Quality Education

'Under development, not underdeveloped'

Prof. Mark O'Hara

Senior Consultant (Education), Advance-HE, https://www.advance-he.ac.uk

Vice Chair, European Association of Institutional Research, https://the-eair.org

Outline

- 'Transcending Boundaries' - origins
- 'Transcending Boundaries' - themes
- Sustainable cultures & curricula:
  - 'Becoming' / learning to learn
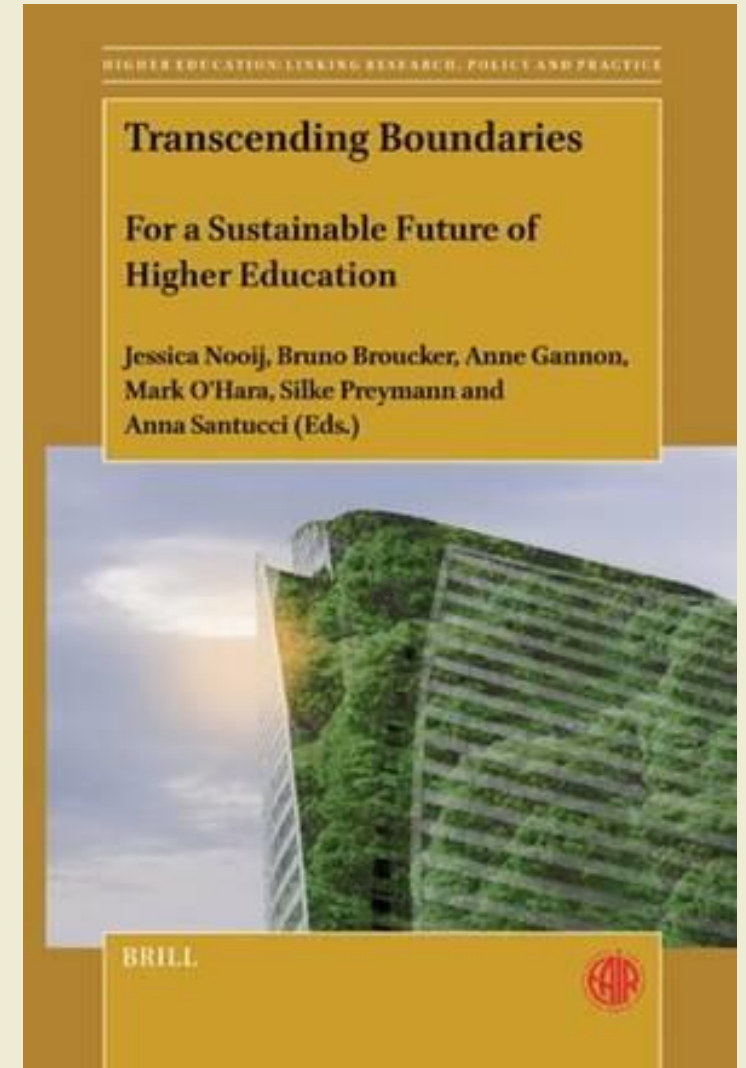 - Investing in staff
- Closing remarks
- Q&A

'Transcending Boundaries' - origins

European Association of Institutional Research (EAIR)

Annual Forum, University College Cork, 21st - 23rd August, 2024: 'Sustainability, well-being and resilience'

'Transcending boundaries' - themes

The book explores how HE institutions can contribute to the delivery of SDG4 by building enduring, responsive and inclusive systems that maintain quality assurance and enhancement amid rapidly evolving societal, technological and geopolitical landscapes.

1. Collaboration	2. Policy & strategy	3. Digital affordances
4. Well-being & resilience	5. Research excellence	6. Research-policy-practice 'nexus'

1. Collaboration

HEIs are urged to work alongside national/regional civil society, practitioners, policymakers to co-create knowledge and solutions. Transdisciplinary research and problem-based education are promoted as vital tools for tackling complex, real-world problems and equipping students with key sustainability and global citizenship skills.

2. Policy & strategy

Strategic management and governance challenges such as fragmented policies are identified in studies of Brazilian HEIs and Dutch AI learning communities. To drive sustainable improvement, concern for quality assurance must be deeply embedded within institutional cultures and accompanied by a concomitant concern for quality enhancement.

3. Digital affordances

Innovation in teaching and learning and the integration of digitalisation, including artificial intelligence (AI), into higher education are inevitable. Active, participatory learning methods and the integration of sustainability into curricula are emphasized as a means to empower students.

4. Well-being and resilience

Supporting students and staff through empathetic learning environments and psychological support systems was viewed as foundational for sustaining quality cultures and outcomes in Higher Education.

5. Research excellence

While competitiveness and prestige remain central in research agendas, the book calls for a balance between performance and practical impact in the interests of more sustainable approaches. It argues for long term strategies that foster strong connections between research, education and society and it questions how research can remain excellent while becoming more open, transdisciplinary and socially impactful.

6. Research-policy-practice 'nexus'

Governments expect higher education to provide evidence-based research that improves learning outcomes and addresses societal challenges. Yet efforts to connect research sustainably with policy and practice often fall short, hindered by such things as poor communication, unfortunate timing and the sheer complexity of applying theory to practice.

Sustainable cultures & curricula

'Becoming' / learning to learn

Insights into student agency & enablement

AdvanceHE

'All models are wrong; but some are useful' (Box G., 1976)

- **Psychological** – Bandura [self-efficacy theory / motivation]; Dweck [growth mindset]; Deci & Ryan [self-determination theory].

- **Educational** – Bloom [taxonomy / mastery]; Duckworth [grit]; Astin [student involvement / voice].

- **Sociological** – Freire [active learning]; Ladson-Billings [culturally relevant curricula / decolonisation]; Herman / Perry [trauma informed pedagogies].

From latency to manifestation

- Unexamined lives
- A process not an event
- A shared as well as an individual experience
- Tackling 'imposter syndrome'
- Self-compassion as well as resilience in the face of adversity
- Adopting a holistic approach - dispositions and beliefs alongside skills development and knowledge acquisition.
- Rehabilitating 'facilitation'

So what?

For students: academic, personal, health & professional benefits (transferable skills, critical thinking, self-regulation, confidence, resilience, autonomy, lifelong learning / citizenship / wellbeing habits).

For us, our institutions and society: improved sustainability and resource efficiency; students better prepared, more motivated, ready for deeper learning, enhanced performance, engagement, retention, satisfaction and employment outcomes.

Sustainable cultures & curricula

Investing in staff

Insights into staff development

- **Educational** – Boud / Schön [reflective practice]; Healey [students as partners / co-creators]; O'Leary & Ciu [POoT).

- **Professional learning & identity formation** – Lave & Wenger [communities of practice & situated learning]; Felten / Hutchings (SoTL).

- **Organisational / institutional learning & development** – Barnett [HE theory]; Clegg [academic practice]; Senge [learning organisations].

A cost or an investment? A peripheral concern or a strategic priority?

- CPD for ESD ([Educational Developments Issue 26.3 – 2025 - Seda](#))
- CPD for inclusive, participatory pedagogies
- Parity of esteem: what is really valued?
- Evaluation, impact, recognition & celebration
- Culture eats strategy for breakfast [e.g. POoT; CoPs]
- Flexibility & imagination in design & delivery
- Leaders need CPD too

So what?
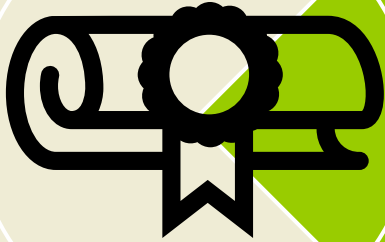
For students: enhanced learning experience, tutors with up-to-date, inclusive, technologically savvy teaching practices coupled with engaging, inclusive, innovative learning environments, that are more supportive of diverse learning needs and widening participation initiatives.

For us, our institutions and society: enhanced teaching, research and leadership skills, confidence and motivation, stronger cross-disciplinary networks, collegiality and knowledge-exchange, better retention and morale, greater institutional agility / resilience in a VUCA world and improved reputation for quality.

Thank you for this opportunity and for your time and attention.

Contact details:

Prof. Mark O'Hara, Senior Consultant (Education), Advance-HE, (mark.o'hara@advance-he.ac.uk)