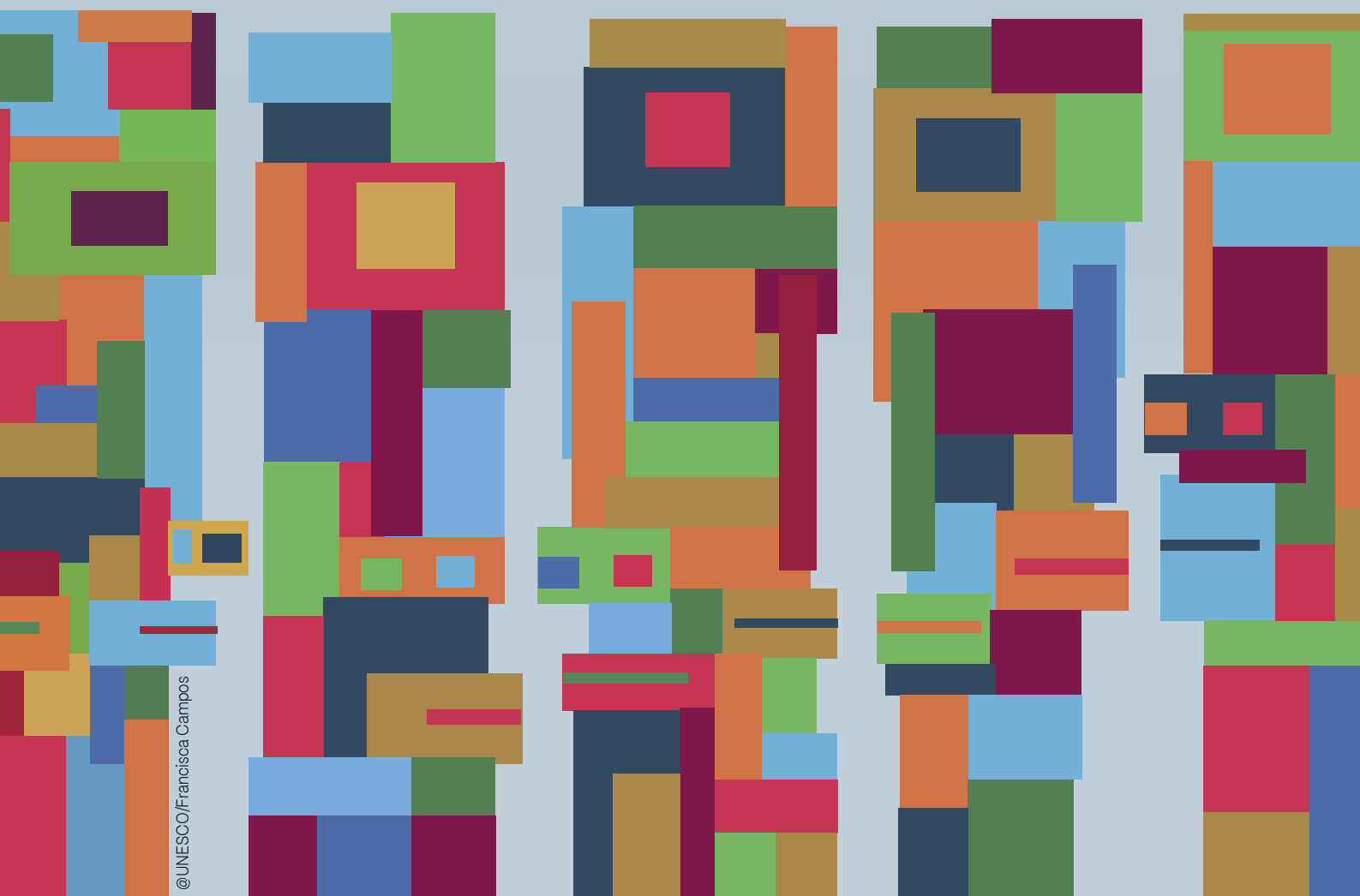


BEYOND LIMITS

New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education



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UNESCO - a global leader in education

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.



This document was prepared by UNESCO to be delivered at the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), organized by UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022, which has the purpose of enhancing the contribution of higher education institutions and systems world-wide, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its pledge to leave no one behind, and looking at the Futures of Education

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Foreword by Assistant Director-General for Education

Stefania Giannini

The 3rd World Conference on Higher Education (WHEC2022) convenes at a time of new and interconnected global threats. Peace is increasingly fragile and our planet severely endangered by the impact of human activity. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened inequalities. The digital revolution is disrupting jobs and polarizing societies, while at the same time transforming every aspect of our lives, including access to knowledge.

Higher education has a strategic and irreplaceable role to play in building more sustainable, resilient and peaceful societies. This was recognized in the previous two World Conferences that took place in 1998 and 2009. They resulted in greater attention to higher education as a responsibility of States and as a public good.

But in the face of mounting global challenges threatening our common future, we have to take a quantum leap to reinvent higher education as a basis for building a safe, more just, democratic and sustainable world. WHEC2022 is an opportunity to deepen the global conversation on how to step up progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and how to forge a new contract for education in the wake of UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative.

This roadmap, informed by multiple and wide consultations, paves the way for such a transformation. It considers the three missions of higher education with fresh lenses; namely, to produce knowledge through research and innovation by adopting inter- and trans- disciplinary approaches; to educate well-rounded professionals who are also fully-fledged citizens able to cooperatively address complex issues; and to act with a sense of social responsibility, locally and globally.

Presented as an intellectual contribution to WHEC2022, this roadmap expresses an urgent call for renewed thinking, dialogue, and transformative action, recognizing that education –including higher education – is a right to be exerted throughout the whole life cycle.

It is an open, living document – one that invites all higher education stakeholders to shape and exchange ideas and practices under a shared ecosystem, in global, regional and country scenarios. The roadmap sets signposts for co-creating more open, inclusive, equitable and collaborative higher education systems that democratize access and knowledge. It encourages a shift in mindsets to privilege cooperation over competition; diversity over uniformity; flexible learning pathways over traditionally structured ones; openness over more elitist viewpoints. All societies stand to gain from connected higher education systems that build bridges, promote partnerships and fertilize synergies for sustainable development, and that creatively use technology to generate high-quality learning, collaborative research and networking without borders. Ultimately, our common goal must be to ensure the right to higher education for all and make institutions accountable to individual learners, their societies and the well-being of our planet at large.

Stefania Giannini

Assistant Director-General for Education
UNESCO

Acknowledgements

UNESCO thanks the contributions from all individuals and organizations that have made possible – through research, dialogue, and consultation– the preparation of this roadmap. Special acknowledgment is given to the members of WHEC2022 Technical Expert Group (TEG), who prepared background documents on the ten themes of the conference and facilitated consultation to more than 180 experts and leaders from all regions of the world.

During the recent months, diverse dialogue and consultations have been led by UNESCO and partners, whose ideas have permeated this document through experts and focal points directly involved in preparing the WHEC2022 and/or conducting related events.

This document has been enriched by diverse UNESCO initiatives on human rights, equity and inclusion, cross-border higher education, recognition of qualifications, attention to refugees, open science, lifelong learning, technical education, sustainable development, and others. Two recent initiatives have been particularly relevant for preparing this document: the report of the UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda ([EGU2030](#)), and the Report of the International Commission on the [Futures of Education](#).

Finally, UNESCO acknowledges the efforts and outcomes of higher education institutions and systems worldwide to enhance equity and quality of HED, and its contribution to the well-being of people and the sustainability of the planet.

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Presentation

This document proposes a roadmap to reinvent higher education (HED) in the upcoming years. First, it identifies the evolving landscape of HED institutions and systems (section one), including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It recognizes the challenges and opportunities associated with global threats faced by humanity and the planet as well as major changes in HED in the last decade. UNESCO's vision of HED is presented (section two) and six principles are identified to shape HED's futures (section three). Based on UNESCO's vision and these principles, six major challenges need to be overcome in reinventing HED (section four), which require significant transitions or transformation. Finally, this proposal identifies several practical approaches to make progress, turning dialogue into action and results (section five). The latter contains a timeline with several global initiatives to keep moving ahead in rethinking, reimagining, and reinventing HED. The roadmap is summarized in the first five pages of this document, and then presented with detail in sections one to five.

A roadmap for HED needs to consider two timeframes at country, regional and global levels in the upcoming years. **The first one is given by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:** the 17 SDGs and their targets. **The Education 2030 Framework for Action** was developed under this umbrella. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a threefold role: achieve their own targets regarding SDG 4, contribute to learning quality and inclusion for the whole education system, and serve (through interdisciplinary, collaborative approaches in education and research programmes) to achieve all the SDGs.

The WHEC2022 takes place approximately at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Education 2030 Framework for Action. While recognizing the numerous positive initiatives involving HED so far, much more remains to be done, as revealed by the [EGU2030 Report](#), launched earlier this year.

The second relevant timeframe is provided by the **Futures of Education Report**, launched in November 2021. This document emphasizes that education has an essential role in building shared, interdependent, collective futures. It calls upon building a new social contract for education towards year 2050 and highlights the key role of HEIs in every aspect of it.

This roadmap is presented during the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) as a **working version** to encourage further thinking and debate among all stakeholders linked with HED in global, regional, and country scenarios. It is an input to deepen a global conversation about reinventing higher education, a technical proposal to be enriched by ideas and practices shared during the conference and beyond.

Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
EGU2030	Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
EQRP	European Qualifications Passport for Refugees
GUNI	Global University Network for Innovation
HED	Higher education
HEIs	Higher education institutions
IAU	International Association of Universities
IESALC	International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IoT	Internet of things
IT	Information technology
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TEG	WHEC2022 Technical Expert Group
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UFN	University of the Future Network
UN	United Nations
UNAI	United Nations Academic Impact
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UQP	UNESCO Qualifications Passport
WAHED	World Access to Higher Education Day
WHEC2022	World Higher Education Conference 2022

Summary

Evolving higher education landscape

Higher education (HED) has undergone substantial changes since the second UNESCO World Higher Education Conference held in 2009. Those changes have impacted global, regional, and country contexts; some have created new opportunities while others have generated new challenges.

Climate change and loss of biodiversity are perhaps the biggest threat to the future of the planet and to humans. Despite recurrent warnings and increased awareness since the 1980s, efforts to implement eco-friendly policies, reduce energy consumption, and use renewable sources of energy have proven insufficient. In 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations unanimously approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework of policy commitments to end poverty by 2030 and achieve a sustainable future, which means overcoming poverty and equality, and building safe, cohesive societies and taking care of the planet. SDG 4 aims at **'leaving no one behind'** in terms of access and quality of education. This frames the significant role of higher education institutions (HEIs) if they step up their commitment to all 17 SDGs through their teaching, research, and engagement with society. This 2030 Agenda has intricate links with all the threats mentioned below.

Persistence of armed conflict is another big threat. The world has become less safe over the past decade. The political situation in many countries and regions remains insecure, exposed to violence and armed confrontation, which jeopardizes the previous progress against war as way to solve conflicts. Threats from regional and ethnic conflict, growing numbers of displaced communities, increased poverty, growing economic inequality, and rising levels of crime and corruption all combine to put severe pressures on political and social institutions of all kinds, including HEIs.

Income inequality is a third big challenge for human societies. Throughout the world, income disparities have grown rapidly both within and across nations as people have benefited differentially from the rise of the global economy. Equitable access to HED and labour market opportunities are indispensable for easing inequalities and related social problems.

The overall decline of democracy is a fourth major source of concern, with 2021 being the fifteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom. According to the Democracy Index calculated by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the share of the world population living in full democracies has decreased from 12.3 per cent in 2010 to 6.4 per cent in 2021. This means less academic freedom, less independent thinking, less institutional autonomy, and less tolerance of research on socially sensitive issues (gender, race, decolonizing the curriculum, etc.).

Changing HED systems and institutions

Expansion with enduring disparities has characterized HED in recent decades. However, despite the spectacular expansion occurring in many parts of the planet, severe disparities persist in HED, especially in the global South. The issue is not only one of access. Students from traditionally under-represented groups also have lower completion rates. They are usually enrolled in less prestigious HEIs, which means fewer labour market opportunities and lower results. Rising cost-sharing and the high number of private HEIs in many parts of the world are major sources of disparities in access and success in HED.

Recent decades have also witnessed a growth in the **HED internationalization**. On par with enrolment, international student mobility has been increasing at an unprecedented rate. These trends have led to the development of 'second generation' [regional recognition conventions](#) as well as the [2019 Global Convention](#)

on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, to help make recognition, mobility and inter-university cooperation a reality for millions, including distance education learners and refugees. At the same time, distance learning and other forms of cross-border HED are contributing to a rise in virtual academic mobility, with all the challenges that new forms of provision present for regulators and quality assurance.

Technologies play an increasingly central role in HED. Technological advances include rapid developments in computer power and Internet reach, fuelled by progress in artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT), and automation. They have transformed teaching, learning and research as well as networking and collaboration within and across nations. [Open Science](#) and Open Education can support the democratization of knowledge using free online content, databases, and research results to ensure immediate access to information for all. At the same time, increased reliance on digital information and advanced communication technologies brings quality challenges, which may result in low retention rates, and carries the danger of a growing digital gap, as evidenced during the pandemic.

Funding approaches are changing. Many HED systems are forced to operate with insufficient public investment, notably in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America. Furthermore, the past decade has witnessed significant changes in the way governments allocate resources to HEIs. Three trends can be noted: first, increased reliance on performance-based allocation mechanisms; second, introduction of targeted free tuition schemes; third, the launch of academic excellence initiatives to support the creation of world-class universities. But in many countries, rather than HED becoming progressively funded by public sources and thus being free for students, the prevailing trend has been to increase tuition fees and other indirect costs.

Accountability frameworks within HEIs and HED systems have grown in complexity to prioritise quality and/or facilitate flexibility in learning. Some systems are changing to emphasize learning outcomes, employability, diversity, and inclusion. Meanwhile, the substantial growth in the number of HEIs and diversity of programme offerings, including through digital means, has placed increased pressure on quality assurance at the systemic and institutional levels. To facilitate the recognition of qualifications in an increasingly diversified HED system, more than 60 countries have implemented national qualifications frameworks that seek to categorize various forms and levels of qualifications with clearly defined learning outcomes for each level. These are essential reference points for lifelong learning and the recognition of qualifications across borders.

Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 outbreak has changed the world in an unprecedented way. While many institutions managed to switch to online education very rapidly and did their best to provide continuity in teaching, the digital gap, and the lack of preparation for online instruction, have increased educational disparities in some regions and created acute social distress, especially among vulnerable students. The pandemic has revealed the need for substantial changes in the economic models of HED systems and institutions to increase their resilience. The pandemic has also stressed that strong IT infrastructure and comprehensive financial aid programmes are indispensable to foster inclusion.

UNESCO's vision of higher education

Education is **a right to be exerted along the whole life cycle** and that comprises different ways of catering for the educational needs of youth and adults including HED. UNESCO sees HED provision as an activity aimed at favouring equity and the equal distribution of opportunities.

HED is tasked with three major missions: **producing knowledge** through scientific research, **educating people**, in the broad sense of the word, and **social responsibility**, which is not an addition to the previous two missions. Social responsibility is intertwined with the first two missions and translates into social outreach actions relevant to the context of each HEI.

HEIs make important contributions regarding knowledge production, but disciplinary specialization is not enough to tackle the many complex issues that require **transdisciplinary approaches** and an ability to think and work with roots into different disciplinary perspectives. In addition, HEIs must educate **well-rounded professionals** who are also fully-fledged citizens that cooperatively address complex issues. Social responsibility needs to be **embedded** within the ethos of HED. HEIs cannot afford to ignore major contemporary issues like inequity and sustainability. These concerns must translate into **institutional practices** that honour human-rights principles (gender equity internal policies, diversity of perspectives in each programme, policies protecting free speech and inquiry).

UNESCO acknowledges that HED is carried out by **institutions** (universities, applied sciences universities, polytechnic institutions, colleges, schools, institutes, fine arts schools, etc.), which may adopt different ways to approach their missions: focus on professional education, combination of professional education with knowledge-production-oriented activities, concern with their local settings, presence into the global arena; emphasis on conventional organizational settings, adoption of flexible operational schemes; orientation to disciplinary activities, interest in problem-solving, etc.

UNESCO sees HED as an integral part of the right to education and a public good, which translates into HEIs carrying out their three missions and enacting democratic principles and values. HED should become an integrated system where diversity helps create different and flexible pathways for youth and adults. HEIs should transcend disciplinary, professional, epistemic, reputational, and institutional frontiers. The aim is to expand educational opportunities, foster professional excellence, and cultivate fully-fledged citizens committed to social justice and sustainability.

Principles to shape the future

Under the overarching framework of being a component of the right to education and fulfilling a public good mission aligned with the SDGs, HED systems and institutions can be guided by six key principles as they look towards 2030, building a new social contract for higher education as proposed by the [Futures of Education Report](#):

- **Inclusion, equity, and pluralism.** Achieving greater inclusion and promoting pluralism in HED is a strong social justice imperative, an objective reflected in target 4.3 of the SDGs about 'equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education.' Effective education and training systems where opportunities are equally distributed are the basis for sustainable development and the construction of fair, peaceful, and democratic societies.
- **Academic freedom and participation of all stakeholders.** HEIs are well-placed to offer a safe space to present and assess a diversity of views and engage with society in public debates on complex issues. It is essential to protect the academic freedom of staff and students from political interference. This requires a high degree of institutional autonomy and self-governance as well as an adequate balance between autonomy and public accountability.
- **Inquiry, critical thinking, and creativity.** HEIs have a unique responsibility to teach how to distinguish real evidence from fabricated information and to apply knowledge to problem-solving in every walk of life. Truth-seeking skills should be at the core of every curriculum at every educational level, including in HED. HED has the power to enhance creativity, ignite imagination, and promote divergent thinking, preparing students to find innovative solutions to address the global challenges.
- **Integrity and ethics.** HEIs must place a strong emphasis on ethical values and behaviours to promote honesty, tolerance, and solidarity. All graduates should be prepared to become professionals who are agents of social responsibility, champions of sustainability and citizens longing for social justice.

- **Commitment to sustainability and social responsibility.** Through training, research, and engagements with local, national, regional, and global communities, all HEIs can contribute actively to building a more sustainable world. Behaving with social responsibility is central to the development of the green economy and societal well-being.
- **Excellence through cooperation rather than competition.** Universities and other types of HEIs can perform their educational missions more effectively through cooperation and solidarity. This helps work in an interdisciplinary manner, pool scientific resources across academic units and institutions, share knowledge and experience through professional networks at the national and international level to achieve synergies.

Reinventing higher education

'Business as usual' is neither sufficient nor acceptable to ensure that people fully exert their right to higher education within free, peaceful, and fair societies. UNESCO urgently calls for substantive changes that help with reimagining our futures and defining clear paths for improving educational experiences and outcomes for all. These paths must involve all stakeholders who have concern with HED.

Based on UNESCO's vision and the principles outlined above, this roadmap identifies six major challenges that need to be overcome in reinventing HED. These include the following transitions and transformations:

- From viewing HED as elitist, discriminatory, and sometimes alienated from its public tasks, to enabling people's rights to HED, through **equitable, well-funded, and sustainable access**. Learning is an essential attribute of human species, and people are entitled to educational opportunities that guarantee their right to learn. To make this a reality in policy and practice means addressing access, equity and non-discrimination, financing and governance.
- From a restrictive focus on disciplinary or professional training to a **holistic student learning experience**. HEIs need to think of themselves as being, in the first place, educational institutions, ensuring every student can undergo a rich and diverse learning experience (not exclusively restricted to the discipline or the instrumental components of the professional practice) that fosters democratic values and the richness of the humans.
- From disciplinary silos to **inter- and trans- disciplinarity**, open dialogue and active collaboration among diverse perspectives. HED should equip students with the capabilities to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and the foundations, attitudes, and habits to humbly acknowledge and transcend the limits of their own disciplines and specialization fields.
- From assuming HED comes immediately after secondary education to a **lifelong learning approach** aimed at serving the diverse education needs of youth and adults. HED is already changing as more countries are offering opportunities for multiple entry and re-entry. Adopting a lifelong learning perspective and offering **flexible learning pathways** provide a more coherent and richer framework to address the learning needs of human beings.
- From a hierarchical and weakly connected archipelago of institutions and programmes to an **integrated system with diversity of programmes** and flexible learning pathways connecting them to enlarge the educational opportunities for youth and adults and avoid dead ends. Recognition mechanisms considering all types of programmes (formal, non-formal, informal; on campus, hybrid, online) as well as the possibility of transfers among institutions and programmes need to be fostered through good qualifications frameworks, standards for practice, assessment mechanisms.

- From an industrial model of teaching to **pedagogically informed and technologically enriched higher learning experiences** where learners manage their own learner pathways. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, collaborative platforms, virtual reality, internet of things, and distributional ledger technology, offer promising ways of improving and enriching teaching, learning and research, on campus and remotely. Technology is a support for pedagogy, and effective pedagogy ensures learning and technology.

Navigating towards 2030 and beyond

To reinvent themselves, HED systems and institutions need renewed thinking, dialogue, decisions, and actions. Through their three main missions, HEI must fulfil their public duties by contributing to build societies that overcome challenges derived from the current, evolving landscape.

The WHEC2022 is an opportunity to **deepen a global conversation** through common democratic values and commitment to public ends for HED to build together shared futures in a single global ecosystem: safer, more just, more democratic, and more sustainable. At the same time, we also create spaces for diversity and pluralism through local - and even institutional- roadmaps. Local groups (in regions, countries, or institutions) should assess their own landscape and challenges – vis-à-vis the features of a shared global roadmap- and define their own priorities, goals and routes of actions to reach those goals.

To move forward, we must keep a sense of urgency: either we do things now or humanity and the planet can end up facing an abyss. In line with the principles and transformations previously mentioned, we propose some practical approaches to make progress, turning dialogue into action and results: (i) ambitious targets and carefully monitoring progress towards them; (ii) quality assurance and continuous improvement in HED; (iii) flexible learning pathways, recognition, mobility, and internationalization; (iv) research on and innovation in HED associated with capacity development; (v) renewed production, dissemination, and use of HED data; (vi) a global conversation on and collaboration in HED; (vii) international cooperation to support by shared goals; (viii) timeline for the upcoming years.

Regarding the timeline for the upcoming years, this roadmap proposes to launch the following global initiatives, articulated with regional and country efforts. During 2022, (i) develop post-conference initiatives to disseminate the results of the WHEC2022 and further promote dialogue at the country, regional and global levels; and (ii) disseminate an updated version of the **HED Roadmap** by early 2023.

Between 2022-2025, (i) activate a **HED Intersectoral Initiative** led by UNESCO to monitor progress towards the HED targets (in the frame of SDG 4) and the contribution of HEIs to all SDGs and start building renewed purposes of HED towards the year 2050; and (ii) channel mechanisms to feed the agendas of Member and all stakeholders linked to HED.

Between 2023-2026, (i) start a process of strengthening data collection and monitoring of HED targets; and (ii) develop a global platform (articulating regional efforts) to facilitate knowledge production and sharing of good practices.

In 2027, hold an online **Mid Term HED Forum** promoting engagement of diverse stakeholders within and across regions. In 2030, shape the goals and targets for HED considering the futures of education and year 2050 objectives. In 2032, hold the 4th World Higher Education Conference (**WHEC2032**).

Section 1.

Evolving higher education landscape

Higher education (HED) has undergone substantial changes since the 2nd World Higher Education Conference held in 2009. Some of those changes have created new opportunities while others have brought new challenges. What follows synthesizes major global changes that impact HED, examines significant trends and, finally, highlights the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.1. A changing global environment

Climate change and loss of biodiversity are perhaps the biggest threat to the future of the planet and to humans. Despite repeated warnings and increased awareness since the 1980s, efforts to implement eco-friendly policies, reduce energy consumption, and use renewable sources of energy have proven insufficient. Many nations and their citizens continue to display business-as-usual attitudes and to rely on fossil fuel without limits. There is now a serious risk of reaching global and local tipping points in climate and biodiversity. 2020 was the hottest year on record, and 1 million species are at risk of extinction. Climate change and loss of biodiversity imply not only increased risk in terms of extreme events like heatwaves, cold periods, drought, forest fires, flooding, avalanches, and rise in sea level, but also pose -directly or indirectly- a major threat to human health, causing forced migrations, declining food production, water insecurity, endangered, life-sustaining ecosystem services, and increased social disparities.

In 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations unanimously approved the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) as a framework of policy commitments to end poverty by 2030 and achieve a sustainable future. The SDGs are directly or indirectly associated with the grand challenges linked not only to climate change, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of natural resources, but also to poverty, insecurity, and inequality. SDG 4 asserts the aim of 'leaving no one behind' in terms of access and quality of education.

However, the official commitment of the global community has not been followed by sufficient concrete actions to make a fundamental difference, and progress towards achieving the SDGs has been uneven. The [2022 Global Sustainable Development Report](#) emphasizes that 'human influence on the Earth's climate has become unequivocal, increasingly apparent, and widespread... Current changes in the climate system and those expected in the future will increasingly have significant and deleterious impacts on human and natural systems.'¹. There is an important role to be played by higher education institutions (HEIs) if they step up their commitment to all 17 SDGs through their teaching, research, and engagement with the economy and society. This 2030 Agenda has intricate links with all the threats mentioned in this section.

Persistence of armed conflict is another big threat, and the world has become less safe over the past decade. As the UN Secretary-General recently said: 'war is evil'², and it is so in the past, the present and the future. The political situation in many countries and regions remains insecure, exposed to violence and armed confrontation, which jeopardizes the progress made in past decades in banning war as a legitimate way of settling conflicts. Threats from regional and ethnic conflict, growing numbers of displaced communities, increased poverty, growing economic inequality, and rising levels of crime and corruption all combine to put severe pressures on political and social institutions of all kinds, including HEIs. Internal and ethnic strife, that had decreased significantly at the end of the Cold War, have proliferated again over the past 10 years. As many as 56 active conflicts were recorded in 2020, eight of these being full-scale wars, affecting most acutely Africa, the former Soviet Union countries, and nations attacked by the so-called Islamic State. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, at the end of 2020, at least 82.4 million people around the world were forced to flee their homes, that is one person out of 95 living people. Among them are nearly 26.4 million refugees, half of whom are under the age of 18. The number of internally displaced people has reached 48 million. Only about 5 per cent of refugees in the reference age cohort have access to HED. In this context, HEIs need to prepare for emergencies and build the capacity to accommodate a larger number of refugee students. Through internationalization and shared values of peaceful coexistence and tolerance, HEIs can help reduce conflict.

1. Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Report of the Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the UN Secretary-General, 2022, p. 40. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FinalDraft_FullReport.pdf

2. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1117132>

recorded in 2020, eight of these being full-scale wars, affecting most acutely Africa, the former Soviet Union countries, and nations attacked by the so-called Islamic State. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates³ that, at the end of 2020, at least 82.4 million people around the world were forced to flee their homes, that is one person out of 95 living people. Among them are nearly 26.4 million refugees, half of whom are under the age of 18. The number of internally displaced people has reached 48 million. Only about 5 per cent of refugees in the reference age cohort have access to HED. In this context, HEIs need to prepare for emergencies and build the capacity to accommodate a larger number of refugee students. Through internationalization and shared values of peaceful coexistence and tolerance, HEIs can help reduce conflict.

Income inequality is a third big challenge for human societies. Throughout the world, income disparities have grown rapidly both within and across nations as people have benefited differentially from the rise of the global economy. In a world where the richest 10 per cent of the global population owns 52 per cent of the total wealth, while the poorest half has just 8 per cent, income inequality translates into power asymmetries that undermine the foundation of democratic societies and, in many countries, social disparities and poverty have led to steep increase in crime and lawlessness. Equitable access to HED and labour market opportunities are indispensable for easing inequalities and related social problems.

The **overall decline of democracy** is a fourth major source of concern, with 2021 being the fifteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom. According to the [Democracy Index](#) calculated by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the share of the world population living in full democracies has decreased from 12.3 per cent in 2010 to 6.4 per cent in 2021, resulting from a fall in the number of fully democratic countries from 26 to 21 over the same period, while the number of flawed democracies stayed stable at 53, meaning that 5 countries fell into the 'authoritarian' category. This means there is less academic freedom, less independent thinking in the pursuit of truth, less institutional autonomy, and less tolerance of research on socially sensitive issues (gender, race, decolonizing the curriculum, etc.).

3. The UN Refugees Agency (UNHCR). Global trends forced displacement in 2020. Figures at a glance. <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

1.2. Trends of HED systems and institutions

In addition to the impact of the global problems discussed above, several important trends have led to the transformation of HED systems and institutions: (i) rapid enrolment expansion with persisting disparities; (ii) internationalization; (iii) growing role of advanced technologies; (iv) changes in funding approaches; and (v) more complex accountability frameworks.

Expansion with enduring disparities characterized HED in recent decades. While in 1970, total enrolment in HED worldwide represented about one tenth of the reference age cohort, that figure has risen today to 40 percent, which is a global participation of 235 million students. However, despite the spectacular expansion that has occurred in many parts of the planet in the past decades, severe disparities persist in HED, especially in the global South. For example, enrolment ranges from less than 10 per cent of the age cohort in Sub-Saharan Africa to almost 80 per cent in Europe and North America. Available statistics show that a disproportionately high proportion of HED students still belong to the richest groups in society. The issue is not only one of access. Students from traditionally under-represented groups also have lower completion rates. They are usually enrolled in less prestigious HEIs, which means fewer labour market opportunities and lower results. Rising cost-sharing and the high number of private HEIs in many parts of the world are major sources of disparities in access and success in HED.

Recent decades have also witnessed a growth in the **HED internationalization**. On par with enrolment, international student mobility has been growing at an unprecedented rate. Over 5.4 million students were studying abroad in 2017, representing almost a threefold increase from just over 2 million in 2000. This figure is forecast to grow to 8 million by 2025. These trends have led to the development of 'second generation' [regional recognition conventions](#) as well as the [2019 Global Convention](#) on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, to help make recognition, mobility and inter-university cooperation a reality for millions, including distance education learners and refugees. At the same time, distance learning and other forms of cross-border HED are contributing to a rise in virtual academic mobility, with all the challenges that new forms of provision present for regulators and quality assurance.

Technologies play an increasingly central role in HED. Technological advances, including rapid developments in computer power and Internet reach, fuelled by progress in artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT), and automation, have made it easier for networks within and across nations to form connections which assist collaboration among groups of learners, instructors, researchers and learning communities. These networks can pool resources and expertise for joint teaching and research activities.

[Open Science](#) and Open Education can support the democratization of knowledge using free online content, databases, and research results to ensure immediate access to information for all. These developments have facilitated the emergence of a new learning paradigm and blended educational approaches that enhance the viability of student-centred models offering interactive and experiential learning experiences, building on what has been learned through decades of open and distance education provision.

The ubiquity of advanced technologies has given rise to EdTech companies complementing or sometimes replacing some of the traditional functions of HEIs (academic management, assessment, digital degrees and qualifications, labour market analysis, etc.). It has also supported the diversification of provisions (on site, blended, online), the proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and micro-credentials as an alternative form that is more accessible for many learners to acquire qualifications than enrolling for full degrees in full-time programmes. At the same time, increased reliance on digital information and advanced communication technologies brings quality challenges, which may result in low retention rates, and carries the real danger of a growing digital gap among and within nations, as evidenced during the pandemic.

Funding approaches are changing. An important determinant of the ability of HEIs to accomplish their mission effectively is adequate levels of funding. Many HED systems are forced to operate with insufficient public investment, notably in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America. Furthermore, the past decade has witnessed significant changes in the way governments allocate resources to HEIs. The first trend is increased reliance on performance-based allocation mechanisms, in the form of funding formulas, performance agreements, and competitive funds. A second development, positive from an equity viewpoint, is the introduction of targeted free tuition schemes in countries as diverse as Chile, the Philippines, and South Africa, which guarantee free HED to all low-income students. The third trend has been the launch of academic excellence initiatives to support the creation of world-class universities, notably in Europe and South-East Asia, but also in Africa with the establishment of the African Centres of Excellence. Influenced by the global rankings, several governments have allocated significant additional resources to a select group of universities to boost their research excellence and international visibility, often at the detriment of the rest of the HED sector that remains underfunded. Academic publishing is often not oriented to producing relevant knowledge that improves human well-being. Nonetheless, in many countries, rather than HED becoming progressively funded by public sources and thus being free for students, the prevailing trend has been to increase tuition fees and other indirect costs. This poses a substantial financial burden on students, affecting both access and completion, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds who, in some cases, need to incur high debts and heavy repayments upon graduation.

Accountability frameworks within HEIs and HED systems have grown in complexity. Some prioritise quality, others facilitate flexibility in learning. Some quality assurance systems have begun to move away from mechanistic input- and process-based approaches to focus on learning outcomes and employability, and/or recognizing the balance between campus-based and work-based learning as well as promoting diversity and inclusion. Meanwhile, the substantial growth in the number of HEIs and diversity of programme offerings, including through digital means, has placed increased pressure on aspects of quality assurance at the systemic and institutional levels. A few countries have launched risk-based external reviews and done away with regular external reviews, thereby reducing the outside scrutiny burden on HEI. To facilitate the recognition of qualifications in an increasingly diversified system of HED provision, more than 60 countries have put in place national qualifications frameworks that seek to categorize various forms and levels of qualifications with clearly defined learning outcomes for each level. These are essential reference points for lifelong learning and the recognition of qualifications across borders. In that regard, the adoption of the UNESCO [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#) in 2019 is a major step towards improved support of academic staff and student mobility, study opportunities for refugees and displaced persons, inter-institutional cooperation and knowledge circulation.

1.3. Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 outbreak has changed the world in an unprecedented way. With the pandemic interrupting face-to-face education on campuses (and across entire education systems) all over the world in March 2020—a possibility very few educational institutions were prepared for—, HED institutions and students have faced significant new challenges. While many institutions managed to switch to online education very rapidly and did their best to provide continuity in teaching, the digital gap, and the lack of preparation for online instruction, have increased educational disparities in some regions and created acute social distress, especially among vulnerable students⁴. The wellbeing of international students has been largely neglected by national policies during the pandemic, and rising discrimination has pushed some students to study at home or change their destinations.

In the medium to long term, Covid-19 is likely to negatively affect learning outcomes, mobility, graduation rates, employability, and job prospects of traditionally underrepresented students across the globe. It is also expected to worsen the already-precarious economic health of many colleges and universities. At the same time, the move to online education poses significant opportunities for transforming the learning experience, whether remote or in person. Curricular and pedagogical practices could be reshaped to promote active, interactive, and experiential education, supported by aligned innovations in assessment and more flexible pathways and qualifications.

The pandemic has revealed the need for substantial changes in the economic models of HED systems and institutions to increase their resilience. Systems with higher proportions of public funding have shown that they were less vulnerable to health and economic crises. The pandemic has also stressed that strong IT infrastructure and comprehensive financial aid programmes are indispensable to foster inclusion.

4. In 2020 alone, HED was projected to experience higher dropout than any other education level and a 3.5 per cent decline in enrolment, resulting in 7.9 million fewer students. UN Secretary-General warns of education catastrophe UNESCO. [Press Release No.2020-73](#)

Section 2.

UNESCO's vision of higher education

Since its inception as the specialized United Nations (UN) agency for education and the one mandated to address HED issues, UNESCO promotes **education as an indivisible part of universally [recognized human rights](#)**. The agency works with the whole UN system to develop a clear comprehension of a rights-based perspective on social issues and its implications. Changes in the global landscape reinforce calls for a rights-based approach and what this entails under the current circumstances.

The right to education is not restricted to compulsory or fundamental schooling primarily designed for minors, as it is **a right to be exerted along the whole life cycle** and that comprises different ways of catering for the educational needs of youth and adults, including HED. Since human rights are universal, our attention is drawn to the high levels of social inequality that impact on and are reproduced by educational systems. UNESCO sees HED provision as an activity aimed at favouring equity and the equal distribution of opportunities for all as expressed in the SDG target 4.3, which addresses access to varied forms of post-secondary education.

But inequality is not the sole major issue we face today. The extensive use of fossil fuels, the high levels of consumerism, and the development of powerful technologies have affected the world in a way that is also compromising its **sustainability**. HED can contribute in many areas to address these challenges and ensuring HEIs are guided by these public needs is of paramount importance.

HED is concerned with three major social missions: **producing knowledge** through scientific research, **educating people**, in the broad sense of the word, paying particular attention to knowledge and skills required for professional life, and being **socially responsible** which is integral to HED, not an optional addition. HEI's public duties are intertwined with the first two missions but also go beyond them, and those duties translate into specific social outreach actions relevant to the contexts where each institution operates.

Knowledge production, educating people and social responsibility are the three core missions of HED. These are interconnected, serve the public interest, and are best achieved through initiative and creativity, unfettered by particular agendas. These tasks have an impact on our societies at large that ranges from improving economic prospects for individuals, families, and communities up to enabling more sustainable ways of addressing planetary issues.

HEIs make important contributions to **knowledge production** via scientific research, but they are not the only player in that field. Disciplinary specialization has enabled major achievements, but some of the educational experiences HEIs provide have become too instrumentalist and focused on disciplinary concerns. There is a risk of losing sight of the overarching nature of any educational experience, especially when specialization comes early in the student's educational trajectory and when disciplinary knowledge is prioritised over pedagogical dimension.

While valuable, disciplinary specialization is not enough to tackle the many complex issues that require transdisciplinary approaches and an ability to think and work with inputs from diverse disciplinary perspectives. Academic traditions need to be open and in dialogue with other epistemic traditions, with logical argumentation and rigorous scrutiny of evidence as essential elements in producing reliable knowledge.

Most students look for professional education when they enrol in a HED programme. We should acknowledge major transformations in the ways we understand educational experience, leaving behind an industrial model centred on 'transmitting' information and knowledge. Societal changes highlight the need for **well-rounded professionals who are also fully-fledged citizens in a complex and interrelated world, and able to cooperatively address complex issues**.

Social responsibility in HED should not be understood exclusively in relation to ‘additional’ activities that some members of the community in HEIs conduct, but as embedded within the ethos of HED. Paying attention to local needs, and undertaking specific activities aimed at tackling societal problems, are integral to this task. Given the public character of education, knowledge production, professional education, and institutional dynamics should be guided by a larger social agenda. This explains why HEIs cannot afford to ignore major contemporary issues like inequity and sustainability. These concerns must translate into institutional practices that honour human-rights principles (for instance, gender equity internal policies, ensuring diversity of perspectives in each programme, or policies regarding the protection of free speech and inquiry).

UNESCO acknowledges that HED is carried out by **institutions**, which result from human actions and are as diverse as these actions can be. This is visible in the diversity of designations institutions adopt – universities, applied sciences universities, polytechnic institutions, colleges, schools, institutes, fine arts schools, etc. –⁵ and in the different ways they approach HED missions. Some are focused on professional education, while others combine professional education with knowledge-production-oriented activities; some are more concerned with their local settings, while others project themselves into the global arena; some are more conventionally organized, while others have adopted flexible operational schemes; some are led by disciplinary activities, while others are more problem-oriented, etc. Within each HED institution, programmes also vary in these regards. One fundamental attribute of a renewed vision of HED will be to recognise and value the **diversity of institutional arrangements and foci**.

Some HEIs are more clearly aware and committed to their public duties, while others may have agendas that can veil or undermine their public responsibilities. It is crucial that public debates on HED are informed, from the onset, by a clear statement about the universal right to education as a public issue. The future demands that we foreground HED’s public responsibilities.

Finally, HED can perpetuate structures that prevent people from fully developing their interests and capabilities or that arbitrarily assume that some professional endeavours are of greater worth, or that some disciplines are ‘superior’ to others. These divides not only limit educational opportunities but also impoverish our societies by disregarding important manifestations of human activity – like the performing and fine arts, the humanities, ethics, sports, crafts, etc.

In sum, UNESCO sees HED today as an integral part of the right to education and a public good. This public good character is translated into HEIs carrying out their three missions – produce relevant knowledge, educate well-rounded professionals, and behave with social responsibility– and enacting democratic principles and values. HED ought to become an integrated system where its diversity contributes to create different and flexible pathways for youth and adults without reinforcing closed niches of unequal opportunities. For this to be the case, HEIs should transcend disciplinary, professional, epistemic, reputational, and institutional frontiers. The aim is to enrich educational opportunities, foster professional excellence in any field, and cultivate fully-fledged citizens committed to social justice and sustainability.

5. Regardless of these labels, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which is focused on contents and not on institutional arrangements, identifies four levels of tertiary education that include ‘what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education’. UNESCO/UIS. (2013, paragraph 200). International Standard Classification of Education. ISCED 2011. Montreal: UNESCO/UIS.

Section 3.

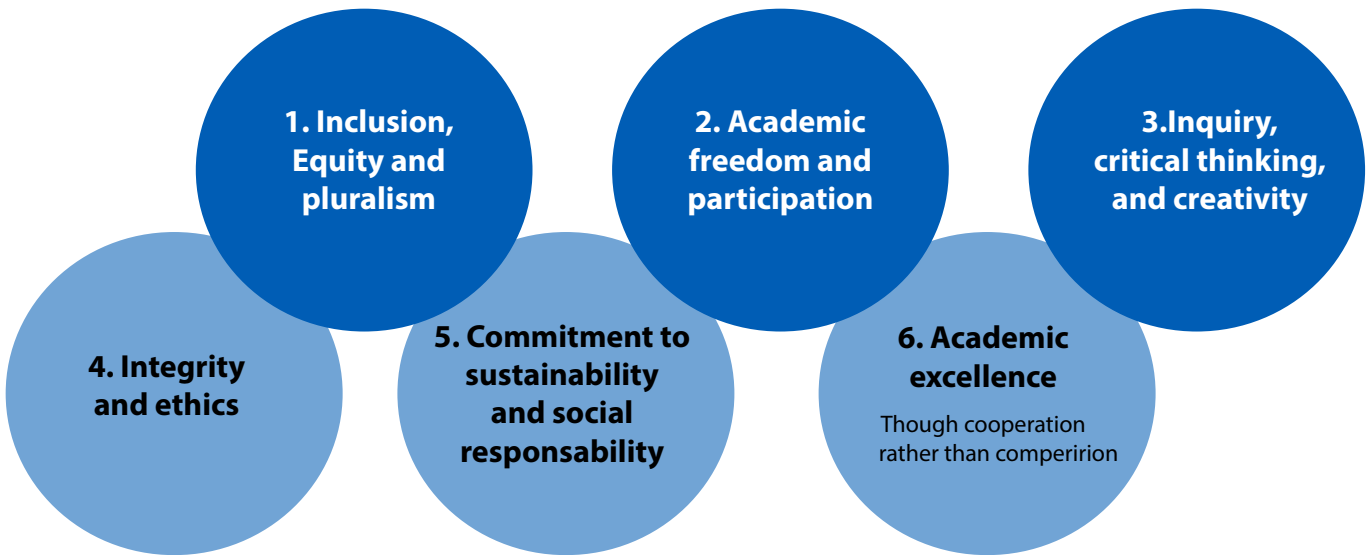
Principles to shape the future



This 3rd World Higher Education Conference is an opportunity to strengthen synergies between all relevant stakeholders and improve the contribution of the HED sector to sustainable development. HED must not only match high academic standards but also be inclusive and collaborative, inter-cultural and international, interdisciplinary, and fully committed to environmental sustainability and social progress. It should provide a safe space that fosters empathy, tolerance, ethical behaviours, critical thinking, and creativity. HEIs need to assess where they stand and the key milestones towards these desired features. They should develop and use effective tools to monitor and assess progress, receive feedback from stakeholders, be self-critical, and always strive for self-improvement.

Under the overarching framework of being a component of the right to education and fulfilling a public good mission aligned with the SDGs, HED systems and institutions can be guided by six key principles as they look towards 2030, building a new social contract for higher education as proposed by the [Futures of Education Report](#) (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Principles to shape the future of higher education



3.1. Inclusion, equity, and pluralism

Equity in access and success at the HED level cannot be seen as a luxury or an afterthought. Achieving greater inclusion and promoting pluralism in HED is a strong social justice imperative, an objective reflected in target 4.3 of the SDGs about 'equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education.' Countries and institutions must accelerate efforts to remove the financial and non-monetary barriers to quality HED for all learners, giving priority to vulnerable groups. Effective education and training systems where opportunities are equally distributed are the basis for sustainable development and the construction of fair, peaceful, and democratic societies. They also need to flexibly respond to an increasingly diverse student population and be organized to allow for upward mobility in the education system (e.g., through articulation between TVET and HED, or between community colleges and universities).

3.2. Academic freedom and participation of all stakeholders

As UNESCO celebrates the 25th anniversary of the 1997 *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-education Teaching Personnel*, academic freedom is under pressure in an increasing number of countries and territories, as evidenced by the negative trends in [the academic freedom index](#). One of the key missions of HED is to uphold the academic tradition of free and fair inquiry and debate. This has been undermined by authoritarianism and populist attacks on 'political correctness.' HEIs are well-placed to offer a safe space to present and assess a diversity of views and engage with society in public debates on complex issues. It is essential to protect the academic freedom of staff and students from political interference. This requires a high degree of institutional autonomy and self-governance and an adequate balance between autonomy and public accountability. Self-governance is important to guarantee a collegial approach to decision-making and academic management.

3.3. Inquiry, critical thinking, and creativity

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of scientific evidence to drive public policy and save human lives. In a world where fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories abound, critical thinking is essential. HEIs have a unique responsibility to teach how to distinguish real evidence from fabricated information and to apply knowledge to problem-solving in every walk of life. Truth-seeking skills should be at the core of every curriculum at every educational level, including in HED. HED has the power to enhance creativity, ignite imagination, and promote divergent thinking, preparing students to find innovative solutions that address the global challenges faced by our society and planet. A key mission for educators is to help their students find passion and purpose.

3.4. Integrity and ethics

Professional education in HED is not only about knowledge and skills acquisition. HEIs must place a strong emphasis on ethical values and behaviours to promote honesty, tolerance, and solidarity. This goes far beyond courses on ethical practice and conduct. Positive values should permeate all academic programmes and be installed inside the DNA of the institutional culture of all HEIs. All graduates should be prepared to become professionals who are agents of social responsibility, champions of sustainability and citizens longing for social justice. Further, the role of HED in promoting the integrity and trustworthiness of Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms is increasingly important. This view includes a commitment to ensure that AI systems work for the good of individuals, societies, and the environment, and embody fundamental values and ethical principles⁶. Above all, HED leaders, administrators and academics must lead by example, demonstrating ethical behaviours in the management of HEI and the conduct of teaching and research.

6. UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137>

3.5. Commitment to sustainability and social responsibility

Through educational programmes, research projects, and engagements with local, national, regional, and global communities, all HEIs can contribute actively to building a more sustainable world. This is central to the development of the green economy and societal well-being. Research-intensive universities should find the right balance between pursuing 'blue sky' research, necessary for ground-breaking scientific advances, and undertaking applied research driven by the need to solve real-life problems and address the local and global challenges embodied in the seventeen SDGs.

3.6. Excellence through cooperation rather than competition

International rankings and national league tables have exacerbated a harsh competition between institutions. Yet solidarity and collaboration are core HED values. These are the essence of academic collegiality, fostering the exchange of ideas, mobility of researchers, and partnerships. Universities and other types of HEIs can perform their educational missions more effectively through cooperation and solidarity. This helps work in an interdisciplinary manner, pool scientific resources across academic units and institutions, share knowledge and experience through professional networks at the national and international level to achieve synergies. Collaboration between HEIs and scientific communities can be stimulated through public policies.

Section 4.

Reinventing higher education

'Business as usual' is neither sufficient nor acceptable to ensure that people fully exert their right to higher education within free, peaceful, and fair societies. UNESCO urgently calls for substantive changes that help with reimagining our futures and defining clear paths for improving educational experiences and outcomes for all. These paths must involve all stakeholders, starting with students and teachers, but also including HEIs, policymakers, international organizations, development partners, the private sector, civil society, youth organizations, social movements, local communities. They should all be involved in substantive debates on the diverse ways HED should move forward.

Based on UNESCO's vision and the principles outlined above, this roadmap identifies six major challenges that need to be overcome in reinventing HED. These include the following transitions and transformations:

- From viewing HED as elitist, discriminatory, and sometimes alienated from its public tasks, to enabling people's rights to HED, through equitable, funded and sustainable access.
- From a restrictive focus on disciplinary or professional training to a holistic student learning experience.
- From disciplinary silos to inter- and trans- disciplinary, open dialogue and active collaboration among diverse perspectives.
- From assuming HED comes immediately after secondary education to a lifelong learning approach aimed at serving the diverse education needs of youth and adults.
- From a hierarchical and weakly connected archipelago of institutions and programmes to an integrated system with diversity of programmes and flexible learning pathways connecting them so as to enlarge the educational opportunities for youth and adults and avoid dead ends.
- From an industrial model of schooling to pedagogically informed and technologically enriched higher learning experiences where learners manage their own learner pathways.

4.1. Equitable and sustainable access to HED

Learning is an essential attribute of human species, and people are entitled to educational opportunities that guarantee their right to learn. To make this a reality in policy and practice means addressing access, equity and non-discrimination, financing and governance.

Access. It has been traditionally assumed that access to HED cannot be universal and, therefore, admission criteria are required to restrict access. The usual filters have been based on academic merit or capacity, but this solution has proven problematic. In unequal societies, merit, or capacity, as many different countries have shown, tends to be inequality in disguise. If educational systems (starting from early childhood programmes on) are not able to compensate for disparities or, even worse, contribute to reproducing or amplifying them, those who access HED already belong to the most privileged groups in society. If admission to HED does not pay attention to social inequality, it ends up excluding those with talent and merit who were born into underprivileged households. This leads to the reproduction of disparities and reduces chances for social mobility.

In addition, existing ways of understanding merit or talent are not necessarily sensitive to the different abilities that people might have and are often focused on academic performance, operationalized in restrictive and formal terms (e.g., through high stakes exams).

Access criteria and procedures should challenge this restrictive view of (academic) merit. We need to address the marginalization of underprivileged populations, attending to the social injustices of past and current practices, from the very beginning of their schooling trajectory. If we take into account that: (i) life expectancy has increased and will continue to do so, (ii) socio-economic conditions are complex and dynamic, so that people have educational needs at very different moments in life, (iii) full maturity is achieved much later in life than we used to believe, (iv) demographic changes are modifying the profile of our populations, and (v) that there is no need to assume that HED provision is limited to full-time programmes aimed at young people who have just graduated from secondary education, then there is no reason to limit access to HED rather than open it to everyone. These constraints prevent open access from being a reality, and they need to be addressed.

Prioritising equity and non-discrimination can transform every aspect of the HED experience. Starting with admission policies, it can address the distribution of students by programmes and fields of study – for instance, women’s participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programmes–, types of institutions (from less prestigious to elitist), organization of the educational experiences (for instance, segregating students based on a given criterion that leads to foster unequal treatment), and institutional practices. While many countries have already implemented affirmative action policies aimed at diverse vulnerable groups, there is much more to do, especially if equity and non-discrimination are integrated into legal regulations, policies, and institutional cultures and not something managed as an ‘add-on’. For example, having a compulsory course on ‘gender equity’ would have weak or no impact if institutional gender discrimination remains, and women do not have equal access to leadership positions or teaching career opportunities within HEIs. The same applies when institutional actions to support diverse vulnerable groups like people with disabilities, refugees, etc are not mainstreamed.

Everyone should have the right to have their HED qualifications evaluated in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner, whether for further study and employment. This includes vulnerable groups, such as refugees and displaced persons, who may be lacking documentary evidence of their qualifications. Recognition facilitates international academic mobility, which promotes the circulation of knowledge and research among education systems, thereby also supporting inter-institutional cooperation and the development of a global HED ecosystem. This is particularly important given the pressure placed on HEI from increased enrolment, which has almost doubled in the past 15 years and is set to double again by 2030, as well as growing numbers of internationally mobile students.

National policies, international frameworks, and institutional regulations should be designed to ensure that equity and non-discrimination concerns are key components of the HED experience. HEIs should ensure that people have equitable access to quality education as embodied in the curriculum, knowledge production, their interaction with their communities, and institutional life.

Financing. HED usually requires more per capita resources than those needed at the previous levels of education. At the same time, HED is expanding, and it is expected to continue to do so. Therefore, the coming years will witness a difficult situation: ensuring proper funding while upholding high standards in every form of HED appears as particularly challenging, and the equity-related risks associated to this situation are significant.

Over the past decades, diverse financing schemes have been implemented, revealing several problems that must be tackled. At one end, we have free HED for all, which very few countries can afford. It means that funding comes exclusively from taxpayers, which can lead, especially when tied to strict admission barriers, to subsidising the more privileged. At the other end, direct cost-recovery from households and students often translates into financial barriers for the poor and a high debt burden for those relying on loans, which can reinforce inequalities.

There is no universal or simple solution to the financing challenges. Every country must find a balance between what is funded with (limited) taxpayers' money and what can be reasonably expected from better-off households and students, especially in contexts with high-income disparities and low levels of direct taxation. To face these challenges, proper attention must be given to the facts that: (i) talent and merit are present in diverse forms and admission mechanisms that are not equity-informed can simply reproduce inequality; (ii) funding schemes could also operate as admission barriers leading to exclusion and/or socio-economic segregation that, in turn, have undermining effects for democracy and social cohesion; (iii) private funding should not be exclusively tied to household or individual contributions, businesses can also contribute in several ways in relation to both professionally or academically-oriented HED.

More countries could adopt 'targeted free tuition', whereby the poorest 40 to 60 percent of the student population get free HED while students from the wealthiest households are expected to contribute tuition fees. This approach can be financially sustainable in the long term and ensures cross-subsidies from the richest groups in society to the poorest segments.

Governance. Institutional mechanisms that guarantee that HEIs pay due attention to the public nature of education are crucial. While autonomy is an essential for the free exercise of teaching staff's professional expertise, and for the free pursuit of knowledge, it should not be synonymous with avoiding accountability to the public ends proper to all educational institutions, including the efficient and effective use of public resources. This issue cannot be solely left to the goodwill of those involved in the provision of educational services. Any well-performing system needs checks and balances to ensure that public ends prevail over private interests, and that public resources are invested with transparency and in the best possible way.

4.2. Prioritising a holistic student learning experience

Traditionally, we have identified two different aspects of HED: the academic and the professional. The first one has been associated with a disciplinary organization of programmes where emphasis is given to theoretical and research practices. The second is linked to professional skills and employability objectives (how to do what a given practitioner does).

While these two aspects are integral to HED, educational experiences are never restricted individually or separately to each one but are about personal development in general. Educating people should never be narrowly focused. Education is based on human interactions within institutional settings that instantiate values, habits, and practices that go well beyond the explicit contents attached to academic and professional training. HEIs need to think of themselves as being, in the first place, **educational institutions**, ensuring every student can undergo a rich and diverse learning experience (not exclusively restricted to the discipline or the instrumental components of the professional practice) that fosters democratic values and the richness of the humans.

It is imperative that HEI ensure the inclusion of **expert educational and pedagogic knowledge** in all their programmes. Teaching or assessing practices as developed by disciplinary experts are not always aligned with these educational intentions and the importance of a rich educational experience for students.

For HED to enhance student's learning, it should include educational experiences and activities not linked solely to a particular discipline or professional practice. Students need to be exposed to a humanistic educational experience that prioritises curiosity, humanism, and ethical development. These elements are not only valuable by themselves and contribute to social life in general, but they are also required for a holistic academic and professional life. This is shown by the increasing emphasis on so-called 'soft-skills' that are expected in the labour market.

4.3. Inter- and intra- disciplinary: Open dialogue between diverse perspectives

HED institutions and programmes have tended to be structured around disciplinary specialization. That can diminish the overarching nature of educational experiences and limit abilities to address complex issues, or foster dialogues among different knowledge traditions.

While specialization contributes to achieve major progress in each of the fields, complex problems (like those affecting the contemporary world in areas as diverse as sustainability, energy-provision, the operation of extractive industries, justice, peace, trade, etc.) require comprehensive approaches that are informed not only by different perspectives (interdisciplinary dialogue), but also by the integration of those perspectives in a transdisciplinary manner (see [EGU2030 Report](#)). HED should equip students with the capabilities to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and the foundations, attitudes, and habits to humbly acknowledge and transcend the limits of their own disciplines and specialization fields. For this purpose, inter- and transdisciplinary education is an area that needs to be reinforced.

The diversity of perspectives is not limited to academic fields or professional areas of practice; it is also related to differences in cultural views and traditions. To some extent, HED has been built upon a unique model of thinking that prioritizes an instrumental relationship with nature. This has partly led to the current climate and sustainability crisis. These views have disregarded other knowledge traditions that, for instance, have promoted a more caring and healthier relationship with our planet. It is urgent that HED becomes open to every cultural and academic tradition and learns from them.

4.4. Lifelong learning approach to serve youth and adults

The assumption that HED is a step in a ladder that comes immediately after secondary education cannot be sustained. HED is already changing as more countries are offering opportunities for multiple entry and re-entry. Certification programmes exist side-by-side not only with structured studies leading to an academic degree, but also with a vast variety of programmes organized in diverse ways and aimed at different populations through onsite, in-house, hybrid and remote modalities. Short courses and micro-credentials are gaining ground internationally. There is no reason to see these programmes as supplementary. They are a vital way to tackle the educational needs of adults at different stages of their personal and professional lives.

It is also sensible to see education systems in terms of the population they serve (and not in terms of what they deliver) and the evolving needs of students over their life cycle. Compulsory or basic education (from pre-school up to upper secondary) can be primarily seen as education for minors, while HED can be understood as a key component of **education for youth and adults**⁷ including those in charge of minors' education. It also produces educational contents and methods in general, so HEI are embedded in the whole system which, in turn, requires coherence. Adopting a **lifelong learning** perspective and offering flexible learning pathways provide a coherent and richer framework to address the learning needs of human beings.

7. That also include remedial programmes for those who could not complete basic education when they were younger.

4.5. Integrated system with programme diversity and flexible learning pathways

HED is made of diverse types of institutions offering a great variety of programmes. Some lead to academic degrees, others to professional certifications, others to degrees with a major professional component, others respond to specific training demands, some are organized relying on remote provision, etc. While this diversity enables a responsiveness to the needs of students, the economy and society at large, it also creates a problematic situation when the HED system is not organized in an articulated manner. Too often various types of institutions and programmes and programme-orientations are conceived and operate as silos with no linkages with other parts of the system restricting mobility among them.

One major problem that underlies this situation is a hierarchical view of occupations and types of institutions. For many, academic work in elitist universities has an intrinsically higher value than other forms of more applied learning and training activities. In some cases, some academic disciplines are considered as more valuable than others. While there is no way to reasonably justify and sustain that hierarchy, the operation of many institutions and groups is predicated on it.

This hierarchical view has relegated the fine and performing arts, sports, and technological and vocational programmes to a lower relative position. At the same time, the humanities (which are essential for any educational experience) and, in some cases, the social sciences, have been undermined. Moreover, non-academic programmes (like those that are more professionally or practice-oriented) are seen as a sort of second-class form of HED.

The strength of HED systems is built on the fact that HEI are diverse. While some institutions are more focused on knowledge production, others prioritize professional education or have programmes that are more professionally or more academically oriented. While all these options are required to meet the learning and training needs of our societies, we need to ensure that they are not provided in a way that prevents us to use what we learnt in one programme to promote our learning experiences in another type of institution or programme. Recognition mechanisms (including recognition of informal and non-formal learning, non-traditional learning modalities and experiential learning) as well as the possibility of transfers among institutions and programmes need to be fostered through effective qualifications frameworks, standards and principles for practice, assessment mechanisms. Regulatory provisions that limit flexible pathways and articulation among programmes and institutions need to be abolished.

4.6. Technology in support of effective teaching, learning and research

The next phase of technological advances involving digital devices and communications is likely to accelerate, enhance and transform ongoing innovations in curricular, pedagogical and assessment practices. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, collaborative platforms, virtual reality, internet of things, and distributional ledger technology, offer promising ways of improving and enriching the learning experience of students on campus and remotely. They are also powerful tools to open new research avenues, including those for interdisciplinary research, and they can also have an important transformative impact on reshaping disciplinary work as it is the case of what is currently known as **digital humanities**. Yet technology is not a miraculous solution, but a platform in support of innovative teaching, learning, and research approaches. Using advanced technologies requires a new mindset among faculty members and adequate training. Advanced information and communication technologies require new configurations of physical infrastructure (active learning classrooms, design studios, etc.) that are more suitable for innovative teaching and learning methods.

Section 5.

Navigating towards 2030 and beyond

To reinvent themselves, HED systems and institutions need renewed thinking, dialogue, decisions, and actions. We call on all stakeholders – within or linked to HED- to endorse UNESCO’s vision (section 2) and consider or adopt the driving principles and features identified in sections 3 and 4.

The process of reinventing HED must be open to transformations in diverse arenas: from restructuring policy, to reshaping organizational priorities and agendas, and engaging those who want to share values, thoughts, sentiments, and actions to build better futures for their own local context and the world. Through their three main missions, HEI must fulfil their public duties by contributing to build societies that overcome challenges derived from the current, evolving landscape (section 1). HED should contribute to eliminating all expressions of destruction and violence - either natural or societal-, cultivating human ethics and respect for diversity and pluralism, and ensuring sustainability, fairness, and peace in the world, with an eye on present and future generations and especially on those who face disadvantageous or vulnerable situations.

The WHEC2022 is an opportunity to **deepen a global conversation** through common democratic values and commitment to public ends for HED to build together shared futures in a single global ecosystem: safer, more just, more democratic, and more sustainable. At the same time, we also create spaces for diversity and pluralism through local - and even institutional- roadmaps. Local groups (in regions, countries, or institutions) should assess their own landscape and challenges – vis-à-vis the features of a shared global roadmap- and define their own priorities, goals, and routes of actions to reach those goals.

To move forward, we must keep a sense of urgency: either we do things now or humanity and the planet can end up facing an abyss. As a start, we propose some practical approaches to make progress, turning dialogue into action and results:

- Ambitious targets and carefully monitoring progress towards them
- Quality assurance and continuous improvement in HED
- Flexible learning pathways, recognition, mobility, and internationalization
- Research on and innovation in HED associated with capacity development
- Renewed production, dissemination, and use of HED data
- A global conversation on and collaboration in HED
- International cooperation to support by shared goals
- A timeline for the upcoming years

5.1. Ambitious targets and carefully monitoring progress towards them

[SDG 4](#) already defines specific targets for the education sector, including HED. The targets that need special mention in the context of HED institutions and systems are: 4.3 (equal access to all types of HED programmes), 4.4 (relevant skills for employment, decent job and entrepreneurship), 4.5 (inclusion: gender, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, children in vulnerable situations), 4.7 (learning for sustainable development and global citizenship), 4a (effective, inclusive learning environment), 4b (scholarships for developing countries, particularly small islands and African countries) and 4c (roles of teaching staff in learning, research and community outreach).

The WHEC2022 can become a stepping-stone to leap towards expanding and deepening progress toward the desirable goals for HED, bearing in mind two deadlines: 2030 (deadline for the 2030 development agenda) and 2050 (target year proposed by the Futures of Education Report). One direction to deepen targets is to determine what else should be monitored regarding the role of HED in the context of the whole education system and its contribution to the 17 SDGs, as approached, for example, by the EGU2030 Report. Another direction is to look at year 2050, by keeping in mind UNESCO's vision (section 2) as well as the driving principles and features proposed above for a reinvented HED (sections 3 and 4).

5.2. Quality assurance and continuous improvement in HED

Under a diverse and rapidly changing HED scenario, the efforts to ensure continuous improvement remains important. However, it is inappropriate to look for a one-size-fits-all approach for quality assurance. Acknowledging the diversity of the academic offer and associated learning paths is crucial to have a meaningful understanding of quality and its assurance. Quality assurance systems need to embrace the diversity of provisions and highlight the relevance and recognition of credentials as a key dimension for measurement.

At the same time, quality assurance mechanisms can be important levers for HED change. For that to be the case, they should help in making visible the areas where change is particularly urgent; for example: (i) embracing a paradigm shift according to which all types of learning complement and supplement each other, (ii) normalizing and recognizing flexible learning pathways supported by relevant and credible structures (meaningful and practicable workloads) that are also required for alternative provisions, (iii) diversity in curricular development focusing on learning gains and not being restricted to disciplinary skills but reinforce the deep meaning of an educational experience and the development of transferable skills, (iv) working with the faculty members to enable them to be more focused on student's learning than on teaching and make them able to connect both academic concerns with real-life problems, (v) institutional management that sustains regular, meaningful and significant connections with stakeholders and uphold the public interest agenda, (vi) develop the regulatory frameworks that facilitate the integration and articulation among the different ways HED is provided; (vii) integrate relevant content and practices for teaching and research and connect them with systematically with social responsibility.

5.3. Flexible learning pathways, recognition, mobility, and internationalization

The evolving landscape of HED is leading to a greater diversity of academic programs and the need to provide flexible learning pathways through recognition of all types of learning. Increased international student mobility has led to a 'second generation' of UNESCO regional recognition conventions as well as the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications. Countries should recognize the importance of their ratification and implementation of these conventions, creating tools to support recognition, mobility, and cooperation. The [Global Conventions](#) complements the regional conventions, supporting recognition and cooperation between the world's regions. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQRP) and, in other regions, the UNESCO Qualifications Passport (UQP), will facilitate [recognition for refugees and vulnerable migrants](#). High-quality virtual student mobility and cross-border provision will be integral to new and more environmentally sustainable forms of internationalization, recognizing that the future will be a hybrid mix of both physical and virtual mobility.

5.4. Research on and innovation in HED associated with capacity development

Few research centres focus on HED as their object of study, and most of these are attached to universities in the richest industrial countries. One of the tasks to be undertaken after the WHEC2022 – with support from international donors, governments, the private sector, youth organizations, and civil society- would be to encourage and support countries and a select number of HEI in the developing world to create or strengthen specialized research centres focusing on HED issues and policies and offer capacity development programmes to support academic leaders. As a first step, they could be organized around the existing UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks and provisioning financial and technical resources for research and development in their respective areas.

Such centres are necessary as HEI and systems have become large and complex, requiring innovative leadership, effective frameworks for decision-making, and experienced management. These centres should conduct research and policy analysis that is distinct from new public management, which tends to analyse universities and other HEI as if they were meant to operate just like any other business organization. It is essential to recognize the public good mission and the specificity of HEI that function as communities of scholars and researchers, and they have benefited from a long tradition of shared governance and self-management. The proposed research centres would contribute to develop a relevant body of knowledge to provide HED systems and institutions with adequate policy guidance to ensure that they are steered and managed in an effective manner to serve the needs of society and support the SDGs.

In line with the [2021 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science](#) and a commitment to 'openness', not just to knowledge but also to society as a whole, HEIs will increasingly be encouraging open science. This will need coordination with national science academies and associations of early-career researchers such as young academies. Changes in current research cultures, and the importance of sharing, collaborating, and engaging with other researchers and society, will need to be considered in reviewing research assessment and career evaluation systems. This will help align them with the principles of open science (i.e., transparency, scrutiny, critique and reproducibility, equality of opportunities, responsibility, respect, and accountability; collaboration, participation, and inclusion; flexibility and sustainability).

5.5. Renewed production, dissemination, and use of HED data

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- The importance of a lifelong learning perspective in HED, given demographic changes and the trends questioning the assumption that HED only occurs right after completing secondary education. Data on participation within HED is not always collected by age, inhibiting an understanding of the participation of mature students. Moreover, predominant household surveys may not collect data on current attendance or exclude adult populations from associated survey items.
- The importance of ensuring high-quality production of data at country level, which in turn is affected by institutional priorities and capacities of all HEIs (public, private, others) to systematically produce, process and use data. Relevant disaggregation for international analysis (income, ethnicity, age, etc.) requires consistent disaggregation at country level.
- The emergence of more flexible and diverse ways of providing and awarding HED qualifications, including micro-credentials; a stronger presence of remote provision; a diversity of orientation programmes (academic, professional, a mixture, skills-oriented, etc.); and the need to ensure that any educational experience goes beyond narrowed objectives to shape our development as human beings and citizens of the world.

- The attention to international mobility and the issues pertaining to recognition of studies, notably information sharing and data exchange on HED systems as stipulated in UNESCO's regional and global conventions on recognition of qualifications concerning HED.
- The balance between disciplinarity inter- and trans- disciplinarity, given the complexity of the world and the corresponding labour-associated demands which are increasingly focused on having well-rounded individuals and responsible citizens.
- The imperative to systematically and globally address how to ensure that knowledge and data to produce it are both openly accessible. In most instances, scientific research is funded with public resources and therefore, there is no reason for its results not to be publicly available.
- The value of blockchain and other Web3 technologies, which provide a paradigm shift for higher education, as they may empower individuals to control their own learning and employment data.

5.6. Global conversations on and collaboration in HED

Dialogue on HED policies, programmes and practices is a basic platform to learn, break paradigms and build shared purposes and ways to make them happen. The WHEC2022 aims to promote a global dialogue on HED based on the exchange of knowledge and practice, in a context of diversity and pluralism. The challenge for all stakeholders – within or connected to HED – is to manage different views (sometimes conflicting views) constructively, cultivate common goals and develop ways to collaborate. Dialogue and collaboration should strengthen synergies within neighbouring countries and regions, but -given the opportunities provided by technology - also connect people worldwide as the basis for creating global citizenship based on shared human values and futures.

All stakeholders with knowledge, experience and shared values to improve HED must be engaged: university authorities; research and teaching staff; students and youth organizations, members of professional networks, experts working in research (within and outside HED), governmental authorities and policy makers (within countries or intergovernmental organizations); leaders of community service programmes; representatives of international organizations and development banks and donors; the private sector and foundations; professional associations; civil society groups; local communities, social organizations, social movements, environmental organizations, groups representing minorities.

Informed, effective, constructive dialogue and genuine collaboration among relevant and diverse stakeholders must be an ongoing activity. Evidence-based exchange among diverse stakeholders strengthen the potential of dialogue. Traditionally, conversation has been tied to physical and temporal co-presence and the emergence of communication mechanisms that can overcome physical distances has transformed that in radical ways. Today, and especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote exchange based on digital media has spread exponentially and allowed for communication among HED stakeholders regardless of their geographical location. Key aspects enabling exchange include use of common languages, management of diverse time zones and sharing common interests. However, we should not overlook differences in time zones that affect communication to some extent and, especially, we need to ensure fair dynamics where every language (and culture) can participate with its own voice.

Numerous initiatives have taken place in recent months. For example, UNESCO supported the preparation and launch of the [EGU2030 Report](#) (February 2022), focused on HED and the [SDGs](#); the work of Technical Expert Group (TEG), whose members prepared background documents on the main themes of the Conference, and the rollout of the series of [HED online conversations](#) also closely linked to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning HED. In addition, relevant consultation activities have been led by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean ([IESALC](#)), the University of the Future Network (UFN) and the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), in the framework of the WHEC2022. Other dialogue initiatives have been promoted by international organizations such as the International Association of Universities (IAU), the UN Academic Impact (UNAI) and the World Access to Higher Education Day (WAHED), and others. To these spaces of dialogue there are other ongoing efforts and achievements like those of the UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks programme – present in all regions of the world. Dialogue should take place at global, region, and country levels.

5.7. International cooperation to support shared goals

International cooperation is a means to ensure that HED institutions and systems become more effective to ensure the right to quality education and contribute to sustainable societies. International allocation of resources should aim at strengthening multiple forms partnerships (among diverse stakeholders connected to HED), networking among individuals and organizations, and capacity building to sustain efforts and outcomes beyond specific projects. HED systems need to develop policy frameworks, resources, and capacities for international opportunities. HEIs should integrate international cooperation as a cross-cutting dimension into their programs and organizational units. Key aspects of cooperation include rethinking institutional goals to face the major global challenges presented above, a shared commitment among all parties involved (within and outside HEIs), effective program development (for training, research, social responsibility), and accountability.

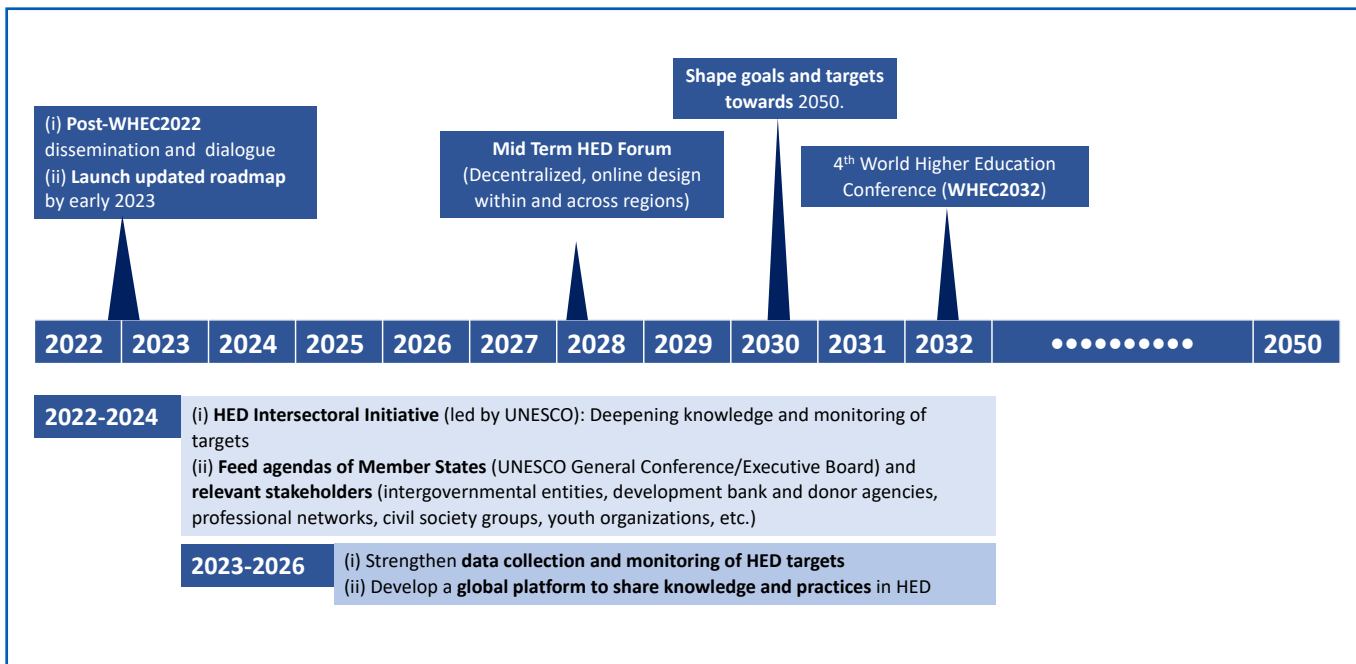
5.8. A timeline for the upcoming years

Finally, to phase future steps and provide concrete opportunities for boosting commitments and actions to keep moving towards reinventing HED, this roadmap proposes to launch the following major initiatives (see figure 2):

- **2022:** (i) Develop post-conference initiatives to disseminate the results of the WHEC2022 and further promote dialogue at the country, regional and global levels. (ii) Launch an updated version of the HED Roadmap by early 2023.
- **2022-2025:** (i) Design and activate a HED Intersectoral Initiative led by UNESCO to monitor progress towards the SDG 4 targets, the contribution of HEI to all SDGs, in connection with the SD4 global cooperation mechanism and the renewed purposes of HED towards the year 2050 objectives. (ii) Channel mechanisms to feed the agendas of Member States (through the UNESCO General Conference and Executive Board) and interested organizations (intergovernmental entities, development bank and donor agencies, professional networks, civil society groups, youth organizations).
- **2023-2026:** (i) Strengthen data collection and monitoring of HED targets actively involving the organizations processing and disseminating global data as well as data production systems in Member States. (ii) Develop a global platform (articulating regional efforts) to facilitate knowledge production and sharing of good practices.

- **2027:** Hold a Mid Term HED Forum (with an online, decentralized design that engage participants and promotes exchange and learning within and across regions) to revisit this roadmap, follow up progress and confirm or define priorities looking at years 2030 and 2050.
- **2030:** Shape the goals and targets for HED considering the futures of education and year 2050 objectives.
- **2032:** Hold the 4th World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2032).

Figure 2. Timeline for the upcoming years



BEYOND LIMITS

New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education

Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the Government of Spain, the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher education and opening doors to new, innovative, creative, and visionary conceptions that not only serve current agendas for sustainable development, but also pave the way for future learning communities that overcome barriers, speak to all and are inclusive of all lifelong learners.

The WHEC2022 promotes a global conversation nurtured by diverse narratives on higher education through various activities: generation and dissemination of knowledge; formulation of updated policy recommendations; identification and sharing of innovative practices; networking and strengthening of partnerships; broad participation of stakeholders at local and international levels (within and outside higher education systems: professors, researchers, youth, managers, authorities, policy makers, experts, entrepreneurs, social leaders, etc.); and development of renewed paths framed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and looking at the Futures of Education.

Section of Higher Education

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