The Accountability and Transparency Agenda:
Emerging Issues in the Global Era

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Are Traditional Formats Fit for Purpose?

- HEIs increasingly 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 the degree of transparency and accountability about what higher education institutions (HEI), both public and private, are doing about these matters.

- Growing dissatisfaction with the usefulness, robustness and comparability of traditional collegial mechanisms;
  - Whether distrust is genuine or being "whipped up" no longer matters;
  - Tensions are dominating discourse about HE and affecting our institutions around the globe.

Massification, Globalisation and Internationalisation

- Over the last 50 years, combination of demographic growth, economic and labour market changes, globalisation and internationalisation have pushed up demand for higher education participation, and for graduates.

  – Everywhere, our (higher) education systems have been transformed, spurred by the recognition that education is key to driving sustainable social and economic growth, empowering personal satisfaction and success, and improving societal outcomes.

  – International data showing continuing expansion and growing diversity amongst students and providers is wide spread internationally.

  – Significant political will "to pursue the expansion of higher education systems in most countries", and "potential for growth in participation in many countries" (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008b, 52).

Pre-requisites of a Global Economy

- Pre-requisites/inter-dependencies around mobility flows, e.g. recognition of credentials and QA; standard setting and guidelines; data transparency; credit transfer and accumulation systems; etc.

- Nation-states remain primary arena of/for HE, but systems are open, and boundaries are necessarily permeable.

- Scale of educational enterprise challenges tradit'l assumptions & practices, enshrined as "principles" of academic life: collegiality, self-assessment, self-reporting, peer review, and self-governance
  - What was possible/normal for small elite systems are challenging for complex systems and societies w/ rates of 60%+;
  - Emergent tensions derive from/reflect sheer logic of complex decision-making, massified systems, and changes in expectations re. "social contract".

- Trust and (re)assurances around quality are the essential lubricant.

Accountability and Transparency Agenda

- Concerns about accountability associated with "ever increasing complexity of governance" (Bovens et al, 2014, 16)
  - Re: elites and misuse of public funds, "fuelled by scandal and perceived misuse of authority in both the private and public sectors" (Leveille, 2013, 6).
  - But – political/economic crisis have exposed limits of market→ provoking concerns about insufficient oversight.
- Governments endeavouring to (re)regulate to ensure closer alignment with societal and national objectives, reflecting transformation in:
  - *Public attitudes* towards public services and the level of tax required,
  - Degree of *public trust* between different sectors of society, and
  - *Public interest* in effective and efficient use of public resources, and contribution and value back to society.

Emerging Issues in the Global Era

1. Quality

- Complex term, and "despite the fact that the concept is used widely, there is 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" (Hazelkorn, Coates & McCormick, 2018; Valeikienė, 2017).

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

- Means "quality" is variable, and is shaped by who-ever decides, by the choice of methodology (qualitative or quantitative) and the indicators – rather than on the basis of standards.

- Academics may understand why this is so and why context matters, but to others this seems to be just a(nother) form of obfuscation.

2. Quality Assurance

- Defining and maintaining quality, guided by norms of peer review, underpins academic-professional self-regulation and self-governance
  - QA based on promotion/embedding quality culture with ownership and responsibility resting with autonomous HEIs;
- But, inability to be *genuinely* accountable, and provide comparable evidence in usable and transparent format has become a major handicap.
- Despite observable virtues, QA seen as being/becoming too process-oriented and insufficiently focused on real measurable outcomes.
- QA *process* often seen as just that – a process:
  - Inefficient use of public resources and people's time,
  - Benefits the academy (which has a proclivity towards process-oriented actions) more than students or society,
  - Not scalable 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 shifted onto 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.

- Welcome rejoinder to global rankings but speaks 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. Accountability & Transparency

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

- More quantitative and externally-driven approaches have emerged in recent decades, including rankings, with greater emphasis on measuring outcomes and learning gain.

- Students have become an important part of the process.

- But, as our systems become even more diverse, participation of third-parties, including business and employers, becomes inevitable.

  - New technologies make the participation of citizens easier than ever.

- Range of different instruments being developed illustrates urgency and multi-stakeholder involvement, including growing web of knowledge intelligence businesses.

The Challenge

- Our critics (and even some of our friends) are saying that neither self-reporting nor peer review is adequate anymore, and that the public will not have confidence unless we add external verification and greater transparency around the quality of institutional & student performance;

- No doubt, many propositions & developments associated with this rapidly expanding and socially/politically diverse "brave new world" are problematic,

BUT

- Onus on universities and colleges, of all missions, and around the world, to
  - Actively engage to identify realistic solutions to the policy gauntlet being thrown down, and
  - "Start driving the bus", if you don't want to be left on the side of the road.

Transparency Theme

- Aim: brings an international perspective from contributors from diverse experiences of scholarship, public policy, and world regions.

- Aim: address the challenges – and challenge ourselves.

- Three sub-themes.

  1. OVERVIEW/KEY THEMES – Looking at development of transparency instruments in terms of public/governmental "intervention" & rankings – the archetypal "transparency tool".

  2. CASE STUDIES/INTERESTING INITIATIVES – Examples from Canada: measuring HE performance and student outcomes; Wales: changing pattern of government interventions; and UK: Teaching Excellence Framework;

  3. FUTURE DIRECTIONS – Adapting and reforming systems to meet requirements of massification (non-formal qualifications and NQF), and internationalisation of QA.

Questions

- What kinds of accountability and transparency instruments/tools – for assessing, measuring and comparing quality and outcomes – are fit for purpose in the 21st century?

- How do we balance different perspectives with expanding societal demands?

- What do/should transparency tools look like in the new global era?

- Quality and transparency are at the heart of Bologna Process/EHEA. So, what are the implications of and lessons for the new political and policy environment?