Introduction

In the chapters that follow, three colleagues show where the rhetoric of hope and hype meets the reality of expectations and expediencies. David Harris, like Adrian Kirkwood and Alan Woodley, has enough experience and insight to point out “the paradoxes that accompany flexibility in higher education and that are responsible for uneven uptake and variable practices.” Such paradoxes are not new but are sometimes difficult to detect within seemingly benign, even helpful institutional operations. David challenges us to reframe our thinking on flexibility, not as a goal in itself but as a critical lens for examining what we confront every day: “the barriers to traditional education.” Adrian knows well the win-lose dynamics at play during technology implementation and also the insidious impacts of “legacy thinking”—those ideas and policies that were useful to institutions in earlier times but that now impede thinking. He analyzes the current range of technology-enhanced learning methods after posing two initial questions: “To what extent does e-learning transform distance higher education into ‘a more student-focused and flexible system’? What adjustments to the practices and behaviours of both learners and teachers might evolve through the increased use of technologies?” Alan’s use of the term sap is deliberately provocative. He wantus to revisit claims that the world-renowned Open University in the UK is still opening educational doors and keeping them open for adults needing a second chance at education. Are these adults, he asks, being foolish or being fooled? Or is there a terrible irony here? In botanical life, sap is a valued nutrient for living plants and trees. But Alan does not use sap to refer to what institutions might offer as vital nutrition to sustain the lives of learners. Rather, it is “people who are offered the possibility of self-improvement yet who, it turns out, have relatively little chance of succeeding” who are the target of the university’s “sap production” machinery, which is driven by the need for enrolments. But who ultimately benefits in this process?