Quality and relevance of programmes in higher education
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.
Summary

With the widened and deepened diversification of learning demands, the issue of higher education responsiveness to the social and economic needs while maintaining relevance and quality of provisions becomes of paramount importance if countries are to meet their commitments to sustainable development. The evolutionary call is to look at higher education from a broader perspective, moving beyond the formal education, to embrace, credit and officially recognize innovative education models (formal, non-formal and informal) to enhance opportunities for diversity of learners so crucial in the era of globalization.

The current background document and policy recommendations aim to guide higher education institutions and policymakers in their strategic planning towards 2030. It covers theme 4 – Quality and relevance of programmes –, one of the ten main themes within the frames of the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022).

A mixed method approach was adopted to explore the current obstacles to quality and relevant programmatic offers globally. As per the results of the study, there has been a major paradigmatic shift in the higher learning landscape, yet higher education seems to be attached to traditional practices with very few advanced systems endeavouring to introduce innovative solutions ensuring quality and relevance of programmes. The key obstacles are multifaceted and evolve around the core of curriculum, the degree structure, qualifications of faculty, stakeholder engagement, definition of quality and nature of current quality assurance practices, and not least regulations promoting recognition of qualifications. Significant is also the role of the governments and national regulators in steering the course of actions leading to quality and relevant programmatic offer.

The background document culminates in a set of policy recommendations, which conclude by reinstating a dire need for the role of higher education to be re-defined to embrace diversity. If no one is to be left behind in this increasingly diversified context and uncertainties, the re-shaping and re-invention of a ‘new higher learning model’ is due to ensure that programmes are relevant, of high quality and the awarded credentials are recognized.
Acknowledgements

With the purpose of producing updated analysis and recommendations for the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), UNESCO organized the Technical Expert Group (TEG), whose members were tasked with preparing background documents on each of the main themes of the Conference. Experts participating in the TEG included César Guadalupe, Dag Olav Hessen, Susanna Karakhanyan, Achim Hopbach, Mpine Makoe, David Mills, Ka Ho Mok, Kilemi Mwiria, Jamil Salmi, Sylvia Schmelkes, Francesc Pedró, Damtew Teferra. This is one of the TEG’s background documents, which respectively approached the following themes:

- Impact of COVID-19 on higher education
- Higher education and the SDGs¹
- Equity, inclusion, and pluralism
- Quality and relevance of programmes
- Academic mobility in higher education
- Governance in higher education
- Financing higher education
- Data and knowledge production
- International cooperation to enhance synergies
- The futures of higher education

The following UNESCO focal points participated in or provided support, at different moments, to the TEG’s activities: Dana Abdrasheva, Daniele Viera, Phoebe Kirkup, Paz Portales, Victoria Galán, Huong Nguyen, Hassmik Tortian, Qingling Kong, Peter Wells, Harold Mera, Takudzwa Mutize, Talal El Hourani, José Antonio Quinteiro, Keith Holmes and Emma Sabzalieva. The TEG’s activities were directly coordinated by José Luis Guzmán.

The TEG met online four times throughout 2021 (March 24, May 19, July 21, and September 8) and held an in-person meeting in Barcelona on 29-30 November 2021. Besides extensive literature review, the process of elaborating the documents included 24 online consultation meetings facilitated by the TEG members. These meetings involved more than 180 experts or stakeholders from all regions of the world. In addition, the TEG members considered comments provided by diverse reviewers for each theme and a technical team of UNESCO specialists reviewed the final versions.

It is through invaluable support and contributions of lead experts and key stakeholders in higher education globally that this background document and resultant policy recommendations have become possible. Gaining from the wealth of expertise globally – Africa, the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, Latin America and Caribbean – this endeavour to delve deeper into the obstacles and opportunities for quality and relevance of higher learning culminated in success.

Specifically, we thank Franz Gertze (Namibia), Emad Abuelrub (UAE), Douglas Blackstock (UK), Michael Milligan (USA), and Maria Jose Lemaitre (Chile), who provided insights and expertise in national regulations and external quality assurance that assisted the identification of trends and challenges immensely. We also thank contributions from Angela Young Chi Hou (Taiwan).

Very special gratitude goes to faculty members Wondwosen Tamrat (Ethiopia), Zahra Baalawi (UAE), Carolin Plewa (Australia), Marti Casadesus Fa (Spain), Frederix Lemieux (USA), Michael Bradshaw (Trinidad and Tobago) for their invaluable contribution in identifying the obstacles, best practices and potential solutions for enhanced quality and relevance within the ever-changing context.

Extremely helpful were the insights coming from students and alumni – Lily Njanja (Kenya), Shurooq Alhaatemi (UAE), Cuong Nguyen (Vietnam), Martina Darmanin (Belgium), Rachel Smith (USA), Juan Manuel Arellano Hernandez (Mexico), who revealed what works and does not work for them.

Another stakeholder group that merits special highlights is the industry and professional associations. Izabela Milewska (Luxemburg), Arno Meeran (the Netherlands), Olivier Crouzet (France), Roy Swift (USA) and German Rios (Spain) brought in the insights from industry perspectives by highlighting the key areas in need of enhancement to ensure relevance in the provisions and coverage of the market needs.

I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the peer reviewers of this document Prof. Bjørn Stensaker (University of Oslo, Norway), Dr. Victoria Galán-Muros (UNESCO, IELSAC), Prof. Deborah Everhart (Credential Engine, USA) and Jamil Salmi (Global Tertiary Education Expert) for sharing their wisdom as we refined and polished the document.

Last, but not least, I am extremely grateful to the UNESCO and IELSAC teams for the efficient organization of the whole preparatory phase for the WHEC2022, tireless efforts and passion they have invested in this extremely important venture.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFR</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>Artificial intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA</td>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARB</td>
<td>The Arab States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENA</td>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENQA</td>
<td>The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQAR</td>
<td>European Quality Assurance Register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQF</td>
<td>European Qualifications Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HED</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher education institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INQAAHE</td>
<td>International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAC</td>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQF</td>
<td>National Qualifications Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QF</td>
<td>Qualification Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDGs</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHEC2022</td>
<td>World Higher Education Conference 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The UNESCO Section of Higher Education (HED) is responsible for supporting the Member States in strengthening their HED systems under the human rights approach, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to leave no one behind. Within this framework, the Section of HED has undertaken organization of the 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), taking place in Barcelona, in 2022. In response to the era of disruption in higher education driven by the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution, diversification of learning needs, ever-growing demand for alignment with socio-economic needs, and dire need of responsiveness to crises, the WHEC2022 aims at breaking away from the traditional models of higher education and opening doors to new innovative, creative and visionary conceptions. The aim is to not only serve the current global agendas for sustainable development, but also to pave the way for a future learning community that speaks to all, is inclusive of all categories of learners.

The WHEC2022 endeavours to establish a constructive platform for UNESCO member states and higher education stakeholders to effectively generate and disseminate knowledge, innovation and good practices; strengthen their political will, policy and programme development, and capacity building; reinvigoration of a coalition within the HED community to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Futures of Education. The conference and its preparatory events expect to mobilize relevant stakeholders to define and prepare for a new era of HED systems (norms, policies, structures, and stakeholders) and institutions (universities, specialized entities, think tanks, and networks), particularly after the COVID-19 global crisis.

This is a background document on theme 4: **Quality and relevance of programmes** supported by policy recommendations 2030 and beyond to enhance quality and relevance of higher learning. The key principles supporting the background document are driven by the United Nations (UN) human rights approach, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the pledge to leave no one behind.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>01.</strong> The higher learning: The paradigm shift</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>02.</strong> Methodology and data collection</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>04.</strong> Major findings</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Diversification of higher learning and learning paradigm shift</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Vertical and horizontal diversification</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Relevance of higher learning and its programmes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Quality and quality assurance</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Recognition of qualifications</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>05.</strong> Policy recommendations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
01.

Background
Quality and Relevance of Programmes, the fourth theme of the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education conference (WHEC2022), focuses on the current and future offers, future prospects and related challenges and solutions for closing the skills gap through relevant and quality higher education provisions.

To ameliorate relevance and quality of higher education, this background document, among other topics, explores the HED diversification trends, the impacts of the ICT and AI, types of innovative higher learning providers, modalities and spaces and respective measures for quality assurance. The global disruption, HED paradigm change, coupled with rapid diversification of HED target population, needs and offers compels a serious remodeling and redefinition of higher education itself to extend its boundaries and acknowledge it beyond the provisions by higher education systems, as we traditionally perceive it. Given the recent trends, with increased globalization, the role of innovative partnership models leading to success and transformational learning necessary for diversity of workforce paths within the frames of life-long learning becomes even more important. It has strong potentials to ensure deeper exploration, better understanding and a more agile response to the trends and challenges, in the meantime guaranteeing increased access to and affordability of higher education to ensure no one is left behind.

Against this backdrop, and in response to the global developments, the United Nations General Assembly at its April 10, 2019, meeting adopted a report on the right to education –Right to education: the implementation of the right to education and Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the context of the growth of private actors in education (UN, 2019). The report makes a special reference to the importance of implementing the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (2015), in accordance with human rights approach, which is not only an obligation of the State, but also essential to tackle educational inequalities effectively, guarantee both access and quality education and ensure accountability.

The scope of the background document covers the last ten years of developments in the field and feeds into the policy recommendations for the next decade.
02.
The higher learning: The paradigm shift
Throughout its evolution during history, education has undergone at least three major disruptions due to technology revolution. The first disruption is characterized by the introduction of the Phoenician alphabet in the 10th century B.C. and the introduction of mass-produced books in the 16th century marked the second major disruption. Most recently, with the rapid expansion of ICT and the introduction of e-learning and mobile devices, education has entered the third era of disruption - fundamentally altered, impossible to predict and rapidly changing with a wealth of innovations, challenges and opportunities. Compared historically, technological disruptions seem to be the primary factor, however, given the complexity and increasing diversification it is valid to argue the current disruptions are multi-faceted, caused by multiple factors such as massification, internationalization, globalization, and diversification - framing a major paradigm shift for higher learning (Blessinger, Reshef, & Sengupta, 2018). This calls for a redefinition of the scope, purpose and expectations of higher learning.

Lower return on investment for students, reduced government spending, significant skills mismatches between graduates' abilities and jobs available coupled with unpredictability of labour market demands are examples of factors that contribute to the paradigm shift by shaping the present and future of higher learning. Student learning pattern has also pivoted and the traditional mode of higher learning delivery, with exchange of information as its main currency no longer meets the demands of the current era. Global crises and pandemics, cause disruptions that push innovative solutions while revealing the deficiencies of the traditional higher learning model, such as the incapacity of systems to accommodate learning in times of crises depriving many of a basic access to education (UNESCO, 2021). Increasingly diversifying market demand on one side and slow response from higher education institutions (HEIs), create new groups that face challenges accessing higher learning. This puts the core of the human rights to education at jeopardy, since more and more potential learners are left out (UN, 2019) due to the limited access to and affordability of formally recognized and quality education. Current higher education practices are increasingly exposing the risks caused by shortcomings in flexibility, adaptability, and relevance.

An overall look at the major developments in higher education identified a whole array of critical trends to focus on if the systems are enabled to face the challenges, thus assuring quality and relevant higher learning for all. These can be grouped under the following major sub-themes relevant to the scope of this background document - diversification, ICT revolution, changing skills for evolving workforce paths, quality assurance and recognition of outcomes.

Three leading questions form the scope of the study and cover the last decade with the target to project the needed transformations for the next decade:
While the two major dimensions of the study are relevance and quality of higher education programmes, the two concepts taken separately would fail to present a holistic picture if not linked to the essential aspects of HED. Thus, throughout the study, links with crucial aspects such as access, affordability, inclusiveness and other key elements driving higher education essence and opportunities for life-long learning will be explored.

Within the document, the following interpretation of the terminology is used:

- **Higher learning** - refers to all types of learning that happen within formal, non-formal and informal setting beyond secondary education level.

- **Higher education** is interchangeably used with tertiary education to describe the education beyond secondary level where teaching and learning are the two major components (e.g., excluding self-learning and work-based learning).

What should various higher education stakeholders (e.g., governments, HEIs, academic leaders/educators/students/employers) do to design and deliver relevant, high quality, and sustainable tertiary education programmes for diverse groups of students with different learning needs?
03. Methodology and data collection
A multiple method approach was adopted to explore the lead questions:

- **Literature review and document analysis.** Through the lenses of existing theories and good practices, literature review and document analysis of the key problems in terms of gaps/needs and challenges were conducted.

- **Pre-focus group concept notes.** Focus groups participants were requested to submit a concept note reflecting on the lead questions. The concept notes supported in drafting questions for the focus groups, which enabled a deeper exploration of the matter.

- **Focus groups.** Based on the major findings, four focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders representing all UNESCO defined global regions. Through focus groups, deeper insights were gained on the current gaps and obstacles in ensuring quality and relevant programmes, good practices and theories as well as the roles of different stakeholders in promoting relevance and quality in line with the current developments in the market and overall in HED landscape. The focus groups also explored potential prospects for ensuring quality and relevance while capitalizing on increased access to education to ensure no one is left behind.

In total, four focus groups with 23 participants were conducted throughout June-July 2021. These included: national regulators, quality assurance bodies and accreditors (six participants); HED leaders and faculty members (six participants); students and alumni (six participants); employers and professional associations (five participants).

Each focus group discussion lasted for about two hours, was held in an online mode, recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were shared with the participants for validation. The four focus groups covered the following UNESCO regions – Africa (AFR), the Arab States (ARB), Asia and the Pacific (APA), Europe (EU), North America (NA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The countries represented are as follows: Ethiopia, Namibia, the UAE, Australia, Spain, the USA, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, Vietnam, Malta, Mexico, the UK, Chile, the Netherlands, France, Colombia, and Luxemburg. There was also participation from Taiwan.

The focus group discussions run in three major themes, namely: obstacles recognition, good practices identification and potential solutions brainstorming. Theme one evolved around the exploration of the key problems and obstacles the key stakeholders are facing in designing and delivering quality and relevant tertiary education programmes. The topic was explored from four different perspectives - higher education (HED) leaders and faculty, students and alumni, quality assurance (QA) bodies and accreditors, employers and professional associations. The key problems and obstacles raised by the key stakeholders can be grouped into two major sub-topics, covering both quality and relevance aspects.
Theme two explored rigorous theory and/or good practices that exist globally and can help resolve the problems identified above. The major findings are around relevance and quality. One of the striking features in this analysis is good theories/practices promoting relevance outweigh that of the quality (innovation vs. assuring quality), which is a major outcry for the QA in general to change or become obsolete in the nearest future.

Theme three explored recommended actions various higher education stakeholders (e.g., governments, HEIs, academic leaders/educators/students/employers) should consider designing and deliver relevant, high quality, and sustainable tertiary educational programmes for diverse groups of students’ learning needs.

The study has the following limitations, which were rectified through viable solutions:

- Regional representation: technical issues preventing one participant to connect online. One focus group participant was not able to join due to a power cut. To ensure inclusion of the views from the missing regions the transcripts were shared to reflect on the state of affairs in the given regions.

- Stakeholder representation: the focus group with employers and professional associations had representation from Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Europe, Asia and the Pacific, the Arab States and Africa were represented by international organizations such as Amazon. In total two international organizations were present.
04.

Major findings
Diversification of higher learning and learning paradigm shift

In the fundamentally altered, rapidly changing and impossible to predict environment the issue of ensuring access to agile and affordable higher education for all while maintaining relevance, quality, trust and credibility gains an even broader and deeper importance. Diversification in higher learning demand and supply continues to expand due to massification, internationalization, globalization, and ICT revolution, thus transforming and shaping the ‘new normal’ for higher learning, where the boundaries can no longer be restricted to formal/traditional provisions only. It is increasingly expanding to embrace non-formal, alternative modalities, introduce innovative models of collaborations and partnerships and enhanced opportunities to close the gap between the skill demand and supply through flexible learning pathways and diversification of workforce paths.

However, how do students learn nowadays? What is the currency of learning? Without a deeper insight into the realities of those two aspects, any attempt to come up with a valid and meaningful discussion on quality and relevance of programmes would be futile. Thus, understanding the learning pattern nowadays is crucial prior to delving into the extent to which higher education has the capacity to deliver relevant and high-quality programmes.

Dramatic changes have affected the curriculum delivery as a more diverse student population with varied interests and goals has raised the pressure to differentiate the curriculum and to offer qualifications in a wider array of fields and disciplines (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). Also, the pattern of learning has evolved and is fundamentally different from the pre-ICT era, resulting in significant decrease of student time allocated on the courses offered within the frames of a programme, thus becoming less effective. As per Bok (2017), current students enrolled in a HED degree, seem to be spending much less time on their course work and demonstrate significantly lower level of abilities than their predecessors did 50 years ago. Due to the technology advancement and diversification of information sources, no longer do students rely on a single source of information/learning when pursuing their career, thus contributing to the formation of a new paradigm where life-long and self-learning gain a significant weight. Thus, in the era of ICT, information is no longer the currency of education as it used to be since Middle Ages. Rather, we are currently witnessing a major higher learning paradigm shift, which dictates a ‘new currency’ for higher education where problem-solving, critical thinking, basics skills (e.g., languages, digital skills), wisdom and insights are the core, learners are bidding for when opting for a higher learning pathway (McMahon, in Rifai et al, 2018). Amid the current disruptions and rapid change, it is critical for people to learn how to learn and apply and adapt what they have learned.
Back in 2010 Altbach et al (2010), in their research under the auspices of UNESCO for the World Conference on Higher Education 2009, already raised concerns regarding barriers preventing HED systems from benefiting from the diversification. A prominent one is the tendency of governments to set strategies and policies that compel HEIs to emulate the top-ranked research universities. The stimulated race with the same aim deepens isomorphism leading to uncontrolled competition among academic institutions pursuing the same goals. This trend undermines diversification and differentiation of provisions, which are linked to the specific needs of a given system and compels the HEIs diverting from the expectations set on them in terms of relevance in delivery. Already in 2010, a call was made for public authorities to set policies and frameworks that promote diversification of academic models to serve varied societal needs (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010).

Little has changed so far within higher education systems, regardless of the increased diversification of learning needs and rapid expansion of higher learning beyond the formal provisions. In contrast with the relatively static traditional provisions of higher education systems, diversification in demand has deepened, expanded and increased and now recognizes no boundaries whatsoever – age, geography, technology, and profession – thus opening up greater opportunities for innovations in higher education provisions, and therefore, enhanced relevance. To close the gap, new ways of acquiring skills are emerging and rapidly growing in scope and volume, thus engaging millions of learners in ‘alternative credentials’ – such as micro-credentials, digital badges and industry-recognized certificates (Kato, Galan-Muros, & Weko, 2020), thus, expanding higher learning beyond formal education. As higher learning diversification evolves and expands, it becomes crucial to identify patterns based on which diversification and its uses could become valuable factors for setting policies for system enhancement and promotion of quality and relevance of programmes.
Throughout the last decade, an extensive discussion around diversification of HED systems and types of institutions in two major directions – vertical and horizontal – has unfolded with an attempt to identify a pattern of developments in higher education - all within the frames of formal provisions (Birnbaum, 1983) (Teichler, 2015). Most recently, driven by labor market demand for more practical and faster skills and competencies, diversification of provisions at a level of programme/course has gained momentum by expanding provisions beyond formal education. The recent diversification of the higher learning call for further elaboration on the theme by grouping the emergent patterns into both horizontal and vertical to set a more comprehensive framework for higher learning. This framework should enable flexible, affordable and inclusive higher learning for all, ensure diversity of learning opportunities – formal and alternative - complement, and supplement each other to benefit the learner.

In terms of horizontal diversification of programmes/courses, a steady trend in moving beyond traditional HED institution provisions and expanding alternative provisions from industry and EdTech firms is tangible. These come in a diversity of modes (e.g., face-to-face, online, hybrid) and models (e.g., micro-credentials, upskilling courses) and, quite often, offer hands-on competencies as a quick and affordable response to the market needs (Oliver, 2019). With the growing cost for higher education, alternative providers gain a growing popularity due to shorter programmes/degrees (e.g., micro-credentials), which through a reasonable investment of time and money ensure success in a diversity of careers. More and more candidates opt to work and study at the same time or wish to upskill while working to maintain and enhance their employability through alternative credentials. However, the current set up of recognized degrees and qualifications often leaves the specific segment of alternative credentials out of ‘recognized higher learning credentialing,’ although some governments already take steps to frame, regulate and recognize those provisions (e.g., New Zealand, Australia, lead European countries).

However, despite the major trend in the rise of a standalone, skill specific alternative provisions, employers also find this specific provision limiting since the necessary generic/transversal skills (e.g., leadership, entrepreneurship), usually covered by HEIs curricula, are lacking. Thus, the plea from industry also supports the need to have a new HED model, which ensures complementary and supplementary provisions from all types of education: formal, non-formal and informal.
The demand for flexibility in and opportunities for choosing or changing majors has grown significantly and has become a norm. The same trend is observed with learner demand for opportunities to exit and re-enter higher education with a credible credential at any time—ensuring flexible learning pathways, which would guarantee firm links with and first-hand exposure to industry on one side and enhance skills to be employable, on the other. Thus, emergence and gradual expansion of shorter degrees, pre-qualification degrees allowing flexible learning pathways, changes in fields of studies and altering career opportunities to find the best fit has gained prominence recently. This takes us to the vertical diversification of programmatic offers based on the demand for shorter periods of study and broader opportunities for diverse age groups to study and work at the same time to constantly upskill to upkeep their employability.

As per the focus group results, a solution to the dilemma could potentially be the design of flexible pathways allowing (re)entry and exit from higher education at any stage/level throughout the learning process and through application of robust mechanisms to enable stack-ability and transferability of earned credentials, such as recognition of prior learning. Flexible learning pathways allowing seamless move between careers and universities, enabling student and faculty exchange are needed whilst empowering the HEIs, industry representatives and, regulators to recognize the earned and carried over learning and credits. Some of the current solutions offered by advanced HED systems (e.g., the Netherlands, Germany) is through opening such opportunities through micro-degrees, or pre-degrees. However, this type of offer is limited since very few HEIs invest in the revision of offers to enable inclusion of this particular segment of learners (e.g., the ones that are willing to change the major or work and study at the same time) in the majors of their desire and need. In addition, those short courses developed and offered by industry often lack respective quality assurance mechanisms and therefore the required credibility to ensure seamless recognition of gained credentials across diverse providers.
Skills mismatch is a rapidly growing concern for both students, graduates and employers alike. The UNESCO study, World in 2030 (2021), surfaces major concerns raised by tertiary education students globally who were strongly concerned about higher education systems not teaching enough skills necessary for current and future employment. As per the report: ‘respondents [graduates] were also concerned about not having the same chance as others to get ahead, not having the skills needed to get by in the future, and women getting paid less and struggling to get ahead’ (p.26), which basically re-affirms failure of formal higher education to ensure inclusiveness.

Likewise, there is growing dissatisfaction of employers on the graduates’ readiness to meaningfully contribute to the organizational goals. In highlighting the crucial role that education solutions play in dealing with this challenge, respondents (employers) to the UNESCO survey (The World in 2030: public survey report, 2021) underline the importance of education that focuses on lifelong learning, capacity-building, 21st century skills, and readiness for work (p.27).

The reasons for the mismatch are multifaceted and evolve around design and logic of curriculum, faculty profile and professionalization, governments and regulatory frameworks, higher education institution management, systemic issues, the role of industry and professional associations were highlighted as key obstacles to relevance.

A. Curriculum

As the literature review and focus group results demonstrate, the core of the problems related to relevance is in the curriculum itself, its design, content, delivery methods and current approaches HEIs deploy to develop new and review the existing ones. To start with, there is unanimous agreement among the respondent stakeholders that time-based education based on 4+2+4 model (BA, MA, PhD) keeps students too long in education and diverts from reality with questionable return on investment. By the time students graduate, the achieved learning outcomes are no longer relevant, thus, the time and cost committed to education without sufficient gain negatively affects students’ life and career. Recent graduates already require a major up-skilling to fill in the gap to secure employment.

Another major obstacle to relevance is the content of curriculum, which is based on information exchange, heavily concentrate on routine learning and theory with almost no opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to develop skills and competencies. The only limited opportunity are internships or research/capstone projects, which due to the current practices in their design often fail to meet the required level of knowledge application. Regardless of the importance of internships, the current practices provide for only limited engagement of student with industry, if any and being limited in their scope fail to prepare learners for employment. Linked to the content is also the form and philosophy of assessment, which needs to be designed in a way that empowers students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, rather than punishes them.
Similarly, placement of students after graduation significantly matters but seems to be only superficially covered and not prioritized by majority of HED providers. In the market-driven systems like the USA, either students find employment or HEIs decide to close the programme. However, not all the systems globally are market-driven taking them to a comfort zone not conducive to upgrading. To add to the deficiencies in ensuring practical skills, current higher education programmes fail to provide basic/transferrable skills (UNESCO, 2021) required to survive and crucial to succeed in a rapidly changing environment – e.g., digital skills, languages, critical and creative thinking, learning to learn (OECD, 2021).

Yet another major limitation of the current design of curricula is a limited opportunity for students to have first-hand exposure to the outside world. Apart from Europe and North America, where special funding and soft regulations ensure student mobility schemes work, students in other parts of the globe face major challenges in transferring their credits and exposing themselves first-hand to diversity of learning and working experiences, contexts and cultures.

Last but not least, another critical aspect that affects the relevance of programmes is the scarce engagement with stakeholders throughout design, delivery and revision of curricula, which is often reduced to a couple of informal meetings with stakeholders and fail to add value to the program delivery causing detachment from the real world and the socio-economic needs.

B. Faculty

Faculty capacity to deliver the programme is the core of success and factors such as qualifications, especially pedagogical competencies to deliver classes effectively, compensation policy and incentive structures, professional development opportunities matter to a significant degree.

When it comes to the relevant qualifications and competencies to deliver programmes, the first and foremost issue raised is a lack of special education/training for faculty which hold qualifications in diverse subject specific areas. It deprives them of understanding the needs of students and prevents them from designing and delivering teaching, learning and assessment methodologies that promote learning and transferable skills. Further, on the one hand, very few faculty members have exposure to what happens in the labor market to enable them delivery of relevant content. On the other hand, the national regulations and related restrictions prevent hiring experienced practitioners from industry to deliver required practical skills. Next, evaluating and recognizing faculty contribution predominantly based on research productivity makes the teaching mission as inferior to research, thus pushing the faculty efforts towards research in detriment to teaching and learning. This focus on research is also amplified by global university rankings – an instrument of high importance in many systems, which further demotivate the faculty from teaching and learning.

In addition, increasingly, obstacles such as poor compensation, inadequate incentives structures, lack of relevant professional development are increasingly contributing to the decline in the attractiveness of the higher education teaching profession. As per Bock (2017), due to budget cuts, more and more HEIs opt for hiring staff on year-to-year contractual basis vs tenure track, which undermines the quality of the hired faculty and therefore the delivery. Migration of scholars and researchers to more favorable systems with better salaries, working conditions, academic freedom, and stability in academic careers is another contributing factor (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010) affecting quality and relevance of programmes in countries with more unfavorable conditions. This trend is continuing and gaining a momentum nowadays.
C. Governments and regulatory frameworks

The role of national regulators and regulatory frameworks is another key to relevance. Nowadays, governments are more concerned than ever before about increasing the number of students entering higher education, their graduation rates and attainment levels. However, they are not prioritizing the quality, relevance and the amount of learning in formal education and even less the lasting value of the obtained education. An overall look at the strategic priorities of a majority of countries strikes with the sole goal for HEIs set by government, which predominantly evolve around being globally ranked among the best 200 HEIs – a reputation race that emphasizes performance of selected HEIs over the performance of the HED systems.

With the higher learning paradigm shift and emergence of alternative provisions, a dire need to revise the role of HEIs arises. Throughout history, the role of HEIs has evolved constantly expanding the expectations and scope, thus ending up with an unclear role amid the recent global developments. The need to clearly specify the role of HED as well as due acknowledgement and definition of the role for alternative provisions is crucial to ensure quality and credible provisions complement and supplement each other in a more effective way, which leads to enhanced relevance.

Yet another obstacle caused by governments is limited autonomy and academic freedom of HEIs, which deeply touches upon the relevance of programmatic offers through governments’ deep involvement in setting the standards and performance requirements, which are not always aligned with the market needs. Thus, HEIs end up complying rather than investing in relevance and quality. Linked to that, unsustainability in the policy implementation adopted by governments that have a tendency to change disruptively, jeopardize the undertaken changes thus taking the planned reforms to a halt.

D. Higher education institution management

Management of HEIs – styles, approaches, required capacity - is another major factor in promoting quality and relevance of the programmatic offers. Globally, few HED systems/regulators require regular updates, adequate financial allocation and human resources investment in the programmes they offer to ensure relevance. As highlighted by diverse stakeholders, insufficient investment by HEIs in the revision and upgrading of the curriculum is one of the major reasons for the reduced relevance.

Furthermore, the majority of HEIs are poorly equipped to face disruptions, global challenges and are not flexible enough to respond to the new trends. An illuminating example is COVID-19, which forced HEIs across the globe to change to an online mode overnight disrupting the education of more than 220 million tertiary students by university closures (UNESCO, 2021). Due to COVID-19, major gaps in higher education management surfaced, including crises and risk management issues, education sustainability and capacity to survive in critical situations. A lack of adequate infrastructure, financial resources and capacity to teach and assess in an online mode up until now deprives many students of quality and relevant education. Even more, some regions (e.g., remote areas in Africa, the Arab States, the Asia and the Pacific, or areas suffering from war/political tensions) are deprived of constant/uninterrupted internet access, power cuts, let alone having adequate resources to support developments.
Other aspects of HEI management that cause obstacles in promoting relevance are stakeholder engagement, data-driven decision-making, and professionalism of top leadership. As the focus group results demonstrate, stakeholder engagement is key to relevance and has to be meaningfully embedded in higher education management practices. Depending on the region, there is limited interaction with key stakeholders let alone meaningful engagement in the programme development and delivery. Apart from Europe and Northern America, other regions suffer from the lack of stakeholder inputs.

Next, in the era of artificial intelligence, the importance of data driven management cannot be overemphasized. Yet, as it surfaced, although all HEIs to some extent collect data, very few are capable of collecting meaningful, relevant and accurate data that support them in their decision-making. The lack of data transparency and publication of relevant information is yet another major problem contributing to the irrelevance of the programmatic offers.

Last, but not least, the extent of professionalism of the top leadership and their capacity to embrace the rapid diversification, the learning paradigm shift and related challenges does matter. If substantive changes are to take place, a major re-evaluation of the required qualifications, skills and competencies of top leaders should mark the launch of changes.

**E. Systemic issues**

Other factors that influence the relevance of programmes to a palpable extent bear systemic nature. As mentioned above, with the rapidly diversifying HED provisions and modalities (e.g., online, hybrid, face-to-face) there is little effort invested to design a new HED model, which brings in the values of the ever-growing diversity through promoting credible, trustworthy and relevant provisions of both formal and non-formal education in a way that complement and supplement each other. There is also an urgent need to design a systemic and coherent set of actions across the whole education sector and across all the education levels to ensure a holistic approach to the system that ensures coherent and sustainable functioning. As current practices demonstrate, national authorities responsible for education tend to make changes in the system by ‘putting patches’ to fix issues, thus failing to connect the new developments with broader concepts driving the changes.

As such, systems end up suffering from a ‘Frankenstein Monster Effect’ – putting together unrelated reforms, thus diverting from the initial aspirations. For example, the introduction of a new HED degree in some systems hardly linked to secondary education outcomes or to the occupations or skills required in the market. Thus, a poor educational background of students prior to enrolment leading to grade inflation and lowering standards for admissions was highlighted as one of the reasons of incongruence and incoherency across different levels of education. The students coming out of high school are hardly aware of the prospects each of the career paths offers and less so ready to engage in gainful learning.

Last, but not least, the lack of transparent, accurate, relevant and valid data on system landscape and performance in both HED and industry, causes major obstacles in informed decision-making, thus affecting relevance of programmes. Ironically, in the era of AI, and the HEI being the hub of generating knowledge and advancing technological developments, the majority of HED systems globally still suffer from lack of adequate, accurate and relevant data to drive decisions.
Yet another factor in promoting relevance of higher education programmes is a meaningful engagement of industry and professional associations with HEIs. Both – HEIs and industry representatives/professional associations have limited interest in such engagement predominantly, due to the lack of mutual trust, commitment or common goals (European Commission, 2018). Employers’ limited trust or hope is reinforced by the length of time required to obtain qualifications offered by HEIs, which fail to meet their expectations. It takes, at least, around seven years from conveying the market needs to HEIs until HEIs are able to graduate a professional with the relevant skills, and by the time they graduate the skill is no longer relevant. Trying to close the gap, it is easier for employers to come up with their own solutions to close the skills gap rather than engage with HEIs, which take too long to respond to their need, let alone deliver the expected skills and competencies.

Likewise, predominant across all global regions is the distrust towards professional associations raised by HEIs. As per HEIs, professional associations’ key concern relates to protecting professionals rather than the professions, which prevents them from designing relevant standards for promoting professions. Further, in some regions (e.g., Latin America), meaningful engagement between HEIs and industry representatives becomes impossible due to the nature of markets, which are dominated by large transnational companies. In these contexts, HEIs find difficult to cooperate with employers since they are more interested in contributing back to their own countries’ economy, hence reluctant to deal with HEIs. Lack of common language and understanding between industry and HED providers is also among major obstacles to meaningful engagement.

Nonetheless, obstacles also have a nature to push for innovative solutions and the following good practices have been identified that could potentially promote relevance of programmes. A good example is partnerships with industry and other stakeholders, which offer multiple benefits. A good practice identified is Barcelona Digital Talent Association, which proposes short programmes/micro-credentials to develop specific skills required in the local labour market. Afterwards, an open call invites local HEIs to bid for proposals to offer these programmes/courses. The effectiveness of the approach is based on ensuring that the programmes cover the identified skills gap and, at the same time are offered by HEIs who are adequate covered by quality assurance measures thus resulting in credible, recognized and transferrable credits. The approach bridges the efforts of HEIs and professional associations through devolving the learning outcomes and content development to the industry and its delivery to HEIs.

Very widely discussed and rapidly expanding their audience are micro-credentials offered by industry to close specific skills gap, which help develop the necessary competencies within a shorter period (e.g., than macro-credentials/full qualifications) and gain access to employment. CISCO, Microsoft, Amazon, Google and other high-tech companies are designing and offering alternative credentials. However, these providers are often looking up at professional associations and other QA bodies to come up with standards for QA to cover them. Micro-credentials are also offered by HEIs and in this latter case, some systems have solutions to cover those provisions by QA (e.g., USA, New Zealand, Australia) and enable stacking into macro-credentials through application of recognition of prior learning (RPL) mechanisms.

Last but not least, a good practice that helps in the identification of labour market needs is the establishment of an easy access to an AI driven platform, that enables data collection and management system on all the qualified job offers in a region (e.g., Burning Glass2). Through such a platform, requirements of the labour market are grouped into skill sets and competencies enabling HEIs to a better understanding of labour market and thus enhancing the relevance of their programmatic offer.

To better understand quality of higher education programmes, it makes sense to have a brief look at the nature and definition of quality and quality assurance provisions nowadays and the extent of relevance of both in measuring and assuring quality of higher learning, outcomes and relevance to socio-economic needs.

Since its rapid expansion at the turn of the 20th century, quality has been described as liquid or too fluid (Weenink, Aarts, & Jacobs, 2018) and any attempt to define quality ended up with Ball’s statement: What the hell is quality? (Ball, 1985). While this was true for decades, it makes a sense to rethink and clearly define it now given the maturity level of QA system and existence of massive data and research on how quality and quality assurance works. A clearly framed and relevant definition will facilitate setting a powerful vision for and realistic expectations from quality.

Like any type of evolution, the definition of quality in higher education evolves and takes different forms as it moves from one stage of its development to the other. For the last decades, the most popular and working definition of quality in higher education has been fitness for purpose (Harvey & Green, 1993) where the HEIs and their programmes were evaluated against the mission set and where setting the mission itself has been subject of a wide debate. As a concept, fitness for purpose has a tangible role in supporting HED systems, institutions and programmes to improve structurally and build on the capacity of systems to self-reflect and improve based on the identified gaps. However, by predominantly looking at the inputs and processes, the current approaches to HED quality assurance fail to serve the ever increasing expectations set on higher learning (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015) (Cheng, 2017). As also confirmed by the stakeholder responses, rigid QA systems limit potentials for innovation and diversification of offers to cover the rapidly growing skills gap and socio-economic needs. In particular, as INQAAHE Global Study (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020), the current QA standards are predominantly designed to measure the proxies of quality rather than the core itself and the following areas are yet to be covered:

- Recognition of qualifications
- Addressing the rapid diversification of higher education provisions
- Measurement of the learning gain
- Links with the labour market and measurement of employability
- Relevance of the qualifications offered (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020)

To be able to come up with a redefined, relevant and potent definition for quality it makes sense to also consider the current expectations from HED given the dynamically growing impact of ICT, increased trends in smart systems, and diversification of HED offers. Virtually, the trends lead to economy where almost all the professions would require higher levels of knowledge to be able to survive the ever-growing competition and achieve the set goals. Thus, relevance, regardless of the types of provisions, comes to be the term to guide the current and future developments of quality and quality assurance of higher learning.
A glance at the quality assurance landscape reveals more than 350 quality assurance providers globally with diverse profiles – measuring quality of HED provisions at institutional and programme levels. Out of 350, only very few concentrates on quality measurement based on subject specific standards defined by industry and professional associations. The predominant majority measure quality of provisions based on generic standards, set at national, regional or international levels (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). In many countries/regions, an approach underpinning ‘one size fits all’ standards applied in evaluations with diverse purposes (e.g., institution, program, QA system) has proven to be as ineffective, adds no value and leads to accreditation fatigue. Thus, these systems end up having programmes that are evaluated against generic standards, in some cases multiple times, which have no reference to any of the professional standards, thus have limited potential to contribute to relevance and quality of the programmes.

Elken & Stensaker (2020) identified diversification trends in functions of select European QA providers (Elken & Stensaker, 2020) such as engagement with new fields by focusing on other levels of education, some degree of cross-border quality assurance, and new tasks such as consultancy, research or expanding the geographical coverage. Further, focus group discussions have also identified some good practices adding up to the diversification trends. As an example, some advanced countries re-focused their approach to QA by developing standards that promote apprenticeship, balance between work-based and campus-based learning, as well as employer-led standards. Other systems have launched risk-based reviews to ensure an outcome-based approach, thus reducing the external scrutiny burden on HEIs. European HED systems, due to the requirements set by European Standards and Guidelines (2015) avail of the benefits from active and meaningful stakeholder engagement, which has potentials to contribute to relevance significantly if applied adequately. In the USA, the pro-active system of professional associations ensures the latter bear responsibility of the profession and develop/revise professional standards that contribute significantly to relevance of HED programmes. However, these are characteristic features in some advanced systems. Globally and predominantly, the current quality assurance frameworks, including the standards and procedures, fail to support the diversity of provisions, promote quality of outcomes and outputs and, thus relevance to socio-economic needs. Standards that are outcome and output oriented, contribute to the socio-economic needs and support closure of the skills gap are largely missing.

Other limitations of current QA and accreditation standards are their focus solely on formal education pathways and time-based curricula. With the paradigm change, diversification and expansion of alternative provisions a major revamp is required to ensure that diversity of offers is covered by a relevant set of standards and instils trust and credibility. Further, the standards in use fail to cover all the levels of formal education. Only few systems globally cover bachelor, master and doctoral programmes with predominant majority focusing only on undergraduate degrees (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020).
Design and development of quality assurance and accreditation standards is another major issue that limits their contribution to relevance and quality. Governments see QA and accreditation as a tool for control and compliance, less so as an enhancement tool. Largely, designed, adopted, and implemented by national regulators, the standards tend to favour political agendas. As such, QA tends to infringe independence, limit academic freedom thus questioning trust in the external evaluation measures. In some regions, standards are transferred and diffused from more advanced systems, with little efforts invested to adjust to the local context, culture, and socio-economic needs. Those QA systems end up adding little value to the development of HEIs, let alone promoting the quality and relevance of programmes and contribution to socio-economic needs. Yet another major obstacle in quality assurance practices that mar HED systems is failure to establish well-balanced systems with explicit links between the autonomy granted to HEIs and the accountability tools, which limits QA systems to compliance mechanisms.

Given the paradigm change in learning and its expansion beyond the boundaries of formal education, relevance of current QA practices is in jeopardy due to its failure to embrace the ever-increasing diversity and limited capacity to proactively respond to the emerging trends. As it is now, it fails to adequately cover the existing programmes with relevant standards driven by professions. Likewise, despite some emerging practices, QA principally fails to cover alternative provisions from industry, thus limiting the opportunities for learners to avail of the benefits of growing opportunities to upgrade and upskill for better employment and life-long learning. Coupled with it is the lack of recognition of such provisions in the formal education system and career structures, which most often discourages such innovative practices in some regions.

Last, but not the least role in the effectiveness of quality assurance measures plays the expertise on which the peer reviews draw to take decisions on quality and relevance of programmes. Majority of experts on the review panel are peer reviewers who come from academia and have very little links with industry. Despite good practices in some systems with stakeholder engagement across all the phases of the review and decision-making (e.g., Europe), in majority of systems globally such an engagement is not existent (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020).
Recognition of qualifications

Linked to relevance and quality of programmes is recognition of the awarded credentials, which becomes increasingly important, especially when touching upon higher education provisions beyond formal/traditional modes. In the majority of countries, unless the qualification awarded is recognized officially, credentials would not be considered as valid for employment, which actually discourages learners from taking alternative routes of education, unless they do so for personal growth.

Unarguably, qualification frameworks (QF) driven by robust quality assurance mechanisms are crucial in this recognition; however, as the results of the study demonstrate, regardless of vast discourse on QA underpinning qualifications recognition, significant efforts are yet required to make that interplay work.

Development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), launched in the late 1990s, have become a major trend in qualifications recognition. NQFs classify a country’s qualifications at different levels and are useful tools and vital reference points for lifelong learning and comparing qualifications across borders. Majority of countries have adopted or are in the process of developing one – predominantly at a generic level and some attempts to also cover subject specific qualifications have been made. Some countries (predominantly in Europe) have managed to align with/verify their QFs against regional ones to promote readability and recognition of qualifications awarded by HEIs (e.g., countries in Europe).

As per the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) in 2019-2020, 39 European countries were cooperating on the European Qualifications Framework implementation. Thirty-six countries formally linked their NQFs with EQF; six countries updated their referencing reports; 33 countries started tagging their certificates, diplomas and qualifications in their databases with NQF and EQF; 38 countries have officially established/adopted their NQFs/ Thirty-six countries are working towards comprehensive coverage of all the levels of education.

However, despite its existence for more than two decades, very few countries have undertaken its revision to ensure relevance. What is more, quality assurance mechanisms measuring relevance and quality of qualifications frameworks are non-existent. With major changes in the HED provisions, the current QFs, which were predominantly built on the pre-ICT era model need a major revision and redesign if they are to remain relevant and serve as a tool to promote quality and relevance of provisions. A good example is the New Zealand’s approach, which with the recent revision also embraced the role of micro-credentials in its QF.

Being predominantly developed to describe generic level qualifications, the learning outcomes in the QFs hardly address the field specific requirements, which are necessary for promoting relevance and quality of programmatic offer and ensure recognition of the awarded degrees. As the analysis demonstrates, apart from Europe and North America that have somehow well-established professional associations that contribute to relevance by defining standards from profession, the remaining regions see the lack of professional standards and sectorial qualifications frameworks as an obstacle to promoting relevance.

Further, heavily focusing on formal education, the QFs fail to acknowledge existence of an immense body of higher learning expressed in alternative provisions, thus demonstrating only a limited part of country's higher education profile. One of the pioneers in embracing the recent trends is New Zealand, which recently included alternative provisions into its QF. Other advanced systems are currently exploring potentials for such an approach.

To support recognition of qualifications, UNESCO has invested significant efforts through launching regional conventions mid-20th century (Wells, 2014) and in 2019 a Global Recognition Convention was adopted to promote qualifications recognition globally. Unlike the regional conventions, the global one clearly specifies quality and quality assurance as the driving force for QF implementation and ultimately, recognition of qualifications. Although countries are committing to the conventions, very few education systems take tangible steps to put in place the necessary regulatory frameworks that would underpin design, delivery and monitoring mechanisms that promote implementation of the conventions, thus facilitate recognition of qualifications regionally and globally. However, good practices merit due credit. For example, the European approach to qualifications framework and promotion of mutual recognition of qualifications based on Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) is a bright example, supported with clear promotion mechanisms underpinned by required regulatory frameworks of ratifying countries. In Europe, the success of the regional convention is also underpinned by the Bologna Declaration (1999)\(^4\), of which quality assurance and recognition of qualifications are the key action lines. Unfortunately, the same cannot be stated on other regional conventions covering the rest of the globe.

Last, but not least, recognition of qualifications that are awarded in an online mode merit a robust system for recognition provided they are supported by relevant quality assurance mechanisms. Driven by COVID-19 all HEIs were compelled to move onto an online mode overnight. Yet, majority of countries (e.g., the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Africa) due to regulatory restrictions did not have systems in place to recognize online degrees and the systems struggled hard to come up with solutions overnight.

Ultimately, if education systems are to succeed, guided by the international soft regulations, robust national regulatory frameworks are to be established to support learners in their quest of their career and life prospects. QFs supported by Regional and Global Recognition Conventions are solid promoters of qualification recognition. For QFs to succeed, they should also be supported by robust internal and external quality assurance mechanisms which allow regular measurement against their relevance and, therefore, ongoing enhancement. Likewise, in the countries ratifying the conventions, robust regulatory frameworks are due to support design, development, implementation, and regular monitoring of the instruments that are to support the needed recognition.

05. Policy recommendations
If HED provisions are to be relevant and of high quality, if no one is to be left behind in this increasingly diversified context and uncertainty, the roles of HED and QA need a major re-imagination followed by their re-design and re-invention.

This section highlights key policy recommendations to support the necessary changes driving relevance and quality of higher education programmes:

**Diversification of higher learning and new learning paradigm**
- Redefining the approach to higher education provisions and embracing the paradigm shift in which all types of learning – formal, non-formal and informal – complement and supplement each other opening up opportunities for relevant and credible learning.
- Normalizing flexible learning pathways supported by relevant and credible structures to empower learners in pursuance of their career opportunities and enhanced employability. Reasonable and meaningful workloads (minimum credits) for alternative provisions need to be clearly established.

**Relevance of higher learning and its programmes**

**Curriculum**
- Ensuring diversity of approaches in delivering the curriculum – time- and competency-based – to meet the individual needs of learners.
  - Making practical, basic and transferrable skills an integral part of the curriculum, thus ensuring a balanced provision for knowledge, skills and competencies, and widening opportunities for learners.
  - Ensuring stakeholder meaningful engagement in the design and delivery of curriculum for promoting relevance and quality in provisions.

**Faculty**
- Professionalizing faculty training to help them deliver the curriculum content in a way that molds the necessary skills in students to effectively engage in LLL to ensure relevant and quality programmes.
- Establishing and engaging a new profile for faculty that combines academic knowledge with industry and caters for LLL as well as for LL learners.

**Governments and regulatory frameworks**
- Acknowledging and clearly specifying the roles of and expectations from diversity of higher education providers – HEIs, alternative providers – thus ensuring a coherent and effective co-existence of both.
- Ensuring academic freedom and autonomy as prerequisites for enhanced relevance and quality, not least fostering creativity and innovation. Robust accountability mechanisms should support the granted autonomy and well-balance with it.
HEI management

- Promoting the following key enablers to drive HED management: relevant and accurate data, stakeholder engagement, robust policies on sustainable education provision.

- Promoting international collaboration to agree on standards and guidelines for data gathering and handling to ensure common language of communication between HEIs and industry.

- Empowering HEIs in catering to the diversity of learners – the regular students and those ones in LLL – through design of a diversity of pedagogical models that ensure flexible learning pathways.

- Promoting agile governance and leadership in HEIs. The HED leadership should become facilitators between external stakeholders and academic staff – making sure that this collaboration is established, meaningful and balanced.

Systemic issues

- Adopting a holistic and coherent approach to education system design to ensure a balance between quality, relevance and efficiency across all education levels, not just HED.

- Positioning transparent, accurate, relevant and valid data as building blocks for informed decision-making in terms of programmatic offers and required skills.

- Governments need to invest reasonable amount of funds in research of higher education and student learning to be able to exploit the data gathered.

Industry and professional associations

- Sharing a common language and holding mutual trust are the premises based on which HEIs should engage with industry representatives.

- Facilitating and fostering trust by governments – not least by providing regulatory frameworks to promote effective collaboration, providing incentive structures to foster collaboration, etc.

- Emphasizing on the role of quality assurance bodies as an intermediate between HEIs and industry.

- Increasing the role of professional associations in promoting relevance through setting field specific standards for professions to support HEIs and QA providers in the quest for relevance and quality.

Quality and quality assurance

- Promoting relevance and quality of programmes through a revised definition of quality followed by a major restructuring of quality assurance approaches and standards.

- Establishing a set of international standards for promoting quality and relevance to guide quality assurance and measure the performance of quality assurance providers globally.
Ensuring quality and relevance of programmes through revised approaches to accreditation of programmes, which are driven by field specific standards key to the profession, framed and measured with active engagement of industry and professional associations. Increasing participation of subject-specific accreditors in the accreditation of programmes and short courses.

Revising quality assurance frameworks – policies, criteria, standards and guidelines – to ensure output and outcome-based approach and measurement of relevance of provisions to socio-economic needs. The revised frameworks should enable quality assurance of diversity of provisions – formal and non-formal - as per their profiles, cater to specific needs and cover all levels of provisions. Alternative provisions should be structured into a recognizable system (e.g., ECTS) to make sure that non-formal learning is not a new breeding ground for fraud and players that want to exploit the system.

Factoring local contexts, cultural peculiarities, and socio-economic needs when designing/revising quality assurance frameworks, to ensure quality and relevance.

Deciding on the eligibility of accreditors to conduct program reviews as per their recognition status against international standards/best practices in assuring quality and relevance.

Professionalizing QA and external reviewers is the key. QA procedures, including the reviews and decision-making should bring in diversity of expertise through active and meaningful engagement of key stakeholders.

Recognition of qualifications

For countries that have ratified UN Regional and Global Recognition Conventions demonstrating the existence of relevant mechanisms that promote implementation of the Conventions should become a priority task. Regular evaluation and system-wide reports should demonstrate the achievements and feasibility of the deployed recognition mechanism.

Revising qualifications frameworks to ensure relevance and guarantee the three dimensions - knowledge, skills and general competence – are reflected in the Higher Education in a balanced way.

Embracing the growing diversification in degrees and programmatic offers in qualifications frameworks.

Deploying robust external and internal evaluation systems measuring quality and relevance of Qualifications Frameworks regularly.

Developing sectorial qualifications frameworks to guide subject specific areas, thus promoting quality and relevance of programmes.
References


Quality and relevance of programmes in 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

https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education

cum di audae sunt.@CUNEsco.com

@UNESCO