



International cooperation to
enhance synergies

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This paper was commissioned by UNESCO and is part of 3rd World Higher Education Conference organized by UNESCO on May 18-20, 2022, with the purpose of enhancing the contribution of higher education institutions and systems world-wide, under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its pledge to leave no one behind, and looking at the Futures of Education. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to UNESCO.

This paper can be cited with the following reference: Pedró, F., and Galán, V. 2022, *International Cooperation to Enhance Synergies*. Paper commissioned for the World Higher Education Conference 18-20 May 2022.

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Summary

International cooperation has become an agenda of increasing strategic importance for higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide, including that of science and research, in response to both the threats and opportunities of globalization. The global knowledge economy -the increasingly globalized, technology- and science-based set of economic relationships that requires high levels of sophisticated international knowledge, skills, and relationships- is strongly impacting international cooperation in higher education (HED) and vice versa.

Paradoxically, competition for resources, talent, and access to the best academic journals and top positions in world HED rankings have become driving forces for international cooperation. Sometimes, this has happened at the expense of more just and equitable cooperation. In a reciprocal relationship, international cooperation increases international students and scholars and international co-authored publications, which are also the driving forces behind greater national and institutional international cooperation schemes. As a result of certain international cooperation efforts, HEIs can also expect to gain national and international attractiveness as a destination for talented students and faculty and, in some cases, significant financial incentives.

However, this widespread rationale does not account for the full extent of international cooperation in HED. Many institutions, especially in the Global South, expect much more from international cooperation than access to more resources and greater prestige: they count on opportunities for capacity building, for raising their voice on the international HED agenda and global research priorities, and, above all, for promoting a humanistic approach to cross-cultural understanding and fertilization. In summary, a new paradigm in international cooperation is needed that is fair, multidirectional and on an equal footing between countries and institutions, rather than unidirectional and centred on commercial and economic interests.

Beyond North-South aid flows to education, it is critical to strengthen South-South and triangular cooperation. The international community must play a critical role in assisting states and non-state actors in aligning around common goals, norms, and standards necessary to realize a new social contract for education. Subsidiarity should be respected, and efforts at the regional, national, and local levels should be supported. International cooperation and the work of global institutions must be used to help the specific educational needs of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and stateless persons.

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.

1. A synthesis based on the report of the UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda (EGU2030): Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (2022). The full report can be found here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380519> (Accessed 9 February 2022.)

Most of the views shared in the document are a mix of a literature review and summaries of the thoughts eminent scholars in the area of internationalization and cooperation in higher education shared during the focus group discussion meetings, namely: Dr. Bernhard Streitwieser, Professor at the George Washington University (USA), and Co-Chair of the GW UNESCO Chair in International Education for Development; Dr. Francisco Marmolejo, President of Higher Education at the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development; Dr. Jocelyne Gacel-Ávila, Director of the Division of Studies on State and Society of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, and Director of the Regional Observatory on Internationalization and Networks in Tertiary Education (OBIRET); Dr. Marcela Mollis, Associate professor at the Department of Education Studies of the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina; Dr. Muhammadou Kah, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of The Gambia; Dr. Nico Jooste, Senior Director at the African Centre for Higher Education Internationalization, South Africa; Dr. Philip Altbach, Research Professor and Founding Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College (USA); Dr. Annette Insanally, former coordinator of the Latin American and Caribbean Centre of the University of the West Indies; Dr. Giulia Marchesini, Senior Officer at the World Bank, and Dr. Mark Zapp, Professor at the University of Luxembourg. The workshops were facilitated by Dr. Prof. Hana El-Ghali from the American University in Beirut.

José Antonio Quinteiro, from the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), provided contributions to this document. The authors would like to acknowledge the useful feedback and suggestions made by Leanne Davey, Vanja Gutovic, Keith Holmes, and Emma Sabzalieva.

Acronyms

COAR	Confederation of Open Access Repositories
CODATA	Committee on Data for Science and Technology
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
HED	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
IESALC	International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
ISR	International Science Council
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Official development assistance
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHEC2022	UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022

Presentation

This document has been drafted with a UN human-rights approach, noting the urgency of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to 'leave no one behind'. The chapters in this paper have all addressed the challenges of international cooperation through higher education by means of moving towards collaboration in ways that contribute to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The universality of the 2030 Agenda, reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), makes development everyone's business. The ambitious and shared pursuit of the attainment of the SDGs underscores the urgency of establishing innovative approaches to international cooperation by HEIs.

The ideas framed in this document are expected to be a useful starting point to rethink international cooperation to make it more international, equitable and of mutual benefit. They aim to set the base to build a common agenda for higher education international cooperation.

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01.

The concept of international cooperation in higher education

As a concept, international cooperation in HED is evolving rapidly and adopts different meanings according to the nature of the proponent, be that governments or HEIs. Although the dominant discourse among the latter is that internationalization is deeply shined into their mission, the fact is that only a few countries (11 per cent) have a nation-wide internationalization strategy for HED. Instead, HEIs have different strands of work that are not always intertwined: teaching and research may seem two sides of the same coin, a university, but in practice the way in which international cooperation happens in each of these two strands follows different logics. While the recent COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the value of international cooperation in research, with clear alliances among universities across regions, the same is less often the case in teaching programs, with only 3 per cent of students being physically mobile (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022a). International cooperation seems to work well only in graduate programs in areas where professionals have the financial means and incentives to participate in multi-country opportunities.

International cooperation among HEIs come in different shapes and forms: it can be bilateral or multilateral, project-driven or sustained over time, formalized at various degrees, involving partners other than HEIs (such as companies, schools, or governments) or not, involving students, academics, managers or a combination of the previous actors and spanning over several regions or just limited to one. Yet, the most fundamental divide in international cooperation is still related to the frontier between the Global North and the Global South, and how countries and institutions within these boundaries operate to strategically use internationalization.

The main drivers for international cooperation in HED are deeply affected by this North-South divide, and the resulting clash or coincidence of interests. The situation of imbalance at all levels leads to alternative sets of expectations. In the best-case scenario, international cooperation in HED is instrumental in promoting peace and mutual understanding, human connectedness, and humanitarianism, while joint forces to address global issues such as the ones reflected in the SDGs. Under this framework, the main expectations of institutions regarding international cooperation would refer to: (i) the opportunities for exchanging ideas and experiences through peer-learning and joint capacity development activities, (ii) gaining access to complementary resources, increasing efficiencies and reducing costs, (iii) joining forces to get a stronger voice regionally or internationally, (iv) contributing to address regional imbalances and strengthen the capacities of emerging institutions in the Global South through technical and academic assistance, or (v) increasing reputation by forging alliances with other institutions whose names are well recognized worldwide. In addition to all these expectations, there are also less obvious goals and yet as much, if not more, powerful, which include economic and commercial interests or new and subtle forms of academic colonialism.

02.

Reframing international cooperation

In HED, internationalization used to be defined as the set of substantial changes in the context and inner life of HEIs in connection with an increasing frequency of cross-border activities. Phenomena that are often considered characteristic of internationalization are increased knowledge transfer, physical mobility, cooperation, and international education and research. The change in university strategy can be seen in the increase in international cooperation among HEIs, namely HED consortia (Beerkens and Derwende, 2007), twinning (Prem, 2014), partnerships, and virtual and affiliated campuses (Knight, 2011).

2.1.

From traditional to economic approaches

The traditional emphasis in international cooperation has been on exchanges and collaboration to understand diverse cultures and their languages better. These dominant foundations have undergone significant changes over the years, from colonial formations to humanitarian ideas linked to peace and reconciliation in the post-war period, to a development agenda during the Cold War. However, since the mid-1990s, there has been a gradual but increasingly visible shift towards greater competition. Van der Wende (2001) calls this a paradigm shift from cooperation to competition. Jones and de Wit (2014) speak of the globalization of internationalization, which requires tertiary education actors in middle- and low-income countries to choose between a more competitive direction of internationalization or a more socially responsible approach.

Now, there seems to be an increasing focus on its economic and commercial potential (Knight, 2015) that has a primarily competitive orientation with national interest as the main driver. This shift towards an economic logic has driven the growth of internationalization, and it is now presented as a universal phenomenon (Chankseliani, 2018). Therefore, efforts to increase international cooperation have shifted over time, first, from the pursuit of academic and cultural exchange to promoting peace and mutual understanding, and then to development aid and increasingly to national competitiveness, trade, and economic considerations (Knight, 2015).

However, these rationales have never been singular, and there are multiple overlapping rationales for internationalization (de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015). Their complex and hybrid nature is currently overshadowed by debates about a dominant rationale with a particularly North American and Eurocentric focus. The current disillusionment about the co-optation of internationalization by neoliberal globalization stems from a naivety that internationalization already had a solid theoretical and practical basis for maintaining its trajectory separate from economic globalization (Beck, 2012). Thus, while international cooperation has become increasingly aligned with economic and commercial motives that internalize neoliberal categories and assumptions in recent years, it has maintained a strong connection to other logics and ideas, in particular positive visions of human connectedness and humanitarianism.

1.2. Differentiation and the role of research-driven institutions

Excellence initiatives, i.e., national or international strategies that promote excellence in teaching and research, have led to differentiation within national systems by separating an elite sector of world-class universities from other more nationally and regionally oriented HEIs. Rankings have come to play a leading role in the construction of excellence schemes. According to Marginson (2017), 'global ranking has remade global HED as a relational environment'. This has been done in three ways. First, through competition, HED is referred to as a competitive marketplace of universities and countries. Second, through hierarchy, as a central element of the valuation system. And third, through performance, leading to 'an often-frenetic culture of continuous improvement at each institution' (Marginson, 2017).

The growing importance of university rankings has played a key role in the landscape of HED and research collaboration, which is itself indicative of the increasing commercialization and involvement of for-profit companies in all aspects of the international HED agenda. Although, inevitably, rankings are widely used for reference, the risks attached to them, including oversimplification, de-contextualization, and denaturalization of the mission of universities, seem to be only noticed by academic specialists.

Research-driven institutions have revised their core missions as they strive to be entrepreneurial and market-relevant (Pusser and Marginson 2013). A culture of prestige has emerged, influencing universities to be perceived as 'excellent' or 'world-class' in terms of research, teaching, and student experience (Blackmore, Blackwell, and Edmondson 2016). Research-intensive universities play a particularly vital role in the global knowledge economy and are among the most internationally linked institutions. They have strong links with similar institutions worldwide, host international faculty and students, and, increasingly, operate in English. Excellence initiatives are underway to develop world-class universities in countries around the world, particularly in the European Union, Asia, and Africa.

1.3 • Challenging knowledge diplomacy and the need for a fresh approach to international cooperation

Globally, a common mistake is to view international cooperation as a goal rather than a means to an end: improving the quality of education, research, and service to society. For decades, international academic activities were, primarily, the domain of national governments as part of their foreign policy, now mainly referred to as 'soft power,' 'public diplomacy' or, as Knight (2020) prefers, 'knowledge diplomacy.' By the late 1980s, HEIs began to reflect on their role globally and develop international activities to support institutional goals and strategies. Institutions developing international cooperation strategies face significant challenges and pressures: revenue generation, competition for talent, brand image and reputation, the need to focus on international research and publications, attracting international students and scholars, and English as a language of research and teaching. International cooperation between institutions and programs is often viewed from a supply and demand perspective, where all parties seek to improve their economic prospects from a 'transaction' that brings benefits to all of them. Global North institutions contribute capacity (and presumably, quality) with the incentives being financial benefits and international branding, while foreign partners, from the Global South, receive capacity-building assistance, to develop and stimulate growth in their economies (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Much of the literature frames branch campuses and the many cross-border forms of international mobility similarly. In addition, institutional alliances are linkages between institutions of similar status (Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008). Where alliances exist between higher and lower status institutions, they are often presented through a deficit discourse with a developmental rationale or designed to benefit the more advantaged partner by way of selling services or improving its international reputation (Obamba & Mwema, 2009). Thus, internationalization at the individual, institution, and nation level becomes an investment for profit rather than a collaborative effort to promote more humanistic goals.

These perspectives conflict with a more inclusive and less elitist approach that addresses the needs of local students and staff and creates opportunities for these groups. There seems to be a tension between a short-term neoliberal approach to international cooperation, focused primarily on mobility and research, and a long-term global approach, focused on global learning for all. More than ever, the purposes and processes of international cooperation are being debated concerning the changing political map.

International cooperation strategies in universities around the world seem to be based on three emerging value-driven models. In Western universities, a commercial imperative underpins internationalization processes and their understanding. In Confucian nations and many in the Middle East, a deep-seated cultural imperative is at the heart of the internationalization agenda. Finally, in the Global South, a curriculum value-driven process characterizes the internationalization priorities of their universities.

In the Global South (Thondhlana et al., 2021) international cooperation in HED continues to gain momentum. This is evidenced by the increased awareness of the need to use a strategic approach to it and be guided using contextual lenses, particularly decolonization. In addition, the trend to enhance regionalization and South-South cooperation shows a shift from policy borrowing of the Western paradigm and the strong propensity for 'vertical internationalization' (Jones and de Wit, 2014). Countries or regions that were previously not considered major partners have suddenly acquired greater or renewed importance in this context. This is the case of several Central European countries, and countries such as Rwanda; Chile; Haiti; Mexico; Vietnam, and others. And this list will surely grow and change in the coming years.

At the same time, new areas of activity have been added to the traditional ones. Cooperation activities in agriculture, education, health, forestry, and hydrology continue to be particularly important, but these have been joined by more recent ones related to the environment, community development, and women's promotion. In recent years, there has also been an increasing demand for massive university intervention in democratic development, governance, human rights training, civil law and justice, conflict resolution, and public administration training.

Unfortunately, multinational collaborations between countries in the South are still rare; these are mostly health systems (Osama 2008). Indeed, the experiences of many practitioners in less developed countries would be particularly well suited to assist scale-up efforts in other low-income countries with similar cultures and challenges (Ivers et al. 2010) and could also inform some processes in high/middle income countries too. In developing countries, organizations are increasingly seeking partnerships for technological change, fostering the emergence of innovation ecosystems. However, many countries are still in the process of building an organized system that requires adequate institutions and policies to guide incentives and facilitate the process. Where such a system is being build, such as in Brazil or South Africa, strong local capabilities to identify relevant technologies and the appropriate transfer mechanism are easily identifiable, and absorbed and adapted according to local economic, social, technical, and environmental conditions.



03.

The role of international aid for higher education

A legitimate question at this point is what role international aid is playing in this context. Traditionally it has played a vital role through financing development initiatives in countries facing structural constraints. Foreign aid, particularly in the form of official development assistance (ODA), has been conceptualized as a means used by wealthy countries to assist least developed ones in stimulating economic growth, improving living standards, and even building more robust institutions. As of today, ODA has been considered the 'gold standard' of international aid and cash flows have continually increased over time, particularly those targeting education, including HED (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022b).

Still, evidence of ODA outcomes shows mixed development results, which is why scholars have engaged in an intense debate around the provision of ODA funding. While some argue in favor of increasing ODA flows as an economic and human development catalyst (Sachs, 2005) that contributes to the SDGs agenda (SDG Financing Lab, 2021), others are concerned about the inefficiencies, risks of budgetary dependency, and potentially detrimental long-term effects (Deaton, 2013; Easterly, 2006; Qian, 2015).

ODA targeting HED represented 2.7 per cent of the total ODA flows in 2019, this is US\$5.2 billion (OECD CRS, 2021). These flows are heavily skewed towards universities, leaving a marginal amount of financial aid to tertiary technical programs even though the TVET education sector plays a particularly important role in developing economies. Such a trend brings forward discussions surrounding the degree to which the design of international aid balances the local recipient needs within global environments.

Flows follow a strong pattern from the Global North to the Global South, with Germany and France as the main donors. Funding patterns typically have strong colonial-era ties (Kim, 2014) and a trade focus (Ali, Banks and Parsons, 2015). Further donor trends include the emergence of countries that are not in the Development Assistant Committee (DAC), which are increasingly dedicating a higher share of resources to international aid. On the other hand, an overview of the main recipients of HED ODA reveals that, despite their ability to raise domestic resources, upper-middle countries capture most of those funding, being China the country and Asia and the Pacific the region that receive more funding (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022b). The declining share of ODA directed towards Africa, which has the lowest human development indicators and is also likely to become home to the world's largest number of youths in 2050, reflects the urgency for the international community to enhance its evidence-based and collaboration mechanisms to better target those staying behind (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022b).

Just below three quarters of the disbursed ODA for HED was dedicated to scholarships and its imputed student costs (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022b). This can help achieve the SDG target 4.b, which call for increasing the volume of ODA flows given as HED scholarships, particularly for least developed countries, small islands, and African nations. However, the reliance on these types of aid, closely related to international mobility, may raise questions regarding their impact on the development of

recipient HED systems since those resources are reinvested within donor countries. This opens an important space for debate towards shared purposes, commitments, norms, and standards established in the way in which aid has been given, bringing to light reflections on the importance of providing access for those populations whose realization of the universal right to education is most at risk.

Although evidence on HE-related outcomes is quite limited (Niño-Zarazúa, 2016), there is enough data to state that the efficiency of HED ODA allocation and thus its impact can be enhanced. An efficient and impactful HED international aid represents an opportunity for HEIs in the Global South to increase their student access and attainment, to enhance the quality and relevance of their education, to offer their graduates international education experiences or to improve their research processes and outcomes. However, this cannot be fully achieved only by unilaterally transferring funds with a top-down approach, as this can perpetuate dependency and global hierarchies that prevent mutually beneficial international cooperation in HED.

To fully capitalize on that potential, the future of international aid must be evidence-based and data-driven. This means that every aid flow will be articulated and coordinated among donors and recipients who will have to be in constant communication to ensure that they align with a common fundraising agenda focused on maximizing the impact of aid at a global scale. International efforts should involve a broad number of actors related to the HED sector, HEIs, student unions, civil society, public and private sector to build new and more inclusive standards.

A paradigm change is required. This includes a renewed commitment to global collaboration in support of HED as a common good as well as an urgent and permanent dialogue to increase coordination among donors away from siloed initiatives, improve and harmonize the information provided to facilitate accountability and evidence-based decision-making, better consider the particular needs of recipient countries, promote long-term interventions focused on building sector-wide capacities, and enhance South-South and triangular cooperation (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022b). Only in this way, inclusive international cooperation in HED can flourish, synergies can emerge and thus truly contribute to global social and economic.

04.

Emerging challenges and opportunities

Despite a range of factors that favour a new paradigm, some challenges must be recognized. Collaborative agreements can have elements of exploitation, especially when partners with unequal scientific strength are involved. Such arrangements may benefit the weaker partner less, especially if it is assigned a peripheral role that will mean modest improvement in capacity at the end of the project. A different problem stems from the fact that the greater the scientific strength of a country, the greater the propensity to participate in international collaboration; this may lead to foreign scientists playing an overly dominant role in setting the research agenda in a scientifically weaker country.

In addition, the administrative and other costs - termed 'transaction costs' - of collaborating with partners from foreign countries can often be high. These costs may be due to language differences and the resulting communication problems, bureaucratic and management differences and styles, and frustrations caused by travel restrictions and the time required to obtain visas. Each of these potential drawbacks must be carefully weighed against the potential benefits before embarking on any collaborative arrangement (Bradley, 2008).

4.1.

A new policy context

Some emerging phenomena, e.g., Brexit (Marginson 2017), refugee displacement, and the desire for relocation, integration, and access to HED (European Students Union 2017), clearly impact international cooperation globally. At the same time, the social role of HED is being re-examined (Musselin 2014) with a call to reassert the public good and the role of HED concerning the global challenges that threaten our future (Goddard and Hazelkorn 2016; UNESCO, 2021). In addition, there is a growing critique of the rationale and approaches to international cooperation that underpin certain HED strategies and policies, initiatives and programs, priorities, and objectives (Yemini and Sagie 2016), for example, the continued hegemony of English to the detriment of local languages in market-driven approaches to internationalization (Choi 2010; Le Ha 2013; Santos and Guimarães-losif 2013).

Moreover, there is a clear link between excellence initiatives, rankings, and international cooperation, reflecting the competitive nature of research universities striving for international students and scholars, and measured by quantitative indicators such as the number of international students and international staff, as well as the number of international co-authors of publications. All this - together with the increasing attention to international rankings and the role they assign to research - helps to understand why, in recent years, more attention has been given to the development of national and institutional strategies for international cooperation with a strong focus on research (Woldegiyorgis, Proctor, and de Wit 2018).

There are calls for more value-based approaches to HED internationalization that develop global citizenship competencies and intercultural understanding (de Oliveira Andreotti and Souza, 2012; Leask and de Wit 2016; Young, Handford, and Schartner 2016). These calls see international cooperation in HED and research as a useful vehicle to internationally foster global, and intercultural skills, mutual understanding, and respect among new generations of leaders, professionals, and citizens around the world (NIEA, 2022). Although they may seem still present in the rhetoric of international cooperation, values such as cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, and solidarity have moved to the background as universities fight for competition, revenue, and reputation/ branding.

4.2.

The impact of the pandemic

As in other fields, the pandemic represented a major challenge for the established manner of creating and performing international HED initiatives and relations. The sudden disruption of COVID-19 caused the cancellation or deceleration of international HED programmes such as student mobilities, multi-lateral research projects and other international academic and learning partnerships. However, the pandemic has also brought along a large number of opportunities that some HEIs have been able to take. The new context has fostered creativity and collaboration in every field of HED, setting by this a new framework of international cooperation. The pandemic has showed that international and global collaboration are highly necessary for addressing the world's complex situations and developing comprehensive responses to global challenges through resource cooperation and knowledge exchange (Castiello-Gutiérrez et al., 2022).

In the field of research, a big door for open science was opened through the need of cooperating for collectively tackling the pandemic (Kardas-Nelson, 2020). Thus, even the fields of research and development that used to be characterized by high secrecy have, at least partially, migrated to schemes of open-data, information sharing and intense collaboration (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022c). The common need of setting priorities in swiftly finding a cure to COVID-19 have made that research-intensive fields, like medicine, drop the competition for scientific breakthroughs and publications (Correy et al., 2020; Paterson, 2021). Researchers have embraced open science, cooperation and thus been able to increase knowledge based on data published in open databases.

Even though, the research conducted as a response of the pandemic has been uneven in the world. On one side, highly ranked universities have established research partnerships with their national or international peers, sidelining less skilled HEIs (Fry et al., 2020). In the same line, some specific regions like North America, Western Europe, China, Australia and the United Kingdom have conducted important academic exchanges. On the other side, regions like Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia have been less able to set research collaborations (UNESCO, 2021).

With no exception, regional funds have been mobilized to research in health sciences and specially to academic initiatives directly related to COVID-19. In the pursue of resisting and overcoming the consequences of the pandemic, regional human, financial and infrastructural resources were allocated to research and development initiatives aimed to give a knowledge-based response to the emergency (Bradt, 2020). In the meanwhile, non-COVID-19-related research programmes have faced serious challenges to increase their budgetary needs.

In the area of student mobility, despite of being the most affected HED internationalization resource (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020), due to its personal nature, programmes got cancelled and, in some cases, students even got grounded in foreign institutions. However, the need of continuing the provision of mobility experiences to students acted as a catalyst for alternative forms of internationalization and new opportunity emerged.

The introduction of virtual student mobility primarily acted as a response to the limitations but also constituted an opportunity to provide internationalization in a virtual environment. The design and implementation of successful virtual mobility programmes heavily depended on strong institutional partnerships. Thus, most of the relations between partner who conducted virtual mobility programmes pre-existed either formally or informally. The previous relations provided the partners with the understanding and confidence necessary for commonly conducting these unprecedented activities (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022a).

Regarding international collaborative learning, almost two thirds of the institutions reported a change. The institutions involved in international collaborative learning initiatives claim that perceived an increase in this kind of experiences (33 per cent), no change at all (37 per cent) and a decrease in them (30 per cent). Also, in adaptation to the new context, traditional international collaborative learning was conducted on-line, increasing the possibilities of this kind of programmes (Marinoni & van't Land, 2022).

International collaborative learning is also uneven depending on the region. For instance, in Africa and Europe 36 per cent and 37 per cent of the HEIs reported decrease of these initiatives, while 38 per cent and only 24 per cent respectively reported increase. However, in America 55 per cent of institutions reported increase and only 13 per cent decrease, and in Asia and Pacific 42 per cent did not perceive any change (Marinoni & van't Land, 2022).

More than ever, after COVID-19, international cooperation in HED has proven to be indispensable, due to the need of rapidly learning to adapt. Therefore, looking forward international HED cooperation should be focused on (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020): Enabling political learning among peers, creating alliances that foster resilience in HED systems and sharing resources and technological solutions.



4.3. Technology as an enabler of new forms of international cooperation

Nowadays, technology plays a major role in all the fields and HED's international cooperation is not the exception. Despite of still being a rather unexplored topic, technology has the possibility to enable diverse cooperation approaches in HED. Nonetheless, international partners shall deploy time, effort and resources for the design or adoption and expansion of common technology for HED.

For successfully facing the challenges of the after-pandemic world there is a need of internationally sharing resources and technological solutions (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020, pp. 47). Innovative virtual connections have created new avenues for online cooperation in HED. Furthermore, collaboration has become a must, since international partnership is now a practical requisite for any meaningful innovation or increase in quality and societal relevance (NIEA, 2022).

Due to COVID-19, in most of the world's regions connectivity and internet have proven to be the main means to reduce the digital divide, but also to provide access to learning and ensuring research and knowledge widely and openly (Giannini, 2021). At the same time, the implementation of higher digital capacities has opened the door for building a digitally connected academic network of peers, which generates curriculum and assessment together, assists to open enrolment to HED offerings, among others (Orr et al., 2018). Technology could also help to build access to open knowledge, but for this aspect of cooperation, universities shall play a major role in improving digital scientific and humanistic literacy (UNESCO, 2021a).

The inclusion of technology, and especially digital technology, in HE's international cooperation seem to offer a path of major progress by promoting openness, inclusivity and common education goals. Nevertheless, like it happened with the agricultural and industrial revolution, digital revolution can also enhance inequality and exclusion (UNESCO, 2021b). Therefore, technology in education and knowledge shall be seen under the perspective of public and common benefit to gain protection against anti-democratic capture and enclosure of the increasingly important digital knowledge commons (UNESCO, 2021b).

Looking at the next decades, all social actors must be aware that international cooperation can be a viable way to face complex situations with comprehensive responses (Castiello-Gutiérrez et al., 2022). Particularly, HEIs shall maintain and strengthen links on international cooperation, creation of common knowledge and science and technology transfer among countries and regions (Romero León & Lafont Castillo, 2022). Thus, technology shall be at the core of these links, concerning aspects like climate change and global pandemics, but specially as a tool for closing the gap between scientific and diplomatic communities (Mauduit & Soler, 2020).

4.4. Recognition of foreign academic qualifications: A booster for international cooperation

One of the main instruments that contributes to international cooperation is the recognition of degrees and studies at the HED level. Its importance has been reaffirmed in the political and academic agenda worldwide, thanks to the strategies of international and regional organizations that promote educational integration, and to the programs for the internationalization of HED promoted by states themselves, associations, and university networks.

UNESCO, the only United Nations organization with a mandate in the field of HED, supports Member States in the recognition of studies, degrees, and diplomas in HED to boost academic mobility and to foster international understanding. To this end, in the 1970s and 1980s, UNESCO facilitated the development of six normative instruments to regulate recognition at the regional level, covering the following geographical areas: Latin America and the Caribbean (1974), the Arab and European States bordering the Mediterranean (1976), the Arab States (1978), Europe (1979), Africa (1981), and Asia and the Pacific (1983) (UNESCO, 2016).

A common objective of the initial UNESCO regional conventions on recognition was to harmonize and ensure fair and non-discriminatory recognition procedures among States Parties to facilitate greater intra-regional academic mobility. This involved the adoption of several agreements for the recognition of studies, degrees and diplomas in education that are considered the 'first generation of Recognition Conventions'. Subsequently, there was the revision of the 'first generation' agreements, resulting in four new agreements being adopted so far, namely: [Lisbon Convention](#), 1997 (Europe), [Tokyo Convention](#), 2011 (Asia and the Pacific), [Addis Ababa Convention](#), (Africa) and the 2019 (Latin America). In parallel, the [Global Convention](#) for the Recognition of Academic Qualifications has been adopted, constituting the first legally binding instrument on HED globally, to complement the five existing UNESCO regional conventions on the recognition of HED degrees and diplomas (UNESCO, 2019d).

Convinced that the international recognition of HED qualifications will facilitate interdependent learning and knowledge development via the mobility of learners and learning, academics, scientific research and researchers, and workers and professionals, and will enhance international cooperation in HED, UNESCO promotes the Global Convention as an instrument to facilitate international academic mobility and strengthen international cooperation in HED.

By 2030, an estimated increase of nearly 120 million students in HED (56 per cent up from 2015) and 2.3 million international mobile students (51 per cent up from 2015) (Studyportals, 2018) will likely result in further possibilities of international cooperation through mobility and joint projects. However, the recognition of the products of this mobility cannot be subject to rigid and limited bilateral agreements between nations, as is still the practice in many countries worldwide. Academic mobility contributes to the quality of science through cross-fertilization - a combination of complementary knowledge, pooling funding & resources, sharing risks, and building institutional capacity. The Global Convention will therefore constitute a traction instrument for academic mobility and a booster for international cooperation in HED.

05.

**Key principles for
a renewed vision:
Multilateralism,
openness, and
sustainability**

Three principles can help to redefine international cooperation in HED: multilateralism, openness, and sustainability. UNESCO's work over the past decades has contributed to define these principles and provided some tools that can help both governments and institutions to put them to work.

Multilateralism is, in HED, the only way to move away from the North-South divide. In its application to HED, multilateralism claims that international cooperation has to acknowledge the existing imbalances North-South and contribute to the development of capacities on an equal footing. Joint projects are thus seen as opportunities for co-creating opportunities that are mutually beneficial. Yet, for multilateralism to work in HED, there needs to be a pool of resources that generate incentives for all participants, moving beyond the logic of donor-recipient to a framework of cooperation among institutions that have different strengths but share a commitment to generating shared responses to global challenges. An excellent example of the tools that UNESCO has created to favour a multilateral approach to international cooperation is the set of Conventions for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications explained above.

Openness is the second principle where UNESCO's work has made a difference. In essence, openness in HED is both a prerequisite and an outcome of multilateralism. It has so far two declinations: open science and open educational resources.

The first international framework on Open Science was adopted by 193 countries attending UNESCO's General Conference in 2019. Open science policies and infrastructure promote values of transparency, reproducibility, accessibility, inclusivity, and social responsibility. The significance of an open science approach is clearly seen when comparing the percentage of scientific publications that were open before and after the pandemic: from 30 to 70 per cent. Clearly, the practice of open science varies among disciplines; for instance, it is more customary in biomedicine than in the social sciences.

For more than twenty years, UNESCO has been promoting Open Educational Resources (OER). OERs and MOOCs are important tools to create open learning spaces that enhance international cooperation in teaching. The progressive adoption of OER policies results in several benefits:

- Economies of scale through collaborative co-production of learning resources
- Enable provision of learning materials that are richer in contents
- Provision of learning to disadvantaged communities and to remote and regional areas globally
- Greater collaboration between universities in fostering peer review and collegial development of learning materials

The commitment to sustainable development will remain as an overarching principle for HEIs beyond the time constraints of the 2030 agenda. While this commitment can be embedded into all teaching programs and drive multiple research activities as well as the inner campus life, it can also be a principle on which to base international cooperation. A growing number of HEIs are mapping out the many activities that unfold their classical three missions against the SDGs. In so doing, they are adopting a common framework to which both the Global North and the South can contribute, facilitating synergies towards a shared goal.

An example of one such global partnership is the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme which fosters intellectual collaboration between 800 university chairs and 50 networks in 117 countries. It offers a vision that is international, inter-cultural, interdisciplinary, built upon shared values, and able to foster knowledge exchange, capacity strengthening, networking, and partnerships for mutual benefit.

Along these three principles, a paradigm shift in international cooperation in HED can be unfolded. This shift would, first, change the approach to knowledge, science, research, and innovation from the perspective of a university as an ivory tower to its transformation into an organization that generates and promotes open science and disseminates contents through open learning resources. Openness creates thus a playing field that changes the relationship of researchers, teachers, and students to knowledge and fosters universal access.

Secondly, the mere existence of a shared playing field, where knowledge is not any more a property of the few but a common good, helps reshaping the nature of partnerships: there is no more one who has, and transfers, knowledge, and the other who receives it; but two partners with different capacities and, at the same time, equal access to knowledge. For HED, location, in the era of connectivity, should not be neither an asset nor a constraint. Thirdly, the resulting equal footing paves the way for forging partnerships that are no longer unilateral, but multilateral: they can proliferate outside the logic of donor-recipient and sustain long-term partnerships. Fourthly, commitment to sustainable development provides the basis for a theory of change that can truly inspire international cooperation.

A last point relates to the need of more mature institutional arrangements for international cooperation. To begin with, institutions willing to embrace seriously international cooperation, no matter where they are located, should ensure that internationalization is properly embedded into their mission. Only when this is the case, university departments and schools can embark in international cooperation with a proper alignment with the university missions. More importantly, senior leadership should invest on fostering international cooperation providing a regulatory umbrella and adequate incentives to move from isolated, independent activities to cooperation based on institutional synergies. On the other hand, external financial incentives to international cooperation are a powerful driver, but the way in which they are generated, framed, managed, and put to play often have resulted in generating the business of international cooperation in HED, with a community of specialized professionals and bodies that tend to capture and monopolize resources. To avoid this risk, institutions must invest in generating their own capacity to deal with the hassles of managing financial resources at play in international cooperation without intermediaries. This capacity development process can be a major goal for international cooperation.

The world of data and knowledge generation on HED is not a homogenous one and it is, therefore, difficult to assert some practices that can be highlighted as potential exemplars to be followed, since the settings are as diverse as the institutions. However, there are some topical areas where we can identify potentially interesting practices for suggesting avenues to address current and expected challenges.

It is possible to start from the most elementary component: why international data coming from official sources seems to be easily compiled and produced for compulsory education and not for HED? The answer to this question is deeply connected to the governance of compulsory education and HED. While national authorities have a clear role regarding compulsory education institutions, the autonomous character of HED makes that situation less clear, at least in some countries. While academic autonomy is of paramount importance for creating an environment that is conducive to good scientific practice, a system without checks and balances always entails a risk of becoming self-serving and, so, the public interest might become compromised. In this regard, clear national policies on HED and the operation of independent overseeing bodies help not only regarding substantive issues pertaining to the provision of educational services but also for ensuring proper information systems are in place.

The dissemination of research results is an area where good practices have emerged over the recent past. Policies regarding open access to what is funded with public resources should become non-negotiable. Promoting free access through interoperable information systems and repositories is a promising avenue to be expanded.

The use of household or specialized survey data to provide a rich analysis of issues on HED (like issues on equity and inclusion) is a major contribution to having a sound way of identifying and addressing HED issues.

Finally, new information and communication technologies are being mobilized for conducting research, recording and analysing data (including data on HED itself), and facilitating the exchange of information and knowledge. Thus, having better information systems at the global level (with high levels of coverage) should not be such a difficult task. For instance, even in the most demanding contexts, HED institutions have in place some sort of administrative systems where enrolments are properly recorded. If that is not the case, the reason might be found in the institutional arrangements, including governance, competition, lack of transparency, etc., and not in technicalities. The potential associated with new technologies is mobilized when some material and institutional conditions are met.

Policy recommendations

Having in mind these three principles, several policy recommendations can be made:

Strategizing international cooperation

Policymakers need to reflect on whether the internationalization of universities mean that they must constantly establish new arrangements of all kinds. If HEIs accept every invitation to join new networks or associate with new partners, here is a clear risk of diluting their focus and efforts, and some international commitments can certainly distract faculty and administrators from their basic duty to serve students on their home campuses. Thus, the promotion of international cooperation must be integrated into an overall plan, along with the other dimensions of internationalization and with the pursuit of the institution's core mission. It is now more crucial than ever that each institution, including each unit, department, and research centre, determines its international priorities and adopts criteria to guide the selection of its target countries and regions, preferred areas of activity, complementarities it hopes to achieve, etc.

Recognizing diversified approaches to international cooperation

The introduction of public programs to support international activities, together with the regulations that go with them, will inevitably involve a certain risk and a tendency to centralize and standardize everything as if what is large and unidirectional must necessarily be more efficient. However, HEIs should not be forced to do everything the same way as there are many paths to effective international cooperation and that always require imagination and flexibility.

Linking cooperation in HED to multilateral science and research efforts

Linkages between science policy and development aid mechanisms already exist in some countries. Traditionally, development aid has been used primarily to provide technical assistance, but there are now new motivations and opportunities to support scientific collaboration for development goals and strengthen research capacity, especially in developing countries. In recent years, several countries and private organizations have prioritized global problems, placed greater emphasis on collaborative research, and moved beyond traditional technology transfer.

In developed countries, scientists and policymakers are increasingly turning to countries in the developing world as desirable and even crucial partners that can bring a wide range of knowledge, resources, and other benefits, from natural research sites to future commercial markets for high-tech products. Meanwhile, an increasing number of developing countries are building and enhancing research capacity to create and use new knowledge essential for their economic growth and address the local effects of global-scale problems in areas such as health, food production, or environmental protection.

Three key dimensions of international cooperation can be identified: selecting the right partner/beneficiary, strengthening networks, and optimizing capacities to be strengthened/transferred. The first dimension is straightforward, and beneficiaries can be classified as individual, institutional, national, and supranational. Some programs focus on individual capacity building by directly funding and supporting certain scientists, e.g., leading researchers in certain scientific fields or young academics. For most programs, institutional scientific capacity building is critical, both in terms of the 'soft' (personnel) and 'hard' (facilities and equipment) components of the research institution. Multilateral development banks often advise on policy development and governance, thus influencing the national scientific capacity-building level.

Promoting multilateral schemes

There are also programs to support multilateral schemes to foster regional collaboration, for example, those of the African Union and the European Commission. Networking is another important dimension of capacity building. Researchers and institutions can be encouraged to establish working relationships differently, depending on program priorities, for example:

- Networks linking multiple scientific fields (i.e., connecting social and natural sciences, conducting inter- and transdisciplinary studies).
- Institutional networks beyond the academic sphere (i.e., non-profit, private/commercial, and public policy sectors).
- Linkages across geographic boundaries (i.e., communal, local, national, regional, supranational, North-South, South-South, triangular).

Developing capacities for coping with the complexity of multilateral programs and calls.

Another dimension of capacity building refers to the skills and experience that funding recipients are expected to acquire. To build and strengthen overall research capacity, researchers and research institutions not only need the ability to perform scientific activities themselves (i.e., experimental measurements, data analysis), but they also need the non-scientific skills to initiate projects and carry them out successfully. These include acquiring funds and building collaborative teams, overseeing, and managing grants and personnel, recruitment, auditing, accounting, writing, and editing proposals and publications, public communication, knowledge of ethical and safety standards, building and equipment maintenance.

Public policies, funding agencies, and universities must consider the inherent complexity of building capacity to generate knowledge through research and academic cooperation between countries. Financial incentives stimulate cooperation, especially international cooperation. In this context, and given the limited research budget, financial incentives encourage expanding knowledge abroad and ensure the continuation of research (Jeong et al., 2014). North-South collaboration can be strengthened by greater involvement of developed countries in funding, supporting, and directing research in developing countries. Cooperation between researchers in the northern and southern hemispheres is of paramount importance for producing new knowledge that generates information for policy development (Bradley 2008). North-South partnerships can bring benefits such as creating skills in local researchers, promoting data collection, and supporting the education and training of local future students and researchers (De Laat, 2020, as cited in Building Evidence in Education, 2020)

Promoting innovation in international cooperation

Collaboration also brings obstacles such as language barriers, unequal access to financial resources and libraries, and lack of publishing opportunities, including editorial biases (Victora and Moreira 2006). The agenda-setting process can be a notorious obstacle in cases of domination of collaborative agendas motivated by Northern collaborators (Bradley 2008). South-South collaborations should also be strengthened through innovative strategies. For example, institutions in upper-middle-income countries, which currently have the greatest capacity to develop comparative research, can be encouraged and incentivized to lead research involving low-income countries. This participation may guarantee not only a greater (and better distributed) technical capacity but also a good research process and, subsequently, a greater political impact (Block 2006).

International cooperation has the potential to become a positive response to the destructive forms of globalized neoliberalism, and the progressive and humanistic possibilities of internationalization are often highlighted, especially mutual understanding, diversity, cross-cultural awareness, global citizenship, and tolerance (Yemini, 2015). In general terms, this humanitarian approach indicates a more holistic view of the individual; it emphasizes cooperation over competition, encouraging a more collaborative and communitarian approach (Bennett and Kottasz, 2011). Furthermore, it is associated with democracy (Svensson and Wihlborg, 2007) and consensus-building while downplaying ethnic and religious ties in favour of shared humanity and global citizenship (Goren & Yemini, 2017).

In line with the approach of the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education, beyond North-South aid flows to higher education, it is critical to strengthen South-South and triangular cooperation. The international community must play a critical role in helping states and non-state actors to align around common goals, norms, and standards necessary to realize a new social contract for education. Subsidiarity should be respected, and efforts at the regional, local, and national levels should be encouraged. International cooperation and the work of global institutions must be used to support the educational needs of asylum seekers, refugees, stateless persons and, particularly, migrants.



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International cooperation to enhance synergies

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.

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