THIRD WORLD HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE (WHEC2021)

Reinventing the Role & Place of Higher Learning for a Sustainable Future

The WHEC2021 is organised by UNESCO in close collaboration with the Government of Spain, the regional Government of Catalonia, the City Hall and the Regional Authority of Barcelona, and supported by the GUNi/ACUP (Global University Network for Innovation/ Catalan Association of Public Universities)

The New Learning Landscape for Higher Education

Our world today is characterised by rapidly changing economies as well as societal and environmental challenges that have direct impact on higher education (HED) systems. This unprecedented transformation is due, among other factors, to new modes of work, technological developments, demographic trends, massive migration.

The digital revolution – including the emergence of artificial intelligence, the rise of web-based education and training and big data developments – is disrupting all aspects of life and work.

Current scenarios for humans include polarisation of labour markets, creation of new jobs and destruction of others, unequal distribution of wealth and diverse forms of conflict, adversity, and uncertainty. Climate change is also affecting human livelihoods, while heightening vulnerabilities and deepening inequalities.

The recent crises derived from the COVID-19 pandemic have provoked major impacts on education systems world-wide, including higher education. Learning opportunities have been significantly disturbed in most countries, particularly for disadvantaged population.

Building on Progress

HED systems have dramatically changed in the last two decades. Since the 1st World Conference on Higher Education, the places, spaces, and modalities of higher learning have changed immeasurably.

The 1998 conference called upon Member States to find answers to emerging challenges to higher education and undertaking in-depth reforms to address them with urgency and relevance. Considerable progress was achieved in terms of greater attention to higher education as a responsibility of States.

A decade later, the Communiqué of the 2009 2nd World Conference demonstrated a commitment by all stakeholders to recognise higher education as a public good, and the major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and advancing research, innovation, and creativity.

Nevertheless, since 2009 there has been a growing acceptance and convergence on common criteria for quality assurance in higher education.

Higher Education in Rapidly Changing World

The globalisation of world's economies and a growing acceptance that knowledge societies need highly skilled and competent knowledge workers has led to the massification of HED systems with a dramatic increase in enrolment levels witnessed in all parts of the world. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, huge disparities within and across countries and regions remain, and social origin continues to be the main factor that influences participation in higher education.

The past decades' unprecedented increase of enrolment in higher education is also reflected in the mobility of students with the transition from an international university to a global campus of learners, faculty and researchers fast becoming a reality.

Since 2009, the quality and added value of higher education has been at the heart of international policy research and dialogue, with demands placed on systems and their organization to justify their relevance in a bewildering array of aspects including: what and how higher education institutions (HEIs) teach; what they research and for whom; how they use their resources and build governance and management structures; what are their outreach and partnerships with the industry; and to which extent their graduates are prepared to enter the labour markets at the level of their qualification(s) to make a meaningful contribution to national or regional development plans.

New ways of learning, highly diversified providers including the emergence of private providers, MOOCs, international joint degrees, cross-border higher education, transnational education, offshore education, and borderless education, as well as increasing academic mobility have direct implications on delivery, certifications, and quality assurance. The pressures to reform HED systemic policies and rethink institutional priorities has thus been immense.

Higher Education and the Sustainable Development Agenda

In the midst of disruptions undergone over the last two decades, the world adopted in 2015 a renewed global frame, as articulated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda was established in motion with the aim of "leaving no one behind" with inclusion and a shared prosperity as an overarching aspiration.

Education is central to this agenda. Specifically, SDG4 aims at ensuring that nations work to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In particular, target 4.3 is requiring equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. The sustainable financing of public HED provision is thus critical for safeguarding the equitable access to, and quality enhancement of, systems of higher learning and that adequately reflect the vital role that the sector plays in long-term national development strategies.

HED systems can contribute to the global agenda in two ways. The dual roles of preparing effective skilled labour and the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge for the construction of professional, institutional, and technological capacities, must be balanced by retaining the ethical and academic values that lie at the foundation of higher learning. HEIs must also address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population including adult learners, non-traditional students, graduates, refugees, and migrants.

The UNESCO Response

UNESCO has actively responded to these trends by revising its Regional Conventions on the Recognition of HED Qualifications and the proposal to its General Conference to adopt a Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education.

Action towards achieving each of the SDGs by the HED community and fostering international cooperation in higher education has been galvanized by the UNITWIN/ UNESCO Chairs Program of some 750 universities around the world addressing sustainable solutions to the global agenda via their targeting collective research and study programmes.

UNESCO has also called the Member States to see education as a continuum and adopt the principles of the right to education, i.e., "non-discrimination" and "equality of opportunities" in their policies and programmes in all educational levels. In this context, the Organization is also leading the Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants initiative, aimed at supporting access opportunities to higher education of migrants and refugees.

Looking beyond the 2030 horizon UNESCO has launched a new global initiative to foster international cooperation, rethink education and shape the future. The Futures of Education initiative aims at catalysing a global debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimagined in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. Higher education is central to this debate because of its research agenda and the important contribution of HED networks to the deliberation of the newly convened International Commission.

Conference Focus

All of the above points to a need for a new vision, a reinvention of what higher education will mean in the future. If higher education and the university were to be invented today – what would they look like? Who would participate and complete his/her higher education? How would participants learn? Where would they learn? What knowledge, skills, competencies, and values would they need to develop to work, become global citizens, and live with dignity? Who would guide these changes: institutional leaders, policy makers, researchers, students, professors, employers, community leaders, civil society groups?

The 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2021) will bring together all relevant stakeholders to define and prepare their roadmap for a new era of higher education systems and institutions. This roadmap will be responsive to the challenges faced by humanity and the planet, as a result of diverse forms of crises, with special attention to the global disruption created by the COVID-19. Furthermore, higher education must anticipate and prepare for its role in societies that go beyond the next decade, under guidelines like those provided by The Futures of Education Initiative, mentioned above.

The WHEC2021 aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher learning and opening the door to new, innovative, creative, and visionary conceptions that not only serve the current global agendas for sustainable development, but also pave the way for a future learning community that speaks to all, is inclusive of all lifelong learners.

An engaging WHEC2021 Program

The WHEC2021 programme will include the following key elements: generation of data, information & knowledge; formulation of updated policy recommendations; identification and dissemination of innovative practices; networking and strengthening of partnerships; broad participation of country stakeholders (highlighting diversity and inclusiveness of external/internal HED stakeholders, including youth); adoption of commitments and a HED Roadmap framed in the 2030 Agenda and The Futures of Education.

The programme will take advantage of digital technologies; hybrid delivery formats; and dynamical, engaging meetings (HED Talks, dialogue with active participation, hands-on sessions). Virtual communication will be a key to maximize global (synchronous, asynchronous) participation and face the potential effects of current COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge production, dialogue spaces and consultation activities will be developed throughout 2021. The Conference will take place in October 7-9, 2021, in the framework of a week focused on higher education, which will include side-events, informal meetings, and exhibitions (technology, innovation, good practices, arts, science, culture) to expand learning and exchange opportunities for all stakeholders.

Key Conference Themes

Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education
- Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on the global economy and society.
- Disruption effects on HED (public, private).
- Response of HED to COVID-19 crisis.
- Moving ahead to the "new normal" and facing new emergencies.
- Innovative solutions and lessons learned from COVID-19 disruption.

Higher Education and the SDGs
- Relevant research agendas for human development.
- Global citizenship: embedding the 17 SDGs in teaching, learning, research.
- SDG4: progress, gaps, and options (role of HED to improve the whole education system and the teaching profession).
- Capacity building for research in HEIs and other actors.
- Third mission of HEIs: community services and local practices adopting global perspectives.

Inclusion in Higher Education
- Leaving no one behind: enabling vulnerable groups to enter, transit and complete HED.
- Financial support to youth from low income families.
- Enhancing gender equality in HED.
- The value of ethnic, multicultural diversity in HED.
- Flexible programmes to integrate population with special needs.
- Diminishing inequities, promoting diversity and maximizing outcomes for all graduates.

Quality and Relevance of Programmes
- Diversification and flexibility of curriculum, programmes, and courses.
- Expanding use of ICTs and AI to enhance learning and collaboration.
- Quality assurance of innovative higher learning modalities and spaces.
- Partnerships for success: students, teachers, employers, communities.
- Evolving leaning skills for evolving workforce paths.
- Innovative post-secondary options in tertiary education.

Academic Mobility in Higher Education
- National and institutional policies and practices for widening access to students with different backgrounds.
- Institutions as lifelong learning communities for all.
- Teachers and researchers in an increasingly diverse campus.
- Building a global campus of learning, teaching and research.
- Acknowledging talent, skills, knowledge, and competences for diversity.
- Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education.

Higher Education Governance
- System level governance in higher education.
- HED institutions governance and responsiveness to dynamic contexts.
- Participation, diversity, and pluralism in higher education.
- Institutional autonomy, organizational effectiveness, and accountability

Financing Higher Education
- Financial options for access, quality, equity and inclusion in HED.
- Per-student investment in Higher Education.
- Optimizing public investment in HED: impact and accountability.
- Private sector investment in HED.
- Cost-effectiveness in HED.
- Developing/sustaining a global fund for HED.

Data and Knowledge Production
- Monitoring Higher Education in the framework of SDG4 and the 2030 Agenda.
- Towards global quality standards of data collection, processing, and delivery.
- Machine leaning, bid data and data analysis in HED.
- Use of information for policy decision making and organizational quality improvement.
- Mapping global quality, equity and inclusion.

International Cooperation to Enhance Synergies
- Articulating inter-governmental initiatives in favour of Higher Education.
- Collaboration strategies of international donors and sponsors in higher education.
- Higher education and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).
- Links with open sciences and open learning movements.
- Networks, platforms and knowledge management for advancing international cooperation.
- Use of knowledge, technology, and innovation to promote collaboration.

Preparing for the Future of Higher Learning
- Beyond 2030: HEIs and the next development agenda.
- Lifelong learning processes and new sites for learning relevant to changing economies, evolving work environments, and a dignifying life.
- The next generation of learners, their profiles and needs.
- Teachers role and new skills.
- Future proofing graduate knowledge and skills (cross-cutting abilities and specialized learning).
- Strategic policies today for anticipating the university of tomorrow.

Expected Outputs, Outcomes, and Impact

The WHEC2021 will focus on three key outputs: (1) production and dissemination of knowledge, innovation, and good practices; (2) guidance to UNESCO Member States and HED stakeholders to strengthen their political will, policy and programme development, and capacity building; (3) reinvigoration of a coalition within the HED community to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Futures of Education. These three outputs are expected to reinforce the capacities (outcome) of HED institutions, leaders, and relevant stakeholders to create, adapt and/or improve their programmes.

Figure 1. WHEC2021. Strengthening HED contribution to the SDGs Agenda and beyond
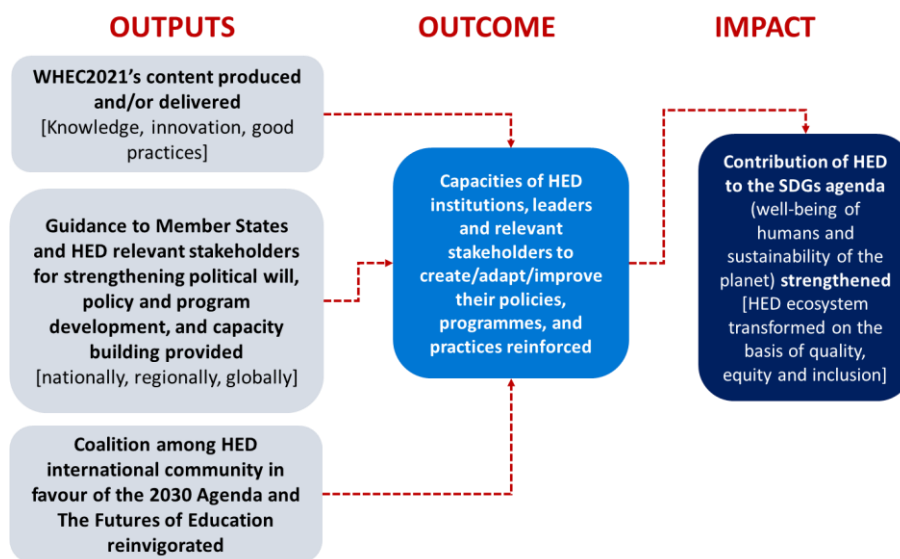
Participants

The Conference will involve a broad range of stakeholders with a vested interest in higher education: UNESCO sectors and related entities (UNDP, ILO, World Bank, EU higher education space), HED-related intergovernmental organizations, UNESCO-specialized institutes (IESALC, IIEP, UIS, IITE, UIL), UNITWIN-UNESCO Chairs, global initiatives (GEM Report, The Futures of Education), UN agencies, regional development banks, country policy-makers responsible for higher education, rectors/presidents and other university authorities, teaching and research staff, leaders of community service programmes, students and youth, the private sector, professional associations, non-governmental organisations, as well as civil society groups teachers' unions, etc.). In addition, international networks, think tanks, and entities active in the HED field will be invited to contribute to the event: Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), International Association of Universities (IAU), National Committee for Agenda 2030 in the Higher Education Sector (SDG Norway), International Science Council (ISC), Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network (Prosper.Net), United Nations University (UNU), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), Education Policies for Global Development (GLOBED), and others.

Working languages

English, French, and Spanish will be the working languages of the WHEC2021.