

Stepping Up Global Collaboration to Protect Higher Education's Future



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Whether a university was founded centuries ago or in recent decades, the past 70 years have seen momentous change in the landscape of higher education and its place in our societies. The year 2020, coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the International Association of Universities (IAU), witnessed change that no forecast had anticipated: the closure or re-alignment to online learning of nearly all higher education institutions in the world, affecting some 220 million students in 175 countries.

Although technology has radically transformed the delivery of higher education in the past decades more than at any other level, systems were not prepared for disruption at such a scale, with many institutions unable to deliver courses online. UNESCO's Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) estimates that in this region alone only 75% of institutions have the capacity to offer online education, while one-quarter of students are being left out due to lack of access to technologies and platforms. Between the recessionary outlook, uncertainty about when and whether institutions will reopen physically or personal financial struggles, the future for tertiary level students has never been more fragile. According to UNESCO's research, higher education students are in fact at greater risk of not continuing their studies, with an anticipated 3.5% decline in enrollment, equivalent to 7.5 million students, with the highest numbers in South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

More than ever, deeper international cooperation is the only response to this crisis—whether to strengthen inclusion, combat inequality, generate innovation and build the capacity to advance societal well-being and sustainable development. UNESCO and the IAU were born in the same generation, sharing similar faith in the right to education and in the power of intellectual and moral solidarity to build

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peace beyond shifting political fault lines. Today, innovative and inclusive tertiary education systems are being turned towards for designing solutions to the crises facing our societies—ones that have never been so interdependent and yet, fragile and unequal. The international community adopted a universal agenda to address these inter-related crises, encompassed in 17 sustainable development goals to benefit people, planet, peace and prosperity. This roadmap, more than ever relevant today in the face of a pandemic that has exposed the life-threatening implications of inequalities, demands a quantum leap in knowledge and can only be achieved if education is at the core. The Agenda includes a specific target on providing equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality tertiary education. This is not negligible as it reflects the strategic role of higher education in generating the knowledge, innovation and professional training that is required to understand the complexity of our times and unlock solutions that make our world more safe, just and fair.

Despite a meteoric rise in tertiary enrollments over the past 70 years, today global coverage stands at only 38%, with wide disparities between regions and countries. Demand will increase, and governments must be braced for this, to nurture the talents that their future depends upon. This starts with equity-centred policies at every educational level, targeted ones where needed, and measures to ensure the equal distribution of opportunities for inclusive access to higher education, without any form of discrimination. Looking to the future, it is incumbent upon the State and higher education institutions to reinforce policies designed to address the multiple structural barriers that prevent students from pursuing their studies, including through financial levers and affirmative action measures. The development of inclusive higher education systems in Africa, where enrolment remains under 10%, should be a priority for international cooperation, together with the establishment of national quality assurance agencies, which do not exist in many countries, leaving students all the more vulnerable to exploitative providers.

Globally the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare inequalities that are not only social and economic in nature, but also digital. Any inclusive policy must therefore strengthen the digital infrastructure of higher education, encompassing investment in online pedagogical resources, training for faculty and equitable access for all students.

Beyond the inclusion imperative, global cooperation must be strengthened to facilitate mobility, the recognition of qualifications, and the creation and sharing of knowledge. By 2025, it is predicted that over 8 million students will study abroad, nearly double the current figure. The Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, adopted in November 2019 by UNESCO's General Conference, represents a multilateral milestone, a collective move towards democratizing knowledge, enabling a more fluid circulation of talent and fostering global trust.

Notwithstanding the critical importance of quality assurance to protect academic standards, excellence in higher education should be measured by the extent to which systems are inclusive and connected to societal and ethical challenges, such as the applications of artificial intelligence that go as far as blurring our core notion of humanity. Because today's defining challenges are global in nature—climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic know no frontiers—they require a response that is

based on deeper solidarity and collaboration, including how knowledge is produced and shared for societal benefit. Gearing study programmes to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires transdisciplinary approaches, action-research and stronger linkages between research, policy design and labour market demands. The IAU's Global Higher Education Cluster on the SDGs is paving the way with sixteen universities around the world championing one of the Global Goals and working with satellite institutions from all continents to advance them.

The Agenda has implications for how higher education and research is organized and funded. The development of open educational resources and open science is the way forward to narrow knowledge gaps, based on a culture of collaboration and citizen participation. This is a movement gaining ground worldwide, one in which UNESCO is leading a global dialogue with a view to develop a Recommendation to our 2021 General Conference.

The future of higher education and global development cannot be delinked. If societies are to become more resilient, equitable and sustainable, then higher education has to provide the intellectual infrastructure for this transition to happen—one that is economic, social, political and environmental. These are after all the institutions responsible for grooming the next generation of leaders, teachers, health and medical personnel, scientists, researchers and other talents to advance the ambitious sustainable development goals in the next decade.

Any reduction in spending on higher education will have irreversible consequences for people and societies. Higher education should be included in stimulus plans for economic and social recovery, with focus on the most vulnerable students, remedial learning and massive digital upgrading. This has to be accompanied by a paradigm shift to make higher education more inclusive, lifelong through more fluid approaches to learning, and catalytic in driving sustainable change.

The Futures of Education initiative, launched in September 2019 to catalyse a global debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimaged in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity, has seen its foresight mission collide with the global disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such disruption is the opportunity to accelerate innovation and lead reform. Decisions made today in the context of the pandemic will have long-term consequences for the futures of education. The International Commission on the Futures of Education of which the IAU is an Advisory Board member, has urged that every choice be based on a humanistic vision of education as human right and a common good, one that should be a bulwark against inequalities. As the Commission states in a paper outlining nine ideas for public action, "COVID-19 has shown us the extent to which our societies exploit power imbalances and our global system exploits inequalities." It calls for "renewed commitments to international cooperation and multilateralism, together with a revitalized global solidarity that has empathy and an appreciation of our common humanity at its core." (UNESCO 2020).

As the only UN agency with a mandate in higher education, UNESCO, together with vital partners such as the IAU, is committed to championing global cooperation in this field to fulfil the rights of every student, protect academic freedom and chart the future along more ethical, equitable and sustainable lines.

Reference

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