

Looking Ahead: Quality Assurance in a Changing World

PROFESSOR ELLEN HAZELKORN
TU DUBLIN & BH ASSOCIATES
AAQ DAY 2025
3 DECEMBER 2025



Opening Provocation

Geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, technological change, climate change and demographic changes, and political extremism have heightened the importance of knowledge & skills as the foundation of social cohesion and sustainable development. Recent reports show Europe facing significant challenges:

- EU, [A Competitiveness Compass for the EU](#) (2025)
- EU, [A Union of Skills to equip people for a competitive Europe](#) (2025).
- EUA, [Universities and Competitiveness](#) (2025)

Tertiary education has a key role to play in addressing these challenges – but is too often unable to “anticipate future skills needs and diversify educational pathways to meet the rising demand for high-skilled workers and lifelong learning...address both foundational and complex sets of skills...use technologies...” (OECD, Trends Shaping Education 2025, p9)

How can QA support future developments in HE and help our institutions achieve their own and society’s long-term goals?



Themes

5 Macro Trends

5 Issues to Think About

The Role of QA in this Changing World



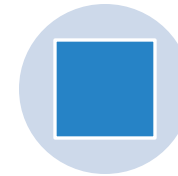
5 Macro Trends To Reflect On



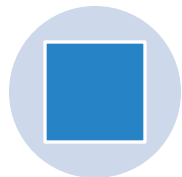
Competitiveness
and AI



Knowledge & Skills



Demographic Shifts



Constrained Funding
Environment



Society & Public
Trust



1. Competitiveness and AI revolutionizing life and work

“Europe has many economic strengths, but must act now to regain its competitiveness and secure its prosperity.... What is at stake for Europe is not just economic growth, but the future of its model.”

EU, A Competitiveness Compass for the EU (2025)

Competitiveness is the keyword in today's geopolitical world, with heightened focus on technology, innovation & knowledge diffusion. Advanced technologies are pre-condition for tomorrow's economy – essential tools not simply a replacement.

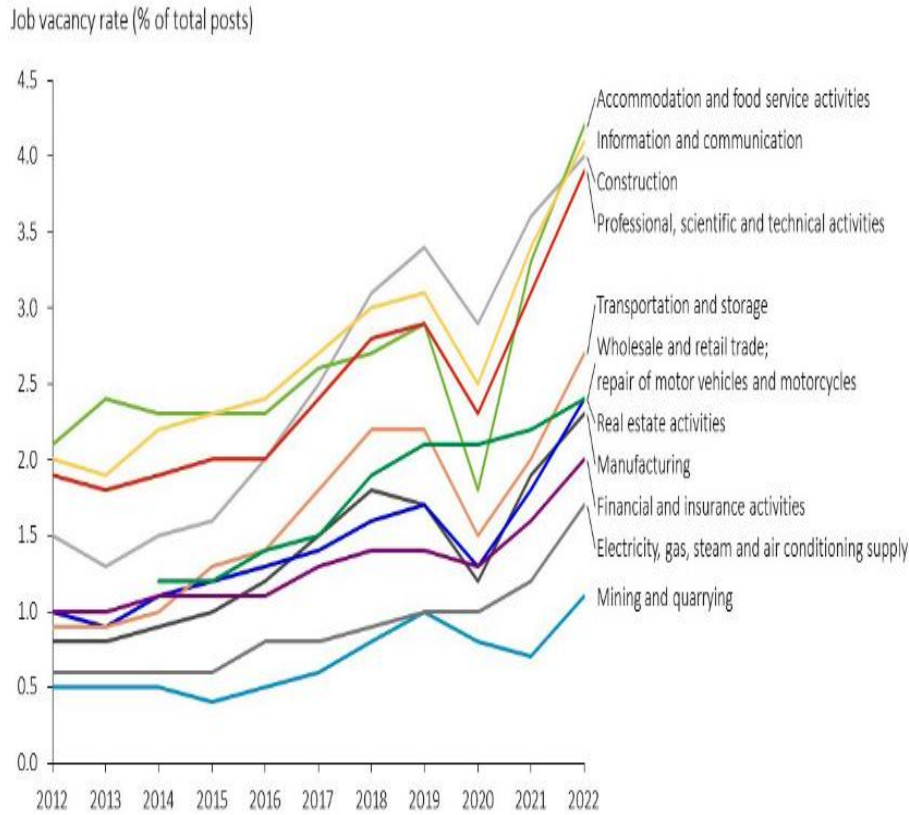
- Concentrate on higher-order critical thinking skills based on the outputs provided by AI.
- Human-oriented employments, e.g., advising, decision-making, reasoning, communicating and interacting, will rise in demand.
- Streamlining processes, offer 24/7 learner support, provide personalised learning,

Employers expect graduates to have AI-related skills

Impact already being felt on graduate entry jobs

2. Knowledge & Skills

Skill shortages in the EU



“The EU has a highly skilled labour force, but it is suffering from persistent skills shortages across different sectors, both in low-skilled and highly skilled occupations, including in the strategic sectors...” Draghi Report (2024), Part B, p67

Concerns about educational relevance, “labour mismatch”, skill gaps, under- and over-employment.

Future requires: higher-order cognitive, communication and interpersonal skills, complex problem-solving, creativity, fluency of ideas and active learning, requiring people to have broad-based skills alongside specialist knowledge.

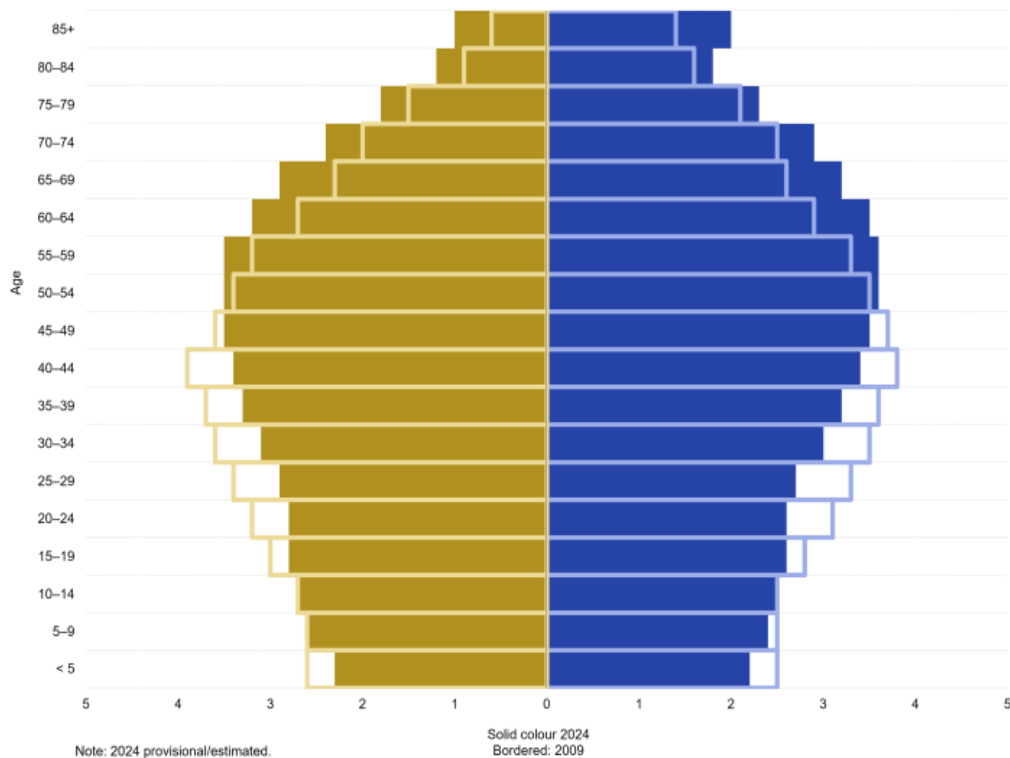
People will require continuous upskilling, re-skilling and repurposing their qualification – new learning pathways

All learners are Life-long Learners!



3. Demographic Shifts

Population pyramids, EU 2009 and 2024
(% of the total population)



Note: 2024 provisional/estimated.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_pjangroup)

Eurostat, February 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing

- By 2070, 30% of people in Europe estimated to be 65+;
- Decline in traditional HE cohort, and in working age population.
- PIACC shows sizeable proportion of adults w/ poor reading, numeracy and problem-solving skills, and limited experience of computers.
- Yet, adult learning not properly embedded in EU education & training systems (Draghi, 2024, ptB, p264)
- Widening access to under-served groups and those who have been inactive is *essential* to meet societal and labour needs/stem growing social inequalities.




4. Constrained Funding Environment

Europe values higher education as a public good – but funding a mass higher education system is very different from a system catering to a small minority.

Funding challenges from external factors, geopolitical tensions, and competition within society & tertiary sector.

End of the “golden age” of HE funding with implications for capital funding and infrastructure.

HE funding challenge being experienced across Europe & beyond  new funding policies

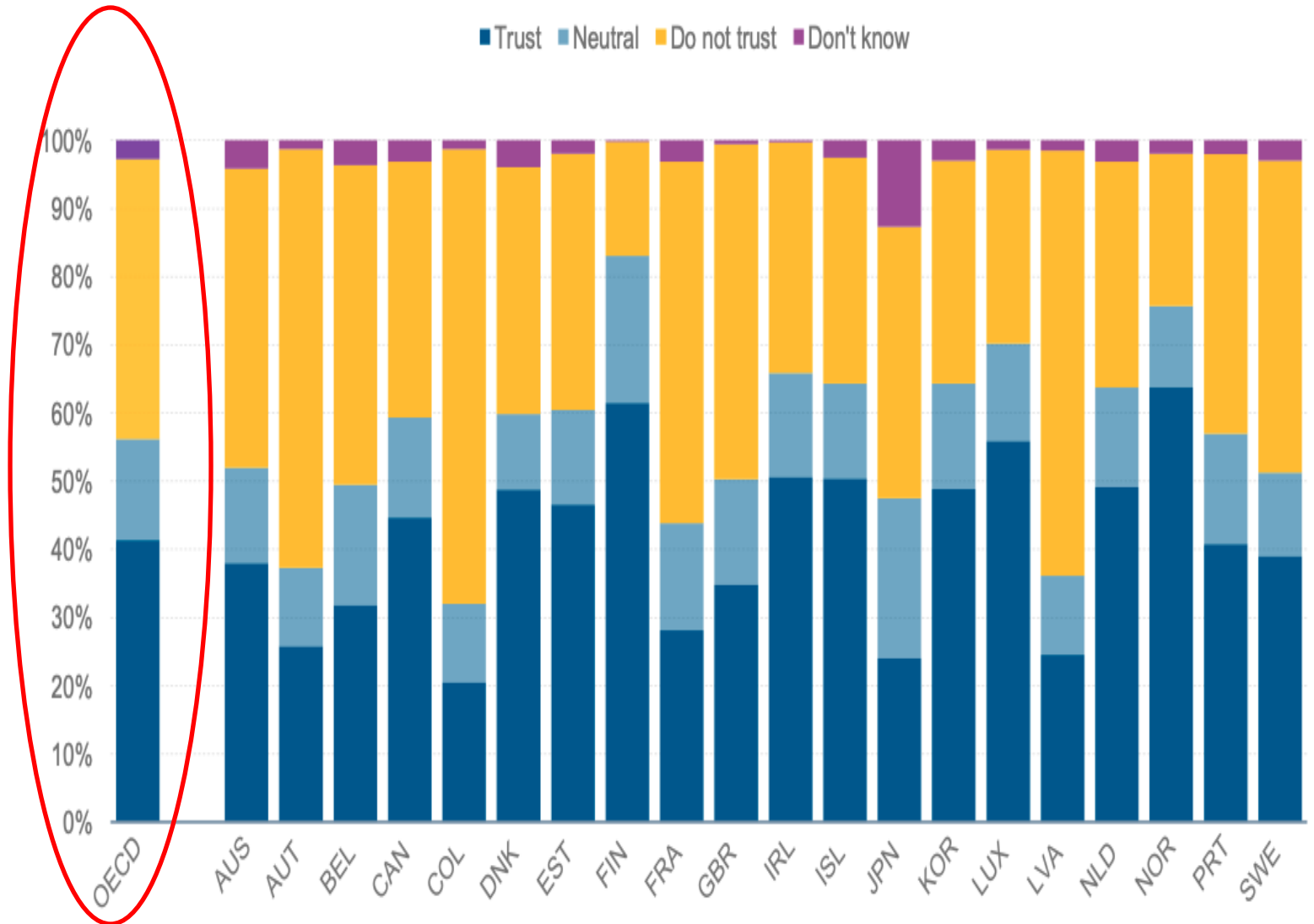
- Performance-based funding – linked to national strategic objectives, e.g., widening participation/equity, enterprise/regional engagement, value for money
- Targeted Innovation funding – increased focus on R&I, regional development/smart specialization
- Tuition on international students, and changes for domestic students.
- Private sector involvement – pursue additional funding sources via PPP, sponsorship, 

5. Society and Public Trust

Growing distrust between elites and others – and “widespread sense that democratic government is working for some, but certainly not for all.” OECD, 2022

Figure 1.2. Just over four in ten people trust their national government

Share of respondents who indicate different levels of trust in their national government (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Switzerland: Similar Trends and Challenges

Demographics & Sustainability: not Swiss specific, but issues emerge as a result of Switzerland's geographic, economic and political situation.

Budget cuts in the public education sector: Across several cantons and at the federal level, financial pressure on public spending raising issues around sustainability, autonomy, and the ability to invest.

European collaboration: Although Switzerland has recently regained association to Horizon Europe, limitations remain regarding participation in Erasmus+.

Digitalization & AI: not Swiss specific

Introduction of micro-credentials: The growing interest in flexible, short-form learning formats presents opportunities and challenges in terms of recognition, QA and alignment with existing degree structures.





5 Issues to Think About

Preparing Learners for the Future

“...providing opportunities for education and adult learning and good jobs for all throughout their lifetimes.”

Draghi, M. (2024). *The future of European competitiveness. Part A., p2*

Institutions must become age-neutral and remove (hidden) barriers to participation.

People will move in and out of different formal, informal and non-formal learning environments over the course of their lifetime.

Customisation of learning – education to be more personalised according to circumstances, priorities, needs and interests.

The labour market will require a speedier academic response – making a standard curriculum obsolete.

Ultimately, opportunities for mature learners is a sustainability issue – no longer a good to have.

- Reconceptualise education as a “60-year curriculum.”
- Embed LLL in everything, and remove traditional distinctions between full and part-time, or weekday and weekend/evening learning.
- New approach which reflects needs of labour market and involves social partners and other stakeholders.
- Rethink the way programmes are designed, delivered, assessed, organised.
- Expand the classroom beyond physical and time constraints.

Restructuring Learning & Curriculum

Providing learners with “capabilities to navigate, influence, and take responsibility for their learning and education pathways and environments”.

Student Agency has big implications for

- Organising our universities and schedule classes and infrastructure
- Curriculum design, delivery and assessment
- Learning experience
- Lecturer preparation and professional development
- Role of AI and other technologies

If fail to respond appropriately and quickly enough, alternative providers will.

- Innovative and coherent institutional approach to learning, teaching and assessment offering just-in-time anytime/anywhere: accessible, portable, relevant, alternative accredited credentials, funding and tuition models.
- Unbundling macro-credentials with stackable/alternative accredited credentials.
- ECTs as a flexible credit accumulation transfer system.
- New forms of assessment which value “what learners can do” rather than “what learners know,” and to assess “understanding and application” instead of “knowing and repeating.”

Place-based Transformative R&I

R&I occurs not only in labs, innovation parks and start-up companies: more than science-based technology and the individual products.

Innovation also occurs in daily life, in social relationships and in the home, and may be focused on new services, and new ways of organizing society, work and ourselves.

To make meaningful interventions, individual research and isolated projects should not be enough.

But – how to measure and assess?

- Fostering innovation which creates both high-skilled jobs and medium-skilled jobs which are the “hidden economic engine”.
- Build collaborative innovation clusters to co-produce solutions to problems. This is the message of the SDGs.
- Entrepreneurship training and opportunities, equipping graduates with the skills necessary to start businesses, providing access to multidisciplinary learning and research environments.

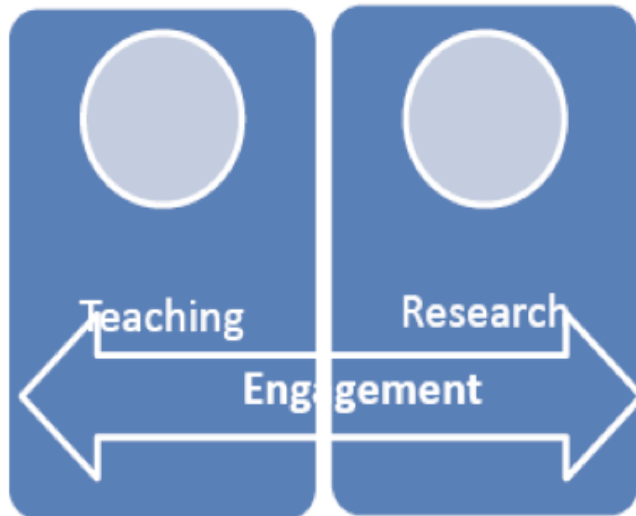
Embedding Societal Engagement

Deep structured engagement with societal partners leads to better outcomes for everyone.

Sustainable partnerships based on 4 Cs: coherence, collaboration, coordination, and co-production.

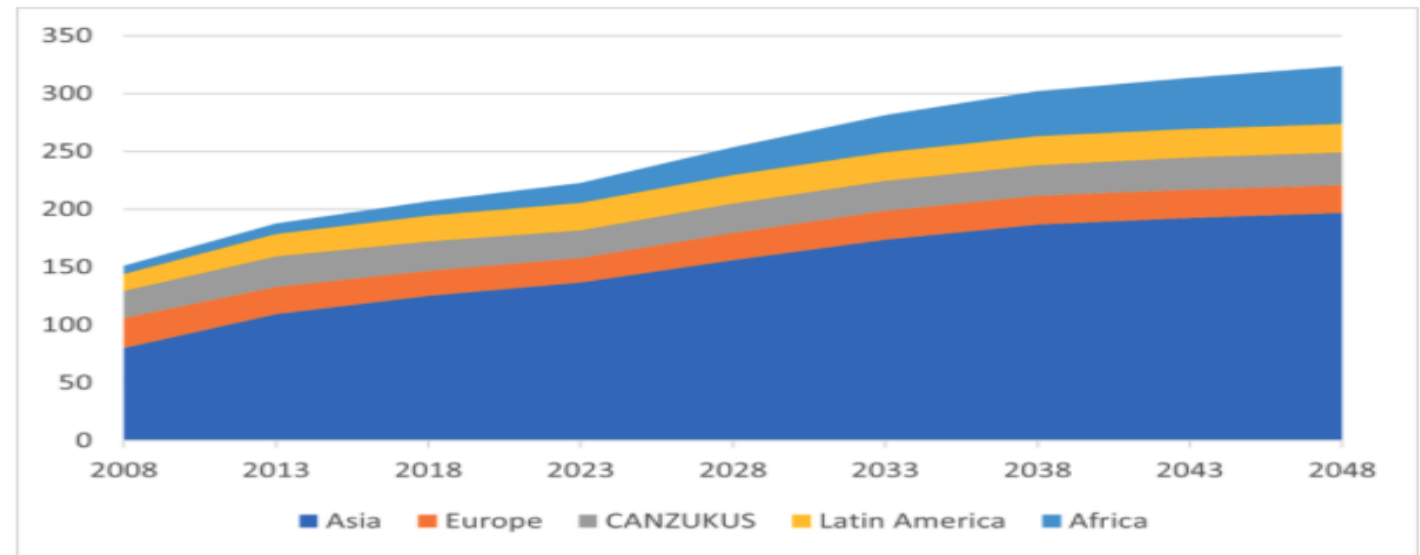
- *What* as well as *how* we teach and research:
 - Responds to societal/workforce needs of region;
 - Outcome and high-impact driven; end-user engagement
- International collaboration to enhance future knowledge and skill needs, guide education programmes and R&I, and engage in projects to solve global challenges
- Deepening and widening openness of higher education, embracing social inclusion, and building trust

Engagement as Horizontal Linking Teaching and Research



Reconfiguration of Global Tertiary Landscape?

Figure 5: Projected Tertiary Enrolments by Continent, in millions, 2008-2048



21,000+ officially accredited/recognised HEIs (IAU), up from 12,000 in 1997. No official number of TVET colleges.

Rising number/type of providers & formats; micro/macro/stackable credentials; in-class, online & hybrid; private and public; diversity of learners, internationalisation; TNE/franchise; education hubs, etc.

Growth in private and TNE: chasing supply – demand gap.

UNESCO: “multiplication of the number and type of accreditors that might lead to individuals, institutions and governments becoming susceptible to fraud.”

Are governments and QA ready to address this expansion?

Are learners sufficiently protected?



The Role of QA in this Changing World

Challenges for Quality & Quality Assurance 1

Defining and maintaining quality has traditionally been guided by academic norms of peer review.

But professional self-regulation and self-governance less tolerated today.

QA seen as too process-oriented; focused on how well “academic standards” are protected.

- Insufficiently focused on future needs of learners and society, and how HEIs are anticipating/adapting to the changing environment.
- Outstanding questions regarding educational quality.
- Insufficient accountability regarding costs, outcomes, impact and benefits.
- Inefficient use of public resources and people’s time.
- Benefits the academy more than students or society.
- Not scalable or sufficiently transparent in any meaningful way.
- Insufficiently focused on next generation learners.



Challenges for Quality & Quality Assurance 2

Quality/QA no longer nation-bound or “owned” *only* by HEIs or evaluators/accreditors.

Big changes across the international learning environment, and global and geo-political landscape

Greater responsiveness to demands of global competitiveness, societal/economic needs and regional/societal challenges:

- Learning outcomes, graduate attributes and life-sustaining skills
- Learners/graduates part of global talent/labour market wherever they live/study
- Rising costs and efficiencies vis-à-vis public and/or private funding
- Engagement of key stakeholders: employers, diverse learners, professional associations, etc
- Positioning and Benchmarking



“Educational quality usually refers to teaching and learning, although it also refers to research, engagement and institutional leadership.

Increasingly, consideration of quality extends beyond internal matters and reflects the capacity and capability of higher education to meet a variety of societal needs and demands.”

(Hazelkorn, Coates & McCormick, 2018)



Multidimensional QA Framework



Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks 1

Governance and Strategic Leadership:

- Is the role of higher education in the new environment?
- Is QA approach sufficiently strategic and future focused? Does it challenge practice and respond/address/support new developments and challenges – or too bureaucratic, focused on perpetuating what's there and sustaining academic hierarchies/privilege?

Curriculum, Learning Outcomes:

- How is QA addressing/supporting the shifts in provision/curriculum from time-served to just-in-time, practice-based, competency-based, remote/flexible learning, AI, etc?
- How is learner-centredness/learner agency being supported/realized?



Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks 2

Service to Society/Engagement & Partnerships:

- Is there sufficient **emphasis on strategic, sustainable and measurable engagement and partnerships/collaboration with external stakeholders – business & employers – other institutions, and what role do they play?**
- Are actions sufficiently **aligned with/responsive to urgent societal challenges (SDG)** – or does the institution simply engage in SDG/green-washing?
- How does the HEI **build trust** to serve as a moral anchor in society?

Research, Innovation and Knowledge Diffusion:

- How does **R&I inform/underpin teaching and learning** or is it simply a mechanism for reputation-seeking?
- In these challenging circumstances, does QA provoke the HEI to **rethink its approach to R&I, its partnerships and its profile?**

Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks 3

Learners:

- Does the QA approach encourage the education system, the institutions and the learning environment to support all learners “to **navigate, influence, and take responsibility for their learning and education pathways and environments**”?
- Does QA promote successful inclusion **or does it reinforce a gatekeeper role** to retain/build status?

Academic/Research & Professional/Technical/Services Staff:

- How does QA **promote, recognise and reward All Talents** – following the example in the NL?
- Are **all staff** supported equally to understand/meet the demands/needs of the changing landscape?



Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks 4

Academic & Research Integrity, Ethics, and Academic Freedom

- Does the **institutional setting promote and guard conditions for academic integrity and individual academic freedom** ?

Better Decision-Making and Improved Accountability

- Is the HEI using **data/information management systems** – rather than self-belief – to underpin **decision-making, strategically plan and ensure sustainability**?
- How are **current and future challenges and risks identified/planned for**?
- How **added value/RoE (return-on-education) publicly demonstrated**?
- Is there **sufficient emphasis on benchmarking rather than rankings**?



The Future Is Already Here

Despite all the changes across societies, economies and education, the way we think about quality and QA has remained relatively unchanged.

We ignore the gathering storm clouds at our peril.

What changes are necessary to reinvigorate QA to help our institutions navigate the challenges, foster innovation, and ensure sustainable growth and fulfil their educational mission in a rapidly changing world?



RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education

Edited by
Ellen Hazelkorn • Hamish Coates
Alexander C. McCormick

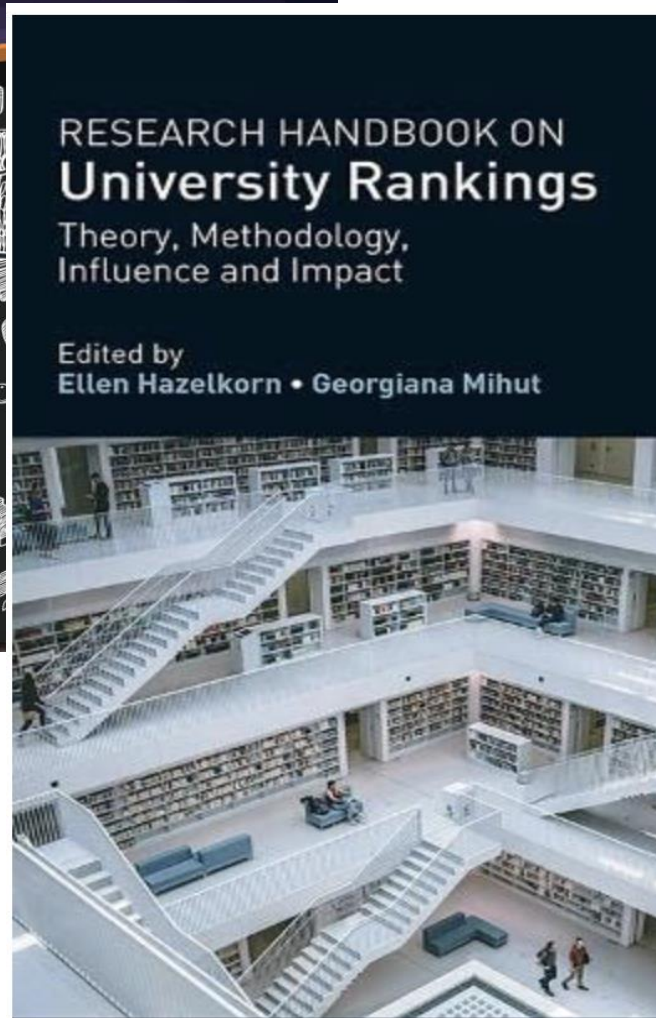


Edited by
John Goddard • Ellen Hazelkorn
Louise Kempton • Paul Vallance



The Civic University

The Policy and Leadership Challenges



RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON University Rankings

Theory, Methodology,
Influence and Impact

Edited by
Ellen Hazelkorn • Georgiana Mihut

ELGAR HANDBOOKS IN EDUCATION

ELLEN
HAZELKORN



Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education

The Battle for World-Class Excellence

2ND EDITION



Professor Ellen Hazelkorn

BH Associates, Ireland

info@bhassociates.eu

<https://www.bhassociates.eu>