Trends and Issues: Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

PROFESSOR ELLEN HAZELKORN
BH ASSOCIATES, EDUCATION CONSULTANTS
QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION – TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EU AND WESTERN BALKANS
SKOPJE, REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA
26 SEPTEMBER 2023

BH ASSOCIATES

Globalisation, an ageing population, the technological and digital revolution leading to increasing use of automation and artificial intelligence, climate change and moves towards a carbon-neutral economy and resource scarcity – alongside changes arising from the Covid-19 pandemic – are reshaping our societies, how and where we live and the world of work.

What are the implications for higher education, and for issues of quality and quality assurance?

Themes

- Mega Trends of the Global Era
- Implications for Quality & Quality Assurance
- Issues to Think About

Mega Trends of the Global Era

Some Macro Trends

Increasing educational participation is a global phenomenon driven by demographic and economic growth and public policy. At the same time, our populations are changing and ageing.

As global mobility rises, dramatic shifts occur in the geography of the global talent pool.

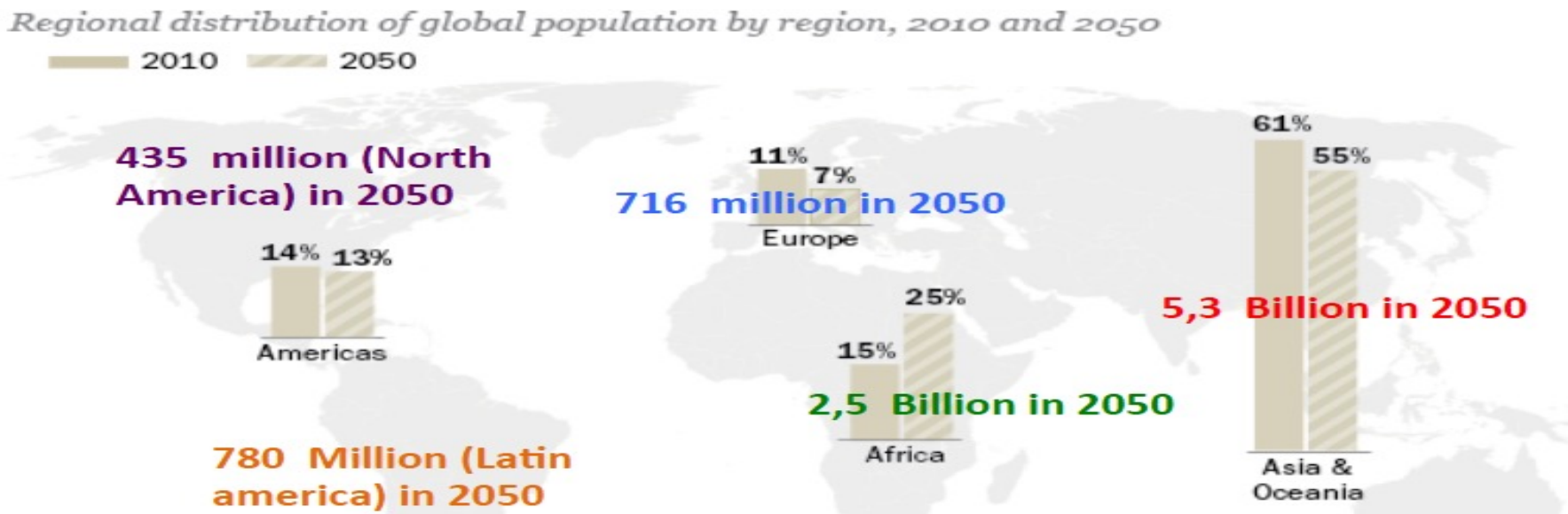
HE is a global enterprise, shaped by geo-political factors and other disruptive events. Its success (or failure) is integral to/powerful indicator of the knowledge-producing and talent-attracting capacity of nations.

Geopolitical tensions are underpinned by competition (and collaboration) in knowledge and science – which is the backbone of the economies of the 21st century.

Industry 4.0 and 5.0 transforming work and the labour market. While most new jobs are in high-skilled global-facing sectors, there is an ongoing need for middle and lower-skilled employment.

Population Expansion 2010-2050

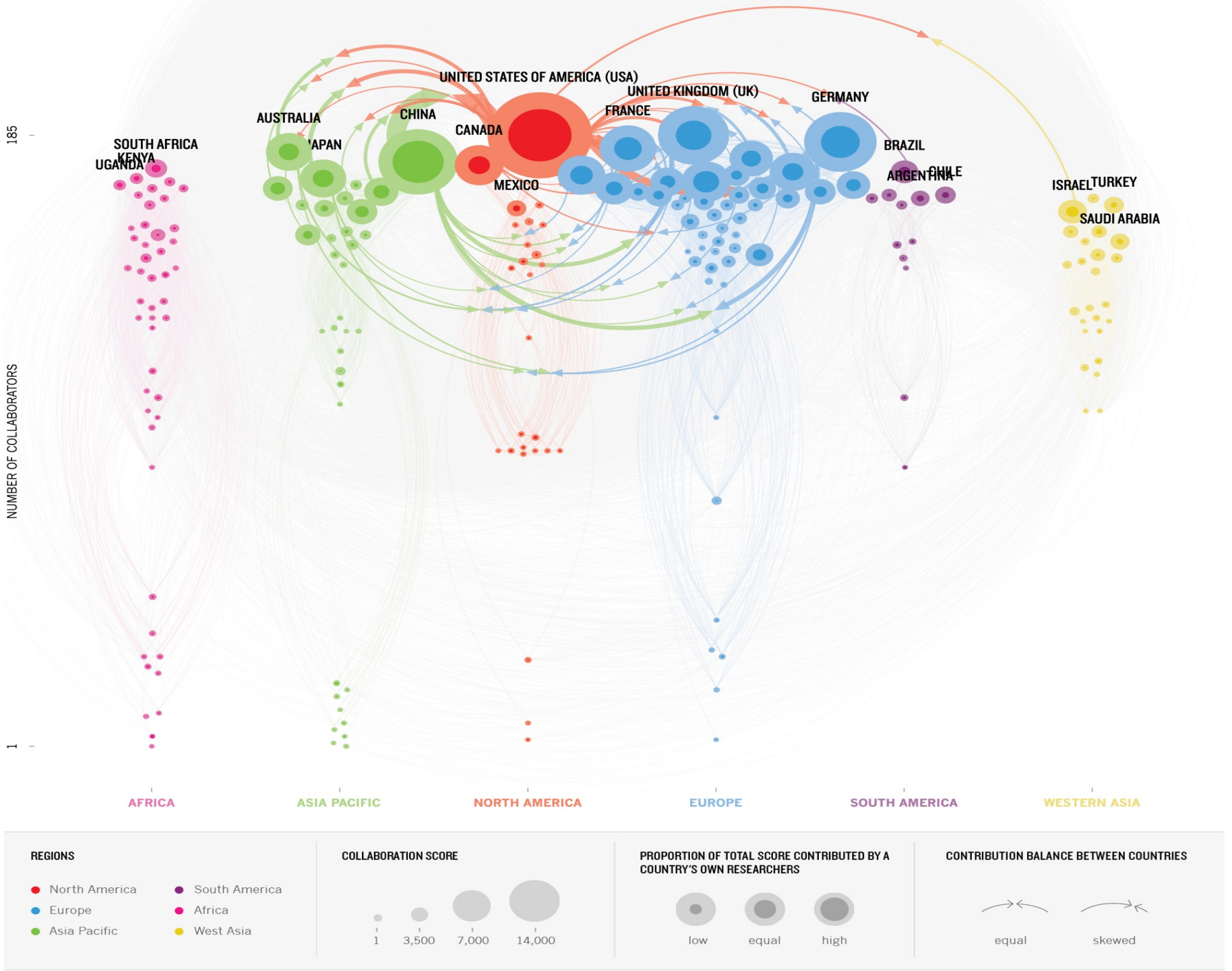
8.6 billion in 2030, and to increase further to 9.8 billion in 2050 and 11.2 billion by 2100



In 2050, 80% out of the global population will be in Africa & Asia

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision

Shift from bi-polar to multi-polar world



Some implications for higher education 1

New types of institutions with different missions, programmes and modes of study to cater for diverse learners and society. Demand from younger & older learners.

Reskilling, upskilling and repurposing qualifications to overcome generational inequalities and disadvantages according to socio-economic, race, ethnicity, regional and digital-divide factors;

Graduate outcomes/career opportunities are key indicators of value-for-money or exchange value in society and the labour market;

Innovative and coherent institutional approach to learning, teaching and assessment offering just-in-time anytime/anywhere: accessible, portable, relevant, alternative funding/tuition models;

Some implications for higher education 2

Mutual recognition of qualifications and internationally recognised credit accumulation and transfer system;

Online, face-to-face and hybrid models of learning are essential;

Increased emphasis on oversight and regulation, monitoring and reporting – with greater alignment between what educational institutions do for society;

A closer association between society, the economy and the educational enterprise is changing the way we think about quality and quality assurance.

Time to rethink traditional model of higher education provision

The future is already here.

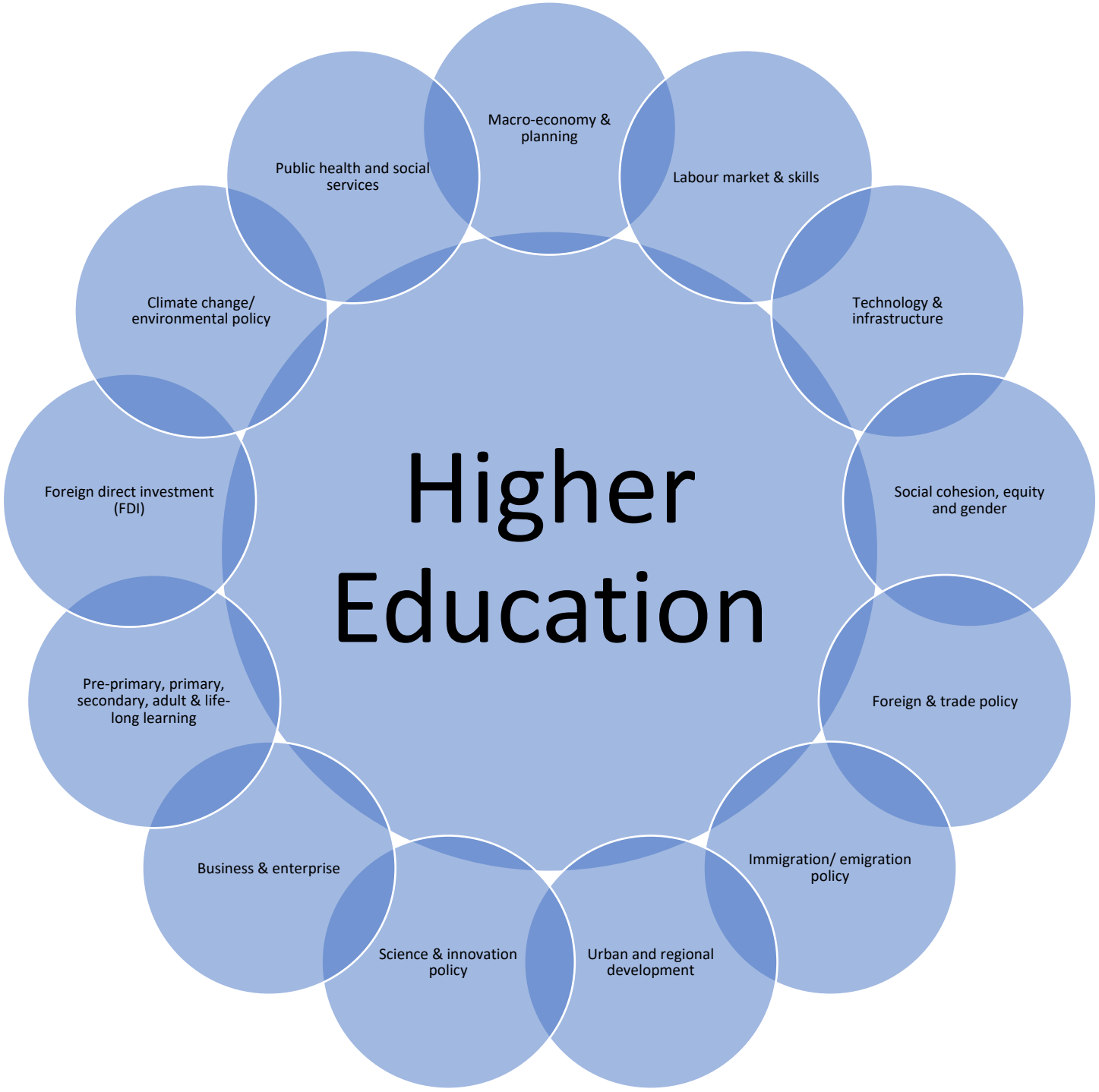
Yet, our model of educational provision has remained relatively unchanged as if it was still a system catering to a small elite.

Radical thinking is required as to how we design, organise, deliver and assess higher education and its relationship to other forms of tertiary education and training.

Integration of the global economy and labour market and internationalisation of the educational enterprise changes the way we think about quality and QA.

HE plays a central role across society, affecting all areas of policy, and civic and personal life.

What needs to change?



Implications for Quality & Quality Assurance

Quality is Critical Factor Globally

Quality is a key driver impacting on and affecting HE, individuals and nations:

- Knowledge and talent-producing capacities of the HE system is determinant of competitiveness;
- Public accountability – society has the right to know whether its institutions are meeting its expectations and using its resources appropriately;
- Provides confidence for prospective students, employers and society:
  - Internationalisation of higher education;
  - Student and professional mobility;
  - Mutual recognition of qualifications;
  - Education & scientific partnerships;
- Necessity to regulate the educational marketplace and protect against fraud.

Quality is Concern for all Stakeholders

National geo-political *positioning and pride*;

Beacon to attract/retain *investment, business and talent*;

Institutional *reputation and status;*

Performance *assessment of scientific-scholarly research;*

Graduate *capability and opportunities;*

The link between qualification and *career opportunities and life-style;*

Value-for-money and return-on-(public) *investment;*

Growing importance of *global networks.*

Political and societal support for HE can only be maintained by **assurance of quality which provides investor confidence**.

Are Traditional QA Formats Fit for Purpose?

HE is accused of being insufficiently accountable to students and society for learning outcomes, graduate attributes and life-sustaining skills in exchange for the funding and public/political support they receive.

Issues take different forms in each country, but essentially questions are being asked about what higher education, both public and private, is doing about these matters.

- *Public attitudes* towards higher education – and in some cases whether HE is worth it,
- Degree of *public trust* between different sectors of society,
- *Public interest* in HE's contribution and value to society.

1. Quality

Complex term – with no agreed-upon definition, or how it should be measured, much less improved.

Everyone has their own perspective, as evidenced by the different approaches, methodologies, and choice of indicators.

Emphasis primarily on T&L and research, but increasingly reflects the capacity/capability of HE to meet a variety of societal needs and demands.

This means “quality” is variable, and is shaped by whoever decides, by the choice of methodology (qualitative or quantitative) and the indicators – rather than on the basis of standards.

2. Quality Assurance

Defining and maintaining quality has been guided by academic norms of peer review which have underpinned professional self-regulation and self-governance

But – the inability to provide comparable evidence in a meaningful and transparent format is a major handicap.

Despite observable virtues, QA is seen as being too process-oriented and insufficiently focused on real (measurable) outcomes.

QA *process* is often seen as:

- Inefficient use of public resources and people's time,
- Benefits the academy more than students or society,
- Not scalable or comparable in any meaningful way.

3. Performance and Productivity

Performance asks how well HEIs operate vis-à-vis their goals and those of society;

- Focus on actual outcomes and outputs rather than simply the process;
- Attention has shifted to academic and professional staff and students.

Productivity asks about what academics produce through their teaching, and issues of academic outputs and outcomes, such as progression and graduate employment.

Concerns speak directly to public and political perceptions about *what academics do all day or all year*.

What people want to know is how effectively students are learning, what they are achieving, and how personnel, institutions and the systems overall help students to succeed.

4. Public Accountability & Transparency

Traditional approaches & formats have relied on collegiality, expert judgment, and peer review.

However, they provide insufficient/robust information regarding educational quality or comparable outcomes.

Students are an important part of the process – BUT the participation of societal actors/ third parties is vital.

- New technologies make citizen participation easier.

The need for publicly integrated instruments for deeper strategic understanding and to facilitate learners is urgent.

- EU *HE Observatory* is an important step forward.

Absent this, higher education and science data is the basis for an ever-expanding and unregulated higher education intelligence business.

Issues to Think About

Challenges for Quality & Quality Assurance

Quality is no longer "owned" *only* by HEIs or evaluators/accreditors.

A growing number of employer-based & private alternatives – response to concerns about quality, grade inflation, skill competencies, etc.;

Demand for:

- International comparability and benchmarking – challenge of global rankings;
- Greater responsiveness to societal/economic needs and regional accessibility;
- Qualifications for mobile students, professionals and migrants;
- QA which can respond to/support new modes of provision, innovative programmes and assessment;
- New technologies, MOOCs and new learning environments.

What People Want To Know

Teaching and learning: student learning environment, culture and quality of experience;
Graduate expectations: career, salary and lifestyle;
Employability of graduates: trends and competencies;
Fields of specialisation/department: level of intensity, expertise, quality and competence;
Faculty quality: qualifications, expertise and track record, research,
Research capacity, quality of outcomes/impact & research team;
Doctoral education, research training/support and management of research;
Performance and compared benchmarked regionally, nationally & internationally;
Attraction capacity and internationalisation;
Value-for-money, societal contribution for individuals, economy and society;
Efficiency level: how much output vis-a-vis funding;
Etc.

Lessons from Bologna

Bologna *placed quality within a broader educational framework*

The big idea was the "accountability loop":

- ESG and QA systems set evaluation standards and guidelines for *institutional self-assessment and quality processes, and external monitoring;*
- Quality is a shared responsibility: Agency, HEI and students/staff;
- The qualification framework *facilitates flexible learning paths* and sets out a clear statement of what students must demonstrate at each qualification level;
- Formalized concept of *learning outcomes rather than measuring inputs* (e.g., credit hours, classroom teaching, entry grades).

Flagship EU Initiatives – with QA implications

European Strategy for Universities & Recommendation for Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation (2021).

European Universities Initiative to develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation.

Legal status for alliances of higher education institutions

Joint European Degree

European Student Card

Automatic recognition of academic qualifications

HE observatory, including U-Multirank, graduate tracking etc.

Development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials

Issues to Think About 1

Governance and Leadership: Is a quality culture and management of quality embedded holistically across the institution? What are we doing to embed and enhance a quality culture across everything we do? To what extent is quality a shared responsibility? Do we have the appropriate resources and tools to address the challenges presented by academic integrity and academic misconduct.

Curriculum, Learning Outcomes: Does the curriculum prepare graduates for the future/changing opportunities and to be global citizens who can have a positive impact locally/globally? To what extent is educational provision underpinned by innovative pedagogies & modes of learning and assessment, with emphasis on multi-disciplinarity, challenge- and practice-based learning?

Issues to Think About 2

Widening Participation and Learning Support Systems: How does T&L support access and successful completion? Has the HEI organised its provision to facilitate diverse learners, shifting from time-served to just-in-time, recognise competency-based education and/or offer online, open and flexible learning?

Research and Innovation: To what extent does R&I inform/underpin teaching and learning rather than simply being a mechanism for reputation-seeking? How is R&I managed so that it encourages inquiry and critical skills alongside making a regional and societal impact?

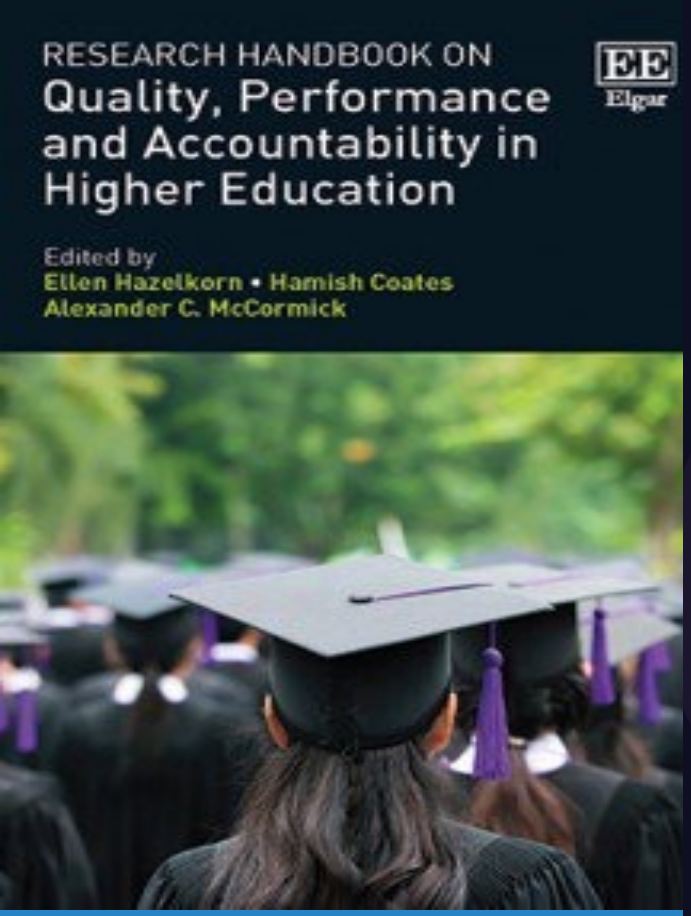
Faculty: How does the institution engage/support all staff in understanding/meeting the demands/needs of the changing landscape? To what extent does the HEI recognise and value all talents for recognition and rewards? How are faculty supported?

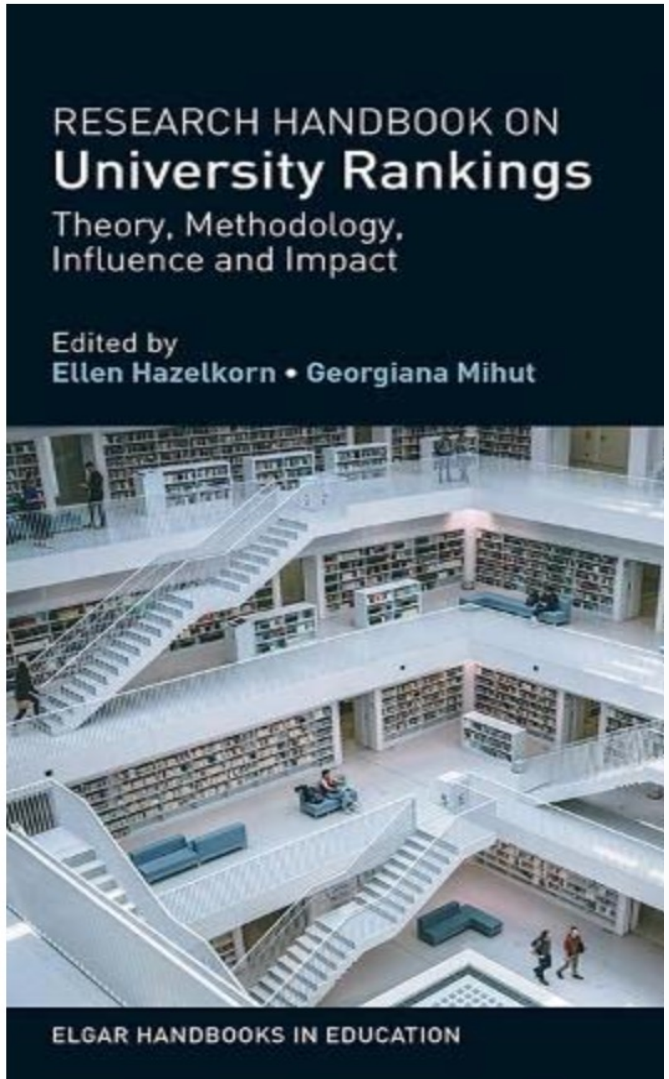
Issues to Think About 3

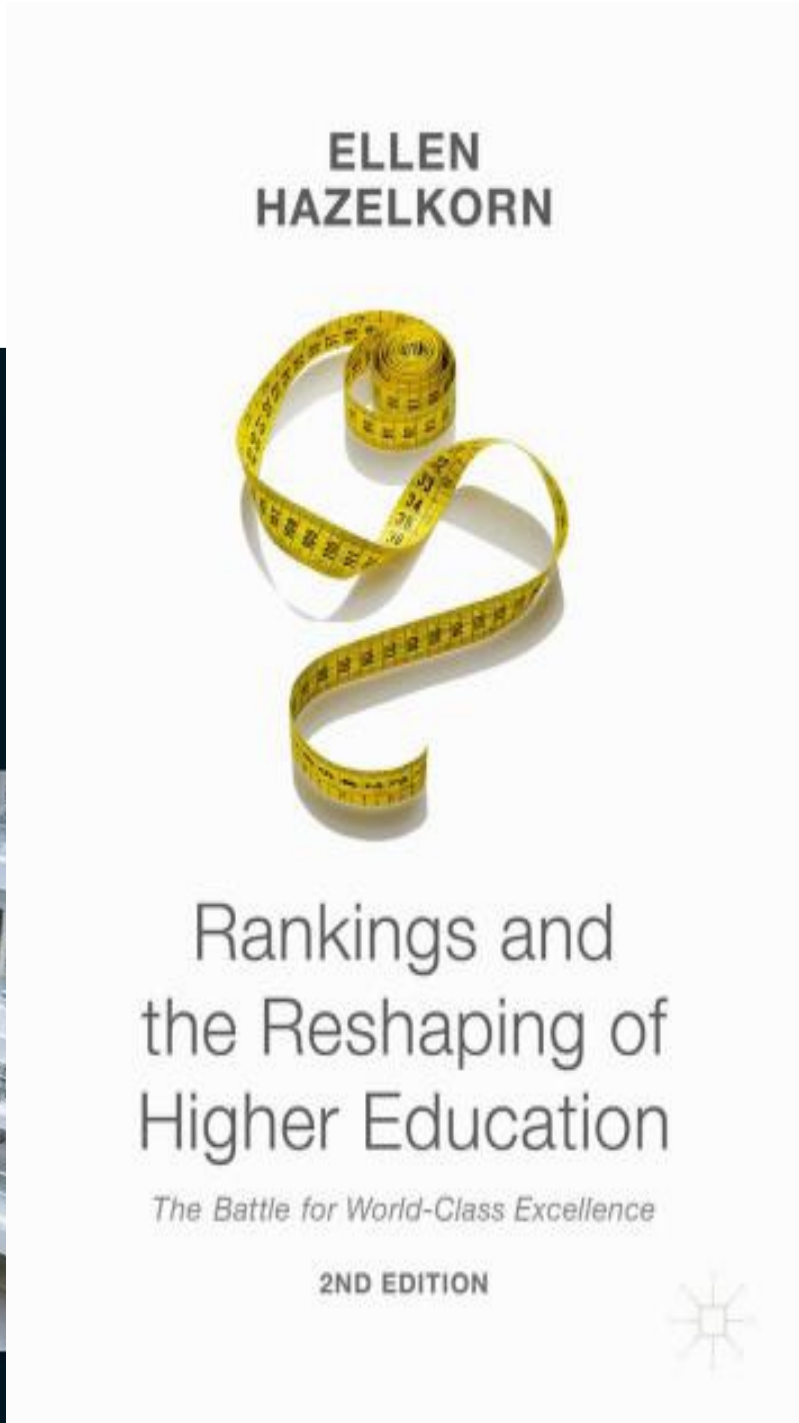
Learners: How and through which processes does my institution support all learners during the entire learner life cycle? How much transparent information is available to help them choose the learning offer most appropriate to them? How does my institution monitor learner success?

Societal Engagement and Impact: How are we ensuring our policies are appropriately aligned to meet the ongoing societal and global challenges (SDG)? To what extent does the HEI collaborate with other partners across society? How does the HEI balance local/regional, national and global aspirations or is the pursuit of "world-classness" its primary ambition?

Evaluate and change to improve: How do we monitor what we are doing? Do we have the capacity to change? Do we have appropriate information management/data systems?







Professor Ellen Hazelkorn
BH Associates, Ireland
info@bhassociates.eu
https://www.bhassociates.eu