Volume
5

Handbook of Higher Education

Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability



Edited by
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About the Book

Handbook of Higher Education: Vol. 5 - Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability examines how universities are being reshaped by digitalization, artificial intelligence, accreditation, rankings, flexible internationalization, institutional smartness, inclusive quality assurance, and future accountability systems.

The volume brings together chapters that move from Global South perspectives and inclusive education to accreditation governance, ranking algorithms, borderless quality assurance, Ubuntu-informed transformation, and smart institutional development. Its central concern is whether evidence can guide improvement without becoming performance theatre.

Designed for scholars, institutional leaders, quality assurance professionals, policymakers, faculty members, and advanced students, the book treats digital transformation not as an isolated technical upgrade but as part of a broader institutional responsibility to govern data, prestige, and accountability with care.

Editor

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Acknowledgements

"Learning is the only thing the mind never exhausts, never fears, and never regrets." - Leonardo da Vinci

Edited books are collective achievements. They may carry one editorial signature, but they are made through many acts of generosity: authors who trust the project, colleagues who read carefully, institutions that protect scholarly time, and readers who give the work its second life.

First and foremost, deep gratitude is owed to the chapter authors of this volume. Their contributions give substance to Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability and ensure that the book addresses prestige, accountability, technology, and institutional responsibility from multiple locations rather than from one narrow center.

A special note of gratitude is reserved for the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Syria. Support for research, academic publishing, quality development, and international scholarly engagement remains essential, especially when higher education is asked to sustain hope, evidence, and professional responsibility under difficult conditions.

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Gratitude is further extended to the HE Higher Education Ranking initiative and its team for continuing to stimulate serious discussion about evidence, benchmarking, accountability, institutional visibility, and the ethical use of data in higher education.

Thanks are owed to reviewers, advisers, colleagues, language reviewers, administrative teams, and technical staff who supported the preparation of the manuscript. Their work is often invisible, but it shapes the final reading experience: cleaner arguments, more consistent metadata, better formatting, and a more coherent volume.

It is also important to acknowledge students, faculty members, quality assurance practitioners, librarians, registrars, IT staff, and institutional researchers whose daily work gives meaning to the themes discussed in these chapters. Higher education is not made by policy language alone. It is made in classrooms, offices, advising meetings, laboratories, accreditation rooms, digital platforms, and shared institutional routines.

Finally, gratitude is owed to families, friends, and close companions who tolerate the practical cost of scholarly work: late evenings, delayed replies, interrupted weekends, and the editor's mind half-occupied by a chapter even during ordinary moments. Their patience is an uncredited contribution.

If acknowledgments have a purpose beyond courtesy, it is to remind readers that knowledge is never produced alone. This volume is a collective accomplishment. May it honor the generosity behind it by being used in research, teaching, institutional planning, policy conversations, and quality improvement work.

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Introduction

Prestige used to travel slowly. It clung to stone buildings, older institutional narratives, and reputations built across generations. Today it also moves through dashboards, ranking interfaces, citation databases, accreditation reports, digital platforms, and algorithmic signals. That shift changes the meaning of accountability in higher education.

This volume, Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability, is organized around ethical prestige-seeking, inclusive accreditation, accreditation as governance, Global South perspectives, ranking algorithms, national policy reform, borderless accreditation, Ubuntu-informed quality, flexible internationalization, and institutional smartness. Its central concern is whether digitalization and AI can support better accountability without reducing universities to what is easiest to measure.

The volume does not treat technology, governance, or prestige as abstract vocabulary. Each chapter begins from a specific site of practice: a regional knowledge system, an inclusive education framework, an accreditation process, a ranking ecology, a policy reform, a cross-border quality problem, or an institutional transformation challenge. This matters because digital accountability is never implemented in the abstract. It is implemented by people, through procedures, with limited resources, and under visible as well as invisible pressures.

A useful way to read the volume is to see it as a conversation about institutional responsibility. Universities are asked to become more digital, more accountable, more inclusive, more globally visible, and more resilient. The question is not whether those expectations can be ignored. They cannot. The question is whether they can be governed in ways that protect educational purpose.

How THE Chapters Speak to THE Volume

Chapter 1, by Uma More, "Ethical Considerations in the Pursuit of Prestige and Conceptual Foundations of Academic Prestige: Pacific and Global South Perspectives," begins from Pacific and Global South perspectives, asking how prestige systems can reproduce older knowledge hierarchies while overlooking local missions, Indigenous knowledge, and community value.

Chapter 2, by Marubini Christinah Sadiki, "Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education: Advancing Inclusive Education," places inclusive education at the center of quality assurance and accreditation, challenging institutions to treat diversity, equity, and inclusion as indicators of effectiveness rather than decorative policy language.

Chapter 3, by Rismawati, "Accreditation as Governance, Ritual, or Resistance: Global Quality Assurance, Institutional Power, and the Political Economy of Academic Prestige," examines accreditation as a form of governance, ritual, and resistance, showing

how quality systems can discipline institutions but can also become sites of agency and local reinterpretation.

Chapter 4, by Hakikur Rahman, "Ethical Considerations in the Pursuit of Academic Prestige: A Global South Perspective on Quality Assurance, Accreditation, and University Rankings," develops an ethical framework for Global South higher education, asking how institutions can seek recognition without surrendering equity, social responsibility, and developmental relevance.

Chapter 5, by Offia Tugwell Owo and Onisomise Duvall Ogbapu, "World University Rankings: Actors, Algorithms, and Agendas," critically examines the actors, algorithms, and agendas that shape university rankings, reminding readers that ranking systems are not neutral instruments but governance technologies with consequences.

Chapter 6, by Ankur Nandi, Sourav Sen, Tupai Barman, Milan Barman, Sudhakar Venukapalli, Tapash Das, Tarini Halder, and Shiuli Maity, "National Education Policy 2020 and New Accreditation Strategy in Indian Higher Education: Possibilities, Constraints, and Framework," studies India's accreditation reforms under NEP 2020 and connects trust-based, outcome-oriented quality assurance with institutional capacity and policy implementation.

Chapter 7, by Michael Oyedele Oyenuga, "Borderless Accreditation in Transnational Higher Education: Rethinking Prestige and Quality Assurance," examines borderless accreditation in transnational higher education, where quality assurance must travel across jurisdictions without losing integrity, transparency, or public trust.

Chapter 8, by Mohamed Mosala, "Quality as Relationship, Prestige as Illusion: Towards Ubuntu-Informed Transformation in Higher Education," reframes quality through Ubuntu, arguing that excellence must be relational, justice-oriented, and grounded in human dignity rather than reduced to positional visibility.

Chapter 9, by Juan Manuel Castro Carracedo, "Flexible Internationalization in Times of Systemic Instability: A Conceptual Framework Beyond Mobility and Metrics," proposes Flexible Internationalization as an institutional capability, shifting attention from mobility counts and prestige metrics to resilience, reciprocity, and outcome continuity.

Chapter 10, by Maria Niari, "From Digitalization to Institutional Smartness: Rethinking Digital Transformation in Higher Education," moves from digitalization to institutional smartness, arguing that real transformation requires governance, culture, adaptability, ethical responsibility, and human-centered decision-making.

Taken together, the chapters offer more than a list of topics. They create a layered argument about how higher education is changing under the pressure of digitalization, AI, evidence, comparison, and future accountability.

Readers may therefore enter the book through their immediate concern. Institutional leaders may begin with digital transformation, accreditation, and smart governance. Quality assurance practitioners may follow the threads of evidence, inclusion, ranking pressure, and accountability. Researchers may attend to the comparative and critical vocabulary that runs across the volume. Policymakers may focus on how systems can encourage improvement without rewarding imitation.

The figures, tables, models, and structured analyses included across the chapters should be read as part of the argument rather than as decoration. They show how authors translate complexity into frameworks that can be tested, debated, and adapted. In a field crowded with slogans, that discipline of making assumptions visible is especially important.

The future suggested here asks institutions to pursue accountability with safeguards: inclusive participation, ethical data practices, context-sensitive accreditation, transparent ranking literacy, and digital systems designed around trust. This is the invitation of the volume: to think beyond isolated tools and toward institutions that can learn, adapt, and remain ethically serious while doing so.

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Preface

Every edited volume carries a small hidden history: drafts sent across time zones, chapter titles checked against metadata, author details confirmed, arguments revised, and themes reorganized until the book begins to speak with a recognizable voice. This preface is written in that spirit. Its purpose is to introduce the volume as it appears through its chapters, rather than through a generic description of a neighboring topic.

The volume is titled Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability, and its intellectual center is the relationship between digital change, prestige systems, artificial intelligence, quality assurance, accreditation, institutional smartness, and ethical evaluation. It is a volume about practice as much as it is about theory. The chapters do not merely describe higher education change; they show the mechanisms through which change is designed, measured, resisted, and lived.

Why does this matter now? Because the central question of the volume is no longer optional: whether accountability can become more digital without becoming less humane. Universities today are under pressure to demonstrate transparency, efficiency, fairness, innovation, and global credibility. These demands are legitimate, but they can become dangerous when pursued without attention to context and consequence.

The editorial choice, therefore, was to preserve plurality. The chapters differ in geography, method, and emphasis. Some contributors write from national systems under intense reform pressure. Others write from disciplinary, institutional, or regional spaces where digitalization and quality assurance are being translated into daily work. That variety is not a weakness. It is the point. Higher education does not have one setting, one rhythm, or one definition of success.

The intention behind the volume is not to provide a simple recipe. Recipes in higher education often travel badly because they hide the context that made them plausible. Instead, the chapters offer lenses: ways of seeing how digital systems, accreditation, rankings, policy reforms, and institutional narratives reshape the meaning of educational responsibility.

Readers will notice that the book keeps returning to the same practical problem: an institution can look modern, visible, or compliant while still failing to become more educationally just, more reflective, or more trustworthy. The reverse is also true. Some of the most valuable work in universities is quiet and difficult to display. This volume asks how those quieter forms of value can be protected while institutions respond to legitimate demands for evidence and accountability.

A note on the visual and structured elements in the chapters is also important. Frameworks, tables, models, diagrams, and comparative structures are not included to make chapters appear technical. They help readers see relationships: between digital tools

and governance, between accreditation and legitimacy, between rankings and incentives, between institutional policy and lived practice.

This volume is intended for scholars, quality assurance professionals, institutional leaders, policymakers, faculty members, and advanced students. It can be read sequentially, but it can also be used selectively. A reader facing a digital transformation question may begin with institutional smartness. A reader working in quality assurance may begin with accreditation, rankings, inclusion, and student outcomes. A reader concerned with equity may follow the chapters that foreground Global South perspectives, Ubuntu, context, and public responsibility.

The corrected framing offered here is simple: the volume should be read through the actual chapters it contains. Its coherence comes not from a generic label, but from the way its contributors bring different realities into one scholarly conversation.

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CHAPTER 1

Ethical Considerations in the Pursuit of Prestige and Conceptual Foundations of Academic Prestige: Pacific and Global South Perspectives

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates the ethics of academic prestige by tracing its conceptual roots to colonial and imperial expansion, where Western universities accrued authority while Indigenous and colonized knowledge systems were sidelined. Focusing on Pacific and wider Global South contexts, it argues that contemporary prestige regimes-especially rankings and indicator-driven "excellence"-reproduce historical asymmetries through English-language publication norms, resource-intensive research expectations, and Northern institutional networks. The pursuit of "world-class" status can yield visibility and funding. Yet, it may also redirect attention away from teaching, community engagement, and culturally grounded missions that are vital across dispersed island communities (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). The chapter frames these dynamics as epistemic injustice, in which locally urgent research on climate adaptation, Indigenous governance, and community-based education is devalued when it falls outside dominant journals and metrics. It proposes Pacific-informed foundations for prestige grounded in regional leadership, cultural preservation, and shared practical public value.

Keywords: ethical; accreditation; prestige; Indigenous; Global South; higher education

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Introduction

The history of academic prestige is closely linked with colonial and imperial expansion. Universities such as Oxford, Paris, and Bologna gained recognition as centres of academic excellence while colonial powers were extracting resources, labour, and knowledge from their colonies. During this era, Western ways of understanding

knowledge were seen as the only valid form, while indigenous knowledge systems were often overlooked or suppressed.

In the Pacific region, higher education systems were largely established during the late colonial and post-colonial periods, modelled after those of Britain, Australia, or New Zealand. Regional institutions, such as the University of the South Pacific, were created with a focus on development, nation-building, and enhancing local capacity. Despite these efforts, none of these institutions have been recognized in global evaluations. Over the past century, higher education has expanded worldwide, yet academic prestige remains concentrated in a small number of institutions. The recent focus on quantitative indicators to assess excellence has reinforced the dominance of certain institutions, emphasizing factors such as English-language publications, well-funded research facilities, and connections to universities in the Northern Hemisphere. As a result, institutions in the Pacific region have faced systemic disadvantages from the outset.

Prestige, Development, and Knowledge Inequality

From a Global South perspective, institutional reputation is closely tied to development narratives and competitive advantage. Nation-states aim for "world-class university" status and invest in select institutions to improve their standing in international rankings. Although achieving high status can bring benefits, it often comes at a cost. Teaching and community activities, critical in regions where communities are spread across many islands and face social and economic challenges, are sometimes neglected in pursuit of prestige (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Systems emphasizing global renown can also distort the meaning of useful knowledge. Research addressing real-life issues, such as climate adaptation in low-lying islands, Indigenous governance, or community-based education, may be overlooked if it is not published in internationally recognized journals. This situation reflects epistemic injustice, where knowledge from the Global South is systematically marginalized by systems that define the rules of the academic field. For Pacific universities, educational excellence encompasses regional leadership, cultural preservation, and research that directly impacts local communities. This form of quality may not be captured in global metrics, yet it is central to both education standards and regional well-being.

Prestige versus Quality: A Pacific Reframing

In the Pacific and Global South, it is essential to distinguish between reputation and quality. Prestige is usually perception-based and develops over time. Quality, on the other hand, depends on context and the experiences of those involved. Pacific quality assurance systems emphasize teaching effectiveness, graduate employability, cultural relevance, and community engagement, areas often overlooked by international systems (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Evidence suggests that highly reputed institutions do not always guarantee effective teaching or inclusive learning environments. For students in

the Pacific, quality is reflected in culturally appropriate instruction, robust support services, and relevance to national development goals, not merely the reputation of the awarding institution. People who care about their students and their communities are the ones who make a tangible difference.

Global reputation should not be ignored entirely, as it can create new opportunities for Pacific universities. However, it must not come at the expense of local standards. Achieving balance requires intentional strategies and a willingness to redefine what quality means in the region. From the Pacific and Global South perspectives, academic prestige is socially constructed, historically rooted, and shaped by political differences. While it may align with certain indicators of excellence, it largely reflects global power structures rather than holistic educational success. The challenge for higher education in the Pacific is to engage with global prestige frameworks while validating local knowledge systems, regional priorities, and culturally grounded interpretations of quality. Prestige should not be treated as a universal standard; instead, it should be contextual, flexible, and locally informed. Only through this approach can higher education move toward greater equity and relevance.

Regional Case Studies: Quality Assurance in THE Pacific, Africa, and Asia

Responsibility, transparency, and continuous improvement are key goals of international quality assurance. Yet outcomes are influenced by history, institutional capacities, system size, and evolving development needs. General principles adapt well, but local conditions often require modification. The Pacific, Africa, and Asia provide illustrative examples of how quality assurance (QA) standards are implemented and adapted as higher education evolves globally.

THE Pacific: Fiji and Small Island Nations

In the Pacific, QA has developed in small, often underfunded systems serving communities dispersed across islands and atolls. Institutions must balance national development goals with global recognition. In Fiji, the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) serves as regulator, accreditor, and auditor, overseeing registration, program accreditation, and periodic quality audits. Its structure links external evaluations with internal QA processes, including program review cycles, minimum staff qualifications, and ongoing student feedback systems (FHEC, 2020).

Pacific QA emphasizes capacity-building beyond mere compliance, particularly for newer universities and smaller private colleges. Regional collaboration, through organizations such as the Pacific Community (SPC) and UNESCO partnerships, aligns local practices with international standards while respecting cultural values, linguistic diversity, and local labor market needs.

Rather than competing aggressively for global rankings, Pacific institutions often focus on regional recognition and student mobility, which better align with local priorities.

Africa: Kenya and Continental Harmonization

Africa's rapid higher education growth necessitates robust QA. In Kenya, the Commission for University Education (CUE) oversees public and private universities through program accreditation, institutional audits, and standards covering staffing, infrastructure, and governance. Internal QA units within universities foster a culture of continuous improvement, supplementing periodic inspections.

The African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM), led by the African Union, aims to move beyond simple pass/fail assessments toward multidimensional profiles that reflect relevance, inclusivity, and social impact (African Union Commission, 2016). At times, this approach may conflict with global rankings, as universities meeting national and regional standards might not appear on international lists.

Asia: Malaysia and Regulatory Maturity

In Asia, QA is deeply embedded in institutions and linked to international competitiveness. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) manages program accreditation and the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), incorporating internal audits, outcome-based standards, and external reviews (MQA, 2019). QA strategies also support the country's aim to attract international students and establish Malaysia as an education hub. Institutions must demonstrate achievements in student learning outcomes, research productivity, and graduate employability—metrics valued by global evaluation systems (OECD, 2023). Additionally, Asian QA agencies collaborate through networks like the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) to promote cross-border recognition and share best practices, enhancing regional integration.

Accreditation Systems and Global Standards

Accreditation formally recognizes that an institution or program meets established standards for quality, relevance, and integrity. In today's competitive higher education landscape, accreditation fosters trust, facilitates degree comparison, and supports student and staff mobility, while enhancing institutional reputation.

National, Regional, and International Accreditation Models

National accreditation reflects legal or regulatory requirements and ensures governance, faculty qualifications, curriculum design, assessment methods, and infrastructure meet minimum standards (UNESCO, 2018). Regional frameworks, such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), align standards across borders, supporting mobility and mutual recognition (ENQA et al., 2015). Other regions,

including Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, are developing similar initiatives, balancing international benchmarks with local priorities.

International accreditation emphasizes credibility and reputation. Professional fields such as business, engineering, medicine, and education often rely on program-level accreditation to boost visibility and partnerships (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Challenges in Transnational and Online Education

Rapid growth in online learning, micro-credentials, and cross-border programs challenges traditional accreditation models. Jurisdictional ambiguity, inconsistent regulations, and variations in quality require updated approaches. Accreditation providers are adopting risk-based, outcome-focused models, enhancing cross-border cooperation, and recognizing diverse delivery modes to maintain trust in ranking and reputation systems (OECD, 2021). Moreover, transnational provision can create variations in quality. Outsourced or franchised programs may undergo less rigorous evaluation than local programs, potentially resulting in a two-tier system. Accreditation providers must modernize their standards without compromising validity or comparability. International organizations and quality assurance networks are promoting risk-based, outcome-focused accreditation, greater cross-border cooperation, and recognition of diverse delivery methods. This is particularly important for ranking and reputation systems. As online and transnational education expands, trust will depend not only on headline performance indicators but also on the robustness of underlying accreditation frameworks.

Regional Case Examples: Rankings in the Pacific, Africa, and Asia

Institutions from the United States, Europe, and East Asia dominate global university rankings. However, regional stories emerge when examined closely. Institutions in the Pacific, Africa, and Asia employ strategies to engage with global benchmarks, adapt to them, or sometimes resist them.

In Kenya, universities such as the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University operate in environments with limited research output in top-tier journals, low international visibility, and few foreign faculty members. Yet, they are proactive: many participate in research networks, join regional consortia, and experiment with open access and online publishing to boost productivity and recognition. These examples highlight a contradiction: while ranking criteria emphasize research output, context-sensitive initiatives such as partnerships, capacity building, and locally relevant programs can help institutions leverage rankings to secure funding, attract staff, and form impactful collaborations.

Asia: Malaysia, China, and Singapore

Asia's higher education landscape reflects diversity and dynamism. In Singapore, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) consistently rank among the world's best due to strong research funding, recruitment of global faculty, and high citation numbers (QS, 2025). In Malaysia, Universiti Malaya (UM) has improved its global standing by increasing research output and international collaboration while maintaining robust internal quality control and accreditation processes (MQA, 2019; OECD, 2023).

In China, Tsinghua and Peking Universities illustrate how national policies and focused funding elevate rankings. Large investments in laboratories, incentives for international research, and pressure to publish in top-tier journals have produced significant achievements. These cases show that when quality assurance, research strategies, and international goals align with national priorities, local institutions can gain global recognition. Rankings not only reflect performance but also influence hiring practices, funding decisions, and academic planning.

Implications for Ranking Publishers

These examples highlight key lessons for those who create and publish university rankings: Context matters: Standard metrics often do not reflect smaller institutions or those with fewer resources, such as in parts of the Pacific or certain African regions. Rankings can be strategic: Universities outside the global elite use rankings to measure progress, focus efforts, and communicate quality to students and partners. Alignment helps: Institutions gain visibility and competitiveness when national quality standards and international ranking criteria align. Equity is crucial: Rankings tend to favour research-intensive, English-speaking institutions.

Alongside social impact and regional engagement, teaching quality should also be considered a key element of excellence. Ranking publishers can go beyond simple listings by incorporating regional perspectives, producing more comprehensive analyses that support strategic planning and global higher education policies.

Rankings, Reputation, and Institutional Behaviour

Rankings are no longer simple lists; they influence budgets, strategy, and daily operations. Originally used to indicate status, rankings now shape funding, research priorities, and even marketing. Rankings act as both a mirror and a magnifying glass: they reflect reputation while increasing pressure to improve (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014).

How Rankings Affect Strategy and Priorities

Ranking results shape institutional goals. Strategic plans, research funding, and internationalization increasingly respond to metrics from QS, THE, and ARWU (QS,

2025; Times Higher Education, 2025). Research-intensive universities focus on high-impact publications and collaborations, while teaching-focused institutions prioritize student-to-faculty ratios and graduate employment. Even resource-limited institutions reference rankings to attract students and justify funding (FHEC, 2020). This focus on ranking metrics can compromise broader educational goals. Institutions face a trade-off: improving measurable outcomes versus investing in socially important work such as inclusive teaching, community partnerships, or locally relevant research.

Gaming the System: Performativity and Metric-Driven Behaviour

Universities often engage in "gaming the system," aligning behavior with ranking indicators rather than educational improvement (Hazelkorn, 2015). Strategies include:

- Hiring highly cited researchers
- Recruiting international faculty
- Enrolling international students to boost diversity stats
- Prioritizing indexed journal publications over local outlets

While these strategies may improve rankings, they can reduce attention to teaching, local research, and community engagement (Marginson, 2014).

Effects on Teaching, Research, and Staff Wellbeing

Ranking pressures affect daily academic life. Teaching preparation, mentoring, and office hours may suffer under publication demands (Hazelkorn, 2015). Research often focuses on internationally popular topics, sidelining local or discipline-specific projects (OECD, 2023). Workloads increase, stress becomes constant, and academics feel like they are ticking boxes rather than engaging deeply with scholarship. Recruitment and retention are especially challenging in regions with limited talent.

Rankings as Branding Tools

Rankings serve as marketing tools as much as analytical instruments. High rankings attract students, funders, and collaborators, creating a self-reinforcing cycle (Hazelkorn, 2015). Emerging universities in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific use rankings strategically, even when global positions are modest, demonstrating that metrics shape identity, policy, and student choices.

Equity, Access, and THE Global South

Global university rankings are central to strategy and prestige but are not neutral. Institutions in the Global South, developing countries, and small island states face structural, linguistic, and geopolitical biases that influence scores and create a global academic hierarchy (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Structural Disadvantages

Common challenges include:

1. Limited research infrastructure and funding: Many institutions cannot support high-cost, long-term projects or publish in top English-language journals (OECD, 2023).
2. Small student and faculty bodies: Metrics such as student-to-faculty ratios disadvantage smaller campuses (FHEC, 2020).
3. Geographic isolation and mobility barriers: Expensive travel, fewer conferences, and unstable internet hinder collaboration and citation networks.

These constraints show that ranking performance may reflect scale and global connectivity more than actual educational quality or social value.

Language, Funding, and Geopolitical Bias

Citation metrics favor English-language research, marginalizing scholarship in other languages or traditions (Marginson, 2014). Wealthier systems can invest in research and rankings; lower-income institutions face heavier teaching loads and limited funding. Western and East Asian universities dominate rankings due to historical advantages and robust networks, while universities in Africa, the Pacific, and Latin America often remain underrepresented (Hazelkorn, 2015).

This raises questions of academic neo-colonialism, as rankings may undervalue indigenous knowledge and community-oriented research (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). For example, Pacific universities conducting research on coastal resilience or African universities running public health programs contribute greatly locally but receive limited global recognition (OECD, 2023).

Alternative Ways to Measure Excellence

Scholars propose metrics emphasizing local relevance, social impact, and inclusivity. Approaches include:

1. Assessing universities based on local priorities such as employability and regional development.
2. Using mission-based or regional rankings, like Multirank, to capture teaching quality, social impact, or sustainability (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Valuing Multilingual and Culturally Embedded Research: Highlighting Indigenous Knowledge Systems

These approaches demonstrate that prestige and quality need not follow a single global standard; they can reflect local and socially responsible excellence.

Student Choice, Mobility, and Employability

Global rankings influence student aspirations, mobility, and career expectations, transforming higher education into a competitive marketplace (Hazelkorn, 2015; QS, 2025).

How Do Rankings Affect Student Decisions?

Rankings are often the primary source of information for prospective students. Higher positions suggest better opportunities, although this oversimplifies complex realities. In the Global South, rankings help students evaluate local and international universities (FHEC, 2020). African and Pacific students increasingly rely on QS and THE to assess international exposure, research collaborations, or business opportunities.

However, this reliance can disadvantage institutions that excel in teaching or serve local communities but lack global recognition. Rankings are based not only on overall position but also on specific indicators such as faculty reputation, international engagement, and research output. Students often choose universities that appear impressive on paper, even if they are not the best match for personal or community needs.

Implications

Strong ranking performance becomes a marketing tool, attracting international students, increasing tuition revenue, and forming partnerships (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Top African universities and Pacific institutions use rankings to strengthen regional partnerships and attract students, even if they face challenges in global visibility (FHEC, 2020).

Employer reputation and graduate outcomes influence recruitment and employability (QS, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2025).

Institutions making meaningful local impacts, such as training teachers or addressing community challenges, may not see these efforts reflected in global metrics. Rankings often reward visibility over social relevance, raising ethical concerns (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014). Pressure to attract international students can exacerbate inequities and widen global hierarchies (OECD, 2023). Experts advocate for transparent ranking metrics and regionally relevant graduate success measures.

In a nutshell, global recognition should be balanced with commitment to students and local communities. Rankings should not be the sole measure of a university's value.

Quality Assurance, Rankings, and Teaching & Learning

Global university rankings significantly influence institutional strategies and public image. Yet a common complaint is heard worldwide, not only in faculty meetings but also in casual conversations, about how rankings reveal very little about the core purpose of universities: teaching. Rankings typically reward research output, citations, and international presence. These metrics are easy to measure, appeal to media attention, and can overshadow the hard work teachers put into classes, curricula, and innovative pedagogy (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014). For rankings to truly enhance educational quality rather than misrepresent it, quality assurance (QA) systems must align with reliable measures of teaching and learning.

Do Rankings Truly Reflect Teaching Quality?

Major ranking organizations such as QS, THE, and ARWU show only limited connection between their criteria and direct measures of teaching quality. QS considers faculty-student ratios and reputation surveys; THE uses research-teaching balance, staff-student ratios, and perceptions of the teaching environment; ARWU largely ignores teaching, focusing on research output and institutional prestige (QS, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2025; Liu & Cheng, 2005). Consequently, many forms of genuine teaching excellence remain unrecognized, especially in universities emphasizing student-centred learning, professional integration, and community engagement. Institutions in the Pacific, Africa, and parts of Asia tailor programs to local community needs, yet these efforts are often excluded from global rankings (FHEC, 2020).

Globally recognized prestige often does not align with local needs, creating tension between teaching excellence and research dominance. Some regions have acted to prioritize teaching in evaluation systems. The UK's Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) assesses student satisfaction, retention, and graduate outcomes, highlighting teaching quality (HEFCE, 2017). In the Asia-Pacific, QA bodies implement program accreditation and institutional audits to assess curriculum design, learning outcomes, and classroom practices. For example, the Fiji Higher Education Commission mandates internal QA processes to monitor teaching effectiveness, curriculum relevance, and student feedback, demonstrating how limited resources can be leveraged for quality (FHEC, 2020). These models show that prestige is not solely derived from research output; public recognition can also be earned by embedding QA systems that value teaching innovation, applied scholarship, and student learning.

Student experience and learning outcomes are critical indicators of quality, yet most ranking systems exclude them. Metrics such as graduate employability, engagement, satisfaction, and progression directly reflect teaching effectiveness but rarely appear in global rankings (OECD, 2023). In small island states and developing countries, student-centered QA practices provide actionable insights that improve planning and teaching outcomes, even if they do not impact rankings.

When QA systems emphasize outcomes and student success, universities become more mission-driven and less focused on research metrics. Teaching innovations—blended and problem-based learning, digital pedagogy, and community-engaged methods—are often overlooked by standard rankings because they are complex and harder to quantify than publications, citations, or international collaborations (Hazelkorn, 2015). QA frameworks have begun evolving to address this gap.

Peer reviews, teaching portfolios, and targeted audits now assess pedagogical excellence. Malaysia's Qualifications Agency evaluates student learning alongside curriculum and assessment innovation (MQA, 2019). In Africa and the Pacific, QA agencies promote locally relevant pedagogies incorporating indigenous knowledge,

sustainability, and culturally responsive practices, even if these methods do not enhance ranking positions.

Using QA findings in institutional planning allows universities to enhance teaching and learning while acknowledging that prestige, research output, and teaching quality are interconnected yet distinct. Rankings are useful tools—like flawed mirrors—that offer insights but cannot fully capture the spectrum of educational excellence.

Governance, Policy, and Global Competition

Global academic prestige rarely emerges from universities acting alone; it is shaped by governments, policy frameworks, and national higher education strategies as much as by individual institutions. Universities operate within a complex governance environment where state intervention, regulation, and national excellence initiatives influence institutional behavior. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, ranking agencies, and university leaders (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014).

National Excellence Initiatives and Flagship Universities

Governments influence prestige agendas through decisions on funding, research incentives, and internationalization support. China's Double First Class University Plan, for example, provides focused funding and policy support to select universities to increase research output, visibility, and ranking (Hazelkorn, 2015). Such initiatives reshape institutional priorities, including hiring strategies, laboratory development, and grant applications.

Many countries support a small group of flagship institutions through concentrated funding, enhanced infrastructure, international faculty recruitment, and incentives for high-impact publications. In Africa, targeted research funding for the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, along with institutional autonomy, allows them to compete globally while addressing local needs (Hazelkorn, 2015). In the Pacific, the University of the South Pacific works to strengthen regional capacity through shared QA systems, though geographic and structural challenges limit global recognition (FHEC, 2020). While flagship policies boost reputation, they also concentrate resources, potentially deepening national inequalities.

Autonomy, Accountability, and Regulation

Autonomy is critical for global recognition. Universities with autonomy can set research priorities, manage finances, and hire strategically, all influencing rankings (Marginson, 2014). Yet autonomy without accountability can be risky, requiring mechanisms to monitor performance and align with national objectives. Regulatory bodies, including accreditation agencies, provide necessary checks and balances. Malaysia and Singapore illustrate balancing autonomy with accountability, ensuring quality teaching and research while allowing flagship institutions global competitiveness (MQA,

2019). In the Pacific, the FHEC helps geographically isolated universities meet international standards despite limited resources (FHEC, 2020).

Good governance integrates global competitiveness with local relevance. Rankings are useful for positioning and improvement but should not be the sole objective. Indicators such as publications, citations, and journal impact factors reveal only part of institutional performance. They often overlook social impact, ethical responsibility, and the daily work universities do for communities. New frameworks are beginning to include sustainability, equity, and community engagement, shifting toward a holistic and inclusive vision of university performance (Hazelkorn, 2015; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Civic and Community Engagement

Evaluation is moving from counting outputs to assessing real-world impact. THE Global Impact Rankings, based on UN Sustainable Development Goals, measure universities' contributions to climate action, gender equality, poverty reduction, and community involvement (Times Higher Education, 2025). Such frameworks influence institutional priorities, particularly in the Global South, where local challenges and capacity building may be more impactful than high-impact publications. For instance, the University of the South Pacific conducts research on climate resilience, fisheries management, and disaster preparedness, directly benefiting vulnerable island communities (FHEC, 2020). Similarly, African universities engage in public health, governance, and community development, which traditional rankings often overlook (OECD, 2023).

Civic universities combine teaching, research, and community engagement as their core mission, applying knowledge in partnership with governments, NGOs, and local organizations. Evaluation should consider community involvement, applied research value, and impact on local societies. This broader understanding of prestige is more inclusive than traditional metrics focused on international scholarly output (Hazelkorn, 2015; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

In the Pacific, universities collaborate with village councils, health services, and environmental organizations, enhancing student learning, graduate employability, and social relevance. Decolonizing QA and accreditation is an emerging movement, emphasizing local knowledge systems, indigenous epistemologies, and culturally responsive curricula (de Wit & Altbach, 2021, 2018). Community stakeholders can participate in accreditation, local languages and traditional knowledge recognized, and regionally relevant research prioritized. These approaches embed equity, cultural relevance, and social justice into prestige.

Prestige is being redefined in terms of sustainability, equity, and local relevance. Universities are increasingly seen as instruments for positive change, using teaching, research, and community engagement to address global and local challenges (Hazelkorn, 2015; OECD, 2023). Ranking organizations and policymakers are beginning to

incorporate teaching quality, societal impact, equity, and sustainability into their assessments.

Conclusion

Evidence shows that universities in the Pacific, Africa, and Asia may not top citation-based rankings but are essential for human development, environmental protection, and knowledge sharing. By redefining prestige, higher education can embrace equitable, context-sensitive, and socially responsible standards of excellence, with real-world implications for ranking publishers, university leaders, and policymakers.

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CHAPTER 2

Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education: Advancing Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This chapter looks at how quality control and accreditation support inclusive education in higher education institutions. As student populations become more diverse, traditional quality assurance frameworks that prioritise academic standards, compliance and institutional efficiency are no longer sufficient to address persistent gaps in access, participation and educational outcomes. The chapter argues that diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) should be emphasised as key indicators of institutional effectiveness in a rethinking of quality. Drawing on social justice and inclusive education perspectives, the discussion explores how implementing evidence-based equity indicators, inclusive instructional methods, accessible assessment methodologies, and robust student support mechanisms might raise accreditation standards. The chapter also highlights how inclusive practices are used by institutional leadership and accreditation bodies to promote accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement. Careful consideration is given to institutional policy alignment with inclusive education principles, data-driven equitable outcome monitoring, and stakeholder input. By defining quality assurance and certification as transformative instruments rather than purely regulatory measures, the chapter demonstrates how higher education institutions may establish inclusive learning environments that enhance student achievement and institutional legitimacy. The chapter contributes to ongoing conversations about educational quality by showing how inclusive education can be carefully included in accreditation frameworks to support socially just, equitable, and high-performing higher education systems.

Keywords: inclusive education; higher education; quality assurance; accreditation

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Introduction

Quality assurance and accreditation safeguard academic standards, institutional responsibility and public confidence in higher education (Chasokela et al., 2025). These processes have traditionally focused on curriculum design, governance, assessment integrity, and resource management as indicators of institutional excellence. Increasing student diversity and persistent inequalities in access and outcomes are a significant threat to contemporary higher education institutions, even though these factors are still vital (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025). A more thorough definition of quality that recognises fairness, accessibility and inclusion as crucial components of academic success rather than incidental characteristics is required to promote inclusive education (Benabid et al., 2025).

Incorporating inclusive education concepts into accreditation and quality assurance systems helps systematically address systemic barriers within higher education institutions (Shepherd, 2025). When accreditation criteria explicitly address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) elements, institutions are urged to offer inclusive pedagogies, accessible learning environments, and adaptable assessment procedures that meet the needs of many learners (Chakrabarty & Singh, 2025). By using evidence-based monitoring of equity outcomes, including participation, retention, and completion rates across different student groups, institutions can identify disparities and implement targeted interventions. As a result, quality assurance becomes a revolutionary tool for inclusive institutional growth that goes beyond following procedures.

Accreditation organisations influence institutional objectives and practices by establishing standards that promote inclusive education (Ramezani & Mostafavi, 2025). By offering clear criteria, evaluation processes, and accountability mechanisms, accreditation organisations can encourage schools to include inclusion in strategic planning, curriculum development, and staff capacity-building initiatives (Arero et al., 2025). Additionally, open evaluation processes and stakeholder engagement, particularly concerning students and marginalised groups, enhance the credibility and effectiveness of accrediting systems (Asamoah et al., 2025). These techniques ensure that commitments to inclusion are reflected in measurable actions and accomplishments rather than only symbolic policy declarations.

In the end, advancing inclusive education through quality assurance and accreditation requires sustaining institutional leadership, collaboration, and a culture of continual development. Academic and professional staff, students, governing bodies, and outside stakeholders must work together to uphold inclusive principles and address emerging concerns. Aligning quality assurance and accrediting processes with inclusive education principles enhances community responsiveness, increases institutional credibility, and contributes to the development of high-performing, equitable higher education systems. By placing inclusion at the core of quality discourse, higher education

institutions may more successfully conduct their social and educational obligations in increasingly varied contexts.

THE Value of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education

Because they establish regulatory and evaluative standards that prioritize fairness, accessibility, and academic achievement for a wide range of student populations, quality assurance (QA) and accreditation are essential to advancing inclusive education in higher education. Comprehensive QA frameworks help schools develop curricula, instructional strategies and evaluation procedures that address learner diversity, including the needs of students from historically under-represented groups and those with disabilities (Busby et al., 2026). Incorporating inclusive education explicitly into accreditation criteria ensures that inclusive principles are systematically integrated, implemented, and evaluated across faculties and academic programmes, institutionalising it as a fundamental obligation instead of being viewed as a secondary issue.

Accreditation processes further reinforce institutional responsibility by requiring verifiable evidence of inclusive policies, accessible physical and digital environments, staff professional development and responsive student support systems (Kayyali, 2024). This calls for the implementation of inclusive and flexible assessment techniques, adherence to universal design for learning principles, and the provision of reasonable accommodations (Black et al., 2015). Institutions are given structured opportunities for critical reflection and continuous improvement through external peer evaluations and ongoing monitoring. This enables them to identify practice deficiencies and implement evidence-based interventions that promote student access, participation, and success. The social justice purpose of higher education is strengthened when quality assurance and accrediting systems align with inclusive education objectives (Nyuma et al., 2025). This alignment fosters a culture of continuous quality improvement where student success is viewed not only in terms of achievement outcomes but also in terms of equal access and meaningful involvement, and diversity is recognised as a vital asset to academic life. Higher education is better positioned to achieve its goals by making inclusiveness a core component of quality.

How Higher Education Institutions Can Foster Inclusive Learning Environments

Higher education institutions are crucial for developing inclusive learning environments that accommodate the requirements, backgrounds, and skill levels of their student populations (Simpfenderfer & Mitic, 2026). Such environments require a deliberate commitment to DEI that is embedded in institutional policies, strategic planning, and quality assurance practices (Perdana et al., 2026). Inclusive learning

environments include equal access to educational opportunities, accessible physical and virtual spaces, and curricula that reflect a variety of perspectives and life experiences (Brunengo et al., 2026). By adopting inclusive education approaches, institutions can move beyond deficit-based techniques and embrace diversity as a resource that improves instruction, learning, and intellectual engagement (Bhimani & Knowler, 2026).

The creation of inclusive learning environments depends heavily on pedagogical approaches. Faculty members play a crucial role in adopting inclusive teaching practices like universal design for learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and flexible assessment methods that consider a range of learning styles and skills. These efforts are further supported by professional development programmes that increase staff capability in inclusive teaching and evaluation. Additionally, by integrating accessible learning resources, assistive technology and student-centred support services, participation barriers are reduced, and all students can participate meaningfully in academic activities (Pieriboni et al., 2026).

Maintaining inclusive learning environments also heavily depends on institutional culture and governance (Misra, 2026). Accountability and ongoing improvement are facilitated by evidence-based monitoring of equality outcomes, stakeholder participation, and leadership commitment. Institutions can promote a sense of community and shared accountability for inclusion by involving students, employees, and external partners in decision-making processes (Kwaw et al., 2026). In the end, creating inclusive learning environments promotes student achievement, raises educational quality and fortifies higher education institutions' social responsiveness in more varied circumstances.

Quality Informed by Principles of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Academic standards, institutional effectiveness and regulatory compliance are metrics that have historically been used to describe quality in higher education (Puerta-Guardo et al., 2026). Although these metrics are still significant, they only provide a partial picture of quality in increasingly varied educational settings. A quality framework based on DEI principles rethinks excellence to include fair access, meaningful engagement, and successful learning outcomes for every student (Murray et al., 2023). This viewpoint acknowledges that institutions must address systemic injustices and establish learning environments that appreciate and encourage a range of identities, experiences, and skills to attain educational quality truly.

It takes a methodical, evidence-based approach across institutional policies and practices to incorporate DEI concepts into quality frameworks. This entails integrating equitable assessment techniques, accessible learning resources, culturally sensitive pedagogies and inclusive curriculum design into teaching and learning procedures (Zandvakili & Gordon, 2025). Additionally, institutions can identify disparities and conduct targeted interventions by using disaggregated data to track participation,

retention, and achievement (Ajiga et al., 2025). By using such methods, quality assurance becomes more committed to social responsibility and ongoing improvement rather than just standards compliance.

Additionally, DEI-informed quality enhances institutional credibility and social responsiveness (Berkley, 2024). Institutions gain the trust of stakeholders, including students, staff, accrediting agencies, and the public, when they exhibit accountability for equity outcomes and inclusive policies (Asamoah et al., 2025). Maintaining this strategy requires leadership dedication, stakeholder involvement, and continual professional growth. The creation of inclusive, high-performing higher education institutions that align with social justice ideals and the changing needs of modern society is supported by incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion into ideas of excellence (Salendab, 2025).

Advancing Institutional Accountability Through Leadership and Accreditation

Ensuring quality, openness and integrity in higher education requires institutional responsibility (Zlotnikova et al., 2025). By establishing strategic priorities, allocating resources, and incorporating policies that respect ethical and professional standards, leadership within organisations plays a crucial role in creating a culture of responsibility. In addition to encouraging participatory decision-making and setting an example of accountability, effective leaders also ensure that institutional goals align with social norms and legal requirements. Institutions can foster an environment where staff, students, and stakeholders are aware of their roles, duties, and contributions to accomplishing institutional goals by placing a high priority on accountability at the highest levels of governance.

By offering external validation and oversight, accreditation organisations strengthen accountability mechanisms and support institutional leadership (Bohlens, 2025). Accrediting agencies ensure that institutions maintain consistent quality, transparency, and conformity with national and international benchmarks through well-defined standards, regular reviews, and organised reporting requirements. Leadership and accrediting organisations can track institutional performance, spot gaps and take corrective action by integrating evidence-based measures, such as DEI indicators. (Kahn et al., 2025). In this sense, accreditation serves as a strategic catalyst for ongoing institutional transformation in addition to being a regulatory tool.

Sustaining accountability in higher education requires collaboration between accreditation agencies and institutional leadership (Teter & Balser, 2025). In governance, quality control, and policy implementation, leaders, employees, and stakeholders work together, and accreditation offers an external framework to assess and validate their endeavours. Transparency, stakeholder participation, and institutional legitimacy are all enhanced by this combined approach, especially when inclusive and socially responsible practices are prioritised. Higher education institutions can ensure that they provide fair,

excellent instruction while meeting the demands of students, authorities, and the public by promoting accountability through both internal leadership and external accreditation (James et al., 2025).

Equitable and Academically Excellent Higher Education Systems

It takes careful integration of social justice ideas with strict quality assurance procedures to create higher education institutions that are both academically outstanding and equitable (Musendekwa, 2025). Ensuring equitable access, engagement and outcomes for all students, especially those from historically marginalised or under-represented groups, is a key component of equity in higher education (Price & Winchester, 2025). Conversely, high standards in research, teaching, learning and institutional governance are all part of academic excellence. When institutions pursue excellence and equity together, they go beyond a narrow focus on performance measures to create environments where all students may reach their potential, helping to create inclusive and socially responsive higher education systems.

Adopting comprehensive frameworks and policies that incorporate DEI concepts into all facets of institutional operations is necessary to achieve this balance. This includes accessible assessment procedures, inclusive curriculum design, culturally sensitive pedagogies, and focused student support services (Anlimachie, 2026). To enable academic and administrative staff to apply these tactics successfully, leadership commitment and professional development are crucial. Additionally, institutions can detect inequalities, track progress, and make evidence-based decisions to improve both equality and quality through the methodical gathering and analysis of data on participation, retention, and achievement across various student groups.

Higher education systems that are both academically outstanding and equitable depend heavily on institutional accountability systems and accreditation procedures. Incorporating DEI indicators into accreditation criteria, together with open reporting and stakeholder involvement, ensures that schools remain accountable to students, authorities, and the public. By aligning governance, quality assurance and inclusive practices, higher education institutions can foster environments that are not only high-performing but also socially just, responsive and sustainable. In the end, integrating equity with academic achievement enhances institutional legitimacy and guarantees that higher education makes a significant contribution to individual, societal and national development objectives.

THE Meaning of Quality Assurance

In higher education, QA refers to the methodical procedures and systems used to guarantee that academic programmes, institutional operations and learning outcomes satisfy predetermined criteria of excellence and dependability (Biloshchytskyi et al., 2025). To preserve and improve educational quality, it includes both internal and

external measures, such as curriculum review, faculty evaluation, student assessment, governance and resource management (Flori et al., 2025). Beyond meeting legal requirements, QA is a tool for ongoing improvement that helps organisations identify strengths, address flaws, and use evidence-based practices that increase administrative efficiency and teaching and learning.

As the importance of responsibility, openness and diversity in higher education has grown, the definition of quality assurance has expanded to include more ethical and sociological aspects (Kyambade et al., 2025). In addition to evaluating academic performance, contemporary QA frameworks consider equity, access and learners' overall development (Ntumi & Bulala, 2025). Institutions can ensure that their programmes are socially sensitive and meet the demands of increasingly diverse student populations by incorporating the principles of DEI into quality assurance procedures. In this way, QA serves as a strategic tool for promoting institutional quality, equity and ongoing innovation as well as a means of protecting standards (Gallegos et al., 2025).

What Is Higher Education?

Higher education, which is usually provided by universities, colleges and other tertiary institutions, is the formal stage of learning that follows the completion of secondary education (Schmees et al., 2025). It includes programmes at undergraduate, graduate and professional levels to foster advanced knowledge, critical thinking, research abilities and practical competences across a range of academic disciplines. Higher education promotes intellectual curiosity, personal development, and the capacity to engage with difficult societal issues, in addition to imparting disciplinary knowledge. It is a major force behind social mobility, economic growth and cultural enrichment, giving students the tools they need to make significant contributions to both their local communities and society at large.

Higher education serves as a social institution that influences knowledge creation, creativity, and social advancement in addition to personal growth. Structured curricula, rigorous evaluation, research projects, and adherence to quality standards, which are frequently tracked through accreditation and quality assurance procedures, are its defining characteristics (Pinias et al., 2025). In keeping with international commitments to social justice and lifelong learning, modern higher education also places a strong emphasis on diversity, equity, and responsiveness to a variety of learner needs (Ul Hassan et al., 2025). Higher education institutions prepare graduates for both professional success and active, knowledgeable, and moral participation in a world that is becoming more linked and complex by striking a balance between academic brilliance and social responsibility (Kyambade et al., 2025).

Inclusive Education

The goal of inclusive education is to guarantee that every student has fair access to high-quality instruction and the chance to fully engage in learning activities, regardless of their skills, backgrounds, or social situations. It promotes a learning environment that is sensitive to diversity and dedicated to social justice by emphasising the eradication of systemic, curricular and attitudinal barriers that may impede student involvement and success (Maguvhe, 2025). Principles like equity, accessibility and respect for individual diversity are fundamental to inclusive education and influence curriculum design, instructional tactics, assessment procedures and institutional policies (Oswal et al., 2025). Higher education institutions that build an inclusive culture not only improve academic results but also foster social cohesion, empower students and help create more equitable, socially responsive and high-performing educational systems (Apelehin et al., 2025).

Institutional Quality Frameworks Promoting Accessibility and Inclusion

Institutional quality frameworks guide higher education institutions to attain and uphold high standards while guaranteeing fair access and inclusion for all students (Diamond et al., 2025). These frameworks offer organised methods for assessing educational initiatives, instructional strategies, administrative procedures, and student assistance programmes. Universities can systematically address obstacles that impede participation and achievement by integrating accessibility and inclusion principles into institutional policies and quality assurance procedures (Yang et al., 2025). This ensures that all students, including those from marginalised or under-represented groups, are supported to succeed academically and socially.

Incorporating inclusive practices into high-quality frameworks necessitates careful consideration of curriculum design, teaching approaches and evaluation techniques (Selvakumar et al., 2025). To meet a variety of learning demands, educational institutions must embrace universal design for learning principles, adaptable assessment strategies, and culturally sensitive instruction. Faculty and staff professional development programmes are crucial for developing the ability to apply these tactics successfully, and continuous monitoring and assessment of equitable results guarantee that institutional initiatives stay grounded in evidence. By using such strategies, quality frameworks transcend procedural compliance and become instruments for revolutionary transformation that advance social justice and academic achievement.

Furthermore, frameworks for institutional quality that promote accessibility and inclusivity improve stakeholder participation, accountability, and transparency. To ensure that policies and initiatives are successfully operationalised, accrediting authorities, institutional leaders, students, and external partners all participate in

monitoring and assessing inclusive practices. Higher education institutions can improve organisational credibility, foster a sense of community among students, and promote social responsibility by aligning institutional objectives with evidence-based criteria for equity and inclusion. In the end, these frameworks enable the creation of accessible, equitable, and high-performing higher education.

Enhancing Access and Participation Through Inclusive Education in Universities

To guarantee that all students, regardless of their social, cultural, or ability-related origins, have fair access to learning opportunities and the opportunity to participate meaningfully in academic life, inclusive education in universities is essential. Higher education institutions can remove systemic and historical barriers that prevent underprivileged or under-represented groups from participating by making access a top priority. This includes creating learning spaces that are both physically and digitally accessible, offering financial and academic support, and establishing regulations that make it easier for diverse learners to enter. Thus, inclusive education guarantees that colleges not only accept students from diverse backgrounds but also allow them to fully engage in all facets of campus life (Pieriboni et al., 2026).

Engagement in learning, research, governance, and extracurricular activities is included in inclusive education, which goes beyond access. Universities must use student support services, assessment techniques, and instructional approaches that acknowledge and meet a variety of learning requirements (Ledgerwood & Kennedy, 2026). Techniques like culturally sensitive instruction, universal design for learning, and flexible assessment alternatives foster learning environments where all students may participate, work together, and thrive (Zandvakili & Gordon, 2025). Furthermore, faculty and staff professional development is crucial for providing them with the information and abilities needed to support inclusive learning environments that raise student accomplishment and engagement (Abuda et al., 2025).

Equity and accountability are strengthened when inclusive education is integrated into institutional governance and culture (Ashurova et al., 2026). Universities can detect inequalities, assess the success of interventions, and continuously enhance policies and procedures by using evidence-based monitoring of student access, retention, and performance. Involving stakeholders in decision-making processes, such as students, teachers, administrators, and outside partners, ensures transparency, shared accountability, and a sustained commitment to inclusion. Universities can promote fair, socially conscious, and high-achieving educational institutions that uphold the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion while also advancing broader societal development by improving both access and participation (Freire et al., 2026).

Conclusion

Fostering equitable and academically demanding higher education systems requires advancing inclusive education through accreditation and quality assurance. Universities can guarantee that every student has meaningful access to education and the chance to thrive by incorporating DEI principles into accrediting requirements, institutional policies, and quality assurance frameworks. Accountability is strengthened. Continuous improvement is supported when evidence-based student outcome monitoring is combined with stakeholder involvement and leadership commitment. The development of high-performing, inclusive and socially responsible higher education systems is aided by the alignment of quality assurance and accreditation with inclusive education principles, which also strengthens institutional credibility, advances social justice, and fosters learning environments that are sensitive to the varied needs of modern student populations.

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CHAPTER 3

Accreditation as Governance, Ritual, or Resistance: Global Quality Assurance, Institutional Power, and the Political Economy of Academic Prestige

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Abstract

This chapter offers a critical analysis of accreditation as a complex and multifaceted issue in global higher education, understood not merely as technical quality assurance but also as governance, ritual, and resistance. Building on recent research, the chapter frames accreditation in relation to global higher education governance, emphasizing it as a mode of soft regulation that shapes institutional behavior, legitimacy, and access to academic capital. It also discusses how accreditation works symbolically as a ritual that boosts organizational legitimacy and contributes to institutional isomorphism through the spread of standardized norms and performance indicators. Meanwhile, the chapter highlights accreditation as a site of struggle where local institutional agency comes to the fore through strategic decoupling, reframing standards, and articulating competing narratives using academic discourses and situated quality. By bringing together analyses of accreditation, global rankings, managerialism, and inequality, the chapter exposes the political economy that informs current quality assurance systems. The final discussion proposes reflexive and participatory trajectories for accreditation systems. It suggests that transformative quality assurance is about balancing accountability with diversity, academic freedom, and societal relevance in a more stratified global higher education landscape.

Keywords: accreditation; global governance; academic legitimacy; institutional resistance; quality assurance

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Introduction

One trend in accreditation that can be traced is a shift from accreditation as a technical quality assurance apparatus to an important arm of global governance in higher education. Facing increasing globalization, transnational mobility, and competition for academic excellence, accreditation shapes how universities worldwide construct, evidence, and legitimate quality as a regulatory infrastructure. Unlike previous generations of accreditation systems that worked within national borders to set standards and norms, today's accreditation regimes are firmly installed in transnational networks of standards, normative references, and policy discourses - all the imaginaries advanced by global actors, including international accreditation bodies such as AACSB or EQUIS, regional quality assurance bodies, and multilateral organizations.

Governance-wise, accreditation is, in effect, a type of soft regulation enforced not by coercion but through norms, benchmarking, and reputational considerations. Scholars argue that accreditation further reworks state authority as governments devolve QA responsibilities to semi-autonomous bodies guided by international best practices. This change mirrors the general pattern of global higher education governance, which is characterized by devolution, managerialism, and performance audit.

Accreditation is also a coordination tool that helps synchronize national systems with worldwide standards of quality, transparency, and equity. Through devices such as learning outcomes, internal quality assurance, and improvement cycles, accreditation institutionalizes global standards in the practices of higher education institutions. It opens them to international recognition and student mobility (Kehm, 2023). But this design is not neutral. It privileges certain epistemologies, design schemes, and institutional practices, which are frequently derived from Anglo-American notions of quality and effectiveness.

Newer studies further suggest that accreditation itself is a 'political technology' in which institutional priorities and the reconfiguration of power relations within universities are at stake. Academic activity is increasingly guided by measurement, regulation, and formats congenial to audit culture in higher education (Huisman & Stensaker, 2020). Hence, governance in the form of accreditation is not simply an agent for improving quality but also a disciplinary force that shapes particular types of institutional behavior.

In this way, accreditation is a linchpin of the governance structures and institutions of global higher education, serving to coordinate while also strengthening hierarchies and redefining what counts as academic quality in a globalized knowledge economy.

National Accreditation Systems and Policy Translation

National quality assurance systems serve as crucial mechanisms for reconciling international quality norms with local contexts in higher education. In an era of internationalization and intensified global governance, higher education accreditation

policies are increasingly appropriated through international standards, frameworks, and discourses, albeit mediated through nationally distinct institutional practices. This flow can be understood as policy translation, in which isomorphic global models are selectively translated, infused with new meanings, or adapted within systems of domestic politics, culture, and organization.

This further indicates that policy transfer in accreditation is a process through which global governance tools are institutionally denationalized. Although principles such as outcomes-based education and continuous improvement are widely advocated in the global context of quality assurance, they are enacted quite differently across national systems, where different stakeholders assume varying degrees of responsibility for quality assurance. Recent research indicates that the use of global accreditation models is frequently a governmental strategy to increase international credibility and competitiveness, especially in the age of world university rankings and transnational education. But institutional models are seldom transplantable in toto; they are processed through national regulatory traditions, legal forms, and capacities.

Accreditation agencies function as important "translators" in this process. Sitting within a triangle formed by the state, higher education institutions, and global quality assurance networks, these agencies mediate between international standards and national criteria, procedures, and assessment practices (Vukasovic et al., 2023). This mediating role highlights that accreditation is about governance, not just technical evaluation. Accreditation is a way for states to exert control over universities indirectly while preserving the appearance of institutional autonomy.

Yet the translation of policy is not a value-neutral or linear practice. Studies reveal that translation may create tensions between global dynamics and local academia, particularly in contexts with disciplinary strongholds or limited administrative resources, such as Swedish higher education (Enders et al., 2013). Sometimes, accreditation is little more than formalistic compliance detached from actual quality improvement. Elsewhere, organizations opportunistically redefine principles to conform with a country's strategic interests or an institution's image.

Hence, national accreditation systems show how global governance is affected through local appropriations rather than standard application. Governance by accreditation is not achieved through standardization alone but through the indefinite negotiation between worldwide norms and local specifics. This highlights the necessity of understanding accreditation as a politically embedded process that is co-constructed through translation, contestation, and institutional agency.

Implications for Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The growth of accreditation as a form of global governance has important implications for institutional autonomy and academic freedom in higher education. Accreditation is often constructed as a tool for quality and accountability, yet it also

functions as a form of regulation that transforms power relations over decision-making inside universities. Accreditation agencies increasingly shape how institutions of learning identify academic priorities, allocate resources, and structure teaching and research initiatives via normed standards, performance measures, and assessment protocols.

In this way, academic freedom is reconstituted rather than erased within accreditation regimes, where the capacity of universities to govern their affairs becomes recognized, to some extent, as an expression of the autonomy they ought to have. Recent literature, however, indicates that autonomy is not only curtailed but transformed into a type of conditional autonomy that ensures institutions have formal self-governance principles while being strongly controlled through external quality assurance. Accreditation bodies operate as shadows of the state or international quality assurance regimes, mobilizing control over higher education indirectly, whereby compliance with their standards is commonly rewarded with legitimacy, funding, and reputation.

Accreditation-driven governance, too, has a chilling effect on academic freedom. There may be more focus on measurable learning outcomes, standardized curricula, and demonstrated performance, which can limit academic discretion in curriculum design, pedagogy, and research priorities. Research demonstrates that academics increasingly face growing administrative burdens and expectations to conform academic norms to set performance benchmarks externally, leading them to become complicit in the normalization of audit culture in higher education (Kallio et al., 2022)—such dynamics potentially subordinate intellectual inquiry to managerial logics of efficiency and comparability.

But the link among accreditation, independence, and academic freedom is not equally stifling. Empirical work suggests that institutions can play the accreditation game strategically to protect academic values by stretching or avoiding interpretations of standards in a way that maintains disciplinary diversity and academic autonomy (Huisman & Seeber, 2023). In this regard, accreditation may be a new location for struggle and refusal rather than an exercise in compliance.

In the end, governance as accreditation has ambiguous results. It promotes transparency and coordination in higher education systems, but it also redistributes control over academic work itself. Making sense of these implications means going beyond simplistic control-versus-freedom binaries and appreciating that accreditation is a complex governance tool that continually redraws the balance between institutional autonomy and academic freedom in an age of globalized higher education.

Accreditation as Ritual: Symbolism, Legitimacy, and Isomorphism

Accreditation and Organizational Legitimacy

Accreditation has emerged as a critical device by which colleges and universities create, sustain, and defend organizational legitimacy in an era of intense competition and

globalization within higher education. Although it is audited for its technical role in ensuring quality, accreditation also works symbolically, marking adherence to the consensus on what "quality," "excellence," or "accountability" ought to look like. From an organizational point of view, legitimacy results from both performance and conformity to legitimized norms in the field of higher education.

Through a neo-institutional theoretical lens, accreditation can be interpreted within a broader framework of ritual and routine - ornate ceremonies and established methodologies that confirm an actor's, or in this case an institution's, legitimacy or worth in the view of external audiences such as government bodies, student populations, employers, or international partners. Recent research stresses the notion that accreditation provides cognitive and normative legitimacy by formally establishing that institutional practices are consistent with dominant ways of organizing higher education. Hence, compliance with accreditation standards acts as a symbolic affirmation of institutional value independent of the extent to which it results in internal transformation (Huisman & Stensaker, 2020).

Empirical findings from the last five years suggest that accreditation results are frequently mobilized strategically by universities to support reputational claims and increase their visibility in global academic markets. Thus, accreditation stamps and rankings are forms of symbolic capital that become part of institutional branding and recruitment literature, as well as being embedded in overseas collaborations. In this way, accreditation serves to reproduce legitimacy hierarchies in higher education systems by favoring institutions capable of resource and administrative compliance.

But the legitimation provided by accreditation is by no means uncontested. Critics suggest that ritualistic forms of accreditation can separate formal adherence from substantial improvement, potentially resulting in legitimation with limited substance (Stensaker et al., 2023). This decoupling helps stabilize external legitimacy while maintaining existing routines within the institution, making accreditation more ceremonial.

As a ritual, accreditation is one site within the broader phenomenon whereby organizational legitimacy is maintained through symbolic obedience rather than intrinsic enhancement. Approaching accreditation in this manner brings to light that it functions not only as a technology of governance but also as a legitimation ritual that secures institutional identities and hegemonic interaction patterns.

Ritual Compliance and Performative Quality Assurance

Ritual compliance has become a hallmark of recent higher education quality assurance, especially in the era of performativity. Accreditation processes, rather than serving only as instruments of substantive quality improvement, are increasingly instruments for accountable displays of external standards in the documented form of indicators and formal procedures. This shift is indicative of a larger trend in the

governance of higher education, in which performance becomes performative - performed, shown, and audited as evidence of quality.

The term performative quality assurance refers to the acting out of compliance through overt and measurable activities that signal alignment with accreditation aspirations. Universities invest enormous resources in writing self-evaluation reports, mapping their curricula onto generic learning outcomes, and reporting on internal quality assurance processes. Studies indicate that these practices can promote a focus on form rather than substance, driving institutions toward what is measurable and reportable rather than deeper pedagogical or scholarly improvement (Trowler, 2021). Accreditation thus becomes a ritual performed to please auditors and the outside world.

From an empirical perspective, the model suggests that compliance rituals are supported by audit cultures inherent in accreditation systems. The back-and-forth dynamics of review, monitoring, and re-accreditation help institute routines that make performativity seem like a natural condition for organizational survival and legitimacy (Kallio & Kallio, 2022). These processes are often perceived by academic staff as a bureaucratic exercise, resulting in behavior driven by compliance rather than critical reflection on quality enhancement objectives. Quality assurance, as a result, runs the risk of being detached from academic work and of creating parallel administrative structures.

However, performative quality is not agentless. As a ritual of accreditation, universities and academic units selectively call attention to positive signs while downplaying negative or "damaging" aspects (Seeber et al., 2023). This "calculated obedience" enables organizations to stay in the game without compromising themselves or their ways of doing things. This tension highlights the ambivalent character of ritual compliance: it both restrains and empowers organizational action.

In this regard, accreditation as ritual illustrates the symbolic force of quality control frameworks. Performative compliance helps maintain expectations, reassure external publics, and reproduce institutional norms, while also challenging the connection between visible performance and substantive educational quality. Viewing accreditation in terms of ritual compliance clarifies its nature as a performative technology of governance rather than just a technical device.

Isomorphism and Homogenization of Universities

Accreditation systems are major drivers of processes of institutional isomorphism and the increased homogenization of universities in world higher education. According to neo-institutional theory, organizations functioning in the same or similar fields tend to become more alike in structure, practices, and strategic direction. In accreditation, coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures reinforce one another to persuade universities to model quality assurance, governance, and academic structure similarly across places.

Coercive isomorphism results from regulation by states and accreditation agencies that require adherence to similarly precise criteria for performance indicators and evaluation processes. Normative isomorphism is further sustained by professional quality control experts, peer reviewers, and consultants who spread shared norms of "good practice" in higher education management. Mimetic isomorphism, in contrast, can be described as institutions mimicking the actions of high-status and internationally visible universities to increase legitimacy and competitiveness (Krücken & Meier, 2022).

Empirical studies show that accreditation increases these processes of isomorphism by rewarding conformity and punishing divergence. For some, this trend is troubling: universities converge more and more in their curricula, internal quality systems, and strategic profiles toward globally benchmarked model patterns at the cost of institutional diversity and contextual responsiveness (Huisman et al., 2023). This "flattening" is most evident in systems aspiring to be part of the international curriculum race, where compatibility with prevailing accreditation models feels like a requirement for looking good and moving around in the world.

But accreditation-induced homogenization has not been observed equally everywhere. Studies point out that the pressure to comply is stronger in peripheral or resource-constrained systems, as accreditation has become a precondition for legitimacy, access to resources, and student enrollment (Vukasovic & Elken, 2021). In these contexts, isomorphism may strengthen global hierarchies that benefit institutional forms grounded in Anglo-American traditions and disenfranchise other missions, epistemologies, and pedagogies.

Scholars have written, however, that the understanding of isomorphism is neither complete nor inevitable. Universities might practice pick-and-mix adaptation, in which they adopt similar structures while keeping some idiosyncratic traditions under wraps. However, the net result of accreditation-induced isomorphism is a diminishment of acceptable organizational diversity in higher education. As a ritualized mode of governance, the practice of accreditation freezes expectations and replicates dominant university models, with implications for innovation, differentiation, and emergent pluralism in future higher education systems.

Accreditation as Resistance: Local Agency and Counter-Narratives

Critical Perspectives on Accreditation Regimes

Some critical voices raised against accreditation regimes question the received perception of accreditation as a disinterested and technical instrument of quality enhancement. Instead, recent work across disciplines has reframed accreditation as a contested mode of governance enmeshed in power relations, knowledge hierarchies, and political economies of higher education. From this perspective, accreditation regimes are not only evaluative technologies but also sedimented arcs of practice that articulate what

kinds of knowledge get to count, which institutional forms are authorized, and how the worthiness of academic work can be understood.

Recent critical analyses suggest that global systems of accreditation tend to favor standardized, managerialist, and outcomes-based models of quality based predominantly on Anglo-American higher education. Such models risk ensuring that specific epistemic assumptions about teaching, learning, and institutional effectiveness become "universalized" at the expense of alternative educational philosophies or locally based academic practices (Shore & Wright, 2022). Consequently, accreditation regimes may replicate epistemic inequalities with particularly deleterious effects on institutions in the Global South or those with strong social, cultural, or community-oriented missions.

Accreditation has also been criticized as a means to extend audit cultures and managerialism in the university. Academic labor, these scholars argue, has been folded into regimes of auditing through performance metrics, the aggregate of which acts as documentation that grows incrementally and never disappears (Lynch, 2021). This refashions academic identities and values, frequently displacing a focus on critical thinking and intellectual risk-taking with compliance-oriented practices. In doing so, accreditation works as a technology of governmentality that disciplines both institutions and academics.

In addition, critical views emphasize the political character of accrediting authorities. Even if often presented as autonomous and neutral, these agencies are embedded within national and transnational power relations and are subjected to state demands, market logics, and discourses of international competition. Hence, accreditation decisions can give impetus to the established hierarchy between schools and systems, creating legitimacy for some and denial for others.

Crucially, while not dismissing accreditation per se, critical scholarship demands conscience and context in its design and use. By revealing the normative assumptions and power relations implicated in accreditation systems, these perspectives create analytic space for resistance, reappropriation, and other models of quality assurance. These commentaries are the basis for reading accreditation as governance and ritual, to be sure, but also as a site of contending discourse in which local agency and counter-narratives can appear.

Institutional Resistance and Strategic Decoupling

Institutional defiance of accreditation regimes may not be direct so much as subtle and strategic. Among the most prominent explanations of these dynamics is strategic decoupling, a situation in which organizations formally comply with external requirements while internally following practices that deviate from prescribed standards. In the accreditation process, decoupling allows universities to maintain values and organizational identities grounded in local academic traditions while accommodating governance requirements mandated by quality management bodies.

Recent literature indicates that the tension between global accreditation standards and institutional missions generates strategic decoupling. Universities can adopt the language, structures, and document requirements associated with accreditation while constraining the extent to which these requirements reshape contingent academic practices, at least in terms of curriculum design, research prioritization, or pedagogical methods (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 2). This selective conformity permits institutions to signal legitimacy and evade sanctions while not entirely internalizing externally generated models of quality.

There is a range of empirical evidence that resistance through decoupling occurs especially when professional autonomy or disciplinary traditions are strong. Units of study often reinterpret accreditation requirements in line with local practices, thus translating global criteria into locally meaningful activities (Vukasovic et al., 2022). Such processes problematize linear models of policy transfer and reform and emphasize the active involvement of institutions as reform actors rather than passive receivers.

The resistance of institutions is also partly a function of power asymmetries within accreditation systems. Accrediting bodies rank high in formal authority, but their dependence on peer review and self-study yields opportunities for negotiation and redefinition. Ambiguity in standards, or the prioritization of qualitative narratives over quantitative indicators, provides possibilities for universities to exercise agency (Seeber & Vukasovic, 2023). In this way, resistance is inscribed into everyday systems of accreditation rather than articulated openly in the form of confrontation.

But strategic decoupling has a mixed impact. Although it may safeguard academic freedom and contextual diversity, it can also perpetuate ritualized adherence and undermine the emancipatory capacity of quality assurance. Critics warn that extensive decoupling potentially brings about the normalization of superficial conformity, sustaining accreditation regimes without actually addressing any shortcomings they might have (Huisman & Stensaker, 2020).

Taken together, institutional defiance via strategic decoupling exposes accreditation as a negotiated governance process. Instead of erasing local agency through traditional quality narratives, accreditation regimes construct a space in which universities actively negotiate and re-signify dominant stories of quality, a process that can sometimes lead to resistance and ultimately produces hybrid notions of "quality" shaped by both global pressures and specific local values.

Reclaiming Academic Values and Contextual Quality

Reclaiming the values and conditions of academic quality is an important form of resistance within contemporary accreditation regimes. With the accreditation regime ever more assertively promoting standardized, metric-led versions of quality, universities and academic communities have also been formulating counter-narratives that affirm higher education for its intrinsic purposes, principally the development of critical inquiry,

intellectual autonomy, and social responsibility. Some of these counter-narratives question universal concepts, such as quality, that can be defined across the board through homogenized standards divorced from local cultures. For instance, as others have noted, "our dominant models of accreditation tend to prioritize efficiency, comparability, and accountability at the expense of epistemic diversity and academic judgment".

In reaction, institutions attempt to reassert academic values by recasting quality in terms of disciplinary standards, pedagogical integrity, and social relevance. This new framing contextualizes quality as a value-laden concept that is not simply a technical manifestation of adherence to external standards. Quality in context focuses on whether institutional missions and local needs are aligned, especially where universities perform important functions in relation to social development, cultural maintenance, and knowledge dissemination. Research indicates that universities increasingly use mission-based narratives in accreditation to legitimize alternative interpretations of standards, institutionalizing local priorities in formal quality regimes (Elken & Stensaker, 2018).

These modes show that resistance should not be understood simply as a refusal of accreditation but rather as an attempt to reconfigure its concept and application. In addition, reclaiming academic values tends to mean empowering collegial governance and professional judgment in mechanisms of quality assurance. Academics insist that peer evaluation, reflective self-assessment, and qualitative evidence form a counterbalance to managerial and audit logics (Kehm & Teichler, 2021). These approaches highlight trust, expertise, and reflexivity, recasting academics as stewards of quality, not subjects for inspection. However, initiatives to restore contextual excellence encounter structural impediments. International competition, rankings, and accreditation demands still put very strong pressure on convergence. Still, the endurance of counter-narratives indicates that accreditation regimes are contestable fields rather than closed systems. Universities engage in resistant practices that transform accreditation toward more inclusive, plural, and socially embedded views of quality by claiming academic values and contextual definitions of quality.

Accreditation, Rankings, and THE Political Economy of Prestige

Intersections Between Accreditation and University Rankings

Accreditation and world university rankings have emerged as the two most powerful tools mediating the global political economy of reputation in higher education. Although they are rarely considered together and are often treated as divergent mechanisms - accreditation as a quality assurance process and rankings as comparative performance measures - their overlap now mediates definitions of what constitutes institutional quality, legitimacy, and excellence. Together, these two form

complementary modes of governance that shape the behavior of institutions through reputational motives rather than direct regulation.

Recent research has indicated that accreditation and rankings are mutually correlative in global higher education governance. Accreditation has long served as a minimum threshold of legitimacy among institutional actors, while ranking practices serve as rank-order differentiating mechanisms for supposed prestige within and across national systems. Certainly, for an institution to establish its credibility - in other words, to demonstrate compliance with accreditation standards - is a prerequisite for qualifying as valid; after that, it becomes about how well the institution plays. In this way, accreditation allows for participation in ranking systems, and rankings strengthen the symbolic capital of accredited status.

The relationship between accreditation standards and ranking criteria is heightened by a convergence between the two. Both instruments tend to focus on quantifiable outputs, such as graduation rates, research productivity, internationalization, and employability. Research indicates that, by aligning universities, strategic enrollment management aims to integrate accreditation requirements with rank-oriented performance measurement systems, thereby consolidating managerial control over academic work (Shore & Wright, 2022). The consequence is that institutional strategies are informed less by educational or social missions and more by the desire for publicity and status.

Yet the confluence of accreditation and rankings also reinforces structural inequalities that funnel institutions throughout the global higher education sector into hierarchically ordered networks. The tendency of ranking systems to favor well-resourced, research-intensive institutions - primarily located within the Global North - has also been shown by scholars to be reflected in the standards that colleges and universities are held to through accreditation (Stack, 2016). This has led to added pressure on institutions in marginal situations to imitate what is considered normal, thus increasing stratification rather than diversity.

From the political economy point of view, accreditation and rankings are market-making instruments that put a price on quality and reputation. Such tags simplify cycles of value in education into commensurable and exchangeable signs, mediating the decision-making of students, money flows, and policymakers. Understanding their overlap also clarifies that accreditation is not just governance or ritual but also participation in the global economy of academic prestige.

Managerialism, Audit Culture, and Performance Metrics

Managerialism and audit culture have emerged to characterize governance in modern higher education institutional settings, which are embedded within accreditation frameworks and performance-related accountability regimes. In this context, accreditation has been identified as a primary site for the institutionalization of

managerial logics and performance measures that configure how universities and academic work are governed. Instead of simply guaranteeing standards and quality, accreditation today promotes a mode of governance that values efficiency, measurability, and strategic control.

Recent studies have shown that accreditation criteria and standards tend to be related to management principles that revolve around target setting, performance benchmarking, performance measurement, and self-review processes. Audit practices realize these principles by requiring universities to produce copious amounts of documentation, performance indicators, and evidence (Kallio et al., 2022). Audit culture, in this way, attunes us to a state of permanent assessment and surveillance: academic work is reduced to measurable products that can be held up for external scrutiny.

These performances are central to upholding this regime of management. Explicit quality management frameworks tend to focus on measurable indicators such as student retention rates, research publications, staff qualifications, and internationalization. Although such indicators enable comparability and accountability, critics argue that they unduly restrict institutional diversity of priorities and promote gaming behavior for scoring points rather than improving quality in substance (Huisman & Seeber, 2023). And so, with the reliance on metrics comes the tendency to translate nuanced scholarly practices into simplified numbers.

The growth of managerialism through accreditation has substantial implications for academic culture and professional independence. Research indicates that academics are subjected to higher levels of top-down managerialism and less autonomy regarding teaching and research decisions, with greater pressure toward performance competition guiding resource allocation and promotion (Lynch, 2021). This shift leads to a reimagining of academic professionalism in which success comes from yielding to management targets rather than making an intellectual or societal difference.

However, the linkage between accreditation, managerialism, and audit culture is not unidirectional. Institutions and scholars can push back against or mold performance measures, deploying them tactically to attract resources while upholding other systems of values. These practices illustrate the ambivalence of accreditation as a regime of governance that restrains and authorizes institutional agency.

Taken as a whole, the entanglement of accreditation with managerialism and audit culture highlights its function within a political economy of prestige. Indeed, by formalizing measures of performance, accreditation enacts the commodification of academic worth and solidifies competitive rankings, even as it incites ongoing inquiries into the ends and ideals of higher education.

Unequal Effects on Peripheral and Emerging Universities

Accreditation and global ranking regimes have differential effects on higher education systems, with peripheral and emerging universities most acutely affected. Though such instruments are frequently presented as value-free tools for quality control and transparency, critical scholarship has drawn attention to the part they play in perpetuating structural inequalities within the global political economy of higher education. Such universities in less well-resourced or new systems often face increased pressure to adopt normative models of academic excellence that are not consistent with their historical ethos or socio-economic circumstances.

Peripheral universities frequently have limited organizational capacity to cope with the administrative, financial, and infrastructural requirements of accreditation and ranking systems. Recent research shows that the implementation of international accreditation norms is costly to establish and maintain in terms of managerial capacity, data infrastructures, expert knowledge, and production of data outputs - resources that are unevenly distributed within world higher education systems (Marginson, 2021). Accordingly, accreditation serves as a gatekeeper that advantages well-endowed universities to the detriment of institutions with strong missions focused on teaching or engagement in the local community.

These inequities are compounded by rankings that perpetuate reputational hierarchies based on historical advantage. Evidence-based studies show that the indicators used in ranking methodologies systematically favor research-intensive universities in the Global North and consequently limit the ability of emerging institutions to advance upward based on local relevance or educational quality (Stack & Mazawi, 2022). In combination with rankings' centripetal metrics, accreditation multiplies these effects by pushing peripheral universities to reallocate scarce resources from locally rooted priorities toward globally recognizable outputs.

Indeed, the differential effects of accreditation and rank also spill over to epistemic elements. Dominant quality benchmarks tend to favor English-language publication, specific research methodologies, and globally recognized disciplinary norms, while marginalizing alternative knowledge systems and locally embedded scholarship (Mok & Qian, 2021). This supports epistemic exclusion and limits the ability of new universities to shape their own notion of quality.

In the face of such pressures, however, peripheral universities are not completely passive receivers of global governance forces. In their studies, researchers identify strategic adaptations, selective engagements, and narrative repositioning among institutions that use accreditation to gain legitimacy while also shaping specific identities (Vukasovic & Elken, 2021). However, the combined weight of accreditation and rankings highlights their position in stratifying higher education in a global setting. Understanding these differential effects is also key to reimagining accreditation not just

as governance or spectacle but as a political-economic power that enables and closes off access to prestige, resources, and honor.

Rethinking Accreditation: Toward Reflexive and Transformative Quality Assurance

Limitations of Contemporary Accreditation Models

Current accreditation models have become important policy tools for the governance of higher education systems at a global level. While these models are widely legitimized for quality assurance, transparency, and accountability, a growing body of literature questions their structural and conceptual legitimacy. Instead of supporting quality improvement in substance, accreditation systems seem increasingly associated with standardizing compliance, managerial control, and performative accountability, thereby raising important questions about their efficacy and legitimacy.

One of the main limitations is the use of one-size-fits-all approaches and indicators for assessing different institutional environments. Accreditation models tend to assume that comparable metrics, such as learning-process outputs, staff credentials, and performance-oriented data can reflect quality. Critics claim that such an assumption overburdens academic quality, obscuring its contextualized, mission-centered, and discipline-based character and the fact that assessments in higher education are necessarily limited, favoring form over substance (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Consequently, the whole process of accreditation is in danger of producing institutional sameness rather than diversifying and encouraging institutional distinctiveness.

Another important limitation concerns the auditorization emerging in accreditation. Recent studies have reported that systems requiring multiple rounds of review, reporting, and monitoring place considerable administrative burdens on institutions as well as academics (Kallio et al., 2022). Such demands can detract from teaching, research, and service to communities, often at the expense of the quality that accreditation is supposed to promote. In addition, audit-driven accreditation might destroy trust in academic communities by substituting collegial judgment with bureaucratic forms of oversight.

Current systems of accreditation are also criticized for further entrenching power imbalances in global higher education. Global accreditation standards often echo the organizational culture and assumed knowledge of well-endowed systems, crowding out alternative traditions of education and ways of knowing (Marginson, 2021). For colleges and universities in developing or marginal locations, adherence might involve copying inappropriate institutions, which can bring further disparity and dependence.

Lastly, the accountability value of accreditation ends up trumping its developmental potential. Accreditation should function as a developmental process and as a means for an accreditor to satisfy itself that an institution has the capacity to offer quality programs

of study recognized by industry and professional bodies. Critics decry how accreditation has moved from being oriented toward learning and improvement to becoming something more summative and geared toward control and legitimacy (Huisman & Seeber, 2023). These constraints point to the necessity of reconsidering accreditation in ways that move beyond governance and recognition, enabling more reflexive, context-sensitive, and transformative approaches to quality assurance.

Reflexive Governance and Participatory Quality Assurance

Reflexive governance and participatory quality assurance represent two key responses to the failures of current models of accreditation. Amid widely perceived challenges of complexity, diversity, and uncertainty facing higher education systems today, scholars claim that rigidly compliance-oriented quality assurance no longer suffices and has to become more adaptive and learning-oriented. Reflexive governance stresses ongoing self-scrutiny, conversation, and change, casting accreditation as an exercise in collective meaning-making rather than external regulation.

One important principle of reflexive accreditation is the acknowledgment of contingency and values in quality judgments. Rather than applying fixed standards, reflexive governance encourages accreditation agencies and institutions to reflect on the interpretation, implementation, and experience of standards in various contexts (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). This line of development stresses the importance of institutional mission, as well as disciplinary cultures and societal roles, providing a responsive rather than prescriptive aspect for quality assurance measures. Recent research, then, indicates that reflexive accreditation supports organizations in learning by looking inward and using feedback that leads them to do more than evidence compliance.

Participatory quality assurance extends reflexive governance by broadening the set of actors who shape and assess quality. Traditional forms of accreditation have been censured for favoring managerialist and outside expert viewpoints to the exclusion of academic staff, students, and the wider community. In comparison, participatory approaches focus on inclusive involvement, peer-based judgment, and consultative processes (Kehm & Teichler, 2021). Empirical findings show that when academics and students are actively engaged in assuring quality, accreditation outcomes are more likely to be oriented toward pedagogical innovation and professional ownership.

Participatory quality assurance's contribution to re-establishing trust in higher education systems is also the subject of recent research. Moving beyond surveillance toward various forms of participation, participatory models help challenge audit cultures and lower the level of resistance to accreditation (Huisman & Seeber, 2023). Accreditation becomes a mutual responsibility, not an imposed one, which increases its legitimacy and efficiency.

However, reflexive and participatory accreditation creates difficulties in operationalization. Power imbalances, resource deprivation, and established demands for

accountability might impede active engagement. Within these limitations, reflexive governance maps out a visionary schema of accreditation, a model that harmonizes quality assurance with academic values, actual contexts, diversity, and democracy. If we reframe accreditation in this manner, it situates it as more than governance or a ritualistic process and more as a co-production able to contribute to meaningful quality enhancement appropriate to higher education within an increasingly globalized system.

Future Directions for Global Accreditation Systems

Prospects for the internationalization of accreditation continue to be guided by increased reflexivity, inclusiveness, and sensitivity to the heterogeneous missions of higher education in society. As accreditation has become a central technology of global governance, its shortcomings as a linear and compliance-oriented system have only reinforced the need for change. We are thus reminded that current theories of accountability should be replaced by new models of accreditation more receptive to issues such as learning, diversity, and the social purposes of education.

One growing new direction will be greater context-driven, goal-oriented accreditation. Rather than simply adopting integrated criteria and expectations, future accreditation schemes should acknowledge the situation-specific nature of institutions and create room for various pathways to quality that are attuned to teaching-oriented, research-intensive, or community-focused university missions (Vukasovic & Elken, 2021). This differentiation defies the one-size-fits-all logic that has historically driven convergence and homogenization in higher education systems.

A further trajectory focuses on incorporating broader societal challenges into accreditation requirements. Recent publications point out the growing interest in integrating sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical governance into quality assurance (Filho et al., 2022). Including elements such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), equity of access, or societal impact can free accreditation from the tyranny of one set of narrow ratios and move it into participation in higher education's public value. This movement reframes accreditation as a prescriptive tool in the service of change, not merely as a symbolic gesture.

Digitalization also offers new potential for global accreditation procedures. Advances in data analytics, digital peer review, and collaborative platforms could facilitate a leaner, more formative, and dialogic quality assurance (Stensaker et al., 2023). But scholars warn that digital tools should not amplify surveillance or metricization and should instead help guide reflective assessment and shared learning across institutions and systems.

Last but not least, accreditation systems in the future will pay more attention to participation and trust. Enhanced involvement of academics, students, and external stakeholders in accreditation may increase legitimacy and reduce resistance. These models of participatory governance relate to broader trends toward democratic and reflexive regulation in higher education (Huisman & Seeber, 2023).

In conclusion, the fate of global accreditation resides in its ability to move away from being a tool for control and symbolic legitimacy and toward a transformative model promoting pluralism, reflexivity, and socially situated definitions of quality. This kind of reimagining is required if accreditation is to remain relevant in the age of the global knowledge economy and deepening uneven development.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that accreditation in today's higher education cannot be fully considered just a neutral or merely technical mechanism for assuring quality. Accreditation does not operate only as a mode of global governance or a ritualized form of legitimacy production, but also as a site for institutional resistance. Within transnational policy networks at the global level, accreditation has become a principal way for norms of quality, excellence, and accountability to be articulated and enforced across different systems of higher education through its adaptation to global rankings and performance metrics.

As a form of governance, accreditation is a kind of soft regulation that directs behavior through standards, benchmarking, and reputational incentives instead of direct state control. As a ritual, it helps maintain organizational legitimacy and encourages isomorphic convergence by internalizing, but usually preferring, standardized models of organization over diversity, specificity, and context sensitivity. Such dynamics are especially influential in peripheral and emergent institutions that, under uneven resource conditions, experience heightened pressure to adapt to dominant global norms.

At the same time, this chapter has demonstrated that accreditation regimes are not monolithic or unchallenged. Universities actively negotiate, reevaluate, or sometimes resist accreditation demands through instrumental and strategic decoupling, along with institutionalizing mission-based narratives and reaffirming their academic values. These actions illustrate the interdependence between local agency and global governance institutions and serve as a reminder that accreditation should be seen as a dynamic process infused with politics.

In terms of implications for the future, this chapter suggests that accreditation needs to be reframed as being less about externality and more about reflexive practice. Critically, however, any future accreditation must transcend compliance-oriented audit cultures and adopt context-sensitive, mission-oriented, inclusive approaches that are about learning, trust, and societal responsibility. Only by recognizing that accreditation is simultaneously a mechanism of regulation and a target to be resisted can we understand how quality assurance might serve the public purpose of higher education in our globally interwoven yet deeply uneven academic world.

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CHAPTER 4

Ethical Considerations in the Pursuit of Academic Prestige: A Global South Perspective on Quality Assurance, Accreditation, and University Rankings

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Abstract

The global pursuit of academic prestige is a defining feature of contemporary higher education, shaped by quality assurance mechanisms, accreditation regimes, and international university rankings. While often presented as neutral indicators of excellence, these instruments carry significant ethical implications, particularly in the Global South, where historical inequities, resource constraints, and contextual diversity shape institutional experiences. This chapter critically examines how prevailing models of quality assurance, accreditation, and rankings often reproduce structural asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South. Metrics privileging research outputs, English-language publications, and reputational indicators frequently marginalize local knowledge, teaching excellence, and societal engagement, generating ethical dilemmas such as compliance-driven practices, mission drift, and pressures on academic integrity. The chapter highlights how accreditation dependency, commercialization, and governance challenges exacerbate these ethical vulnerabilities, emphasizing the tensions between global visibility and local responsibility. In response, it proposes a context-sensitive ethical framework for pursuing academic prestige that aligns institutional aspirations with social responsibility, equity, and developmental relevance. By foregrounding Global South experiences, the chapter contributes to a more inclusive and ethically grounded understanding of academic prestige, offering actionable insights for policymakers, higher education leaders, and scholars seeking to balance global engagement with local impact.

Keywords: academic prestige; Global South higher education; quality assurance ethics; university rankings; accreditation governance; higher education equity

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Introduction

In today's interconnected higher education landscape, the pursuit of academic prestige—through quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings—has become a central concern for universities worldwide. While these mechanisms are often portrayed as neutral measures of excellence, their impact is neither uniform nor without ethical implications. Institutions in the Global South, in particular, face unique challenges: historical inequities, limited resources, and diverse local contexts shape how prestige is pursued and experienced. This chapter examines these ethical dimensions, exploring how global standards and evaluation systems can both support and undermine socially responsible, mission-aligned higher education. By focusing on the Global South perspective, the chapter highlights the tension between global visibility and local relevance, offering guidance for more equitable, context-sensitive approaches to academic excellence.

Framing Academic Prestige as a Normative and Ethical Concern

Academic prestige has become a central organizing logic of contemporary higher education systems. Universities increasingly define success through international recognition, accreditation status, and performance in global rankings, often treating prestige as a proxy for quality and excellence. However, prestige is not a neutral or purely technical outcome of institutional performance; it is a socially constructed and normatively loaded concept that reflects underlying assumptions about value, legitimacy, and worth in higher education (Marginson, 2008; Bourdieu, 1988). Decisions made in pursuit of prestige inevitably privilege certain forms of knowledge, institutional missions, and academic behaviors while marginalizing others, thereby raising fundamental ethical questions.

From an ethical standpoint, academic prestige shapes how resources are allocated, how academic labor is evaluated, and how institutional priorities are set. Ranking-sensitive indicators—such as publication counts, citation impact, and international visibility—often incentivize universities to prioritize research outputs over teaching quality, equity, and social engagement (Hazelkorn, 2015). While such trade-offs are evident across higher education systems, they carry heightened ethical significance in contexts where universities play a critical role in national development, social mobility, and public service. The pursuit of prestige thus extends beyond strategic management to become a moral issue concerning responsibility, fairness, and the public good (Barnett, 2011).

Moreover, prestige operates as a form of symbolic capital that confers authority and legitimacy within global academic fields (Bourdieu, 1986). Institutions with high prestige

enjoy cumulative advantages, including greater access to funding, partnerships, and talent, while less prestigious institutions face persistent marginalization. Treating prestige as an unquestioned indicator of quality obscures these dynamics and risks normalizing inequality as a meritocratic outcome. This chapter therefore frames academic prestige not simply as an aspirational goal, but as an ethical construct that requires critical scrutiny.

THE Global South in THE International Higher Education Hierarchy

The ethical dimensions of academic prestige become particularly visible when examined from the perspective of the Global South. Higher education systems in developing and transitional contexts operate within an international hierarchy shaped by historical legacies, economic disparities, and uneven global knowledge flows. Institutions in the Global North have long dominated the production, validation, and dissemination of academic knowledge, establishing standards of excellence that are subsequently universalized through global governance instruments (Altbach, 2016; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Universities in the Global South often enter this hierarchy at a structural disadvantage. Limited financial resources, expanding access demands, and infrastructural constraints coexist with strong expectations to conform to international benchmarks of quality and performance. Global quality assurance frameworks, accreditation regimes, and ranking systems frequently privilege research-intensive models, English-language scholarship, and reputational indicators that align poorly with the missions of many Global South institutions (Salmi, 2009; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). As a result, institutions face pressures to emulate elite models rather than pursue contextually relevant forms of excellence.

This positionality generates ethical tensions between global visibility and local responsibility. Universities may redirect scarce resources toward activities that enhance prestige—such as international publications or symbolic partnerships—while underinvesting in teaching quality, community engagement, and locally grounded research. Such dynamics risk reinforcing epistemic dependency, where knowledge produced in the Global South gains legitimacy only when validated by Global North institutions and publication outlets (Connell, 2007). Understanding the Global South's location within the international hierarchy is therefore essential for assessing the ethical consequences of prestige-driven governance.

Chapter Aims, Scope, and Analytical Approach

This chapter aims to critically examine the ethical considerations associated with the pursuit of academic prestige in the Global South, with particular attention to quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings. It seeks to demonstrate how these governance mechanisms—often presented as objective and technical—are embedded in

normative assumptions that shape institutional behavior and reproduce global inequalities. Rather than rejecting international standards outright, the chapter interrogates how their design and implementation create ethical pressures and unintended consequences in resource-constrained and development-oriented contexts.

The scope of the chapter is conceptual and analytical, drawing on interdisciplinary literature from higher education studies, ethics, sociology of knowledge, and global governance. It adopts a critical political economy and postcolonial perspective to examine how power, legitimacy, and authority operate within global prestige regimes. By foregrounding the Global South experience, the chapter highlights ethical dilemmas related to compliance, mission drift, academic integrity, and social responsibility.

Ultimately, the chapter seeks to contribute to a more ethically grounded understanding of academic prestige—one that recognizes contextual diversity, epistemic plurality, and the public mission of higher education. It lays the conceptual foundation for subsequent sections that explore specific ethical challenges in quality assurance systems, accreditation practices, and ranking regimes, and that propose principles for more equitable and context-sensitive approaches to global academic recognition.

The discussion now turns to academic prestige in higher education and the global asymmetries that shape it.

Academic Prestige and Global Asymmetries

Academic prestige in higher education is neither neutral nor organically determined; it is historically produced and sustained through global power relations that shape what is recognized as excellence. Contemporary hierarchies of universities reflect long-standing asymmetries in knowledge production, institutional capacity, and geopolitical influence. Examining these hierarchies through an ethical lens requires attention to their historical foundations, epistemic structures, and the persistent structural disadvantages faced by institutions in the Global South.

Historical Roots of Prestige Hierarchies in Higher Education

The global architecture of academic prestige is deeply rooted in the historical development of European and North American universities, which came to dominate scientific authority during the expansion of colonial empires. These institutions established disciplinary norms, research standards, and credentialing practices that later became universalized as markers of academic excellence (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). Higher education institutions founded in colonized regions were often designed to serve imperial administrative needs rather than local social or economic development, reinforcing asymmetrical relations between metropolitan centers and peripheral systems.

Following political decolonization, many Global South countries expanded their higher education systems rapidly, positioning universities as key instruments of nation-building. However, international recognition continued to be mediated through Global

North institutions and evaluative frameworks. The rise of global university rankings since the early 2000s further consolidated these hierarchies by embedding historical advantages—such as long-established research infrastructures, endowments, and alum networks—into performance metrics (Hazelkorn et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2011). As a result, prestige became cumulative and self-reinforcing, raising ethical concerns about intergenerational and interregional fairness in global higher education.

Knowledge Production, Epistemic Dominance, and Colonial Legacies

At the core of prestige asymmetries lies unequal epistemic authority. Contemporary systems of knowledge production continue to privilege theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and research agendas originating in the Global North. English-language dominance in high-impact journals and citation databases remains a major gatekeeping mechanism, limiting the visibility and legitimacy of scholarship produced in other linguistic and cultural contexts (Hammarfelt et al., 2020; Paasi, 2021).

Recent studies demonstrate that global rankings and research evaluation systems systematically favor institutions embedded in Anglo-American publishing ecosystems, thereby marginalizing locally relevant research and alternative epistemologies (Gadd et al., 2019). For Global South institutions, this creates a persistent ethical dilemma: aligning research priorities with international prestige metrics may improve visibility but risks undermining commitments to indigenous knowledge, applied research, and societal problem-solving (Connell & Dados, 2014; de Sousa Santos, 2018).

These dynamics reproduce what scholars describe as epistemic injustice, wherein certain forms of knowledge are systematically devalued or excluded from global recognition (Fricker, 2007; Walker & Martinez-Vargas, 2020). Colonial legacies thus persist not only through institutional histories but also through contemporary metrics that normalize a narrow conception of academic excellence while obscuring the structural conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Structural Disadvantages Faced by Global South Institutions

Institutions in the Global South confront multiple, intersecting structural disadvantages that constrain their participation in prestige-driven systems. Chronic underfunding, limited research infrastructure, high student–faculty ratios, and heavy teaching and administrative workloads reduce capacity for research output emphasized by rankings and accreditation regimes. These challenges are compounded by unequal access to international research funding, mobility opportunities, and global academic networks (Marginson, 2021).

Governance and regulatory environments in many developing contexts further intensify these pressures. While quality assurance and accreditation systems aim to enhance accountability, they often rely on externally derived standards that prioritize documentation and compliance over substantive quality improvement (Stensaker, 2018;

Blackmur, 2020). This can encourage performative behavior, strategic reporting, and short-term reputation management rather than long-term institutional development.

From an ethical perspective, evaluating Global South institutions against standards they neither shaped nor are resourced to meet raises serious concerns about justice and responsibility in global higher education governance. Prestige-seeking under such conditions entails unequal risks, including mission drift, compromised academic integrity, and the diversion of scarce resources away from teaching and social engagement. Recognizing these asymmetries is therefore essential for developing more inclusive, context-sensitive, and ethically defensible approaches to quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings.

Table 4.1 summarizes the links between prestige mechanisms, ethical risks, and their impacts on higher education institutions in the Global South.

Table 4.1: Prestige Mechanisms, Ethical Risks, and Impacts on Global South Higher Education

Prestige Mechanism	Underlying Ethical Risks	Impacts on Global South Institutions
Global University Rankings	Methodological bias; reputational weighting; metric-driven evaluation	Marginalization of teaching-focused and socially engaged universities; pressure to game metrics; reinforcement of Global North dominance
Research Performance Indicators (publications, citations)	Epistemic injustice; language and disciplinary bias	Devaluation of local and indigenous knowledge; prioritization of English-language journals over locally relevant research
International Accreditation	Commercialization; access inequality; one-size-fits-all standards	Financial burden on resource-constrained institutions; reduced institutional autonomy; symbolic compliance rather than substantive improvement
National Quality Assurance Frameworks (aligned to global norms)	Bureaucratization; audit culture; performativity	Increased administrative workload; focus on documentation over teaching quality; diversion of scarce resources
Internationalization Metrics (mobility, partnerships)	Prestige signaling over academic substance	Unequal partnerships; outward brain drain; limited benefits for local capacity building
World-Class University Policies	Elitism; mission drift; inequitable resource allocation	Concentration of funding in a few flagship institutions; neglect of access-oriented and regional universities
Research Funding Competitions (international grants)	Matthew effect; cumulative advantage	Systematic exclusion of early-career and under-resourced scholars; dependence on Global North agendas
Reputational Surveys	Opacity; network bias	Low visibility for Global South

Prestige Mechanism	Underlying Ethical Risks	Impacts on Global South Institutions
and Peer Assessment		institutions; slow reputational mobility regardless of performance
Performance-Based Academic Promotion	Publish-or-perish culture; ethical stress	Increased research misconduct risks; neglect of teaching, mentoring, and community engagement
Benchmarking Against Elite Institutions	Normative isomorphism; loss of diversity	Institutional homogenization; erosion of context-sensitive missions and national development goals

These asymmetries also shape the ethical challenges embedded in quality assurance systems.

Ethical Challenges in Quality Assurance Systems

Quality assurance (QA) has become a central governance mechanism in higher education worldwide, promoted as a means of enhancing accountability, transparency, and academic standards. In the Global South, the rapid expansion of QA systems has been closely tied to broader processes of globalization, internationalization, and competitiveness. While quality assurance frameworks are often introduced with the stated aim of improving institutional performance, their ethical implications are complex, particularly when models developed in the Global North are transferred into markedly different social, economic, and institutional contexts. This section examines three interrelated ethical challenges: contextual misalignment arising from imported QA models, the dominance of compliance-driven practices, and tensions between national priorities and global benchmarks.

Imported Quality Assurance Models and Contextual Misalignment

External influences, including international development agencies, regional harmonization initiatives, and policy transfer from established QA regimes in Europe, North America, and Australasia have shaped many quality assurance systems in the Global South. While policy borrowing has facilitated the rapid institutionalization of QA structures, it has also produced significant contextual misalignment (Altbach et al., 2009; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Standards, indicators, and evaluation procedures are frequently adopted with limited adaptation to local conditions, institutional missions, or resource realities.

Ethically, this raises concerns about fairness and relevance. QA criteria emphasizing research output, internationalization, and standardized documentation may disadvantage institutions whose primary mandates focus on teaching, access, and regional development. Studies show that such misalignment can lead to symbolic conformity, where institutions comply formally with QA requirements without achieving substantive improvements in educational quality (Stensaker, 2018; Schindler et

al., 2015). In the Global South, where institutional diversity is high and resources unevenly distributed, the imposition of uniform standards risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Furthermore, externally influenced QA systems may inadvertently marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, local pedagogical practices, and culturally grounded curricula. When quality is defined narrowly through imported benchmarks, alternative conceptions of excellence rooted in social relevance and community engagement struggle to gain recognition, raising ethical questions about epistemic inclusion and respect for contextual diversity (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

Compliance-Driven Practices versus Meaningful Quality Enhancement

A second ethical challenge concerns the growing dominance of compliance-driven QA practices. As QA systems mature, they often evolve into bureaucratic and audit-oriented regimes that prioritize documentation, reporting, and measurable indicators over pedagogical improvement and academic development (Blackmur, 2020; Harvey & Williams, 2010). This tendency is particularly pronounced in the Global South, where regulatory capacity constraints and political pressures encourage a checklist approach to quality assurance.

Compliance-driven QA can generate perverse incentives. Academic staff may devote disproportionate time to preparing self-assessment reports, evidence files, and audit responses, diverting attention from teaching, research, and student support. Institutions may prioritize activities that are easily measurable rather than those that meaningfully enhance learning outcomes or academic culture. From an ethical perspective, such practices raise concerns about the responsible use of public resources and the well-being of academic communities.

Moreover, the emphasis on compliance can foster performativity and strategic behavior, including data inflation, selective reporting, and superficial reforms designed to satisfy external evaluators (Power, 1997; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). In contexts where institutional survival or legitimacy depends heavily on QA outcomes, the moral pressure to "appear compliant" may undermine academic integrity and trust. Rather than serving as a tool for continuous improvement, QA risks becoming an end in itself, weakening its ethical justification.

Ethical Tensions Between National Priorities and Global Benchmarks

A further ethical tension arises from the growing alignment of national QA frameworks with global benchmarks and international recognition agendas. Governments in the Global South increasingly seek to position their universities within global knowledge economies, often using QA systems to signal credibility to international partners, students, and ranking agencies (Hazelkorn, 2015). While such

strategies may enhance visibility, they can conflict with national development priorities and social mandates.

Universities are frequently expected to contribute to workforce development, social cohesion, and regional innovation—roles that global QA indicators may not adequately capture. When national QA systems privilege international benchmarks, institutions may face ethical dilemmas in balancing global competitiveness with obligations to local communities. This tension is particularly acute in public universities serving marginalized populations, where access, affordability, and teaching quality are central to social justice objectives.

The ethical challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling external accountability with internal responsibility. QA systems that prioritize global comparability risk marginalizing context-sensitive goals and undermining institutional autonomy. Addressing this tension requires rethinking quality assurance as a developmental and ethical practice—one that recognizes diversity of missions, supports capacity building, and aligns quality enhancement with broader societal needs rather than narrow prestige-driven outcomes.

These QA-related ethical issues become more pronounced when accreditation is shaped by commercialization and external dependency, bringing questions of power, legitimacy, and institutional autonomy to the foreground.

Accreditation, Power, and Legitimacy

Accreditation has become a powerful mechanism through which academic legitimacy is constructed, signalled, and regulated in global higher education. While accreditation is often framed as a quality-enhancing and trust-building process, its ethical implications are closely tied to questions of power, access, and authority. For institutions in the Global South, accreditation increasingly operates within transnational regimes dominated by external standards, commercial actors, and international recognition imperatives. This section critically examines how dependence on external accreditation, the commercialization of accreditation services, and evolving accountability demands generate ethical vulnerabilities and reshape institutional autonomy.

Dependence on External and International Accreditation Regimes

In many Global South contexts, national accreditation systems remain uneven in capacity, legitimacy, or international recognition. As a result, institutions frequently seek external or international accreditation—often from agencies based in the Global North—as a means of signaling quality, enhancing global visibility, and improving ranking prospects (Altbach et al., 2017; Knight, 2019). While such accreditation can provide benchmarking opportunities and facilitate cross-border recognition, it also creates asymmetric dependencies.

External accreditation regimes typically reflect the norms, values, and institutional models of their countries of origin. Standards related to governance structures, faculty

qualifications, research expectations, and resource thresholds may align poorly with local realities in the Global South. The ethical concern lies not in accreditation per se, but in the unequal power relations embedded in who defines quality and whose standards are treated as authoritative (Hou, 2012). Institutions seeking legitimacy may feel compelled to conform to external expectations, even when these conflict with national priorities or social missions.

Moreover, reliance on international accreditation can undermine the development of locally grounded quality assurance ecosystems. When global legitimacy is prioritized over national recognition, domestic accreditation agencies may be marginalized, reinforcing a hierarchy of validation in which Global North approval carries disproportionate symbolic value. These dynamics raise ethical questions about epistemic sovereignty and the long-term sustainability of national higher education systems (Marginson, 2021).

Commercialization, Access Barriers, and Ethical Vulnerability

Accreditation has increasingly become a commercialized enterprise, particularly in cross-border and international contexts. Accreditation fees, consultancy services, preparatory audits, and periodic re-accreditation processes impose high financial costs on institutions. For well-resourced universities, these costs may be absorbed as strategic investments; for institutions in the Global South, they can represent substantial burdens that divert funds from teaching, research, and student support (Eaton, 2016; Blackmur, 2020).

This commercialization introduces ethical vulnerabilities. Institutions with limited resources may face exclusion from prestigious accreditation regimes, reinforcing inequalities in visibility and recognition. Others may engage in selective or symbolic participation, prioritizing accreditation labels over substantive quality improvement. In some cases, the line between quality assurance and market transaction becomes blurred, raising concerns about conflicts of interest, credibility, and the commodification of trust (Harvey, 2020).

Furthermore, access barriers associated with language requirements, documentation standards, and audit processes may disadvantage institutions serving marginalized populations or operating in non-English-speaking contexts. The ethical implications are significant: accreditation intended to safeguard quality may instead function as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges already-advantaged institutions and systems. Such outcomes challenge the normative claim that accreditation serves the public interest, particularly in contexts where higher education is central to social mobility and development.

Implications for Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability

Accreditation regimes exert substantial influence over institutional behavior, shaping governance structures, academic priorities, and strategic decision-making. While

accountability is a legitimate objective, excessive external control can compromise institutional autonomy—a core value of higher education and a prerequisite for academic freedom (Berdahl, 1990; Estermann et al., 2011). In the Global South, where universities may already face political interference and regulatory volatility, layered accreditation demands can further constrain decision-making space.

Ethically, the tension between accreditation-driven accountability and public responsibility is particularly acute in public universities. These institutions are accountable not only to accreditation agencies but also to governments, students, and society at large. When accreditation criteria prioritize market-oriented outcomes or global prestige indicators, public accountability to local communities may be weakened. Universities may reorient missions toward reputational goals at the expense of access, equity, and social engagement.

This reconfiguration of accountability raises broader questions about legitimacy. Whose interests does accreditation ultimately serve—students, society, the academic community, or global markets? Addressing this question requires reframing accreditation as a developmental and ethical practice rather than a purely evaluative one. For the Global South, this implies strengthening nationally and regionally grounded accreditation systems, promoting transparency and inclusivity, and ensuring that external recognition complements rather than overrides public missions and institutional autonomy.

Questions of power and legitimacy become even more explicit in university rankings, where metrics, reputation, and global comparison determine institutional visibility.

University Rankings and THE Ethics of Visibility

University rankings have become one of the most influential instruments shaping global perceptions of academic quality and prestige. Widely disseminated and easily interpretable, rankings offer a powerful mechanism of visibility that affects institutional reputation, student mobility, funding decisions, and policy agendas. However, rankings are not neutral reflections of performance; they are normative systems that privilege particular indicators, epistemologies, and institutional models. For universities in the Global South, rankings pose acute ethical challenges related to methodological bias, unequal visibility, and pressures that encourage strategic behavior with unintended consequences.

Ranking Methodologies and Bias Against Global South Realities

The methodologies underpinning major global rankings—such as QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)—are heavily weighted toward research output, citation impact, reputational surveys, and internationalization metrics. These indicators tend to favor large, well-funded, research-intensive universities, most of which are located in the Global North (Hazelkorn, 2015;

Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011). As a result, rankings systematically disadvantage institutions whose missions prioritize teaching, access, professional education, or regional development.

From an ethical standpoint, the central problem lies in the universalization of a narrow model of excellence. Ranking metrics rarely capture contextual contributions such as widening participation, community engagement, indigenous knowledge production, or alignment with national development goals—areas where many Global South institutions play a vital role (Marginson, 2021). When such contributions remain invisible, rankings implicitly devalue them, reinforcing a hierarchy in which global prestige is decoupled from social relevance.

Furthermore, reputational surveys—often accounting for a significant share of ranking scores—rely on subjective perceptions shaped by historical visibility and academic networks dominated by Global North institutions. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which institutions with limited international exposure struggle to improve their standing regardless of actual performance improvements (Dill & Soo, 2005; Hazelkorn et al., 2018). Ethically, this raises questions about fairness, transparency, and the legitimacy of rankings as comparative tools in a globally unequal system.

Language, Publication, and Citation Inequities

A core driver of ranking bias lies in the political economy of academic publishing. Most ranking systems rely heavily on bibliometric data drawn from databases such as Web of Science and Scopus, which privilege English-language journals and disciplines aligned with Western research traditions (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Scholarship produced in local languages, regional journals, or applied fields is often excluded or undervalued, regardless of its societal impact.

This linguistic and epistemic asymmetry produces what many scholars describe as epistemic injustice, whereby certain knowledge producers are systematically disadvantaged within global evaluation systems (Fricker, 2007; Hammarfelt et al., 2020). For Global South academics, publishing in high-impact international journals may require conforming to research agendas that resonate with Global North audiences, potentially sidelining locally relevant questions and methodologies (Connell, 2007; Paasi, 2021).

Citation practices further exacerbate inequality. Research from Global South institutions tends to receive fewer citations due to limited visibility, network effects, and systemic biases in referencing practices. Since citation impact is a central ranking indicator, these dynamics translate directly into lower institutional scores. The ethical concern is not only exclusion but also distortion: rankings reward conformity to dominant publishing norms while marginalizing intellectual diversity and contextual relevance.

Strategic Behavior, Gaming, and Unintended Ethical Compromises

The high stakes associated with rankings incentivize strategic behavior by institutions seeking to improve visibility and reputation. While some strategies—such as strengthening research support or international collaboration—may be constructive, others raise ethical concerns. Empirical studies document practices such as selective data reporting, manipulation of faculty classifications, prioritization of ranking-sensitive disciplines, and short-term recruitment of highly cited researchers to boost metrics (Sauder & Espeland, 2009; Gadd et al., 2019).

In the Global South, where institutional legitimacy and survival may depend disproportionately on external recognition, the pressure to "play the rankings game" can be particularly intense. Resources may be diverted away from teaching quality, student support, and community engagement toward activities with limited intrinsic academic value but high metric payoff. Such trade-offs raise ethical questions about mission drift, responsible governance, and the appropriate use of public funds.

Moreover, ranking-driven incentives can exacerbate academic integrity risks, including excessive publication pressure, questionable authorship practices, and neglect of mentoring and pedagogy. These unintended consequences undermine the ethical foundations of higher education and challenge the assumption that rankings drive genuine quality improvement. From a Global South perspective, the ethical issue is not simply poor ranking performance, but the broader transformation of academic values under conditions of structural inequality and asymmetric visibility.

Ranking-driven visibility also collides directly with access, inclusion, and developmental goals, particularly in the Global South.

Equity, Social Responsibility, and THE Public Mission

Higher education institutions in the Global South are expected to serve multiple and often competing roles: advancing knowledge, expanding access, supporting national development, and addressing pressing social challenges. At the same time, growing emphasis on global prestige—mediated through quality assurance, accreditation, and rankings—has reshaped institutional priorities and definitions of success. This section examines how prestige-driven governance generates ethical tensions between global recognition and local societal needs, with particular implications for teaching quality, access, community engagement, and the risk of mission drift in developing contexts.

Tensions Between Global Prestige and Local Societal Needs

Global prestige frameworks tend to privilege indicators associated with research intensity, international visibility, and reputational standing. While such indicators may enhance global competitiveness, they often inadequately capture the societal roles universities play in the Global South, including poverty reduction, workforce development, public health, and social cohesion (Marginson, 2018; McCowan, 2016).

This misalignment creates ethical tensions for institutions seeking international recognition while remaining accountable to local and national priorities.

Public universities in developing contexts frequently serve first-generation students and marginalized communities. Yet contributions such as widening participation, regional innovation, and policy engagement are rarely rewarded within prestige-driven evaluation systems. When institutional success is defined primarily through global benchmarks, universities may feel pressured to deprioritize socially responsive activities that lack international visibility.

Ethically, this raises concerns about distributive justice and the legitimacy of using public resources to pursue reputational gains that deliver limited local benefit (Unterhalter, 2019).

Moreover, the global framing of excellence can obscure contextual diversity, implicitly suggesting that institutions failing to meet elite standards are deficient rather than differently oriented. Such narratives risk delegitimizing alternative models of excellence rooted in social relevance and public service—models that are particularly vital in the Global South.

Teaching Quality, Access, and Community Engagement

Teaching and learning constitute the core function of most higher education institutions in the Global South, yet these dimensions are often undervalued in prestige regimes dominated by research metrics. Empirical studies show that ranking and accreditation systems tend to rely on proxies for teaching quality—such as staff qualifications or student–faculty ratios—rather than meaningful assessments of learning outcomes or pedagogical effectiveness (Harvey, 2020; Gibbs, 2010). As a result, institutional incentives may skew toward research outputs at the expense of teaching investment.

Access and equity are similarly affected. As universities seek to enhance prestige, they may adopt selective admissions practices, increase tuition fees, or reallocate resources toward elite programs, thereby reducing opportunities for disadvantaged students (McCowan, 2017). These trends pose ethical challenges in contexts where higher education is a key mechanism for social mobility and inclusive development.

Community engagement and locally grounded research—central to social responsibility—also struggle for recognition within global prestige frameworks. Partnerships with local governments, civil society organizations, and communities may yield significant social impact but generate limited citation or reputational value. The ethical concern is that universities may disengage from their communities in pursuit of symbolic capital, weakening the social contract between higher education and society (Boyer, 1996; Benneworth, 2018).

Ethical Risks of Mission Drift in Developing Contexts

Mission drift—the gradual shift away from an institution's core public mandate toward externally valued goals—represents one of the most significant ethical risks associated with prestige-seeking in the Global South. As universities align strategies with global metrics, they may adopt research-intensive, market-oriented models ill-suited to their historical missions, resource capacities, or societal roles (Salmi, 2009; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

In developing contexts, mission drift can exacerbate inequality within national systems. Flagship universities may capture disproportionate funding and attention, while access-oriented and regional institutions are marginalized. At the institutional level, mission drift can undermine staff morale, weaken teaching cultures, and erode trust among students and communities. These outcomes challenge the ethical foundations of higher education as a public good rather than a positional competition.

Addressing mission drift requires reasserting the normative importance of equity, social responsibility, and public accountability in defining quality and excellence. For the Global South, this entails developing evaluation frameworks that recognize diverse institutional missions and reward contributions to societal well-being alongside global engagement. Without such recalibration, the pursuit of academic prestige risks deepening inequalities and compromising the ethical purpose of higher education.

Prestige pressures also operate at the level of everyday academic practice, affecting research conduct, teaching practices, professional life, and student experience, particularly in Global South institutions.

Academic Integrity and Professional Ethics Under Pressure

The pursuit of academic prestige does not only reshape institutional strategies and governance structures; it also penetrates everyday academic practices, professional norms, and student experiences. In the Global South, where resource constraints and performance pressures intersect, prestige-driven systems can intensify ethical stress at individual and collective levels. This section examines how global incentives linked to quality assurance, accreditation, and rankings affect research ethics, academic labor conditions, and student well-being, often in ways that challenge the ethical foundations of higher education.

Research Ethics, Authorship Practices, and Publication Incentives

Research productivity and visibility are central to prestige regimes, particularly those driven by rankings and international benchmarking. Incentive structures that reward publication counts, citation impact, and placement in high-impact journals have significantly reshaped research behavior across higher education systems (Müller & de Rijcke, 2017; Gadd et al., 2019). In the Global South, these pressures are amplified by

institutional expectations to "catch up" with global standards despite limited research funding, infrastructure, and mentoring support.

Such conditions create ethical risks related to research integrity. Empirical studies document increased incidences of questionable research practices, including honorary and coerced authorship, salami-slicing of publications, plagiarism, and submission to predatory journals (Anderson et al., 2007; Grudniewicz et al., 2019). These practices are often framed as individual misconduct, yet they are better understood as systemic responses to misaligned incentive structures. When career advancement and institutional legitimacy depend heavily on publication metrics, ethical decision-making becomes constrained by survival imperatives.

Authorship norms present particular challenges in Global South contexts, where hierarchical academic cultures and precarious employment can limit junior scholars' ability to resist unethical practices. The ethical concern lies not only in the erosion of research integrity but also in the unequal distribution of risk, with early-career researchers and women disproportionately affected (Müller, 2021). Addressing these issues requires shifting attention from individual blame to the ethical design of evaluation and reward systems.

Faculty Workload, Precarious Employment, and Ethical Stress

Prestige-driven governance has also reshaped academic labor conditions, often intensifying workloads and employment insecurity. In many Global South institutions, faculty members balance heavy teaching loads, administrative responsibilities linked to quality assurance compliance, and escalating research expectations tied to accreditation and rankings (Bentley et al., 2013; Teichler, 2017). These cumulative pressures contribute to ethical stress, burnout, and diminished professional autonomy.

Precarious employment—including short-term contracts, limited promotion pathways, and performance-based renewal—further complicates ethical decision-making. Academics in insecure positions may feel compelled to prioritize metric-driven outputs over pedagogical care, collegial responsibilities, or ethical reflection. Studies suggest that such conditions undermine academic freedom and weaken the collective capacity of institutions to uphold ethical standards (Fanghanel et al., 2016; Marginson, 2021).

From an ethical perspective, the normalization of excessive workloads and precarious labor raises questions about institutional responsibility and the sustainability of prestige-seeking strategies. When academic staff is treated primarily as performance units rather than members of an intellectual community, professional ethics risk being subordinated to organizational survival and reputational goals.

Student Experience, Assessment Practices, and Well-Being

Students are often positioned as beneficiaries of prestige-driven reforms, yet their lived experiences reveal more ambiguous outcomes. In the Global South, expanding enrollments and limited resources already place strain on teaching and support systems. When institutions reallocate resources toward research visibility and accreditation compliance, student-centered investments may be deprioritized (McCowan, 2016; Harvey, 2020).

Assessment practices are particularly affected. Pressure to demonstrate performance through completion rates, graduate employability metrics, or standardized learning outcomes may encourage superficial assessment strategies that prioritize measurability over meaningful learning. Such practices raise ethical concerns about academic standards, fairness, and the authenticity of educational experiences.

Student well-being is also implicated. Competitive institutional cultures oriented toward prestige can intensify academic pressure, reduce opportunities for mentoring, and weaken support structures, especially for first-generation and disadvantaged students. In contexts where higher education represents a critical pathway to social mobility, these dynamics pose serious ethical challenges. Ensuring that prestige-seeking does not come at the expense of student dignity, inclusion, and well-being is central to preserving the public mission of higher education in the Global South.

These integrity pressures can be mitigated or intensified through governance, regulation, and ethical leadership.

Governance, Policy, and Ethical Leadership

Effective governance and ethical leadership are indispensable for navigating the complex interplay between global prestige pressures and local higher education missions. In the context of quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings, the decisions of governments, regulators, institutional leaders, and regional bodies shape not only compliance outcomes but also the ethical culture of universities. This section examines the role of public governance actors, the capacities of institutional leaders to enact ethical frameworks, and the potential for regional cooperation and South–South collaboration to counterbalance global asymmetries.

Role of Governments, Regulators, and QA Agencies

Governments and quality assurance (QA) agencies have a pivotal role in establishing policies that balance accountability with institutional autonomy and ethical responsibility. In many Global South contexts, national authorities have expanded QA systems as part of broader reforms aimed at enhancing international competitiveness and securing external legitimacy (Salmi, 2021; Stensaker, 2018). However, ethical concerns arise when policy instruments are designed primarily with external benchmarks in mind, potentially sidelining locally meaningful measures of quality.

For instance, national QA frameworks that mirror global criteria without adaptation to contextual needs risk imposing standards that are misaligned with institutional missions and socio-economic priorities (Blackmur, 2020; Prapaipanich & Ferdous, 2022). Governments can play an ethical leadership role by actively shaping QA policies that recognize diverse institutional roles and emphasize equity, access, and social impact alongside global engagement. Regulators, for their part, must balance their oversight functions with support for capacity building, transparency, and consultative policy processes that involve diverse stakeholders (Harvey, 2020).

The ethical quality of governance is reflected in how well policies mitigate unintended harms—such as resource diversion due to compliance pressures—and how they reinforce public accountability. Governments that foreground the public good in higher education policy can temper the dominance of global prestige metrics and align evaluation systems with national development agendas (McCowan, 2016).

Institutional Leadership and Ethical Decision-Making Frameworks

Institutional leaders—vice-chancellors, deans, and governing boards—serve as ethical stewards of their universities, responsible for mediating between external demands and internal values. Leadership plays a crucial role in setting priorities that balance performance expectations with professional ethics, academic freedom, and community responsibility (Bolden et al., 2012; Winter, 2018). Ethical decision-making frameworks within institutions provide structured approaches to evaluating trade-offs, navigating strategic tensions, and embedding values into governance practices.

An ethical leadership orientation emphasizes transparency, inclusivity, and dialogue. For example, involving faculty, students, and community stakeholders in strategic planning can democratize decision-making and ensure that prestige pursuits do not eclipse core educational missions. Leaders can also foster ethical research cultures by aligning promotion criteria with integrity, mentorship, and societal relevance rather than solely with publication metrics. Ethical frameworks within institutions may incorporate codes of conduct, conflict-of-interest policies, and deliberative forums that foreground ethical reflection as integral to academic life.

Importantly, ethical leadership in resource-constrained environments demands sensitivity to context. Leaders in the Global South must navigate structural constraints while advocating for policies that reinforce the public mission of higher education. This includes resisting narrow interpretations of success that privilege external recognition over local impact (Marginson, 2021).

Regional Cooperation and South–South Collaboration

While global QA and accreditation regimes are often dominated by Global North actors, regional cooperation and South–South collaboration offer promising avenues for alternative governance frameworks rooted in shared contextual realities. Regional

networks—such as the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), and the South Asian Quality Assurance System—seek to harmonize standards, share best practices, and build mutual recognition mechanisms reflective of regional diversity (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Jowi, 2021).

Such collaboration can reduce dependency on external accreditation models and promote cultural and epistemic relevance in evaluation practices. South–South partnerships in research, joint degree programs, and capacity-building initiatives can strengthen institutional capacities and foster locally grounded standards of excellence (Teferra & Knight, 2008). These initiatives also have ethical significance: they democratize knowledge production, challenge epistemic hierarchies, and create space for alternative conceptions of quality that are socially responsive and contextually anchored.

Regional cooperation may also contribute to ethical leadership by facilitating peer learning, shared governance innovation, and collective advocacy. When countries with similar socio-economic and higher education challenges collaborate, they can generate context-sensitive policy instruments that balance global engagement with local accountability. This type of collaborative governance aligns with broader development agendas. It can serve as a counterweight to mechanisms that otherwise privilege global prestige at the expense of equity and mission diversity.

A context-sensitive ethical framework is therefore needed to connect global engagement with equity, social responsibility, and mission diversity.

Toward a Context-Sensitive Ethical Framework

As this chapter has demonstrated, the pursuit of academic prestige—mediated through quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings—poses significant ethical challenges for higher education in the Global South. To navigate these challenges constructively, institutions and policy actors require a framework that balances legitimate aspirations for global competitiveness with commitments to local relevance, equity, and social purpose. This section outlines key principles for responsible prestige-seeking, discusses strategies for aligning global engagement with contextual priorities, and highlights alternative indicators of quality and excellence that extend beyond traditional metric-driven models.

Principles for Responsible Prestige-Seeking in THE Global South

Equity and Inclusion: Ethical prestige-seeking must foreground equitable access to opportunities and recognition. This includes recognizing diverse institutional missions and ensuring that evaluation systems do not disadvantage teaching-intensive or community-oriented universities (Unterhalter, 2019). Equity-centered frameworks should also support historically marginalized groups within institutions, including women, early-career scholars, and underrepresented communities (Müller, 2021).

Contextual Relevance: Prestige frameworks should be grounded in the specific social, economic, and cultural contexts of individual countries and regions. As scholars argue, quality assurance and ranking systems that privilege global norms over local relevance risk reproducing epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Paasi, 2021). Responsible frameworks therefore value contributions to national priorities such as workforce development, public health, and sustainable development.

Transparency and Accountability: Ethical engagement with prestige mechanisms demands transparency in data reporting, decision-making processes, and strategic priorities. Public accountability requires that institutions clarify how pursuit of prestige contributes to broader societal outcomes, not merely to reputation enhancement (Harvey, 2020).

Integrity and Scholarly Purpose: Responsible prestige-seeking must safeguard research integrity, academic freedom, and professional ethics, resisting pressures to engage in gaming behaviors or superficial compliance that undermine scholarly values (Anderson et al., 2007; Gadd et al., 2019).

These principles are mutually reinforcing and provide normative guidance for policies and institutional strategies that better align prestige with public mission and ethical practice.

Table 4.2 compares dominant prestige logics with principles for responsible prestige-seeking from a Global South ethical perspective.

Table 4.2: Principles for Responsible Prestige-Seeking in the Global South: A Comparative Ethical Framework

Principle	Dominant Prestige-Oriented Approach	Responsible Prestige-Seeking (Global South Lens)	Ethical Rationale
Equity and Inclusion	Rewards elite institutions and already advantaged actors; reinforces cumulative advantage.	Recognizes differentiated missions; supports inclusion of marginalized institutions, scholars, and students	Prevents reproduction of global and internal inequalities; aligns prestige with social justice
Contextual Relevance	Applies universal standards derived largely from Global North models	Anchors quality and excellence in national, regional, and socio-economic contexts	Resists epistemic injustice and mission distortion
Public Mission Orientation	Prioritizes reputation, visibility, and competitiveness	Emphasizes contribution to public goods, national development, and community well-being	Reaffirms higher education as a public good rather than a market commodity
Integrity and Ethical Conduct	Incentivizes output maximization and metric compliance	Prioritizes research integrity, ethical authorship, and	Protects academic values and professional ethics under pressure

Principle	Dominant Prestige-Oriented Approach	Responsible Prestige-Seeking (Global South Lens)	Ethical Rationale
		responsible evaluation	
Transparency and Accountability	Relies on opaque reputational surveys and proprietary indicators	Promotes transparent criteria, open data, and stakeholder participation	Enhances legitimacy and trust in evaluation processes
Balanced Evaluation	Overemphasizes research outputs and citation metrics	Integrates teaching quality, social impact, and capacity building	Supports holistic definitions of excellence
Institutional Autonomy	Encourages conformity and isomorphism	Preserves strategic autonomy and mission diversity	Enables context-sensitive innovation and ethical leadership
Sustainability	Favors short-term reputational gains	Supports long-term institutional and human capacity development	Aligns prestige with sustainable development goals
Collaborative Orientation	Promotes competitive ranking-based positioning	Encourages regional cooperation and South–South collaboration	Reduces dependency and builds collective resilience
Reflexive Governance	Treats prestige indicators as neutral and fixed	Encourages critical reflection and periodic recalibration of metrics	Acknowledges ethical consequences of evaluation systems

Figure 4.1 presents the proposed ethical pathway framework.

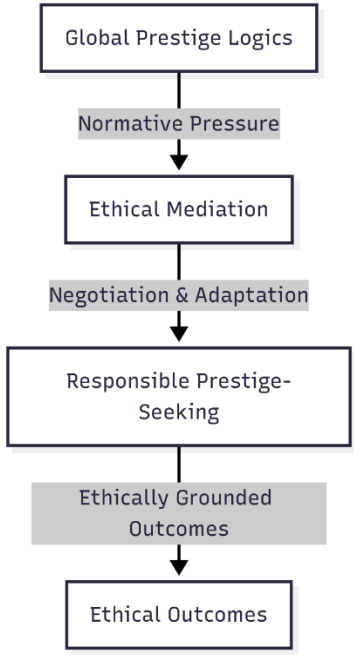

Figure 4.1: Ethical Pathway Framework (Source: Author).

This flowchart presents a sequential pathway for achieving ethical outcomes in the context of global prestige dynamics. It begins with Global Prestige Logics, which exert Normative Pressure on institutions. This pressure is ethically mediated through ethical mediation, followed by negotiation and adaptation to local contexts. The process leads to Responsible Prestige-Seeking, which produces Ethically Grounded Outcomes, ultimately culminating in Ethical Outcomes that reflect equity, relevance, and resilience.

Each stage in the figure is connected by directional arrows, emphasizing progression, mediation, and transformation rather than domination. The framework highlights how context-sensitive governance can align global engagement with ethical and developmental goals in the Global South.

Balancing Global Competitiveness with Local Relevance

Balancing global competitiveness with local relevance is not a zero-sum proposition; rather, it requires strategic integration. Global engagement—through research collaboration, international partnerships, or cross-border accreditation—can enhance institutional capacity while strengthening contributions to local society when aligned with clear mission priorities (Knight, 2019). Institutions can leverage international networks to build capacity in critical areas such as technology transfer, applied research, and pedagogical innovation that have direct societal impact.

National governments and QA agencies play a key role in facilitating this balance. Policies that incentivize internationalization should be paired with mechanisms that

reward contributions to national development goals, such as community service, policy advice, and locally relevant research (McCowan, 2016). Ethical governance frameworks encourage institutions to develop balanced scorecards that integrate global and local performance indicators, ensuring that neither dimension is neglected.

Leadership capacity-building is also crucial. Institutional leaders who are skilled in ethical decision-making can articulate a coherent vision that reconciles global visibility with local accountability, fostering cultures that resist metric-driven conformity while pursuing meaningful excellence.

Alternative Indicators of Quality and Excellence

To move beyond narrow conceptions of prestige, higher education systems need alternative indicators of quality and excellence that capture mission diversity and societal impact. Several emerging approaches are relevant:

Social Impact and Engagement Metrics: These include measures of research translation into policy, community partnerships, service-learning participation, and contributions to public goods. Such indicators reflect the civic role of universities and align with developmental goals (Benneworth, 2018).

Teaching and Learning Outcomes: Rather than relying on proxies like faculty qualifications, evaluators can assess the effectiveness of learning through student portfolios, longitudinal career outcomes, and employer feedback. These approaches emphasize substantive learning rather than superficial measures (Gibbs, 2010).

Equity and Inclusion Indices: Tracking equity-related outcomes—such as access for underrepresented students, financial aid uptake, and retention rates—provides a more holistic picture of institutional commitment to social justice (Unterhalter, 2019).

Contextualized Research Evaluation: Bibliometric indicators can be augmented with assessments of local relevance, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and contributions to addressing regional challenges, thereby broadening the definition of research excellence (Hammarfelt et al., 2020).

Importantly, alternative indicators should be developed collaboratively, with input from a diversity of stakeholders—students, communities, employers, and policymakers—to ensure their legitimacy and relevance. Multi-dimensional evaluation frameworks that combine global and contextual indicators offer a more ethical and nuanced understanding of quality.

Table 4.3 compares dominant prestige-based indicators with context-sensitive alternatives and highlights their ethical significance for Global South higher education systems.

Table 4.3: Alternative Indicators of Quality and Excellence: A Comparative Perspective

Dimension of Quality	Dominant Prestige-Based Indicators	Context-Sensitive Alternative Indicators	Ethical Significance for the Global South
Research Excellence	Number of publications in high-	Locally relevant research outputs; policy briefs;	Recognizes societal relevance and reduces

Dimension of Quality	Dominant Prestige-Based Indicators	Context-Sensitive Alternative Indicators	Ethical Significance for the Global South
	impact (often English-language) journals; citation counts	applied research addressing regional challenges	epistemic marginalization
Knowledge Production	Disciplinary prestige aligned with Global North agendas	Indigenous, local, and interdisciplinary knowledge systems	Counters epistemic injustice and values diverse ways of knowing
Teaching Quality	Faculty credentials; staff–student ratios; reputational surveys	Student learning outcomes; pedagogical innovation; graduate trajectories	Prioritizes substantive learning over symbolic indicators
Social Impact	Limited or absent in global rankings	Community engagement; service learning; social innovation outcomes	Aligns excellence with public good and development goals
Equity and Inclusion	Aggregate enrollment and selectivity	Access for underrepresented groups; retention and completion rates	Addresses structural inequalities and promotes social mobility
Internationalization	Inbound student numbers; elite global partnerships	Equitable partnerships; South–South collaboration; capacity building	Shifts focus from status signaling to mutual benefit
Academic Integrity	Output volume and speed	Ethical research practices; mentorship quality; responsible authorship	Protects scholarly values under performance pressure
Institutional Mission	Convergence toward "world-class" university model	Mission differentiation and contextual responsiveness	Preserves diversity and prevents mission drift
Graduate Outcomes	Global employability rankings	Local and regional employability; public sector contributions	Reflects national labor market realities
Governance Quality	Formal compliance with QA and accreditation standards	Participatory governance; ethical leadership practices	Enhances legitimacy and trust in institutions
Sustainability	Short-term performance gains	Long-term institutional capacity and resilience	Supports sustainable higher education development
Data Transparency	Proprietary ranking methodologies	Open data and contextualized	Enables ethical accountability and

Dimension of Quality	Dominant Prestige-Based Indicators	Context-Sensitive Alternative Indicators	Ethical Significance for the Global South
		reporting	informed policy-making

Next, a conceptual diagram summarizing ethical evaluation pathways is given in Figure 4.2.

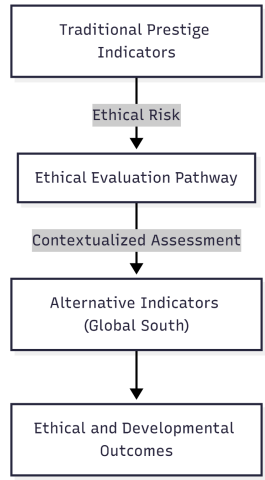

Figure 4.2: Ethical Evaluation Pathways for Alternative Indicators of Higher Education Quality in the Global South (Source: Author).

The figure above illustrates a simple ethical evaluation pathway that transforms traditional prestige-based metrics—such as global rankings, publication counts, and elite accreditation—into context-sensitive, socially responsive indicators suitable for Global South higher education. The pathway highlights the mediation role of ethical reflection, balancing research, teaching, equity, and societal impact. The outcome emphasizes mission-aligned excellence, inclusive education, and sustainable institutional development, offering a holistic alternative to conventional, metric-driven definitions of quality.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex ethical terrain surrounding the pursuit of academic prestige in the Global South, focusing on quality assurance, accreditation, and university rankings. Throughout, it has emphasized that academic prestige is not merely a matter of global recognition or reputational positioning; rather, it is inherently a normative and ethical concern that implicates institutional missions, societal obligations, and the public good. Reframing academic prestige requires moving beyond a narrow metric-driven approach and recognizing it as a form of ethical and developmental responsibility. Traditional indicators of excellence—such as high-impact publications, global rankings, and external accreditation—reflect Global North-centric standards that

often marginalize local relevance, equity, and social impact (Fricker, 2007; Altbach & de Wit, 2018). In contrast, a responsible approach foregrounds context-sensitive evaluation, ethical governance, and the integration of social, pedagogical, and developmental outcomes (Benneworth, 2018; Unterhalter, 2019).

For Global South institutions, prestige-seeking must be balanced with public mission imperatives. This includes fostering equitable access, supporting community engagement, enhancing teaching quality, and promoting research that addresses local and regional challenges. Ethical leadership, reflexive governance, and participatory decision-making are central to ensuring that prestige-enhancing strategies do not compromise institutional integrity or social responsibility (Bolden et al., 2012; McCowan, 2016).

At the *policy level*, governments and quality assurance agencies should design frameworks that integrate global competitiveness with local relevance. Incentive structures need to reward socially impactful research, teaching excellence, and inclusive practices alongside traditional global metrics (Harvey, 2020; Knight, 2019). Regional and South–South collaboration can serve as an ethical counterbalance to dominant Global North standards, enabling contextually appropriate models of excellence and mutual capacity-building (Jowi, 2021; Teferra & Knight, 2008). At the *institutional level*, leaders should cultivate cultures of integrity, equity, and mission-aligned strategy. Ethical decision-making frameworks and transparent evaluation processes can mediate between external prestige pressures and core institutional objectives, mitigating risks of mission drift, workload stress, and compromised academic integrity (Marginson, 2021). For future research, scholars should explore empirically how alternative indicators, ethical governance practices, and South–South collaborations influence the distribution of prestige and institutional effectiveness in diverse contexts. Comparative studies across regions and disciplines can illuminate strategies for aligning global engagement with local impact while preserving ethical and developmental responsibilities (Hammarfelt et al., 2020; Paasi, 2021).

In conclusion, academic prestige in the Global South must be reconceptualized not merely as competitive positioning but as an ethical and developmental responsibility. By integrating context-sensitive evaluation, equity, social relevance, and integrity into the pursuit of prestige, institutions can achieve both global recognition and meaningful contributions to local and regional development.

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CHAPTER 5

World University Rankings: Actors, Algorithms, and Agendas

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Abstract

World university rankings have become powerful governance instruments that shape higher education policy, institutional behaviour, and resource allocation globally. This chapter critically examines the key actors involved in producing and consuming rankings, the algorithmic methodologies that underpin ranking systems, and the various agendas that drive their proliferation and influence. Through analysis of major ranking organizations including Times Higher Education, QS, and Academic Ranking of World Universities, this study reveals how rankings reflect epistemological assumptions about quality and excellence while serving multiple stakeholder interests. The chapter demonstrates that ranking algorithms are not neutral technical tools but rather embody specific values and priorities that advantage certain institutional types and national systems. Furthermore, the chapter explores how rankings have created new forms of global competition, stratification, and isomorphism in higher education. Drawing on critical policy analysis and theoretical frameworks from the sociology of quantification, this chapter argues that understanding the interplay between actors, algorithms, and agendas is essential for developing more equitable and meaningful approaches to assessing university quality. The findings have significant implications for university leaders, policymakers, and researchers seeking to navigate the rankings landscape while maintaining institutional mission and diversity.

Keywords: university rankings; higher education policy; algorithms; global competition; quality assurance; performance metrics

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Introduction

World university rankings have emerged as one of the most influential phenomena in contemporary higher education. World university rankings fundamentally reshape how institutions, governments, students, and other stakeholders perceive and evaluate academic quality (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2016). What began as relatively modest attempts to provide comparative information about universities has evolved into a multi-million-dollar global industry that exercises considerable power over institutional strategies, national policies, and individual choices (O'Connell, 2015; Stack, 2016). The rise of rankings represents a paradigm shift in higher education governance, introducing new forms of accountability, competition, and standardization that transcend national boundaries and traditional regulatory frameworks (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Kauppi & Erkkilä, 2011).

The proliferation of ranking systems since the early 2000s reflects broader trends toward quantification, audit culture, and managerialism in public sector organizations (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015). Rankings exemplify what has been termed "governance by numbers," whereby complex organizational realities are reduced to comparable metrics that facilitate judgment, comparison, and action at a distance (Grek & Ringarp, 2021; Lawn & Grek, 2012). This transformation has occurred remarkably rapidly: the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), launched in 2003 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, is widely considered the first global ranking, yet within two decades, dozens of ranking systems now operate internationally, each claiming to measure university excellence through different methodological approaches (Liu & Cheng, 2005; Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

The impact of rankings extends far beyond their ostensible purpose of providing information. Empirical research demonstrates that rankings significantly influence student mobility patterns, research collaboration networks, faculty recruitment, funding allocation, and institutional strategic planning (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2011; Musselin, 2018). Universities have created specialized administrative positions dedicated to improving ranking performance, reallocated resources toward activities that boost ranking scores, and modified admission and recruitment practices to enhance selectivity metrics (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Governments increasingly reference rankings in policy documents, using them to justify reforms, allocate funding, and assess the international competitiveness of their higher education systems (Kehm, 2014; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

Despite their pervasive influence, rankings remain deeply contested and controversial. Critics argue that rankings embody narrow, Anglo-American conceptions of university excellence that privilege research productivity over teaching quality, social engagement, and cultural relevance (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Locke, 2011). Concerns about methodological validity, including indicator selection, weighting schemes, and data

quality, have been extensively documented (Billaut et al., 2010; Soh, 2017). More fundamentally, scholars question whether the complex, multidimensional nature of university quality can be meaningfully captured through composite indicators and ordinal rankings (Dill & Soo, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2007). Rankings have also been criticized for exacerbating global inequalities, as institutions in developed countries with greater resources consistently dominate ranking tables while universities in the Global South remain largely invisible (Altbach, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

This chapter provides a comprehensive critical analysis of world university rankings by examining three interconnected dimensions: actors, algorithms, and agendas. The actors dimension explores the organizations that produce rankings, the institutions that respond to them, and the various stakeholders who consume and utilize ranking information. The algorithms dimension investigates the methodological choices, indicators, and computational processes through which rankings translate diverse institutional characteristics into standardized numerical scores and hierarchical positions. The agendas dimension examines the multiple, often competing interests that shape ranking production and reception, including commercial motivations, policy objectives, institutional prestige-seeking, and ideological commitments to models of higher education.

By analysing these three dimensions and their interrelationships, this chapter aims to advance scholarly understanding of rankings as sociotechnical systems that are simultaneously technical artifacts, political instruments, and cultural phenomena. The analysis draws on interdisciplinary scholarship from higher education studies, science and technology studies, sociology of quantification, and critical policy analysis to illuminate how rankings operate as powerful governance mechanisms that shape behavior while claiming merely to measure it (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Porter, 1995). Understanding the interplay between actors, algorithms, and agendas is essential not only for scholarly purposes but also for developing more informed and reflexive approaches to assessing and improving university quality in ways that preserve institutional diversity and serve broader public purposes.

THE Rise and Proliferation of University Rankings

The contemporary landscape of world university rankings is characterized by multiple competing systems, each employing distinct methodologies while claiming to provide authoritative assessments of institutional quality. The three most prominent global rankings are the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), and QS World University Rankings (Baty, 2013; Rauhvargers, 2011; Soh, 2015). These systems collectively reach millions of users annually and significantly influence perception of universities worldwide, yet they frequently produce divergent results due to their differing approaches and priorities (Saisana et al., 2011; Vernon et al., 2018).

ARWU, often called the Shanghai Rankings, pioneered global university comparison by focusing heavily on research output and scientific achievement (Liu & Cheng, 2005). Its methodology emphasizes objective, verifiable indicators such as Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals awarded to alums and faculty, highly cited researchers, publications in Nature and Science, and papers indexed in major citation databases (Liu et al., 2005). This approach reflects Chinese policymakers' initial motivation to assess the gap between Chinese universities and world-leading institutions, particularly in natural sciences and technology (Huang, 2012; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). ARWU's emphasis on research excellence and its reliance on bibliometric data have made it influential in research-intensive contexts but also subject to criticism for neglecting teaching, humanities and social sciences, and institutional mission diversity (Federkeil et al., 2012; Ioannidis et al., 2007).

Times Higher Education World University Rankings emerged in 2010 after THE separated from QS, with which it had previously collaborated. THE rankings incorporate a broader range of indicators organized into five main categories: teaching environment, research volume and reputation, citations, international outlook, and industry income (Baty, 2013). The methodology includes substantial reputational surveys alongside bibliometric measures, with teaching reputation and research reputation together accounting for 33% of the total score (Morphew & Swanson, 2011). This mixed approach attempts to balance objective metrics with expert judgment. However, the heavy reliance on reputation has raised concerns about circularity, whereby highly ranked institutions receive favourable reputational scores partly because of their high rankings (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Tight, 2019).

QS World University Rankings, produced by Quacquarelli Symonds since 2010, places even greater emphasis on reputation, with academic reputation accounting for 40% and employer reputation for 10% of the overall score (Sowter, 2013). QS also includes faculty-student ratio, citations per faculty, and international faculty and student ratios as key indicators (Johnes, 2018). The system's focus on reputation and employability reflects QS's commercial origins as a student recruitment and university marketing organization (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Critics argue that QS rankings particularly advantage institutions with strong global brand recognition and extensive international networks, regardless of actual educational quality (Gonzalez & Bustamante, 2014; Holmes, 2013).

Beyond these major systems, numerous specialized and regional rankings have proliferated. The Leiden Ranking focuses exclusively on bibliometric indicators calculated from Web of Science data, offering multiple metrics and allowing users to customize weightings (Waltman et al., 2012). U-Multirank, launched by the European Commission, provides multidimensional institutional profiles rather than composite rankings, attempting to respect institutional diversity and mission differentiation (van Vught & Ziegele, 2012). National rankings exist in many countries, including the U.S.

News & World Report rankings in the United States, the Guardian and Complete University Guide in the United Kingdom, and various systems in China, Russia, Brazil, and elsewhere (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2011).

The proliferation of rankings reflects growing demand for comparative information in an increasingly globalized higher education market characterized by enhanced student mobility, internationalization strategies, and competition for research talent and funding (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Knight, 2013). Rankings serve multiple functions simultaneously: they provide information for prospective students, offer accountability mechanisms for governments, create benchmarks for institutional performance management, and generate prestige hierarchies that structure academic reputation and resource flows (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2015). However, the multiplicity of ranking systems with divergent methodologies creates confusion and raises fundamental questions about what rankings measure and whose interests they serve (Harvey, 2008; Locke, 2014).

Actors in THE Rankings Ecosystem

The rankings ecosystem comprises multiple actors with varying degrees of power, interests, and agency in shaping how rankings are produced, disseminated, and utilized. Understanding these actors and their interrelationships is crucial for analysing rankings as social and political phenomena rather than merely technical exercises in measurement and comparison (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Ranking Organizations

Ranking organizations occupy the pivotal position of knowledge producers in the ranking's ecosystem, wielding considerable authority through their capacity to define excellence, select indicators, and assign institutional positions (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014). Major ranking producers include media organizations (Times Higher Education, U.S. News & World Report), research institutions (Shanghai Jiao Tong University for ARWU, Leiden University), and commercial entities (QS). The organizational form and business model of ranking producers significantly influence their methodological choices and operational priorities (Hazelkorn, 2015; O'Connell, 2015).

Media-based rankings typically prioritize accessibility, public engagement, and annual attention-generating events, as their commercial viability depends on attracting readers and maintaining brand visibility (Stack, 2016). This creates incentives for methodological stability (to maintain comparability across years) alongside periodic revisions (to generate news value) and emphasis on dramatic movements in rankings (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Commercial ranking organizations often develop multiple revenue streams including data analytics services, consulting for universities seeking to improve their ranking positions, and hosting conferences and events (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). These financial relationships raise obvious conflicts of interest when

ranking producers also offer services to improve institutional performance on the very metrics they define (Myers & Robe, 2004).

Academic ranking producers claim greater methodological rigor and independence but face their own pressures and limitations. Resource constraints may restrict data collection capabilities and limit the sophistication of analytical approaches (Federkeil et al., 2012). Academic rankings may also reflect national or disciplinary perspectives on what constitutes excellence, as exemplified by ARWU's initial focus on comparing Chinese universities with international benchmarks in natural sciences and technology (Huang, 2012; Liu & Cheng, 2005).

Universities and Higher Education Institutions

Universities occupy a complex and often contradictory position as both subjects and objects of rankings, simultaneously critiquing their methodological limitations while investing substantial resources in improving ranking performance (Hazelkorn, 2011; Morphew & Swanson, 2011). Institutional responses to rankings vary considerably based on factors including current ranking position, institutional type and mission, resource availability, and leadership priorities (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Wedlin, 2011).

Elite institutions that consistently rank highly often express public skepticism about rankings while privately monitoring their positions carefully and taking strategic actions to maintain or improve placement (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Mid-tier institutions pursuing upward mobility frequently adopt aggressive ranking-improvement strategies, including recruiting international students and faculty to boost diversity metrics, investing heavily in research infrastructure and faculty hiring to increase citations, and engaging in selective admissions practices to enhance student quality indicators (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Stack, 2016).

Institutions outside the top tiers face difficult strategic choices regarding ranking engagement. Some actively resist ranking logics by emphasizing distinctive missions, local engagement, or teaching excellence, though such resistance becomes increasingly difficult as rankings become institutionalized in policy and funding frameworks (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Tight, 2019). Others pursue niche rankings that better align with their strengths or focus on regional rather than global comparisons (Hazelkorn, 2015).

National Governments and Policymakers

Governments have emerged as crucial actors in the rankings ecosystem, increasingly utilizing rankings to assess higher education system performance, justify policy interventions, and drive institutional behaviour toward national strategic objectives (Erkkilä, 2013; Kehm, 2014). Many countries have explicitly incorporated ranking performance into higher education policy, establishing excellence initiatives aimed at producing world-class universities that achieve top ranking positions (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2011).

Germany's Excellence Initiative, France's creation of merged "super-universities," and similar programs in China, Russia, South Korea, and elsewhere reflect governmental ambitions to enhance national competitiveness through producing globally recognized research universities (Shin & Kehm, 2013; Yudkevich et al., 2015). These policies typically involve substantial additional funding targeted at selected institutions, often accompanied by demands for organizational restructuring, research concentration, and international recruitment (Marginson, 2017; Musselin, 2018). Rankings thus become instruments of "competitive accountability," whereby governments use international comparisons to legitimate domestic reforms and performance expectations (Grek, 2009; Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

However, governmental embrace of rankings creates tensions with other policy objectives including widening participation, regional development, and teaching quality enhancement, which rankings typically do not measure or reward (Deem et al., 2008; Locke, 2011). This has generated debate about whether pursuit of ranking success diverts resources and attention from broader public missions of higher education (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

Students and Families

Students and families represent the most numerous yet often least powerful actors in the ranking's ecosystem, positioned primarily as consumers of ranking information rather than participants in its production (Hazelkorn, 2015; Stack, 2016). Research demonstrates that rankings significantly influence student choice, particularly among international students, graduate students, and those selecting among prestigious institutions (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Bowman & Bastedo, 2009).

The influence of rankings on student choice varies by context and student characteristics. Prospective students from high socioeconomic backgrounds with substantial cultural capital tend to use rankings alongside other information sources and often possess sufficient knowledge to interpret rankings critically (Hazelkorn, 2011). In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds, particularly international students with limited direct knowledge of foreign higher education systems, may rely more heavily on rankings as easily accessible proxies for quality (Marginson, 2016; Stack, 2016).

Rankings shape student choices both directly through consultation of ranking tables and indirectly through influence on institutional reputation, employment perceptions, and social prestige (Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). This creates feedback loops whereby highly ranked institutions attract stronger applicants, enhancing selectivity metrics and further improving ranking positions (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999).

Academic Professionals and Professional Associations

Academic professionals participate in rankings primarily through reputational surveys, peer review processes, and citation behaviours that generate bibliometric indicators (Marginson, 2014; Tight, 2019). Faculty members' ambivalence toward rankings mirrors institutional responses: many critique rankings' limitations while simultaneously pursuing publication strategies that maximize citation impact and seeking positions at highly ranked institutions (Gonzalez & Bustamante, 2014).

Professional associations and disciplinary organizations have generally been critical of rankings, particularly their treatment of disciplinary diversity and emphasis on research over teaching (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). However, their capacity to influence ranking practices remains limited given rankings' commercial motivations and public visibility (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Algorithmic Construction of Rankings

Rankings exemplify how algorithms translate qualitative, multidimensional organizational realities into quantified, commensurable scores suitable for hierarchical ordering (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Porter, 1995). This section examines the algorithmic processes through which rankings are constructed, revealing the methodological choices, technical procedures, and normative assumptions embedded in ranking systems.

Indicator Selection and Conceptualization of Quality

The foundation of any ranking system lies in selecting indicators that purportedly capture university quality or excellence. This process inherently involves value judgments about what dimensions of university performance matter most and how they should be measured (Dill & Soo, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2007). Rankings typically employ input indicators (resources, student quality), process indicators (student-faculty ratios, teaching methods), and output indicators (research publications, graduate employment), though the balance among these categories varies substantially across systems (Harvey, 2008; Johnes, 2018).

Research-focused rankings emphasize bibliometric outputs including publication counts, citation impact, and highly cited researchers (Ioannidis et al., 2007; Waltman et al., 2012). These choices reflect epistemological assumptions about knowledge production privileging natural sciences and medicine over humanities and social sciences, English-language publications over other languages, and basic research over applied or locally relevant scholarship (Federkeil et al., 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). ARWU's inclusion of Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals as quality indicators, for instance, dramatically advantages institutions in fields where such prizes are awarded while rendering invisible excellence in most academic disciplines (Liu & Cheng, 2005).

Reputational indicators, prominent in THE and QS rankings, attempt to capture expert judgment about institutional quality through surveys of academics and employers (Baty, 2013; Sowter, 2013). However, reputational measures face severe methodological challenges including low response rates, potential circularity with existing hierarchies, name recognition bias, and limited capacity to assess dimensions beyond general prestige (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Morphew & Swanson, 2011). Studies consistently demonstrate that reputational scores correlate strongly with previous rankings, suggesting they measure brand recognition rather than current quality (Holmes, 2013; Tight, 2019).

Teaching quality indicators remain underdeveloped across major rankings despite teaching being a core university function. Most rankings employ proxies such as faculty-student ratios or teaching reputation rather than direct measures of pedagogical effectiveness or student learning outcomes (Dill & Soo, 2005; Hazelkorn, 2015). This reflects both conceptual challenges in defining learning quality and practical difficulties in collecting comparable teaching data across diverse national contexts (Harvey, 2008).

Data Collection and Verification

Rankings depend on massive data collection efforts involving both institutional reporting and extraction from external databases (Soh, 2017). Data quality issues plague all ranking systems, as institutions may lack requested information, use inconsistent definitions and measurement approaches, or engage in strategic reporting to maximize ranking performance (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Stack, 2016).

Bibliometric data drawn from Web of Science, Scopus, or Google Scholar face limitations including database coverage bias, field variation in publication practices, citation manipulation, and difficulty attributing publications to institutions correctly when authors have multiple affiliations (Ioannidis et al., 2007; Waltman et al., 2012). Rankings' reliance on specific databases creates incentives for universities to encourage faculty to publish in indexed journals regardless of relevance to local contexts or research questions (Federkeil et al., 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

Institutional data submitted by universities vary in quality and comparability due to different national statistical systems, academic calendars, and definitions of key concepts like faculty members, students, and research expenditures (Rauhvargers, 2011; Saisana et al., 2011). Rankings attempt to standardize data through detailed definitions and verification procedures, but perfect comparability remains elusive given profound structural differences among higher education systems (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

Normalization, Weighting, and Aggregation

After data collection, ranking algorithms employ normalization procedures to make indicators with different scales and distributions comparable (Billaut et al., 2010; Soh,

2015). Common approaches include z-score standardization, min-max normalization, and percentile ranks. These technical choices substantially influence results, as different normalization methods alter the relative distances between institutions and the statistical distributions of transformed scores (Saisana et al., 2011; Vernon et al., 2018).

Weighting schemes assign relative importance to different indicators in calculating composite scores, representing explicit or implicit judgments about the relative value of different aspects of university performance (Johnes, 2018). ARWU assigns 20% weight to Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, 20% to highly cited researchers, 20% to publications in Nature and Science, and 20% to total publications, reflecting prioritization of natural sciences research (Liu & Cheng, 2005). THE distributes weights across teaching (30%), research (30%), citations (30%), international outlook (7.5%), and industry income (2.5%), attempting greater balance but still emphasizing research heavily (Baty, 2013).

Weighting decisions remain fundamentally arbitrary despite sophisticated technical justifications. Sensitivity analyses consistently demonstrate that alternative weighting schemes produce substantially different rankings, indicating that results depend on methodological choices rather than objective reality (Billaut et al., 2010; Saisana et al., 2011). Some scholars argue for allowing users to customize weights based on their priorities, as exemplified by U-Multirank, though this approach sacrifices the simplicity and authority of definitive ordinal rankings (van Vught & Ziegele, 2012).

Aggregation procedures combine normalized and weighted indicators into composite scores through additive or multiplicative formulas (Soh, 2017). Additive models assume perfect substitutability among dimensions, allowing weakness in one area to be compensated by strength in another. This enables institutions to achieve high rankings through diverse strategies but obscures important qualitative differences in institutional profiles (Usher & Savino, 2007). Alternative approaches including geometric means or data envelopment analysis have been proposed but rarely implemented in major rankings (Johnes, 2018).

Technical Limitations and Methodological Critiques

Rankings face fundamental technical limitations that constrain their validity and utility regardless of methodological refinement (Dill & Soo, 2005; Harvey, 2008). The reduction of complex, multidimensional organizational quality to single composite scores necessarily involves substantial information loss, eliminating nuance and context (Usher & Savino, 2007). Rankings' emphasis on quantifiable indicators systematically undervalues dimensions of quality that resist measurement, including teaching innovation, student support, community engagement, and cultural contributions (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Locke, 2011).

Statistical analyses reveal concerning properties of ranking data, including high measurement error, low year-to-year stability at the institutional level, and arbitrary distinctions between closely ranked institutions (Billaut et al., 2010; Soh, 2017). Many

institutions' positions reflect random variation rather than meaningful quality differences, yet rankings present precise ordinal positions suggesting clear hierarchies (Saisana et al., 2011). Confidence intervals calculated around composite scores typically overlap for dozens of institutions, indicating their ranks could easily reverse under slightly different conditions (Vernon et al., 2018).

Rankings' treatment of uncertainty and limitations remains inadequate, as systems rarely communicate clearly about methodological constraints, measurement error, or appropriate interpretation (Dill & Soo, 2005). The apparent precision of numerical ranks obscures their dependence on arbitrary methodological choices and incomplete, imperfect data (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Porter, 1995).

Agendas Driving Rankings

Rankings embody multiple, often competing agendas pursued by various actors in the higher education landscape. Understanding these agendas is essential for critically assessing rankings' role in contemporary higher education governance and their effects on institutional behaviour and system development (Hazelkorn, 2015; Kehm, 2014).

Commercial and Organizational Interests

Ranking organizations pursue diverse commercial and organizational agendas that shape their methodological choices and operational practices (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; O'Connell, 2015). Media-based rankings seek to generate readership, advertising revenue, and brand value through producing newsworthy content that attracts public attention (Stack, 2016). This commercial logic favors methodological approaches that produce dramatic year-to-year movements, controversial results, and accessible presentations suitable for mass audiences (Espeland & Sauder, 2007).

QS and similar commercial entities have developed sophisticated business models monetizing ranking data through multiple channels, including consulting services helping universities improve ranking performance, recruitment services connecting students with institutions, data analytics products, conferences and events, and licensing ranking brands to regional partners (Hazelkorn, 2015). These revenue streams create problematic conflicts of interest whereby ranking producers profit from the very systems they assess, potentially compromising objectivity and independence (Myers & Robe, 2004; Tight, 2019).

Universities themselves have become consumers of ranking services, purchasing detailed institutional reports, benchmarking analyses, and improvement consultancies from ranking organizations (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). This transforms rankings from independent assessments into collaborative products shaped by institutional clients' preferences and priorities (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). The commercialization of rankings raises fundamental questions about their status as public goods versus private commodities and whose interests they ultimately serve (O'Connell, 2015).

Policy and Governance Agendas

Governments and policy actors employ rankings to pursue various governance objectives, including enhancing national competitiveness, driving institutional performance improvement, and legitimating policy reforms (Erkkilä, 2013; Grek, 2009). Rankings enable new forms of "governance at a distance" whereby international comparisons create performance pressure without direct regulatory intervention (Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Shore & Wright, 2015).

Excellence initiatives in numerous countries explicitly target ranking improvement as policy goals, reflecting governmental agendas to demonstrate higher education system competitiveness and justify resource allocation decisions (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Shin & Kehm, 2013). Rankings provide politically valuable evidence that can be used to argue for increased investment, demand institutional restructuring, or rationalize system consolidation (Hazelkorn, 2011; Musselin, 2018). The apparent objectivity and technical sophistication of rankings lend authority to policy decisions that might otherwise face resistance (Porter, 1995).

However, governmental embrace of rankings creates tensions with other policy objectives including equity, access, regional development, and teaching quality (Deem et al., 2008; Locke, 2011). Resources directed toward ranking improvement through research concentration and international recruitment may reduce capacity for widening participation or supporting regional economic development (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). This highlights how ranking-driven agendas can reshape higher education systems in ways that privilege global prestige over local relevance and social inclusion.

Institutional Prestige and Competition

Universities pursue ranking success as part of broader prestige-seeking strategies aimed at securing competitive advantages in global higher education markets (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Marginson, 2016). Rankings provide visible, easily communicated signals of institutional quality that can be leveraged for student recruitment, faculty hiring, fundraising, and partnership development (Hazelkorn, 2015; Stack, 2016).

The pursuit of ranking improvement reflects strategic responses to intensified competition for students, faculty, and resources in globalized higher education systems characterized by increasing mobility and institutional interdependence (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Knight, 2013). Universities invest substantial resources in ranking-oriented activities including hiring high-profile researchers to boost citation metrics, recruiting international students and faculty to enhance diversity indicators, and targeting publications in prestigious journals (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006).

These strategic responses can drive resource misallocation and mission drift as institutions prioritize activities that improve ranking performance over those aligned

with local needs or distinctive missions (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Tight, 2019). The competitive dynamics unleashed by rankings create pressures toward institutional isomorphism as diverse universities adopt similar strategies and organizational forms in pursuit of ranking success (Morphew & Swanson, 2011; Wedlin, 2011).

Ideological and Epistemological Agendas

Rankings embody ideological commitments and epistemological assumptions about the nature of universities and the meaning of quality that merit critical examination (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Locke, 2014). The predominance of research metrics reflects prioritization of knowledge production over teaching, service, or other institutional functions, while the specific research indicators employed privilege natural sciences and medicine over humanities and social sciences (Federkeil et al., 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

Rankings' emphasis on competition, selectivity, and hierarchical differentiation aligns with neoliberal ideologies valorising market mechanisms and elite institution formation over equity and collective benefit (Gonzalez & Bustamante, 2014; Marginson, 2013). This ideological orientation shapes rankings' treatment of institutional diversity, with systems typically penalizing mission differentiation in favor of convergence toward research-intensive models (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; van Vught & Ziegele, 2012).

The epistemological assumptions embedded in rankings regarding what can and should be measured reflect broader trends toward audit culture and quantification in public sector governance (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015). Rankings exemplify faith in numerical measurement and comparison as vehicles for improving organizational performance, despite extensive scholarly critique of such approaches (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Porter, 1995). Understanding these ideological and epistemological dimensions is essential for recognizing rankings as political projects rather than neutral technical tools (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Grek & Ringarp, 2021).

Consequences and Effects of Rankings

Rankings produce wide-ranging consequences for institutions, systems, and individuals that extend far beyond their ostensible purpose of providing information (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2015). This section examines key effects of rankings on university governance, resource allocation, institutional behavior, and higher education systems.

Institutional Strategy and Resource Allocation

Rankings significantly influence institutional strategy development and resource allocation decisions as universities pursue ranking improvement or defence of current positions (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Morphew & Swanson, 2011). Many institutions have created specialized administrative units dedicated to monitoring ranking

performance, analysing ranking methodologies, and coordinating improvement efforts across campus (Hazelkorn, 2011; Stack, 2016). These organizational responses reflect institutionalization of rankings as legitimate performance indicators requiring systematic attention and strategic response (Wedlin, 2011).

Resource allocation decisions increasingly reflect ranking priorities, with investments directed toward activities that improve ranking scores, including research infrastructure, faculty hiring in high-citation fields, international recruitment, and selective admissions enhancement (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Such reallocation may divert resources from teaching improvement, student support services, community engagement, or mission-aligned activities that do not enhance ranking performance (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Tight, 2019).

Strategic planning processes incorporate ranking performance as explicit goals or metrics, sometimes alongside or supplanting traditional mission statements and educational objectives (Hazelkorn, 2015). This integration of rankings into institutional governance creates powerful internal accountability mechanisms as departments, faculties, and individuals are evaluated partly on their contributions to ranking success (Marginson, 2014; Musselin, 2018). The result is the transformation of rankings from external measurements into internal management tools that shape organizational priorities and individual behaviours (Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

Research and Teaching Priorities

Rankings' heavy emphasis on research metrics influences institutional priorities regarding the balance between research and teaching, resource allocation between disciplines, and types of research pursued (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). Faculty hiring and promotion decisions increasingly emphasize research productivity and citation impact, potentially disadvantaging excellent teachers or scholars producing locally relevant but less internationally visible work (Gonzalez & Bustamante, 2014; Marginson, 2014).

Disciplinary hierarchies are reinforced by rankings' bias toward natural sciences and medicine over humanities, social sciences, and professional fields (Federkeil et al., 2012; Ioannidis et al., 2007). This affects resource allocation, faculty hiring priorities, and strategic decisions about which academic programs to develop or eliminate (Locke, 2011). Universities may reduce investment in disciplines that do not contribute to citation metrics or research income indicators, threatening the breadth and diversity of academic knowledge production (Tight, 2019).

Publication strategies shift toward targeting high-impact journals indexed in major citation databases, potentially at the expense of practitioner-oriented outputs, books, locally relevant publications, or non-English language scholarship (Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015; Waltman et al., 2012). Such shifts have particularly severe consequences for institutions outside English-speaking countries and for fields where books, edited

volumes, or professional publications represent important scholarly contributions (Federkeil et al., 2012).

Teaching quality receives inadequate attention in most ranking systems despite being central to university missions and student experiences (Dill & Soo, 2005; Harvey, 2008). This imbalance creates disincentives for investing in pedagogical innovation, curriculum development, or student support services that do not enhance research metrics or selectivity indicators (Hazelkorn, 2015). Some institutions explicitly acknowledge this tension, attempting to maintain teaching commitments while pursuing ranking success, but resource pressures and competitive dynamics make such balance difficult to sustain (Morphew & Swanson, 2011; Tight, 2019).

Internationalization and Student Recruitment

Rankings drive internationalization strategies as universities seek to recruit international students and faculty, establish global partnerships, and enhance international reputation (Knight, 2013; Marginson, 2016). International diversity indicators in THE and QS rankings create explicit incentives for recruiting international students and scholars, while reputational surveys and citation metrics reward global visibility and networks (Baty, 2013; Sowter, 2013).

Student recruitment practices increasingly prioritize candidates who will improve ranking metrics including selectivity indicators, graduation rates, and diversity measures (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). This may disadvantage applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who could benefit greatly from higher education, but whose academic preparation reflects socioeconomic inequalities (Hazelkorn, 2011). Rankings thus potentially conflict with access and equity objectives despite higher education's role in promoting social mobility (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012).

International student recruitment becomes increasingly competitive as institutions compete for talented students who will enhance both diversity metrics and academic quality indicators (Stack, 2016). This competition particularly affects recruitment from countries with large numbers of internationally mobile students, including China, India, and various Asian nations (Marginson, 2016). Rankings influence both institutional recruitment strategies and individual student choices, creating feedback loops that concentrate international students at highly ranked institutions (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Global Stratification and Inequality

Rankings contribute to global stratification in higher education by creating and reinforcing hierarchies that advantage institutions in developed countries while marginalizing universities in the Global South (Altbach, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). Systematic biases in ranking methodologies, including English language publication emphasis, reliance on expensive citation databases, and focus on research fields where developed country institutions dominate, ensure that universities in developing

countries rarely achieve high rankings regardless of their quality or local relevance (Federkeil et al., 2012; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

This stratification has material consequences as rankings influence international student flows, research collaboration patterns, faculty mobility, and resource allocation, concentrating opportunities and resources at institutions that already possess substantial advantages (Marginson, 2016; Musselin, 2018). Brain drains from developing to developed countries are reinforced as talented students and scholars pursue positions at highly ranked institutions (Altbach, 2012). Partnerships and collaborations increasingly reflect ranking hierarchies, with highly ranked institutions preferring partners of similar status (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Rankings also shape regional and national inequalities within countries as elite urban institutions outperform regional universities in ranking metrics, potentially justifying resource concentration at already privileged institutions (Kehm, 2014; Shin & Kehm, 2013). This threatens the viability of comprehensive higher education systems serving diverse populations and missions (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Locke, 2011).

Reactivity and Gaming

Rankings generate reactivity as measured organizations respond strategically to indicators and measurements, sometimes in ways that improve ranking scores without enhancing actual quality (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, 2016). This phenomenon includes both legitimate strategic responses and problematic gaming behaviours that manipulate metrics without corresponding quality improvements (Stack, 2016; Tight, 2019).

Documented gaming strategies include selective reporting of favourable data, strategic timing of faculty appointments and departures, encouraging early retirement for less productive researchers, manipulating admissions processes to enhance selectivity metrics, and various citation manipulation practices (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). While ranking organizations attempt to detect and prevent such gaming through verification procedures and methodological adjustments, the strong incentives for ranking improvement ensure ongoing strategic adaptation by institutions (Hazelkorn, 2015; Soh, 2017).

The distinction between legitimate strategic responses and illegitimate gaming remains contested. Is recruiting high-citation researchers primarily to improve ranking metrics gaming or strategic quality improvement? Does encouraging faculty to cite institutional colleagues represent academic collaboration or citation manipulation? These ambiguities highlight the complex interplay between measurement and organizational behaviour that characterizes rankings' effects (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Critical Perspectives and Theoretical Frameworks

Analysing rankings requires theoretical frameworks that illuminate their nature as sociotechnical systems embedded in broader political, economic, and cultural contexts (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Grek & Ringarp, 2021). This section reviews key critical perspectives on rankings from sociology of quantification, science and technology studies, critical policy analysis, and higher education scholarship.

Sociology of Quantification

Sociological scholarship on quantification provides crucial insights into how numerical measurement shapes social relations, organizations, and governance (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Porter, 1995). Rankings exemplify commensuration, the process of transforming qualitative differences into quantitative comparisons through establishing common metrics (Espeland & Stevens, 1998, 2008). This transformation involves power relations as certain dimensions of quality become measurable and comparable while others resist quantification and thus marginalization (Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

Reactivity represents a central concept in understanding rankings' effects, referring to how measurement systems alter the phenomena they purport to measure (Espeland & Sauder, 2007, 2016). Rankings not only reflect but actively constitute university hierarchies and quality standards through their methodological choices and symbolic power (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). This constitutive dimension challenges claims that rankings measure preexisting quality, revealing instead how measurement systems shape what counts as quality and how organizations pursue it (Espeland & Stevens, 2008).

Scholarship on the authority of numbers demonstrates how quantification lends credibility and legitimacy to claims and decisions, often obscuring the value judgments and methodological choices underlying numerical measures (Porter, 1995). Rankings' apparent objectivity and technical sophistication enhance their authority despite substantial methodological limitations and normative assumptions (Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Saisana et al., 2011). Understanding this authority helps explain rankings' influence even among sophisticated actors aware of their limitations (Hazelkorn, 2015).

Governance and Policy Analysis

Critical policy scholarship examines rankings as governance instruments that shape higher education systems through mechanisms including comparative judgment, competition creation, and norm establishment (Grek, 2009; Lawn & Grek, 2012). Rankings enable governance at a distance whereby international comparisons create performance pressures without direct regulatory intervention (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). This aligns with broader neoliberal governance trends emphasizing markets, competition, and quantified accountability over direct state control and professional self-regulation (Shore & Wright, 2015).

Rankings exemplify soft governance mechanisms that exercise power through knowledge production and norm diffusion rather than legal authority (Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Grek & Ringarp, 2021). Their influence depends on voluntary adoption by institutions and incorporation into policy frameworks rather than mandatory compliance (Hazelkorn, 2015). However, this soft character does not diminish rankings' effects, as competitive dynamics and institutional isomorphism create powerful pressures for conformity (Morphew & Swanson, 2011; Wedlin, 2011).

Policy transfers analysis illuminates how ranking-driven reforms spread internationally through mechanisms including policy learning, competitive emulation, and conditionality (Kehm, 2014; Shin & Kehm, 2013). Excellence initiatives in diverse national contexts reflect policy convergence around similar strategies for producing world-class universities, often inspired by rankings of leading institutions (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Marginson, 2017). This convergence raises questions about the appropriateness of transplanting policies across different contexts and potential homogenization of diverse higher education systems (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

Institutional Theory and Organizational Behaviour

Institutional theory provides frameworks for understanding how rankings shape organizational fields and drive institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Wedlin, 2011). Rankings create normative pressures for conformity to organizational forms and practices deemed legitimate and successful (Morphew & Swanson, 2011). Institutions mimic strategies of highly ranked universities through mimetic isomorphism, adopt similar structures through coercive pressures from funding bodies, and conform to professional norms through normative mechanisms including shared training and professional networks (Hazelkorn, 2011; Musselin, 2018).

Field theory concepts illuminate how rankings structure competition and position-taking in higher education, creating hierarchies that constrain strategic possibilities and shape resource flows (Marginson, 2008). Position in ranking hierarchies affects institutions' strategic options, partnership opportunities, and competitive dynamics (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011). Movement within rankings requires substantial resource investment and strategic repositioning that may be unavailable to lower-ranked institutions, contributing to hierarchy persistence (Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

Organizational identity theory helps explain tensions universities experience between external ranking demands and internal mission commitments (Morphew & Swanson, 2011). Institutions manage these tensions through various strategies, including decoupling formal ranking responses from core activities, creating specialized units to manage ranking engagement, or genuinely restructuring missions and activities to align with ranking criteria (Hazelkorn, 2015; Tight, 2019). Understanding these

organizational dynamics reveals the complex ways rankings influence institutional behavior beyond simple metric optimization (Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

Alternative Approaches and Future Directions

Growing recognition of rankings' limitations has spurred development of alternative approaches to assessing and comparing university quality that attempt to address identified problems while preserving accountability and transparency (Dill & Soo, 2005; van Vught & Ziegele, 2012). This section examines promising alternatives and discusses future directions for more meaningful, equitable, and diverse quality assessment systems.

Multidimensional Profiling

U-Multirank and similar systems eschew composite rankings in favour of multidimensional institutional profiles that display performance across multiple indicators without aggregation into single scores (van Vught & Ziegele, 2012). This approach respects institutional diversity by allowing universities to excel in different dimensions and enables users to prioritize indicators matching their needs and values rather than imposing universal weighting schemes (Usher & Savino, 2007). Research suggests multidimensional profiles provide richer information and reduce pressures for institutional homogenization compared to ordinal rankings (Harvey, 2008).

However, multidimensional systems face challenges including reduced simplicity and public appeal compared to rankings, requiring more sophisticated interpretation by users, and potentially overwhelming stakeholders with excessive information (Hazelkorn, 2015). Their limited adoption suggests that despite superior methodological rigor, profile-based approaches struggle to compete with the powerful simplicity of ordinal rankings in capturing attention and shaping perception (Tight, 2019).

Mission-Differentiated Assessment

Alternative approaches emphasize assessing institutions against their stated missions and contexts rather than universal excellence criteria (Dill & Soo, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2007). This recognizes that teaching-focused regional universities, research-intensive global institutions, and specialized professional schools serve different purposes and should be evaluated accordingly (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Classification systems like the Carnegie Classification in the United States provide frameworks for mission-differentiated comparison, though their integration with accountability and funding remains limited (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Implementing mission-differentiated assessment requires developing appropriate indicators for diverse institutional types, establishing legitimate processes for defining and verifying missions, and creating accountability frameworks that respect differentiation while maintaining quality standards (Kehm, 2014). Challenges include preventing opportunistic mission claims to avoid accountability and ensuring mission

differentiation does not perpetuate inequalities by accepting lower standards for institutions serving disadvantaged populations (Morphew & Swanson, 2011).

Learning Outcomes and Value-Added Assessment

Growing interest in learning outcomes assessment and value-added measures attempts to shift focus from institutional inputs and reputation toward actual student learning and development (Dill & Soo, 2005; Harvey, 2008). Value-added approaches compare students' entry and exit characteristics to assess institutional contributions independent of student quality at admission, potentially providing more valid measures of educational quality than selectivity-based indicators (Hazelkorn, 2015).

However, learning outcomes assessment faces substantial methodological challenges including defining appropriate learning outcomes across diverse programs and institutions, developing valid and reliable measurement instruments, accounting for selection effects and contextual factors, and ensuring comparability across different educational approaches and cultural contexts (Johnes, 2018). International initiatives including the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project have struggled with these challenges, leading to limited implementation (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Responsible Rankings and Methodological Improvement

Some scholars advocate for improving existing rankings through methodological refinement and more responsible practices rather than abandoning comparative assessment entirely (Soh, 2017; Vernon et al., 2018). Recommendations include greater transparency about methodological choices and limitations, reporting confidence intervals and uncertainty measures, reducing reliance on reputational indicators prone to circularity, improving indicator balance to value teaching alongside research, and ensuring appropriate disciplinary representation (Billaut et al., 2010; Saisana et al., 2011).

The International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) has developed principles for responsible ranking including transparency, accountability, respect for institutional diversity, and appropriate use of data (Hazelkorn, 2015). However, adoption remains voluntary, and competitive pressures often overwhelm methodological considerations as ranking organizations prioritize market appeal and media attention (O'Connell, 2015; Stack, 2016).

Alternatives to Rankings Entirely

Some scholars question whether any form of comparative ranking or rating can adequately capture university quality, arguing for fundamentally different approaches to quality assurance and accountability (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Locke, 2014). Alternatives include strengthening institutional accreditation systems with genuine peer review of educational quality, developing more robust internal quality assurance

processes focused on continuous improvement rather than external comparison, and creating public good frameworks that assess universities' contributions to social, cultural, and economic development rather than competitive positioning (Dill & Soo, 2005; Harvey, 2008).

These approaches face challenges including developing legitimate governance structures, ensuring meaningful accountability without reverting to quantification, and maintaining public and policy confidence in quality assurance absent visible comparative metrics (Kehm, 2014). However, they offer possibilities for assessment systems that preserve institutional diversity, respect educational complexity, and serve broader public purposes than market-oriented competition (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of world university rankings examining actors, algorithms, and agendas, the following six recommendations are proposed for different stakeholders to promote more responsible, equitable, and meaningful approaches to university assessment:

1. Ranking organizations should substantially improve transparency by publicly disclosing complete methodologies including all data sources, indicator definitions, normalization procedures, and weighting rationales.
2. Universities should resist pressures for mission drift by maintaining commitment to distinctive institutional missions, values, and stakeholder needs rather than pursuing ranking improvement at the expense of core purposes.
3. Governments must avoid overreliance on rankings in policy development and funding allocation by recognizing their limitations and potential negative consequences.
4. Students and families should use rankings critically as one information source among many rather than definitive quality measures.
5. Academic communities including disciplinary associations, research councils, and professional organizations should develop and promote alternative quality frameworks that better serve higher education's diverse missions and stakeholders.
6. International organizations including UNESCO, OECD, and regional bodies should promote development of more equitable global standards for assessing university quality that reduce systematic biases against institutions in the Global South.

Conclusion

World university rankings represent complex sociotechnical systems that have fundamentally transformed higher education governance, institutional behaviour, and

stakeholder relationships over the past two decades. This chapter's examination of actors, algorithms, and agendas reveals rankings as powerful instruments that simultaneously reflect and constitute hierarchies, quality standards, and competitive dynamics in global higher education. While rankings claim to measure objective quality through sophisticated methodologies, critical analysis demonstrates they embody values, serve specific interests, and produce significant intended and unintended consequences that extend far beyond information provision.

The actors involved in rankings range from commercial organizations pursuing profit to governments seeking policy leverage to institutions competing for prestige and resources. These diverse actors bring different agendas to rankings production and consumption, creating tensions and contradictions that shape how rankings function and what effects they produce. Ranking organizations' commercial interests, governmental competitiveness concerns, and institutional prestige-seeking create powerful convergent pressures while also generating resistance and critique from those disadvantaged by ranking logics.

The algorithms through which rankings transform complex institutional realities into numerical scores involve numerous methodological choices that privilege certain dimensions of quality while marginalizing others. Indicator selection, data collection, normalization procedures, weighting schemes, and aggregation methods all embody normative assumptions about what universities should value and how excellence should be measured. These technical choices systematically advantage research-intensive institutions in developed countries while disadvantaging teaching-focused universities, institutions in the Global South, and those prioritizing missions beyond research productivity and international visibility.

The agendas driving rankings include commercial profit-seeking, governmental policy objectives, institutional competitive positioning, and ideological commitments to particular models of higher education. These multiple agendas create complex political dynamics whereby rankings serve various stakeholder interests while claiming technical neutrality. Understanding these agendas is essential for critically assessing rankings' role and effects, recognizing them as political projects rather than purely technical measurement exercises.

Rankings produce wide-ranging consequences, including reshaping institutional strategies and resource allocation, influencing research and teaching priorities, driving internationalization patterns, contributing to global stratification, and generating reactive behaviours including gaming and mission drift. These effects demonstrate rankings' power to reshape higher education systems while raising serious concerns about whether changes enhance actual educational quality or merely improve performance on problematic metrics. The distinction between legitimate strategic responses and counterproductive gaming remains contested, highlighting ambiguities inherent in using measurement systems to drive improvement.

Critical theoretical perspectives from sociology of quantification, governance studies, and institutional theory illuminate rankings as phenomena that cannot be understood through methodological critique alone. Rankings exemplify broader trends toward audit culture, governance by numbers, and competitive accountability that characterize contemporary public sector management. Understanding rankings requires recognizing their constitutive power, whereby measurement systems actively shape what they purport to measure rather than simply reflecting preexisting realities.

Alternative approaches, including multidimensional profiling, mission-differentiated assessment, and learning outcomes measurement, offer possibilities for more meaningful and equitable evaluation systems. However, these alternatives face challenges including reduced simplicity and public appeal compared to rankings, implementation difficulties, and resistance from actors invested in current ranking systems. Developing viable alternatives requires not only methodological innovation but also political will to challenge ranking-driven governance and resource allocation patterns.

The six recommendations proposed address different stakeholders' responsibilities for promoting more responsible, equitable, and meaningful approaches to university assessment. These recommendations recognize that improving higher education evaluation requires coordinated action across multiple actors rather than relying on any single stakeholder group. Ranking organizations must enhance transparency and eliminate conflicts of interest; universities should resist mission drift while developing comprehensive quality assurance; governments need to avoid overreliance on rankings while supporting alternative approaches; students should use rankings critically alongside other information; academic communities must develop alternative quality frameworks; and international organizations should promote more equitable global standards.

Looking forward, the future of university assessment depends on whether stakeholders can move beyond ranking-driven accountability toward more nuanced, contextual, and mission-appropriate evaluation approaches that preserve institutional diversity while maintaining meaningful quality assurance. This requires recognizing that universities serve multiple purposes for diverse stakeholders in different contexts, and that no single metric or ranking system can adequately capture this complexity. Quality assessment should support continuous improvement, inform stakeholder decisions, and ensure accountability while respecting educational values including access, equity, pedagogical innovation, and social contribution.

The proliferation and influence of rankings raise fundamental questions about higher education's purposes and values in contemporary society. Do universities exist primarily to compete in global prestige hierarchies, or to serve students, communities, and societies through teaching, research, and engagement? Should quality be defined primarily through research productivity metrics, or through broader considerations including educational experience, social mobility, cultural preservation, and sustainable development? These questions cannot be answered through technical methodological

improvements but require sustained dialogue among diverse stakeholders about higher education's role and meaning in the twenty-first century.

Rankings will likely continue to influence higher education for the foreseeable future given their institutionalization in policy frameworks, their appeal to media and public audiences, and the commercial interests invested in their continuation. However, critical awareness of rankings' limitations, biases, and effects creates possibilities for more informed and reflexive engagement with them. Universities, policymakers, students, and scholars can recognize rankings' partial validity as information sources while resisting their totalizing influence on institutional missions and system development. This balanced approach acknowledges rankings' role in increasingly globalized and competitive higher education while preserving space for alternative values and priorities.

Ultimately, developing more meaningful and equitable approaches to assessing university quality requires moving beyond simplistic metrics and hierarchical comparisons toward rich, contextual understanding of diverse institutional contributions to student learning, knowledge advancement, and societal wellbeing. This transformation demands not only methodological innovation but also political commitment to resisting powerful forces promoting standardization, competition, and quantified accountability at the expense of educational quality, equity, and social purpose. The analysis of actors, algorithms, and agendas presented in this chapter aims to contribute to such transformation by illuminating the complex political, technical, and social dynamics through which rankings exercise power over contemporary higher education.

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CHAPTER 6

National Education Policy 2020 and New Accreditation Strategy in Indian Higher Education: Possibilities, Constraints, and Framework

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Abstract

This chapter examines the accreditation requirements of NEP 2020, makes a case for transitioning to a trust-based and outcome-based system, outlines critical implementation issues, and provides recommendations for the successful and effective implementation of the new accreditation system, proposing an appropriate framework for Indian higher education. The current research employed a qualitative research method, using documentary analysis. This chapter concludes by noting that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 transforms accreditation in Indian higher education by changing it from a compliance-based exercise to a trust-based, outcome-oriented, and developmental quality assurance mechanism. The suggested reorganization of HECI and the introduction of the National Accreditation Council are expected to contribute to improvements in institutional freedom, responsibility, and accountability. Although the policy has created major opportunities in terms of graded accreditation and the integration of digital and outcome-based evaluation, its practical implementation faces challenges related to infrastructural gaps, regulatory complexity, and disparities in institutional capacity. To address these issues, the chapter suggests a coordinated accreditation model that meets NEP 2020 requirements and is learner-centered, inclusive, research-oriented, and responsive. In general, the accreditation vision of NEP 2020 will be successful in its implementation only with long-lasting policy support, capacity building, and alignment of stakeholder involvement.

Keywords: National Education Policy; accreditation strategy; higher education; possibilities; constraints

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Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's education system, emphasizing a holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible approach. Aimed at aligning the Indian education framework with global standards, NEP 2020 introduces transformative reforms to enhance the quality, inclusivity, and accessibility of higher education (Raju, 2025).

Assessment and accreditation play a pivotal role in ensuring the quality and credibility of educational institutions. In India's vast, diverse landscape, accreditation is a mechanism that enhances institutional performance, boosts accountability, and encourages continuous improvement (Srijampana, 2025).

A set of transformative reforms has been proposed to strengthen the periodic approval, assessment, accreditation, and ranking of 'All HEIs' of India. These reforms have been proposed with the strategic intent of being consistent with the vision of NEP 2020, adopting a simple, trust-based, credible, objective, and rationalized system for the

approval, accreditation, and ranking of HEIs, with a technology-driven modern system that could replace or minimize manual involvement, make the accreditation process transparent, and integrate stakeholder input (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2024).

Since the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's higher education system has undergone a significant transformation (Farooqi et al., 2025).

Overall, NEP 2020 reframes accreditation from a peripheral compliance exercise to a core driver of quality, autonomy, and restructuring of Indian higher education, operationalized through NAC under HECI, graded accreditation, and expanded NAAC coverage. However, implementation capacity and real quality gains remain key challenges.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is an important development in the Indian system of higher education, focusing on quality assurance, institutional freedom, and outcome-based learning. In this respect, accreditation has become one of the key tools for providing accountability and improvement. Nevertheless, current accreditation procedures tend to fail to identify the diversity, contextual differences, and developmental phases of Indian higher education institutions.

The policy-based change that NEP 2020 envisages requires a revision of traditional accreditation strategies. Integrating accreditation procedures with the policy's holistic and flexible vision is a critical challenge. In this study, this gap has been filled by suggesting an accreditation framework that is sensitive to the aspirations and realities of Indian higher education.

Objectives

- To examine the accreditation-related provisions/recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the context of Indian higher education.
- To analyze the proposed shift toward a trust-based, transparent, and outcome-oriented accreditation system in India.
- To identify key challenges in implementing the new accreditation strategy
- To offer suggestions for the effective and successful implementation of the new accreditation system.
- To propose an accreditation framework aligned with NEP 2020 and India's diverse higher education landscape.

Methodology

Research Design: To explore the accreditation-related provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the new accreditation strategy in the Indian higher education system, the current chapter uses a qualitative documentary research design

with a focus on thematic content analysis. The chapter particularly aims to determine the major possibilities, structural and institutional limitations, and consequences of such reforms in developing an efficient and localized accreditation framework.

Documentary research is especially appropriate when the research aims to synthesize policy analysis, conceptual advancements, and institutional reform discourses (Bowen, 2009). This approach allowed for a critical and systematic examination of official policy texts, regulatory documents, and scholarly literature, rather than primary data collection, since the research problem is mainly policy-oriented, normative, and institutional in nature.

Qualitative documentary analysis has been extensively applied in research that evaluates reforms in higher education, quality assurance systems, governance models, and changes in regulations. It enables a researcher to make sense of policy texts and scholarly discussions in their wider socio-institutional and regulatory setting. Thus, the approach was deemed appropriate for determining the trends, inconsistencies, reform paths, and implementation issues related to NEP 2020 and a transforming accreditation ecosystem in India.

Data Sources and Documentary Corpus Development

The documentary corpus in this chapter is composed of a diverse selection of policy documents, regulatory guidelines, scholarly publications, and institutional reports on quality assurance, accreditation, and reforms in higher education in India. In particular, the focus was placed on sources that discuss NAAC, the National Accreditation Council (proposed), outcome-based education, institutional autonomy, trust-based regulation, and global quality assurance practices.

Key sources included:

1. Policy documents by the authorities, such as the National Education Policy 2020, UGC regulations, NAAC manuals, and reports of higher education reform committees;
2. Research articles also published in scholarly materials about accreditation systems, quality assurance and governance in Indian higher education;
3. Empirical and conceptual research on institutional quality and accountability, as well as regulatory structures;
4. National and international bodies' reports and policy briefs of UNESCO, OECD, World Bank and regulatory agencies;
5. Overviews and comparative analyses of quality assurance and global accreditation models.

Several large academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect, were searched. Reference chaining was also used to identify influential and highly cited works that added theoretical depth and analytical coherence.

Selection Criteria

Systematic inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to ensure relevance and analytical value.

Inclusion Criteria

Clearly addressed NEP 2020, accreditation reforms, or quality assurance in Indian higher education.

- Reviewed regulatory systems, institutional controls, or assessment systems;
- Opportunities, problems, or implementation difficulties associated with accreditation or quality improvement;
- Offers conceptual, empirical, or policy-oriented information on institutional change

Exclusion Criteria

- Limited to technical or administrative processes without critical reference to policy or institutional change;
- Addressed accreditation mechanisms that were not connected to higher education or the Indian setting, except for comparison.
- Did not have adequate conceptual or analytical foundations related to quality assurance or governance.
- The emphasis was placed on literature published in recent years, i.e., 2019-2025, the period of NEP 2020 formation, initial implementation, and further reforms of accreditation mechanisms.

Analytical Framework and Procedure:

A thematic content analysis was conducted on the data, as prescribed by Braun and Clarke. The reason behind choosing this approach was its capability to help identify, classify, and analyze patterns that occur in a wide range of documentary materials. The following stages were used in the analytical process:

1. **Data Introduction:** All the chosen materials were read several times to obtain a general idea of policy goals, regulatory texts, institutional assumptions, and academic commentary on NEP 2020 and accreditation changes.
2. **Preliminary Coding**: Inductive and deductive coding of relevant parts of the text was performed. Early codes included recurring ideas such as regulatory restructuring, outcome-based evaluation, institutional autonomy, accountability, digital accreditation systems, implementation barriers, and capacity constraints.
3. **Theme Development and Categorization:** Codes were systematically organized into broad thematic categories aligned with the study objectives. Major themes included:

Elements of a Successful Accreditation Model

1. **Interpretation and Synthesis:** Themes were narrowed down, interpreted, and synthesized to create higher-order understanding. This phase helped to build a holistic conceptual understanding of the changing accreditation environment. It contributed to the establishment of a suggested framework in accordance with the diversity of higher education in India.
2. **Assuring Rigor and Trustworthiness:** Several measures were taken to increase the credibility and reliability of the findings. Data triangulation was conducted through various types of sources, such as policy statements, scholarly research, and regulatory reports. Transparency was ensured by consistently recording database searches, keywords, and selection procedures.
3. Reflexive analysis was used to reduce the researcher's bias by constantly reflecting on coding choices and thematic interpretations. The use of peer-reviewed literature and official policy documents also enhanced methodological rigor.
4. **Methodology Weaknesses:** As qualitative documentary research, the study is restricted by its secondary sources. The results are interpretations based on policy texts and published literature and may not fully capture the practices and ground-level perceptions of the stakeholders of a particular institution. Also, thematic analysis is interpretive and, as such, can be based on the analytical perspective of the researcher.

Even with these shortcomings, a theoretically based and systematic understanding of NEP 2020 and India's new accreditation strategy can be achieved through the use of thoroughly developed and up-to-date literature. The research design is effective in establishing structural opportunities, institutional limitations, and a suggested context-sensitive accreditation system for Indian higher education.

Discussion

Accreditation-related provisions/recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the context of Indian higher education.

Creation of National Accreditation Council (NAC): NEP 2020 proposes a meta-accreditation body, the National Accreditation Council, under the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), to coordinate and oversee all accreditation agencies and the graded accreditation of HEIs (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

HECI is envisaged as an umbrella body with separate verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards, separating these functions to avoid conflicts of interest (Reddy, 2022).

Graded accreditation & autonomy (15-year roadmap): NEP 2020 recommends a graduated/graded accreditation system, under which, over approximately 15 years, all

HEIs should move toward becoming independent, self-governing institutions focused on innovation and excellence (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

Regulatory load is to become "light but tight," with accreditation outcomes used to determine institutional autonomy and oversight (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

Widening accreditation coverage: NAAC's new guidelines now allow institutions operating for just one academic year to seek provisional accreditation, compared to earlier requirements of six years' existence or two graduating batches, aiming to "broaden the horizon of accreditation."

However, faculty surveyed in Maharashtra largely felt these new norms may not substantially improve quality standards on their own.

Table 6.1: How NEP 2020 positions accreditation in higher education reform

Aspect	NEP 2020 vision /mechanism	Citations
Quality assurance	Systematic, periodic accreditation of all HEIs; ranking & accreditation as levers for quality	Srijampana et al., 2025
Governance reform	HECI with NAC; accreditation used to grant graded autonomy	Reddy, 2022; Aithal & Aithal, 2020
Continuous improvement	Accreditation tied to institutional development, research culture, and student outcomes.	Hamid & Sharma, 2024; Reshma et al., 2023

Overall, NEP 2020 reframes accreditation from a peripheral compliance exercise to a core driver of quality, autonomy, and restructuring of Indian higher education, operationalized through NAC under HECI, graded accreditation, and expanded NAAC coverage. However, implementation capacity and real quality gains remain key challenges.

A Shift toward a trust-based, transparent, and outcome-oriented accreditation system in India.

Assessment and accreditation play a pivotal role in ensuring the quality and credibility of educational institutions. In India's vast, diverse landscape, accreditation is a mechanism that enhances institutional performance, boosts accountability, and encourages continuous improvement (Srijampana, 2025). A set of transformative reforms has been proposed to strengthen the periodic approval, assessment, accreditation, and ranking of 'All HEIs' of India. These reforms have been proposed with the strategic intent of being consistent with the vision of NEP 2020, adopting a simple, trust-based, credible, objective, and rationalized system for the approval, accreditation, and ranking of HEIs, with a technology-driven modern system that could replace or minimize manual involvement, make the accreditation process transparent, and integrate stakeholder input (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2024). Since the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's higher education system has undergone a significant transformation (Farooqi et al., 2025). This transformation is manifested in the following:

- **Reforming the Regulatory System of Higher Education:** The Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is divided into four independent institutions, namely, NHERC (regulation), NAC (accreditation), HEGC (funding), and GEC (setting learning outcomes under the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework [NHEQF]). The areas of focus of HECI will be quality measurement, financing, and accreditation (Reshma et al., 2023; Raju, 2025; Reddy, 2022; Sharma & Inda, 2021).
- **Coherent and Results-Focused Regulation:** Coalescing into a single regulatory body (HECI) in place of multiple agencies such as UGC and AICTE will address regulatory redundancy, boost transparency, and enhance institutional autonomy and accountability through quality- and results-based accrediting frameworks (Nandi, 2023).
- **Change toward Developmental Accreditation:** Switching to the new NAAC system is based on its developmental, rather than merely evaluative, quality. HEIs are also encouraged to consider accreditation as an opportunity to grow rather than as a control mechanism. This change promotes a proactive attitude, making the culture of constant improvement and innovation part of the institutional culture (Divaakaran, 2024).
- **Embedded Accreditation Mechanism:** Current accreditation agencies, like NAAC and NBA, will be replaced by a more comprehensive, transparent, and outcome-focused accreditation system across all institutions of higher education (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).
- **Autonomous Degree-Granting Institutions:** Institutions of higher learning will enjoy greater academic, administrative, and financial freedom. This autonomy will focus on promoting research and innovation (Reddy, 2022).
- **Restructuring of Higher Education Institutions:** Institutions of higher learning are restructured into a three-tier institutional architecture, i.e., Tier 1 - Research Universities, Tier 2 - Teaching Universities, and Tier 3 - Autonomous Colleges (KPMG, 2020).
- **Research-based Quality Outcomes**: The outcome-based accreditation framework of NEP 2020 emphasizes research results and innovation, as well as student participation in research, with clear funding and assessment via agencies such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) (Hamid & Sharma, 2024).
- **Research and Innovation**: Research and innovation in the education sector, including the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF). Promotion of research-oriented universities and institutions. Formation of the Education Commission to spearhead research and innovation changes (Reddy, 2022; Raju, 2025).

- **Change to Continuous Assessment**: The model of examination will change to a continuous and comprehensive evaluation system, which encourages holistic learning, consistent feedback, and outcome-based evaluation (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).
- **Higher Accountability and Transparency:** The new model will especially require more accountability and transparency on the part of HEIs. Institutions should be ready to provide verifiable data to support their claims, either by enhancing their data management systems or by strengthening internal audit practices (Divaakaran, 2024).
- **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** Studies would be included if they evaluated the effect of accreditation on institutional quality in Indian higher education. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and official reports were taken into account. Studies were not included if they were devoted to accreditation outside India or lacked empirical evidence (Srijampana, 2025).
- **Homogeneous Nomenclature of Institutions in Higher Education:** The different categories of higher education institutions, such as Deemed to be University, Affiliating University, Affiliating Technical University, and Unitary University, are going to be unified under the single name university, in accordance with the specifications established to facilitate transparency, equity, and accountability in the higher education system (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).
- **Technology Integration:** Technology is expected to be a major aspect of the new accreditation process, both as a criterion and as a means of assessment. The adoption of advanced educational technologies will be necessary for all HEIs to empower learning, as well as to monitor and report on educational outcomes (Divaakaran, 2024). The policy urges the application of technology in learning, teaching, and assessment. To support the integration of technology, the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) will be created (Reddy, 2022).
- **Emphasize Outcome-Based Education:** India has an outcome-based system of accreditation, which requires institutions of higher learning to enhance teaching and learning by improving academic curricula, career guidance, research output, and community engagement (Divaakaran, 2024).

Issues Associated with Applying THE New Accreditation Strategy

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 will be a paradigm shift in India's education system, with its focus on a multidisciplinary, flexible, and holistic approach. Since it seeks to align the Indian education system with international standards, NEP 2020 presents radical changes to improve the quality, inclusivity, and accessibility of higher education (Raju, 2025). Although the reforms suggested in NEP 2020 are progressive, they have several challenges to implementation, including:

- **Infrastructure and Financing:** The shift to multidisciplinary institutions and the creation of the ABC require massive investments in infrastructure, technology, and resources. Many higher education institutions in India are not equipped with the physical or digital infrastructure needed to implement these reforms. The lack of funding for government institutions and excessive dependence on private investment may contribute to inequalities (Raju, 2025; Reddy, 2022). Budget allocations remain insufficient even though 6% of GDP is the target for education. Infrastructure in many institutions, especially in rural settings, is of low quality, and access to research facilities is lacking (Srivastava, 2024; Khajuria & Thapa, 2025).
- **Quality Assurance:** The formation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is supposed to promote quality, but it might prove difficult to achieve consistent quality across a variety of institutions. Quality assessment mechanisms will be of utmost importance for proper implementation (Reddy, 2022; Raju, 2025).
- **Digital Divide:** The trend toward digital universities and online education can further widen the digital divide, since less than a quarter of rural households in India could access the internet in 2021. In the absence of proper digital infrastructure, these reforms have the potential to widen the divide between urban and wealthy students, and rural and poor students (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- **Regulatory and Administrative Bottlenecks:** The policy suggests that the higher education sector should have one regulatory body, the Higher Education Commission of India, which, though aimed at reducing fragmentation, raises concerns about over-centralization. According to critics, over-centralization can suppress institutional independence and create a uniform approach to regulation (Shrivastav, 2025). The creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) requires coordination among several regulatory frameworks, which can cause delays. Simplifying governance structures and accountability is a complicated undertaking (Raju, 2025).
- **The Necessity to Balance Innovation and Regulation:** Due to constant innovation in higher education, accreditation agencies need to balance innovation and regulation. This balance is growing in value as universities try out new forms of learning, including competency-based education, hybrid models, and micro-credentials. New models tend to disrupt conventional accreditation standards and demand changes to the quality measurement process (Teachers Institute, 2023).
- **Weak Research and Innovation Ecosystem:** NEP emphasizes encouraging research via the National Research Foundation (NRF). Nevertheless, questions remain about whether the government can adequately invest in research in all

fields, particularly in cases where STEM is likely to receive more focus than the humanities and social sciences (Srivastava, 2024). Establishing the National Research Foundation (NRF) is a positive move, yet creating a research and innovation culture requires time, resources, training, and facilities. The system of higher education in India has historically been low in research productivity, and this requires a shift in priorities (Raju, 2025). A lack of research infrastructure and a shortage of research partnership networks prevent the creation of the strong research culture expected under NEP 2020 (Inamdar & Parveen, 2020).

- **Research and Innovation Culture:** NEP has done well in attaching importance to research and innovation; however, a research culture cannot be established instantly. Institutions may have challenges related to funding, infrastructure, and mentorship of research projects (Reddy, 2022).
- **Drawbacks Facing Emerging Colleges:** Outcome-based education draws special focus to emerging colleges, which may still be in the process of establishment, both in terms of identity and infrastructure. These institutions will be forced to invest strategically in developing industry-relevant and outcome-based curricula from the ground up. Large resource allocation may also be necessary to build strong IT infrastructure and e-governance systems (Divaakaran, 2024).
- **Greater Role of the Private Sector:** NEP promotes the role of private institutions in education, which critics fear may bring about further privatization of education. The rise of private institutions may increase inequalities because students with lower economic status may not be able to afford education in private institutions (Srivastava, 2024).
- **Challenge in Global Comparison:** The major problem with accreditation bodies is the inability to uphold quality across various nations and education systems. Educational priorities, policies, and regulatory frameworks differ across countries, making it hard to compare and evaluate institutions around the world. Also, online learning tends to blur the boundaries between various learning settings—students can take online courses at institutions in other countries or even customize and combine courses from different institutions. This complicates the process of ensuring that online programs meet globally acceptable standards (Teachers Institute, 2023).
- **Equity and Access:** Technology-centered education could marginalize students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds who lack access to digital devices and stable internet connectivity. The urban-rural disparity in both resources and institutional quality is a serious issue to resolve (Reddy, 2022; Raju, 2025).

- **Leadership Vacuity and Policy Stability:** The lack of a permanent vice-chancellor in most higher education institutions results in ineffective institutional leadership and a slow pace of introducing long-term change (Khajuria & Thapa, 2025).
- **Efforts to Commercialize:** As more power is granted to private institutions and they can charge fees, private institutions are likely to adopt profit-driven methods, leaving higher education unattainable for poor and marginalized populations (Srivastava, 2024).
- **Quality Assurance in Online Programs:** One of the issues that needs to be addressed when accrediting online programs is quality assurance. Online learning programs are often not as interactive as a real classroom environment, and it may be more difficult to understand the success of instruction and education in the online setting. Other institutions might compromise on the quality of the services they offer online, focusing on numbers rather than quality and giving students tuition that is not rigorous enough or does not offer enough support services. To make sure that online courses offer an equivalent level of interaction, support, and evaluation criteria as on-campus programs, accrediting bodies should address this issue (Teachers Institute, 2023).
- **Weak Institutional Autonomy and Red Tape:** Although NEP 2020 suggests that universities should be given more autonomy, tight control by numerous regulatory institutions, such as UGC and AICTE, does not allow curriculum flexibility and new governance methods (Times of India, 2025a).
- **Opposition to Change:** Existing institutions will need to be reformed to become multidisciplinary, which in turn will require reorganizing curricula, altering systems of evaluation, and changing administrative practices, which the stakeholders might not well receive. Organizations accustomed to traditional ways will not find it easy to accept new methods such as credit transfer and flexible degree programs (Raju, 2025).
- **Faculty Shortages and Skill Gaps:** Frequent vacancies, the use of ad hoc staff, and the lack of professional development programs complicate the transition to multidisciplinary teaching, research integration, and technology-enabled pedagogy (Inamdar & Parveen, 2020).
- **Absence of Awareness:** Not every stakeholder would be completely aware of the changes introduced by the NEP. Effective implementation of these measures among students, parents, educators, and administrators should be based on spreading accurate information and creating awareness among students, parents, educators, and administrators (Reddy, 2022). Conservative institutional cultures, bureaucratic barriers, and ignorance of NEP 2020 delay the adoption of reform and impede the timely execution of policies (Khajuria & Thapa, 2025).

- **Multidisciplinary Institutions:** Although the trend of establishing multidisciplinary institutions is very positive, converting current universities and colleges into multidisciplinary institutions will entail significant restructuring and investment that may take years to realize (Srivastava, 2024; Reddy, 2022).
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** The shift toward continuous assessment and credit-based learning may necessitate a redesign of assessment. It may not be easy to ensure fairness and accuracy in assessment (Reddy, 2022; Srivastava, 2024). Differences in academic standards and curricula between countries are among the primary issues to consider during international institution accreditation (Teachers Institute, 2023).

Recommendations on how the new accreditation system can be implemented successfully and effectively.

To solve the current problems of the assessment and accreditation processes, the Government of India conducted deliberations, and the following areas of focus were taken into consideration:

- **Government and Policy Makers:** Streamline regulatory frameworks and bring about openness in governance to prevent duplication among agencies. Invest in sufficient research, innovation, and digital infrastructure. Grant agencies autonomy, hold them accountable for high performance, and concentrate on rural reach, scholarships, and routine policy reviews (Khajuria & Thapa, 2025).
- **Constitution of Regulatory Bodies:** The regulatory bodies stated in NEP 2020, viz., the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), the National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC), the National Accreditation Council (NAC), the Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC), and the General Education Council (GEC), should be constituted as early as possible. The scope of work, authority, roles, and responsibilities of these regulatory bodies should be clearly defined to remove conflicting and overlapping roles (Gupta & Choubey, 2021).
- **Rethink Assessment:** Rethink assessment practices by moving to competency portfolios, school-based assignments, and formative assessments while maintaining high-stakes tests with a primary diagnostic role (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- **Enhance Outcomes-Based Measurement:** Within accreditation, include outcome measures for learning outcomes, research outcomes, employability outcomes, and social outcomes.
- **Teachers and Faculty:** Provide continuous upgrading in pedagogy, technology integration, and research methodology. Encourage participation in interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and mentor students to be critical

thinkers, creative, and problem solvers. Be actively involved in institutional planning, curriculum development, and quality assurance (Khajuria & Thapa, 2025).

- **Make Processes Transparent and Digitally Integrated:** Use digital solutions in the process of accreditation, data submission, and transparent institutional performance.
- Launch Accreditation 2.0 based on cycles of continuous improvement, program outcomes, and student support and placement on public dashboards without league table sensationalism (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- **Increase the Capacity of Higher Institutions of Learning:** Train and mentor institutions on the principles of accreditation and better internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- **Enhance Institutional Independence and Responsibility:** Provide graded autonomy tied to the level of accreditation performance, while maintaining the use of quality standards.
- **Promote Constant Enhancement:** Do not perceive accreditation as a compliance exercise that is done once; accreditation is a process of continuous quality improvement.
- Grant academic autonomy to institutions of learning that apply equity and quality standards, and remove it in cases where standards decline (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- **Light yet Tight Regulation:** A regulatory framework should be balanced by providing transparency, integrity, and accountability through audits and public disclosure while granting autonomy and good governance to facilitate innovation and institutional empowerment (Jain & Kaur, 2022). Ensure stakeholder input through the institutionalization of school management committees, student councils, and teacher councils with deliberative capacity, not token input (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- **Continuous Quality Monitoring:** Continuously monitor institutional progress through persistent research and periodic evaluation by educational specialists to ascertain steady improvement and quality enhancement (Jain & Kaur, 2022).
- Undertake gender, caste, disability, and rural-urban disparity audits by a third party annually, with a percentage of public funding tied to measurable progress in reducing disparity (Shrivastav & Nirmala, 2025).
- Provide learning support through needs-based scholarships and a system of fee regulation on increases in costs in private-aided institutions.

Accreditation framework to be in line with NEP 2020 and the diversity of Indian higher education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a significant change in the Indian higher education system that emphasizes quality assurance, institutional freedom, and outcome-based learning. In this regard, accreditation has been one of the most prominent tools for ensuring accountability and improvement. However, existing accreditation processes are likely to be weak in detecting diversity, cultural variations, and stages of growth of Indian higher education institutions. The change presented by the NEP 2020 policy demands a change in the old accreditation strategies. A key challenge is integrating accreditation procedures with the policy's holistic and flexible vision. This gap is addressed in this study by proposing an accreditation framework that is responsive to the aspirations and realities of Indian higher education.

Rationale and Conceptual Background of THE Proposed Model

The proposed framework is founded on the principle of learner-centered education, in which academic development, personal growth, and future sustainability of students take priority. NEP 2020 suggests a more research-oriented and student-centered approach to learning to foster the holistic growth of students and equip them to meet the demands of the twenty-first century (Reddy, 2022). This includes the following:

- One of the most important requirements of NEP 2020 and NAAC quality standards is curricular flexibility. According to the National Education Policy 2020, a flexible curriculum is suggested, with the recommendation of offering students a variety of courses and subjects based on their own interests and career aspirations (Bal & Singh, 2023). The proposed model can support a multidisciplinary, choice-based, and competency-based curriculum in response to the needs of different learners while maintaining academic requirements and institutional relevance.
- Assessment provides an opportunity to ensure that a self-critical community that includes educators, students, support staff, and management authorities is engaged in continuous quality improvement efforts (Trivedi et al., 2020). The proposed model supports flexible, formative, and outcome-based evaluations that suit learner diversity and facilitate long-term academic growth.
- The model pays much attention to the use of research in teaching and education. Evidence-based learning enhances critical thinking, inquiry-based learning, and academic maturity among students and consequently supports education and knowledge generation within institutions.
- The National Education Policy 2020 aims to create an India-centric education system that considers India's traditions, culture, values, and ethics, ensuring that it successfully converts the nation into an active and sustainable knowledge-based society (Jain et al., 2022). The policy places specific focus on the socio-cultural situation, fair resource allocation, and community involvement (Bangad & Kumar, 2025; Government of India, Ministry of

Human Resource Development, 2020). The proposed model will promote a participatory approach to managing faculty, students, administrators, and other external stakeholders, thereby introducing transparency, collective responsibility, and trust in the institution.

- Computer systems play an extremely crucial role in quality assurance, access, and efficiency. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the role of technology in education. It recognizes the transformative power of digital tools to create a better learning experience and improve educational outcomes (Bhattacharyya, 2025). The proposed model includes teaching and assessment, monitoring, and governance using digital infrastructure, which is consistent with the NEP 2020 emphasis on technology-based education.
- The framework will also encourage continuous monitoring rather than episodic evaluation through internal quality assurance mechanisms. Pilot programs that help test new methods and structures are useful in generating information regarding their effectiveness. Data collection and monitoring should inform iterative modifications to make the model sustainable and scalable (Singh et al., 2025).

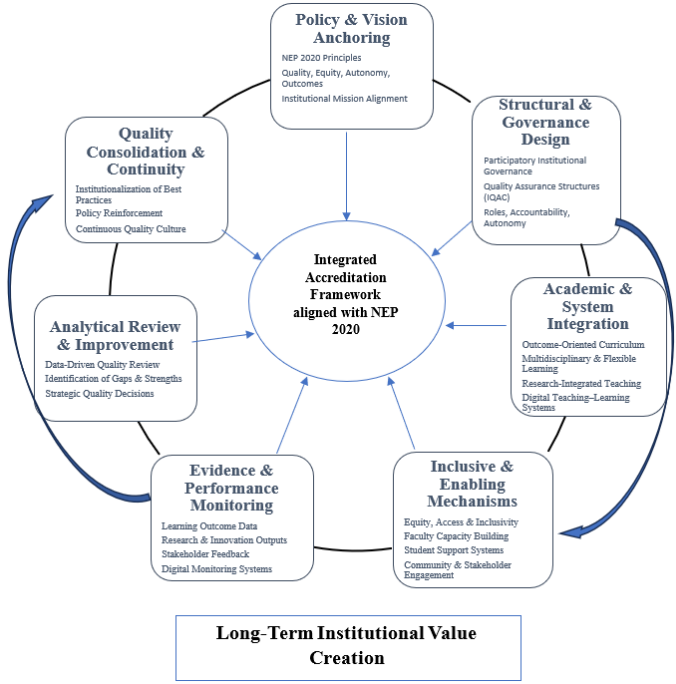

Figure 6.1: Accreditation framework aligned with NEP 2020 and India's diverse higher education landscape

Operational Definitions of Key Constructs in THE Model

- **Outcome-Oriented Curriculum Alignment:** How well institutional curriculum is clearly defined according to the clearly stated learning outcomes, national qualification frameworks, multidisciplinary flexibility, and employability-oriented competencies as envisioned under NEP 2020.
- **Participatory Institutional Governance:** The level at which the decision-making processes in higher education institutions involve several stakeholders, such as faculty members, students, administrators, and external experts, to ensure inclusive, democratic, and responsive forms of governance.
- **Equity, Access, and Inclusivity Mechanisms:** The institutional ability to provide equitable access to higher education by addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups, providing support systems, flexible learning opportunities, and social and cultural diversity-specific interventions.
- **Digital Integration and Academic Innovation:** The systematic integration of digital technologies in teaching, learning, administration, assessment, and academic innovation without compromising quality, accessibility, and pedagogical effectiveness.
- **Faculty Capacity Building and Professional Development:** The organized procedures through which institutions facilitate the ongoing personal growth of faculty members, such as training in pedagogy, research development, digital skills development, and alignment with new academic practices.
- **Research, Innovation, and Knowledge Engagement:** How far institutions are organized to support a research-focused academic climate through interdisciplinary inquiry, innovation activities, community involvement, and socially relevant knowledge generation.
- **Evidence-Based Quality Decision-Making:** Planning, resource allocation, and strategic quality improvement efforts based on the use of systematically gathered institutional data, performance indicators, and stakeholder feedback.
- **Context-Responsive Accreditation Adaptability:** The capacity of the accreditation structure to be responsive to institutional diversity, geographical setting, disciplinary orientations, and institutional development phases in Indian higher education institutions.
- **Stakeholder Feedback and Responsiveness Systems:** The institutional processes put in place to gather, examine, and implement feedback provided by students, alums, employers, and community stakeholders to enhance the performance of the institution academically and administratively.

- **Long-Term Institutional Value Creation:** The long-term contribution of higher education institutions to academic excellence, social development, economic growth, and national priorities through ethical practice, strategic planning, and continuous quality enhancement.

Operational Stages of THE Model

- **Foundational Alignment Stage:** This stage identifies the institutional quality orientation and maps national policy priorities of NEP 2020 to accreditation expectations by ensuring that institutional goals, mission statements, and quality commitments are clearly stated before the implementation process begins.
- **Structural Configuration Stage:** At this stage, institutions translate policy intent into an organized quality structure through defining the roles and responsibilities, quality indicators, and internal systems needed to promote the functioning of institutions in a learner-centered, accountable, and autonomous manner.
- **Practice Integration Stage:** It involves implementing the framework by combining academic, research, administrative, and digital practices in the institution's day-to-day activities, ensuring quality assurance is integrated rather than treated as an external demand.
- **Evidence Generation Stage:** Institutions systematically gather qualitative and quantitative evidence through performance data, feedback, documentation, and in-house evaluation to assess the effectiveness of institutional processes.
- **Analytical Review and Refinement Stage:** The gathered evidence is critically assessed to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and needs that emerge, enabling informed decisions and focused improvements to academic and governance practices.
- **Quality Consolidation and Continuity Stage:** Practices that have been validated are formalized and maintained by policy reinforcement, capacity building, and institutional learning to allow continuous quality improvement even after accreditation cycles.

How the Model Functions (Working Mechanism)

- The suggested model is a working model and an integrated, ongoing system of quality assurance that links national accreditation requirements to the reform-based vision of NEP 2020, emphasizing long-term institutional enhancement rather than short-term compliance.
- The model's operation begins with the clear definition of institutional quality objectives in accordance with NEP 2020 priorities and recognized accreditation

standards, so that academic and administrative actions are oriented toward a common quality direction.

- Once the quality direction is established, institutional practices are oriented toward learner-based academic practices, inclusive governance structures, research-based pedagogies, flexible assessment mechanisms, and effective use of digital systems.
- Then, the model operates by conducting routine evidence gathering through internal evaluation, stakeholder feedback, and performance data to determine the results of institutional practices under real circumstances.
- On this basis, institutions systematically analyze their practices to find areas that require review and implement remedial actions to enhance academic delivery, management efficiency, and quality assurance practices.
- Effective practices adopted over time become incorporated into normal institutional operations and form a stable, sustainable culture of quality that can be used to achieve improved student achievement, open governance, increased research involvement, and institutional independence.

Analysis of Empirical Studies on Quality Assurance and Accreditation Models in Indian Higher Education.

- **Continuous Quality Improvement Practices:** Quality assurance in higher education is a complex process that serves as a means of continuous improvement, rather than checking adherence to a set of standardized criteria (Martínez-Rojas et al., 2025). Departmental judgments, university accreditation, and strategic planning are all activities that should be intertwined to focus on constant improvement instead of reaching a fixed status (Stratton, 2019).
- **Institutional Governance and Administrative Requirements:** Quality assurance and accreditation have been particularly essential in the context of digital learning, as higher education is constantly changing due to technological advancement (Emmanuelle, 2023). Institutions are required to comply with all legal requirements, have independently audited accounting systems, and maintain records of their technology and operations (Kumaravelu & Suresh, 2021).
- **Learner-Centered Curriculum Design:** A learner-centered curriculum design is among the key indicators of accreditation because it takes into consideration the aspects of relevance, inclusivity, and continuous enhancement of teaching-learning practices. Law (2022) also claims that, to implement a curriculum effectively, it is necessary to know the needs, goals, and interests of every student. This curriculum will enable students to customize their learning process through their own decisions. Students will be able to select their activities and learning experiences.

- **Professional Collaboration and Stakeholder Participation in Accreditation:** The accreditation process is good in that it gives professionals a chance to contribute toward the establishment of requirements that would lead to entry into the profession. It also enhances the rapport between professions by uniting professionals, academicians, and students into a teamwork approach that is expected to enhance professional practice and preparation (Ibrahim, 2014).
- **Skilled Human Resources and Expertise of Professionals:** Academic institutions will have to hire scholars who are not only relevant to the industry sector but also adequately competent and knowledgeable to lead students. Training programs should also be accredited and registered in educational institutions (Kumaravelu & Suresh, 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a critical look at accreditation-related provisions found in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the new accreditation strategy in Indian higher education, particularly its opportunities, limitations, and implications for the system. The analysis shows that NEP 2020 is a resounding rejection of previous practice-based compliance and inspection-based quality assurance schemes by refocusing accreditation as a key driver of quality improvement, institutional freedom, responsibility, and long-term value addition. The proposed policy restructuring through the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and the setting up of the National Accreditation Council (NAC) envisages an integrated, trust-based, transparent, and outcome-oriented accreditation ecosystem that is sensitive to national priorities and in line with global best practices.

According to the study, graded accreditation, outcome-based assessment, developmental orientation, and technology-enabled processes can help transform accreditation from a periodic exercise into a continuous quality-improvement system. Simultaneously, the results highlight various structural and institutional issues that could make effective implementation challenging, such as infrastructural and financial barriers, digital disparities, regulatory duplication, asymmetric institutional ability, faculty problems, leadership, and resistance to change. These issues show that policy intent alone is insufficient; implementation requires long-term capacity building, sufficient resource allocation, and effective institutional governance.

The research proposes an integrated accreditation framework that is consistent with NEP 2020 and focuses on learner-centered education, participatory governance, equity and inclusivity, research integration, digital innovation, and evidence-based decision-making by synthesizing policy documents, scholarly literature, and empirical insights. The working mechanism and the operational stages of the model reveal how

accreditation can function as an ongoing, context-responsive, and developmental process rather than a one-time evaluation event.

To sum up, NEP 2020 provides an innovative vision of accreditation in Indian higher education, with the potential to promote quality improvement, independence, and sustainable institutional growth. Nevertheless, this vision can be achieved by overcoming the challenge of implementation through coordinated action in policy, stakeholder involvement, and monitoring. The suggested framework contributes to the discussion by providing an organized and versatile strategy that would connect policy aspirations and institutional realities, thus aiding the long-term strengthening of higher education in India.

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CHAPTER 7

Borderless Accreditation in Transnational Higher Education: Rethinking Prestige and Quality Assurance

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Abstract

The emergence of borderless accreditation is inseparable from the broader global governance architecture for transnational higher education. This chapter examines the rise of borderless accreditation as a response to the expansion of transnational higher education and the resulting mismatch between cross-border provision and nationally bounded quality assurance regimes. It conceptualises borderless accreditation as a set of evaluative and recognition practices that travel across jurisdictions through regional arrangements, international accreditors, network-based frameworks, and hybrid systems that combine domestic oversight with external validation. The chapter analyses borderless accreditation through the lenses of legitimacy, trust, and global governance, arguing that accreditation now performs dual functions: safeguarding educational standards and producing portable reputational signals in competitive international markets. It further interrogates how prestige logics, amplified by rankings, branding, and market differentiation, can reshape accreditation priorities, sometimes encouraging compliance behaviours and label accumulation rather than substantive improvement. The chapter concludes by outlining implications for governance design, integrity, transparency, and digitally mediated accreditation futures.

Keywords: accreditation; global education; higher education; quality assurance; transnational education

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Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE), which includes cross-border network provision, international branch campuses and programs that are delivered across borders, has grown rapidly since the 1980s, heightening a policy concern of how quality in

education can be assured when delivery is beyond the reach of a single nation-state (Zwanikken et al., 2013; Damme, 2002). Since TNHE traverses and delimits nationally defined, jurisdictionally oriented regulatory structures, traditional domestic accreditation and quality assurance (QA) regimes often fail to oversee providers, qualifications, and student protections whose design, delivery, and value are geographically dislocated (Damme, 2002). In this context, borderless accreditation refers to increasingly complex international, regional, networked, and external-agency accrediting practices that transcend borders, in which claims to quality are portable across education markets (Damme, 2002; Hou, 2010).

The rise of transnational higher education to include borderless accreditation is within the contours of the larger global governance framework for TNHE. UNESCO has been labelled as having a constitutive effect on transnational higher education in the making, and on the configuration of development strategies and QA tools at the global and regional levels, which contribute to shaping policy vocabularies about cross-border quality and recognition (Авшенюк, 2020). Meanwhile, today's QA configurations are increasingly operating in a 'glonacal' (global-national–local) space where institutional actors such as providers and policy makers jostle together across multiple scales rather than fitting neatly within distinct territorial layers (Hou et al., 2014). The result is that borderless accreditation cannot simply be regarded as an optional extra to national QA; it constitutes a regulatory response to cross-border provision which reconfigures authority, standards and accountability across multiple levels of governance (Hou et al., 2014; Damme, 2002).

However, this chapter is premised on the fact that borderless accreditation remaps prestige, not just control of quality. International accreditation is often sought in the context of broader institutional internationalisation efforts, including signalling world-class aspirations and enhancing competitiveness in global higher education markets (Kairanbayev & Kudaibergenova, 2022). The alternative perspective is that accreditation can be a visibility and positioning tool in international markets, operating as yet one of many status signals used to attract students and partners (Oralkan, 2023; Istileulova, 2023). This status function also cross-cuts the impact of global university rankings in framing and enacting quality in QA policy and practice, with the salience accorded to accreditation as a key QA mechanism in systems increasingly sensitive to comparative reputation (Komotar, 2020; Istileulova, 2023). In other words, borderless accreditation can get caught in prestige logics that make institutions pursue visible accumulation of 'accreditation stars', which may distract from closer attention to educational quality than to competitive signalling (Hou, 2010; Komotar, 2020).

At the same time, the literature highlights that borderless accreditation might be useful for nurturing quality development, particularly when domestic QA capacity has not yet sufficiently matured, but it also might introduce new risks. There are also positive elements: international accreditors can support systems without well-developed QA

arrangements; cross-border QA networks may offer common benchmarks for the assessment of programmes delivered through international collaboration (Hou, 2010; Zwanikken et al., 2013). In practice, network-type solutions (such as consortium models) have been employed to coordinate QA in cross-border provision, suggesting how standards, peer review and coordination can be ordered beyond the nation-state to meet the challenges of cross-border delivery (Zwanikken et al., 2013). But the same forces can produce negative consequences: when competitive pressures encourage institutions to pursue more and distinctive symbols of quality, QA systems may be unsuitable or untrustworthy. It seems that with accreditation, more is not necessarily better assurance (Hou, 2010). Furthermore, accreditation regimes can involve high procedural and time costs, especially when accrediting new courses, while they can also create ongoing confusion about whether borderless approaches facilitate cross-border recognition or instead further entrench bureaucratic practices across several jurisdictions (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023; Damme, 2002).

Against this backdrop, the chapter poses three distinct framing questions that leverage these tensions: (i) why and how borderless accreditation expands as TNHE continues to outpace national regulatory reach (Zwanikken et al., 2013; Damme, 2002); (ii) how global–national–local interactions shape QA authority and the meaning of quality in cross-border contexts (Hou et al., 2014; Damme, 2002); and (iii) stakeholder perceptions of logics at work as accreditation quality-improvement and accountability functions coexist and sometimes conflict with its growing role as a prestige signal within ranking- and brand-sensitive environments (Hou, 2010; Komotar, 2020; Oralkan, 2023; Istileulova, 2023). In foregrounding these concerns, the chapter situates borderless accreditation as more than a technical QA solution to governance, but also a practice of status-making that serves to regulate educational provision and redistribute reputational advantage within TNE markets (Damme, 2002; Komotar, 2020; Hou, 2010).

THE Evolution of Accreditation in Higher Education

Accreditation for HE is described as an evaluative determination by a governmental or non-governmental organisation that an institution or program has met the standards established by the accrediting body; this eligibility status is conferred through a process called accreditation (Zwanikken et al., 2013). Cross-national evidence suggests that accreditation has also been established through state-based quality regimes (e.g., Nigeria's government coordinating body developing program accreditation), highlighting the diverse governance forms of accreditation across systems (Alani & Ilusanya, 2008). This variability assumes greater importance as higher education becomes more internationalized and cross-border provision continues to grow, challenging nationally bound QA systems while promoting new international and transnational systems of quality assurance and accreditation (Damme, 2002).

Table 7.1: Chronological Evolution of Accreditation in Higher Education

Year / Period	Evolutionary milestone	Illustrative evidence from the references
1535	Terminological antecedent: "accreditation" exists as a concept/term long before its contemporary HE governance role.	The term "Accreditation" is reported as being used from 1535 (Istileulova, 2023). (This is a linguistic-historical point; it does not yet evidence modern HE accreditation systems.)
Post-1945	Massification problem frame: rapid postwar expansion of HE raises concerns that quality lags behind quantitative growth, making accreditation attractive as an institutional device for quality problems.	Korean policy analysis explicitly links HE's explosive expansion since 1945 to quality concerns and treats accreditation as a device to address them (Chung, 1987).
Late 1940s (≤1949; inference from 1995 "over 46 years")	Institutionalization of specialised professional accreditation in the U.S. (example field: psychology).	By 1995, APA-sponsored accreditation had operated for "over 46 years", implying establishment in the late 1940s (no later than ~1949) (Sheridan et al., 1995). This supports an early postwar institutionalisation of programmatic professional accreditation in at least one major discipline (Sheridan et al., 1995).
1963–1964	Teacher education accreditation formalizes via a dedicated national council (U.S. example).	NCATE is described as coming into being and beginning to function in 1963, with an explicit statement of its operation published in 1964 (Joyal, 1964).
1960s	Accreditation impulse diffuses into faith-based postsecondary sectors (Canada example), illustrating broader legitimacy pressures beyond mainstream universities.	A historical study documents an "impulse towards accreditation" among Canadian Bible schools during the 1960s, positioning the decade as critical for that movement's accreditation orientation (Guenther, 2004).
1980s (system-level)	Cross-border higher education expands; QA becomes a foreground issue. This is an evolutionary shift from primarily domestic accreditation concerns to transnational ones.	Transnational/cross-border higher education is described as expanding rapidly since the 1980s, bringing quality assurance questions to the forefront (Zwanikken et al., 2013).
1982 (U.S. specialised accreditation recognition)	Specialised accreditors gain formal standing/recognition (example: midwifery education).	The American College of Nurse-Midwives' Division of Accreditation is described as being recognised continuously by the U.S. Department of Education since 1982 (Carrington & Burst, 2005).
1987	National system-building and sector intentions: (i) national	(i) Korea's accreditation system is analysed historically and directionally in 1987 (Chung,

Year / Period	Evolutionary milestone	Illustrative evidence from the references
	development of HE accreditation (Korea example); (ii) accreditation adoption decisions in professional preparation programs (counsellor education example).	1987). (ii) A 1987 national survey reports counsellor preparation programs' intentions related to CACREP accreditation (Cecil et al., 1987).
1991	State-evolved program accreditation for minimum standards (Nigeria example).	Nigeria's National Universities Commission is reported to have evolved a system of academic program accreditation in 1991 to ensure conformity with minimum standards and promote quality (Alani & Ilusanya, 2008).
1993	Professional accreditation/evaluation emerges in China as a dated policy marker.	A 2017 account states it has been "more than 20 years" since China's professional evaluation of 1993, explicitly marking 1993 as an origin point for that strand of professional accreditation (An, 2017).
2002	Globalization and "education trade" reframes accreditation/QA toward international models (capacity-building, mutual recognition, meta-accreditation, international schemes).	A foundational policy analysis argues that international trade in HE "transcends and challenges" national QA/accreditation frameworks and sets out four models of international QA development (including mutual recognition and international schemes) (Damme, 2002).
2004 (Saudi Arabia medical education)	Accreditation becomes newly required/valorized in rapidly expanding systems (medical education example).	A 2025 reflection reports that before 2004 Saudi medical programs required no accreditation (relying on internal review), but that growth in colleges led the Ministry to recognize accreditation's importance thereafter (Alenezi et al., 2025).
2005	State process redesign: accreditation processes are reviewed and revised at sub-national/state levels (U.S. community college example).	Iowa's Department of Education began a comprehensive review of its community college accreditation process in February.
2009	"Continuous scrutiny" environment: accreditation becomes more persistent and demanding for institutional leaders (U.S. regional accreditation context).	Institutional leadership is described as facing nearly continuous scrutiny from regional accreditors; the paper frames this as a changing climate with multiple trends and implications (published 2009) (Bardo, 2009).
2010	International accreditation at a distance scales up—with benefits (support for under-developed QA systems) and risks (commercial "stars," unreliable procedures, and	International accreditation is portrayed as assisting countries with less-developed QA systems but also as susceptible to commercialization ("accreditation stars") and the rise of accreditation mills; bona fide

Year / Period	Evolutionary milestone	Illustrative evidence from the references
	accreditation mills).	national/international accreditors operate in 50+ countries, and U.S. accreditors provide services in 65+ countries (Hou, 2010).
2013	Network-based transnational accreditation frameworks operationalize (tropEd example), evidencing "borderless" QA mechanisms in practice.	A case study describes a transnational QA framework developed by the tropEd network to accredit modules via a rigorous process accepted by stakeholders; the paper situates this within TNHE expansion since the 1980s and key issues such as comparability and sovereignty (Zwanikken et al., 2013).
2014	Operational impacts and multi-scalar governance logics become explicit: (i) resource/effort trade-offs in program accreditation (EUR-ACE case); (ii) "glonacal" QA reforms combining global/national/local dynamics and self-accreditation (Taiwan case).	(i) Observations of a EUR-ACE accreditation process analyze benefits versus required effort and resources (published 2014) (Niemelä et al., 2014). (ii) Taiwanese QA transformation is analyzed explicitly in a "glonacal" (global–national–local) context, including moves toward self-accreditation, published 2014, Hou et al., 2014.
2015	International accreditation positioned as an imperative for global mobility; voluntary accreditation emphasized as an institutional approach to quality control under internationalization.	A 2015 article argues that increasing internationalization makes global standards for quality control imperative and frames voluntary accreditation as an effective institutional approach (Steve, 2015).
2017	Accreditation becomes embedded in institutional differentiation and accountability debates, including contested legitimacy in certain sectors (e.g., community colleges; HBCUs).	Community college accreditation controversies are analyzed for their national implications (published 2017) (Barber & McNair, 2017), while a dedicated review highlights the complexity of studying accreditation's effects on HBCUs and clarifies what accreditation entails (published 2012, but used here to mark a maturing critical literature leading into the late 2010s) (Fester et al., 2012).
2019	Voluntary/independent accreditation markets expand (Russia example), emphasizing supply-demand dynamics and interaction with European processes.	Voluntary accreditation of study programs in Russia is analyzed through supply and demand and the activity of Russian and foreign accreditation organizations (published 2019) (Matveeva, 2019).
2020	Global policy coordination and system digitalization: (i) UNESCO's role in shaping transnational QA strategies; (ii)	UNESCO is characterized as exerting constitutive influence on TNHE development, including strategies for quality assurance at global/regional levels and recommendations

Year / Period	Evolutionary milestone	Illustrative evidence from the references
	accreditation management supported by information systems aligned with national standards.	emphasizing mutual trust, respect for diversity, and detection of dishonest providers (published 2020) (Авшенюк, 2020). In parallel, the development of accreditation information systems aligned to national standards is documented for vocational HE (published 2020) (Fariani & Damayanti, 2020).
2020 (policy horizon)	Accreditation as a planned lever for autonomy via graded regimes (India example).	NEP 2020 underscores accreditation's importance and introduces a National Accreditation Council with a phased approach emphasizing graded accreditation and institutional autonomy over a long horizon (Kumar et al., 2023).
2023	Accreditation intertwines with rankings and visibility logics, while procedural burden and process efficiency remain active concerns.	Accreditation and rankings are explicitly framed as "visibility mechanisms" in the early 2020s and theorized as part of a global accreditation landscape (published 2023) (Istileulova, 2023). In parallel, a cross-national review emphasizes time/bureaucratic burden in accrediting new courses and variability in complexity for first-time or innovative programs (published 2023) Duarte & Vardasca, 2023).
2024	Cross-border accreditation standards and compliance comparisons intensify, reflecting continued evolution toward "borderless" QA alignment.	A 2024 comparative study analyzes accreditation standards against UNESCO–OECD guidance for cross-border HE and proposes improvement measures, indicating active calibration of accreditation to cross-border provision norms (Park, 2024).
2025 (emerging concern)	Integrity and corruption risks become explicit research objects in accreditation studies.	A 2025 study targets alleged corruption in accreditation processes, synthesising causes and preventive measures and framing integrity as a major research gap (Kumar et al., 2025).

Source: Author Compilation

Across the dated milestones in Table 1, the evolution of accreditation in HE can be read as a sequence of *expanding scope and rescaled governance*: from quality devices responding to massification after 1945 (Chung, 1987), to institutionalized professional accreditation (e.g., APA by the late 1940s; NCATE from 1963) (Sheridan et al., 1995; Joyal, 1964), to the diffusion of accreditation legitimacy pressures across sectors (e.g., faith-based colleges in 1960s Canada) (Guenther, 2004). From the 1980s onward, the key evolutionary shift is the growing centrality of cross-border higher education, making QA/accreditation questions unavoidable and forcing consideration of comparability and sovereignty across systems (Zwanikken et al., 2013). In the 2000s, accreditation's

evolution was increasingly shaped by globalisation and trade in education, which explicitly challenges national frameworks and motivates international QA models, including mutual recognition and international schemes (Damme, 2002), while also prompting national adoption surges where accreditation had previously been absent (e.g., Saudi medical programs post-2004) (Alenezi et al., 2025).

In the 2010s–2020s, the evidence indicates simultaneous expansion and problematization. International accreditation scales and commercialises, helping capacity development in some contexts but also encouraging "accreditation stars" behaviour and enabling accreditation mills beyond national jurisdiction Hou, 2010). Accreditation also becomes more entangled with multi-level governance (Hou et al., 2014) and with resource and bureaucracy considerations (effort/resource trade-offs in program accreditation; time burdens in new course accreditation) (Niemelä et al., 2014; Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). Finally, the most recent references emphasise accreditation's increasing embedding in visibility regimes (rankings–accreditation interactions) and in integrity debates (corruption risks), signalling an evolution from a primarily technical QA mechanism toward a contested sociopolitical infrastructure of legitimacy in national and borderless higher education fields (Istileulova, 2023; Kumar et al., 2025; Hou, 2010).

Transnational Higher Education and THE Challenge of Borderless Quality

Transnational higher education (TNHE) has brought questions of quality assurance (QA) to the foreground precisely because educational provision increasingly occurs across, rather than within, national regulatory boundaries (Zwanikken et al., 2013). A central difficulty is that cross-border trade in higher education transcends and challenges national regulatory frameworks, including domestic QA and accreditation systems that were historically designed for territorially bounded institutions and qualifications (Damme, 2002). In parallel, TNHE has been enabled and intensified by global trade and policy architectures (e.g., the General Agreement on Trade in Services), further reinforcing the mismatch between nationally organised QA authority and border-spanning educational delivery (Bosire & Amimo, 2017).

Within this context, the 'borderless quality' might be rendered as a problem of how to accomplish credible and effective quality claims (standards, judgment and recognition-decisions) across multiple jurisdictions without taking for granted one sovereign regulator. Comparative evidence also identifies the tensions that transnational QA must or is known to address, including (i) concerns around comparability between different QA frameworks; (ii) a tension between collaboration and perceived loss of national educational sovereignty; and (iii) the functions of accrediting agencies, articulated explicitly in research on transnational QA (Zwanikken et al., 2013). International policy work also highlights that cross-border QA and recognition must be underpinned by mutual trust while respecting the diversity of HE systems, and that QA

frameworks must support identifying rogue or untrustworthy providers that may operate beyond the effective reach of any single national jurisdiction (Авшенюк, 2020). Since QA actors and institutions work at global, national, and local levels in parallel ways (Hou et al., 2014), governance of QA in TNHE should be best conceptualised as multi-scalar rather than merely national, a construction that has been invoked to elucidate the current changes to the form of QA frameworks, including shifting resource allocation between agencies and institutions (e.g., self-accreditation arrangements).

Responses to borderless quality are increasingly through international and transnational accreditation and QA systems. One significant typology identifies four higher education development trajectories: reinforcing national QA capacity, stimulating cross-border QA and mutual recognition, developing meta-accreditation of QA agencies, and creating international schemes for QA and accreditation (Damme, 2002). In reality, however, transnational networks have operationalised the borderless conception of QA: tropEd's border-levelling deterritorialised curriculum shows that curricular components can be mutually accredited by other members through a positivist-governed formal process involving stakeholders (Zwanikken et al., 2013), yet asserted at all times identity claims about comparability, sovereignty and transparency. Similarly, notably in capacity-developing mode where national QA systems are only slowly evolving, many have looked to non-domestic or international accreditors as a means of augmenting local QA efforts, even though research also warns of the risk whereby marketization and competition can generate accreditation stars, promoting voracious or unreliable QA processes and providing room for accreditation mills that remain largely beyond national regulatory oversight (Hou, 2010; Nguyen, 2017; Fearnside & Chung, 2017).

The challenge of borderless quality (Figure. 7.1) is therefore not only *technical* (how to evaluate learning, curricula, and governance) but also *institutional and political* (who has legitimate authority to judge quality, and on what basis) (Zwanikken et al., 2013; Damme, 2002; Duarte & Vardasca, 2023; Hou et al., 2014).

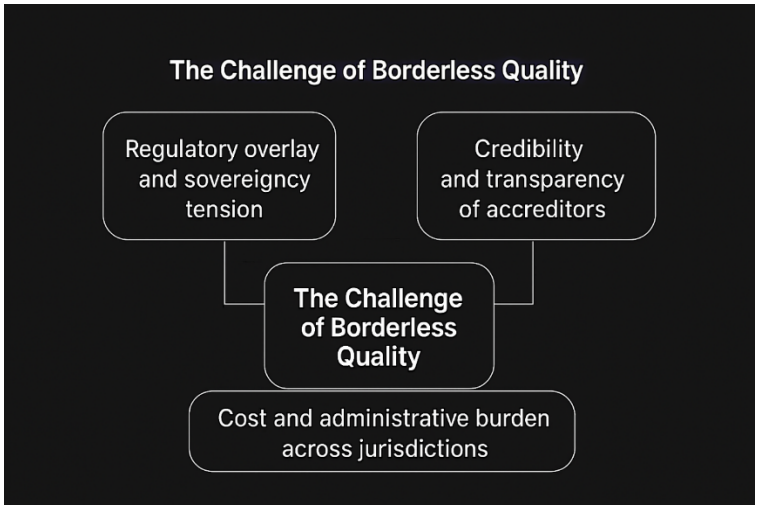

Figure 7.1: The Challenges of Borderless Quality

Source: Authors Compilation

Borderless Accreditation: Conceptual Foundations

In higher education, accreditation is primarily a judgment, an evaluative decision by a recognized accrediting organization (usually non-governmental, though sometimes governmental) that an institution, school or program meets the accreditor's standards; in addition it serves as a signal to the public as to quality of education and as a means for recognition and portability (such as transfer) of information and credentials in regulated systems. As internationalisation of higher education (IHE) expands, however, the rootedness of traditional accreditation in national authority structures comes under increasing tension through cross-border provision because, it is argued, cross-border higher education crosses and challenges state regulatory frameworks, like national quality assurance (QA) and accreditation systems (Zwanikken et al., 2013). On this basis, borderless accreditation can be defined as: Any system where the standards, evaluative power, and/or recognition effects are designed deliberately to cut across national borders in such a way that judgments about quality remain meaningful for provision beyond national borders and delivery in more than one country is involved (Damme, 2002; Zwanikken et al., 2013; Fearnside & Chung, 2017).

Theoretical Perspectives: Legitimacy, Trust, and Global Governance

A. Legitimacy: Accreditation as Authorisation and as a Signal

The legitimating role of accreditation has two analytically separate but practically linked aspects. First, the legitimacy of accreditation is defined through a standards-based authorisation: it states that an institution and program meet some pre-defined criteria

from an acknowledged body. Second, particularly in cross-border contexts, accreditation is being used as a market-facing or reputational signal: stakeholders (students, employers, governments) consider the accreditation label as shorthand for quality when it comes to provider and qualification recognition across borders (Hou 2010). This signalling part is also much more prominent when institutions compete internationally through marketing or branding and use accreditation to underpin their other marketing communications to markets, signalling entry compliance and standing awards (Hou, 2010). This phenomenon can escalate into a race for more than one label, competition for status and prestige that could also lead to prioritisation of competitive display over raising the quality of teaching and learning, which is particularly problematic in cross-border provision when, due to the differences between national policy priorities, cultural homogenization may be overlooked (Hou, 2010; Zwanikken et al., 2013).

B. Trust: Comparability, Transparency, and Protection Against Dishonest Quality Claims

Borderless accreditation depends on trust because its judgments must travel across jurisdictions and be accepted by actors not embedded in a shared national regulatory culture. The literature identifies trust-related conditions for transnational QA as including comparability of QA frameworks, transparency about accrediting agencies and processes, and careful negotiation of collaboration versus perceived erosion of national educational sovereignty (Zwanikken et al., 2013). At the global policy level, UNESCO's role in transnational higher education includes supporting quality assurance strategies and normative approaches that emphasise mutual trust between countries alongside respect for diversity in higher education systems; it also highlights the need for mechanisms that enable the detection of dishonest providers in cross-border educational services (Авшенюк, 2020). The cross-border proliferation of accreditation actors reinforces these trust imperatives: alongside bona fide accreditors, there is explicit concern about accreditation mills that sell status without independent assessment and can sit outside effective national jurisdiction, creating a direct credibility risk for borderless quality claims (Hou, 2010). Consequently, borderless accreditation is theoretically inseparable from trust-building architectures (transparency, recognition rules, and safeguards) that distinguish legitimate evaluation from opportunistic credential signalling (Zwanikken et al., 2013; Hou, 2010; Авшенюк, 2020).

C. Global Governance: Multi-Scalar Authority and "Glonacal" Quality Assurance

Borderless accreditation re-allocates evaluative power on the global, national and local level. Internationalisation pressures with a trade orientation underpin the quest for international QA and accreditation as regulatory tools. By their very nature, transnational higher education questions national systems of quality assurance

(Damme, 2002). UNESCO is said to have exercised constitutive influence in the production of transnational higher education as well as the articulation of QA strategies at both global and regional scales, such as synchronising terminologies, generating guidelines for managing transnational higher education and setting up exchange information mechanisms (Авшенюк, 2020). At an operational level, the present generation of QA systems is often understood as "glonacal," since institutions, policy makers and QA agencies on different levels interact running along these scales rather than up or down (Hou et al., 2014).

This goes some way to explaining why borderless accreditation is enacted as overlapping authority (domestic regulators, foreign accreditors, networks and meta-recognition mechanisms) rather than a single-stage world accreditor (Damme, 2002; Hou et al., 2014; Fearnside & Chung, 2017).

Comparative Models

A widely used conceptual foundation for comparing borderless accreditation models is the fourfold typology of international QA development pathways (Fig. 2).



Figure 7.2: Development Pathways for Borderless Quality Assurance

Synthesising this typology with observed cross-border practices yields three analytically useful families: regional, global, and hybrid, each with distinct legitimacy and trust implications (Damme, 2002; Zwanikken et al., 2013; Hou, 2010; Авшенюк, 2020).

A. Regional Models

Regional models are evident in Europe-centric program accreditation schemes (e.g., EUR-ACE), a European quality label for engineering programs administered from one country to others by an agency, where the intended impact of accreditation is that curriculum work gets done, but also has resource demands that vary across institutions

and faculty members (Niemelä et al., 2014). A supplementary regional type of register-based confidence-building is that the criteria for listing agencies in the European QA register are very strict, so if an agency is listed, then its independent international accreditation can contribute to both the quality assurance and recognition challenges from the perspectives of several leading universities (Matveeva, 2019). These regional agreements can be seen conceptually as the operationalisation of Damme's focus on cross-border quality assurance (QA) and mutual recognition and, in part, meta-accreditation (through recognised registers) as a means to enforce trust in accreditor legitimacy across borders (Damme, 2002; Matveeva, 2019).

B. Global Models

The global models map most directly onto the development of international QA and accreditation schemes and the creation of globally oriented policy norms around cross-border quality (Damme, 2002). The global policy role of UNESCO is topical, as it promotes strategies and recommendations for transnational higher education governance and quality assurance at global and regional levels, with a focus on mutual trust, respect for system diversity, and action against rogue providers (Авшенюк, 2020). Globalising processes are also manifested in practice through international professional accreditors operating in multiple countries (e.g., the recognition of engineering and business accreditors), which might be thought of as sector-specific global schemes that claim portable standards and reputational comparability (Hou, 2010). However, global models also carry with them credibility questions since cross-border supply of accreditation value can lead to a proliferation of potentially illegitimate mills. Commercialisation could incentivise the hoarding of accreditation labels in ways that may undermine rather than affirm the meaningfulness of quality-related claims if transparency and bona fide status remain unchecked (Hou, 2010; Авшенюк, 2020).

C. Hybrid Models

Hybrid models combine national QA authority with border-spanning evaluative mechanisms, reflecting the empirical reality that most quality governance remains multi-scalar rather than purely global Hou et al., 2014). Three prominent hybrid forms are supported in the literature:

- **National capacity and international accreditation assistance**: For countries with underdeveloped internal QA services, there is the possibility of support from foreign bona fide accreditors, albeit with the risk that national policy objectives and cultural orientations are being sidelined in cross-border provision (Hou, 2010). Vietnam's case, for instance, involves the governmentality of foreign accreditation agencies within national borders as well as the material effects of international accreditors upon teaching and learning, faculty development and capacity-building of a nascent QA system to

achieve a coupled domestic–international governance rather than total externalisation (Nguyen, 2017; Hou, 2010).

- **Consortium and network accreditation**: The case of the tropEd network illustrates a transnational QA model developed by a network for accrediting modules by applying an approach that seems to have gained acceptance among stakeholders, which actively targets transnational QA issues (e.g., comparability, autonomy, and transparency) through co-construction (Zwanikken et al., 2013). This model is borderless, not because it substitutes for national quality assurance (QA) processes, but because it introduces network-level assessment and recognition that accompany transnational curricula across institutions and countries (Zwanikken et al., 2013; Damme, 2002).
- **Cross-border QA by external agencies under specific legal and policy conditions**: Cross-border QA reveals a hybrid service model that calls for fit-for-purpose standards and clear alignment with the host jurisdiction's legal framework and its expectations of local higher education providers (Fearnside & Chung, 2017). This model implements borderless accreditation into practice through a portable procedure, not through a single global authority. The mechanism accords with the general observation that trade and mobility forces result in multiple international QA strategies rather than agendas converging on a single model (Damme, 2002; Fearnside & Chung, 2017; Hou et al., 2014).

Digital Transformation and Accreditation Futures

Digital transformation is reshaping higher education (HE) delivery and international flows, with analyses of the global education market emphasising that new technologies are changing learning technologies and the structure of education itself (Tsymbal & Kalenyuk, 2023). The COVID-19 period intensified this shift through rapid, emergency digitisation of educational and communicative spheres, compelling universities to revise curricula and delivery modalities under crisis conditions (Махачашвілі & Semenist, 2021; Oyedele & Iember, 2021). In parallel, transnational and cross-border higher education (TNHE) continues to transcend and challenge nationally bounded regulatory frameworks, making quality assurance (QA) and accreditation increasingly dependent on mechanisms that can operate across jurisdictions and scales (global–national–local) rather than within a single national frame (Damme, 2002; Hou et al., 2014).

The other end of the digital transformation can be seen most immediately in evidence and review becoming datafied within accreditation practice. For instance, accreditation in engineering systems either requires or pushes faculty to focus on specific learning outcomes and be held accountable for the results, but what this means can become debased locally when ranking pressure and accreditation rewards can incentivise thumbnail-sketching of cohort evidence at minimal-acceptable rigour levels appropriate only for low-cost continuous quality improvement(Abimbola et al., 2020), a problem

noted in ABET-related discussion of accreditation during and after COVID-19 (Hussain et al., 2020). In terms of practice, accreditation has also been described as time- and resource-costly, especially for first-time certification or when new courses are involved, so there is often a push to go digital to minimise related administrative work and increase pace without compromising quality (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023).

Moreover, an Accreditation Information System (AIS) designed around national accreditation standards integrated departmental data, increased transparency, reduced paper-based costs, and aimed to prevent delays in preparing accreditation instruments (Fariani & Damayanti, 2020). These digital process pressures coincide with broader expectations of ongoing reporting and nearly continuous scrutiny from accrediting bodies in some systems, further pushing accreditation toward continuous, platform-mediated assurance rather than episodic review Bardo, 2009). At the institutional level, accreditation is also reported as a lengthy, time-sensitive change process requiring intensive documentation, structured coordination (e.g., task forces), and sustained engagement with accrediting bodies, features that make digital workflow and evidence management increasingly consequential to successful outcomes (Alenezi et al., 2025; Fariani & Damayanti, 2020).

Looking forward, accreditation futures appear to be converging on simplified participation frameworks, maturity-based logics, and digitally enabled internal QA. India's policy direction (NEP 2020) explicitly underscores accreditation, envisaging graded accreditation and greater institutional autonomy over a phased horizon, thereby embedding accreditation more deeply into system steering and institutional governance (Kumar et al., 2023; Oyenuga, 2026). Complementarily, recent discussion of NAAC reforms describes a shift toward a binary assessment approach and a proposed maturity-based graded accreditation framework intended to enhance transparency, reduce subjectivity, and simplify participation for higher education institutions (Kilaru & Raju, 2025). Because digital delivery quality increasingly depends on organisational capability, e-learning capability and maturity assessment has been presented as a route to enable continuous improvement in online teaching and learning, an approach that aligns conceptually with maturity-based accreditation trajectories (Santally et al., 2020; Kilaru & Raju, 2025). Finally, proposals to optimise internal quality audits through artificial intelligence indicate a plausible next step in which internal QA evidence generation and verification become more automated and analytics-driven, potentially altering what accreditors can reasonably demand as routine, high-frequency assurance (Buaton et al., 2022; Bardo, 2009). Across these developments, global policy emphases on mutual trust, respect for system diversity, and mechanisms to detect dishonest providers remain salient as digital transformation expands both the scale and opacity of cross-border provision, increasing the importance of credible, transparent accreditation infrastructures (Авшенюк, 2020; Damme, 2002).

Policy and Governance Implications

Transnational higher education (TNHE) expands across jurisdictions. It thereby transcends and challenges nationally bounded regulatory frameworks for quality assurance (QA) and accreditation, creating a governance gap when accountability, delivery, and recognition are distributed across multiple systems (Damme, 2002; Zwanikken et al., 2013). Policy responses, therefore, need to move beyond purely domestic accreditation toward cross-border regulatory strategies, including capacity strengthening of national QA, mutual recognition arrangements, meta-accreditation of QA agencies, and international accreditation schemes, as already conceptualised in international QA models linked to cross-border education markets (Damme, 2002). At the global and regional levels, UNESCO's normative work explicitly frames transnational QA around mutual trust, respect for diversity of higher education systems, quality management of transnational educational services, and mechanisms to detect dishonest providers, implying that governance must prioritise both cooperation and protection of stakeholders in borderless settings (Авшенюк, 2020). Because QA actors operate simultaneously across global, national, and local scales, policy design must anticipate "glonacal" interactions rather than assume a single sovereign locus of control Hou et al., 2014).

A core governance implication is the need for clear authorisation structures and legal fit-for-purpose arrangements when QA activity crosses borders. Cross-border QA practice demonstrates that agencies operating outside their home jurisdictions must articulate a rationale for engagement, align standards and procedures with host-system expectations, and possess a clear understanding of the relevant legal framework (Fearnside & Chung, 2017). Similarly, regulatory frameworks for TNHE may require standards that ensure equivalence of quality while permitting contextual divergence, as illustrated by the evolution of Australia's regulatory approach to assuring standards "wherever" a course is offered and "however" it is delivered, alongside revisions intended to support local cultural and contextual divergence (Bentley et al., 2017). Legal-institutional clarity is also critical domestically because accreditation system design can be judicially contested; Germany's 2016 Federal Constitutional Court verdict finding the then-program accreditation system unconstitutional indicates that accreditation governance requires robust statutory foundations and appropriately delegated authority (Quapp, 2018). In parallel, governance reforms that shift responsibility toward institutional autonomy, such as Taiwan's dual-track framework combining accreditation and authorised self-accreditation, imply that policy must specify accountability boundaries, conflict-of-interest safeguards, and oversight mechanisms when institutions accredit their own programs (Chen & Hou, 2016; Hou et al., 2014).

Borderless accreditation also raises integrity and transparency obligations that are intensified by market pressures. International accreditation can support systems lacking a

fully developed QA capacity. Yet, competitive motivations may encourage accumulation of accreditation stars, and the cross-border environment is especially exposed to accreditation mills that sell status without independent assessment and may sit beyond effective national jurisdiction (Hou, 2010). UNESCO's emphasis on detecting dishonest providers implies that cross-border governance must incorporate transparency requirements and information-sharing infrastructures to reduce asymmetries for students, employers, and regulators (Авшенюк, 2020). Sector-specific evidence similarly underscores transparency as a trust-building policy issue; calls for making accreditation results easily accessible are justified as a means to build trust among communities and stakeholders (Talaat et al., 2023). Finally, the emergence of alleged corruption as a specific research and policy concern in accreditation suggests a governance agenda focused on integrity controls, procedural safeguards, and credible oversight arrangements rather than reliance on accreditation labels alone (Kumar et al., 2025).

Operationally, policy must address the evidentiary and administrative demands of accreditation, especially as provision digitalises and review modalities shift. Outcome- and learning-outcomes-based accreditation models reflect a system-level expectation for concrete evidence of student achievement and reporting practices that permit evaluative judgments and improvement (Hou, 2010), consistent with broader claims that accreditors and governmental bodies require evidence of learning outcomes and accountability Hussain et al., 2020). However, accreditation can be time- and bureaucracy-intensive, particularly for first-time institutions and new or innovative programs, so governance reforms increasingly intersect with digital transformation and process modernisation (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). Evidence from accreditation information systems designed around national standards shows that digitized QA infrastructures can integrate data across units, improve transparency, reduce delays, and support timely completion of accreditation instruments Fariani & Damayanti, 2020), while digital quality management systems have been proposed to automate learning-outcome data collection and enable virtual accreditation audits when on-site visits are disrupted (Hussain et al., 2020). These developments imply that future accreditation governance will need explicit standards for data quality, verification, and comparability in digitally mediated evidence production, while also ensuring that efficiency reforms do not weaken the credibility of cross-border quality judgments (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023; Hussain et al., 2020; Fariani & Damayanti, 2020).

Conclusion

The centrality of borderless accreditation for transnational higher education derives from its ability to make quality claims recognisable outside the regulatory purview of a single state. But there is more to it than technical insulation: borderless accreditors are also in on the game of producing and circulating prestige, making for portable signals that socialise institutional strategy, student demand, and global competition. This dual

role creates an ongoing tension between work quality improvement and status-seeking visibility, particularly when accreditation is regarded more as a market credential than as a development process.

Key to the chapter's argument is that successful borderless accreditation relies less on a proliferation of standards than on the perceived legitimacy of governance arrangements that support trust across jurisdictions. Such arrangements depend on clear authority, fit-for-purpose evaluation designs, honest reporting, and strong protection against opportunistic quality claims. With digital transformation of online and hybrid provision growing and the pace of evidence production speeding up, accreditation will probably move even more towards a performance-based, ongoing assurance based on data. The challenge to be faced in the future is to make sure that such changes actually enhance educational substance and protect the public rather than just ratcheting up competitive signalling amidst a prestige economy where borders don't count.

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CHAPTER 8

Quality as Relationship, Prestige as Illusion: Towards Ubuntu-Informed Transformation in Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter examines how global higher education increasingly defines quality through rankings, accreditation systems, and performance indicators linked to prestige, visibility, and competitive advantage. Although these mechanisms promote accountability, they may overlook deeper concerns related to equity, inclusion, and social justice, particularly in historically unequal contexts such as South Africa. Using a conceptual and interpretive approach, the chapter compares prestige-oriented global measures with South Africa's policy commitments to transformation, access, and public accountability. It draws on policy documents and cultural narratives, including The Ron Clark Story and Amateur, to reveal the limitations of individualised accounts of educational success. Ubuntu is employed as a normative and analytical framework emphasizing relationality, collective responsibility, epistemic justice, and human dignity. The chapter argues that Ubuntu offers an alternative understanding of quality, defining excellence as an ethical, relational, and justice-oriented achievement while repositioning higher education as a space for collective transformation and shared human flourishing.
Keywords: Ubuntu philosophy; higher education quality; quality assurance; transformation in higher education; equity and inclusion; global university rankings

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, higher education systems globally are positioned within a highly competitive ecosystem. In this environment, prestige, visibility, and rankings increasingly shape institutional legitimacy, resource flows, and academic reputation (Times Higher Education, 2025). The University of Cape Town has made recent climbs in international rankings (UCT News, 2025). These improvements reflect not only

citation impact and research reach but also global perceptions of quality and influence in knowledge production. Such performance indicators are emblematic of a broader global race for prestige, where universities strive to differentiate themselves through research output, internationalisation, and selective excellence. In South Africa, this quest is overlaid upon a transformative policy mandate that seeks to redress the historical inequities of apartheid. It foregrounds equity, relevance, and inclusivity as central goals of the higher education system. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), established under the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997), serves as the country's statutory quality council (Republic of South Africa, 1997). It mandates quality assurance, accreditation, and strategic advice to the Minister of Higher Education and Training. The CHE's mission emphatically includes promoting access and success for historically disadvantaged populations and supporting a diverse, equitable, and quality higher education sector (Council on Higher Education, 2025).

The foundational policy architecture for quality in South African higher education is deliberately multi-dimensional. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is a key statutory committee of the CHE that embeds quality assurance within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Council on Higher Education, 2025). It aligns programme relevance, responsiveness, and standards with national socio-economic development goals. Quality assurance is not merely an administrative exercise (Rudakova, 2025). It is part of a broader social contract between universities and society. This contract aims to ensure relevance and accountability in teaching, research, and community engagement. However, the contemporary landscape reveals tension between global prestige metrics and the transformative imperatives that post-apartheid policy aspires to institutionalise. International rankings often prioritise research outputs that are comparable on a worldwide scale, reputation surveys, and resource-intensive measures (Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). These factors tend to favour established institutions that have historically had advantages. Therefore, universities that focus on teaching, access, and societal impact may be marginalised. In South Africa, universities, even those recognised globally, must navigate the tensions between prestige-driven incentives and the critical issues of equity, relevance, and local accountability (Raciti & Motala, 2025).

This chapter argues that prevailing conceptions of quality and excellence are rooted in global comparability and often tied to narrow performance indicators. These factors risk obscuring more profound structural inequities. Additionally, these conceptions limit transformative potential. In South Africa, quality cannot be an abstraction divorced from historical injustice, socio-economic stratification, and the lived experiences of diverse student bodies (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2025). To navigate these tensions, this chapter proposes that Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophical tradition, encapsulates relationality, collective responsibility, and human dignity (Kamga, 2018). It offers a critical normative framework for rethinking quality in higher education. Ubuntu emphasises the idea that

"umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (Kamga, 2018, p. 626), meaning a person is a person through other persons, emphasising the importance of interconnectedness. It positions social well-being as a core educational goal, challenging individualistic and prestige-driven models. Through articulating Ubuntu as an analytical lens, the chapter begins a sustained critique of dominant quality paradigms, setting the stage for both conceptual reorientation and policy reflection.

Why Quality Matters

In the 21st century, the quest for prestige in higher education has intensified, turning global rankings into key indicators of institutional reputation and legitimacy. These rankings, such as the Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings, increasingly influence perceptions among prospective students and funding bodies (Times Higher Education, 2025; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025). However, critics emphasise that these systems often prioritise quantifiable research outputs and financial resources, marginalising institutions focused on teaching, access, and societal impact. As such, the emphasis on narrow performance indicators risks obscuring more profound structural inequities and the transformative potential of higher education. Understanding the implications of these quality metrics is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable higher education.

THE Global Race for Prestige, Rankings, Accreditation, and Visibility

Higher education in the 21st century has become a globalised field of competitive hierarchies in which institutions strive for visibility, reputation, and prestige. Ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings have become prominent signals of institutional prestige (Marginson, 2014; Dearden et al., 2019). They shape perceptions among prospective students, faculty, and funders. These global rankings are now embedded in the governance frameworks, strategic planning documents, and internationalisation strategies of universities worldwide. However, a substantial body of literature critiques the epistemic foundations and normative effects of rankings on institutional behaviour and academic missions.

Scholars observe that global ranking systems emphasise quantifiable research outputs, citation metrics, and reputational surveys (Dougherty & Horne, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). These systems often privilege research-intensive institutions with substantial financial resources. Consequently, they marginalise those whose strengths lie in community engagement, contextual teaching excellence, or transformative inclusion. As Nguyen et al. (2024) note, such rankings frequently reinforce a narrow understanding of quality focused on global reputational capital, not local relevance. This emphasis can inadvertently relegate core functions of higher education, particularly teaching and social responsiveness, to secondary status (Dougherty & Horne, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono,

2024). Consequently, universities can engage in isomorphic behaviours aimed at improving their visible metrics rather than focusing on deepening contextual quality (Selten et al., 2020; Dougherty & Horne, 2022). This trend entrenches a prestige-driven logic rather than one that prioritises holistic educational value.

The resilience of rankings as cultural artefacts within the neoliberal academy reflects a broader shift toward market logics in higher education governance. Rankings are simultaneously tools of accountability, competition, and branding. They invite critique, as they may not reliably measure the multifaceted quality of universities, especially those serving historically marginalised populations or prioritising social justice missions (Dougherty & Horne, 2022; Ramadhan & Sarwono, 2024). The methodological opacity and heavy weighting toward research metrics have prompted scholars to argue that rankings often fail to capture meaningful indicators of teaching excellence and student experience (Selten et al., 2020; Dougherty & Horne, 2022). Furthermore, they suggest that these rankings do not adequately reflect community impact.

South Africa's Higher Education Landscape: CHE, HEQC, and Transformation Imperatives

In South Africa, quality assurance and transformation are central to higher education policy. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), established under the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997), serves as the statutory quality council responsible for guiding and monitoring quality assurance across the sector (Republic of South Africa, 1997). The CHE's mission explicitly encompasses not only the accreditation of programmes and institutions but also promoting access, success, diversity, and inclusivity across historically divided higher education institutions (Council on Higher Education, 2025). Through its subsidiary, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the CHE operationalises quality assurance systems that align national policies with institutional practices. National quality assurance frameworks, including the HEQC's practice standards, attempt to balance accountability with developmental responsiveness. As articulated in recent policy discourse, the CHE encourages institutions to move beyond minimal compliance (Council on Higher Education, 2025). Instead, it advocates for a reflective, contextually responsive implementation of quality standards that acknowledges diversity among institutions and their communities. This shift reflects an intention to reconcile quality assurance with broader transformation imperatives, including addressing structural inequities and promoting socio-economic inclusion (Council on Higher Education, 2025). It emphasises the need to understand quality as something that is interconnected with contextual needs, rather than as a technocratic formula.

Despite these policy intentions, South African quality assurance is not immune to tension. Stakeholder perspectives indicate that quality remains a fluid, context-bound concept potentially defined in relation to inputs, processes, outputs, and the lived

experiences of diverse learners (Council on Higher Education, 2025). Historically, quality assurance instruments were developed to serve both accountability and improvement purposes. However, differences in stakeholder views, ideological orientations, and institutional histories complicate uniform implementation (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2024). The challenge of designing quality frameworks that simultaneously enhance performance, ensure accountability, and advance equity is well documented (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2024). This suggests that quality assurance is as much a political and cultural process as it is a technical one.

Stories That Teach: THE Ron Clark Lens

In an era defined by competitive higher education landscapes, the Ron Clack Lens offers a unique framework for storytelling that goes beyond conventional narratives. It draws from the principles of interconnectivity and collective responsibility, echoing the Ubuntu philosophy. This lens emphasises the importance of social well-being and the lived experiences of diverse communities, challenging prevailing notions of individualism and prestige. Through reframing stories through this perspective, the study demonstrates the transformative potential of education in addressing historical inequities and fostering inclusivity. The Ron Clack Lens serves as a powerful tool for rethinking quality and relevance in higher education narratives.

Heroic Teaching in Harlem and Its Limits

Popular educational narratives often centre on singular heroic figures who, through passion and determination, seemingly transform dysfunctional schools and disengaged students. The Ron Clark Story, a television film based on the real teacher Ron Clark, exemplifies this genre (Haines, 2006). The film describes Clark leaving a stable teaching post in rural North Carolina to teach in an underperforming sixth-grade classroom in Harlem, New York (Haines, 2006). Initially dismissed by administrators and ostracised by students, Clark uses creative methods, music, unconventional lessons, personal engagement, and high expectations to win trust (Haines, 2006). Therefore, he improves both behaviour and test performance in the class that others have abandoned. In the narrative arc, Clark's energy, resilience, and relationship-building lead to dramatic improvements in the students' academic outcomes.

In cinematic terms, The Ron Clark Story offers an inspirational archetype: the dedicated teacher whose personal commitment enables transformation against structural adversity. Several educational analyses note that the film foregrounds Clark's strategic teaching approaches, including rapport-building with students and families. It also stresses differentiated instruction and motivational techniques designed to resonate with the class's lived experiences. These approaches are portrayed as driving academic success even in a class marked by low prior achievement and complex socio-economic backgrounds.

However, as reviewers and critics have pointed out, this narrative often flattens complexity and swings toward what some scholars describe as the hero teacher figure. This cultural frame valorises individual capacity while obscuring broader systemic factors. A viewer commentary explicitly critiques interpretations of the story as a systematic white saviour narrative:

"This is a functional white saviour teacher movie ... the story stays traditional and on the expected path." (Haines, 2006)

Such readings recognise that popular depictions can simplify real conditions of urban education and systemic disadvantage. The film's dramatic structure, tension, breakthrough, and resolution necessarily abbreviate the institutional, socio-cultural, and resource constraints that shape the schooling environment (Haines, 2006). Clark's personal efforts are laudable in narrative terms. However, they do not provide analytic leverage for understanding how structural inequities in funding, policy, and community resources shape educational quality in historically marginalised communities. Singling out individual effort can obscure persistent organisational barriers and the uneven distribution of material and pedagogical supports. This narrative limitation stresses a broader caution: hero narratives provide compelling stories but are insufficient for systemic critique.

Lessons for Universities and Systemic Change

Despite its narrative framing, The Ron Clark Story contains elements that explain broader questions relevant to higher education quality and transformation (Haines, 2006). These elements particularly emphasise the interplay between teacher agency and institutional frameworks. Clark's methods emphasise relationship-centred pedagogy, the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies, and high expectations grounded in belief in students' potential (Haines, 2006). These themes resonate with research on culturally responsive pedagogy. This research suggests that meaningful educational engagement arises from practices that recognise and build on students' identities, experiences, and strengths. Although the film's context is a sixth-grade classroom, the underlying educational logic, investment in relationships, high expectations, and adaptive methods are significant. This logic has conceptual parallels in higher education contexts, where student diversity, inclusion, and engagement are central quality concerns.

Moreover, the film describes Clark's interactions with students' families and their life circumstances. These interactions point to ecosystemic determinants of learning that extend beyond the classroom walls. Clark's willingness to learn about students' lived realities, including the socio-economic pressures they face outside of school, aligns with the broader literature on context-sensitive educational practices. These practices account for structural marginalisation and the community environment. In higher education, similar sensitivities are essential when institutions engage with historically excluded

student populations. Structural barriers, including schooling inequalities, community disadvantage, and socio-economic precarity, shape these students' pathways.

Nonetheless, the film's narrative logic stops short of engaging with institutional and policy structures that condition the environment in which education occurs. It highlights individual innovation rather than collective responsibility, policy alignment, or systemic accountability mechanisms, aspects that are central to higher education transformation. The film's pedagogical tactics serve as empirical models of engagement and relational practices. However, they do not substitute for rigorous analysis of policy infrastructures, resource distribution, or systemic reform strategies.

THE Danger of Hero Narratives

If taken uncritically, heroic teacher narratives like The Ron Clark Story can reinforce simplified models of quality that emphasise individual effort over collective and systemic transformation. Education scholarship cautions against framing quality improvement solely as a function of exceptional individuals, noting that such narratives may inadvertently

"reinforce the absurd notion that students ... can always 'pick themselves up by their bootstraps'" (Haines, 2006)

with the help of a motivated teacher. This critique emphasises that while exceptional practice is valuable, structural conditions matter significantly. Singular heroism cannot substitute for equitable resourcing, policy coherence, and supportive institutional cultures. Hero narratives also risk marginalising the voices and agency of learners themselves, especially those who navigate complex socio-economic landscapes. Clark's story, as described in the film, centres on the teacher's perspective and actions, with the students' experiences filtered through his relational engagement (Haines, 2006). Such narrative centring can inadvertently minimise students' own resilience, socio-cultural resources, and interpretive agency. In higher education, where student voice and agency are increasingly recognised as central to quality and belonging, this narrative limitation is particularly salient.

Film Amateur as a document analysis case for neurodiversity, identity crises, and systemic invisibility

Although Amateur is not primarily a film about education policy, its narrative outlines a gifted young athlete navigating institutional and ethical pressures (Koo, 2018). This offers a symbolic case for exploring issues of identity, systemic invisibility, and normative structures. The film tells the story of Terron Forte, a 14-year-old basketball phenom recruited to an elite prep school system. He confronts the ethical and structural pressures of amateur athletics and institutional expectations while trying to pursue his passion (Koo, 2018). While Amateur does not foreground neurodiversity explicitly, its thematic focus on an individual negotiating identity, institutional rules, and external

pressures can serve as analytic material. This can help us think about how educational institutions construct norms of success and belonging.

The film's emphasis on fitting in and navigating identity within competitive structures reflects broader questions in higher education (Koo, 2018). It also addresses the challenges of confronting ethical dilemmas and how systems recognise or marginalise diverse forms of competence, agency, and student identity. Conceptually, then, Amateur can be read metaphorically as a text for document analysis. It is not just a direct case study of neurodiversity, but rather a cultural artefact that invites reflection on how institutions, norms, and evaluative structures shape personal trajectories and identity formation. Additionally, it highlights the visibility or invisibility of particular forms of talent and difference. Concerning this chapter, such an analysis emphasises the limits of normative success metrics, whether in sports, schooling, or higher education. It also reveals how institutional expectations can invisibilise alternative capacities, identities, and pathways.

Competing Definitions of Quality

In the evolving landscape of higher education, competing definitions of quality emerge from the interplay between global rankings and local imperatives. While international metrics often emphasise research output and visibility (Yadigarova, 2025), they frequently overlook the unique challenges faced by institutions in transforming societies, particularly in contexts like South Africa. This tension emphasises the risk of prioritising prestige over equity and inclusivity, as universities strive to align with both global standards and local needs. As the quest for legitimacy and resource allocation intensifies, it becomes essential to redefine quality in ways that address historical injustices and foster social well-being. A more refined understanding of quality must incorporate local realities alongside global expectations.

Policy and Accreditation Frameworks in South Africa

In South Africa, the quality of higher education is defined and operationalised principally through a tripartite institutional architecture comprised of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and its permanent committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2025; South African Qualifications Authority, 2025). Each of these bodies plays a distinct but interrelated role in defining, assuring, and accrediting quality in universities and other post-school education sectors. The CHE, established under the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, serves as the Quality Council for Higher Education within the South African Qualifications Framework (NQF) system (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2025). Its mandate includes advising the Minister, developing and managing the Higher Education

Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), and implementing policies that govern programme accreditation, institutional audits, and quality promotion in higher education. The Council on Higher Education's (2025) Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) articulates a multi-dimensional and integrated approach to quality that encompasses learning and teaching, research, community engagement, and the broader social purpose of higher education. The QAF explicitly links quality to knowledge generation, student development, and the preparation of graduates capable of addressing complex societal challenges, with attention to national, continental, and global citizenship.

Under the NQF, SAQA provides overarching governance for qualifications by developing and implementing policies and criteria for the registration of qualifications across education sectors, including higher education (South African Qualifications Authority, 2025). SAQA's role is integrative, ensuring that qualifications meet national criteria for legitimacy, credibility, and articulation within the NQF (South African Qualifications Authority, 2025). The NQF's design, involving multiple sub-frameworks overseen by quality councils, is intended to promote systemic coherence, transparency, and learner mobility across sectors. DHET, as the governmental policy authority, regulates the unified higher education system and sets national statutory frameworks that define minimum requirements for qualification offerings and institutional registration (Republic of South Africa, 1997). The DHET policy documents highlight the connection between internal institutional quality mechanisms, accreditation by the CHE, and registration on the NQF. They emphasise that external quality assurance is integrated within broader policy objectives. These objectives include transformation, access, and graduate employability.

Within the South African quality architecture, quality is therefore framed as a norm-referenced, context-responsive construct (Govender et al., 2025). It is not merely about meeting pre-defined inputs or outputs. It is also about how well programs and institutions serve national goals, such as transformation, social inclusion, and economic development (Sachs et al., 2019; Zavgorodniy, 2022). Furthermore, they must comply with statutory benchmarks that protect students and maintain public confidence in qualifications. A distinct feature of the CHE's QAF is its intentional integration of institutional self-evaluation with external peer review. Quality is understood as both an internal, reflective institutional process and an outward, systematic account of alignment with national qualification standards and improvement aspirations. The QAF's scope extends beyond narrow compliance to include capacity development, internal quality assurance systems, and evidence-informed enhancement strategies (Council on Higher Education, 2025). While these frameworks aim to align South Africa's higher education quality mechanisms with national imperatives, they also reveal conceptual contestation. The CHE's model emphasises quality as fitness for purpose, relevance, and transformational impact, rather than merely complying with technical criteria (Council

on Higher Education, 2025). This orientation connects quality to equity, access, and contextual responsiveness. It diverges from narrow interpretations of quality that reduce it to quantitative benchmarks or institutional ranking positions.

Global Rankings and Prestige-Focused Quality Metrics

In contrast to national policy frameworks that embed quality within societal purpose and equity aims, global ranking systems operationalise university quality primarily through quantitative metrics. These metrics emphasise research performance, reputation, and international visibility. Two of the most influential global ranking systems are the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings and the QS World University Rankings. These rankings demonstrate how quality is constructed in ways that privilege specific institutional attributes (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2025). The Rankings classify university performance across five core pillars, including teaching environment, research environment, and international outlook (Marginson, 2014). Furthermore, they assess research quality, often measured through citation impact and industry income. These indicators are aggregated using standardised data submitted by institutions, with heavy weight given to research intensity and impact alongside teaching reputation and international engagement.

Similarly, QS Rankings employ a set of indicators grouped around academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty/student ratios, research citations per faculty, and internationalisation measures (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025). Academic reputation alone, derived from global surveys of academics, may account for a significant proportion of the overall score, reinforcing the emphasis on reputation as a proxy for quality (Qazi & Al-Mhdawi, 2025). These ranking methodologies reveal an implicit theory of quality that equates institutional excellence with research prominence, global visibility, international student and staff diversity, and reputational esteem. The prioritisation of bibliometric indicators and reputational surveys aligns quality with visibility in scholarly networks and global markets. This focus tends to overshadow deep systemic goals such as equity, community impact, or teaching-learning transformation. Scholarly assessments of rankings also emphasise the limitations of such quality conceptualisations (Depo, 2024).

Critics argue that these systems often measure reputation and research output rather than intrinsic educational quality (Vernon et al., 2018). They also contend that they may incentivise behaviour aligned with global competitiveness instead of local relevance. Additionally, these systems can reproduce hierarchies that favour well-resourced, historically advantaged institutions, thereby amplifying global inequalities in higher education. Thus, while rankings serve functions for students, funders, and policymakers, such as signalling comparative strengths or enabling market visibility, they remain partial and contested constructs of quality. They offer one lens through which performance is

viewed. However, they do not capture the multi-dimensional, socially embedded, and contextually grounded quality dimensions emphasised in national assurance systems such as South Africa's CHE/HEQC-SAQA framework.

Prestige as Illusion versus Transformation

The association of policy-based quality definitions with ranking-driven prestige metrics reveals an essential conceptual tension. This tension arises from the conflict between using prestige and quantifiable excellence as proxies versus pursuing transformational quality anchored in equity, inclusion, and societal relevance (Gill et al., 2022). Global rankings prioritise standardised, quantifiable outputs and reputational signals that facilitate international comparability (Komotar, 2019). However, this often comes at the expense of conditions and contributions that matter most in local contexts. South African policy frameworks embed quality in serving the national socio-economic agenda and protect students while supporting diversity (Maama, 2023). They also foster institutional cultures that advance equity and inclusion. These different regimes reflect underlying questions about the purpose of quality. Should quality primarily signal institutional competitiveness in global markets? Or should it fundamentally reflect how well higher education fulfils its public mission, nurtures critical citizenship, and promotes equitable opportunities?

The answer to this question has profound implications for policy, institutional priorities, and conceptualisations of excellence. In sum, competing definitions of quality, policy-embedded, equity-oriented frameworks, and global prestige-oriented rankings explain different dimensions of what quality might mean in higher education. Understanding these competing logics is crucial for analysing how quality is operationalised in policy and how institutions respond to multi-scalar expectations. Moreover, alternative paradigms such as Ubuntu-informed excellence might reframe what it means to be excellent in a socially just higher education system.

Ubuntu as a Different Path

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, the relentless pursuit of global prestige often overshadows the foundational goals of equity and inclusivity, particularly evident in South Africa. This chapter suggests that the philosophy of Ubuntu provides an essential alternative framework for rethinking quality in education. This is achieved through emphasising interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and human dignity. Ubuntu challenges the prevailing metrics of success that prioritise individual achievements and research output over community well-being (Kamga, 2018). It calls for a deeper understanding of quality that is rooted in the historical and socio-economic realities faced by diverse student populations. Therefore, embracing Ubuntu fosters a more holistic approach to educational excellence that aligns with transformative policy mandates.

THE Philosophy of Relationship, Justice, and Collective Responsibility

Ubuntu is a normative African philosophy grounded in relational ontology, often expressed through the maxim "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (Kamga, 2018, p. 626): a person is a person through other persons. Philosophically, Ubuntu rejects atomistic and individualistic conceptions of the self (Letseka, 2012). It positions human identity, dignity, and flourishing as fundamentally constituted through relationships, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. Within this framework, ethical life is not defined primarily by competition, accumulation, or individual achievement, but by mutual recognition, care, and justice-oriented interdependence.

Scholars argue that Ubuntu articulates a moral economy that foregrounds human dignity, social harmony, and collective well-being (Letseka, 2012; Kamga, 2018). This perspective offers a counter-logic to neoliberal paradigms that prioritise efficiency, performance metrics, and hierarchical differentiation. Importantly, Ubuntu is not merely a cultural ideal or moral exhortation; it constitutes a normative framework with implications for governance, accountability, and institutional responsibility. It demands that social institutions, including universities, be evaluated not only by outputs or prestige but by how they sustain relationships, enable participation, and advance justice. In the context of higher education, Ubuntu provides a philosophical lens through which quality can be reconceptualised as a relational and ethical achievement, rather than a competitive ranking position. This reconceptualisation directly challenges global quality regimes that privilege visibility, reputational capital, and comparative performance over social responsibility and inclusive participation.

Ubuntu in South African Higher Education Scholarship

South African higher education scholarship has increasingly engaged Ubuntu as a critical resource for transformation. This engagement is particularly in response to persistent inequities, student alienation, and institutional cultures that remain misaligned with the lived realities of diverse students. Letseka (2012) argues that Ubuntu offers an ethical foundation for education that prioritises belonging, moral development, and social responsibility. This perspective positions education as a public good rather than a private investment. Within this framing, quality cannot be reduced to throughput rates or research output alone, but must include how institutions cultivate humane, inclusive, and dialogical learning environments. Empirical and conceptual studies in higher education have linked Ubuntu-informed pedagogies to inclusive teaching practices, student engagement, and peer-based support systems (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Sparks & Louw, 2023). This is especially relevant for students navigating structural disadvantage. While this chapter does not make causal claims, the literature suggests that Ubuntu provides a theoretical vocabulary for understanding why relational practices are central to educational quality. This includes mentoring, collective learning, and recognition of student identity, especially in contexts marked by inequality.

Ubuntu scholarship in higher education also interrogates epistemic justice. Scholars argue that dominant academic cultures often marginalise African ways of knowing, reproducing colonial epistemologies that privilege Eurocentric norms of excellence and legitimacy (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Sparks & Louw, 2023). From this perspective, quality assurance regimes that rely heavily on global ranking benchmarks risk reinforcing epistemic exclusion. They valorise research visibility and citation patterns that systematically disadvantage locally grounded, socially responsive scholarship. Ubuntu, therefore, reframes quality as epistemically plural, relationally grounded, and ethically accountable. It demands attention to whose knowledge counts, whose voices are heard, and whose success is recognised within institutional definitions of excellence.

Connecting Ubuntu to Higher Education Policy Frameworks

While Ubuntu is often discussed at the level of philosophy or pedagogy, its relevance extends to institutional governance and policy frameworks. South Africa's higher education quality architecture, particularly through the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), already contains implicit normative commitments that resonate with Ubuntu, even if not explicitly framed as such (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2025). The CHE's Quality Assurance Framework emphasises transformation, access, student success, responsiveness to context, and social accountability, positioning quality as a public responsibility rather than a market signal (Council on Higher Education, 2025). Ubuntu offers a conceptual bridge that can make these policy commitments analytically coherent (Letseka, 2012). For example, the CHE's insistence on institutional self-evaluation, peer review, and continuous improvement aligns with Ubuntu's emphasis on collective responsibility and relational accountability (Letseka, 2012; Council on Higher Education, 2025). Quality assurance, from an Ubuntu-informed perspective, is not merely about compliance with minimum standards, but about sustaining ethical relationships between institutions, students, communities, and the state. Ubuntu challenges the dominance of prestige-oriented quality indicators by foregrounding relational outcomes that global rankings fail to capture. These outcomes include aspects such as student belonging, institutional care, and community engagement. While ranking systems measure visibility and reputation, Ubuntu directs attention to institutional obligations toward those most vulnerable within the system. This includes first-generation students, students with disabilities, and those navigating socio-economic precarity. This reframing does not reject accountability or excellence; instead, it redefines excellence as justice-oriented and inclusive.

Redefining Excellence: Inclusivity, Sustainability, and Community Engagement

Under an Ubuntu-informed framework, excellence in higher education is not an abstract status conferred by global comparison, but a practice sustained through ethical relationships (Waghid, 2020). Inclusivity becomes a core quality indicator, not as a symbolic commitment but as an institutional capacity to recognise difference, respond to diverse needs, and enable meaningful participation (Letseka, 2012; Kamga, 2018). Sustainability is reframed as the capacity of institutions to maintain relational integrity over time. It ensures that quality enhancement does not come at the expense of human dignity or social cohesion. Community engagement, often marginalised in prestige-driven quality regimes, assumes central importance within Ubuntu. Universities are understood as embedded social institutions, accountable to the communities they serve. Quality, therefore, includes how knowledge production and teaching practices contribute to social well-being, democratic participation, and collective problem-solving. This aligns with South African policy discourses that position higher education as a driver of social and economic development, rather than a detached elite enterprise. In this sense, Ubuntu does not merely supplement existing quality frameworks; it reorients the evaluative logic of higher education (Waghid, 2020). It shifts the focus from competition to care, from visibility to responsibility, and from individual prestige to collective flourishing. This reorientation provides the normative foundation for the chapter's subsequent discussion of transformative policy and institutional practice. In this chapter, quality is understood as a relational achievement rather than a positional advantage.

Towards Transformation

The landscape of higher education in the twenty-first century is shaped by global competition, where institutional prestige and rankings increasingly dictate legitimacy and resource allocation. In South Africa, this competitive environment intersects with transformative policies aimed at addressing historical inequities stemming from apartheid, prioritising equity and inclusivity in higher education. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) plays a crucial role in promoting quality while grappling with the tensions between global performance metrics and local imperatives (Council on Higher Education, 2025). This chapter argues for rethinking quality through the lens of Ubuntu, a philosophy that emphasises interconnectedness and collective responsibility, positioning social well-being as a core educational goal (Waghid, 2020). Eventually, we seek a more holistic understanding of quality, one that aligns with the transformative aspirations of the South African higher education system.

Policy Implications: Reshaping Accreditation and Quality Assurance

If quality in higher education is to be redefined through an Ubuntu-informed lens, significant implications arise for policy design, accreditation processes, and quality assurance regimes (Waghid, 2020). South Africa's higher education policy architecture, particularly through the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), already acknowledges that quality must be linked to transformation, responsiveness, and social accountability (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2025). The operationalisation of these commitments often remains constrained by compliance-oriented indicators and reporting logics. These systems tend to privilege demonstrable outputs over relational and ethical dimensions of institutional life. Ubuntu reframes quality assurance as a form of collective ethical accountability, rather than a purely technocratic exercise (Letseka, 2012). From this perspective, accreditation processes should not merely verify whether minimum standards are met, but should interrogate how institutions enable participation, recognise difference, and sustain inclusive academic cultures. This does not imply abandoning rigour or standards; instead, it suggests broadening evaluative criteria to include how institutions enact care, relational responsibility, and justice in teaching, learning, and governance.

Policy frameworks such as the CHE's Quality Assurance Framework already gesture toward such an approach by emphasising institutional self-evaluation, peer review, and contextual responsiveness. Ubuntu provides the normative coherence that can bind these elements together, positioning quality assurance as a dialogical process rooted in mutual responsibility between institutions, regulators, and the public. In this sense, transformation is not an outcome imposed externally, but a relational process cultivated through reflective engagement. At the policy level, Ubuntu also challenges the uncritical importation of global ranking logics into national quality discourses. While international comparability remains relevant, Ubuntu insists that quality indicators be evaluated against local social imperatives, including equity, access, and redress. An Ubuntu-informed policy stance would therefore resist equating institutional excellence with positional advantage in global hierarchies, instead foregrounding the institution's contribution to collective social good.

Practical Shifts: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Institutional Culture

Transformation cannot be realised through policy discourse alone (Schmidt, 2011). It must be enacted through institutional practices that shape the everyday experiences of students and staff. Ubuntu provides a framework for rethinking curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture as interconnected sites where quality is produced relationally (Waghid, 2020; Ajayi, 2025). In curriculum design, Ubuntu challenges content-centred and canon-driven approaches that marginalise local knowledge systems and lived experience. An Ubuntu-informed curriculum does not reject disciplinary rigour; instead,

it seeks to broaden epistemic horizons. It recognises African scholarship, contextual knowledge, and diverse intellectual traditions as integral to academic quality (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025). This approach aligns with calls for epistemic justice in South African higher education, where students have repeatedly highlighted alienation arising from curricula that fail to reflect their realities.

Pedagogically, Ubuntu foregrounds relational engagement, dialogical learning, and collective responsibility for success. Teaching quality, from this perspective, is not reducible to individual lecturer performance or student throughput metrics (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025). Instead, it is understood as an institutional capacity to create learning environments where students experience belonging, recognition, and meaningful participation. This resonates with critiques of heroic teaching narratives, such as those demonstrated in The Ron Clark Story, which valorise individual effort while obscuring the structural supports required to sustain quality teaching at scale. Institutional culture is a particularly critical site of transformation. Ubuntu challenges competitive, exclusionary academic cultures that reward individual achievement at the expense of collaboration and care. In practice, this implies rethinking performance management systems, promotion criteria, and reward structures that prioritise prestige-driven outputs over relational labour, mentorship, and community engagement. While such shifts are complex and contested, the literature suggests that institutional cultures play a decisive role in shaping student experience, staff well-being, and the sustainability of transformation initiatives.

Sustainable Futures: Quality as Relationship, Not Prestige

One of the central contributions of an Ubuntu-informed conception of quality is its emphasis on sustainability (Kamga, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This sustainability encompasses not just environmental factors, but also the sustainability of institutional relationships, practices, and commitments over time. Prestige-driven quality regimes often incentivise short-term gains in visibility and ranking position, sometimes at the cost of long-term institutional cohesion and social trust. Ubuntu, by contrast, frames sustainability as the capacity of institutions to maintain ethical relationships with students, communities, and the broader society. From this perspective, quality is not a static attribute or a competitive ranking slot, but a dynamic relational achievement that must be continually nurtured. This has important implications for how transformation is understood. Rather than viewing transformation as a finite project with measurable endpoints, Ubuntu conceptualises it as an ongoing ethical obligation. It represents a commitment to adapt institutional practices in response to changing social conditions and student needs. The revealing analysis of Amateur reinforces this point. The film's depiction of an individual navigating institutional expectations and identity pressures stresses how systems often reward narrow forms of excellence while rendering other capacities invisible. In higher education, similar dynamics play out when quality

frameworks privilege certain forms of achievement while marginalising students whose curves do not conform to dominant norms. Ubuntu challenges institutions to ask not only who succeeds, but who is enabled to belong, persist, and flourish within the system.

A Cautious Note on Limits and Possibilities

While Ubuntu offers a powerful normative framework for rethinking quality, it is important to acknowledge its limits (Waghid, 2020). Ubuntu does not provide a technical blueprint for policy reform (Ngcetane-Vika & Pule, 2025). It also does not resolve the structural constraints facing South African higher education, including resource inequalities, massification pressures, and global competitiveness demands. Moreover, the translation of ethical principles into institutional practice is neither linear nor guaranteed. The literature suggests that Ubuntu's contribution lies less in prescriptive solutions and more in its capacity to reorient evaluative frameworks and institutional priorities. It invites policymakers, institutional leaders, and academics to interrogate the assumptions underpinning dominant quality paradigms. It also encourages a critical reflection on whose interests are served by existing definitions of excellence. Transformation outcomes, therefore, remain contingent, context-dependent, and subject to ongoing negotiation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that quality in higher education is neither a neutral technical construct nor a self-evident indicator of excellence. Instead, it is a contested, value-laden concept shaped by competing logics of prestige, accountability, equity, and justice. The analysis critically engages with global ranking regimes and South Africa's quality assurance architecture. It demonstrates that prestige-driven metrics prioritise visibility, reputation, and comparative performance. These priorities often come at the expense of relational, pedagogical, and inclusion-centred dimensions that are essential for transformation in unequal societies. South African policy frameworks, particularly those articulated by the Council on Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee, embed quality within a broader social mandate. This mandate foregrounds access, relevance, student success, and accountability to the public good. Ubuntu has been advanced as a normative and analytical framework capable of reconciling these tensions by reorienting quality toward relationality, collective responsibility, and justice. This approach does so without abandoning rigour or accountability. When examined closely, The Ron Clark Story and Amateur illustrate the limitations of heroic and individualised narratives of success. These narratives risk obscuring systemic constraints and institutional responsibility. They also overlook the lived experiences of students who navigate structural inequality, identity pressures, and forms of invisibility within educational systems. Rather than celebrating exceptional individuals, an Ubuntu-informed conception of quality foregrounds the ethical obligation of institutions to

create conditions of belonging and epistemic recognition. It emphasises the importance of sustained participation for diverse learners. This chapter has been explicitly conceptual and interpretive, drawing on document analysis rather than empirical data, and therefore does not claim causal effects or offer a prescriptive policy blueprint. It contributes a theoretically grounded reframing of quality that challenges prestige as a false proxy for excellence. Additionally, it advances justice, inclusivity, and relational accountability as core criteria of higher education quality. In doing so, it invites further empirical research and policy deliberation on how Ubuntu-informed frameworks might be operationalised within quality assurance systems. This approach should not be viewed as symbolic compliance, but rather as a substantive redefinition of excellence rooted in collective human flourishing.

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CHAPTER 9

Flexible Internationalization in Times of Systemic Instability: A Conceptual Framework Beyond Mobility and Metrics

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Abstract

Flexible Internationalization is proposed as a conceptual framework for sustaining credible internationalization under systemic instability. Rather than treating internationalization as an inventory of activities (mobility, recruitment, partnerships, or rankings-facing metrics), Flexible Internationalization reframes it as an institutional capability: the capacity to deliver international aims with integrity when the pathways to achieve them must change. The framework operationalizes reconfiguration readiness through four interrelated dimensions (modal, temporal, geographical, and governance) and foregrounds three tensions that institutions must manage explicitly: continuity vs. reconfiguration, performativity vs. mission coherence, and scalability vs. equity and academic labor sustainability. Flexible Internationalization contributes a "quality-with-flexibility" evaluative logic to make resilience-oriented internationalization legible in quality assurance and accreditation contexts, shifting assessment from activity counts to outcome continuity, auditability, reciprocity, and sustainable resourcing. The chapter offers criteria and evidence bundles to support institutional self-assessment and external review.

Keywords: Flexible Internationalization; internationalization of higher education; quality assurance; institutional resilience; accreditation

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Introduction

Internationalization has become one of the most visible markers of institutional quality and global status in higher education. Universities invest in cross-border student and staff mobility, international recruitment, research partnerships, joint programs, and global branding. In many systems, these investments are reinforced by external quality

assurance (QA) regimes, accreditation expectations, and global rankings that treat *internationalization* as both a desirable outcome and a proxy for excellence (Hazelkorn, 2015; Salmi, 2009).

Yet the last decade has repeatedly shown how fragile many internationalization strategies are. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most obvious example. However, it sits alongside a broader landscape of systemic instability: tightening visa and migration regimes, climate and sustainability pressures, supply-chain disruption, and geopolitical volatility. These conditions resemble what organizations in other fields describe as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). For higher education, the practical consequence is that cross-border flows can become unpredictable and, at times, abruptly unavailable. Universities have had to cancel mobility on short notice, renegotiate partnership arrangements, manage sudden shifts in recruitment flows, and develop digital alternatives for transnational learning and collaboration.

The field has responded with important conceptual developments: critiques of the *mobility and metrics* paradigm, calls for more inclusive and sustainable internationalization, and increased attention to curricular and digitally mediated forms of international engagement (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Ilieva et al., 2014). However, one gap remains under-theorized and under-assessed: institutional reconfigurability. Many institutions can point to an inventory of internationalization activities, but far fewer can demonstrate that they can sustain international objectives and outcomes when conditions change. Emergency improvisation is not the same as strategic flexibility.

This chapter proposes a conceptual framework for *Flexible Internationalization* (FI). FI reframes internationalization from a set of reportable activities to an institutional capability: the capacity to sustain and reconfigure internationalization objectives through a multimodal portfolio of global engagement (physical, virtual, and blended), supported by adaptive governance and quality-sensitive decision-making, so that learning, research, and partnership outcomes remain credible under systemic instability. In these settings, internationalization is often evaluated through proxies (mobility numbers, international student ratios, partnership counts, international co-authorship indicators), which can drive institutions towards strategies that maximize visibility but not resilience. FI provides a vocabulary and an evidence logic to help institutions and evaluators recognize resilience-oriented internationalization as a quality practice rather than a deficit.

From Mobility and Metrics to Capability and Resilience

Internationalization has become a normalized policy script in higher education: a taken-for-granted marker of institutional quality, modernity, and global relevance, often invoked as self-evidently desirable rather than as a contested set of aims and trade-offs (de Wit, 2015; Hudzik, 2011). While widely cited definitions frame internationalization as the integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purposes

and functions of postsecondary education (Knight, 2004), the operational reality in many systems has been narrower. Internationalization is frequently rendered legible through visible and countable proxies: cross-border mobility, international student ratios, partnership counts, and, increasingly, performance indicators that feed rankings and external accountability (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2022). This proxy-driven governance produces a subtle but consequential shift: internationalization becomes less a pedagogical and institutional transformation than a portfolio of reportable activities.

Against this background, the literature has long warned that this *mobility and metrics* settlement is neither neutral nor evenly beneficial (Ackers, 2008). Internationalization practices have been shaped by geopolitical asymmetries and global hierarchies, which structure who can move, who is recruited, and whose knowledge and credentials travel more easily across borders (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). In parallel, rankings cultures encourage institutions to prioritize what is comparable and metrically rewarded, reinforcing performative strategies that optimize for external visibility rather than for educational value (Hazelkorn, 2015). Under such conditions, internationalization can become strategically brittle: institutions concentrate their exposure in a small set of corridors, markets, and reputational signals, creating vulnerability when shocks disrupt mobility, finance, or cross-border cooperation.

A significant corrective has been to broaden internationalization beyond the mobile minority and beyond market rationales. Internationalization at Home (IaH) argues that international and intercultural learning should be purposefully embedded in curriculum and campus experience for all students, not treated as a derivative benefit of outbound mobility (Harrison, 2015; Leask, 2015). Sustainable internationalization perspectives further problematize what internationalization *sustains*, foregrounding power relations, unequal distributions of benefit, and the ecological implications of mobility-intensive models (Putty, 2025). Sector-level analyses similarly emphasize the need to reorient internationalization toward inclusivity, public value, and long-term viability rather than expansionary growth alone (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Taken together, these lines of critique do not reject internationalization; they relocate its center of gravity from activity volume to educational purpose, equity, and integrity.

Digitally mediated international engagement has accelerated this reconfiguration by expanding the repertoire of possible international experiences. Virtual exchange can embed guided online intercultural collaboration into curricula and, when designed and facilitated with pedagogical intent, support intercultural and digital collaboration competences (O'Dowd, 2021). Importantly, conceptual work on Internationalization at a Distance (IaD) argues that technology-enabled and distance-based forms constitute a distinct category rather than a residual substitute for *real* internationalization, challenging the implied prestige hierarchy that privileges physical travel as the default gold standard (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). European guidance likewise frames virtual and blended mobility as part of a broader ecosystem of international collaboration and

participation (Henderikx & Ubachs, 2022). Recent global surveys indicate rising strategic attention to digital and hybrid internationalization and to risk, resilience, and inclusivity within internationalization priorities (IAU, 2024). Yet, as the pandemic period also revealed, expanding a repertoire of modes is not the same as possessing an institutional capability to sustain and reconfigure internationalization credibly under disruption, precisely the distinction that motivates the move from mobility and metrics to capability and resilience (Celbis et al., 2025). Early crisis responses often privileged continuity of delivery over continuity of outcomes, exposing weaknesses in quality assurance routines, student support infrastructures, partnership governance, and staff workload sustainability (Ülker, 2023). In this sense, the post-2020 literature increasingly treats resilience not as an individual trait or an *ad hoc* emergency capacity, but as an institutional property shaped by governance, resources, and the integration of internationalization into core academic processes (Wang et al., 2024). Across this literature, a common thread is that mode expansion only becomes strategically meaningful when it is embedded in governance routines and quality processes that can be activated under stress, rather than treated as an add-on during emergencies.

These developments expand the repertoire of internationalization. Yet a repertoire is not a capability. Institutions may accumulate modalities (mobility, virtual exchange, blended formats) without developing the organizational conditions that make reconfiguration reliable: decision rights, risk sensing, partnership architectures, and quality criteria that travel across modalities. Practically, this means having pre-defined decision thresholds, partner-level contingency protocols, and assessment/QA criteria that remain stable even when delivery modes change. The distinction matters because, in disruption, institutions can pivot quickly but still lose credibility if learning integrity, partner trust, and staff sustainability erode in the process (Hou, 2024). FI is grounded in the view that flexibility is valuable only insofar as it is quality-sensitive and outcome-preserving, rather than merely speed-optimizing.

Organizational research on strategic flexibility and dynamic capabilities helps clarify what is at stake. In strategic management, flexibility in internationalization becomes valuable under uncertainty only when organizations treat international investments as real options, maintaining multiple pathways and adjusting exposure as conditions change (Lee & Makhija, 2009). Recent work has also operationalized dynamic capabilities and governance as determinants of performance in the higher education sector, reinforcing the relevance of capability-oriented lenses for universities as complex organizations rather than as collections of activities (Heaton et al., 2023). While universities differ from firms in purpose and accountability, capability-oriented lenses remain useful to specify how institutions protect mission-critical outcomes: learning integrity, research continuity, partnership trust, and public responsibility. FI translates this capability logic into the governance and quality language of higher education, where legitimacy depends on demonstrable standards, not only on activity volume.

A further reason to treat internationalization as a capability is that its risk landscape is no longer exceptional. Internationalization is increasingly shaped by intersecting pressures (geopolitical constraints, inequality, securitization, digital dependence, and financial volatility), which intensify the tension between openness and protection, global engagement and local responsibility (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019; Tran et al., 2023). Recent sector debates about *rethinking mobility* similarly point to a shift away from mobility as the default center of internationalization, toward more plural, context-sensitive, and ethically defensible forms of engagement (Vakulenko et al., 2025). The implication for FI is not that one configuration is universally preferable, but that institutions need *structured capacity* to diversify and integrate diversification into governance, rather than adding parallel initiatives that remain weakly coordinated (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023).

FI also connects to the idea of comprehensive internationalization: the institutional alignment of internationalization across teaching, research, service, leadership, and operations (Hudzik, 2011; Shahjahan et al., 2024). However, breadth and integration do not, by themselves, specify reconfigurability under instability. An institution may be comprehensively internationalized in stable conditions and still lack controlled pathways for adaptation, especially when quality assurance systems are calibrated to steady-state delivery. FI therefore complements the comprehensive view by foregrounding *reconfiguration readiness* as a quality property: the institution's ability to sustain international outcomes when modalities, timelines, or geographies must change, without downgrading standards or external trust (Wysocka et al., 2022).

Finally, FI is attentive to the difference between activity continuation and outcome continuity. Under disruption, institutions can attempt to preserve activities (for example, maintaining mobility numbers or partnership counts) or to preserve outcomes (for example, ensuring intercultural learning, collaborative work, and credible assessment continue through alternative configurations). FI prioritizes outcome continuity. This is crucial for QA and accreditation because it shifts evaluative attention from counting international activities to judging whether intended learning, partnership, and research outcomes remain robust when conditions change—i.e., whether quality thresholds are preserved across reconfigurations rather than only under steady-state delivery (Clarke & Kirby, 2022). This shift sets the stage for the FI framework proposed in the next section, which specifies the dimensions and tensions through which reconfiguration readiness can be made assessable.

Defining Flexible Internationalization

Flexible Internationalization (FI) can be defined as *an institutional capability to sustain and reconfigure internationalization objectives through a multimodal portfolio of global engagement (physical, virtual, and blended), supported by adaptive governance and*

quality-sensitive decision-making, so that international learning, research, and partnership outcomes remain credible under systemic instability.

To Avoid Conceptual Drift, Four Delimitations Are Necessary

First, FI is not reducible to digital provision. Digitalization may enable flexibility, but an institution can be technologically advanced and still internationally fragile if it remains dependent on a narrow set of recruitment markets, mobility corridors, or partnership configurations, or if it lacks the decision capacity and QA routines required to adapt without eroding standards. FI concerns the substitutability and combination of modalities under explicit quality claims, not the mere presence of digital infrastructure.

Second, FI should not be conflated with emergency adaptation. Crisis measures can be unavoidable, but they typically rely on improvisation and short-term workarounds. FI presupposes deliberate design: pre-planned alternative pathways, agreed triggers for reconfiguration, QA mechanisms calibrated to modality shifts, staff development, and partnership arrangements that anticipate disruption. In this sense, flexibility is not speed; it is preparedness coupled with governance.

Third, FI does not entail a relaxation of what qualifies as internationalization. The purpose is to widen legitimate pathways to international outcomes while maintaining a stable outcomes logic and clear expectations about how those outcomes are achieved across different modalities. FI therefore requires explicit claims about intended learning, research, and partnership outcomes, alongside evidence that these outcomes remain robust when delivery configurations change.

Fourth, FI is formulated to be legible under quality assurance, accreditation, and prestige-oriented logics. Institutions operate under external scrutiny and reputational pressures; resilience-oriented strategies are more likely to be adopted when they can be evidenced and narrated as quality decisions rather than as *ad hoc* adjustments. FI therefore links flexibility to auditable criteria such as learning outcomes, assessment integrity, equity of participation, partnership reliability, and the sustainability of academic labor, providing a basis for evaluation beyond activity counts.

These delimitations establish FI as a quality-oriented account of reconfiguration readiness and clarify the evaluative logic that underpins the framework developed in the next sections.

A Four-Dimensional Framework

Flexible Internationalization can be operationalized through four interrelated dimensions: modal, temporal, geographical, and governance flexibility. Together, these dimensions specify both where reconfiguration can occur (modes, timing, geography) and the enabling condition that makes such change credible (governance). Analytically separable but practically intertwined, the dimensions highlight that alternatives in one domain typically depend on design and decision structures in another: modal

substitution requires governance and QA alignment; temporal flexibility presupposes curricular sequencing; geographical diversification depends on partnership strategy; and governance flexibility depends on evidence systems and sustainable academic labor arrangements. Table 9.1 summarizes the four dimensions and their scope.

Figure 9.1 *provides a compact visual of the FI logic as a capability architecture: the four flexibility dimensions define the design space for reconfiguration, while the quality-with-flexibility criteria specify the conditions under which reconfiguration preserves standards. Read this way, FI links "what can change" (modes, timing, geography) with "how change remains credible" (governance and auditable quality claims), offering a bridge between conceptual framing and the evidence logic developed later in the chapter.*

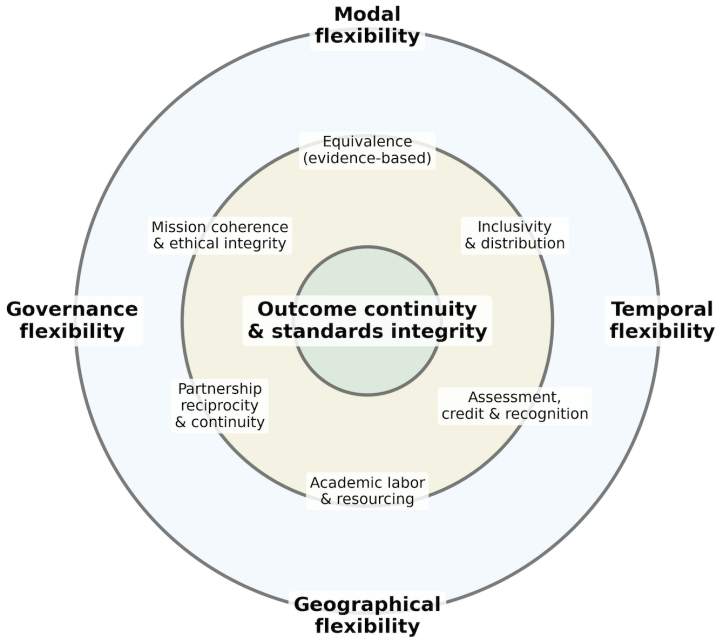

Figure 9.1: Flexible Internationalization as a capability architecture

Table 9.1. Four dimensions of Flexible Internationalization

Dimension	Description
Modal flexibility	Ability to achieve international outcomes through multiple engagement modes (physical mobility, blended mobility, virtual exchange/COIL, Internationalization at Home, Internationalization at a Distance, and joint or transnational provision), with explicit equivalence claims and evidence.
Temporal flexibility	Ability to adjust timing, sequencing, and duration of internationalization opportunities (micro-mobility, modular exchanges, flexible windows, staged pathways) while maintaining progression and learning outcomes.

Dimension	Description
Geographical flexibility	Ability to diversify and rebalance the partnership and mobility geography (multi-hub networks, regional diversification, risk-aware portfolios), reducing dependence on single corridors or markets.
Governance flexibility	Ability to make timely, accountable, quality-sensitive decisions across units and partners (adaptive governance, clarified decision rights, integrated QA, data-informed monitoring, and sustainable academic labor arrangements).

Read together, the four dimensions describe a map of *reconfiguration readiness*: what can shift, under what constraints, and with what evidence of quality continuity.

Modal Flexibility

Modal flexibility concerns not the existence of multiple modes, but the institution's capacity to treat modality as a controlled design variable. In practice, many universities now have a mixed repertoire that includes physical mobility, blended formats, curriculum-based internationalization, and digitally mediated collaboration. FI becomes relevant when that repertoire is governed as a set of accountable pathways to shared outcomes, rather than as parallel initiatives that grow opportunistically and remain weakly connected to program design and quality assurance. The central claim is therefore not that one mode replaces another, but that institutions can sustain credible international learning and partnership outcomes through planned reconfiguration, with explicit standards and evidence.

From this perspective, the critical question is how mode shifts are made defensible when constraints change. Physical mobility can offer intensity and relational depth, but FI assumes that mobility is structurally bounded and periodically disrupted; the challenge is to prevent international learning from being contingent on uninterrupted travel. The key move is to specify which outcome components are mode-sensitive and which are mode-robust. Preparation, intercultural teamwork, and reflective integration can be distributed across phases and modes, while certain experiences may require physical presence (Henderikx & Ubachs, 2022). Blended mobility becomes one way to operationalize this decomposition: it is not simply shorter travel plus online work, but an architecture that sequences learning functions across modalities with continuity in assessment and support (European Commission, 2022).

Similarly, virtual exchange and COIL-type collaboration should be treated less as a *modality* and more as an institutionalized pedagogical arrangement with defined quality conditions. The evidence base is now clear that outcomes depend on design, facilitation, partner alignment, and assessment, and that scaling without these conditions can produce thin participation metrics with limited learning value (Hackett et al., 2023; O'Dowd, 2021). FI uses this literature to sharpen what modal flexibility requires at the institutional level: stable support structures for educators, agreed partnership routines, and assessment practices that preserve standards when delivery conditions vary. In other

words, the question is not whether online intercultural contact occurs, but whether the institution can sustain the pedagogical and relational infrastructure that makes such contact educationally consequential, especially when scaling beyond pilot projects (Rubin, 2017; Garcés & O'Dowd, 2021).

Internationalization at Home and Internationalization at a Distance also gain analytical precision under FI when they are positioned as anchors for equity and continuity rather than as categories to be described. IaH becomes the backbone that prevents international learning from being allocated primarily to those who can travel; IaD expands access to cross-border participation through distance-based provision, but it raises sharper requirements regarding student support, academic integrity, and the comparability of learning conditions across contexts (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). FI's contribution is to insist that labels do not legitimize these modes, but by demonstrable equivalence claims and a quality logic that can travel across configurations.

Equivalence is therefore the core quality problem of modal flexibility, and it should be treated explicitly as an assessment and QA challenge rather than as an operational convenience. Institutions cannot assume that substituting physical travel with digitally mediated collaboration produces comparable learning—instead, the burden shifts to outcome specification and evidentiary backing. Where intercultural competence is intended, established assessment work cautions against relying solely on self-report and supports triangulated approaches that combine multiple sources of evidence (Deardorff, 2006). Where collaborative problem-solving is intended, credibility depends on task design, the quality of outputs, and transparent rubrics aligned with program outcomes. Systematic reviews of COIL/virtual exchange underline that learning gains are most consistently observed when projects are embedded in curricula and assessed, rather than treated as optional add-ons (Hackett et al., 2023). Modal flexibility becomes defensible when mode substitution is governed through shared standards, assessed artefacts, and documented alignment.

For QA purposes, FI recommends expressing modal flexibility through compact, audit-friendly equivalence claims. The point is not to claim identity across modes, but to show that different pathways are mapped to the same intended outcomes and assessed against comparable criteria, with documented support and partnership arrangements. This aligns with broader QA guidance developed during and after the pandemic, which emphasizes that quality in digitally mediated provision depends on coherent design, support, integrity procedures, and evidence-based monitoring rather than on delivery mode alone (ENQA, 2020). In this sense, modal flexibility is not a technical property; it is a *quality property* that must be articulated in ways that evaluators can examine.

Modal flexibility also intersects with *prestige* pressures. Rankings and performance regimes tend to privilege visible mobility indicators, while curricular and digitally mediated forms remain undercounted. FI therefore frames capability as a quality signal: the capacity to deliver rigorous international learning for students who cannot travel and

to sustain partnership-based collaboration under disruption should be legible as institutional maturity and reliability, particularly in QA and accreditation contexts where continuity and integrity matter (Hazelkorn, 2015). This is also a way to reduce strategic brittleness: institutions are less exposed when their international learning outcomes do not depend on a single high-visibility mode.

Finally, modal flexibility depends on safeguards and sustainability conditions that become critical when digital engagement scales. Virtual exchange, for example, requires attention to access and inclusion (hardware, connectivity, platform accessibility) and facilitation capacity to manage intercultural interaction risks; IaD requires demonstrable student support and integrity procedures that are not weakened by distance. Without these conditions, modal flexibility risks devolving into thin participation metrics, undermining the quality claims FI seeks to protect.

Temporal Flexibility

Temporal flexibility concerns not simply when mobility happens, but how international learning is sequenced so that program integrity survives disruption. Traditional mobility windows presume stable calendars and long uninterrupted availability. Under systemic instability, that assumption becomes a quality risk: timing constraints can exclude students with work or care responsibilities, and sudden disruption can break progression, delay graduation, or force inconsistent recognition decisions. FI treats time as a design parameter that must be governed with the same seriousness as curriculum and assessment.

In FI terms, temporal flexibility is achieved when international learning functions are distributed across time in ways that protect intended outcomes and credit integrity. The key move is to design pathways that remain credible even when a component is postponed, shortened, or shifted in modality. This is easiest to operationalize through modular sequencing: preparatory work, partner collaboration, disciplinary engagement, and reflective integration are treated as distinct learning functions that can be staged. A blended architecture is often effective here because it enables continuity when travel is disrupted and reduces the *all-or-nothing* dependency on a single period abroad (Ma & Lee, 2021).

The quality challenge is not the existence of short-term or staged formats, but whether they preserve three forms of integrity. *Progression integrity* concerns whether students can complete their programs without disproportionate delay when an internationalization component is disrupted. This requires that flex windows and substitutions are built into curriculum governance rather than negotiated ad hoc under pressure. *Learning design integrity* concerns whether re-sequencing produces meaningful learning or merely compressed exposure. Temporal flexibility needs explicit outcome mapping across phases, so that what is learned before, during, and after the international component is coherent and assessable, rather than a collection of loosely

connected experiences. *Recognition integrity* concerns whether credits, workload, and assessment standards remain consistent across variants and partners, which is crucial for fairness and auditability.

Temporal flexibility also has non-trivial workload implications. Multiple sequencing options increase advising, partner coordination, and assessment complexity. FI therefore treats resourcing and workload recognition as quality conditions, not managerial afterthoughts: a pathway that is theoretically flexible but practically unsupported becomes fragile and inequitable. This aligns with post-pandemic QA guidance that emphasizes the need for documented processes, auditable decisions, and integrity safeguards when delivery conditions change.

For evaluation, temporal flexibility is most convincingly evidenced not through counts of short-term formats, but through documented pathway rules and their effects. What matters is whether substitution decisions are pre-specified, transparent to students and staff, and consistently applied across cohorts and partners; and whether progression data show continuity without disproportionate delays, withdrawals, or inequitable reliance on fallback options. In FI, the test of temporal flexibility is therefore outcome continuity under calendar and modality variation, supported by recognition clarity and sustainable implementation.

Geographical Flexibility

Geographical flexibility concerns not simply where internationalization takes place, but how exposure is distributed across regions, partners, and markets in ways that remain viable under volatility. Prestige-oriented strategies often concentrate activity in a small number of high-status geographies or recruitment markets. While concentration can reduce transaction costs and align branding, FI treats it as a structural fragility: when geopolitical relations shift, visa regimes tighten, or a region experiences disruption, overconcentrated internationalization can fail abruptly, with cascading effects on mobility, recruitment income, and partnership continuity (Hung & Yen, 2022).

In FI, geographical flexibility is achieved when institutions can rebalance their international engagement without abandoning mission coherence or partnership quality. This is not a call for indiscriminate expansion of partner numbers; it is a call for portfolio design with explicit dependency awareness and continuity logic. The relevant question is therefore not "how many partners", but what kind of portfolio architecture the institution has built and how that architecture protects educational and research outcomes when a corridor becomes unavailable. A *geographically flexible portfolio* typically combines depth with breadth: a limited number of mature partnerships that anchor strategic priorities, alongside additional partnerships that enable continuity and diversification without overloading governance capacity.

The quality challenge is that diversification can easily become performative. Institutions may add partners or markets to signal global reach while neglecting

reciprocity, academic fit, or the conditions required for sustained collaboration. Sustainable internationalization critiques are helpful here because they shift evaluation toward what internationalization sustains and for whom, foregrounding unequal distributions of benefit and the ethical implications of partnership design (Ilieva et al., 2014; Kuzhabekova, 2025). From an FI perspective, geographical flexibility is only defensible when diversification is aligned with mutual benefit, transparent governance, and continuity planning, rather than treated as a numbers exercise.

Geographical flexibility also concerns epistemic diversity and curriculum consequences. If an internationalization portfolio is concentrated in a narrow set of global North hubs, it can reproduce limited perspectives and constrain the range of contexts through which students engage with global issues. Diversification can therefore be justified not only as risk reduction, but as curriculum enrichment and ethical positioning, provided that partnerships enable co-designed learning opportunities and do not simply externalize extractive recruitment or short-term project activity (Li et al., 2024).

For QA and accreditation purposes, geographical flexibility becomes legible when institutions document portfolio dependencies and the rules by which rebalancing occurs. What matters is whether partnership purposes are explicit, governance arrangements are stable, reciprocity is evidenced, and contingency pathways are pre-specified. In practical terms, an institution can evidence concentration ratios (for example, reliance on a single inbound market or outbound corridor), partnership typologies with documented purposes and expected outcomes, reciprocity indicators (such as co-authorship patterns or co-developed teaching), and continuity clauses in agreements that enable substitution or phased reconfiguration without collapsing activity. A short portfolio governance statement can make this auditable by specifying partner-selection principles, diversification logic, and the conditions under which alternative pathways are activated. This framing helps evaluators distinguish risk-aware diversification as a quality practice from opportunism.

Governance Flexibility

Governance flexibility is the enabling condition for the other three dimensions. Institutions can only reconfigure modes, timing, and geography credibly when governance structures support timely and accountable decisions and when QA is integrated into internationalization rather than appended to it. In many universities, internationalization remains organized as a patchwork of projects: a mobility office, dispersed partnership activity, isolated virtual initiatives, and weak integration with curriculum governance. Under disruption, fragmentation turns adaptation into improvisation: decisions become slow and contested, standards drift across units, and QA becomes reactive rather than preventive (Heaton et al., 2023).

FI treats governance flexibility as the capacity to authorize change without downgrading standards. This requires clarity about who decides, on what basis, and with what evidentiary expectations. Decision rights matter because mode shifts, partner substitutions, recognition adjustments, and assessment changes are not merely operational; they are *academic-quality decisions*. When authority is ambiguous, institutions either delay action or delegate it informally, both of which increase inequity and inconsistency (Gumport & Sporn, 1999).

A flexibility-capable QA system is therefore central. FI assumes that QA frameworks calibrated to steady-state delivery can become barriers under instability unless they include controlled routes for change. The point is not to relax QA, but to make it adaptable and auditable: program review, curriculum approval, and risk management should specify how international components can be reconfigured while preserving learning outcomes, assessment integrity, and student support standards (ENQA, 2020). In this sense, governance flexibility is inseparable from an explicit outcomes logic and from documentation that allows evaluators to distinguish planned reconfiguration from *ad hoc* substitution.

Governance flexibility also depends on monitoring that is fit for purpose. Counting mobility is insufficient for FI because it says little about continuity, equity, or learning integrity. Institutions need evidence that can signal emerging fragility: uneven participation patterns across groups, assessed outcomes where equivalence claims are made, partner reliability and delivery quality, student support indicators, and workload intensity in international learning design and facilitation. Such monitoring supports early corrective action and makes resilience-oriented internationalization legible in accreditation and internal QA routines.

Partnership governance is a further condition of credible reconfiguration. Modal and temporal flexibility depend on partner alignment regarding academic standards, assessment practices, recognition mechanisms, and student support responsibilities. Agreements that include contingency clauses and shared quality responsibilities enable substitution or phased reconfiguration without collapsing trust. Under FI, partnership governance is not an administrative layer; it is part of the quality architecture that allows international learning and collaboration to continue when conditions change.

Finally, governance flexibility requires sustainable academic labor arrangements. Internationalization relies on coordination, mentoring, relationship maintenance, and increasingly digital facilitation. If flexibility is achieved by shifting burdens onto individual academics without recognition, resourcing, or training, it becomes extractive and quality erodes over time. FI therefore treats workload accounting, support staffing, and professional development as governance requirements rather than optional enablers, particularly where institutions scale virtual exchange, blended mobility, or multi-partner collaboration.

A practical governance pattern consistent with FI is a dual-routine model: *stable routines* for normal conditions and *rapid-response routines* for disruption. Stable routines include annual partnership review, curriculum approval pathways for international components, and regular evaluation of international learning outcomes. Disruption routines include pre-authorized triggers and fast-track decision processes that can activate pre-approved alternative pathways without bypassing QA requirements. The quality condition is auditability: decisions are recorded, criteria are explicit, and outcomes are monitored, ensuring that speed does not come at the cost of standards.

Tensions Made Visible by Flexible Internationalization

FI is not presented as a solution that removes trade-offs. Its contribution is to make three recurrent tensions explicit so they can be governed and evaluated, rather than managed implicitly through ad hoc decisions:

Tension 1: Continuity Vs. Reconfiguration

Under instability, institutions can privilege continuity of existing arrangements or pursue reconfiguration through changes in mode, timing, or partnership geography (Fløisdorf & Adriansen, 2022). The risk is familiar: continuity can harden into inertia, while rapid reconfiguration can weaken standards and partner trust. FI shifts attention from the binary choice to the conditions under which reconfiguration is legitimate: alternative pathways are designed in advance, linked to shared outcomes, and activated through auditable decision processes. In this framing, continuity is judged primarily in terms of outcomes, not in terms of preserving the original pathway.

Tension 2: Performativity and Prestige Vs. Mission Coherence

Internationalization is often entangled with rankings and reputational signaling, which creates incentives to optimize what is visible and countable (Hazelkorn, 2015; Salmi, 2009). In such environments, flexible configurations can be perceived as second-order substitutes, particularly when virtual or curriculum-based forms do not translate into prestige metrics. FI does not deny these pressures; it provides a language for resisting brittle optimization by treating resilience-oriented internationalization as a quality claim that can be evidenced through governance transparency, outcome integrity, and partnership reliability.

Tension 3: Scalability Vs. Equity and Academic Labor Sustainability

Flexibility can widen participation, but it can also increase coordination and assessment demands and distribute burdens unevenly. Scaling virtual exchange, expanding blended formats, or diversifying partnerships can intensify hidden labor unless resourcing, workload recognition, and support structures are built into governance (Ge, 2022). FI therefore treats equity and labor sustainability as quality

conditions: flexibility that relies on uncompensated workload intensification or shifts costs onto the most constrained students is neither scalable nor defensible.

These tensions become visible at concrete decision points. When disruption occurs, institutions must decide whether to suspend internationalization activities or to activate alternative pathways and demonstrate continuity of outcomes; when high-prestige corridors become risky, they must choose between preserving reputational signals and rebalancing in ways that remain mission-aligned. FI offers a framework for articulating and documenting these decisions without treating them as cost-free, and it clarifies what kinds of evidence and governance processes make such choices credible.

Figure 9.2 *provides a compact map of where the three tensions become most salient across the four FI dimensions, and it indicates the QA focus that typically carries the evidential burden in each intersection. This visual bridge clarifies why the criteria in the next section are framed as quality-with-flexibility rather than as general internationalization indicators.*

Dimensions	Continuity ↔ Reconfiguration	Prestige ↔ Mission coherence	Scalability ↔ Equity & labor
Modal flexibility	Substitution logic	Legibility to QA/rankings	Design load & support
Temporal flexibility	Progression protection	Interpretation of proxies	Advising & recognition load
Geographical flexibility	Portfolio rebalancing	Status vs reciprocity	Coordination costs
Governance flexibility	Decision rights	Audit trail & narrative	Workload & resourcing

Figure 9.2: Flexible Internationalization: Dimensions x Tensions x QA focus

Quality-with-Flexibility: Criteria and Evidence Logic

A core contribution of FI is to specify how flexibility can be evaluated as quality rather than treated as convenience. In QA and accreditation settings, internationalization is often judged through proxies that are easy to count. FI does not reject proxies, but it insists that flexibility claims should be assessed through an outcomes-and-governance logic: what outcomes are protected, by what design and support conditions, under what decision rules, and with what evidence. On this basis, the following criteria translate FI into auditable expectations for internal QA, accreditation self-assessment, and evidence portfolios.

The following *quality-with-flexibility* criteria summarize what evaluators should look for when internationalization is reconfigured across modes, timelines, or partnership geographies:

- **Evidence-based equivalence of outcomes.** Where institutions claim that different pathways can deliver comparable international learning or collaboration outcomes, the claim should be anchored in explicit outcomes and commensurate evidence. This criterion avoids assuming that international learning is automatic and foregrounds triangulated assessment where appropriate.
- **Inclusivity and distribution of opportunity.** Flexibility counts as a quality virtue only when it expands access beyond the mobile minority without diluting rigor and with adequate support. Evidence should include distributional participation patterns and the extent to which international learning is embedded for all students, consistent with IaH principles.
- **Integrity of assessment, credit, and recognition.** Reconfiguration is credible only when assessment standards, workload expectations, and recognition decisions remain transparent, consistent, and auditable across variants and partner arrangements. This includes documented substitution rules, aligned assessment criteria, and clear mechanisms for resolving equivalence disputes.
- **Sustainable academic labor and resourcing.** Flexible pathways depend on coordination, facilitation, advising, and partnership maintenance. Institutions should evidence workload recognition, support roles, and professional development, since flexibility implemented through unrecognized labor intensification reliably erodes quality over time.
- **Partnership reciprocity and continuity planning.** Because internationalization quality is co-produced, reciprocity, shared responsibilities, and continuity arrangements should be visible in partnership design and review. This operationalizes sustainable internationalization concerns by examining what internationalization sustains and for whom.
- **Mission coherence and ethical integrity.** Flexibility should align with institutional mission and avoid opportunistic expansion that undermines student support, assessment integrity, or partner equity. Evaluators should examine how risks are anticipated and mitigated, and how the institution justifies reconfiguration choices in value terms, not only in operational terms.

For QA purposes, these criteria become operational when paired with structured *evidence bundles* rather than narrative claims alone. **Table 2** provides a pragmatic template that institutions can adapt to local standards and use for internal review, accreditation self-assessment, or external evaluation.

Table 9.2: Evidence bundles for assessing Flexible Internationalization

Bundle	Illustrative evidence
Outcomes and curriculum	International/intercultural outcomes; mapping to curriculum and

Bundle	Illustrative evidence
evidence (modal and temporal)	assessment; samples of assessed work with rubrics; evidence of reflective/integrative components.
Modality design and equivalence evidence (modal)	Design documentation for VE/blended mobility; assessment alignment for equivalence claims; student support and accessibility provisions.
Progression and recognition evidence (temporal)	Mobility windows and alternatives in handbooks; substitution rules and recognition agreements; progression/completion data across variants.
Partnership and portfolio evidence (geographical)	Portfolio dependence ratios; partnership purposes and typologies; reciprocity indicators; continuity clauses and plans.
Governance and sustainability evidence (governance)	Decision rights and escalation pathways; QA integration points; monitoring indicators including equity/workload; workload and staff development policies.

The intent is not to standardize internationalization, but to make flexibility assessable. Evidence bundles also counter a recurrent evaluation problem: when only counts are available, counts dominate. When institutions document outcomes, equivalence logic, distributional effects, and governance maturity, flexibility can be judged as a defensible quality practice rather than as a rhetorical claim.

Using FI in QA, Accreditation, and Ranking-Oriented Environments

FI has practical implications for how institutions present internationalization in self-assessment reports and how reviewers interpret performance under instability. A first implication is evidentiary: reviewers should be able to distinguish a decline in mobility activity from a failure of international learning outcomes. Under FI, a temporary reduction in outbound mobility during disruption is not, by itself, decisive if institutions can demonstrate continuity of outcomes through approved alternative pathways and stable standards.

A second implication concerns narrative structure. In rankings-oriented environments, institutions may feel pressured to prioritize what is visible and countable, even when this increases fragility. FI provides a counter-narrative that is compatible with QA language: reconfigurability is framed as institutional maturity, evidenced through documented decision rules, outcome integrity, partnership reliability, and equity of participation (Liu et al., 2021; Hamann & Ringel, 2023). This does not require rejecting rankings; it requires supplementing metric-facing reporting with quality-facing evidence that shows robustness under stress.

A third implication is that QA itself functions as governance. If QA is treated mainly as compliance validation for steady-state delivery, it can become an obstacle when

conditions change. FI instead implies principle-based, outcome-oriented QA designs that can authorize controlled change while preserving auditability. In this sense, internationalization quality becomes inseparable from governance capacity: institutions that can demonstrate controlled reconfiguration under instability can plausibly claim a higher level of quality capability than those that perform well only under stable conditions.

Finally, FI points to a constructive agenda for indicators. Where benchmarking and rankings remain influential, evaluators could improve measurement by recognizing *curriculum reach* (the proportion of students achieving international learning outcomes), *quality-assured digital collaboration* (with assessed evidence and facilitation capacity), *partnership reciprocity* (co-produced outputs and mutual benefit), and *portfolio robustness* (dependence and concentration indicators). Even if external systems do not change, institutions can internalize these indicators in QA dashboards, reducing reliance on narrow proxies as the sole drivers of strategy.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that, under systemic instability, internationalization should be understood less as an inventory of activities and more as an institutional capability. Within *Flexible Internationalization*, the central question is whether international aims can be delivered with demonstrable integrity when the route to achieving them must change; doing so requires coordinated options, clear decision rules, and evidence that standards hold across reconfiguration. The framework operationalizes this claim through four dimensions (modal, temporal, geographical, and governance) and makes visible three tensions that institutions must manage explicitly: continuity vs. reconfiguration, performativity vs. mission coherence, and scalability vs. equity and academic labor sustainability.

Flexible Internationalization is designed to be legible in QA- and accreditation-oriented environments because it translates flexibility into assessable quality claims. The *quality-with-flexibility* criteria and *evidence bundles* provide a practical basis for internal review and external evaluation, shifting attention from proxy volume to outcome integrity, distributional access, partnership reciprocity, and governance maturity. This does not imply abandoning conventional indicators, but repositioning them within a broader evidentiary logic. In FI terms, the key question is not whether mobility numbers are maintained at all costs, but whether intended international learning, collaboration, and partnership outcomes remain robust when pathways change. Framed this way, reconfiguration becomes a quality decision rather than a reputational embarrassment, provided that it is planned, documented, and assessed.

To make FI actionable, three implementation moves follow from the framework. First, institutions can build *equivalence architectures*: a limited set of pre-approved pathway variants that are mapped to shared outcomes and assessed through stable

criteria. Equivalence should be framed as comparability of intended outcomes rather than as identity of experience, and assessed artefacts and transparent substitution rules should support it. Second, institutions can develop a *portfolio governance routine* that treats internationalization geography and partnership dependence as manageable exposure rather than as a fixed legacy. A small number of deep partnerships can be complemented by continuity-capable networks, with documented reciprocity and contingency clauses. The aim is not partner proliferation, but rebalancing capacity without quality drift. Third, institutions can formalize reconfiguration readiness through *dual routines*: steady-state processes for normal operation and a disruption protocol with pre-authorized triggers, recorded decisions, and monitoring that includes equity and workload signals. Together, these moves translate FI from a conceptual label into institutional practices that can be evidenced and evaluated.

Flexible Internationalization also offers implications for the wider internationalization field. For QA agencies and accreditors, the framework suggests evaluating internationalization not only by activity volume but by the institution's capacity to preserve standards and protect outcomes across modality and calendar variation. This implies greater attention to evidence of curriculum integration, assessment integrity, and governance mechanisms that authorize controlled change. For rankings-oriented environments, FI points to a measurement gap: when what counts is restricted to mobility proxies, systems incentivize brittleness and undervalue high-quality international learning that reaches the majority. Even if rankings do not change, institutions can adopt FI-aligned internal indicators (outcome reach, participation distribution, reciprocity signals, concentration ratios, and workload sustainability) to reduce strategic dependence on narrow external metrics.

As a future research agenda, Flexible Internationalization invites empirical testing and refinement across institutional types and regulatory contexts. Work is needed to validate which forms of evidence most convincingly support equivalence claims, how partnership reciprocity and continuity planning can be assessed without reducing collaboration to checklists, and which governance arrangements enable timely reconfiguration without lowering standards. Comparative studies could examine whether FI is associated with stronger continuity of learning and collaboration outcomes during disruption, and whether FI-oriented strategies reduce inequities in access to international learning while remaining sustainable for academic staff. In doing so, Flexible Internationalization can serve not only as a descriptive framework, but as a normative and evaluative concept that supports more resilient, equitable, and quality-grounded internationalization.

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CHAPTER 10

From Digitalization to Institutional Smartness: Rethinking Digital Transformation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Digital transformation has become a dominant narrative in contemporary higher education, accelerated by technological innovation, global competition, and crisis-driven change. However, many universities continue to equate transformation with the mere adoption of digital tools, platforms, and infrastructure, resulting in fragmented and often superficial reforms. This chapter argues that meaningful digital transformation requires a shift beyond digitalization toward what can be conceptualized as institutional "smartness" -a holistic reconfiguration of governance structures, organizational culture, decision-making processes, and academic practice. Drawing on conceptual and critical literature in higher education studies, organizational change, and digital governance, the chapter distinguishes analytically between digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. It examines why technological adoption alone fails to generate sustainable institutional change. It then proposes a conceptual framework for smart institutions, emphasizing adaptability, data-informed governance, human-centered design, and ethical responsibility. By reframing digital transformation as an institutional rather than a purely technological process, the chapter offers a critical lens for scholars, policymakers, and university leaders seeking to understand and guide the future development of smart higher education institutions.

Keywords: digital transformation; smart institutions; higher education governance; organizational change; digital maturity; institutional culture

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital transformation has emerged as one of the most pervasive and influential narratives in higher education policy, strategy, and institutional

planning. Universities across the globe have invested heavily in learning management systems, digital libraries, virtual classrooms, analytics dashboards, and administrative platforms, often under the assumption that technological adoption itself constitutes meaningful transformation. This momentum has been further accelerated by external pressures such as globalization, market competition, massification, and, more recently, crisis-driven disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, digital transformation has become both an aspiration and an expectation for contemporary higher education institutions.

Despite this widespread engagement with digital technologies, there is growing evidence that many universities have struggled to translate digital initiatives into sustained institutional change. Instead, digital transformation efforts often remain fragmented, project-based, and disconnected from broader academic missions and governance structures (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Selwyn, 2016). The rapid deployment of digital tools during emergency contexts, while necessary, further reinforced a tendency to prioritize speed and functionality over strategic coherence and institutional learning. Consequently, the term "digital transformation" risks becoming a rhetorical label rather than a substantive process of organizational change.

A central problem lies in the conceptual ambiguity surrounding digital transformation in higher education. Universities frequently conflate digitization, i.e., the conversion of analog materials into digital formats, with digitalization, understood as the use of digital technologies to enhance or streamline existing processes (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016). While both processes are important, neither necessarily challenges underlying institutional logics, power relations, or cultural norms. Digital transformation, by contrast, implies a more profound reconfiguration of how institutions operate, make decisions, define academic roles, and engage with stakeholders (Vial, 2019). When these distinctions are overlooked, digital initiatives tend to reproduce existing structures rather than transform them.

This conceptual confusion has practical consequences. Universities often pursue digital transformation through isolated technological upgrades or pilot projects that lack integration across academic, administrative, and governance domains. Responsibility for digital initiatives is frequently delegated to Information Technology units, while academic leadership and faculty engagement remain peripheral. Such approaches reinforce the perception of digital transformation as a technical rather than institutional endeavor, limiting its potential impact (Marshall, 2018). Moreover, vendor-driven solutions and performance metrics increasingly shape institutional priorities, raising concerns about managerialism, datafication, and the erosion of academic autonomy (Williamson, 2017).

The notion of the "smart university" has recently gained prominence as a proposed response to these challenges. Borrowed from broader discourses on smart cities and digital governance, the concept of smartness suggests institutions that are adaptive, data-

informed, interconnected, and capable of continuous learning. However, as with digital transformation, smartness is often narrowly interpreted as the deployment of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, or automated systems. Without a critical and institutional lens, the smart university risks becoming another technocratic ideal that prioritizes efficiency over educational values and human judgment.

This chapter argues that digital transformation in higher education must be reconceptualized as a process of institutional smartness rather than technological sophistication. Smartness, as proposed here, is not defined by the quantity or novelty of digital tools, but by an institution's capacity to align technology with governance, culture, ethics, and academic purpose. From this perspective, a smart institution can reflect on its own practices, adapt to changing environments, and make informed decisions while preserving core academic values such as autonomy, inclusivity, and intellectual freedom. Digital technologies play a crucial enabling role in this process, but they are neither the starting point nor the ultimate goal.

Adopting this institutional perspective also highlights the central role of governance and leadership in digital transformation. Research on organizational change in higher education consistently demonstrates that sustainable transformation requires shared vision, cross-unit coordination, and cultural alignment (Kezar, 2014). Digital strategies that are disconnected from institutional missions or imposed through top-down mandates are unlikely to produce meaningful change. Instead, digital transformation must be understood as a collective endeavor involving faculty, administrators, students, and professional staff as co-creators of institutional smartness.

At the same time, reframing digital transformation raises important ethical and political questions. The increasing reliance on data-driven systems introduces new forms of surveillance, algorithmic decision-making, and power asymmetries within universities (Selwyn, 2022). Smart institutions must therefore grapple with issues of transparency, accountability, and equity, ensuring that digital innovations serve educational goals rather than undermine them. Ignoring these dimensions risks reinforcing existing inequalities and reducing higher education to a managed, metric-driven enterprise.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a critical and conceptual framework for understanding institutional smartness in higher education. Drawing on literature in higher education studies, organizational change, and critical digital education, the chapter distinguishes analytically between digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation, examines why technology-led approaches frequently fail to produce sustainable institutional change, and proposes a multidimensional framework of smartness centered on governance, culture, adaptability, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, the chapter contributes to emerging debates on smart institutions by offering an institutionally grounded alternative to technologically reductive models of transformation.

Clarifying THE Concepts: Digitization, Digitalization, and Digital Transformation

The growing prominence of digital transformation in higher education discourse has been accompanied by persistent conceptual ambiguity. Terms such as digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation are frequently used interchangeably in institutional strategies, policy documents, and scholarly discussions, despite referring to analytically distinct processes. This lack of conceptual clarity contributes to unrealistic expectations, fragmented implementation, and the misalignment of digital initiatives with institutional goals. A precise understanding of these concepts is therefore essential for assessing the scope, limitations, and transformative potential of digital change in higher education.

Digitization: Converting THE Analog to THE Digital

Digitization represents the most basic level of digital change and refers to the technical process of converting analog information into digital formats (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016). In higher education, digitization has long been part of routine academic and administrative activity, including the scanning of library collections, the digitization of student records, and the electronic submission of assignments. These practices improve accessibility, storage, and efficiency, but they do not fundamentally alter how universities operate or make decisions.

While digitization is often presented as a prerequisite for broader digital change, its transformative capacity is limited. Digitized content and records typically replicate existing structures and workflows in digital form, leaving institutional logics and power relations intact. For example, digitizing lectures through recorded videos does not inherently challenge pedagogical models centered on one-way knowledge transmission. Similarly, digital archives may expand access to information without reshaping how knowledge is produced or evaluated. As such, digitization should be understood as an enabling condition rather than a transformative process.

Digitalization: Optimizing Processes Through Technology

Digitalization moves beyond content conversion to focus on integrating digital technologies into organizational processes, intending to enhance efficiency, coordination, and service delivery. In higher education, digitalization is reflected in the widespread adoption of learning management systems, enterprise resource planning platforms, online assessment tools, and digital communication infrastructures. These systems reconfigure workflows and interactions, often reducing administrative burden and increasing scalability (OECD, 2021).

Despite its broader scope, digitalization remains largely instrumental in nature. It tends to optimize existing processes rather than question their underlying purposes or assumptions. For instance, digital student information systems may streamline

enrollment and progression tracking, yet still reinforce standardized pathways that marginalize non-traditional learners. Similarly, learning analytics platforms may support early intervention strategies while simultaneously narrowing definitions of student success to measurable indicators (Selwyn, 2019). In this sense, digitalization often reflects managerial priorities and performance logics rather than pedagogical or scholarly innovation.

Importantly, digitalization can also generate new dependencies and vulnerabilities. Universities increasingly rely on proprietary platforms and external vendors, which may shape institutional practices in ways that are opaque or difficult to contest. This raises concerns about data governance, interoperability, and institutional autonomy, particularly in contexts where digital infrastructure is unevenly distributed or externally controlled (Williamson, 2017). While digitalization can improve operational capacity, it does not automatically foster institutional learning or adaptability.

Digital Transformation: Institutional Reconfiguration and Cultural Change

Digital transformation represents a qualitatively different level of change, encompassing the reconfiguration of organizational structures, governance arrangements, cultural norms, and strategic priorities in response to digital technologies (Vial, 2019). Rather than focusing on tools or processes, digital transformation addresses how institutions redefine their missions, relationships, and decision-making practices in digitally mediated environments.

In the context of higher education, digital transformation involves reconsidering fundamental questions about teaching, research, governance, and engagement. This may include rethinking academic roles, revising assessment and credentialing models, adopting new forms of collaboration, and developing data-informed but ethically grounded decision-making frameworks. Crucially, digital transformation is not a linear or technologically deterministic process; it is shaped by institutional histories, power dynamics, and cultural resistance (Kezar, 2014).

However, many universities invoke the language of transformation without engaging in the depth of change it implies. Strategic plans often label digital initiatives as transformative while maintaining traditional hierarchies, siloed structures, and risk-averse cultures. As a result, transformation becomes aspirational rather than operational, and digital investments fail to produce lasting institutional impact. This gap between rhetoric and reality underscores the need for a more critical and institutionally grounded understanding of digital transformation.

Why Conceptual Distinctions Matter

Distinguishing between digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation is not merely an academic exercise; it has significant implications for policy, leadership, and

practice. When universities conflate these concepts, they risk allocating resources to highly visible technological projects that offer limited strategic value. Moreover, success is often measured in terms of system adoption rates or technological sophistication rather than institutional learning, equity, or academic quality.

Clear conceptual differentiation also enables institutions to diagnose their own digital maturity more accurately. Many universities operate at advanced levels of digitization and digitalization while remaining at early stages of transformation. Recognizing this disparity can help leaders move beyond checklist approaches to digital strategy and toward more reflective and participatory models of change. It also shifts attention from technological capabilities to institutional capacities, including leadership, governance, and culture.

Finally, these distinctions lay the groundwork for reconceptualizing digital transformation as institutional smartness. By acknowledging that transformation requires more than optimized processes, universities can begin to articulate what it means to become adaptive, ethically responsible, and learning-oriented institutions in digital contexts. The following section builds on this conceptual foundation by introducing smartness as an alternative lens through which to understand and guide digital transformation in higher education.

Why Digital Transformation Often Fails in Universities

Despite sustained investment in digital infrastructure and persistent rhetorical commitment to innovation, universities frequently struggle to achieve meaningful digital transformation. Rather than reshaping core academic and organizational practices, digital initiatives often result in incremental improvements, symbolic compliance, or temporary adaptations. These limitations cannot be explained primarily by technological constraints; instead, they reflect deeper institutional conditions related to governance, culture, and power within higher education.

Fragmentation and Siloed Implementation

One of the most frequently identified barriers to digital transformation in universities is the fragmentation of digital initiatives across institutional units. Digital projects are often developed within individual faculties, administrative departments, or support units, with limited coordination or shared strategic vision. As a result, institutions accumulate a patchwork of platforms, systems, and practices that lack interoperability and strategic coherence (Marshall, 2018).

This fragmentation reflects the decentralized and loosely coupled nature of higher education institutions. While such organizational arrangements support disciplinary autonomy and localized innovation, they also limit the capacity for institution-wide transformation. Digital initiatives remain project-based rather than systemic, dependent on short-term funding, individual champions, or external pressures. Without integrative

governance mechanisms, digital transformation remains episodic and reversible rather than cumulative and institutionalized (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Technology-Led Change and Vendor Dependency

A second factor contributing to the failure of digital transformation is the predominance of technology-led approaches that prioritize tools over institutional purpose. Universities increasingly adopt digital platforms in response to vendor offerings, policy incentives, or perceived sectoral norms, often without critically assessing their alignment with academic values, pedagogical practices, or governance arrangements (Selwyn, 2016; Williamson, 2017).

Vendor-driven solutions embed particular assumptions about efficiency, standardization, and performance that may conflict with disciplinary diversity and collegial governance. As Williamson (2017) argues, digital platforms increasingly act as "policy actors," shaping institutional practices through software architectures and data infrastructures. In this context, universities risk adapting their organizational processes to proprietary technologies rather than shaping technologies in accordance with institutional missions. Such dependencies constrain institutional agency and reinforce perceptions of digital transformation as externally imposed rather than collectively owned.

Academic Culture, Professional Identity, and Resistance

Digital transformation initiatives frequently encounter resistance within academic communities, not because of an inherent opposition to technology, but due to concerns about professional autonomy, workload, and the erosion of academic judgment. Universities are professional organizations characterized by strong disciplinary identities and norms of collegial governance, which shape how change is interpreted and enacted (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Trowler et al., 2012; Trowler, 2014; Kezar, 2014).

Faculty concerns often reflect substantive issues rather than cultural inertia. Digital transformation generates new forms of academic labor, including online course design, platform administration, continuous student engagement, and interaction with data-driven systems. This labor is frequently unevenly distributed and insufficiently recognized within promotion, workload, and reward structures (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Watermeyer et al., 2021a; Watermeyer et al., 2021b). When digital initiatives are framed primarily in managerial or efficiency-oriented terms, they risk undermining trust and legitimacy, resulting in compliance rather than genuine engagement.

Managerialism, Metrics, and Performative Transformation

Digital transformation in higher education is increasingly entangled with managerial and performative logics centered on accountability, efficiency, and competition. Digital systems enable the extensive collection and visualization of data on teaching, learning, and institutional performance, often framed as tools for evidence-based decision-making.

However, as critical scholarship has shown, the proliferation of metrics can narrow institutional priorities and reshape academic behavior in performative ways (Ball, 2012; Selwyn, 2019).

Learning analytics and performance dashboards frequently privilege what is easily measurable over what is educationally meaningful, reducing complex academic practices to simplified indicators. Rather than supporting institutional learning and pedagogical reflection, data-driven systems may reinforce surveillance and control, contributing to skepticism and disengagement among academic staff. In such contexts, digital transformation becomes symbolic, demonstrating responsiveness and modernity without challenging underlying organizational logics.

Weak Governance and THE Absence of Institutional Learning

Underlying these challenges is the absence of governance structures that support institutional learning, reflexivity, and ethical oversight. Responsibility for digital transformation is often dispersed across senior leadership, IT units, teaching and learning centers, and external consultants, resulting in fragmented accountability and limited strategic alignment (Marshall, 2018).

Digital strategies frequently exist as standalone documents, disconnected from academic planning, quality assurance, and resource allocation processes. Moreover, digital change is commonly framed as implementation rather than inquiry: once systems are deployed, attention shifts to optimization and compliance rather than evaluation and reflection. Opportunities to learn from failures, unintended consequences, or contextual mismatches are rarely institutionalized (Kezar, 2014). Without learning-oriented governance, digital transformation remains reactive and path-dependent.

Crisis-Driven Change and THE Illusion of Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly illustrative example of the limitations of digital transformation in higher education. The rapid shift to emergency remote teaching demonstrated universities' capacity for short-term adaptation under crisis conditions. However, it also exposed the fragility of digital strategies not grounded in long-term pedagogical and institutional planning (Hodges et al., 2020).

While the pandemic accelerated digital adoption, it did not necessarily produce transformation. In many cases, emergency measures were rolled back once immediate pressures subsided, with limited institutional learning or structural change. This pattern underscores a broader tendency to equate rapid digitalization with transformation, reinforcing the illusion of progress while leaving underlying governance, culture, and power relations largely intact.

From Recurrent Failure to Conceptual Reframing

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the recurrent failure of digital transformation in universities is not accidental but structural. Fragmentation,

technology-led agendas, cultural misalignment, performative governance, vendor dependency, and crisis-driven change combine to limit the depth and sustainability of digital initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond technology-centric models of transformation toward an understanding of digital change as an institutional process shaped by governance, culture, and ethical responsibility.

This diagnosis provides the foundation for the conceptual shift developed in the following section. By reframing digital transformation as institutional smartness, the chapter advances an alternative lens through which universities can be understood not in terms of technological advancement, but in terms of their capacity for reflection, adaptation, and responsible decision-making in digitally mediated environments.

From Digital Transformation to Institutional "Smartness": A Conceptual Framework

The recurring limitations of digital transformation in higher education point to the need for a conceptual shift in how institutional change is understood. Rather than treating digital transformation as the culmination of technological adoption, this chapter proposes *institutional smartness* as an alternative analytical lens for understanding how universities evolve under digital conditions. Institutional smartness foregrounds governance, culture, and ethical responsibility, positioning digital technologies as enabling resources rather than as drivers of transformation.

This section develops the chapter's central conceptual contribution: a multidimensional framework of institutional smartness for higher education. The framework moves beyond technologically deterministic models by emphasizing institutional capacities for reflection, adaptation, and responsible decision-making. In doing so, it responds directly to dominant but increasingly contested narratives of smart universities as data-intensive, automated, and efficiency-oriented organizations.

Defining Institutional Smartness in Higher Education

The concept of "smartness" has gained prominence in discussions of smart cities, smart governance, and smart organizations, where it is typically associated with data integration, responsiveness, and real-time decision-making (Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). In these contexts, smartness is often framed as a technical attribute, achieved through the deployment of advanced digital infrastructures, analytics, and automated systems. When transposed uncritically to higher education, however, such interpretations risk reproducing the same technological reductionism that has limited earlier digital transformation efforts.

In this chapter, *institutional smartness* is defined as the capacity of a higher education institution to align digital technologies with governance structures, organizational culture, and academic purpose to adapt responsibly to changing internal and external conditions. This definition emphasizes three key features. First, smartness is institutional

rather than technological; it is expressed through decision-making processes, governance arrangements, and professional practices rather than through tools or platforms. Second, smartness is dynamic, understood as an ongoing process of learning and adaptation rather than a fixed institutional state or maturity level. Third, smartness is normative, grounded in educational values such as academic freedom, inclusion, and intellectual integrity.

This conceptualization distinguishes smart institutions from universities that are digitally advanced but institutionally rigid. An institution may possess sophisticated platforms and extensive data infrastructures while lacking the capacity to reflect on their implications, integrate them across organizational boundaries, or govern them ethically. Conversely, institutions with more modest technological resources may demonstrate high levels of smartness through participatory governance, strategic coherence, and reflexive cultures. Smartness, therefore, should be understood as a form of institutional intelligence rather than technological sophistication.

Beyond Technology-Centered Models of Transformation

Much of the literature on digital transformation implicitly assumes a linear relationship between technological adoption and organizational improvement. Digital maturity frameworks, for example, often depict transformation as a progression from digitization to optimization and, ultimately, to innovation, with technological integration serving as the primary indicator of institutional advancement (Marshall, 2018). While such models provide useful descriptive benchmarks, they obscure the social, cultural, and political dimensions of institutional change.

Technology-centered models tend to underestimate the role of academic norms, professional identities, and power relations in shaping how digital systems are interpreted and enacted. They also risk promoting a form of technological determinism, in which digital tools are assumed to generate positive outcomes independently of context. Critical scholarship in digital education has repeatedly demonstrated that technologies often reinforce existing managerial logics and inequalities unless actively governed and contested (Selwyn, 2016; Williamson, 2017).

Institutional smartness therefore requires a departure from instrumental and linear accounts of transformation. Rather than asking which technologies universities have adopted, the more analytically productive question becomes how technologies are embedded within institutional decision-making, how their effects are evaluated, and how their use aligns with academic values and public purposes. Smartness shifts attention from technological capability to institutional capacity.

Core Dimensions of Institutional Smartness

Building on this critique, the chapter proposes a four-dimensional framework of institutional smartness in higher education. These dimensions are analytically distinct yet

mutually reinforcing, capturing the conditions under which digital technologies contribute to meaningful institutional transformation rather than superficial modernization.

Smart and Integrated Governance

Smart institutions demonstrate coherence between digital initiatives, institutional mission, and governance structures. Digital strategies are embedded within broader academic and organizational planning rather than existing as isolated or technical documents. Decision-making authority is transparent, cross-unit coordination is actively supported, and responsibility for digital transformation is institutionally anchored rather than delegated exclusively to IT units or external vendors. Importantly, smart governance incorporates participatory mechanisms that enable faculty, professional staff, and students to contribute to strategic digital decisions.

Adaptive Institutional Culture and Human-Centered Design

Institutional smartness depends on cultures that value learning, experimentation, and critical reflection. Rather than framing digital change as compliance or disruption, smart institutions foster dialogue and recognize uncertainty as a condition of innovation. Academic and professional staff are positioned as co-creators of digital transformation, and their expertise, labor, and professional judgment are recognized and supported. Human-centered design principles emphasize that digital systems should enhance, rather than constrain, pedagogical diversity and academic autonomy (Kezar, 2014).

Data-Informed, Not Data-Driven Decision-Making

Smart institutions make systematic use of data to inform decisions, but they resist reducing complex educational processes to metrics alone. Data are interpreted within professional, contextual, and ethical frameworks, with human judgment remaining central. This distinction between data-informed and data-driven governance is critical for avoiding algorithmic decision-making that obscures responsibility and narrows institutional priorities (Selwyn, 2019). In smart institutions, data function as a resource for reflection and learning rather than as instruments of surveillance or control.

Ethical and Reflexive Digital Practice

Ethical responsibility is not an external constraint on smart institutions but a constitutive dimension of smartness itself. Universities must critically assess how digital systems affect privacy, equity, academic freedom, and inclusion. Smart institutions establish governance mechanisms for data protection, algorithmic transparency, and accountability, recognizing that ethical oversight is an ongoing institutional practice rather than a one-time compliance exercise. Reflexivity, the capacity to question assumptions, evaluate consequences, and revise practices, is central to sustaining ethical smartness over time.

Smartness as a Process, Not an End State

A defining feature of institutional smartness is its rejection of fixed endpoints or idealized models. Unlike rankings or maturity frameworks, smartness is understood as a continuous process of institutional learning and recalibration. Universities operate in environments characterized by uncertainty, technological change, and shifting societal expectations; smartness lies in the capacity to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.

This process-oriented understanding also helps explain why attempts to transfer "best practices" across institutions often fail. Institutional smartness is context-sensitive, shaped by organizational histories, regulatory environments, resource constraints, and cultural norms. What constitutes smart governance or ethical practice in one setting may not be directly transferable to another. Smartness must therefore be cultivated through ongoing institutional work rather than implemented through standardized solutions.

Reframing Digital Transformation Through Institutional Smartness

Reconceptualizing digital transformation through the lens of institutional smartness has important analytical implications. It shifts attention away from technological novelty toward institutional coherence, emphasizing governance, culture, and ethics as central components of transformation. It also provides a framework for evaluating digital initiatives not by their scale or sophistication, but by their contribution to institutional adaptability, learning, and academic purpose.

By positioning smartness as an institutional capacity rather than a technological achievement, this framework offers a critical alternative to dominant narratives of smart higher education. It provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how universities can move beyond traditional models not by becoming more automated or data-intensive, but by becoming more reflective, adaptive, and ethically responsible institutions. The following section builds on this framework by examining the leadership and governance conditions necessary to enable institutional smartness in practice.

Governance, Culture, and Leadership in Smart Institutions

If institutional smartness is understood as a capacity rather than a technological condition, then governance, culture, and leadership become central mechanisms through which smartness is enabled, constrained, or undermined in practice. Digital transformation does not unfold in a vacuum; it is shaped by how decisions are made, how authority and responsibility are distributed, and how institutional values are enacted within digitally mediated environments. This section examines governance, culture, and leadership as interdependent dimensions that translate the conceptual framework of institutional smartness into organizational practice.

Governance Beyond IT-Centric and Managerial Models

Conventional approaches to digital governance in higher education have frequently positioned digital transformation as a technical or operational concern, often delegated to information technology units or specialized project teams. While such arrangements may support infrastructure deployment, they tend to marginalize academic leadership and faculty participation in strategic digital decisions, reinforcing the perception of digital transformation as a technical rather than institutional process (Marshall, 2018).

From the perspective of institutional smartness, governance must extend beyond IT-centric and managerial models. Smart governance integrates digital strategy within broader academic, organizational, and ethical decision-making structures. This includes cross-functional governance bodies that bring together academic leaders, professional staff, faculty representatives, and, where appropriate, students. Such arrangements enhance strategic coherence, reduce fragmentation, and support the alignment of digital initiatives with institutional mission and academic purpose.

Crucially, smart governance also encompasses data governance. As universities increasingly rely on analytics, algorithmic systems, and platform-based infrastructures, governance frameworks must clarify data ownership, decision authority, transparency, and accountability (Selwyn, 2022). Without such mechanisms, digital systems risk becoming opaque instruments of control rather than resources for institutional learning and informed judgment.

Institutional Culture, Participation, and Professional Trust

Institutional smartness is not sustained by governance structures alone; it is equally dependent on organizational culture. Universities are professional organizations characterized by strong disciplinary identities, norms of academic autonomy, and traditions of collegial governance. These cultural features shape how digital transformation is interpreted and enacted, and they can either enable or inhibit institutional smartness (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Digital transformation initiatives that are perceived as externally imposed, efficiency-driven, or surveillance-oriented often generate resistance and disengagement. Such responses should not be understood as opposition to innovation, but as expressions of concern over professional identity, workload, and academic values. Smart institutions respond to these dynamics by prioritizing participation, dialogue, and trust. Faculty and professional staff are recognized as co-creators of digital transformation rather than passive implementers, and their expertise and labor are explicitly valued.

Participation also has a practical dimension. Professional development, recognition of digital work, and alignment between evaluation systems and digital innovation are critical for embedding smartness within institutional culture (Kezar, 2014; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Without such supports, digital transformation risks remaining superficial, regardless of technological sophistication.

Leadership for Institutional Smartness

Leadership plays a pivotal role in enabling institutional smartness, particularly in navigating the tensions between innovation and tradition, autonomy and coordination, and efficiency and academic values. Research on organizational change in higher education consistently emphasizes that sustainable transformation depends on leadership that is both strategic and inclusive, capable of articulating institutional direction while engaging diverse stakeholders in the change process (Kezar, 2014).

In smart institutions, leaders function less as drivers of technological adoption and more as stewards of institutional coherence. This involves aligning digital initiatives with academic mission, mediating conflicts between managerial and collegial logics, and ensuring that ethical considerations remain central to decision-making. Senior leaders play a critical role in signaling the institutional importance of digital transformation, but leadership for smartness is not confined to executive roles.

Rather, institutional smartness is supported by distributed leadership across multiple levels of the organization, including deans, department heads, program leaders, and faculty champions. Distributed leadership enables institutions to mobilize localized expertise while maintaining strategic alignment, reducing dependence on individual leaders or short-term initiatives. This approach also enhances institutional resilience in the face of leadership turnover or shifting technological priorities.

Trust, Transparency, and Ethical Accountability

Trust is a foundational condition for institutional smartness. Digital transformation initiatives that emphasize monitoring, metrics, and automation can undermine trust if they are perceived as instruments of surveillance or managerial control. Smart institutions therefore prioritize transparency in how digital systems operate, how data are collected and used, and how decisions are justified.

Ethical accountability is not an external constraint on leadership or governance, but an integral component of smart institutional practice. This includes establishing mechanisms for ethical oversight, algorithmic accountability, and stakeholder engagement, particularly where digital systems have significant implications for equity, inclusion, and academic freedom. Leaders in smart institutions must be prepared to question technological solutions, acknowledge uncertainty, and revise practices in response to emerging risks and unintended consequences.

Governance, Culture, and Leadership as Interdependent Enablers of Smartness

Governance, culture, and leadership should not be understood as separate domains, but as interdependent enablers of institutional smartness. Governance structures shape leadership possibilities; leadership practices influence institutional culture; and culture determines how governance arrangements are interpreted and enacted. Digital

transformation efforts that focus on only one of these dimensions are unlikely to produce sustainable institutional change.

Institutional smartness emerges when governance frameworks support participation and accountability, leadership fosters alignment and trust, and institutional culture encourages reflection and learning. Under these conditions, digital technologies become instruments of institutional adaptation rather than sources of fragmentation or control. The following section builds on this analysis by examining the risks, tensions, and ethical challenges that accompany the pursuit of institutional smartness in higher education.

Risks, Tensions, and Ethical Considerations in Smart Institutions

Discourses of smart institutions often emphasize efficiency, responsiveness, and innovation, presenting digital transformation as a largely technical or managerial endeavor. Yet the pursuit of institutional smartness in higher education is inseparable from questions of power, ethics, and responsibility. Smartness is not ethically neutral: how data are collected, systems are designed, and decisions are automated have profound implications for academic freedom, equity, inclusion, and institutional accountability. From this perspective, ethical responsibility is not a constraint on smart institutions but a defining condition of smartness itself.

Datafication, Surveillance, and THE Reconfiguration of Academic Life

A central feature of smart institutions is the extensive datafication of academic activity. Digital systems generate continuous streams of data on student behavior, learning engagement, teaching practices, and institutional performance. These data are frequently framed as resources for personalization, efficiency, and evidence-based decision-making. However, as critical scholarship has demonstrated, datafication also introduces new forms of surveillance and control that reshape academic life in subtle but consequential ways (Williamson, 2017; Selwyn, 2022).

For students, data-driven systems may narrow definitions of learning success by privileging measurable indicators over diverse intellectual trajectories. Predictive analytics, in particular, risks framing students through deficit-based models that individualize risk while obscuring structural inequalities. For faculty, the expansion of digital monitoring can erode professional autonomy by subjecting teaching and assessment practices to algorithmic evaluation and managerial oversight. In smart institutions, the boundary between support and surveillance becomes increasingly blurred, raising fundamental questions about consent, transparency, and proportionality.

Ethically grounded smartness requires universities to govern these boundaries actively rather than allow them to be defined implicitly through technological infrastructures. This involves not only compliance with data protection regulations, but also ongoing

institutional debate about what kinds of data should be collected, for what purposes, and under whose authority.

Algorithmic Governance, Bias, and Inequality

Smart institutions increasingly rely on algorithmic systems to support or automate decision-making processes, from admissions and student progression to performance evaluation and resource allocation. While these systems promise efficiency and objectivity, they are shaped by the data on which they are trained and the assumptions embedded in their design. As a result, algorithmic governance often reproduces or amplifies existing social inequalities rather than mitigating them (Noble, 2018).

In higher education, learning analytics tools intended to identify "at-risk" students may disproportionately target students from marginalized backgrounds, reinforcing deficit narratives rather than addressing structural barriers to participation and success. Similarly, algorithmic performance metrics may disadvantage disciplines, pedagogies, or forms of scholarship that do not align with standardized indicators of productivity or impact. These dynamics raise critical questions about fairness, epistemic diversity, and the narrowing of academic practice within smart institutional environments.

From the perspective of institutional smartness, the challenge is not simply to improve algorithms, but to interrogate the values and power relations they encode. Smart institutions must therefore develop capacities for algorithmic transparency, critical evaluation, and contestation, ensuring that automated systems remain subject to human judgment and institutional accountability.

Managerialism, Automation, and THE Erosion of Collegial Governance

The ethical challenges of smart institutions are closely intertwined with broader transformations in higher education governance. Digital technologies often align with managerial logics of efficiency, performance measurement, and strategic control, reinforcing shifts away from collegial and participatory forms of governance (Deem et al., 2007). Smart dashboards, key performance indicators, and automated reporting systems can enhance oversight, but they can also marginalize academic deliberation and collective decision-making.

When digital governance tools privilege speed, standardization, and comparability, they risk reducing complex academic judgments to technical outputs. Authority becomes embedded in infrastructures rather than exercised through deliberative processes, making governance less visible and more difficult to contest. Over time, this can reshape institutional culture, narrowing spaces for dissent, critique, and democratic engagement.

Ethically constituted smart institutions must therefore resist the depoliticization of governance through automation. Rather than replacing collegial processes, digital systems should be designed to support informed deliberation, transparency, and shared

responsibility. Maintaining this balance is a central ethical challenge of institutional smartness.

Ethical Accountability as an Institutional Capacity

If ethical responsibility is constitutive of institutional smartness, it cannot be delegated to isolated committees or treated as a one-time compliance exercise. Instead, ethical accountability must be embedded within governance structures, leadership practices, and institutional culture. This includes clear policies on data governance, mechanisms for stakeholder participation, and processes for reviewing and revising digital practices in light of emerging risks and unintended consequences.

Ethical accountability also extends to universities' relationships with external technology providers and platform companies. As institutions become increasingly dependent on proprietary digital infrastructures, questions of data ownership, transparency, and long-term institutional autonomy become more pressing. Smart institutions must retain the capacity to negotiate, contest, and, where necessary, refuse technological arrangements that conflict with academic values or public responsibilities.

Developing ethical capacity further requires cultivating critical digital literacy among leaders, faculty, professional staff, and students. Institutional smartness depends not only on formal governance mechanisms, but on shared understanding and collective responsibility for the ethical implications of digital change.

Ethics at THE Core of Institutional Smartness

Taken together, these tensions underscore that ethics is not an external risk to be managed at the margins of digital transformation, but a core dimension of institutional smartness. Universities that fail to engage critically with issues of power, surveillance, inequality, and governance may become technologically sophisticated while remaining institutionally fragile and normatively hollow.

Ethically grounded smart institutions are characterized by their capacity to reflect on the consequences of digital systems, to involve diverse stakeholders in digital decision-making, and to revise practices in response to ethical concern. In this sense, smartness entails not only institutional adaptability, but institutional responsibility. By placing ethics at the center of smartness, higher education institutions can resist reductive and technocratic models of transformation and instead cultivate forms of digital change aligned with their educational missions and public purposes.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The conceptual reframing of digital transformation as institutional smartness carries significant implications for higher education policy, practice, and research. Recognizing that technology alone does not constitute transformation necessitates a shift in how

universities, policymakers, and scholars approach strategic planning, resource allocation, and institutional evaluation.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, governments and funding agencies must move beyond technology-centric mandates and toward frameworks that encourage holistic institutional development. Policies should emphasize organizational learning, adaptive governance, and ethical data practices as core components of transformation rather than optional add-ons (OECD, 2021; Vial, 2019). For example, accreditation standards and quality assurance processes could incorporate measures of digital maturity and institutional adaptability, rather than focusing solely on infrastructure deployment or online course availability.

Policies should also address equity and inclusivity in digital initiatives. Unequal access to digital infrastructure, skills, and support can exacerbate existing disparities among students, faculty, and institutions (Williamson, 2017). By foregrounding equity in digital policy, governments and institutional leaders can ensure that smart institutions serve diverse constituencies and do not unintentionally reinforce privilege or exclusion.

Practical Implications for Institutional Leaders

For university leaders, the smartness framework highlights the importance of strategic alignment, participatory governance, and cultural readiness. Institutional leaders should approach digital initiatives as complex, long-term processes rather than discrete projects, integrating technological adoption with broader mission-driven objectives. Practical steps include:

- Developing cross-unit digital governance structures that involve academic and administrative stakeholders.
- Embedding professional development programs that enhance digital literacy, pedagogical innovation, and data-informed decision-making among faculty and staff.
- Fostering a culture of experimentation, reflection, and continuous improvement to support adaptive change.
- Ensuring transparency and accountability in the collection, use, and analysis of institutional data.

By emphasizing process over product, leaders can cultivate adaptive institutions capable of responding to evolving student needs, technological shifts, and societal expectations.

Implications for Research

Scholars of higher education are positioned to play a critical role in advancing knowledge on digital transformation and smart institutions. Future research should

adopt multi-level approaches that consider organizational, cultural, and ethical dimensions of digital change. Potential avenues include:

- Longitudinal studies assessing the impact of digital initiatives on institutional adaptability and learning outcomes.
- Comparative research examining smartness in diverse national and regional contexts to identify context-specific enablers and barriers.
- Critical analyses of data governance, ethics, and algorithmic decision-making in university contexts.
- Exploration of faculty, staff, and student experiences of digital transformation to inform inclusive and human-centered practices.

By producing empirically grounded and theoretically robust insights, researchers can support evidence-based strategies for fostering institutional smartness and inform policies that promote sustainable, equitable digital transformation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that prevailing approaches to digital transformation in higher education are insufficient for understanding how universities are changing under digital conditions. Despite significant investment and strategic emphasis, digital transformation initiatives frequently fail to produce sustained institutional change. As the analysis has shown, these failures are not primarily technological but institutional, rooted in fragmented governance, technology-led agendas, cultural misalignment, performative managerialism, and weak capacities for institutional learning.

In response to these limitations, the chapter has advanced *institutional smartness* as an alternative conceptual framework for understanding digital change in higher education. Rather than equating transformation with technological sophistication, institutional smartness reframes digital change as a matter of institutional capacity: the ability of universities to align digital technologies with governance structures, organizational cultures, and academic purposes in ways that support reflection, adaptation, and responsible decision-making. Smartness, in this sense, is not a destination or maturity level, but an ongoing institutional process.

By conceptualizing smartness as institutional intelligence rather than technological advancement, the framework challenges dominant narratives of smart universities as data-driven, automated, and efficiency-oriented organizations. Instead, it emphasizes the centrality of governance coherence, participatory culture, professional trust, and ethical accountability. Universities may adopt advanced digital infrastructures without becoming smart, just as institutions with more modest technologies may demonstrate high levels of smartness through reflexive governance and value-driven leadership.

The chapter has further shown that institutional smartness cannot be realized without attention to governance and leadership. Smart institutions require governance arrangements that integrate digital strategy within broader academic decision-making,

leadership practices that balance coordination with autonomy, and cultures that recognize faculty and professional staff as co-creators of digital change. Distributed leadership, transparency, and trust emerge as critical conditions for sustaining smartness over time.

Crucially, the analysis has positioned ethics not as an external risk to be managed, but as a constitutive dimension of institutional smartness. Datafication, algorithmic governance, and platform dependency introduce new forms of power and inequality that cannot be addressed through technical fixes alone. Smart institutions are distinguished by their capacity to reflect on these dynamics, to engage stakeholders in ethical deliberation, and to revise digital practices in light of social and educational consequences. In this sense, institutional smartness entails responsibility as much as adaptability.

Taken together, these arguments contribute to the broader project of rethinking higher education beyond traditional institutional models. As universities navigate increasing uncertainty, digital complexity, and societal expectation, the challenge is not simply to become more technologically advanced, but to become more institutionally intelligent. Institutional smartness offers a framework for understanding how universities can move beyond reactive digitalization toward forms of transformation grounded in governance, culture, and ethical purpose.

For scholars, the concept of institutional smartness provides an analytical lens for examining digital change that foregrounds power, values, and institutional agency. For university leaders and policymakers, it offers a critical reminder that meaningful transformation depends less on the adoption of new technologies than on the capacity of institutions to govern, interpret, and contest their use. In an era of accelerating digital change, the future of higher education may depend not on how smart its technologies become, but on how smart its institutions choose to be.

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Conclusion

This volume began with a practical concern: whether universities can become more digital, more accountable, and more ethically serious at the same time. After moving through the chapters, that concern becomes sharper and more demanding. The central lesson is that Digitalization, AI & Future Accountability cannot be reduced to a single platform, policy, algorithm, or accreditation framework. The volume's chapters show that digitalization changes the speed and visibility of higher education governance, but it does not decide the values by which governance should operate.

Several implications follow. First, institutions need accountability systems that are strong enough to use evidence without being captured by evidence. Data, rankings, dashboards, accreditation standards, and AI-supported tools can help institutions learn, but only when they remain open to interpretation, contestation, and contextual judgment.

Second, inclusion must be treated as central rather than supplementary. A quality system that cannot see marginalized students, under-resourced institutions, local knowledge, language differences, and uneven capacity is not simply incomplete; it is ethically weak.

Third, accreditation and rankings should be understood as governance systems, not neutral mirrors. They do not merely report quality. They organize incentives, distribute attention, shape policy language, and sometimes reward performance over substance.

Fourth, digital transformation must be governed as an institutional process. Tools can accelerate documentation, analysis, communication, and prediction, but they can also reproduce old hierarchies at new speed. Future accountability therefore requires transparency, interpretability, and human judgment.

Finally, the volume suggests a more mature understanding of prestige. Universities do need to be trusted, compared, and held accountable. Yet visibility should make educational integrity more apparent, not replace it. Recognition is most meaningful when it remains connected to learning, equity, public service, and institutional responsibility.

The volume therefore closes not with finality, but with an invitation: to read the chapters as working material for better decisions. The test of the book will not be whether readers agree with every argument, but whether the chapters help them ask better questions about technology, prestige, accountability, and the future of higher education.

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