
1 Quality, performance and accountability: emergent challenges in the global era

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INTRODUCTION

After decades of discussion involving many thousands of people from around the world, there seems no simple way of clarifying higher education quality, performance and accountability, or of distinguishing between these elusive yet very important ideas. Herein lies an enormous problem of increasing worldwide concern. For if quality is ephemeral and subjective, then really anything goes. If there is no agreement on the aspects of performance that matter most, then inefficiencies can abound. If accountabilities are malleable and contestable, then the loudest or most powerful voices control the discourse. Surely an institution that both privileges and produces knowledge and expertise can do better than such vapid and porous relativism. How else can higher education develop human capital, nourish ethical judgement, promote civic-ness, save forests, cure cancer, or clarify the interaction of the heliosphere with the local interstellar medium? What basis is there for assuring the ongoing contributions of academic research and education?

The chapters in this book go a long way to articulating what is meant by higher education quality, performance and accountability. They do not conclusively settle these important matters, but they do furnish an expansive, scholarly and globally diverse set of perspectives – which should be the starting point for further discussion, debate and investigation.

Higher education itself is very old, but this book charts the emergence of a relatively young domain of inquiry. Quality, performance and accountability have been longstanding concerns in higher education, but the nature of higher education and its changing role in contemporary society challenge the collegial approaches that have sufficed for centuries. The role, scale and expectations of higher education have changed with the massification of higher education and intensified demands of society on higher education as knowledge intensity has become a key determinant of economic competitiveness. Global leaders continually reiterate that the only sustainable growth strategy is through innovation for which higher education plays a major role through research and the supply of qualified graduates. Thus, around the world, in different ways, governments are inspecting – and questioning – the capacity and capability of their various higher education institutions, and the system-as-a-whole, to meet the needs of society and the economy into the future.

These matters have become more important as higher education has become larger, more diverse and costlier, and its role as a driver of personal and social achievement and for national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy has become the predominant paradigm around the world. These factors have introduced a sense of urgency into the

debate. That the discussion has, at times, taken on an increasingly technical tone belies its overall significance and underplays its complexity. As higher education becomes more internationalised, and graduates join a global talent pool, there is a necessity to provide consumer-type information for students and parents, and strategic intelligence for governments, business and the public. Concerns over affordability, student opportunities and outcomes, and societal impact has focused attention on matters such as value for money, effectiveness and efficiency, and on improving education and research. Ultimately good quality, international comparative information is essential to: underpin strategic leadership and decision-making at the national and institutional level; enable governments and institutions to gain a greater understanding of their own situation by comparing 'good practice'; and provide assurances to the public about the contribution and relevance of higher education to societies and economies.

Many accountability and transparency instruments exist, but there has been growing dissatisfaction with existing mechanisms like global rankings that excessively valorise elite universities and research or traditional norms of peer review and self-governance. No doubt ideology underpins the embrace of new public management approaches. However, genuine concerns and efforts to develop alternative instruments have often come up against academic self-interest, thus contributing to a decline in higher education's authority. A gap is opening between higher education and its many publics. Public voices claim that universities are too self-serving, focused on their own (global) reputation rather than providing a quality education. Almost everywhere, a war of words about the quality of graduates is set against a decline of trust in public institutions and in higher education attainment as a sure path to socioeconomic mobility. What's clear is that in a globally connected world, in which higher education is an indicator of knowledge production and talent attractiveness, how it performs is now of critical concern to everyone. This offers a considerable challenge to how we consider issues of quality, performance and accountability.

RATIONALE FOR THIS *RESEARCH HANDBOOK*

This string of uncertainties pulses through this emergent field. As the following chapters convey, there is a perennial tension between collegial, commercial and governmental forces. Academic standards contend with commercial strategies and politically espoused public interests in this newly contested terrain. Rational analysts fail to find sensible ways for substantiating public investments with private returns or enabling valid (cross-national) comparisons. Indeed, the failure to measure important outcomes in any generalisable and consensually accepted way that also enables international comparisons, stymies the kind of econometric insights that have played such an important reforming role in other sectors. Should public universities act differently from private universities and from other kinds of higher education institutions (HEI), such as technical, technological or vocational institutions? What is the landscape in which institutions operate, and what should the governance arrangements be and for what purposes? To what extent do national context and institutional landscapes require or nuance different forms of governance and academic autonomy, and how does autonomy play out in a world of precarious balance sheets and contingent labour? So, what is the appropriate balance between accountability

and autonomy? How can we best understand and assess higher education as a ‘public good’, and according to whose definition? Will technology advocates finally deliver on their project of ‘revolutionising’ higher education with innovative digital ‘solutions’? Such hefty uncertainties are unlikely to be resolved easily, yet they do inject important impetus for the clarifying perspectives that follow.

Herein lies the value of this book. It represents the first attempt to provide an essential and comprehensive reference tool that brings together the most up-to-date research and thinking, from around the world, about one of the most challenging and pressing academic and policy issues of our time. It offers insights on recent trends and surveys prospective developments. It looks across the field of higher education, and seeks to place the tertiary or post-secondary sector within its broader socioeconomic and political contexts. It brings together broad-based macro-level studies and detailed case studies. The questions pursued and discussed are global because higher education is a global enterprise; the nation-state remains the principal governance and financial framework but national boundaries are less and less relevant to students, academic staff, graduates and institutions, and to the knowledge learned, discovered, transmitted and innovated. Ultimately, the book seeks to provide an evidence base, and to promote and stimulate new thinking in this young domain of inquiry. That it draws together such a wide range of international scholars and thinkers shows the extent to which the concerns discussed are universal, and cannot be excused or ignored as any local manifestation.

As these ruminations suggest, this book is relevant to a broad range of people. You might be reading it because you have a passing interest in higher education, are working for a government or community organisation, are engaged as a tertiary sector manager, teacher or researcher, or are an emerging or established scholar of the field itself. However you come to the book, it is best seen as a series of expert contemplations around a small clutch of common topics. There is value both in dipping into single chapters and in reading all the chapters as a whole. The pieces do not pretend to simplify or finalise any of the very complex and often fraught matters under discussion. Authors seek to offer up the most advanced current thinking, drawing on international scholarship and case studies, thereby building knowledge and understanding. Ultimately, there are limitations; hence, authors identify outstanding questions, and areas and issues requiring our attention.

FRAMING IDEAS

In this introductory chapter it is helpful to begin the process of unpacking the terms in the title and to set foundations for the contributions that follow. There may well be more that unites rather than separates the ideas of quality, performance and accountability. But to help spark analysis the terms are approached separately in the foray that follows. The three themes were chosen because they represent the most significant challenges affecting and impacting on higher education today, while at the same time being complex, widely debated and often controversial. There is a rich academic literature going back decades although recent years have witnessed an intensification of research and developments at the supra-national, national and institutional level, matched by a wealth of publications.

Quality

Quality is a complex term that broadly refers to inputs, processes and outputs at the level of learners, teachers and scholars, institutions and entire systems. Despite the fact that the concept is used widely, there is no agreed-upon definition of 'quality' 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. 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. It is often used in association or conterminously with 'excellence' as if to assert or emphasise the objective of quality. Thus, quality considers such matters as: the production of new knowledge and capacity for innovation; student learning outcomes; the educational or learning gain in both declarative knowledge and more diffuse 'soft skills'; student performance, retention, graduation and employability; support for student success; the production of suitably trained and demographically representative graduates at different educational levels; the breadth and depth of the curriculum and its responsiveness to contemporary needs; pedagogical methods, training and academic support and development; and links to societal practice and working life, including graduates' preparedness as citizens and lifelong learners.

Other aspects include how well higher education institutions or the system as a whole is governed, managed and assured, student learning pathways and progression through the system, and equity of access, participation and opportunity. Collectively these different attributes matter because of significance of (higher) education for national competitiveness and global positioning; hence there is increasingly a geopolitical aspect to quality.

Performance

Performance involves questions of how higher education is assessed and evaluated, and often involves reference to productivity and funding as much as quality-related standards. Like quality, the term 'performance' itself raises the question 'relative to what?'; hence work in this area tends to provoke discussion of criteria, standards and expectations. Discussions of performance focus on outcomes and how inputs and processes produce them. Talk of 'productivity' raises questions about the role and activities of academic staff, challenging traditional assumptions about the self-regulated nature of the academic profession. Broader analyses of return-on-investment may take account of these process-related interactions as well.

Traditionally, focus has concentrated on individual institutions but increasingly performance-related deliberations have shifted to academic and professional staff and students. There is a longer history of measuring research activity, but questions are now being asked more broadly about academic staff. Controversially, it speaks to public and political perception about what academics do all day or all year, and thereby shifts responsibility for student learning onto academics and other higher education professionals. This explains increasing attention to what academics produce through their teaching, and issues of academic outputs and outcomes, such as progression and graduate employment. How effectively are students learning, and what are they achieving? How do support per-

sonnel, institutions and the systems overall help students succeed? Much recent attention has begun to look at the role and contribution of administrative leadership.

There is also increasing focus on the performance of the educational system as a whole. The concept 'system' can itself be confusing; are we talking about tertiary, post-secondary, post-compulsory or vocational, professional, further, higher and life-long education? Different countries, regions and organisations embrace or use specific terms. Over time, these different concepts have ebbed and flowed but it seems clear that attention on the capacity of the system in aggregate is gaining traction as high participation becomes the norm and rigid distinctions between types of education experiences fade and student learning takes centre stage. This approach goes beyond simply looking at individual institutions and how their students perform – an approach which has often privileged elite universities with high-achieving students and academic staff. Instead, it looks at access, participation and opportunities for success, for all students, across all types of institutions, and the collective impact and benefit of tertiary education on and for society.

Assessing and evaluating performance is both a controversial and complex process. Traditional approaches have relied on collegiality, expert judgement and peer review. More quantitative and externally driven approaches have emerged in recent decades, which range from international rankings and bibliometric systems to institution- and even department- or field-based approaches. Associated forms of academic management have developed in response to such changing contexts, linked with new forms of workforce development and regulation.

Accountability

The depth of the global economic crisis has focused attention on the interconnectedness of the world's economy and the capacity of higher education institutions to meet the needs of national economies at a time when governments face many fiscal demands and constraints, including taxpayer resistance. Indeed, it seems unlikely, given increasing demands, that the state will be able to fund all the higher education that society requires and citizens demand. As a result, approaches to financing higher education are changing in many countries, with greater emphasis on cost sharing by way of shifts away from governments to students and industry. At the same time, as the range and number of education providers grows and market principles intrude further into higher education, governments have stepped in to regulate the marketplace. This has challenged the traditional role of academic staff while also signalling the critical significance of education to the sustainability of the (global) economy.

As higher education becomes simultaneously more essential for personal and societal success and costlier, attention has turned to holding tertiary institutions accountable for their use of funds (whether from public or private/tuition sources) and other resources. Traditionally, accountability measures focused on quality assurance and research excellence. Today the ground has shifted, exposing tensions between institutional and academic autonomy and public accountability, marking a shift from *laissez-faire* deference to academic expertise and instruments of soft-steering towards variations of top-down regulation mixed with new formations of social contract or compact. Concepts such as the new public management and the evaluative or regulatory state have been used to describe

this shift while alternative perspectives focus on matters of relevance and valorisation, and public value management.

Questions are being asked about the relevance and contribution of higher education to societal goals. These issues arise not merely because of transactional or financial concerns but because of the essential role that higher education plays within the national infrastructure and global architecture. Concerns about quality, performance and accountability apply to both public and private (not-for-profit and for-profit) institutions, whether national or transnational, because they all play a role that can impact positively or negatively on society and the economy – which is why ratings agencies, for example, include indicators of performance in their own calculations. Thus, new accountability and transparency instruments have emerged over recent decades, spanning from light-touch or bottom-up self-assessment and quality assurance tools to top-down regulatory processes of accreditation and performance-linked funding. Other methods include benchmarking, classification or profiling, and other forms of evaluation. Global rankings are widely criticised, and as such their appearance and influence has compelled considerable attention by academics, institutions and policy-makers to consider alternative rankings and post-ranking futures. The significance of these tools for governing international higher education is illustrated by the fact that action – involving all players: higher education institutions and organisations, academics and governments – is being taken at the national as well as at international and supranational levels.

STRUCTURE

The book assembles specially commissioned chapters from international scholars who define, review, analyse and reflect upon the issues to produce a *Research Handbook* of academic merit, international strength and practical value. Prepared over two years by editors with an enduring curiosity about the field, care has been taken to engage perspectives from people across different cultures and regions, ages and genders, organisations and roles, and fields and sectors. The field of higher education studies is inherently eclectic and dynamic, and we have tried to embrace this in our selection of writers as well as topics. This flows with our goal for a generative and reflective volume rather than a reductive and summative one. Invited contributors leapt at the opportunity to contribute, and engaged in sustained and creative ways. Thus, what the reader will find will be a treasure-trove of scholarship on one of the hottest issues of our day.

The book is divided into five further parts, each of which drawing upon the growing literature and practice to provide an evidence base for scholarship, academic planning and decision-making, and policy-making, at the national and international level.

Part II draws together some of the key overarching issues and perspectives that frame the ongoing scholarly discussion and policy discourse around quality, performance and accountability. Harvey, King and Dill each look at the rise of quality assurance as a now integral part of the higher education landscape, but do so within the context of the evolving shift from academically-based to government-driven quality assessment. Lennon, and Massy and Archer both examine issues around measuring and assessing learning outcomes and productivity – another indication of how attention has shifted away from considerations of process towards outcomes. The increasing role of both private and

transnational higher education, and the implications and challenges that they pose for quality and accountability, are discussed by Lane, Kinser and Zhang, and also by Teixeira and Amaral. Over the years considerable attention has also been given to mechanisms for monitoring performance and ensuring accountability; much has been written about the shift from top-down to bottom-up, and variations of soft steering and new social contracts. Bell, Fryar and Hillman challenge assumptions about the effectiveness of performance-based funding, as operational in the United States and elsewhere, while Huisman looks at accountability arrangements in the Netherlands, England, Norway, Austria and Italy, suggesting the importance of dialogue in making the process work.

Part III looks at the world of indicators and rankings, which today constitute an essential component of decision-making at all levels of government and higher education. Martin looks at the growing use of indicators from the perspective of having five different purposes: public information and accountability, monitoring policy objectives, management and resource allocation, international comparison and benchmarking, and international management. Varghese takes a broader approach, looking at the use of indicators to track global trends in higher education, including enrolment rates, gender parity, student mobility and so on. Moore, Coates and Croucher provide a deeper dive, looking at productivity as a concept just beginning to be applied to higher education. The chapters by Williams, and Borden, Coates and Bringle both examine measurement and performance assessment at the system level by highlighting the contribution of diverse institution types to overall economic capacity. In the former instance, this takes the form of a system-based ranking while the latter looks at new approaches to measuring and classifying performance that recognise mission diversity. The next two chapters, by Yang and Liu, and by Tijssen look, in the first case, at rankings in terms of their impact on China itself – the birthplace of global rankings – while the latter looks at the impact of academic research in terms of commercialisation and entrepreneurship. Finally, Hazelkorn and Gibson analyse the influence of rankings on the quality, performance and accountability agenda, looking at the extent to which the ‘industry’ has changed in response and reaction to rankings, and where it is going in terms of alternative rankings and alternatives to rankings.

Part IV looks specifically at learning and the student experience – the bread and butter of higher education that lies at the heart of the quality debate. Shavelson, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia and Mariño sketch the field of learning indicators, and argue for a profile of multiple student learning indicators to capture the complexity of the learning process. Lennon, Fukahori and Edwards reflect on the methodological and political lessons learned from the OECD’s attempt to develop a global approach to assessing learning outcomes. At its core, the Bologna Process embraced comparability across European systems and institutions as the enduring principle for mobility; Tuning began as a grass-roots programme to support curriculum change and modernisation but had its weaknesses. Wagenaar looks at these issues, and at a new initiative that seeks to develop detailed assessment frameworks. Orr and Usher, as well as Kuh and Jankowski, also look at the measurement of student performance and student learning. The first is a cross-national study asking what student success looks like and how it can be measured, while the latter adopts a macro perspective of the United States experience, examining its highlights and lessons. The final two chapters in this part look at quality assessment from the perspective of students, who are *the* critical actors in the system yet for whom quality assurance

processes are often an afterthought. Jungblut, Stensaker and Vukasovic suggest that students' understanding of quality can be difficult to identify because of the complexity of the system. Accordingly, Klemenčič sees students as key actors who need to be brought directly into the process and seen as equal partners rather than tokenistically involved.

Part V presents a survey of developments from around the world. Often critically portrayed as an illustration of policy copying, the value of this part lies in the varied narratives and analyses offered by scholars and policy actors from around the globe. Common themes emerge, such as quality assurance to underpin socioeconomic development as well as for student and academic mobility, using indicators for comparability and benchmarking to facilitate transformation and improvement, and quality as a vital roadmap to full participation in global higher education. Lange and Strydom reflect on two decades of quality assurance practices in South Africa, while Moyo takes four case studies from South Africa and Uganda to examine the necessity of developing systems to assess research and innovation. The next five chapters look at different aspects of quality assurance and performance measurement across Asia. Shi, Luo, Wen and Guo look at the case of China, while Huang looks more broadly at East Asian accountability models, comparing approaches across China, Japan and Korea. Hou looks specifically at Taiwan; Ismail, Wan and Ibrahim look at Malaysia; and Adeyemo and Weber consider developments in the Philippines. The chapters by Mahat and Hanlon, and Croucher both reflect on the Australian experience, examining what's worked and why, and what lessons are worth sharing. Shifting attention to Europe, Brown examines changing patterns of accountability in the United Kingdom, whose move from institution-based quality assurance to the newly introduced government-driven teaching excellence framework (TEF) exemplifies the shift in policy practice over recent decades. Dobbins and Aleksandriyskaya look at experiences across Central and Eastern European higher education, reflecting tremendous political change in the region. Norway presents a very different governance scenario: Skodvin and Lid examine the outcomes and unintended consequences of the Norwegian government's efforts to use policy instruments to enhance quality and increase institutional diversity. Some of these objectives are also present in Ontario's strategy described by Weingarten and Hicks, who controversially argue that funding seems to play little or no role in performance. Finally, Jerez and Blanco look at developments in Chile, rounding off a world tour of developments in quality, performance and accountability.

Part VI concludes the book, bringing together four chapters that each look ahead at emerging developments in this new field. Noonan challenges us to look at system-level issues: as we move from elite to universal systems of participation, is it possible to develop a performance framework system that embraces and truly values institutional diversity? Austin and Jones consider the implications that emergent trends in accountability present for governance by looking at four different models. Benneworth and Zeeman look specifically at the challenge of identifying ways to measure and assess higher education's civic and economic contributions. As this becomes an increasingly important output of higher education, the challenge being addressed everywhere is how higher education's full contribution can best be measured and valued. Finally, Jongbloed, Vossensteyn, van Vught and Westerheijden provide an important book-end to the *Research Handbook*. Accepting transparency and accountability tools are a fact of modern governance, whether of higher education or finance or hospitals, and the authors assess emergent instruments and current debates in the United States and Europe.

LOOKING AHEAD

This book provides a macro view of an emergent field, drawing authorship from around the world to integrate issues of quality, performance and accountability for the first time. The chapters shine a light on a hot scholarly and policy area, one that in its practice and implementation responds to public and political concerns, and challenges some academic sacred cows.

This chapter has introduced the book, reviewed key ideas, foreshadowing the contributions that follow. We close by considering some formative future directions. As this is a new and developing field we steer away from convergence and instead close with a few creative suggestions.

With changes in higher education activities, institutions and systems there is a need to better understand funding approaches and their relation to outcomes. Most studies of funding are culturally or nationally bounded, often informed by political orientation or nuance. This book affirms the need for more scientific inquiry into all aspects of contemporary higher education finance. This could involve conceptual analysis, experimental and quasi-experimental policy analysis, meta-analysis and other kinds of large-scale survey work, pilots and trials, and the formation of standards and infrastructure. Such work should examine macro-level questions such as how governments and households finance higher education while also promoting capacity- and infrastructure-building within institutions.

The contributions in this book frame substantial future work in the contested terrain of higher education quality and productivity. Whereas conventional treatments disproportionately focus on higher education's role in research and knowledge production, this book's chapters nourish an ongoing need for work that surfaces other dimensions of quality and performance, creating new understandings and insights. Such work should move beyond generalisation to focus instead on specificities within disciplines, professions and systems as well as institutions. The chapters also articulate an undeniable trend towards framing quality in ways that extend beyond institutional boundaries. Treasured and deeply entrenched norms of academic peer review are being challenged and even supplanted in ways that suggest its hegemony is eroding. Apart from hortatory rhetoric, the consequences of such a seismic shift are only beginning to be subjected to systematic investigation. Worldwide we hear urgent and amplifying calls for new information and transparency regarding student learning outcomes, research impact and the contributions of higher education to society at large. This movement has spurred new indicators, metrics and reporting platforms but with little examination of how these new approaches affect choices made by institutions, systems and policy actors. As with finance, this work will be most effective when it successfully surfs the dialectics that string together classroom, institutional, national and international settings.

Work focused on finance and quality must also contend with new policy contexts, and even the changing nature of policy itself. Many chapters provoke reflection on the appropriate domain(s) in which work should unfold: local, institutional, national or international. What is required to develop contextualised yet comparative insights into higher education outcomes that also make sense to its various publics? What does the rapid expansion of higher education in Africa, Asia and the Americas foreshadow about developments over the next decade and beyond? What facets of higher education quality

are unique to universities, and what facets are generalisable and meaningful to other providers, particularly those that are privately owned and those fuelled by profit-seeking motives? As discourse on higher education accountability takes on new urgency around the globe, who determines precisely what it is that higher education should be accountable for, to whom, and by what mechanisms? If core functions of higher education are trending into post-system futures, what kind of policy is required, what evidence is needed, and how is policy formed and governed? How can markets, governments and academics best work together to improve the quality, performance and accountability of higher education? The latter is especially important in the context of an increasingly internationalised higher education system; thus, what are the appropriate governance arrangements for a system in which cross-border mobility and dialogue are its DNA?

As we noted at the outset, these are complex and uncertain matters, and what seem like common-sense approaches can lead to unanticipated and even pernicious outcomes. The following chapters chart ideas, techniques and practices that we hope will inspire deeper and more meaningful progress on this important set of questions as well as new and more nuanced questions as this field matures.