Introduction

For these seven chapters, we asked very experienced practitioners to write narratively and reflectively, to tell us as much of their unvarnished experience and lessons learned as they dared without getting into trouble in their home institution!

Their results create, in effect, a primer for change agents attempting to create greater flexibility in higher education. Consider Darcy Hardy’s strategic persistence in following her principle of full collaboration with all stakeholders across a huge multi-campus system. Andrew Higgins and Mark Northover were ordered to implement, without visible failures, a top-down, imposed technology solution designed for greater flexibility. They had to rigorously prioritize tasks in order to ensure full compliance of existing systems with the new software and, just as difficult, to promote adoption of the software by faculty members. Further lessons for change agents lie in Andy Lane’s efforts to inform senior management exactly how much sustained flexibility to learning and teaching might be added with open educational resources. Accompany Kay MacKeogh and Seamus Fox on what proved to be their own rocky road toward more flexible access and success routes for students after the government of Ireland withdrew its funding of their university’s distance-education centre. Their “rocks” were buried in an all-too-familiar problem: the gap between the institutional “rhetoric of flexibility and accessibility” and the “deep-seated attachment” to very traditional live transmission of pre-digested content to students sitting in lecture theatres. Darien Rossiter searches for answers to her university’s current lack of sustained “user engagement with flexible learning” despite a record of many innovations implemented mostly by early adopters. She finds the answers in four major constraints that, in combination, make a covertly powerful mix of forces against enhanced flexibility.

Yoni Ryan’s astute and pithy observations are far ranging. They illuminate significant changes in societal values that underlie changes in education, expose the impacts of “false prophets” of technology adoption,
and explore some of the consequences of today’s increasingly part-time academic workforce. She remains fully committed to the earlier drivers of flexible educational provision—those based (much more so than those today) on principles of equity, access, and robust support for all kinds of learners. Yoni sees no good reason to switch her allegiance to the current and dominating driver of online learning per se. Will her patience last while the technocrats rule? Might she see any signs of a public return to the earlier drivers of flexibility?

Do not be fooled by Non Scantlebury and Gill Needham’s skilful narration of their adventures in the politics of power. They expose covert and non-benign influences on their attempts to walk their talk about enhancing flexibilities in library services and being strong advocates for students. Their analysis of their opponents’ behaviour makes for very vivid imagery. But consider what forces lie beneath the surfaces of staff meetings and power plays. Discover how Non and Gill were able to stay focused on what really mattered in the long term, despite trying to manage intra-institutional rivalries.

Such brief notes on these chapters fail to do the authors justice. So read on!