

Preface

This book had its genesis more than 15 years ago with the realisation that, despite significant engagement with the potential offered by technology, the university seemed strangely immune to the potential for change. The e-learning Maturity Model was created in an initially naïve belief that progress would follow from the identification and replication of best practice in the use of technology by the top international universities. The recognition that the problem facing the university is far more complex has seen my research expand beyond the technological, engaging with colleagues in many countries in the exploration of the shared problem we all face in stimulating and supporting change.

The goal of this book is to assist university leaders responding to technological change. Building resilient and agile universities is based on a clear understanding of the complex nature of the existing institution, its students and the organisational context. Universities need to learn how to sustain their relevance in a rapidly changing social, political, economic and technological environment. Effective organizations use technology to shape their operations in ways that build their capability and lead the wider understanding of the role higher education plays in a vibrant and healthy society.

Words like ‘transformation’ and ‘innovation’ are often invoked in a frenzied ritual of organisational behaviour that is driven by technocratic visions amid a sense of unrelenting service to commercial and political prerogatives. Technology, in particular, is positioned as an inevitable trigger of deterministic change, redefining entire industries in ways that make a variety of modern services cheap and ubiquitous. Higher education is not immune to this sense of technocratic predestination as illustrated most recently through the international response to the concept of the massive open online course (MOOC). This book rejects these simplistic linear models of technological transformation and innovation, instead positioning technology as a tool for exploring and understanding the university as a modern institution of society.

The idea of continuous change and organisational agility sustained by an ongoing process of sense-making—a deeper understanding of the nature of the particular organisation’s context and challenges—is a key feature of this book.

Technology provides a lens for re-evaluating and exploring the organisation's activities as well as offering new ideas or possibilities. The opportunities provided by technology enable the organisation to transform itself through a deep understanding of its identity and core purposes, rather than being transformed by technology. Change activities can then provide a means by which continuous engagement in understanding the roles and purposes of the university positions it for the future in a form defined for itself, rather than being determined and controlled by external interests.

Writing a book of this scale is a journey of discovery. Sense-making is both a tool described in this book and a description of its totality. The process of researching, discussing, writing and editing its chapters has been a sense-making journey where the cues have flowed from the conversations with colleagues, both in person and through the longer timescale of the published literature. The bibliography of this book spans millennia, reflecting the ongoing relationship between education and civilisation. Despite the common assumption that engagement with technology inevitably involves new ideas and 'innovation', many of the challenges and ideas engaged in this book have been explored for decades. This implies a mixed set of possible messages. Possibly the university is eternal and the issues discussed merely distractions, but more likely, the exponential and unpredictable pace of technologically catalysed change means that long-standing problems are culminating in a wicked problem requiring a shift in the mindset of university leaders and faculty.

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