

Preface

Everyone has a stake in education. This book springs from an appetite to re-imagine higher education so it can make an even better contribution to more people's lives.

The education and research provided by universities and other kinds of higher education institutions transforms people's lives, yet even—and perhaps especially—a casual participant cannot help but notice how things could be improved. It is a poorly kept secret that big buildings can sit idle many months each year, people can be educated in batch-like 'vanilla' ways disconnected from workforce needs, people trained as research experts can be expected to provide professional teaching to learners with increasingly diverse backgrounds and aspirations, and very large institutions can remain somewhat isolated from the communities around them.

Not a day passes without news of new attempts to transform higher education. Thousands of specialist researchers and research centres have focused energies in recent decades, hundreds of government ministers and university presidents have steered difficult reforms, students and staff have adapted to new stakes and perspectives, and consultants have minted careers advising executives of options.

Over the past few decades, I have become convinced that understanding and developing transparency lies at the heart of any genuine advance. Improving transparency offers the jolt required to shift practice, and reinforces the infrastructure leaders and others then need to do their work. Hence, in thinking through options for a somewhat imaginative book on higher education, transparency clarified as the natural topic to pursue. By rendering the idea less obtuse, it offered a mechanism for organising my ideas and insights in ways relevant to shaping future directions.

Transparency seemed a useful underpinning frame, but even after initial forays it appeared an under-researched and underdeveloped topic. Most existing work appeared driven by high-level sectoral or institutional governance concerns, much work sat outside higher education, and many of the most interesting initiatives—perhaps strangely—seemed private or commercial in nature. This sense stirred my interest in further articulating transparency, both conceptually and in terms of its relevance to practice and policy.

Building on conversations dating back to 2010, I started writing this book in 2014. My intention was to stand back from the to and fro of academic and institutional work and write the book fresh, from start to finish. But as the design and text took shape it became clear that the single-authored monograph offered a special opportunity to knit together earlier ruminations and organise substantial prior work using the core thrust of transparency. Consequently, as the book shaped up it has drawn on prior works and collaborations. This writing endeavour has offered me an intellectual opportunity to position these works into imaginative play regarding certain futures for higher education.

Writing a book like this is a deeply individual experience, yet higher education research and development is an inherently social and typically collaborative venture—and of course, this book has been shaped by conversations with thousands of people all around the world over the past 20 years. I am very grateful to these students and academic colleagues. Too many pages would be required to list everyone, and it is impossible to list people who have provided anonymous insights or confidential advice. By way of a first and very broad acknowledgement, therefore, I am very grateful to everyone who has contributed to the thinking I step out in this book.

More particularly, I am very grateful to the following people (listed alphabetically) for help developing this book: Sara Bice, Victor Borden, Mollie Dollinger, Gail Maddigan, Marian Mahat, Attila Pausits and Jinghuan Shi. I am also grateful to numerous colleagues who have provided opportunities for me to deliver keynotes and seminars on various ideas discussed. I thank my daughters Imogen and Annabel for helping me learn.

Much of my previous work has been captured in previous chapters, papers and presentations. Certain contributions have been co-authored (ordered alphabetically) with: Emmaline Bexley, Sara Bice, Justin Brown, Tim Friedman, Leo Goedegebuure, Ellen Hazekorn, Paula Kelly, Mary Catharine Lennon, Marian Mahat, Alexander McCormick, Lynn Meek, John Mitchell, Ryan Naylor and Peter Noonan.

I acknowledge that text in this book has been published in the following publications, and used with permission from the publishers (noted in brackets at the end of each citation):

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<http://www.springer.com/978-981-10-2871-7>

The Market for Learning
Leading Transparent Higher Education
Coates, H.
2017, XXI, 169 p. 18 illus., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-981-10-2871-7