CONCEPTUALISING THE DIGITAL UNIVERSITY
THE INTERSECTION OF POLICY, PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

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Digital Education and Learning

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Much has been written during the first decade of the new millennium about the potential of digital technologies to produce a transformation of education. Digital technologies are portrayed as tools that will enhance learner collaboration and motivation and develop new multimodal literacy skills. Accompanying this has been the move from understanding literacy on the cognitive level to an appreciation of the sociocultural forces shaping learner development. Responding to these claims, the Digital Education and Learning Series explores the pedagogical potential and realities of digital technologies in a wide range of disciplinary contexts across the educational spectrum both in and outside of class. Focusing on local and global perspectives, the series responds to the shifting landscape of education, the way digital technologies are being used in different educational and cultural contexts, and examines the differences that lie behind the generalizations of the digital age. Incorporating cutting edge volumes with theoretical perspectives and case studies (single authored and edited collections), the series provides an accessible and valuable resource for academic researchers, teacher trainers, administrators and students interested in interdisciplinary studies of education and new and emerging technologies.

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Today’s permanent and increasingly accelerated revolution of technology, the main bastion of capitalism against socialism, alters socioeconomic reality and requires a new comprehension of the facts upon which new political action must be founded. (Paulo Freire 1997)¹

Although Paulo Freire penned these words more than twenty year ago, they actually ring truer today than ever. At a breakneck speed, new technological gadgets are introduced to the marketplace, as the great societal panacea of our generation. Technology is touted in even redemptive terms, akin to religious fervour. The consumerist values of capitalism are well-embedded into marketing discourses framed around issues of relentless competition, heightened productivity, innovation, instrumentalism, and marketisation. Nowhere has neoliberal technological discourse become more fierce than in the context of university life. And although the corrupting force of neoliberalism on universities has been well-documented over the last three decades, the discourse of economic globalisation continues to move internationally like hellfire across the reaches of university life.

With the fallacious promise of time-saving efficiency, our labour within the university was systematically increased and accelerated by the

arbitrary and commonsensical introduction of technological tools that have held faculty and staff captive. In the midst of this phenomenon, few critiques or alternatives have been able to interrupt the burgeoning and disproportionately skewed myths that have deepened managerial and technicist university practices, meant primarily to harness digital technology in the service of the marketplace. In the process, the culturally oppressive epistemology that undergirds values tied to technological practices has resulted in, as the authors of *Conceptualising the Digital University* well confirm, the impoverishment and reductionist account of the digital university today. It is, then, precisely a systematic and eloquent rethinking of these values and practices—offering, as Freire insists, *a new comprehension of the facts*—that is at the very heart of this volume.

**Rethinking the Culture of the Digital University**

*Technologized media themselves now constitute Western culture through and through, and they have become the primary vehicle for the distribution and dissemination of culture.* (Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner)

Within the life of twenty-first-century universities, we would be hard-pressed to find a cultural milieu where a Western positivist epistemology of technology, anchored by extension upon scientific hubris, has not all but supplanted humanist educational values. This represents a central concern, in that neutral or depoliticised views of the digital university ignore or fail to contend with the inseparability that exists between culture and power. Without the tools for critically examining the manner in which the expansion of technology has shaped the neoliberal culture of universities, educators cannot effectively fashion academic spaces where contradictions to emancipatory visions, as well as partial and competing viewpoints, can be critically interrogated and transformed. The unfortu-

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nate consequence here is an inability to politically unsettle through our pedagogical labour those essentialised or carte blanche approaches to digital technology that negatively impact the social agency and decision-making of faculty, students, and the larger community—generally excluding them from genuine participation in decision-making related to technology and other issues that directly impact their lives.

In response to these concerns, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth begin by acknowledging that our understanding of technology has generally emerged as a discursive construction—where an ‘idea is brought into the social world by being talked about or written about without necessarily being subject to analysis or research’—in their quest for finding an effective strategy for exploring the digital university. Through forging a critically profound lens of investigation, they produce a brilliant analysis of the historical, political, economic, and pedagogical agendas that have driven the positivist culture of digital technology in ways that have betrayed emancipatory and pluralistic visions of university life. What results is a complex unveiling of the ways in which the cultural underdevelopment of pedagogical theory and organisation development practice within the digital university has functioned to reproduce and perpetuate structures of inequalities that betray our emancipatory efforts.

However, beyond their critique, their sound understanding of discursive construction has also provided them the dialectical basis upon which to offer a more substantive and nuanced reading of technology, as well as a set of innovative cultural values that privilege liberatory notions of pluralism, through a perspective of the current context as both a challenge and an opportunity to transform the digital university. In this way, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth’s perspective revolutionises how we conceptualise the dynamics of academic and organisational development in the digital university, illuminating key aspects of a matrix for practical uses in the integration of technology as a liberatory tool for individual and community empowerment.

Deconstructing the Political Economy of Digital Hegemony

Highly capitalized tools require highly capitalized men. (Ivan Illich)

In centreing the political economy of learning in their treatise, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth signal the importance of material conditions to any critical examination of the digital university and, moreover, any attempts to transform the digital hegemony that permeates university contexts. Ivan Illich’s concern, for example, for the tyrannical manner in which economic policy options unfold under capitalism seems especially pertinent to the discussions of digital technology within the neoliberal university. It is evident, moreover, that the oppressive and alienating forces of advanced capitalism have largely shaped the manner in which digital technology as a tool has been capitalised within the university and society. This has required, as Illich rightly argues, highly capitalized men and women who commonsensically embrace the underlying myths of technology as neutral and non-obstructive to our labour and, thus, acquiesce to the changing forms of university work—even when such changes strip us of conviviality or the freedom of choice.

For example, in the early 1990s, university professors were suddenly mandated to establish email accounts. For the most part, there was little pushback to the rhetoric of innovation and time-saving promises made to faculty across universities. In the excitement of the novelty, there was little argument against the fact that technology would overnight add two to three hours of labour daily to our already full workloads and that we would become enslaved to our email 24/7. As a consequence, our productivity did increase without necessarily an increase in our salary, as was the case across many industries. The result was not only heightened labour expectations, in which we did not have a voice, but also a loss of autonomy for our labour that until this day is seldom discussed. It is this loss of autonomy and infringement into our creative production that

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5 Ibid.
well-illustrates a mechanism by which academic workers became further capitalised. Similarly, technology in the neoliberal university has also led to the standardisation and instrumentalisation of curriculum development and pedagogical activities within the classroom that have grossly interfered with the autonomy, fluidity, and creative processes of educators. In the name of progress, this has led to increasing conditions of surveillance and control of our labour, often shrouded, once again, by the distorted rhetoric of efficiency and heightened productivity—a sort of radical positivist proclamation.

With this in mind, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth work meticulously to reveal the underlying myths behind deceptive transformative claims and descriptions of the digital university, which function to intensify the political economic grip of neoliberalism. From this standpoint, the authors expose the unevenness of digital development over the last three decades and across multiple levels of university life, unveiling gross disparities related to technological practices and the adoption of technology. In this way, the reader is moved towards critically exploring the emancipatory potential and benefits of digital technologies for teaching and learning, as well as the possibilities for genuine transformative change to the digital culture of higher education. Through an eloquent engagement with notions of porosity, open education practice, and the concept of the commons, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth demonstrate the mounting need for widening participation from both within and without the university. By so doing, the authors counter the oppressive exclusionary culture of neoliberalism, asserting the power of open, democratic relationships and participation in building a new political economic ethos for the digital university.

**Critical Literacy and the Digital University**

*Critical literacy is also necessary to hold to critical scrutiny many of the claims made by those heralding this brave new world of the 4IR.* (Peter Mayo)⁶

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Given the great hoopla that is currently underway among global university discussions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution—the nascent intensification of old neoliberal values now more aggressively twisted by an economic determinist rhetoric linked to the imminent takeover of drones, Artificial Intelligence, and other technological forces—never has there been a timelier moment for this outstanding volume. Countering the economic opportunism associated with the political priorities and interests of the few (at the expense of the many) points to the necessary pedagogical scrutiny of critical literacy for disrupting hegemonic myths and shattering deceptive arguments. In the overwhelming neoliberal milieu of the digital university today, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth rightly argue that critical literacy is essential to countering the material and social conditions of inequality and exclusion within and outside the digital academy—conditions unequivocally preserved by technologically driven structures, policies, practices, and relationships that conserve the status quo.

Towards this end, *Conceptualising the Digital University* holistically critically examines a variety of pressing concerns tied to information literacy and the curriculum, considering themes of digital capability, social agency, and personhood, as key dimensions of the digital university committed to social justice. Moreover, by making critical literacy a central feature of their emancipatory design, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth consistently provide a much-needed critique of marginality at all levels of university academic development. In this way, a critical view of digital literacy is presented as a substantive focus in the evolution of curriculum development, particularly with respect to critiques of neoliberalism, the globalisation of technology, and struggles for democratic life in higher education. As would be anticipated, critical pedagogy underpins their discussions of redesigning technological learning spaces and environments. Here, a radical understanding of space is effectively deployed to engage salient questions of digital, pedagogical, and social relations—whether these exist in or out of the university—in order to expand possibilities for the democratisation of learning and an understanding of the digital university as public good.
Reinventing the University as Public Good

_In this possibly terminal phase of human existence, democracy and freedom are more than just ideals to be valued—they may be essential to survival._ (Noam Chomsky)⁷

Just as Noam Chomsky has often reminded us of the essential need for freedom and democracy, Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth also build their germane arguments for the reinvention of the digital university on a similar premise. Grounded in a clear recognition of how political economy, education, and democracy always comingle, the authors insist that critical pedagogical alternatives of the university as public good must be founded upon values that unquestionably support the exercise of democracy and freedom, within universities and the larger society. This reinvention encompasses the digital university as a significant site of struggle and contestation, as well as a potentially democratic space for both educational and societal transformation.

Here, the values of critical pedagogy, open education, and academic praxis are significant features connected to knowledge production, intellectual formation, and community participation in the interest of the common good. Furthermore, an innovative conceptual matrix and digitally distributed curriculum paradigm are presented as critical democratic tools to guide collective reflection, dialogue, decision-making, and action. This dynamic design of the university as public good fittingly privileges digitally enriched learning spaces that reinforce democratic learning and co-creation, by way of porous boundaries between knowledge, spaces, and formal organisation. More importantly, these spaces comprise a pedagogical and political essential for reinventing how we comprehend the place and purpose of technology in education and the world today.

In this difficult historical moment, where our very humanity seems at risk to destructive technological forces linked to political irresponsibility, social exclusions, and economic greed, _Conceptualising the Digital University_ constitutes a powerful clarion call for educators of conscience

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committed to critical education, democratic political ideals, and economic justice. The book issues a critical call to action engendered by what Paulo Freire called radical hope\(^8\) and an emancipatory vision of the digital university—one that is founded on political and pedagogical actions that engage the liberatory possibilities of academic leadership, embrace the democratising value of pluralism, and enact democratic organisational policies and practices unapologetically committed to the building of a more just and loving world.

Loyola Marymount University, USA

Professor Antonia Darder
International Scholar,
Public Intellectual, Educator,
Writer, Activist and Artist

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The writing of this book has very much been a discursive process and the culmination of many discussions and dialogues around the vague concept, questionable assumptions, and actual realities of realising any sort of vision and plan for the ‘digital university’.

Collaboration has been at the heart of this book, and the thinking and ideas we present within it. A series of blog posts by Bill and Sheila in 2011 prompted Keith to get in contact in 2012 about a project he was leading, which led in turn to our collective endeavours in further exploring the concept of the digital university, and the place of ‘the digital’ in Higher Education. Our efforts in doing so have encompassed our own joint dialogue, reflections, and writing, our further reading and research, and crucially also the dialogue we have had with colleagues across the sector, through workshops at a range of universities, and through presenting our thinking, as it developed, at a number of conferences, symposia, and events.

Now, six years later, we have this book.

Finding and developing our shared critical understanding of the concept of the digital university has been a challenging and humbling experience, and one which saw our own thinking move away from questioning the concept of the ‘digital university’ to also questioning the purpose of universities, and Higher Education, in relation to the constraints, purpose, and possibilities of digital technologies, spaces, and practices, and
in relation to the ideas and ideals of critical and public pedagogy, openness, and democracy. As we have contextualised our understandings, we have given each other hope in a shared critique which we in turn hope our readers will share and use as a starting point for many more critically informed discussions, based on a shared recognition of the need for critical love and hope to challenge the neo-liberal dominance of our age.

There are a number of people we need to thank. Firstly, the team at Palgrave Macmillan for recognising the potential for a book in our work, and their continued support throughout the writing process. Our work draws from many sources and we are continually inspired by all of our professional networks and the encouragement we have received from our peers at conferences where we have presented our work, and the opportunities that we have been given to publish. This has given us the faith to carry on and develop our thoughts from conversations and debates into this most tangible of outputs, a book.

We’d like to give special thanks to some key colleagues and friends. We warmly thank Antonia Darder for her immediate and continued engagement, support, and critical love for our work. We were fortunate to meet Antonia at a pivotal point in the preparation of our book, and the time we spent with Antonia, both learning from and being inspired by her, left an indelible mark on our thinking and across the final version of this text. We also thank Helen Beetham, Catherine Cronin, Alex Dunedin, and Martin Weller for taking the time to read the book and for their generous endorsements of our work. Their own respective work has had a significant impact on our thinking and the structure of this book, as has the work of Mark Johnson, who introduced us to the concept of Value Pluralism which we explore at several points.

There are almost too many other people to thank, and we realise frustratingly that we cannot put a name to everyone we have had the benefit of speaking with as we have developed our work. However, we would like to give a special mention and thanks to a number of colleagues and friends who have supported and encouraged us as we started to clarify and structure our ideas into the form in which they are now presented, or with whom we were fortunate to have important discussions at important points of our journey. In addition to those already mentioned above, we thank Gordon Asher, Linda Creanor, Jim Emery, Julia Fotheringham,

In the above context, we extend a particular thanks to Richard Hall. Chapter 8 of our book, as indicated in the chapter, incorporates and extends material published in the paper by Hall, R. and Smyth, K. ‘Dismantling the Curriculum in Higher Education’ (2016), published in the Open Library of Humanities. We are grateful to Richard and the Open Library of the Humanities for allowing us to repurpose this material in our narrative. Richard also draws upon aspects of the aforementioned paper in his recent book *The Alienated Academic: The Struggle for Autonomy Inside the University* (2018, also published by Palgrave Macmillan).

To our respective families, thank you for your patience and understanding and tolerance of lost weekends over the past year. Thanks also to colleagues at Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the Highlands and Islands for your support and understanding at points where our work on this book had an impact on other activities. Finally, we’d like to give a special mention to the Black Isle Bar in Inverness for providing a welcoming space for warmth, laughter, pizza, and the occasional glass of red wine.

In solidarity, love, and hope.
I read this book with a sense of both recognition and urgency. This is not a manifesto about utopian digital futures, but rather a provocative invitation to re-think higher education and its role in increasingly open, networked, and participatory culture. Written in a language of “hope and critique” (Giroux, 2011), the authors use the lenses of critical pedagogy and praxis to offer a compelling case for troubling the existing boundaries of universities – and thus for greater openness and democratic engagement within and beyond higher education. The questions and analytical frameworks proposed by the authors should stimulate much dialogue and debate by educators, academic developers, policy makers, and all interested in the future of higher education. A vital and timely book.”

—Dr Catherine Cronin, Strategic Education Developer, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Dublin, Eire

“This is a timely and necessary book. All universities are in some form negotiating their relationship with the digital context they now operate within – what does it mean for students, staff, ways of learning, methods of research and the role of the university in society. What and how should we teach in order to give students the appropriate skills to operate as effective citizens in a digital world? These are all questions which the higher education sector seeks answers for. The issue is that often the answers to such questions are provided by those with a vested interest – technology vendors or ed tech consultants. What this book does is place these types of questions within a meaningful and well reasoned framework. The book addresses this in three sections, looking first at the broadly
Praise for *Conceptualising the Digital University*

“...In the second part, how the digital university might be conceptualised and practically implemented is considered. Lastly, the authors address how such a digital university is situated within a social context. By addressing these elements, a comprehensive, critical and nuanced picture of the digital university can be established, rather than one determined by a technological perspective alone. It is therefore essential reading for anyone with an interest in the digital evolution of the university.”

—Professor Martin Weller, *The Open University, UK*

“This timely work examines the power of the digital in context with what is happening to education today, and in particular to Higher Education. Understanding education in terms of human development, it is comforting that narratives of education as a public good are being related through the digital. We live with the golden promises of technology to emancipate and extend social and intellectual benefits to the many, however this thinking needs to be matched with the practical details whilst not shying away from critique of expanding a successful monoculture. Just as with the industrial revolution before, our technology industries are proposing revolutions which lead us round the same circle, down the same paths of behaviour. Scrutiny of formal education reveals how learning has been commodified and narrowed; just as we have come to consume the natural world we have come to consume education. This book provides robust analyses and alternative envisioning to the consumption of education exploring how technology can be used as a tool to open up vital opportunities to everyone, as well as essential vistas to those in the academy if it is not to atrophy as an intelligent organ of human society.”

—Alex Dunedin, *Ragged University*

“We’ve been waiting for this: a book-length critique of the ‘digital university’ that gives full attention to the political context. Johnston, MacNeill and Smyth explore the role that digital technologies have played in corporatising the academy, from the curriculum to learning environments, and from business models to terms of academic employment. They’re hopeful enough and engaged enough in the wider world to also show how alternative digital pedagogies and strategies might be pursued, reframing higher education as an open, critical and democratic project.”

—Helen Beetham, Education Consultant, writer, researcher, commentator (https://helenbeetham.com/about/)
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Section I

Visioning the Digital University
Introduction: Locating ‘The Digital’ in a Contested Environment

Our aim in this book is to conceptualise ‘The Digital’ as a feature of the change forces influencing higher education in the twenty-first century. These forces include (i) neoliberal policies to reposition higher education as a market of providers and consumers; (ii) the expansion of the number of institutions and increase in the numbers of students; (iii) overemphasis on the contribution made by universities to economic growth and competitiveness; (iv) introduction of external mechanisms to measure the quality of teaching, research, and the performance of staff; (v) digital technology itself, primarily positioned as a practical means of enhancing learning and teaching; and (vi) critical responses to negative changes. It is within this complex nexus of forces that we locate ‘The Digital’ in relation to the university. However, we also contend that ‘The Digital’ is best understood as contestable territory in relation to the overall strategic policy directions universities choose to define their place in society. So it is in the space of critical approaches to strategic direction that our efforts
will converge and focus, particularly on academic and organisational development in universities.

We will show in Chap. 2 that these change forces elicit contradictory responses to the idea of the digital university. Some commentators are extremely positive, whilst others are highly sceptical, voicing concern that the intrinsic motivations of students and scholars are under threat from a repositioning of higher education as a market in knowledge and qualifications. From our perspective the contradictory nature of response is of most interest, and our approach to the argument and narrative development in the book embraces contradiction as the focal point for conceptualisation of the digital university. We will seek to answer the question ‘what is the digital university’ by a dialogic process, and it is only through creating opportunities for critical dialogue that affords opportunities to all stakeholders that radical digitally enabled transformation can actually occur. We look to critical pedagogy as a key theoretical focus to create the appropriate supportive spaces for these dialogues to be instantiated and evolve. We look to highlight the positive elements of radicalisation, as something that is based on human values that allows everyone to find their voice, to be valued, and to question the many illusions of consumer choice that our neoliberal society and in turn education systems currently operate. We see this as the way to create a meaningful alternative narrative to that of the increasingly managerialist, education as a service with customer’s approach that senior managers within universities are embracing.

Our aim in this introductory chapter is to expose and challenge the power of neoliberalism to shape higher education and universities. We contend that neoliberalism impoverishes higher education and in response introduce an alternative framing of change and educational transformation. Our values are drawn from notions of critical pedagogy, public pedagogy, and openness as defining characteristics of university institutions.

We interpret critical pedagogy as a theory and practice of learning and teaching derived from radical educators such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Antonia Darder, which engenders critical consciousness of the oppressive social and economic conditions influencing learners and teachers. Critical pedagogy in action is often described in relation to the
term praxis, which denotes collective understandings derived from cycles of dialogic and experiential learning, and a commitment to challenging and changing that which needs challenged and changed.

We recognise and explore the challenges of value pluralism, that is “the view that different values may be fundamentally and defensibly correct in different contexts, but may also be incommensurable” (Johnson and Smyth 2011, pp. 211–212) in relation to the place of the digital in our universities. This expresses our view of organisational tensions between differing concepts of the digital, pedagogy, curriculum, and the university, and we recognise that such tensions will be manifest in the behaviour of institutional actors on the organisational stage and in the substance of their decisions about strategy, funding, structures, and daily practice.

We interpret openness as entailing notions of open educational practice, open pedagogy, open educational resources, and critical and public pedagogy. We see openness as a way to provide increased opportunities for participation and knowledge creation, and the sharing of knowledge created through pedagogic engagements within and through the university. As we come on to argue and explore at several points, openness is not the sole preserve of online or digital environments. There are many ways in our physical environments where an open ethos can provide alternative ways to extend our notions of physical learning spaces, and where a co-location and intersection of the physical and digital can enrich and extend educational opportunities.

These principles are at the centre of our conceptualisation of the digital university and interconnect with each other as we consider the politics, practices, and pedagogies of modern universities and the potential for radical change.

Our main intellectual strategy is to treat the ‘digital university’ not so much as a discrete type or kind of university; rather we adopt the notion of ‘discursive construction’ (Jones and Goodfellow 2012) in relation to the term ‘digital university’ to express our sense that what is required is holistic investigation of the concept rather than the establishment of hard and fast categories of description. We will take the process of discursive construction further by employing Freire’s sense of praxis as involving not simply discussion but also challenge and action to change oppressive elements in our environment. Allied to this is the related notion of public
pedagogy within which we contend that academic work undertaken in a university should matter in relation to social needs and the wider good (Giroux 2000). In line with this critical strategy, we will explore both ‘The Digital’ and ‘The University’ as problematic and contestable constructs, which are subject to definition and redefinition by powerful sociocultural forces and political and economic interests. However, we contend that the agency of staff and student can be interposed to counter such forces, generate alternative visions of the nature and purpose of universities, and redraw the boundaries of participation to engage a much wider and more varied university population.

On the Nature of ‘The Digital’

‘The Digital’ has become a talismanic phrase in general use suggesting a powerful socio-economic force. In everyday parlance, ‘The Digital’ is mainly associated with computer technology applications such as data recording, storage, and transmission, and specific examples including digital TV. However, a much wider horizon of meaning is evident and includes terms such as ‘digital age’, ‘digital generation’, and ‘digital revolution’. When espoused by the management consultancy McKinsey (Dörner and Edelman, 2018) in relation to universities, we find the following assertion:

… we believe that digital should be seen less as a thing and more a way of doing things. To help make this definition more concrete, we’ve broken it down into three attributes: creating value at the new frontiers of the business world, creating value in the processes that execute a vision of customer experiences, and building foundational capabilities that support the entire structure.

Whether the McKinsey copywriter has actually made the definition ‘more concrete’ by invoking high-level management speak, or has simply appropriated the term to serve corporate interests, is a matter for debate.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that universities are contributing to the debate by using the phrase ‘digital university’ to attempt a redefinition of the university in the twenty-first century. However, when it comes to the
practicalities of what a university ‘being digital’ might look like, different perspectives are being embedded in the policy, provision, and futures planning of higher education institutions. We suggest that development is hampered by the term being used in narrow contexts, mainly relating to digital technology and infrastructure, or to developing student digital skills and/or digital literacies. Equally we are concerned that a corporate style of top-down management is determining the nature of digital developments in universities and constraining staff and student capacity to shape their learning and teaching experiences.

These different, often competing, understandings are informed by the responsibilities that different individuals or departments have for specific aspects of digital practice within the institution. This variety represents a form of what we described above as value pluralism (Johnson and Smyth 2011), in university organisation, and we will elaborate this important concept in later chapters in concert with our advocacy of critical pedagogy. Hereafter we will use the form—the digital—and express the various connotations in the particular context of our discussion at given points in our narrative. Also we will expand our consideration of the nature of the digital in Chap. 2 in the context of a number of key commentators on the digital university.

**Neoliberalism and the Neoliberalisation of the University: The Architecture of the Digital University**

We see neoliberalism as the primary shaping influence on contemporary universities, exemplified by notions of higher education as a market comprising universities as providers and students as consumers. Consequently, it is essential to preface any discussion of what a digital university might be, with a discussion of what a neoliberal university is and what alternatives can be adduced.

Headline features of neoliberal political economy include (i) valuing private property over public ownership; (ii) appropriation of public resources through government policy of privatisation; and (iii)
introduction of corporate management styles to public sector organisation. As an intellectual construct, neoliberalism has been carefully analysed (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Birch 2017) and critiqued (Harvey 2005; Streek 2014; Maclean 2017). As both economic doctrine and political practice, neoliberalism has dominated state policy in the UK, the EU, North America, and many other nations, since at least the 1970s, and has come to dominate contemporary cultural frameworks. At the time of writing, it is strongly associated with the austerity policies enacted in response to the 2008–2009 financial crash.

We describe neoliberalism from three perspectives:

- Philosophy of economic and social dominance by the rich and powerful at the expense of socialist and social democratic values; a long-term economic project to prize market values and ensure corporate power.
- Practice: shrink the state, suppress organised labour, accept wage stagnation, deregulate enterprise, use zero-hour contracts and other employment mechanisms to increase precariousness of work, minimise welfare systems, sanction welfare claimants, install austerity.
- Presentation: there is no alternative; negative attitudes to workers, welfare claimants, immigrants and ‘experts’; control of media messages to grab attention, shape public opinion and voting behaviour; stifle critical thinking.

Neoliberalism is claimed by some to be an economic and political structure in crisis (Mason 2015; Srnicek and Williams 2016) exemplified by the economic shocks post the 2008 financial crash including stagnant wages, low interest rates, low productivity, precarious employment, and a weakening of public services. Both sets of authors make out cases for radical alternatives involving digital technology and new ways of collaborative working. Nevertheless, neoliberalism remains the primary influence of the strategic direction on higher education and management of universities.

In essence the neoliberal approach to higher education is as an industry ‘producing’ degrees, to be ‘purchased’ by student customers with the intention of career benefit to the consumer and the economy as a whole. The strong tendency, therefore, is to curtail ideas of an educa-