The future of higher education: Takeaways from the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022

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2022 has been a big year for the international higher education community as we saw the once-every-decade event, the UNESCO 2022 World Higher Education Conference (a.k.a 3rd WHEC or WHEC 2022) taking place in Barcelona, Spain, last May. It seems coincidental that all three WHECs happened amid major global crises, with the previous two linked with the global financial crises in 1998 and 2009 and this year’s overshadowed by the worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the global crises were regrettable, they also created great momentum for higher education stakeholders to rethink the fundamentals of higher education. Indeed, major challenges to higher education at this scale often catalyse opportunities to reset our understanding of higher education towards a more peaceful and sustainable future for humanity and the planet.

Unlike the previous two WHECs that ended up with the release of a Declaration and a Communiqué, respectively, the 3rd WHEC was informed by the submission of a new Roadmap, Beyond Limits: New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education (hereafter ‘Roadmap’).

The Roadmap complements rich contributions made during the Conference, including 60 parallel sessions and 400 speakers. In total, there were in attendance over 2,500 higher education stakeholders in Barcelona, including youth representatives, and 8,300 virtual attendees from all over the world. The consultations preceding the Conference, and the open knowledge products that resulted from them, were far-reaching in scope, indeed in hopes that they would stimulate further debates during the Conference, if not well beyond its conclusion.

What follows are my key takeaways from these essential documents, along with some of my observations on the future of higher education. UNESCO recognizes youth voices and the diversity of perspectives and experiences in higher education worldwide, all of which we hope to continue exploring through active dialogues such as those typical of the Conference itself.

The human-rights-based approach to higher education
The human-rights-based approach to education has been a signature position of UNESCO ever since its founding in 1945, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In the field of education, this rights-based approach is anchored in several UNESCO Conventions and other normative instruments, not least of all the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education.

As reconfirmed in the Roadmap submitted to the 3rd WHEC this year, ‘UNESCO sees higher education as an integral part of the right to education and a public good.’ Indeed, education, including higher education, is increasingly becoming a necessity rather than a luxury, if we want to grow and thrive in both work and life in a fast-changing world.

The global benchmarks on the eligibility for education have been evolving with ‘universal primary education’ proposed, in 2000, as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), followed by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), covering 2015 to 2030, which calls for ‘complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all’.

In reality, the gross enrolment ratios (GERs) of different levels and types of education in countries indicate substantial variations in the eligibility for education. We need to go beyond literacy and numeracy and intensify our efforts for better access to equitable, quality and relevant tertiary education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education, as they are critical for economic and social transformation.

To secure people’s rights to higher education as a public good, governments need to meet the international benchmarks of ‘allocating at least 4% to 6% of gross domestic product (GDP) to education and allocating at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education’, as proposed by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and reiterated in the Incheon Declaration. Furthermore, a more significant proportion of the increased government financial resources should be allocated to higher education.

Competing demands from other public service sectors threaten the right to higher education, with shrinking government revenues caused by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNESCO calls for actions to prioritize, protect and increase domestic finance for education, including higher education.

Additional resources mobilized through public-private partnerships and partnerships with international donors also help promote the rights to higher education. Developed countries need to meet the target of spending 0.7% of their gross national income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries.

To advance a human-rights-based approach to higher education, public investment is key. With much needed investment, the future of higher education in this region will see more systems moving from the elite stage to massification and even universal access to higher education supported by inclusive, sustainable, equitable, well-funded policies and practices.
Quality assurance: from inputs-driven to process- and outputs-driven

Although learning outcomes and the ways to achieve them are not the focus of the Roadmap, they are the main concerns of good qualifications frameworks which the Roadmap promotes in line with its lifelong learning approach to higher education.

The proliferation of the practices of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) worldwide has indicated a paradigm shift of higher education quality assurance from inputs-driven to process- and outputs-driven. This is based on the fact that investment in higher education has substantially increased from the government and other higher education stakeholders with the expansion of higher education systems in recent decades.

Indeed, when higher education is small or still at an early stage of development, inputs-related indicators can serve as leverage for securing more investment from the government and other stakeholders. In an era of higher education massification, outputs are more relevant as quality eventually depends on students’ achieving the expected learning outcomes.

In the future, learning outcomes will be more holistic to include not only knowledge and understanding, skills and competencies, but also values and attitudes, so that we nurture well-rounded professionals who are also ‘fully fledged citizens that cooperatively address complex issues.’

This requires that we pay more attention to the learning process in which learners interact with teachers and fellow learners, as well as other learning partners and the learning environment. The overall aim is to ensure that the learning process is pedagogically learner-centred and leading to the achievement of comprehensive learning outcomes, including cognitive and non-cognitive competencies, as well as transversal skills.

Higher education teaching personnel who are well trained in their subject areas should also be well trained in pedagogies and their applications with the support of state-of-the-art technologies. There should be more continuing professional development opportunities, including micro-credential programmes for higher education teaching personnel.

We will also need to increase the relevance of learning outcomes to both work and life. A post of ‘Chief Learning Scientist’ can be created at higher education institutions to coordinate institution-wide teaching and learning strategy, and serve as a liaison ensuring the alignment of external quality assurance and internal quality assurance, as well as acting as a bridge between the supply and demand sides of the learning programmes.

Flexible learning pathways

The Roadmap proposes a transition ‘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.’
This transition is revolutionary and has been accelerated by the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It can break the long monopoly of conventional higher education institutions and allow new learning providers, especially those close to the demand side, among them enterprises and professional bodies, along with those empowered by innovative technologies, to provide higher education learning programmes.

According to a background paper for the 3rd WHEC on quality and relevance of programmes in higher education, new flexibility can also be reflected in ‘moving beyond the formal education, to embrace, credit and officially recognise innovative education models (formal, non-formal and informal) to enhance opportunities for learners.’ In this regard, learning will be more flexible in terms of time, length, and venue, making it possible for people to have multiple entry and exit points to higher education and to learn at any time and in any place.

NQFs, subject-specific quality standards, and programme development templates constitute the basic national academic infrastructure for learning outcomes of different types and levels of learning programmes across the country to be comparable, transferable, and stackable with one another under common quality frameworks. They are thus critical tools in facilitating the equivalency and recognition arrangements between and among different qualifications and learning programmes.

National learning management systems, such as interconnected and learner-centred digital credit bank systems at the system and institutional levels, comprise the other essential academic infrastructure to be put in place. They would ensure that credits earned from different higher education providers can be recognized, deposited, and accumulated, leading to the award of micro-credentials and full qualifications.

In the future, higher education learning programmes will go beyond the simple division of academic, professional, and higher vocational. More mixed types of these three contents will be developed into different learning programmes if they align with the NQFs and other upstream quality frameworks.

We might foresee that higher education institutions (HEIs) will not need to excel in every subject area and domain of their activities in the future. They can outsource their uncompetitive services to external providers and keep building on their own core competitive functions. They can also play a qualifications/degree-awarding role by validating learning experiences and credits from various providers. In other words, learners will earn credits from different learning providers to DIY their own individualised qualifications to be assessed by recognized providers in line with the national qualifications frameworks.

**Promoting social mobility**

‘Inclusion’ and ‘equity’ are two of the many keywords highlighted in the Roadmap for the 3rd WHEC. Inclusion can bring more students from different social backgrounds, especially disadvantaged groups, to the bigger talent pool and enable them to make
upward social mobility after graduation. With social mobility, we can avoid clear-cut social stratification, thereby strengthening social cohesion of a country.

As stated in the Roadmap, inequality in university admissions criteria can produce disparity and reduce chances for social mobility. We need to think of both merit-based and quota-based admission policies as they complement each other. Necessary affirmative action measures should be put in place to support learners from disadvantaged groups to gain access to quality higher education and flourish subsequently in both life and career.

Higher education should not perpetuate the existing social stratification. A real test to higher education’s equity and inclusiveness is its ability and results in promoting social mobility. There is a need to establish mechanisms, like Social Mobility Watch, to monitor the yearly intakes and retention rates of various tiers and types of HEIs by students from different social and economic backgrounds, and to trace their employment destinations after graduation.

Inclusion and equity should be promoted in a holistic manner to include not only student recruitment, but also student learning processes, including pedagogy and assessment, and employment after graduation. Inclusion and equity should also cover institutional governance, research, and social engagement and outreach activities of the higher education institutions.

In the future, higher education must serve as a social institution for promoting upward social mobilization. Every citizen, irrespective of their economic and social background, can resort to higher education as an effective and fair platform to change their fate and enter the mainstream of the societies where they live and work.

Higher education shall also soon facilitate circulation of all citizens with changing and rotating roles, status, and responsibilities, making it possible for a society to reboot and refresh its social dynamics regularly and increase the coherence, innovativeness, resilience and competitiveness of its people and society as a whole.

**Institutional autonomy and social accountability**

These two seemingly conflicting arguments have been the two principles guiding the development of higher education worldwide. When the systems have been small, especially when there has been less government spending on higher education, institutional autonomy has tended to speak louder than other arguments.

The pioneer countries in higher education usually have a long tradition of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. By notable contrast, latecomer countries tend to launch their higher education systems with more coordination provided by government. Asia and the Pacific is a region where most countries are latecomers with their higher education systems influenced by different traditions that have originated in the pioneer countries.
As higher education systems in most countries have been rapidly expanding in recent decades, the self-sustaining tradition has increasingly been challenged. The vast numbers of graduates produced by the expanded systems need to be accommodated by the employment market. At the same time, the massive budget from taxpayer monies for the expanded systems has also required accountability measures to ensure that all the spending meets the principle of value for money.

In this regard, the fundamental issue is the relationship between governments and HEIs. Historically, we have had the famous University Grants Committee (UGC) model to install a buffer organization between the government and universities. The composition of the UGC initially was more in favour of universities. With the expansion of the systems, however, more UGC members were appointed by the governments, including those members from the industries. Social accountability has become another principle impacting the operation of HEIs.

As the Roadmap points out, learning outcomes, employability, diversity, and inclusion have been more visible in the quality assurance and accountability frameworks. Academic freedom and participation of all stakeholders is one of the six principles to shape the future of higher education.

We can anticipate that the relationships between governments and HEIs will be more balanced in the future, with external regulations and internal innovations and alignment mutually nurturing and complementing each other. Regulated institutional autonomy and ‘autonomy for accountability’ will constitute the way forward.

**Internationalisation of higher education**

Currently, there are two leading multilateral platforms for promoting the internationalisation of higher education. One is UNESCO, as the only UN agency with a mandate in higher education; and the other is the World Trade Organization (WTO), which sees higher education as a service sub-sector subject to regulation under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

The two platforms use different but mutually transferrable frameworks. UNESCO’s framework has focused on conceptualisation of cross-border higher education, including the cross-border mobility of students, programmes and institutions. The WTO’s approach has centred around four modalities of delivery: consumption abroad, cross-border supply, commercial presence, and the movement of natural persons.

The Roadmap mentions UNESCO’s Conventions on academic recognition to promote mobility and inter-university cooperation. Indeed, the recognition issue has long been the entry point for UNESCO regarding higher education. The Tokyo Convention for Asia and the Pacific has already entered into force and has 12 ratifications as of October 2022. The Global Convention, adopted in 2019 in Paris, welcomed Japan last month as its 17th ratification in the world and the 1st ratification in Asia and the Pacific. This positive development brings us closer to the 20 ratifications required for the Global Convention to enter into force.
Joining and aligning with international normative instruments such as these conventions are critical indicators for measuring the status of higher education internationalisation at both system and institutional levels. We have yet to see the first ratification of the Tokyo Convention and the Global Convention on academic recognition from South-East Asia countries. The ratifications will help remove the recognition barriers to student and professional mobility in the region and beyond.

Student mobility has been high on the internationalisation agenda, as many traditional destination countries have faced declining enrolments of their domestic students due to fast-aging populations. However, other considerations have also driven student mobility, such as higher education being regarded as a greening service sector to generate income, and the competition for young talent from a more significant international talent pool, and so forth.

Looking ahead, we may see more intense competition between and among countries in the Asia-Pacific region as they strive to develop into regional higher education hubs. We may also see more 'study-plus-work-permit' packages offered by countries to attract young international talents to study in the given priority areas and stay in the destination countries for employment after graduation.

In July of this year, we witnessed the launch of a two-year work plan for establishing a common higher education space in South-East Asia in Hanoi, Viet Nam. This event was a milestone for kicking off the harmonisation processes for higher education systems in the region. According to the work plan, there will be more national alignment of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), more student and professional mobility opportunities, and the covering of more sectors by the Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs). In addition, regional partners in South-East Asia aim to catalyse internationalization through a critical mass of student mobility under a new ASEAN Branded Scholarship.

**Digital transformation of higher education**

The Roadmap states that ‘technologies play an increasingly central role in higher education.’ Although there are gaps and disparities among countries in the maturity of frontier technologies and their applications in higher education, the rapid developments in computer power, algorithms, big data, artificial intelligence (AI) and internet reach ‘have transformed teaching, learning, and research, as well as networking and collaboration within and across nations.’

Digital transformation goes beyond awareness and ICT literacy. It means that digital technologies should be embedded and integrated in all types and domains of higher education activities. We should move from ‘technology-assisted’ to ‘technology-enabled, -enhanced, and -empowered’, and eventually to technology-embedded, or fully integrated learning and governance ecosystems.
The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide given unequal access to the technologies for delivering higher education programmes. For conventional HEIs, online and blended learning have been mainstreamed and become the ‘new normal’ during and even beyond the pandemic. There is, nevertheless, an increasing need to integrate technologies with content, pedagogy, assessment, and other quality assurance measures to ensure the most efficient and powerful work synergies among these critical domains, as well as to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) continue to gain momentum towards greater expansion in this region with the establishment and functioning of National MOOC portals, such as Indonesia Cyber Education Institute, JMOOCs, KMOOCs, M-MOOCs, XuetangX, ThaiMOOC, and so forth. Some are financed by governments, some managed by the private sector, and some run by consortiums of HEIs.

There will soon be more mature and advanced learning analytics empowered by big data and AI to help diagnose teaching and learning activities at institutional, subject, programme, and individual session levels. Big data generated by HEIs on a daily basis will be more efficiently and ethically used by university leaders, administrators, faculty and students, as well as other higher education actors and stakeholders.

University governance should also go digital with a whole set of applications to support the workflow of different administrative activities. These activities include finance; staff recruitment, evaluation and professional development; student affairs management; international partnership and cooperation; travel and leave management; resource mobilisation; and public information and outreach, among others. A one-stop-shop, web-based daily operation system will allow HEIs to go paperless via online tools for their daily administrative work.

ICT infrastructure, institutional capacity-building, and teachers’ professional development are essential for the digital transformation of higher education. We hope that in the future, the gaps in internet speed and penetration can be narrowed so that HEIs can have better public infrastructure towards promoting digital transformation across every domain of their activities.

**Foundation for the future**

The 3rd World Higher Education Conference provided us a chance to rethink and reimagine the fundamentals of higher education – around the three critical missions of teaching and learning, research, and social engagement – from the perspectives of access, quality, and equity. The Roadmap and open knowledge products submitted to the 3rd WHEC set a good foundation for further national, international and global stakeholder debates.

The multiple cause-and-effect chains described in this paper are not deterministic but somewhat hypothetical. Considering that the national higher education dynamics and ecosystems are diverse and uncertain, convergent trends discussed here shall serve as
global benchmarks to inform different countries for their national adaptations. We look forward to collecting renewed thinking and actions as we navigate towards 2030 and beyond.

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