

# Transforming higher education

Global collaboration on visioning and action



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Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.



## The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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# SHORT SUMMARY

Higher education has long stood as a bridge between pasts and futures. Universities and other higher education institutions are places where ideas are developed, values are debated and new possibilities are imagined. Today higher education institutions have a critical role to play in responding to pressing contemporary challenges. Through research, teaching and community engagement, they can provide the critical understanding, scientific expertise and creative imagination needed to tackle complex, multi-layered issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, health crises, persistent inequalities, the devastating consequences of armed conflicts, technological disruptions, democratic backsliding, economic challenges and rapidly transforming work environments.

To maximize the transformative potential of the sector, higher education itself needs to be transformed. UNESCO convened the third World Higher Education Conference in Barcelona in 2022 as part of a once-a-decade process of multilateral policy dialogue, deliberation, peer learning and agenda-setting. Drawing from this process and further consultations, this publication is the latest iteration in collectively fashioning and realizing a forward-looking higher education agenda.

This roadmap provides insights into developments and trends; it presents a set of forward-looking guiding principles to inspire and inform the work of all involved in higher education. It also identifies Lines of Transformation that point the way a new social contract for higher education, and is a call to action to help faculty, students, leaders and stakeholders change the sector into the transformative force the world and future generations need.

This roadmap  
draws from over  
**250 sessions,**  
**1,500 inputs**  
**and 250**  
knowledge  
products



**unesco**

"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"



# Transforming higher education

Global collaboration on visioning and action

## Foreword



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Universities have always been places where knowledge is created, questioned and shared. They preserve collective memory and help societies imagine new futures, shaped by values that have endured across generations: inquiry, rigor, openness and a belief in knowledge as a common good. Higher education systems play a strategic and irreplaceable role in building more sustainable, peaceful and fair societies. This role was recognized by the World Higher Education Conferences convened by UNESCO in 1998 and 2009, which resulted in greater attention to higher education as a responsibility of States and as a public good.

The third World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) was held in Barcelona in May 2022, on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period underscored human vulnerability and interconnectedness, while at the same time demonstrating our potential for resilience and innovation – particularly in the rapid development of vaccines, where universities and international scientific cooperation played essential roles. The technological transformations already underway at that time have only accelerated in subsequent years, disrupting the world of work and impacting societies; in short, transforming nearly every aspect of our lives, including access to knowledge and learning.

As higher education systems expand at an unprecedented pace, institutions are called upon to address complex societal challenges while navigating mounting financial, technological and social pressures. These trends highlight the urgency of guidance to help higher education systems adapt, innovate and remain anchored in their public mission.

This publication builds on the outcomes of the WHEC2022 and subsequent consultations, as part of a once-a-decade process of multilateral dialogue, peer learning and collective agenda-setting. It calls for the urgent transformation of higher education as a cornerstone of the right to quality lifelong learning. Reaffirming its three core missions - teaching, research and community engagement – it sets out guiding principles and pathways toward a new social contract for higher education, offering practical guidance for actors across the sector, from policy-makers to professors and beyond.

Higher education systems stand at the heart of social progress, driving knowledge creation and innovation worldwide. By deepening collaboration and reinforcing their public mission, they can magnify these contributions, building inclusive learning ecosystems, accelerating solutions for global challenges and shaping a future where education empowers students from all backgrounds, strengthening the very fabric of our societies.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stefania Giannini'.

**Stefania Giannini**

Assistant Director-General for Education  
UNESCO

## Acknowledgements

This roadmap was prepared by Noah W. Sobe, Chief of Section for Higher Education, within the Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems led by Borhene Chakroun, with the assistance of Hans Schildermans. It builds on the analyses conducted by Paz Portales, Josefina Sotomayor Jaramillo, Phoebe Kirkup and Jose Luis Guzman Martell, and also has also greatly benefitted from reviews undertaken by members of the UNESCO Higher Education Section as well as Sobhi Tawil, Jordi Plana Arrasa and Martín Benevides.

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UNESCO also expresses its gratitude to the over 15,000 people who either participated in WHEC2022 events, contributed to the more than 250 knowledge products submitted, or provided the more than 1,500 comments received on the draft roadmap released in Barcelona in 2022, and on which this present publication is based.

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## Executive summary

Universities have long stood as bridges between pasts and futures. They preserve humanity's collective understanding while pioneering new ways of thinking and doing. Throughout history – and at their best – universities and other institutions of higher education have been spaces of free inquiry, critical debate and key players in supporting sustainable human and socio-economic development.

Higher education has evolved over time and with the times. Today, we recognize it as a key part of the right to quality education throughout life; as a driving force for navigating change, generating prosperity and wellbeing; and as a key actor in making the world more sustainable, peaceful and just. Higher education creates social wealth and builds shared value. Universities and other institutions of higher education build the value that comes, for example, from having well-run professions; strong innovation ecosystems; robust public infrastructures; legal systems based on the rule of law; democratic living; and, not least, from a social contract rooted in inclusion, solidarity and participation.

### *Higher education creates social wealth and builds shared value.*

With the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the importance of universities and higher education institutions and their research, teaching and community engagement missions has been further reinforced. As part of a once-a-decade process of multilateral policy dialogue, deliberation, peer learning and agenda-setting, UNESCO convened the third World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) in Barcelona in 2022. This collaborative process of visioning and strategic planning involved widespread engagement with higher education stakeholders of all types and from all world regions. And the consultations have continued. This publication is the latest iteration in collectively fashioning and realizing a forward-looking higher education agenda. It presents a finalized roadmap intended to guide universities and higher education institutions towards transformative change.

The effects of a rapidly evolving higher education landscape can be felt on the position and functions of universities and higher education systems. Disruptive changes are underway, and they affect the relation between higher education and knowledge; between higher education and learning; and between higher education and societies, economies and publics. Today's many complex, multi-layered challenges – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, health crises, persistent inequalities, social exclusion, the devastating consequences of war and conflict, technological disruptions including the growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI), democratic backsliding and rapidly transforming worlds of work – both force and invite universities to reimagine the ways that they are governed, work and the purposes they serve.

Global enrolment in higher education reached 269 million students in 2024. For the first time, a global average of 43% of the age group is enrolled in higher education with more than 7 million students internationally mobile and studying outside their home countries.<sup>1</sup> These new generations of students bring new demands and are driving educational change in new ways. On the institutional side, higher education is a rapidly growing and diversifying sector that includes public, private, faith-based and community-based institutions. All told, there are now over 22,000 accredited and quality-assured higher education institutions worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

The WHEC global process of collaborative visioning and agenda-setting, both leading up to the 2022 event and in subsequent consultations, has elevated seven Guiding Principles. They are presented by UNESCO in this publication to inspire the work of higher education faculty, students, leaders and staff – as well as to affirm a transformative agenda that can be advanced by non-profit and advocacy organizations, philanthropy, partners in business and industry and policy-makers at all levels. The principles call for:

1. Committing resources to equity and pluralism
2. Promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally
3. Fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity
4. Establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies and AI
5. Embracing an ethic of collaboration and solidarity
6. Centring stewardship, sustainability and regeneration
7. Supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence and relevance

Looking toward and beyond the horizon of 2030, these Guiding Principles are envisioned as supporting the shared project of constructing a new social contract for education, as called for in UNESCO's 2021 flagship report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*.

These principles underscore the fact that higher education institutions and systems will need to be different in the future than they are today. They will need to be more inclusive; better protected and better connected; better resourced; more critical, creative and innovative; more relevant and impactful; and more attuned to sustainably living well together within planetary boundaries.

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1 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), UIS Data Browser, <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser> (accessed 2026).

2 International Association of Universities (IAU), World Higher Education Database (WHED), <https://iau.global/whed> (accessed 2026).

To maximize the transformative potential of the sector, higher education itself needs to be transformed. Yet the paths of higher education transformation vary from context to context. For this reason this publication is styled as a roadmap. There will be different starting points and different priorities in different settings and moments. But a transformative agenda must also have directions of travel. Thus, in addition to suggesting priority actions for key stakeholders, this publication offers a set of Lines of Transformation to be taken forward at different levels:

- At the level of **higher education systems**, openness and inclusion should be embraced and resourced as a defining paradigm, both to diversify ways of being and knowing and to make more available to more. Flexible and harmonized integration should also be promoted to facilitate personal and innovative educational trajectories that allow learners to move across different institutions and countries within a life-long and life-wide learning perspective.
- At the level of **higher education institutions**, adopting a life-long learning orientation and advancing flexible learning pathways, and more dynamic forms of engagement with labour markets and entrepreneurial opportunity will make learning more meaningful to all students at whatever age(s) they choose to undertake such studies. Reclaiming higher education as connected and holistic studies that marry the humanities with sciences will help mitigate against disciplinary fragmentation and allow the sector to live up to its promise of serving the global common good.
- As regards **the learning of students in higher education**, active, problem- and project-based learning, including relevant internship and work-place learning, are important strategies for pedagogical renewal and diversification. Making higher education, with its distinct practices of study and inquiry, meaningful and relevant to individual, community, national, regional and planetary futures, places it at the heart of a transforming world.

These Lines of Transformation (See pp. 50-51) can only be advanced through convivial, intergenerational collaboration and effective partnership. As the global higher education landscape continues to change, those advancing the Lines of Transformation need to keep sight of the Guiding Principles that link us to higher education's fundamental values and commitments.

Humans are learning all the time, life-long and life-wide. The special potency of universities and other higher education institutions comes from condensing space and time in intentional moments and places of concerted, collective work that develops knowledges and capabilities. Durable but also dynamic, higher education is well positioned to further evolve and be a key social actor in moving our world towards greater justice, prosperity and peace.

# Section 1

## Introduction

Higher education is a place where ideas are developed, values are debated, and futures are imagined. Since their inception, universities have been essential infrastructures for the creation and mobilization of knowledge. They provide individuals and societies with a vital means for flourishing and bringing justice, prosperity, and peace to our world.

The university has evolved over time and with the times. Today alongside universities there exists a broad range of higher education institutions. Their mutual aim, and the essential business of higher education, remains concern with truth and evidence, the free exchange of ideas, and social and human development. And while higher education has sometimes worked against these purposes, in most instances across the globe these commitments continue to inspire the sector's teaching, research and community engagement missions.

One of the most important aims of higher education is to foster debate and foment action on possible and preferred futures for humanity and the planet. For this reason, once a decade UNESCO convenes a World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) where governments, policy-makers at all levels, professors, students, university leaders, NGOs and private sector partners come together. The goal is for policy dialogue and collaborative discussions on the state of the sector in the context of changing global conditions to lead to a shared higher education agenda that lays out priorities and actions for the next decade.

The third edition of the WHEC took place in Barcelona in 2022. But before its 1,500 in-person participants convened (with thousands more joining online), an extended consultation process featuring working groups exploring different topics took place over several years.<sup>3</sup> On the closing day of the Barcelona conference UNESCO published a draft roadmap *Beyond limits: New ways to reinvent higher education*. Further consultations ensued and over 1,500 comments were received. The more than 150 WHEC2022 sessions and the 250 knowledge product inputs received from all parts of the world were also carefully reanalyzed. The result is this finalized roadmap, an implementation guidance document born out of an iterative and ongoing process of visioning and action.

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<sup>3</sup> For information on the preparatory materials and WHEC2022 programme, please see <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/2022-world-conference>

## UNESCO's vision for higher education

The WHEC multilateral process joins several other key initiatives and programmes through which UNESCO works to advance its vision of higher education as a global common good that benefits all. Chief among these is UNESCO's leadership on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. A further important policy initiative is the 2022 Transforming Education Summit which placed education as a global policy priority and built off UNESCO's landmark report, [\*Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education\*](#). This UNESCO flagship initiative foresaw a role for universities as active in every aspect of creating a new social contract for education that could repair past injustices while transforming the future. It advocated for pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity, highlighted the importance of the global knowledge commons, and called for a renewal of the mission of higher education – seeing the sector as key in enabling sustainable collective futures.

**UNESCO's mandate on higher education is unique within the UN system.** As part of this mandate, the Organization has adopted a series of normative positions that highlight its humanistic and values-based approach to higher education. Collectively, this normative work has established shared understandings about higher education and underlined Guiding Principles such as the necessity of equitable access on the basis of capacity, the importance of quality higher education for all, and flexible lifelong learning opportunities. UNESCO's work has also positioned higher education as a public undertaking and common good, as opposed to a private matter or individual good.

**UNESCO sees higher education as a critical component of the right to quality education throughout life.** In the context of WHEC2022, UNESCO published [\*Right to higher education: Unpacking the international normative framework in light of current trends and challenges\*](#). This examination of human rights instruments that provide for the right to higher education took up issues around access, inclusion, quality, mobility, qualifications recognition and system-level governance and financing issues. It argues that the indisputable right to higher education is protected by international human rights law which provides that quality higher education shall be made available to all on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and, in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education. If there is no requirement for higher education to be *universally accessible*, states must ensure that higher education is *equally accessible* on the basis of capacity with no discrimination.

**UNESCO is committed to setting international standards for faculty members and other higher education teaching and research personnel.** The 1997 UNESCO [\*Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel\*](#) sets forth the rights and responsibilities of higher education teaching personnel and international standards for their initial and further education, recruitment, employment, as well as teaching and learning conditions. The standards are grounded in a principle of institutional

autonomy and accountability, and they place a strong emphasis on academic freedom, for example, in teaching, research and sharing expertise with the public. A central message is that teachers should have a voice in academic policies that affect them and their students. In the 2017 UNESCO [Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers](#) the rights and responsibilities of researchers are framed within a vision of open and safe science ecosystems that encourage the generation and free flow of ideas.

**UNESCO has also led the way in establishing legal frameworks ensuring the recognition of higher education qualifications.** A [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education](#) was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2019 and at time of writing has been ratified by 40 States Parties. Responding to increased student mobility across borders as well as accelerated migration and forced displacement, the convention establishes as a global right the fair, transparent, consistent, coherent, timely and reliable assessment for recognition purposes of higher education qualifications. It requires appropriate quality assurance processes and calls for respecting, upholding and protecting the autonomy and diversity of higher education institutions and systems. The Global Convention on Higher Education joins a constellation of related regional qualifications conventions that includes: for Africa, the [Addis Convention](#); for Asia and the Pacific, the [Tokyo Convention](#); for Europe, the [Lisbon Convention](#); for Latin America and the Caribbean, the [Buenos Aires Convention](#); as well as the [Arab States Convention](#).

Taken together, through their workplans and broad Member State and partner engagement, these instruments and this work constitute an important **global higher education policy space**. What is accomplished in this space is at once normative and technical, but the focus remains on ensuring that higher education best serves students, their communities, countries and regions and the global common good. WHEC2022 and this finalized roadmap are key pieces of this evolving architecture intended to support global collaboration on visioning and action in higher education.

**///** *The focus remains on ensuring that higher education best serves students, their communities, countries and regions and the global common good.*

## **An integrated view on the missions of higher education**

Higher education performs three purposes that serve the public interest. First, higher education institutions are actively engaged in teaching and learning. This includes providing broad access to the knowledge and skills required for various professions and specializations in a changing world of work and creating spaces where future global citizens can exercise critical and creative thinking. The teaching and learning mission of higher education is also tied to cultural expression and to supporting the world's cultural diversity. Second, higher education institutions contribute in essential ways to knowledge production and dissemination. Research practices draw on a variety of epistemological

traditions and questions about the social uses of arts and sciences, as well as the relation between science and other forms of knowing, are relevant topics of debate. Third, higher education institutions promote social responsibility through various forms of community engagement and outreach.

Every higher education institution exists within multiple other ecosystems, interacting with the public and private sectors, with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and employers, with governments and with leaders from different cultural, social, political and economic domains. While each is distinct, the three missions of higher education interlace and overlap. Increasingly universities are leveraging this to their advantage, knitting together and synergizing their research, teaching and engagement missions in increasingly internationalized environments.

## **A roadmap for transforming higher education**

UNESCO's vision on higher education needs to be considered within a rapidly evolving global higher education landscape. **Section two** of this roadmap discusses developments and trends, some of which appear to shakeup the position and functions of universities and higher education systems. It was clear across the conversations held before, during and after WHEC2022 that disruptive changes are underway. These changes affect the relationships between higher education institutions and knowledge, learning, and the public.

Subsequently, in **section three**, UNESCO presents a set of seven Guiding Principles formulated through the WHEC2022 global process of collaborative visioning and action. They are presented to inform and inspire the work of all involved in higher education. Though they build on established norms and standards like those discussed above, they are also forward-looking and acknowledge that higher education institutions and systems will need to be different in the future than they are today.

This publication is a roadmap which recognizes that there will be different starting points and priorities depending on the particular setting and that the paths forward will have to be debated and embarked upon locally. At the same time the roadmap proposes clear directions of travel for a transformative agenda. Thus, in addition to suggesting priority actions for key stakeholders, **section four** offers a set of Lines of Transformation to be taken forward at the level of higher education systems and institutions, and in shaping the patterns and practices that shape the learning of students in higher education.

In concluding, **section five** of this roadmap presents a call to action. It explains how higher education faculty, students, leaders and staff – as well as non-profit and advocacy organizations, philanthropy, partners in business and industry and policy-makers at all levels – can collaboratively transform their institutions, systems and the entire sector to become the transformative force the world needs and future generations deserve.

# Section 2

## An evolving higher education landscape

Global enrolment in higher education reached 269 million students in 2024. For the first time a global average of 42% of the traditional adolescent & early-adult university-going age cohort is enrolled in higher education. More than 7 million students are internationally mobile and studying outside their home countries.<sup>4</sup> On the institutional side, higher education is rapidly growing and diversifying with over 22,000 accredited and quality-assured institutions worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

This growth is occurring in a world that is changing rapidly and in ways that are profoundly unsettling to many. Environmental and climate disruptions, digital transformations and geopolitical tensions call into question established institutions and ways of living – as well as how to collaboratively and convivially reimagine our futures together.

Today, as in the past, universities and other higher education institutions are called upon to help our world respond to pressing contemporary problems and issues. Through their research, teaching and community engagement missions, universities can provide the critical understanding, scientific expertise and creative imagination needed to tackle complex, multi-layered issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, health crises, persistent inequalities, social exclusion, the devastating consequences of war and armed conflict, technological disruptions, democratic backsliding and rapidly transforming worlds of work.

Disruptive change also impacts universities themselves. Many of the transformations underway unsettle the position and functions of higher education institutions and systems. Each of the missions of higher education is being recast.

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4 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), UIS Data Browser, <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser> (accessed 2026).

5 International Association of Universities (IAU), World Higher Education Database (WHED), <https://iau.global/whed> (accessed 2026).

## The changing relation between higher education institutions and knowledge

As vitally relevant as they are to mobilizing expert knowledge to address global challenges, many higher education institutions are also increasingly aware that blind belief in straightforward, technocratic solutions might itself be part of the problem. Ours is a world of rapidly expanding knowledge production. The claims of local and indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly prevalent, with voices from the global south dismantling knowledge gatekeeping. At the same time, developments like generative AI, the strong presence of commercial actors in academic publishing, and the role of private philanthropy in steering research agendas, are profoundly reshaping the ecosystems and possibilities of knowledge generation. How this will affect global inequalities and asymmetries in both knowledge creation and consumption remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, the repositioning of academic research also presents opportunities. Open science, for example as put forward in [the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation](#), requires a different way of working. The rigidities of disciplinary siloes are being frequently challenged. Sharp demarcations between the practical and the theoretical no longer provide the certain foundations once assumed. Today, mobile devices provide billions of people with access to vast quantities of data and research (with that access patterned by the algorithms of others). All of these developments are requiring higher education institutions to reimagine the ways they work with knowledge.

## The changing relation between higher education institutions and learning and learning pathways

The easing of some barriers and the acceleration of knowledge flows is facilitating learning and learning pathways in novel ways. This includes a changing relationship between higher education and secondary education. While in many countries, obtaining a secondary education certificate following a high-stakes exam, remains the norm for accessing universities and other institutions of higher education, other admission pathways are gaining force, including those that validate vocational qualifications or consider accumulated learning in a variety of modalities as routes into higher education.

At the same time, regional and global infrastructures for qualifications recognition have increased consideration for partial study and the recognition of prior learning. Micro-credentials and calls for life-long learning offer opportunities for student-directed educational pathways that are profoundly affecting higher education institutions in many parts of the world.

Much is also changing in how learning itself is being viewed in higher education. Traditional listen-and-repeat pedagogical methods are increasingly criticized as poorly matched to a world desperate for creativity, collaboration and innovation. The importance of soft skills

and an emphasis on developing learners' capabilities are reshaping higher education curriculum planning and programme design. Generative AI's increasingly powerful ability to mimic dialogic interaction already has some lauding it as a technological substitution for teachers and tutors. Others dispute the feasibility and desirability of this route. At this disruptive moment, some are calling for a rediscovery of higher education learning as process-focused more than product-oriented. All of these changes are pushing universities to reimagine the ways they approach teaching and learning. [UNESCO IESALC's Higher Education Policy Observatory](#) (HEPO) tracks all these and other developments in real time.

## The changing relation between higher education institutions and the public

Higher education institutions are affected by the global decline in public trust for nearly all social institutions. Even as the numbers of students in higher education continues to rise in all world regions, the value proposition of higher education is being increasingly challenged. Higher education is costly, both for individuals and for governments. Too often graduates have to struggle with unemployment; underemployment; or precarious and vulnerable job status (in all world regions to varying degrees). When academic and professional programmes do not evolve to match changed global realities, the relevance of higher education is put into question.

Though criticized by some as elite bastions that perpetuate privilege and inequalities, the vast majority of higher education institutions today are strongly committed to a social mission and to serving communities near and far. Of course, public trust must be built and younger generations are making new demands on higher education, ranging from an insistence on increasingly applied learning opportunities to calls for universities to be at the forefront of social and environmental transformation. In sum, much work still lies ahead for higher education institutions to reimagine the ways they serve the public and contribute to the global common good.

Participants in the WHEC2022 and the consultations conducted revealed important additional dynamics that are powerfully shaping the evolving contemporary higher education landscape. These include:

- **Rapid expansion and persisting inequalities:** Enrolment numbers are on the rise globally, though with significant differences across regions. More and more students have the opportunity to cross-borders to expand their horizons and pursue their studies. However, structural inequalities still make it difficult for vulnerable groups to access higher education as part of their right to education throughout life. The rapid expansion of student numbers in recent decades has also put pressure on higher education systems and has jeopardized the provision of quality instruction across various institutions. The same goes for opportunities to participate in international

academic mobility. As was pointed out across multiple WHEC2022 panels and consultations, if higher education institutions are about building better futures for all, then it is essential that all students can take part in the programmes of study of their choice and receive educations of the highest quality.

- **To gender parity and beyond:** Across all world regions the numbers of female students is increasing (in real and relative terms). This represents a significant global accomplishment in achieving gender equality. But disparities continue by field of study and degree levels with women under-represented in STEM fields in some regions. At the same time, new asymmetries have emerged. According to [UNESCO's 2024 Higher Education figures](#), on average globally there are now 113 women enrolled in higher education for every 100 men. Participants in WHEC2022 pointed out that in some world regions policy attention should be given to men's higher education persistence and success. Ensuring that universities and other institutions of higher education serve all students well remains an enduring priority.
- **Threats to academic freedom:** The freedom to teach, research and study without undue interference by political authorities or economic motives is vital for the functioning of universities as democratic spaces of critical inquiry. Today, however, academic freedom is under threat in numerous places across the globe. We have seen authoritarian leaders undermining the institutional autonomy of higher education and populist movements stoked by scientific denialism. Excessive research security policies risk undercutting the free flow of ideas, researchers and students so integral to the academic enterprise. However, academic freedom faces challenges in more intricate ways as well. When framed as a 'marketplace of ideas,' the door is opened for funding agencies, philanthropy and corporate donors to narrowly contour what knowledge is deemed useful or desirable and what is not. Against this, we need to understand academic freedom as rooted in a concept of people as autonomous agents whose freedoms of inquiry and expression are based in essential human dignity and are best maintained as a collective responsibility within structures of solidarity.

### *Freedoms of inquiry and expression are based in essential human dignity.*

- **Self-defeating accountability frameworks:** In many settings today, the leadership and governance structures of higher education consider the principles of quality, relevance and excellence to be the primary objectives of higher education. However, on their own, these principles are rather empty and self-referential. They do not provide clear direction and are often institutionalized in impoverished accountability metrics that are out of tune with the everyday practices of learning, research and engagement, as was highlighted in several WHEC2022 panels and consultations. At the same time, the responsibilities of higher education institutions – to students and to society – need to be taken seriously. Dynamic, meaningful and contextually-relevant accountability frameworks that go well beyond rankings and ritualized performativity are needed.

- **Changes in funding paradigms:** Higher education is dependent on multiple sources of funding. In most systems this involves some combination of public funding and cost sharing with students and/or their families – frequently with scholarship and loan programmes used to ensure inclusive equality of opportunity. Recent austerity politics at the institutional, national and international levels have made it harder to provide quality higher education for all. In some instances, performance-based funding mechanisms and ‘excellence frameworks’ have had perverse effects on access, quality and even on research productivity (especially when quantitative measures are favoured). All stakeholders need to be brought together for thoughtful, collective engagement that is both evidence- and values-backed to determine the policy objectives and funding mechanisms. The solutions and strategies may vary strongly from place to place, but this ongoing work is an essential part of building a new social contract for education.
- **Digital transformation and AI:** Technological innovation has always played an important role in shaping and spreading knowledge in society. Just as the invention of the printing press gave rise to a profound social and cultural shift in early modern times, digital technologies are reconfiguring the relation between knowledge, education systems and the public in new ways today. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly intensified the use of digital tools and platforms in higher education. The evolving role of digital technologies in teaching, learning and research reflects larger global transformations and leaves its mark on the provision of higher education. The rise of generative AI is affecting the world and the higher education sector with it. Even before the widespread release of generative AI tools at the end of 2022, it was increasingly clear to many WHEC2022 participants that higher education institutions could not just passively adopt new technologies without reflection on the ethical, educational, social and economic questions that arise. In fact, by establishing and modeling norms and best practices, higher education could lead the way in ensuring that we get the digital transformation right – in education and beyond.

These shifts in the higher education landscape are all connected to broader social, political, economic, cultural and environmental changes at the global and planetary level. They present a complex alchemy of threat and opportunity. Certain disruptive changes risk undermining UNESCO’s vision of higher education as a key component of the human right to education throughout life and a common good yet they could be used as an opportunity to steer towards desired futures.

The following section presents a set of principles coming from the collective agenda-setting of WHEC2022 and its follow-on that are proposed as guidance through the ever-evolving higher education landscape.

# Section 3

## Guiding principles to transform the futures of higher education

To advance higher education as a global common good and essential component of the right to education throughout life, the WHEC global process of collaborative visioning and action has elevated seven Guiding Principles. They are presented here by UNESCO to inspire the work of higher education faculty, students, leaders and staff – as well as to affirm a transformative agenda that can be advanced by non-profit and advocacy organizations, philanthropy, partners in business and industry and policy-makers at all levels.

These Guiding Principles draw upon the noblest values and traditions of universities as they have enriched human and social development worldwide over centuries. The introduction discussed many essential established standards and practices, such as those enshrined in the [2019 UNESCO Global Convention on Higher Education](#) and the [1997 Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel](#). Those commitments are reflected in the principles outlined below.

At the same time, the Guiding Principles also represent new and forward-looking strategies for addressing contemporary global challenges and future aspirations, such as those laid out in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations. Like the SDGs themselves, the Guiding Principles detailed below are interlinked and need to work in concert. Looking toward and beyond the horizon of 2030, they are intended to support the shared, iterative project of constructing a new social contract for education, as called for in UNESCO's 2021 flagship report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. Further thinking, debate and action will need to follow.

Taken together, these Guiding Principles constitute a fundamentally transformative agenda and higher education institutions and systems will need to change. They will need to be more inclusive; better resourced; better protected and better connected; more critical, creative and innovative; more relevant and impactful; and more attuned to sustainably living well together within planetary boundaries.

# 1. Committing resources to equity and pluralism

There are millions worldwide who merit higher education studies. Advancing inclusion and equity in higher education is of paramount importance. Shared futures are diminished if intellectual talents, curiosity and dedication are wasted.

*Shared futures are diminished if intellectual talents, curiosity and dedication are wasted.*

From the perspective of social justice – and to advance SDG Target 4.3 of, by 2030, ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university – higher education institutions and systems must first eliminate all forms of discrimination in their operations. Governments, NGOs, higher education institutions and professional educators themselves must work collaboratively to remove any barriers (relating to, but not limited to, gender, family income, ethnic origin, religion, migration, dis/ability, place of residence and nationality) that marginalize and exclude individuals and communities.

Shared efforts need to go beyond ensuring that higher education is made accessible to all based on their interest and potential. Introducing an equity focus means bringing concerns about justice and rights to both opportunities and outcomes. Student retention and programme completion must be a priority. Higher education helps to build fair, peaceful and democratic societies, but only when quality learning is guaranteed for all learners and when vulnerable and under-represented groups are affirmatively supported.

Moreover, inclusion and equity can only be accomplished when higher education is properly resourced. Public sector spending is necessary for universities and other higher education institutions to be affordable, as called for in SDG Target 4.3. Student aid packages need to extend beyond tuition fees to also consider costs like housing, transportation and insurance that learners and their families face. The crushing debt that graduates face in some parts of the world calls for a host of public policy responses that include better regulation of financing instruments, improved quality assurance processes and information sharing, and strengthened commitment to relevant and comprehensive public higher education options.

Students must be able to envision and realize higher education as an attainable pathway. This requires careful attention to the transition from secondary to higher education, which is frequently constrained by intersecting economic and social barriers. Education systems need to be designed as enabling mechanisms that foster upward mobility and social

transformation. Such considerations comfortably fit with national investments in science, technology and innovation. Higher education capacity- strengthening is most effective when policies simultaneously ensure that learning and talent-development pathways remain open to any and all.

At the same time, an equal distribution of robust, effective education and training systems requires reconsideration of the very terms of inclusion. Taking inclusion and equity for all seriously requires doing more than just providing affordable access to students with various identities. It demands a willingness to engage with plural forms of knowing as these are practiced by various communities around the globe as well. Universities offer an invaluable space for the promotion of intercultural dialogue and the productive tensions between diverging forms of knowing and being that it entails. Bringing learning opportunities to all students (youth and adults) means that universities and other higher education institutions cannot merely accept and celebrate the many ways that human beings know the world and live in it with others. The sector needs to go beyond respect and tolerance to ensure that diversity and pluralism are cultivated and sustained. This is an imperative that will enrich everyone, but also one that requires a fundamental reimagining of business-as-usual in the higher education sector such that heterogenous ways of knowing and being become a welcome and respected foundation for building futures together.

## Committing resources to equity and pluralism



## 2. Promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally

The effectiveness of higher education for human and socio-economic development rests on a noble academic tradition of free inquiry and open debate. Universities and other higher education institutions offer an autonomous yet nonetheless public space for collective deliberation that brings values and evidence to bear on complex issues and questions.

Academic freedom is crucial. Without it higher education cannot properly fulfil its teaching, research and service missions. For students, academic freedom includes the right to learn across the lifespan free from censorship and to be able to choose among rich and relevant learning pathways and curricular options that uphold standards of open-ended scientific inquiry and relate to contemporary social and political issues in critical and constructive ways. For faculty, academic freedom includes the right to teach and research without undue restrictions. University faculty need to be able to pursue research agendas that challenge conventional wisdom. And, they should be free to share their ideas and expertise, including with the public, without fear of retribution. As the [1997 UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel](#) specifies, academic freedom also encompasses the right of researchers to join professional associations and collaborate across borders without political interference. The open global cooperation that led to the development of COVID-19 vaccines in record-breaking time is an object lesson in this regard.



The exercise of academic freedom requires a high degree of institutional autonomy and collective responsibility. To engage in creative and innovative teaching – and to undertake research that expands and transforms knowledge in the service of society and sustainable development globally – strong academic self-governance is necessary. It is crucial to have the broad participation of leadership, faculty, staff and students in collegial decision-making related to academic standards and the management of academic programmes and institutions. Of course, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are optimized within effective and appropriate systems of quality assurance, public accountability, global standard-setting and local regulatory oversight. It is only when all these mechanisms are geared to safeguarding the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally, that higher education can best build and sustain the public trust necessary for it to be a well-functioning global common good.

**//** *The exercise of academic freedom requires a high degree of institutional autonomy and collective responsibility.*

### 3. Fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity

Whether attempting to ignite the imagination, foster disruptive and transformative thinking, or, more modestly, seek incremental advancements in human understanding, the foundations of higher education lie in inquiry and study. Across the great diversity of higher education institutions and programmes there is a common engagement in a set of intellectual virtues that helps to ensure decision-making is wise and well-informed, lives are well lived, and the world moves towards greater justice, prosperity and peace.

Higher education's scholarship and knowledge mobilization mission plays a critical role in ensuring that advocacy and action are supported by research and reflection. In addition to generating scientific understanding and evidence (and training their students as researchers), universities need to communicate research well and actively engage the public in collective learning processes. In this way higher education plays its part in advancing thoughtful and effective responses to contemporary challenges.

Truth-seeking skills and the capacity to apply ethical judgment should be at the core of learning at all education levels. In a world of fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories (increasingly enabled by AI and social media), critical thinking skills are essential. Higher education institutions have a particular responsibility to use their moral authority in the public sphere to enhance public understanding of how scientific knowledge is produced, to support the discernment between authentic evidence and fabricated

misinformation, and to strengthen the application of reliable information and values-informed discernment to problem-solving in all areas.

At the same time, promoting critical, analytic rigour must not preclude creativity and innovation. The imagination can open doors to the new. Through strategies such as design labs, arts-based practices, and with the support of authentic and process-based leadership, universities and other higher education institutions should promote spaces and approaches that allow for the exploration of unconventional solutions, for experimentation and speculation and for imagining the world differently.

**//** *Higher education institutions have a particular responsibility to use their moral authority in the public sphere.*



## 4. Establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies and AI

Universities and other higher education institutions have historically played an important role in developing and responding to new technologies. Digital transformations underway globally afford new opportunities for the generation and mobilization of knowledge as well as for teaching, learning and widening access to quality higher education. However, realizing these opportunities requires an intelligent, considered and human-centred use of digital technologies and AI in particular. Establishing and modeling norms for working with new technology and the tech industry is an urgent task for the higher education sector. The policy and governance challenge is to ensure that AI and digital technologies promote the sustainable development agenda and are employed to remedy rather than exacerbate existing inequalities and global asymmetries in higher education access and quality.

Education systems have a key role in helping people learn to allocate attention and effort. In recent decades, information has become much more accessible while its volume has increased considerably. And, while there are many tools that help us process these vast amounts of *information* and *data* (and here AI offers important strategies and tools), it still falls to human beings, both individually and collectively, to generate *knowledge* and *understanding*. This is where universities and other higher education institutions come in; one of their contemporary roles is to enhance the capabilities of individuals and societies to advance the ethical and equitable use of digital technologies.

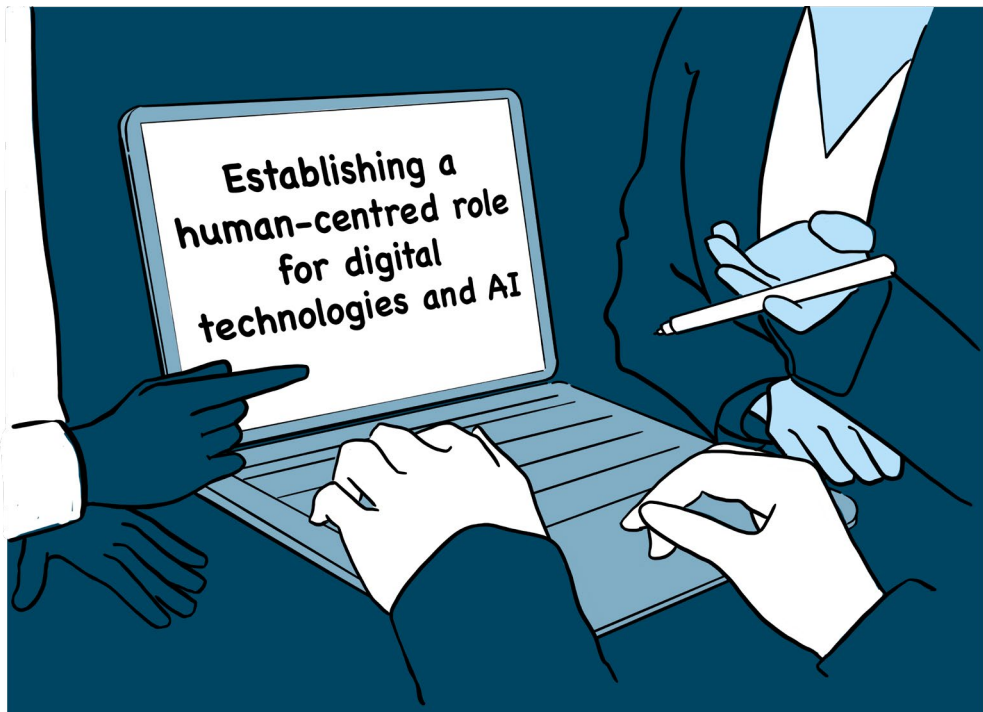
**//** *It still falls to human beings, both individually and collectively, to generate knowledge and understanding.*

University research plays an important part in understanding and shaping how technology is evolving including its ethical and environmental dimensions and how it benefits the global common good. At the same time digital and AI technologies, such as those in virtual laboratories and the digital humanities, have huge potential to reshape academic knowledge production. The knowledge and skills necessary to effectively use these new technologies need to be provided to researchers, teaching staff and students.

Large-language model generative AI is already having disruptive impacts on higher education that threaten to hollow out authentic learning processes. The university's core concern with the truth and evidence is completely absent from AI systems that merely mimic human language. Particularly worrying is a future scenario of exacerbating inequalities where novices use AI in ways that actually degrade their cognitive capabilities, while expert users benefit from the augmented capacities this new technology brings.

All of this gives new relevance to higher education's core learning activities of reading, writing, reasoning and debating that are at the heart of higher education.

At the same time, digital technologies also afford unprecedented opportunities for inter-personal exchange in virtual environments, whether through video and audio communications, social media platforms, social interactions and collaborative gaming in 'metaverses', or more prosaic collaborations through the near-instant exchange of documents and other resources. All of this is changing the ways we work, live and learn. Online and hybrid learning has brought radically new learning and teaching opportunities to higher education. Higher education institutions and systems will follow different paths in leveraging these new technologies to renew themselves and in finding the right balance between online and in-person learning, as well as between individualized and shared learning.



## 5. Embracing an ethic of collaboration and solidarity

The challenges the world faces today can only be solved through shared resolve and collective action. The higher education sector must dramatically pivot so that collaboration and solidarity become its defining features – both in terms of the teaching and learning focused on students, and in the ways higher education systems are structured.

*“The higher education sector must dramatically pivot so that collaboration and solidarity become its defining features.”*

Across all professional specializations, the educational work of universities and other higher education institutions goes beyond knowledge and skill acquisition. Higher education imparts values. In addition to the study of ethics, value commitments need to permeate institutional cultures. Pedagogy should orient towards fostering the practical and moral capacities of students to work together toward jointly agreed-upon ends (while remaining open to reconsidering these ends collectively in light of new findings and evidence). An overarching aim of higher education should be to build collective and individual capacities for facing our common challenges together.

It is important to recall that academic work is undertaken within communities of expertise and practice. Research and scholarship rely on shared endeavour and fruitful debate within the university, across universities, but also with civil society, private enterprises, social movements and the public sector, all of whom have a significant stake in the work of higher education institutions. Although obtaining a degree within a specific discipline or specialization remains an essential feature of higher education systems, it is increasingly evident that higher education cannot be a world apart. It must be fully engaged with the world. Higher education institutions need to consider the ways their research and service take place *in* and *with* communities. Action-research and strengthened partnership with local governments, business and non-profit sectors are key ways to take this forwards.

A commitment to cooperation needs to infuse higher education ecosystems themselves, so that the inefficiencies of inter-institutional competition are replaced by an ethic of collaboration and solidarity. Embracing open science (see the [UNESCO 2021 Recommendation](#)) is one valuable strategy for moving in this direction.

Higher education has a long history of academic mobility and internationalization, both on the part of faculty and students. In a world of conflict and acute geopolitical tensions, studying, teaching and researching across borders is a valuable means of improving intercultural understanding and building conditions of lasting peace.

In addition to promoting study away and scholarly exchange, intelligent and inclusive internationalization examines possibilities for learning to engage in dialogue across difference via digital means. It also values the existing forms international diversity on campuses, for example, in heritage and migration experiences.

Strong commitments to international cooperation in higher education need to backstop all this work and extend to ensuring the smooth and effective functioning of processes for the recognition in one country of study undertaken and academic qualifications earned in another as advanced in [the UNESCO global and regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications](#).



## 6. Centring sustainability, stewardship and regeneration

Sustainably living together within planetary boundaries – while repairing damage and also ensuring peace, security, prosperity and human rights for all – is one of the greatest projects of our time. The future of humanity and the planet will be indelibly shaped by our actions today. In line with the whole-of-system approach recommended by the [Greening Education Partnership](#) led by UNESCO, many higher education institutions and systems have made substantial advances to align their teaching, research and community engagement work (as well as their own operations) with the SDGs. Yet, there is room for the higher education sector to play a greater role leading the global transitions and regenerative transformations needed.

The higher education sector is well positioned to become an exemplar of responsible stewardship. This begins with the adoption of robust sustainability commitments in the management of campus facilities, landholdings and overall operations and extends into the management of knowledge resources. Responsible stewardship calls for an open science approach to research and scholarship contributions of students and faculty, as laid out in the [2021 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science](#). Universities and other higher education institutions are powerful guardians of what UNESCO's 2021 [futures of education report](#) refers to as the Global Knowledge Commons. The higher education sector has a responsibility to make sure that research and scholarship are democratized, decolonized and disseminated to serve the common good.



As universities and other higher education institutions link their work to the aspirations of individuals and societies, we cannot forget the responsibility to the future called for in the UN [Declaration on Future Generations](#). Alongside sustainability and stewardship, attention must be given to repairing what is already degraded or damaged. This is where regenerative approaches that design human systems to co-evolve with natural ecological systems come in. A regeneration imperative needs to be in the foreground as higher education prepares learners to green economies, build sustainable communities, promote well-being and find paths forward for lives of purpose. For example, efforts to prepare students for future employment and cultivate entrepreneurship must be framed by a commitment to regeneration – to finding a symbiosis where people and nature flourish.

**//** *Regenerative approaches design human systems to co-evolve with natural ecological systems.*

## 7. Supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence and relevance

Quality assurance is essential at all educational levels, while the quest for excellence encourages all involved in higher education not to settle for reduced ambition but to always aim higher. Yet, as with many assessment measures, there is the risk of their pursuit becoming more symbolic and performative than meaningful and impactful. Ongoing discussion is needed on how quality is to be defined across diverse settings. As each of the preceding Guiding Principles suggest, there is a pressing need for excellence in multiple areas. From working to sustain cultural diversity, to supporting freedom of inquiry and expression, and so forth, there is a broad set of activities that universities and other institutions of higher education need to excel at.

International rankings, national league tables and competitive funding mechanisms can inform policy planning and accountability frameworks, but they do not always promote quality and excellence to the extent intended. In some contexts, a harsh and corrosive competitive environment has emerged in the higher education sector – when in fact, as noted above, higher education institutions can deliver on their missions more effectively through cooperation and solidarity. Quality and excellence are best supported in conditions of academic collegiality, the free exchange of ideas, the mobility of researchers and students and the formation of partnerships.

The principles of quality and excellence provoke discussion about the measure of academic work within institutions of higher education, while the principle of relevance is outward facing and invites institutions to consider the social impact of their work on local, national, regional and global levels. The SDGs provide one valuable, globally agreed-upon frame of reference for appraising the relevance of research agendas and courses of study. At the same time, universities need to design curricula and learning outcomes to support graduate employability – by offering strong preparation for labour markets and a changing world of work and preparing students to become innovators, entrepreneurs and job-creators. Ultimately, the relevance of higher education programmes and institutions will be fostered locally by universities working in close cooperation with multiple actors and constituencies to determine what forms quality, excellence and relevance should take.

**//** *Ultimately, the relevance of higher education programmes and institutions will be fostered locally.*



# Section 4

## Lines of transformation

The belief that business as usual is no longer viable was front and centre at the WHEC2022, and in September that year, the UN Secretary-General convened a Transforming Education Summit that further established the importance of educational transformation in global policy circles. Since then the understanding that the world is experiencing a unique historical moment of world-altering transformation has only strengthened.

Many see national education systems, policies and practices as needing to be repurposed both to address climate, environmental, technological, economic and social challenges already with us – to leverage opportunities and to avert catastrophes looming on the horizon. The assumption is that the typical slow and uneven pace of educational ‘reform’ is no longer adequate. Incremental improvements to existing systems need to be replaced by transformative education agendas that involve shape-shifting into new systems, new policies and new practices.

The Guiding Principles laid out in the previous section frame a transformative educational agenda in which key global education priorities travel along a holistic and comprehensive pathway that promises to have synergistic and significant impacts.

The pathways will vary from context to context. Systems and institutions may already be well advanced in some areas and less well developed in others. Given the welcome diversity of higher education institutions and systems worldwide, certain of these Lines of Transformation may be more relevant to some than to others.

Nonetheless, a transformative educational agenda must have directions of travel. The WHEC2022 global process of collaborative agenda-setting and action has suggested that particular attention be given to desirable Lines of Transformation at the level of higher education systems and ecosystems, individual institutions, and in terms of the patterns and practices that shape student learning.

## Priority Lines of Transformation for higher education systems and ecosystems:

The organization and management of the higher education sector needs to move from a scarcity and exclusion mindset to **an openness and inclusion paradigm**.

Higher education systems need to move from hierarchies, competition and fragmentation to **flexible and harmonized integration**.

## Priority Lines of Transformation for higher education institutions

Within individual institutions of higher education, there is a need to move from a narrow focus on traditional, terminal degree programmes to **a life-long learning orientation** through the recognition of prior learning, of learning in different settings and of flexible learning pathways.

Higher education institutions also need to move from outdated workforce planning models towards **dynamic engagement with labour markets, innovation incubation and entrepreneurial opportunity**.

Academic programmes and related research initiatives need to move from disciplinary siloes towards **connected and holistic study and inquiry**.

## Priority Lines of Transformation for the patterns and practices that shape student learning

Pedagogical approaches need to move from traditional listen-and-repeat methods towards **active, problem- and project-based learning** including internship and related applied learning opportunities.

Student learning experiences need to move from the abstract and unanchored towards **greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations**.



## Transformation towards an openness and inclusion paradigm

The benefits of higher education multiply when more and more people receive the quality educations they seek. This is not to deny the fact that higher education credentials have long served to screen, to exclude and to perpetuate inequalities. It is rather to point to a fundamental feature of education itself: which is that knowledge and the capacity to learn are among humanity's most valuable and most inexhaustible resources. When more people have access to knowledge, depth and breadth expand and knowledge becomes more and more useful for all.

*When more people have access to knowledge, depth and breadth expand and knowledge becomes more and more useful for all.*

Of course, the resources that foster and enable learning need to be carefully managed – and in view of this an openness and inclusion paradigm should be favoured. When it comes to primary education it has long been established that individuals and their societies benefit greatly from high quality education that ensures advanced literacy and numeracy, along with a host of other capabilities and knowledges. SDG 4 of the 2030 Agenda adds an emphasis on free, equitable and quality universal secondary education. And while post-secondary learning opportunities need to take a range of different forms, a commitment to affordability and equal access for all must be expanded. Historically this has not always been the case for higher education. It is quite possible to organize higher education systems that deliberately parcel out limited opportunities to a limited number, a pattern that can still be observed widely across the world. Knowledge can be appropriated and enclosed. Opportunities to develop skills and competencies can be denied (with the criteria of disqualification frequently mirroring existing patterns of marginalization). Or there can be a move in the opposite direction, away from limitations.

Transforming towards an openness and inclusion paradigm means **recognizing that resource scarcity is, at times, an artificial result of power asymmetries**. Tax justice; shutting down illegal financial flows; and preventing the excessive extraction, enclosure and concentration of wealth by increasingly narrow numbers of elites, would go a long way. The burden of action to counter exclusion and strengthen the rule of law falls on governments which can be supported and prodded by civil society. Nonetheless, universities and other higher education institutions have an important social role to play here. They also need to leverage their knowledge mobilization and teaching resources to insist on and advocate for more equitable distributions of resources and opportunities across the globe – including within the higher education sector itself.

Transforming towards an openness and inclusion paradigm also means **addressing the prestige and reputation fixation within the sector**, as this is also a scarcity-inducing mechanism. The admissions selectivity of an institution should not be considered an automatic proxy for the knowledge and competencies its graduates are expected to possess. Similarly, rankings differences between higher education institutions – particularly at the top tiers of different education systems – should not be over-dramatized. The truth is that there are many high-quality institutions out there and each student interacts with each higher education institution differently. Some will flourish in certain settings, others in others. Of course, individual institutions need to be strongly committed to serving all their students and fostering success – whether of women, men, those historically disadvantaged, or those with disabilities. Diverse and flexible higher education systems (as discussed below) are also necessary. Robust quality assurance systems are a further aid. A degree or academic qualification that is properly quality-assured should stand on its own, with both the student pursuing it and key social actors highly confident as to what the degree attainment means, independent of the awarding institution. The fixation with prestige in the sector can be further addressed by making sure that it is a given student's actual period of study that counts and not the reputation of the institution derived from the accomplishments of former graduates.

Finally, transforming towards an openness and inclusion paradigm needs to extend to appreciating and **cultivating learning environments characterized by a wide variety of worldviews and social experiences**. Intellectual traditions are not simply abstract systems of thought but are lived and practiced by different epistemic communities across the globe. Taking openness seriously requires the affirmation of various student, faculty and staff identities and accessible enrolment pathways for those who have been historically excluded. Nonetheless, openness should not only be sought in identities, social/cultural backgrounds and worldviews. It also needs to be found in the range of study programmes and research fields that higher education institutions make available. This means ensuring that the humanities, the arts and the social sciences are well represented, along with behavioral and natural sciences. Even within more technically focused fields like engineering or medicine, a complete education will include learning from other disciplines where learners might be challenged, for example, to approach their work from ethical, historical, sociological and/or literary perspectives.



## Transformation towards flexible and harmonized integration

Unnecessary hierarches, competition and fragmentation often stand in the way of higher education systems realizing their full potential to serve students and societies. A diversification of higher education systems is necessary. This can be achieved by providing a robust range of speciality studies that also support the intellectual virtues of inquiry, critical thinking and creativity and foster collaboration, ethical judgment and responsible stewardship. The diversification of higher education necessitates a range of different institutional types including institutions offering bachelor degrees or equivalents, comprehensive universities that offer masters- and doctoral-level degrees, as well as institutions focused on advanced, post-graduate studies. Diversified higher education systems may additionally include technology institutes, higher technical education, community colleges and other 'short-cycle' entities offering qualifications separate from the bachelor level. The global diversity of a wide range of higher education institution types is to be celebrated and nurtured. However, in any given higher education system academic leaders and policy-makers have a responsibility to ensure that within this diversity and the system as a whole, there is sufficient equality of opportunity, efficiency, articulation, as well as flexible and robust learning pathways.

*/// The global diversity of a wide range of higher education institution types is to be celebrated and nurtured.*

Transforming towards flexible and harmonized higher education systems means **favouring and rewarding cooperation among institutions**. Valuable forms of cooperation include the establishment of joint degree programmes where two higher education institutions synergize to leverage their respective strengths. Cooperation between institutions can also take the form of joint research and community engagement initiatives. When the collective, collegial nature of academic knowledge production is fully embraced it becomes easier to take pride in sharing credit for what can be achieved through partnership. Within urban environments where competing, reduplicative efforts can be common, there is much to be gained from remembering that, at their best, academic communities (of researchers, teachers and students) are not simply bound by one institution's walls but extend laterally. [The UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities](#) offers good examples in this regard. So too does the UNESCO [Chairs and UNITWIN programme](#) which reminds us that that twinning, collaboration, international joint degrees and South-South as well as South-South-North cooperation is wanted and welcome in higher education systems the world over. When it comes to promoting civic responsibility, democratic participation, the rule of law and standing in solidarity around core principles of academic freedom, there is no better route forward for higher education than inter-institutional cooperation and solidarity.

Transforming towards flexible and harmonized integration means **ensuring that higher education opportunities are geographically and socially well distributed**. Among others, rural areas, Indigenous Peoples and regions affected by climate change or economic transformation, need to have quality, state-of-the-art higher education opportunities close at hand. Carefully attending to the equitable availability of higher education institutions and programmes also applies to post-conflict and emergencies settings. Typically, humanitarian responses to crises correctly prioritize health, safety and well-being. But as psychosocial supports for children and youth are rolled out and schooling is reestablished, it is essential not to overlook the critical role that higher education plays in supporting social stability, sustainable economic prosperity and conditions of enduring peace.

Finally, transforming towards flexible and harmonized integration also means **building quality assurance and qualifications recognition systems that are adaptable to diverse learner profiles, institutions and programmes – as well as to the cross-border mobility of students, institutions and programmes**. 'Quality' is a necessary overarching frame of reference for the integration of higher education systems, even as the concept will always be ever-evolving. It is crucial that policies around quality assurance do not aggravate dynamics of estrangement and competition. Too often, international frameworks and benchmarking exercises are constructed on the assumption that individual institutions inhabit an abstract space suitable for comparison and competition. But context is constitutive, not a background factor. Ways forward must do justice to the situatedness of higher education institutions and their embeddedness in different regions and cultures. In their standard setting function, quality assurance processes and mechanisms should be designed to be highly responsive to contextualized concerns and values. The work being done in the global higher education policy space created by the UNESCO [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications related to Higher Education](#) – together with the complementing efforts of the UNESCO regional recognition conventions – is a necessary further component in ensuring the flexible and harmonized functioning of higher education systems on an international plane.



## Transformation towards a life-long learning orientation

Higher education provides opportunities for students to acquire knowledge, skills and competences in line with their own talents and interests as well as in relation to the demands of a changing global economy and a changing world. What is taught in universities and other higher education institutions touches on different spheres and stages of life. And, in this regard, it is important to recognize that student learning extends well beyond the aims and objectives of particular degree programmes. Within higher education learning environments students may be exploring their identities or trying to figure out what 'living a good life' means to them. They may be refining their political, social, spiritual and/or religious convictions. Moreover, we also need to recognize that individuals come to higher education study at different moments in their lives and with different motivations. Thus, both for the personal meaning of higher education in the life course of individual students, as well as for the social meaning of higher education learning at large, we need to reframe the higher education enterprise as much more than a set of profession-preparatory terminal degree programmes of study undertaken by some lucky few at early, formative moments in their lives.

Transforming towards a life-long learning orientation means **embracing the wider personal and social learning taking place during higher education studies**.

An excessive focus on traditional degree programmes and structures of qualification risks narrowing the role of universities to diploma factories. For those pursuing higher education early in life, it is possible to appreciate the learning that helps prepare a person for a first job *and* to value the life-long formative impact of higher education studies. The social, civic, cultural and relational learning that occurs within specific programmes of study should not be an afterthought. A life-long learning orientation in higher education elevates the importance of broader learning objectives, which might include sharpening students' abilities to solve problems, to be creative, to be leaders and to communicate effectively. When these competencies are further supported by an earned understanding of how to navigate relationality and interdependencies (with other people and with the natural world of which we are a part), then we have arrived at a kind of higher education that empowers people to live well across their life-spans, to adapt to changing conditions, as well as to resist and redirect change when that is warranted.

Transforming towards a life-long learning orientation also means **ensuring that higher education institutions provide frequent and accessible learning opportunities across the lifespan**. The understanding of higher education as *only* a transition stage between adolescence and adulthood, or between foundational schooling and work, is at odds with reality. In many settings around the globe adults at different stages of life engage with universities to broaden their knowledge, to explore the world, to change their career

paths, or to enhance their skills and knowledge in an area of existing work. Many are the motivations that inspire people to seek out higher education at various points in a life-span. However, not all higher education systems today sufficiently reflect the broad variety in ambitions and personal backgrounds that might prompt individuals to seek further education. Short-term programmes, micro-credentialing courses of study and part-time study options can usefully complement the longer-term intensive studies characteristic of many existing higher education programmes (which are often oriented only around the awarding of undergraduate or postgraduate degrees). Enriching higher education offerings with a broad variety of programmes with different levels of intensity and involvement – including the possibility to study online and/or in hybrid formats – would open higher education to more diversified learner motivations and interests, as well as to those who pursue it alongside full-time employment or care work. At the same time, higher education institutions should recognize that students can learn in different settings and spaces, whether that be in workplaces, in communities, or different cultural settings. By remaining open to flexible learning pathways, offering different forms of learning including micro-credentials and through the recognition of prior learning, universities and other higher education institutions can valorize and encourage the learning that is already happening in many spaces and places.

**///** *Higher education institutions should recognize that students can learn in different settings and spaces, whether that be in workplaces, in communities, or different cultural settings.*

Transforming higher education institutions towards a life-long learning orientation also means **increasing the engagement of universities in the public sphere and in diverse social spaces**. Referred to in some settings as ‘extension’ work, incredibly valuable societal benefits accrue when universities and other higher education institutions work well outside their traditional campus learning spaces. For example, this can involve initiatives that meet students where they live, a programming approach with great potential for opening up higher education opportunities to historically marginalized populations, immigrants, refugees, displaced persons as well as incarcerated populations. Universities can also meet students where they work, through in-service and continuing education in workplaces (including in the informal economy).

Many higher education institutions are already designing programmes of study, training and capacity development that support economic transformation towards green energy, regenerative agriculture and the circular economy. Nonetheless, additional efforts can be focused on linking up research and policy, as well as on better managing social and economic transitions, which is something the [Management of Social Transformations \(MOST\) programme](#) of UNESCO does by working to strengthen cooperation between

academic communities, national authorities and civil society. Transformation towards a life-long learning orientation is also manifested when universities play the role of trusted facilitator of social dialogue; when they impartially host political debates or undertake political polling; and when they support culture, the arts and science through engagement with museums, libraries and festivals. And, not least, when they work closely with primary and secondary schools. Individuals and communities benefit enormously from higher education engagement of this type as do universities themselves, both in the public trust that accrues and in the validation of the transformative societal role that higher education plays in our world.



## Transformation towards dynamic engagement with labour markets and entrepreneurial opportunity

Universities are key players in local and national economies and labour markets. However, it is no longer viable for universities to passively rely on student programme interest or enrolment allocations by governments to shape the ways in which they align with labour markets and support their graduates' professional careers. Instead, universities and other higher education institutions need to reposition themselves as active contributors to youth and adult employability.

Transforming towards dynamic engagement with labour markets requires **tuning learning, research and community engagement with the needs and opportunities of local economies**. In this work university career services can play a critical role. Modern career guidance no longer consists of psychometric testing to determine a person's suitability for this or that vocation; instead, career services centres can be among the more dynamic spaces on campus offering practical learning opportunities in the form of internships and apprenticeships, connecting university with industry, business, municipal and social service sector partners, and even nurturing applied, action-oriented and community-based research. Advancing career services and graduate employability is one of the concrete ways that universities can challenge extractivist and exploitative knowledge and production systems. Close engagement with transitioning local economies can help universities to question and evolve beyond outdated programme offerings that perpetuate environmental harm, exacerbate inequality, or prop up unsustainable development models.

*Advancing career services and graduate employability is one of the concrete ways that universities can challenge extractivist and exploitative knowledge and production systems.*

However in many instances, engagement with labour markets is not enough. Universities also need to **form job-creators by supporting entrepreneurship and incubating innovation**. Both youth and adult students should be recognized for the creativity they possess. They should be supported through entrepreneurial training, design-thinking approaches and leadership opportunities to further develop the skills that will help them launch new enterprises, as well as become social entrepreneurs.



## **Transformation towards holistic study and inquiry**

Universities are centres of study and inquiry that generate knowledge in a variety of ways. This allows complex problems to be approached with different methodologies and perspectives. Academic disciplines are the foundational knowledge infrastructure of higher education. Disciplines present particular lenses for viewing the world and build on specific bodies of knowledge. There are discipline-specific ways of defining problems and of using scientific methodologies to advance understanding and propose solutions to problems identified.

Higher education cannot operate without disciplinary traditions. Nonetheless, higher education institutions err when they overemphasize compliance with established rules and rigidly conceived methods. Excessive disciplinary boundary policing runs the risk of stalling higher education's core scholarship and knowledge mobilization mission. When the ability to create meaningful connections between various disciplinary perspectives is not nurtured, students and researchers can become trapped in narrow grooves and lose contact with the wider world. They can even lose contact with the questions that made these disciplinary perspectives relevant in the first place.

Transforming higher education institutions toward holistic study and inquiry means **centring the importance of disciplinary communication and exchange** within and across both the humanities and the sciences. University training in disciplinary expertise will only ever be a partial training if it does not also prepare professionals to bring their knowledge into conversation with other forms of expertise. To avoid rigid confinement into disciplinary 'silos' it is necessary to strike a careful balance between intensive initiation in the epistemological foundations and methodological instruments of a discipline and critical engagement with other disciplinary perspectives around related and relevant matters of concern.

In addition, transforming higher education institutions toward holistic study and inquiry means **elevating reflection on the usefulness and relevance of knowledge being produced, taught and learned**. Importantly, this does not mean automatically privileging ‘applied’ over ‘basic’ research. In many instances, it is the more foundational work that opens up the most relevant advances in questioning established ways of seeing and thinking and in solving problems. Usefulness is not an intrinsic quality of different subject areas or sciences. Usefulness only comes into being in relation to actual problems and concerns for which these forms of knowledge provide effective solutions or refreshing points of view. Faculty and students alike should be regularly articulating the relationship between their studies and contemporary issues. Take climate change as an example: it is only by responding to concrete questions posed by the local effects of this global phenomenon that academic research – whether in the natural sciences or in the social and human sciences – proves its usefulness for building socially just and sustainable futures.

Transforming higher education institutions toward holistic study and inquiry means **embracing a necessary plurality of approaches to inquiry**. Extensive knowledge of the theoretical and methodological foundations of a discipline should be treated as a point of departure for engagement with other forms of expertise around the key challenges and opportunities facing our shared world. Contemporary issues of concern, such as global health, the rise of authoritarianism, or the state of the world’s oceans, are not disciplinary problems in the narrow sense and have never been. It is here that pluridisciplinary efforts come in. Higher education faculty, students and staff have the shared task of designing programmes of study, research projects and community engagement initiatives that connect different disciplines. Yet, too often the administrative practices and priorities of institutions serve to fragment different fields of study. In the university, the diverse offerings of multiple disciplines need to be simultaneously protected and promoted, as it is only on this kind of secure basis that collaborative engagement across disciplines can flourish. Importantly, the benefits of such engagement flow back to the disciplines themselves as they create opportunities to revise foundations through confrontation with actual problems and other points of view.

**///** *The theoretical and methodological foundations of a discipline should be treated as a point of departure for engagement with other forms of expertise.*



## Transformation towards active, problem- and project-based learning

Within the diverse communities of inquiry and expertise that together constitute a university it is expected to find a broad variety of pedagogical approaches. A robust and varying set of teaching strategies is needed for students to master the advanced skills, competencies and relevant bodies of knowledge required in different areas of study. Aspiring biochemists will need to know how to conduct experiments in laboratories and/or in virtual simulations. Future anthropologists will need to spend time at fieldwork sites engaging with people to learn their ways of thinking and living. Students of history will likely need to spend time in archives consulting source material as part of learning their craft. Electrical engineers will be soldering and building circuits as they learn digital systems design. In all these instances knowledge and skills are being acquired through practice. Many can attest to the powerful learning that can accompany one's own active involvement in the process of meaning and knowledge construction. Importantly, this is something that can equally occur in regular classrooms as in practicum and apprenticeship types of settings. Nonetheless, there is a worrying risk that excessive reliance on traditional listen-and-repeat methods (where active learner involvement is absent) is greatly impoverishing higher education's teaching and learning potential.

Transforming higher education pedagogies towards active, problem- and project-based learning means **attending to the starting and ending points of student learning**. Understanding how students come to their learning; what advance knowledge and experience they have; as well as what fascinates, irritates and inspires them, is a key strategy for effectively configuring curricular expectations. Student centredness is not simply about being driven by (or capturing) student interests. Rather, it entails involving learners in their own learning, so they are the ones making connections and shaping meaning. Significant learning experiences often begin with a genuinely felt problem motivating the learner. Learning experiences can conclude with some equally perceptible resolution, accomplishment and/or reflection on learning. For this to work, the professors and other instructors charged with orchestrating learning journeys of this sort need working conditions that enable involved, interpersonal pedagogies. Support is particularly needed when faculty are innovatively expanding and adapting their assessment strategies to match a more student-centred approach.

**///** *Significant learning experiences often begin with a genuinely felt problem motivating the learner.*

Transforming towards active, problem- and project-based learning means **recalling that learning is a social process that can take many forms**. A diversity of pedagogical methods should be favoured. The outward traces of active learning do not always look the same. From lecture hall to seminar room to laboratory, different students interact in different ways. Higher education teaching methods should be expansive enough to accommodate students in all the manner of human diversity and learning approaches that they present themselves in.

Finally, transforming towards active, problem- and project-based learning means **reorienting higher education study toward active engagement with a vibrant, ever-changing world**. Humanity's vast reservoirs of accumulated knowledge can be mobilized in inquiry into how the world is changing today. The scientific advancements built by previous generations can help us ascertain how human societies and the natural world are changing, as well as what possibilities are opening and closing. Living labs that relocate experimentation sites from walled-in campuses to communities are an excellent example of how to study questions and problems together with the human and other-than-human beings that might be involved in possible solutions. Active engagement with contemporary issues and challenges can make learning in universities and other higher education institutions come alive as an ecology that reaches far beyond textbooks and scholarly articles to include the panoply of human experience – rivers, viruses, paintings, gods, theorems and galaxies – implicated together in the vibrant, humming complexity that is our world.



## Transformation towards greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations

Since their inception in late antiquity and the early middle ages universities have maintained close, if at times strained, relationships with the communities of which they are a part. The social and cultural heterogeneity of cities provided the background within which the earliest universities emerged as centres of collective study. In the modern era higher education institutions took on new purposes as they created and disseminated much of the knowledge and expertise instrumental for the development of nation-states. Today global processes and interdependencies – both as they are facilitated and resisted – position universities within larger world-spanning networks. This creates radically new environments for knowledge creation and student learning.

Globalization is leaving its mark on nearly all areas of human life. Increasingly, we recognize the global and the local not as separate, but as interpenetrating and interlinked. Higher education both drives and responds to the intensification of connections between various sites and institutions across the globe. This gives the sector a role and responsibility to

ensure to protect cultural differences in the face of globalization, for example, by valorizing lesser-spoken languages and safeguarding cultural heritage.

Previously the world was understood by many as 'complicated', that is to say perplexing but ultimately designable, predictable and controllable. Today many would say that the world is 'complex', in the sense of being non-linear, emergent and less easily unfolded. Less a deterministic world of clear causes and effects, more one of continuous modification and novelty where small causes can have large (and unpredictable) effects. Accordingly, institutions meant to generate and disseminate knowledge must have be forward-looking with open perspectives. Higher education needs to be relevant in more ways and in more directions than ever before and student learning experiences must appear concrete rather than abstract and unanchored.

Transforming towards greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations means **learning to be at home with a planetary perspective and consciousness**. UNESCO's 2021 [futures of education report](#) proposed that a planetary approach means putting at the centre of education a learner who assumes responsibility for world-making with other beings. The exigencies of climate change and environmental degradation inject new significance into global citizenship education.

Higher education institutions need some planetary-perspective updating as well. Over the last three decades higher education internationalization has tended to favour an approach of teaching strategic competencies and cosmopolitan ease when it comes to preparing students to navigate an interconnected world. The starting point is different for a planetary perspective open to emergent forms of change that are unknowable in advance. A planetary perspective sees connections in the vibrant ever-changing world already under our feet and in the air and water around us, as well as in the objects and people that circulate through our lives. The new internationalization means being at home with the international wherever it is encountered. Relationality and interdependencies become the keywords and concrete reference points for planetary consciousness or citizenship. Universities and other higher education institutions can prepare students to be at home in the specific and the general by emphasizing the inherent simultaneity of the local and the global as well as the fundamental situatedness of learning and other social activities. In terms of altered learning objectives, this would be preparation to *dwell within* rather than *move across*.

 *Relationality and interdependencies become the keywords and concrete reference points for planetary consciousness or citizenship.*

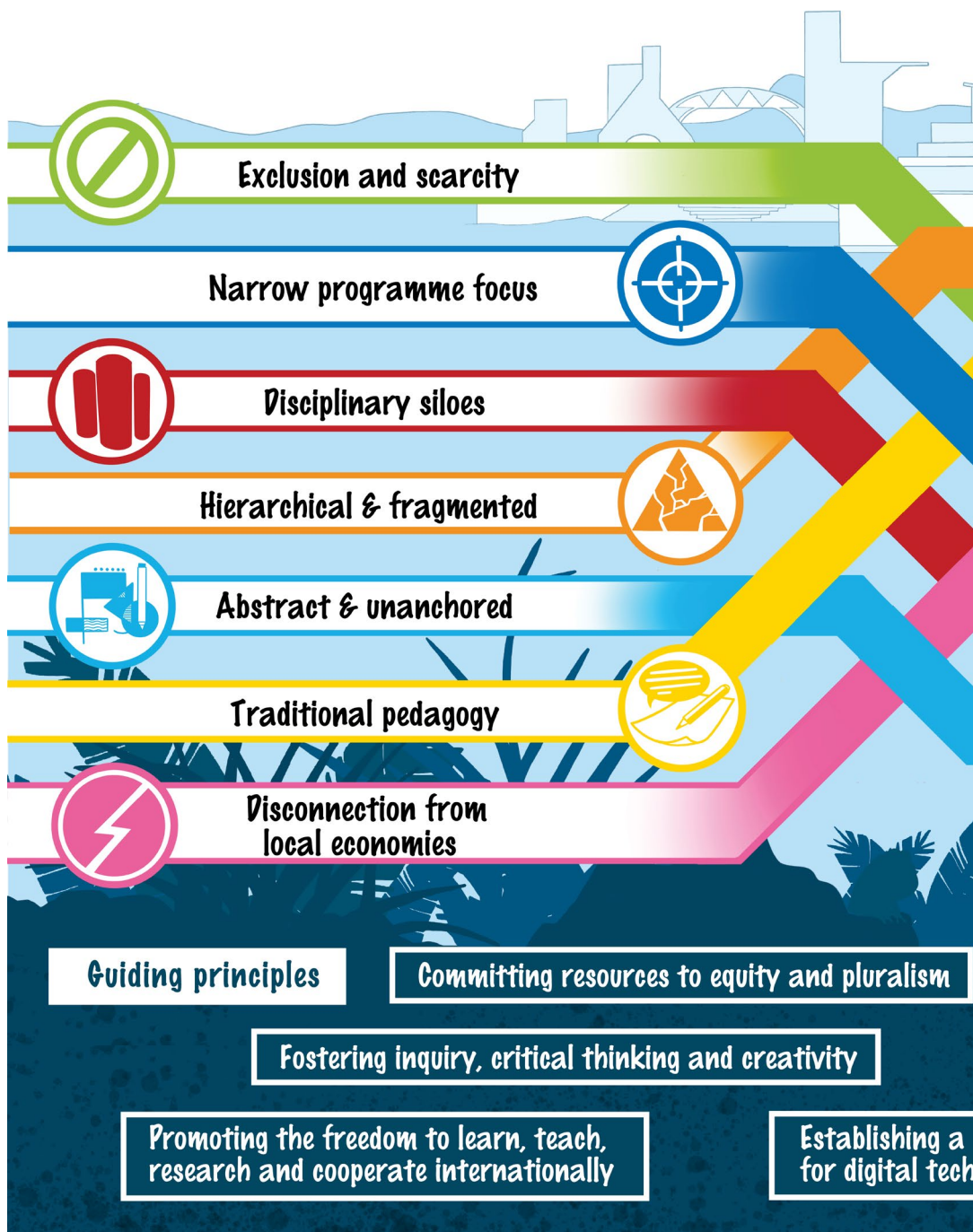
Transforming towards greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations also means **responding to the eagerness of youth for genuine intergenerational co-leadership**. Higher education can play a decisive role in creating a world that looks beyond the views and possibilities expressed by any one generation. The existential severity of contemporary global challenges does not leave us the luxury of time for the traditional handover between one generation and the next. Increased human lifespans are further reason why participatory societal decision-making needs to be distributed across all age brackets.

Intergenerational justice is not served by making decisions for children and youth. Nor is it advanced by kicking problems down the road. Instead, new forms of intergenerational co-leadership are needed. While they can do more, many higher education institutions are already well-advanced in this work as seen in the involvement of students in collegial academic governance and also in the transformations that valorize students as researchers and partners in the knowledge mission of the university. The abundant talents of youth and those early in their careers cannot be consigned to a leadership waiting room. When student leadership is cast as learning *and* doing, universities stand to be exemplars for advancing intergenerational co-leadership.

Finally, transforming towards greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations means **expanding our capabilities for imagining radically different futures**. As the saying goes, today's problems cannot be solved with yesterday's tools. Neither will tomorrow's problems be solved by today's tools. Futures are often imagined by extrapolating from the world as it is. This is needlessly limiting. Universities and other higher education institutions need to connect students to expansive and creative ways of examining their aspirations and hopes. UNESCO's [Futures Literacy](#) work has demonstrated the power of harnessing imagined futures to embrace and shape change. At the centre of this is the power of anticipation, the use of the imagination to bring a not-yet-existing future into the present. Universities and other institutions of higher education are especially fertile grounds for cultivating the anticipatory competencies and understandings that will enhance agility, strengthen resilience and engage with the needs and aspirations that shape people's fears and ignite their hopes.



# Transforming higher education: Global



# collaboration on visioning and action



# Section 5

## A call to action

We must work towards envisaging and enacting futures in which higher education contributes even more to the global common good, peace and to sustainable and regenerative development. In a world that is changing rapidly, we need to take seriously the ways that higher education institutions are affected by global and local processes of transformation. Democratic backsliding, threats to academic freedom, changes in funding and accountability frameworks, expectations of the public and digital transformation including AI, are all leaving their mark on higher education today.

However, it is important to remember that universities and other higher education institutions need not passively undergo these and other transformations. One of the key messages of the WHEC2022 was that higher education plays a pivotal role in *futures creation* – and that, at its best, it does so in democratic, inclusive, sustainable and regenerative ways.

### *Higher education plays a pivotal role in futures creation.*

The Guiding Principles proposed in Section 3 of this report aim to strengthen the future-making potential of higher education, and to ensure that the futures envisaged and enacted will be just, prosperous and peaceful. They need to be approached with an understanding of higher education as an open ecosystem that, at its best, is actively involved in global and local processes of transformation and change *in, for and with society*. Concerted, collaborative effort across this ecosystem will be needed to safeguard and ensure the implementation of these principles.

1. In **committing resources to equity and pluralism** joint efforts between academic and other key social and political leaders will be necessary. Governments need to commit sufficient public funding to higher education, taking care that investments result in a rich array of relevant academic programmes and research initiatives. Faculty, students and staff can do the hard work of advancing intercultural dialogue and rethinking the terms of inclusion. NGOs, advocacy organizations and philanthropy have a role to play – in partnership with governments – to reduce barriers and counter discrimination. The private sector can contribute through expertise, resources and innovation in curriculum, research and workforce development. International organizations can contribute to the setting of standards, benchmarks and goals for ensuring equal access to quality higher education.
2. In **promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally** all hands and minds are needed on the job. Multilateral action on the part of organizations like UNESCO is necessary to safeguard and promote academic freedom, as well as to sustain international cooperation in the sector. Both of these efforts also need to be taken forward by academic leaders standing together in solidarity on issues like institutional autonomy and educational and scientific cooperation across borders. Students, their families, faculty, as well as the organizations and companies that hire the graduates of

higher education programmes, can similarly stand in solidarity on the importance of learning environments that are free from censorship and that feature rich and relevant programmatic and curricular options. Advocacy organizations and NGOs can monitor, protect and ensure public accountability for these necessary freedoms.

3. In **fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity** there are huge resources already available in the intellectual traditions that have long evolved in higher education settings. University leadership, governments and other social partners can work together to ensure the moral authority of higher education has its proper place in the public sphere. Faculty, students and staff can double down on their efforts to creatively imagine the world differently.
4. In **establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies and AI**, universities need to experiment responsibly and with careful attention to ethical concerns and the global common good. Governments and international organizations should draw on academic expertise in policy-making and regulatory work. The tech industry, with its deep dependence on university training and expertise, can be enlisted as a partner that, with others, commits to being a responsible social actor.
5. **Embracing an ethic of collaboration and solidarity** is a critical element of the work to be done by faculty, students and staff as they engage in learning and teaching that prepares individuals to face our common challenges together. Higher education leaders also have much to contribute through the institutional cultures and ethos they nurture. Governments, NGOs and international organizations can help make responsible internationalization, cross-border cooperation and the seamless recognition of studies and qualifications key priorities.
6. In **centring sustainability, stewardship and regeneration** there is great opportunity for broad-scale collaboration among higher education institutions, local municipalities, NGOs and advocacy organizations. As much as this suggests local actions, it also invites collaboration and concerted action across great distances. Other key players for reinforcing stewardship, sustainability and regeneration in higher education include actors in the relevant economic sectors (e.g. agriculture and renewable food systems, renewable energy and natural resource management, among others).
7. In **supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence and relevance** there are many shared actions that can help higher education institutions deliver on their missions more effectively. Policy-makers at all levels can work to favour academic conditions and performance cultures that begin with careful thinking on what higher education should excel at. Social partners outside the university – from governments to industry to the non-profit and social services sector – need to be brought into these discussions with faculty, students and academic leaders, particularly for the critical role that these social partners will play in the implementation of a redefined understanding of what the purposes of higher education should be.

This document has surveyed the actual higher education landscape and pointed towards possible directions and pathways. The Lines of Transformation presented here are not a static blueprint that can be implemented anytime, anywhere and everywhere. Instead, they offer orientation and suggestions to those who want to play a role in higher education transformation by initiating change in policy and practice. Section 4 of this report offered a range of concrete suggestions to be taken forward at different levels:

At the level of the **higher education systems**, openness and inclusion should be embraced as a defining paradigm, both to diversify ways of being and knowing and to make more available to more. Flexible and harmonized integration should also be promoted to facilitate personal and innovative educational trajectories that allow learners to move across different institutions and countries.

At the level of **higher education institutions**, adopting a life-long learning orientation and advancing more dynamic forms of engagement with labour markets and entrepreneurial opportunity will make learning more meaningful to all students and at whatever age(s) they choose to undertake higher education studies. Reclaiming higher education as connected and holistic studies will help mitigate against fragmentation and help the sector live up to its promise of serving the global common good.

In the patterns and practices that shape **the learning of students in higher education**, active, problem- and project-based learning are important strategies for pedagogical renewal and diversification. Ensuring meaningful relevance to individual, community, national, regional and planetary futures situates the work of higher education, with its distinct practices of study and inquiry, at the heart of a world in transformation.

Higher education faculty, students, leaders and staff – as well as non-profit and advocacy organizations, philanthropy, partners in business and industry and policy-makers at all levels – can collaboratively advance these Lines of Transformation. Returning to the metaphor of a roadmap, what the starting points will be and what pathways to take will highly depend on local contexts, conditions and concerns. The Lines of Transformation are presented here as recommended lines of travel. The participants in WHEC2022 established proof of concept; implementation and action have been underway since.

The global higher education landscape continues to change and, for this reason, those advancing these Lines of Transformation need to be grounded in the Guiding Principles presented here which link to higher education's fundamental values and commitments.

Transforming higher education will always be an iterative, ongoing, multilateral and intergenerational process. UNESCO has prepared this roadmap to guide higher education institutions and systems towards transformative change. Further policy dialogue, thinking, debate and action will need to follow. The dissemination and adoption of these Guiding Principles and Lines of Transformation need to be advanced in a **global higher education**

**area of international cooperation and solidarity.** Spaces for sharing goals and values, for peer learning and co-creation, and for open science, technology transfer, and co-creation are exactly what UNESCO's periodic WHEC conferences seek to provide and advance.

**//** *Transforming higher education will always be an iterative, ongoing, multilateral and intergenerational process.*

In closing, it should be recalled that humans are learning all the time, life-long and life-wide. The particular potency of universities and other higher education institutions comes from condensing space and time in intentional moments and places of concerted, collective work that develops knowledges and capabilities. Durable but also dynamic, higher education is well positioned to further evolve and be celebrated as a key social actor for moving our world towards greater justice, prosperity and peace.



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# Transforming higher education

## Global collaboration on visioning and action

In a rapidly evolving landscape shaped by climate change, biodiversity loss, health crises, persistent inequalities, democratic backsliding, conflicts, economic challenges, technological change including AI, and rapidly transforming worlds of work, higher education systems and institutions are called upon to evolve, so that they can respond to complex challenges and support quality lifelong learning for all.

Drawing on the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) and continued consultations, this publication translates a shared global vision into a roadmap for transforming higher education systems. It sets out seven Guiding Principles and offers a set of Lines of Transformation at system, institutional and learning levels, in support of a new social contract for higher education. It is also a call to action for policy-makers, institutional leaders, faculty, students and partners to work together so that higher education contributes more to the global common good, peace and sustainable development.

