

To Cohere and Act as One: IAU—The Global Voice of Higher Education



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Knowledge and knowledge development have always been essential for the survival and continuing development of humankind. As part of the human condition, people have always adapted to the particularities of local environments which in turn are influenced by global conditions and changes, such as climate change, disease, and armed conflict, among others. Knowledge has, throughout human history, been shared and transferred, and with time ever more extensively across regions and national borders. The basic idea that knowledge has no borders has always been and needs to continue to be a guiding light for higher education (HE). International mobility is part of this knowledge transfer and exchange as it augments our understanding of cultural, structural, and financial differences in the world, which must be considered collectively as our shared global responsibility for sustainable social development. These, as well as other perspectives, will be addressed in the following lines.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which is ongoing at the time of writing, is a global phenomenon, both in regard to the spread of the virus and the consequences the pandemic has in social and financial terms; consequences which the whole world will have to bear in both the short- and long-term, and for which there is a common responsibility. To contribute to sustainable social development for all and to ensure the survival of the planet for generations to come is what 193 countries' governments promised to do by ratifying the 2030 Agenda (UN 2015). This agenda includes 17 goals (SDGs) to (i) eliminate extreme poverty; (ii) reduce inequalities and injustices; (iii) promote peace and justice; and (iv) solve the climate crisis (UN 2015).

SDG4 is specifically aimed at education—“*Good education for all—Ensuring an inclusive and equal education of good quality and promoting lifelong learning for all*”. However, extensive involvement of research and teaching is required for

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the fulfilment of each and all the SDGs, which is why the United Nations have underlined the key role of universities. In 2017, Peter Thomson, the former President of the United Nations General Assembly, used the contact information collected in the vast IAU World Higher Education Database (whed.net) to reach out to all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the world: *“It goes without saying that young people are the most capable of the transformation required, having the most to gain or lose, from the success or failure, of Agenda 2030. I therefore make this sincere request to you to make these goals an integral part of research, teaching and study at your institutions”*.

The International Association of Universities (IAU) was founded 70 years ago in 1950 as a global network in order to mark and promote the role of HE in society and its significance for building democratic societies and peace. At UNESCO’s initiative, HEIs and organisations from around the world convened in Utrecht in 1948 to discuss the future of HE in a world that was then recovering from the consequences and experiences of the Second World War. They addressed the need to rebuild confidence in the role of HE to impart knowledge and values and thus contribute to social and democratic development, the building of civil society, and the preservation of peace. Universities were reminded of their most fundamental values and that the university’s mission extends beyond teaching and research, and were called upon to take up their social responsibility. Indeed, the vigorous safeguarding and defending of the core values of HE was deemed a prerequisite for HEIs in order to be able to truly assume what later became to be known as corporate social responsibility. These core values include academic freedom (to critically ask questions and carry out unrestricted research) and institutional autonomy free of economic, political or ideological pressures. The result of the meeting resulted in an agreement on the need for more global cohesion among universities, and under the UNESCO mandate, the IAU was formed in 1950 (IAU 1950).

Throughout the 70 years of the Association’s existence so far, the demand for HE and the conditions under which HE operates have changed dramatically in many respects. The massification of HE has virtually exploded. The number of HEIs in the world has grown nearly ten-fold, and universities have spread out across 196 countries.¹ Never before have the younger generations had as much access to HE and vocational training as today. Accordingly, universities have accompanied and driven the transformations associated with the training of graduates to serve the needs of a knowledge-based society.

However, the increase of the student population in HE and of HEIs has been accompanied by the emergence of new negative aspects. The first is the commodification of HE, which affects accessibility and has resulted in considerable socioeconomic inequality. This is a development that counteracts the goal of the 2030 Agenda to ensure “good education for all” and thereby produces competencies that reflect social, economic and cultural diversity in society. The commodification of HE also

¹ For the expansion of the higher education sector see the yearly increased figures in the IAU’s International Handbook of Universities and World Higher Education Database (WHED) (www.whed.net/).

means that many HEIs around the world depend on tuition fees as a significant or dominant part of their funding—and thus rendering the uneasy relationship between HE as a private and/or public good ever more complicated.

COVID-19 has with great force and speed magnified the financial fault lines of the higher education sector: future cutbacks in public spending for HE in many countries; over-reliance on tuition fees from students; dependence on large numbers of international students (IAU 2020). Whether or when student mobility will be back to the volumes seen before the pandemic remains uncertain. It is therefore high time to rethink internationalisation of students and how we can maintain the so important cultural and structural exchange in a meaningful way. Loss of tuition fees from international students and the resulting financial deficit will likely result in increased tuition fees nationally. Unless governments introduce financial support schemes or frameworks, there is a great risk of increased socioeconomic inequality in society.

Another consequence of the massification of HE is the ever-greater decoupling of research and teaching. Today we can note that of the 19,700 HEIs² many do not carry out their own research. Research and teaching should be inseparable as it is one of the fundamental principles of HE (Magna Charta 1988). It is obvious that research funding has not increased in parallel with the expansion of teaching. There has been a redistribution of research funds to medicine, science and technology at the expense of the humanities, social sciences and arts, and the resources allocated fall way short of the needs. The coupling of teaching with research and empirical knowledge is important to provide the students with current subject knowledge but also with analytical and creative skills and critical thinking. Education must have the capacity to impart the relevant knowledge and skills needed to keep up with the increasing pace of change. The skills of the future should be the skills for sustainable social development. Subject knowledge is continuously changing; more important is the ability to be critical and analytical in assessing information and knowledge and use those skills to creatively generate (new) solutions in the different sectors of society.

To ask all HEIs to conduct their own research would be a tall order, but HE must rest on a scientific or empirical framework, and HEIs and organisations must jointly support and ensure that university teachers have a postgraduate education with research experience. Teachers with competencies to impart skills to students so that they can translate new knowledge critically and analytically into their professional life. HEIs and organizations must jointly take responsibility for building capacity worldwide by putting cohesion before competition. Without taking global responsibility, the goals of Agenda 2030 will not be achieved, regardless of the fact that 196 countries have ratified it.

Internationalisation in research equates to strong collaborations between research-active universities around the world. Knowledge creation and development through research is needed for societal development and crucial for reaching the SDG goals. Research might focus on local challenges but will have to be informed by knowledge which may come from any part of the world. Knowledge in any discipline needs to be

² Ibidem.

shared through publications; in this, open access is an important development. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a severe effect on young scientists, especially who are prohibited from taking up postdoc or doctoral positions and who are thus having to postpone the start of their career. Their participation in research projects is an important part of capacity building, global exchange and development of knowledge. This also means that a research project will not be completed due to travel restrictions and that there is a much greater risk of less research-active HEIs falling behind.

Physical mobility of researchers and students is an important component of research and teaching especially in regard to knowledge exchange and capacity building around the world. The ongoing pandemic, with its immediate effect on physical mobility, has shown that HE must jointly come up with short- and long-term solutions to the new challenges to internationalisation, even if this means finding new modes with limited physical mobility. Local and regional research and development projects must have a global perspective, and the HE sector needs to, in a cohesive way, promote and advocate for international knowledge exchange.

For many years societies have experienced ever-faster technological development, including digitalisation and its introduction to all sectors of society. This has also been the case for HE. There are high expectations that this will lead to greater accessibility to higher education, to support distance education, especially for lifelong learning. Many stakeholders, including politicians, have complained that such transformation is coming about too slowly. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown higher education's ability to swiftly adapt and take responsibility. Almost overnight, the universities started to work remotely, both in teaching and research (IAU 2020).

However, many HEIs do not avail of the necessary resources or infrastructure needed to carry out their activities online. Many students, also in developed regions, do not live in an environment which is conducive to studying. Some of the consequences of the switch to unplanned and unprepared remote teaching has led to students complaining about the deterioration of quality and the loss of the human experience from physical interaction with classmates and teachers.

The expectations from decision- and policymakers to continue digital development in HE will put pressure on HEIs. Any kind of quality assurance in the digital transition of higher education institutions and organisations can only come about through cooperation and shared notions of quality. This includes aspects of equality in HE locally and globally and the promoting and advocating of academic competencies such as creativity, critical and analytical thinking.

When IAU was founded 70 years ago, there was a concern for the fact that fundamental values of higher education were cast into doubt: academic freedom, free choice of research questions and methods, and institutional autonomy, prerequisites for HE to fulfil its unique role in society, not least as an important critical voice. Unfortunately, today we are experiencing a time in which these values and the relevance of HE are again being increasingly questioned by politicians, decision-makers and other stakeholders. We find ourselves in a post-truth society, characterised by a form of epistemic phobia, showing little confidence in scientific knowledge and questioning the science and relevance of HE. The world is also experiencing a time of increased protectionism and nationalism, and freedom of expression and human rights are

challenged. However, a positive finding of the IAU survey on the consequences of COVID-19 was that in many countries, not all, HEIs have been experiencing an increased demand for expertise and advice. Thus, the necessity of cohesion and a “global voice” promoting and advocating for the importance of HE is as important as it was 70 years ago. A unified voice that is expressed and heard at national and regional levels by both HEIs and organizations.

Cohesion and collaboration between HE institutions and organisations need to involve the societal stakeholders, politicians, the public and private sector, and civil society. This is probably best developed locally and regionally, where collaboration addressing local challenges and specific needs for skills and personal cohesion comes more naturally. Collaboration must be based on respect and trust and have common goals; it must promote HE as a public good, that knowledge is an investment in society and the labour market and will strengthen civil society. Without competencies, society cannot drive technical development and actively contribute towards the SDGs.

However, collaboration and social responsibility in HE must be part of a quality assessment framework and needs to include not only quantitative but also qualitative benchmarks. In this context, the IAU is committed to the sharing of knowledge from local and regional initiatives while championing the importance of cohesion and collaboration with all sectors of society.

In summary, the unique role of HE for a sustainable society must be understood, advocated, and promoted by all stakeholders in society and across the higher education sector. HE needs a common global voice, a voice that the IAU has had for seventy years now. However, a global voice of higher education will not be heard without a degree of cohesion among HE institutions and organisations around the world. The IAU’s credibility and opportunities to promote the role of universities for a sustainable future of our planet and for future generations must be based on trust, respect and cohesion. In all the diversity characterising universities around the world, they are bound by a common denominator: they share a set of academic values and a common ontological narrative. As President of IAU, I see that the university sector is showing a greater willingness than ever before to jointly support and safeguard HE locally, regionally and globally, and this is a fantastic confirmation of our work and motivation to amplify the global voice of IAU in its endeavour to shape the future of higher education and society.

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