

Putting digital transformation at the heart of HE systems

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The advancement and widespread adoption of digital technologies have shaped the higher education landscape worldwide. We have gone through the stage of digital awareness to digital responsiveness and now find ourselves in an era of digital transformation for education, as confirmed by the Transforming Education Summit held at the United Nations headquarters last year in New York, United States.

It is indeed encouraging to see that digitalisation has been included as the second transversal theme, alongside sustainable development, which cuts across the following four priority areas of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Education Process: quality assurance and recognition; engaging business and industry in education; balanced mobility; and lifelong learning, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET).

My interest is to highlight the potential interregional collaboration between Asia and Europe on these four priority areas in the context of digital transformation with the aim being to enhance access, quality and equity of higher education provision.

Quality assurance and recognition

Quality assurance and recognition are two interrelated issues in higher education. Recognition should be rooted in the quality of learning rather than solely relying on the goodwill of the parties concerned. At the same time, comparable quality standards can facilitate the recognition of learning and qualifications across different countries.

The Sydney Statement issued in August 2016 at the 14th Session of the Regional Committee on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific acknowledged for the first time the connections between quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and recognition for mobility and employability.

This was a milestone in getting policy-makers and practitioners in these two critical areas to work together and align with each other. A similar trend can also be observed in Europe at the same time, if not earlier, as Europe has been a world leader on both fronts.

As for the content of learning, digital transformation means we must include digital skills, competencies, values and attitudes in various qualification frameworks to inform the development, delivery and regular updating of learning programmes and courses offered by different learning providers.

National and regional bodies and authorities responsible for developing and implementing digital competency frameworks in both regions should strengthen their collaboration in order to share experiences and build capacity, especially when it comes to categorising digital skills and competencies and integrating them in programme development and course planning processes at institutional and faculty levels.

The digital transformation process enables us to incorporate digital technologies into the management and delivery of higher education programmes. As a result, ensuring quality assurance and recognition of online and blended learning has emerged as a pressing challenge for countries in Asia and Europe.

To promote greater mobility of students and professionals across regions, countries in Asia and Europe should leverage various multilateral and bilateral platforms, such as the ASEM Education Process, in accordance with the Tokyo Convention, Lisbon Convention and the Global Convention on academic recognition which has recently entered into force.

These frameworks highlight the need for transparency, comparability, compatibility and harmonisation of quality standards and should guide efforts to enhance interregional collaboration.

Together with UNESCO, Asia and Europe must place a special focus on the inclusion of all learners, the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance, particularly in developing countries.

Engaging business and industry

Throughout much of the history of higher education, the academic community and professors have wielded substantial authority over university affairs under institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a system that has been primarily driven by the supply side, leaving little room for input or feedback from external actors and stakeholders.

As higher education systems continue to expand globally, it is critical to establish shared ownership of these systems between the supply and demand sides. To achieve this, engaging business and industry can be a viable solution that amplifies the voices of the demand side in the planning and implementation of higher education programmes.

The involvement of business and industry can be crucial in developing and implementing national quality standards and frameworks at the system level. Therefore, institutionalised and effective engagement mechanisms must be established to ensure that their input and concerns are duly considered throughout the process.

Digital technologies offer a range of apps and tools that enable us to incorporate business and industry engagement into online workflows for programme development and course planning. This is instrumental in enhancing the relevance and quality of higher education programmes and increasing accountability of the sector to various stakeholders, including taxpayers, students, employers and the wider society.

Asia and Europe can benefit from sharing their experiences in developing and implementing guidelines, regulations and workflows related to business and industry engagement in higher education, utilising technology at the systemic, institutional and faculty levels. To facilitate this, thematic working groups can be established to develop joint priorities and work plans, thus advancing collaboration between the two regions.

Balanced mobility

Asia and Europe are among the most significant destinations for international students worldwide. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), there has been a gradual increase in the number of students moving between these two regions, with an average annual growth rate of 6.97% for students going from Asia to Europe and 3.17% for students going from Europe to Asia between 2008 and 2020.

According to the same UIS data, in 2020, the number of students moving from Asia to Europe totalled over one million, significantly surpassing the 12,925 students who moved from Europe to Asia.

Achieving a balance in international student mobility involves more than just the sheer number of students moving between regions; it also requires consideration of the balance of academic disciplines, modalities of delivery and levels of study programmes. Some countries and sub-regions face significant imbalances, which must be explored in depth.

Digital transformations in higher education can be vital in shaping shared priorities for mobility programmes between Asia and Europe.

Cross-border higher education, as defined by UNESCO, encompasses the mobility of students, professionals, institutions and programmes across national or regional boundaries. With the help of digital technologies, new forms of mobility have emerged, including virtual campuses, online classrooms and virtual mobility for students and professionals within and between regions.

These innovative approaches are expanding opportunities for cross-border education and enhancing the internationalisation of higher education.

Similar mobility frameworks have also been developed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) through its General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), including the four modalities of delivery: cross-border supply (virtual mobility), consumption abroad (in-person mobility), commercial presence (movement of programmes and institutions) and the movement of natural persons (movement of students and professionals).

As numerous countries in both regions are members of UNESCO and the WTO, reconciling divergent views on higher education is crucial. On the one hand, higher education is a public good that necessitates public investment. On the other hand, it is a service sector subject to the WTO's market access and national treatment rules.

Achieving such reconciliation is essential to ensure equitable and high-quality cross-border higher education for all students.

To promote international and interregional mobility among students and professionals, public and private scholarship providers in both regions should collaborate and work towards a shared agenda. However, compared to the EU-funded Erasmus+ programme, Asia has yet to develop a coordinated scholarship initiative with sufficient scale to support students and professionals from the region.

Lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning has evolved beyond simply referring to adult learning and continuing professional development and has instead become a fundamental principle that spans across various levels and types of education, including TVET and higher education. This is reflected in the title of Sustainable Development Goal 4: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Furthermore, adopting a lifelong learning perspective has also led to a significant expansion of learning spaces. As a result, it is crucial to establish flexible learning pathways encompassing diverse learning tracks and orientations, various learning venues, a range of learning delivery modalities and multiple learning providers.

There are several ways in which digital technology can help establish a lifelong learning society. Firstly, it can facilitate access to lifelong learning through online and blended learning opportunities, particularly for individuals from under-served communities.

Secondly, it can enhance the quality of learning by providing learners with access to a wealth of online learning resources, particularly through open educational resources (OERs).

Lastly, it can promote equality by enabling outreach to previously unreachable populations.

The demand for digital skills and competencies is evolving rapidly. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate these changes into national digital competency frameworks to inform the development and implementation of lifelong learning programmes.

In addition, cross-regional collaboration between Asia and Europe is essential in addressing gaps in each other's areas of expertise and complementing one another in a mutually supportive way, especially for countries facing significant skills gaps.

As the primary academic infrastructure for supporting the establishment and functioning of a lifelong learning system, including TVET and higher education, countries from both regions can benefit from referencing each other's national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) to identify areas for improvement. This is particularly important in ensuring that national quality standards and frameworks remain relevant in the digital transformation era.

UNESCO actively promotes the use of NQFs, MOOCs (massive open online courses), OERs and micro-credentials as indispensable tools for fostering a lifelong learning society. Thematic inter-regional workshops, webinars and other experience-sharing activities should be arranged through various multilateral and bilateral platforms engaging policy-makers, researchers and practitioners from both regions.

Shared goals

UNESCO's collaboration with member states on the Transforming Education Summit follow-ups underscores the shared priority of digitalisation in education across Asia, Europe and globally. It is imperative to examine higher education systems through the lens of digital transformation, ensuring that digital technologies are integrated into the various domains rather than treated as mere additions.

Digital transformation is about transforming content, pedagogy, governance and management within higher education systems. It offers various entry points to initiate the process, such as focusing on learning outcomes associated with essential digital competencies, acknowledging flexible learning pathways, fostering collaboration with external partners and advocating for virtual mobility and blended mobility opportunities for students and professionals.

We strongly believe that digital transformation in higher education holds immense potential to create pivotal opportunities for all systems to enhance accessibility, inclusivity and overall quality and standards. As we collectively strive towards our shared goals for 2030 and beyond, UNESCO stands ready to provide unwavering support throughout this journey.

Libing Wang is director (ad interim) of the UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office in Bangkok, Thailand. This is a lightly adapted version of a keynote speech initially delivered at the Senior Officials' Meeting of the ASEM Education Process on 'Asia and Europe: Reboosting Interregional Cooperation on Education', held from 22–23 May 2023 in Saint Julian's, Malta.

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