Introduction

In South Africa, Milly Daweti and Jean Mitchell admit to significant tensions in their work to expand flexible options in post-secondary education. They separate pre- and post-1994 South Africa to show how the driving and restraining forces around increased flexibility changed after the huge social transformation in the country. The new drivers of legislation, labour-market demands, subsidized higher education, and technology for flexible access also expose gaps between “the promise and the reality”—a situation that many agents for change in higher education beyond South Africa may well understand. We leave it to you to decide whether their chapter offers another case study of rhetoric versus reality, of assumed opportunities for student access and success versus restrictions or dropouts.

Cathy Gunn asks two questions that refuse to disappear: “Why is it that far fewer faculty than anticipated are prepared to engage with flexible learning, and what barriers exist between strategic intent and the translation of flexible learning principles into good educational practice”? She argues for a “capacity development framework” that really does reveal the forces that restrain institutional strategies. Three questions drive her thinking: “What are the missing links between policy and practice, why have they proved so persistent, and what can be done to address them?” One lesson she has learned is that flexibility across institutional operations can be most “elusive” despite the best-intentioned efforts.

Cultural diversity delivers (or should deliver) a strong impact on designing flexible approaches, according to Colin Latchem and Insung Jung. With the help of a famous fable, they remind us that “every culture needs to define flexibility within its own philosophical, theoretical, and operational frameworks,” while remaining sensitive to cross-cultural issues. Asian countries are experiencing two main drivers toward greater flexibility—rapid expansion without escalation of costs and reform of higher-education administration. But serious longer-term costs of doing off-shore “business” may apply when trying to impose Western versions
of flexibility on other cultures or assuming that collaborative technologies will be accepted in very hierarchical and regulatory cultures.

The road to open and flexible education in New Zealand is not always smooth. Metaphorical potholes may wreck an innovator’s chances of piloting a smooth ride through changes toward flexibility. Mary Simpson and Bill Anderson take a broad view. They argue that “government frameworks, teaching and research activities, institutional policies, and the digital environment” are the key danger points on the journey toward better access and success in higher education. If those were not enough potholes, these intrepid travellers have also seen the forces that work against greater flexibility in distance-mode education in dual-mode institutions. Mary and Bill have learned that innovators need to be very skilful drivers to weave through all the operational roads in an institution.