deliver them in innovative ways" (p. 89). This would complement the move towards the "distributed university," which would allow the higher education sector to have a sustainable future (p. 80).

Though the lucid experiences outlined in this book are drawn largely from the health arena, the presentation of the concepts, linked to the literature, ensures its general applicability across the university sector.