

Higher Education for the Future: The Role of Quality Assurance (QA)

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Opening Provocation

Globalisation, massification, demographic changes, technological progress and shifts in the global economy and labour market has heightened the significance of knowledge & skills as the foundation of sustainable social, cultural & economic development.

- Structure of education programmes based on traditional learners in full-time study with academic year running to fixed schedules with designated entry and exit points.
- Boundaries between universities and the workplace/community as a learning site becoming more porous – but universities shy to embrace new forms learning and alternative credentials.
- Embrace of digital only prompted by pandemic: too slow to change and too quick to revert.

What are the implications for our higher education institutions – and especially our QA systems?

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



Themes

3 Macro Trends To Reflect On

5 Issues to Think About

Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks



3 Macro Trends To Reflect On



Climate Change, the
Digital Revolution &
Future Skills



Demographic Shifts &
Active Ageing



Society & Public Trust



1. Climate Change, the Digital Revolution & Future Skills



Known Knowns & Unknown Unknowns

Big Data, robotics, machine learning/artificial intelligence (AI) augmented reality (VR), and the Internet of Things (IOT) are revolutionising how we live and work.

But precise information about which jobs are likely to be affected, automated, lost or displaced remains uncertain.

- Technology overtaking people's jobs, replacing people with machines

vs.

- Human-oriented employments, e.g., advising, decision-making, reasoning, communicating and interacting, will rise in demand and people will have greater freedom to engage creatively according to their desires.

Future opportunities will emphasize 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.



Future Skills Needs

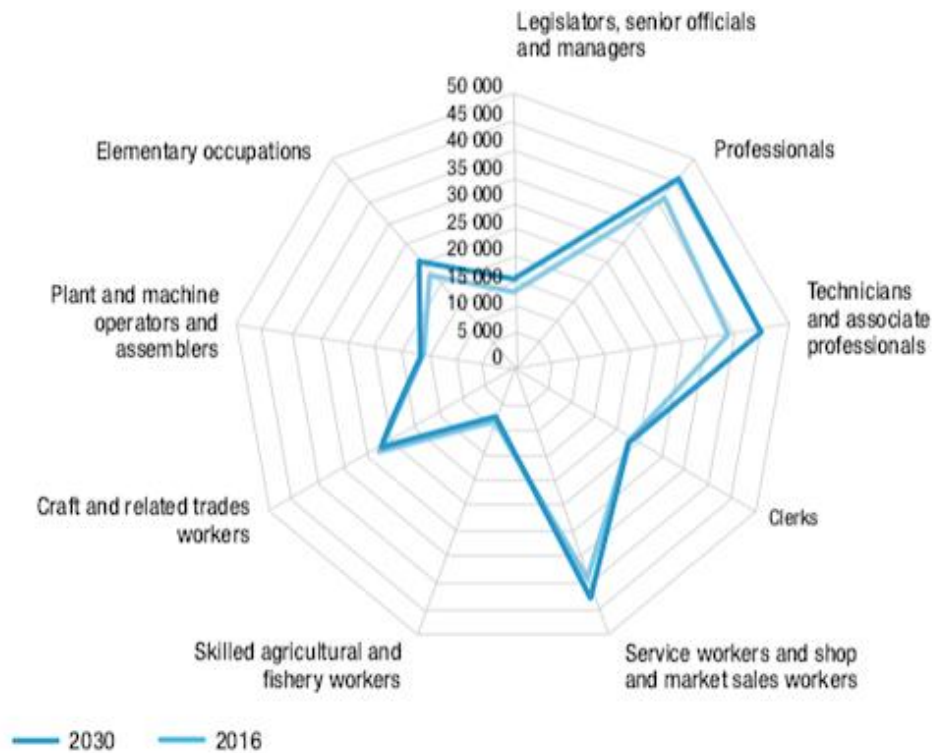
By 2030, higher/professional skills will constitute more than 40% of the required skills mix, but almost 45% of jobs will require medium/associate professional skills (Cedefop)

Digital and green skills are a necessary precondition – but not sufficient.

Standard employment model in which people have stable fulltime jobs less dominant: shift career → job → task.

Self-employment and entrepreneurship will alter traditional concept of employment.

All learners, regardless of location, are part of global talent pool.



Cedefop. (2018). *Skills forecast. Trends and challenges to 2030*.

Skills Gaps & Mismatch

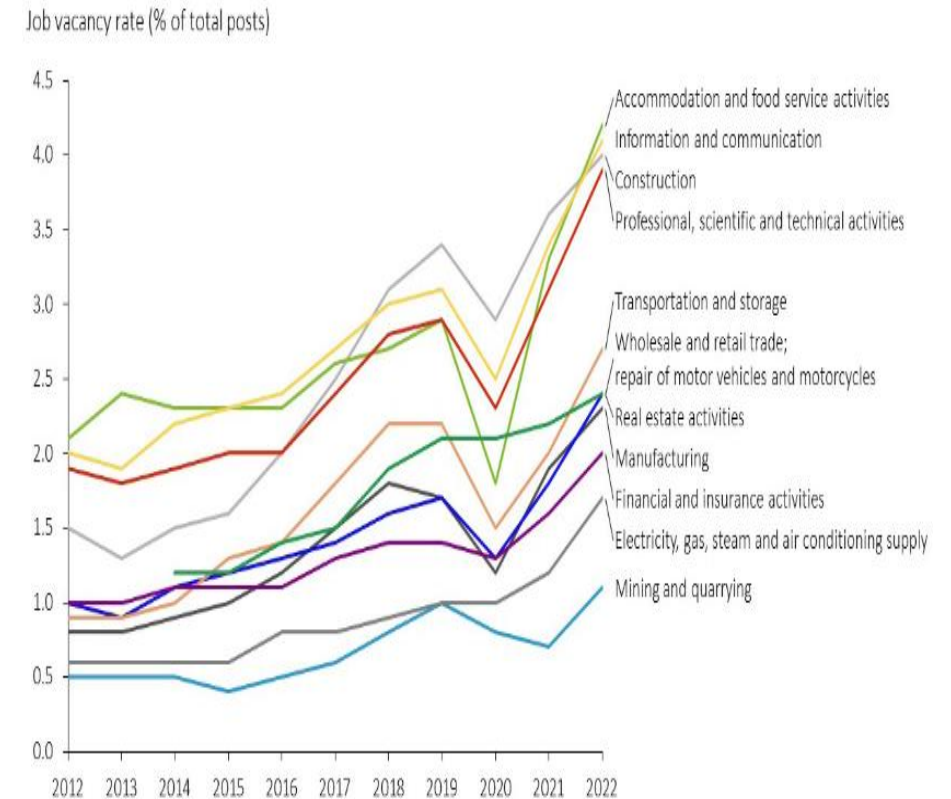
As attainment levels rise, questions asked about “labour mismatch” and skill gaps: divergences between qualifications, skills and employment especially if people lack the right skills or cannot make use of them.

❓ Criticism focuses on relevance of curriculum, and whether graduates have appropriate balance between practical skills, learning facts and critical thinking.

At the same time –

PIACC shows sizeable proportion of adults w/ poor reading, numeracy and problem-solving skills, and limited experience of computers.

Skill shortages in the EU



Draghi, 2024, PtB, p260

2. Demographic Shifts and Active Ageing



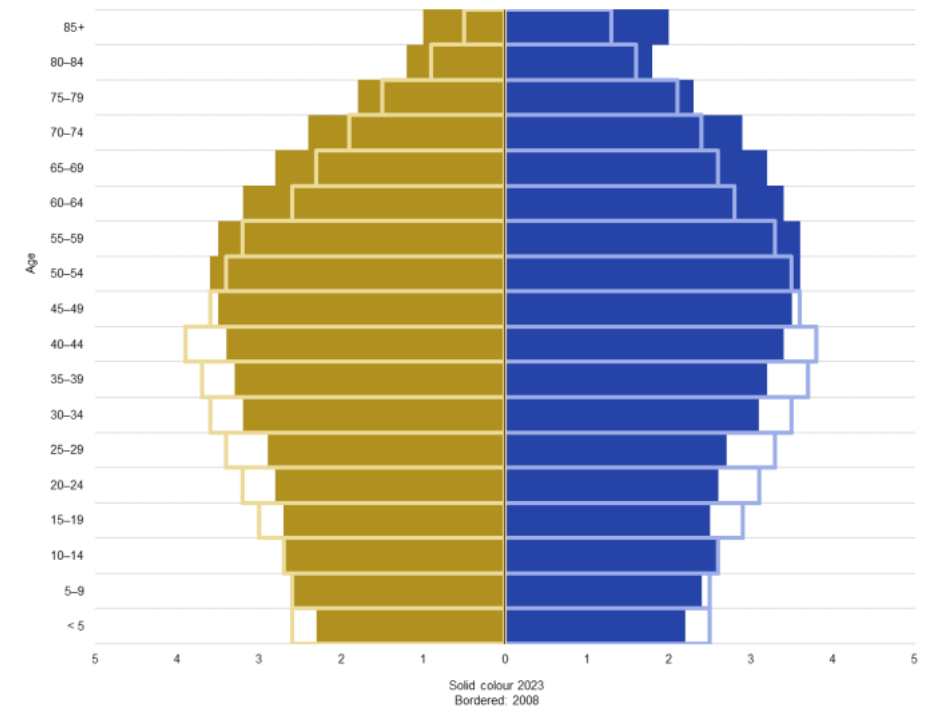
Shifting Demography & Active Ageing

As people live longer, necessity to expand learning opportunities.

- ❓ In many countries, traditional post-secondary education cohort is declining
- ❓ People aged 50+ forecast to rise to 45% of pop. by 2050 (OECD).

People will require upskilling, re-skilling or repurposing their qualification in response to changes in the labour market & or their own personal life choices.

Population pyramids, EU 2008 and 2023
(% of the total population)



Note: 2023 provisional/estimated.

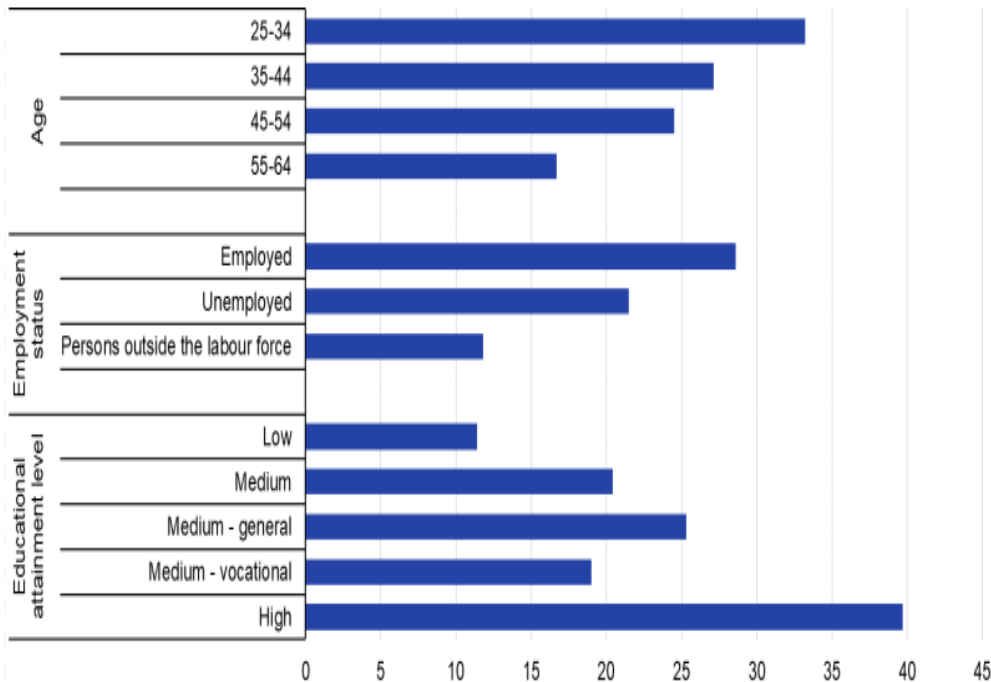
Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_pjangroup)



eurostat

We Are Ignoring Adult Learners

Adult learning (last 12 months) by age, employment status and educational attainment, EU, 2022
(%, EU-LFS)

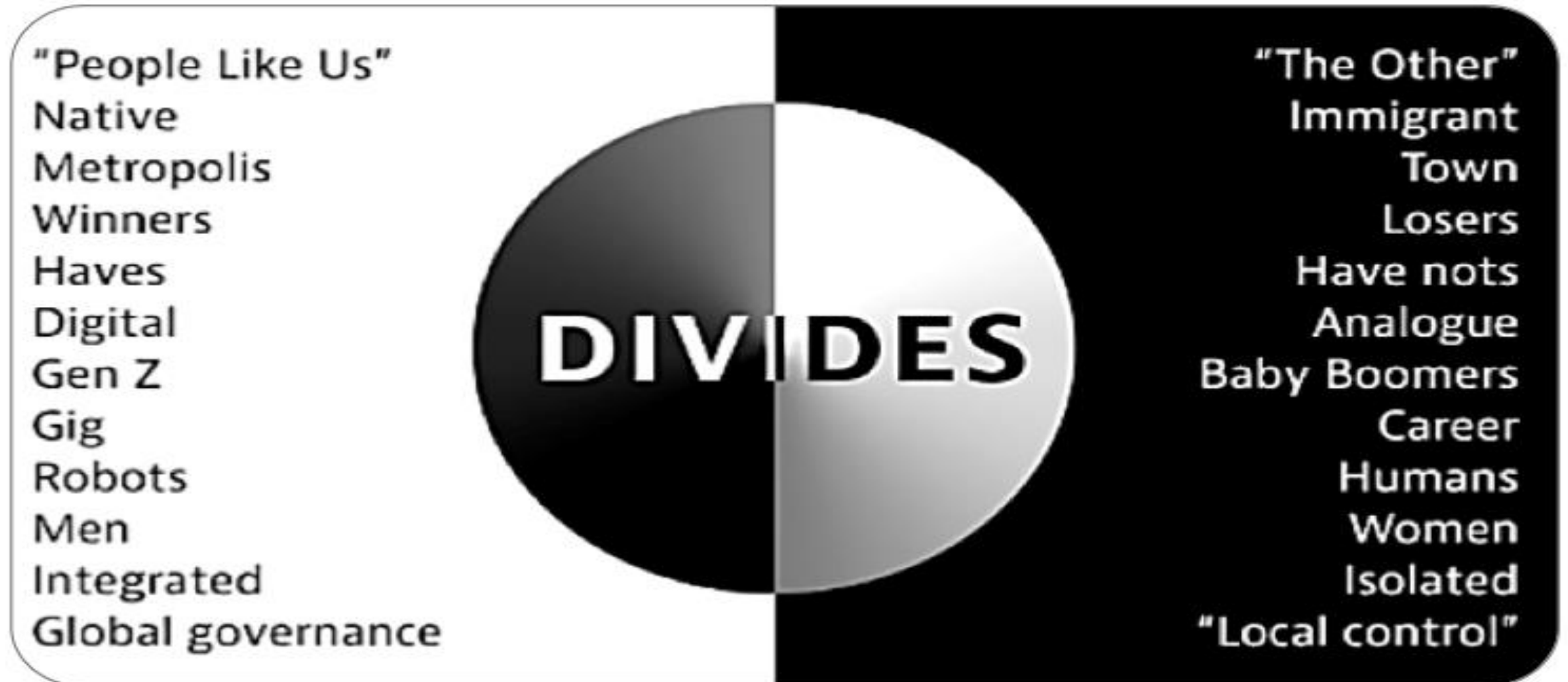


Despite rise in participation, adult learning not properly embedded in EU education & training systems (Draghi, 2024, ptB, p264) –

- ❓ Younger people – more likely to participate in education and training than older people.
- ❓ Employed vs unemployed or those outside the labour force.
- ❓ People already with high education attainment level

Widening access to under-served groups and those who have been inactive is essential to meet societal and labour needs as well as stem growing social inequalities.

3. Society and Public Trust

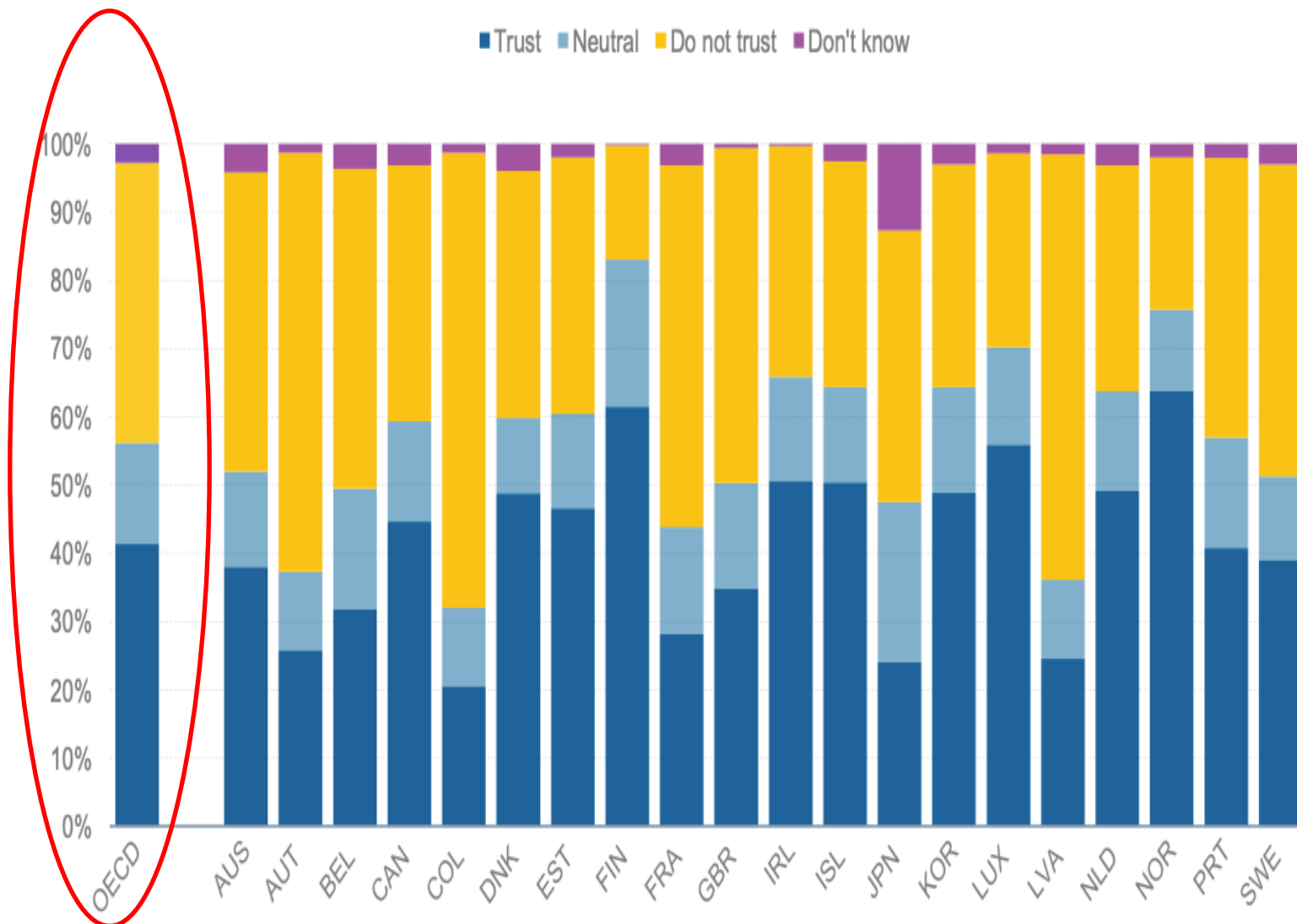


“Widespread sense that democratic government is working for some, but certainly not for all.”

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



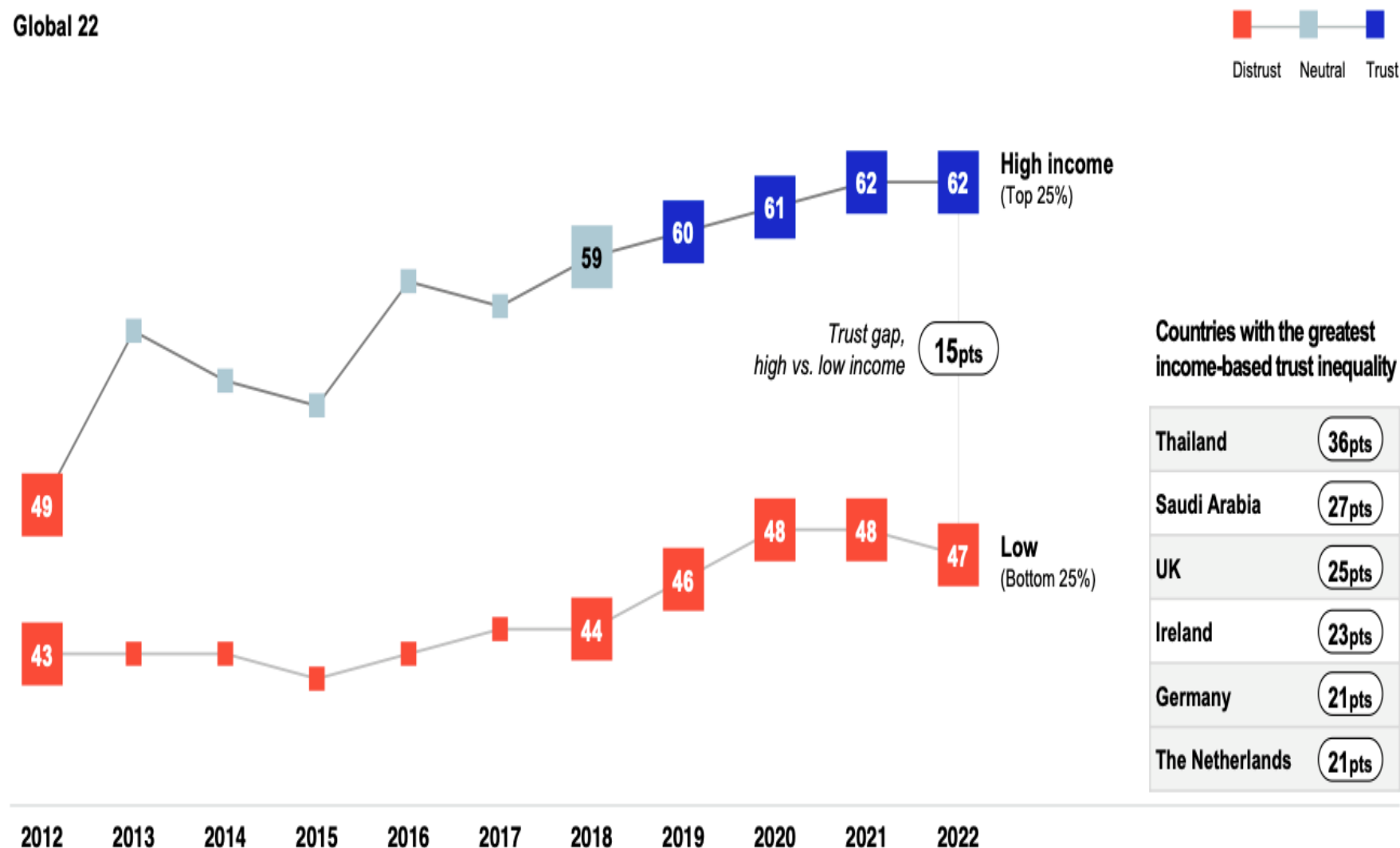
Growing Distrust between Elites and Others.

Gap of 15 points between top 25% and bottom 25% of populations.

RECORD TRUST GAP BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW INCOME

Trust Index

Global 22



Changes in Societal Attitudes & Social Cohesion

Evolution from elite to mass institutions has been transformative – BUT

- 70% of Europe's GDP is concentrated in centres of social, cultural, and economic activity leading to an intensification of inequalities and opportunities.
- Trust often correlated with inequality and higher levels of education (Eurofound, 2018; Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024).
- Concerns about people “left behind” and “lagging regions” → increasing public and policy importance
- Declining trust in democracies, governments & science → growing polarisation within societies and across the world.

As participation has expanded, tertiary landscape has become more stratified → reinforcing unequal access to public goods and and life chances.





Issues to Think About

Are Our QA Practices Fit for Purpose?

How well do our QA practices reflect or respond to these changing dynamics?

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

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



All learners are life-long learners

“...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.

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”.

Education will become more personalised according to circumstances, priorities, needs and interests.

Student Agency has big implications for

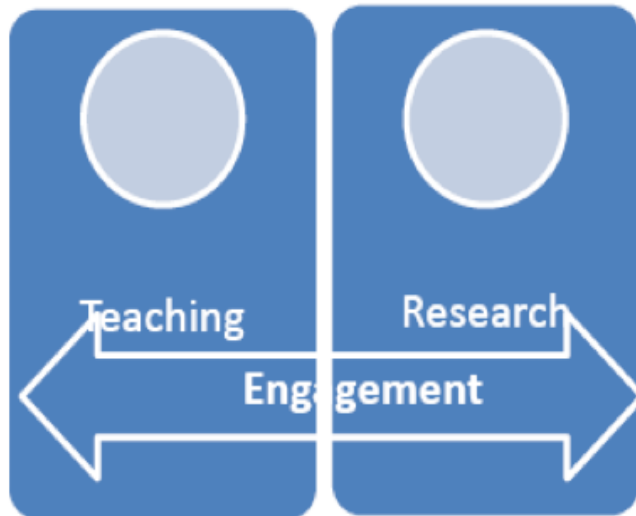
- Organising our universities and schedule classes and infrastructure
- Curriculum design, delivery and assessment
- Learning experience
- Lecturer preparation and professional development
- Role of AI and other technologies

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.
- 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.”
- ECTs as a flexible credit accumulation transfer system.

Embedding Societal Engagement

Engagement as Horizontal Linking
Teaching and Research



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
- Understanding future knowledge and skill needs to help guide education programmes and R&I
- Deepening and widening openness of HE systems, embracing social inclusion, and building trust

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.

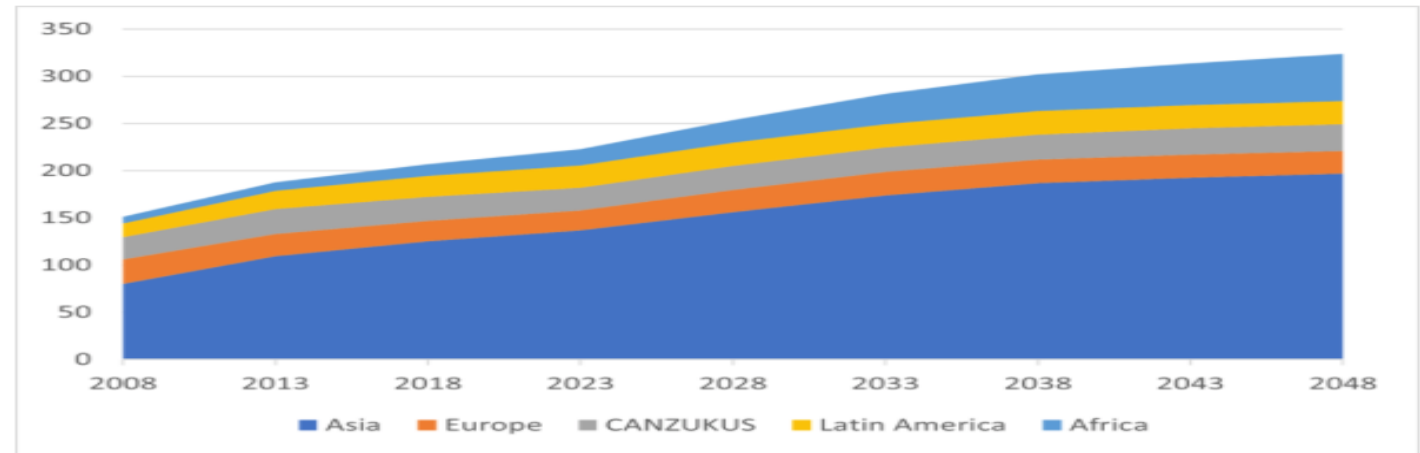
To make meaningful interventions, individual research and isolated projects should not be enough.

- 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.

Transformation & Expansion of Global Tertiary Landscape

Once “large sections of the population are sending nearly all their sons and daughters to some kind of higher education, and the system must again create new forms of higher education as it begins to move rapidly toward universal access.” (Martin Trow, 2006, p253)

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



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

Rising number/type of providers & credentialing models, private/public, diversity of learners, open science/open society, AI/new technologies, mobility/internationalisation, transnational provision, etc.

Increasing focus on “tertiary” – reflect massification & growing diversity of institutions and programmes.

Expansion of QA around the world → greater harmonisation and international higher education area?



Reframing QA Processes & Frameworks

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 process-oriented; focused on how well “academic standards” are protected.

- ❑ Insufficiently focused on needs of learners and society, and how HEIs are anticipating and 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



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 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
- ❑ Benchmarking – significance of [European Higher Education Sector Observatory \(EHESO\)](#) & the challenge of global rankings.



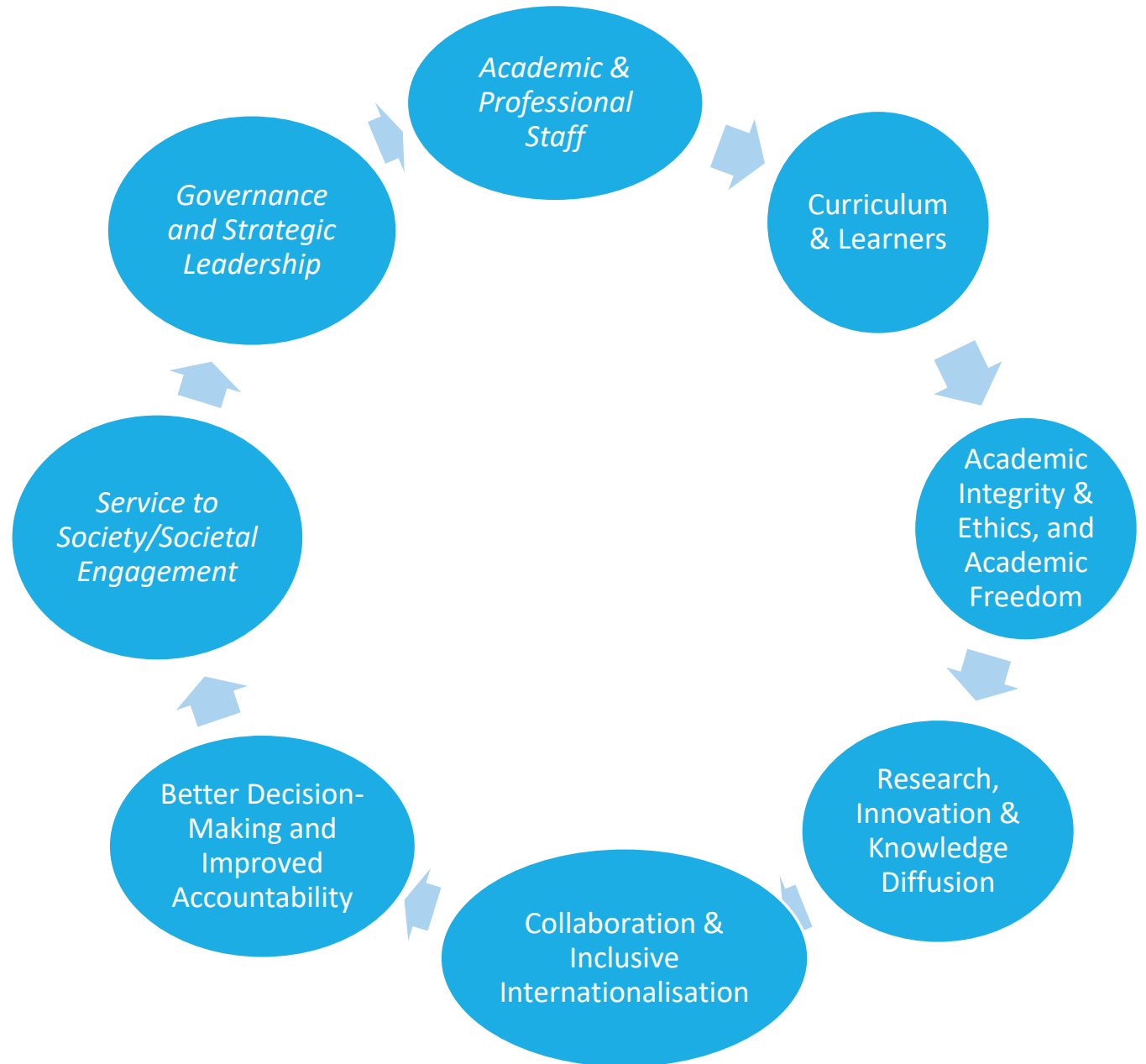
“Educational quality usually refers to teaching and learning, although it also refers to research, engagement and institutional leadership.

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 **QA framework mission and context-driven**,?
- Is **approach sufficiently challenging, innovative and robust to 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/Societal Engagement:

- Is there sufficient **emphasis on strategic, sustainable and measurable societal engagement?**
- Are actions genuinely aligned with societal and global challenges (SDG) – or simply SDG-washing?

Research, Innovation and Knowledge Diffusion:

- How does **R&I inform/underpin teaching and learning** or is it simply a mechanism for reputation-seeking?
- How does QA promote Responsible Research & Innovation (RRI) – socially desirable, undertaken in the public interest & responsibly assessed – to make **impactful societal contribution?**

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**”?

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 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? To whom does it apply, and does context matter?

Better Decision-Making and Improved Accountability

- How are data/information systems – rather than self-belief – being used to strategically plan and to inform about outcomes and RoE (return-on-education), social contribution, benchmarks and financial stability?
- How are current and future challenges and risks identified/being planned for?
- 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 help our institutions navigate the challenges, foster innovation, and ensure sustainable growth and fulfil their education 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
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