The futures of higher education

Reimagining the Futures of Higher Education: Insights from a scenario development process towards 2050
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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.


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Summary

The process of thinking about the future is vital because it encourages people to think about things in a different way. The aim of engaging in this imaginative process of scenario development is to inspire decision-making that may lead to futures being aspired. In the envisioning process of imagining the futures of higher education towards 2050, the common good was used as a visionary lens and social justice was utilized as a framework to support the idea of accessible, inclusive and equitable higher education systems that give every person a chance to develop to their full potential in a community.

A scenario development process was used to create and explore diverse desirable future situations to facilitate reflections on assumptions and opportunities for the futures of higher education. Findings from the futures studies’ literature, scientific and technical reports were used as a starting point for imagining and drafting four scenarios that were shared with higher education actors and policymakers for further creative inputs and development during consultations. This background document, prepared for WHEC2022, also builds upon UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative and UNESCO-IESALC’s Futures of Higher Education project. The four desirable scenarios developed are as follows:

- Scenario 1: Open higher education
- Scenario 2: Technology enabled networked learning hubs
- Scenario 3: Ecologically sustainable higher education
- Scenario 4: Development driven higher education

This background document proposes a methodology in phases that could be used or adapted for designing and developing scenarios for the futures of higher education in different contexts.
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 SDGs
• 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.

We are also grateful for the generous contributions shared by:

— Young people who participated in the focus groups organized by UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative.
— Higher education experts who generously shared their visions of the future through concept notes and consultations organized by UNESCO-IESALC’s Futures of Higher Education project.
— UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa expert advisory group on the futures of education and other global higher education actors who took time to review the scenarios and made helpful comments that led to the further refinement of them.
— Policymakers and stakeholders in higher education who participated in the consultation workshop

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<tr>
<td>IESALC</td>
<td>Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOOC</td>
<td>Massive open online course</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OER</td>
<td>Open education resource</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
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Presentation

This background document offers an example of a scenario development process, drawing upon insights from the field of futures studies, and presents the resulting four images or scenarios of the future. Futures research methods were adapted for the purpose of this document to provide a phased approach for the development of four futures scenarios for higher education.

Engaging in a scenario development process helped by revealing assumptions about higher education and supporting the anticipation of internal and external factors in order to advance the social, cultural, individual and community value of higher education. Scenario development, a methodology inspired by futures studies, is proposed to facilitate the engagement of WHEC2022 participants and the higher education policy community for developing alternative scenarios specific to their contexts.

The development of scenarios was based on literature on futures of higher education and related fields, technical reports and findings from research activities and consultations conducted by UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative and the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), involving youth and higher education experts2. Scenarios were specifically developed to provide a set of desirable futures, which in their own ways, seek to address the current and past injustices inherent in higher education systems, policies, structures and practices. The questions that led to the development of the scenarios were based on the search for desirable and aspired futures, that is, ‘how would a desirable scenario for higher education look like in 2050?’

The draft scenarios created were then subjected to a review process and consultations with higher education stakeholders, including policymakers, to explore areas that needed further attention, as well as provide insights into their perceptions of the scenarios. In addition, an imaginative visioning process was conducted to identify people's aspirations about the future, including for the futures of higher education. The outcomes of the consultations were used to further refine the four scenarios as presented. Since the process of scenario development focuses on the future, recommendations were made for actors who are engaged in higher education. This background document focuses on the methodology of generating scenarios for desirable futures of higher education that also have practical value for policy processes.

2. This background document builds upon and also contributes to the ongoing work of UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative and UNESCO’s IESALC Futures of Higher Education project.
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01.
Introduction
Human beings are constantly creating mental images of what different futures might look like. Some of the images emerge as hopes, others as fears and some as plans. All have a major impact on what people end up pursuing and doing in actual life (Holfelder, 2019). ‘Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace,’ according to the 1948 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, Article 26. Therefore, education enhances human dignity, inspires people’s dreams and aspirations. UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative considers education as transformative because it does not only respond to the changing world but transforms the world (UNESCO, 2020).

Although the nature of education is to prepare people for the future, most actors in the education sector have not been thinking about how to prepare for the futures they aspire for. This problem is exacerbated in some countries, where research and dominant discourses about visioning the futures of higher education are often generated from other parts of the world. Without compelling, contextualized, visions of what higher education may look like in the future, institutions in many countries may not reach the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and its pledge to leave no one behind.

This background document on the Futures of Higher Education, was partly inspired by the global debate on rethinking education in relation to how knowledge, teaching and learning are reimagined in an increasingly precarious world (UNESCO, 2015). It will focus on some of the current assumptions that may be deemed problematic while identifying opportunities that may assist us to reimagine and refocus the vision of higher education towards the 2050 horizon and beyond (UNESCO, 2021; 2022). This is done as a contribution to the overall theme of the WHEC2022: Reinventing Higher Education for a Sustainable Future. The preparation of this document draws on work done by UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative and the UNESCO-IESALC project on the Futures of Higher Education, with the aim of stimulating discussions around the futures of higher education from global perspectives (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO-IESALC, 2021a).

For many years, there have been growing voices of discontent towards higher education being criticized for not addressing some of the challenges that are contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss, marine pollution, and other environmental, economical and social issues. This shows the growing need to reinvent higher education in order to address some of the issues driven by current trends such as the rapid development of emerging technologies and economies; demographic changes of aging populations in high-income countries or increasing demand for higher education by young people in
low-income countries; and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic that has suddenly forced almost all humankind to either resist or adapt to a changing environment. These factors have made it clear that, inexorably, desirable futures are going to be different from what we are familiar with. It makes sense therefore that higher education institutions need to re-examine their roles and purposes within the current systems as well as towards the future of 2050 and beyond. At this time, numerous international organizations, such as UNESCO, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), regional organizations, national and local authorities, as well as higher education institutions, students and youth in different parts of the world, are engaging in visioning processes of (re)imagining the higher education of the futures.

Future visions are not only dreams; they can help to generate long-term policies, strategies and plans, which help to bring desired and plausible future circumstances in closer alignment (Inayatullah, 2008, 2022; Dator, 2009). Hence, the visioning process of the future looks at current trends that are influencing our thinking; the legacy practices that may stand in the way of moving forward; and factors that will assist us to imagine the desired futures. Current events and trends have tended to cloud the discourses of education by influencing our thinking about the future. The level of instability and disruption created by these trends have made it necessary for higher education actors to challenge their assumptions while recognizing that change is inevitable. By enabling thinking beyond present day turbulence, political tensions and conflicts, the future can be a safe space for dialogue and co-construction of a more peaceful and sustainable world.
02.

Visioning
Processes of thinking about the future are vital because they encourage people to think about things in different ways. Visions of the future, according to Facer and Sandford (2010, p.77), ‘aim[s] to empower individuals and groups to make decisions about possible future paths’. The aim of engaging in the visioning process is to ‘make better decisions today that may contribute towards the future we aspire for’ (Inayatullah, 2008). The idea of using the visioning process, that is, developing constructive images of desirable futures, is to consider essential features that are worth strengthening, threats that need to be eliminated and probable lines of development that are worth noting (Dator, 2009).

Thinking and researching about the future, according to Mannermaa (1986, p. 658), is not the study about the ‘future per se, but it is about the present reality and the historical knowledge of the past’. It is not a projection about the future, an analysis or a strategic plan, but a multi-disciplinary examination of change in all major areas of life (Inayatullah, 2008; Kosow and Gaßner, 2008). The idea is to analyse potential change that is likely to make a systemic or fundamental difference over the next 30 years or more. Applied to education, futures research is ‘usually oriented towards exploring the implications of potential future developments for educators, learners, schools and university education’ (Facer and Sandford, 2010, p.75).

This document proposes a scenario development methodology that may assist higher education policy makers, decision-makers, planners and others to systematically envisage and create possible future events and circumstances that will assist them to make strategic choices about the future of higher education. This methodology is not ready-made, ‘off-the-shelf’, but has been adapted for the purposes of the 3rd World Higher Education Conference. Futures research is not about planning for 2-5 years, it is a vehicle that could be used to imagine a world 30, 40 or 50 years from now; a world that is different from our world today. However, Inayatullah (2008) argues that the visions of the future must link to the day-to-day realities as well as measures that reflect it. Futures research uses a rigorously imaginative process that is both critical and constructive (Amer, Daim and Jetter, 2016; van der Heijden, 1996).

The aim of futures research is not to present a single future, but to validate multiple plausible and desirable futures that offer the higher education sector the freedom to choose what works best in various contexts. ‘The intentional use of the plural in words such as futures, knowledges, and purposes are meant to open the imagination to a plurality of plausible futures’ (UNESCO, 2021, p.3). It challenges the assumption of a single predictable future by recognizing that there are different ways of knowing while acknowledging the multiple dimensions and contexts of higher education and society. Nevertheless, the planet itself is a shared context for higher education.
In the innovative scenario development process proposed here, common good was used as a visionary lens for higher education in 2050. Visioning was guided by the common good principles based on solidarity towards shared visions of the community. Inayatullah (2008) expresses that, ‘the task for visioning the futures is about creating a vision that pulls us forward’.

Using common good as vision is a guide that provides direction of what should be done in preparing for an inclusive, equitable higher education that promotes contextualised knowledge systems. Hence, higher education needs to develop new and innovative approaches that view education not only as an economic tool for individual progress, but as a collective societal effort for the fulfilment of human-beings and their communities (Locatelli, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). In this sense, ‘it is not only the “good life” of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common’ (UNESCO, 2015, p.78).

This deeply social view of common good is embodied in the Southern and Eastern African concept of Ubuntu based on one’s relation to others, that is, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu in Zulu, meaning ‘I am what I am because of others’. This means that ‘society exists for the person and the person exists for the society’ (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2019). This concept is not unique to African communities and shares some of its principles with many other communities around the world. The basic idea of Jen in Confucian perspective illustrates how human beings should relate to one another through interconnections that encourage them to extend themselves to others (Ng, 2009). The foundation of the education paradigm, according to the indigenous people of Abya Yala continent, known as America, ‘is that human beings learn, in fulfilling themselves in community, from life, with life, and for life’ (Macas, 2021). All these concepts place greater emphasis on the networks of solidarity among people and recognise their rights as global citizens.

Common good envisages renewed higher education that reaffirms greater cooperation amongst people working together and sharing responsibilities collectively for the benefit of society. Common good is both global and context-specific and it aims to develop more ‘sustainable systems based on a vision of education seen as a shared societal effort through which individuals, communities and societies have a chance to succeed’ (Locatelli, 2018). It is meant to bring together diverse knowledges from cultural, ecological and scientific spaces to be collectively produced for the benefit of individuals and communities (DeSouza, 2021).

Understanding higher education through the common good lens, according to Gracia-Calandín and Tamarit-López (2021), ‘is a useful approach, as it better encompasses the multiple benefits of higher education for society and the international community’. Higher education institutions that are committed to common good principles will ensure that people have equitable access to quality education as embodied in the curriculum, in the knowledge production as well as in its interaction with the community. This communal approach is also supported in many educational discourses that promote the shift from teaching to learning, which places emphasis on participatory processes with the community it serves (UNESCO, 2015).
While the common good is the vision that pulls towards the future we aspire for, social justice principles of human rights, inclusion, access, and equity, are utilised as a framework for the scenario development process. The social justice mandate of education is inextricably linked with the common good principles that support the idea that every person should be given a chance to develop to their full potential in a community (Arthur, Kristjánsson and Vogler, 2021). The social justice framework brings to the fore the concept of justice which treats distribution (economic) and recognition (cultural) as two fundamental aspects of justice (Fraser, 2012).

Economic justice recognises the links between those who have and those who do not have resources to participate in the creation of economic structures that control and prescribe who should participate, generate knowledge, engage with communities and benefit from higher education. The recognition of cultural injustice, on the other hand, deals with institutionalized cultural values that dominate higher education practices. Therefore, the framework assists us to question some of the epistemological assumptions that continue to dominate in higher education in order to probe the construction of injustices across education systems, theories and processes (Adefila et al., 2021).

Social justice is also used to challenge institutional injustices that are standing in the way of moving towards a higher education inspired by common good principles. The aim of imagining higher education in this way is to ‘create the ground on which other virtues, both societal and individual can flourish’ (Fraser, 2012, p.42). To address social injustices that have been fuelled by past and present practices, higher education should aspire to address maldistribution of resources and economic inequality to enable access to education in an equitable way. This redistributive justice speaks directly to access issues, especially for those people who have been, and still are, systematically excluded from participating in higher education (Lambert, 2018).

Institutionalized hierarchies of cultural values from the dominant groups have denied other knowledges from diverse cultures to find space in the curriculum and knowledge construction. Social justice principles recognize that people’s culture and practices should be valued and respected irrespective of their status (Hodgkinson-William and Trotter, 2018). It is therefore important that the visioning process of the futures of higher education should be guided by the common good and linked with the social justice mandate of higher education which promotes inclusive access to quality teaching and learning, knowledge generation and community engagement.

The concepts of common good and social justice are open to different interpretation, however, Deneulin and Townsend (2007) argue that education policies need to recognise and nurture this diversity of contexts and knowledge systems, while respecting fundamental human rights. Therefore, access to higher education should be available on the grounds of capacity considering that an individual has a choice to follow different forms of higher education that could be either professional or academic or technical or vocational depending on what they deem best suited to their needs and ambitions (UNESCO, 2019). However, the question of how ‘capacity’ should be defined in relation to access remains contested. Despite this, higher education continues to play a critical role.

Both the common good vision and social justice framework are useful in assisting us to explore the implications of a socially just higher education inherent in the good of communities as well as the good of the world in which individuals live (Deneulin and Townsend, 2007). Therefore, the principles of social justice will be utilized to redefine what it means to have an equitable quality education for all, and the common good will be used to provide visions of the future where every member of society is empowered to develop their full capacities and able to interact with others, the planet and all other living beings in the world we live in.
03. Methodology
The process of determining what is possible, plausible and desirable is a complex task requiring a range of methods. Since the future cannot be predicted with certainty, possible and desirable futures can be envisioned, designed, and achieved on a continually evolving basis, according to Dator (2018). Futures research provides a set of methodologies to help us understand the range of possible and desirable futures (Dator, 2009; Glenn, 2009; Inayatullah, 2013, 2022; Mannermaa, 1986).

In building visions of desirable futures, it is also important to work out the steps that are needed to realise them. In theory, futures thinking helps to create the conditions for a paradigm shift where a sector can imagine a new future, create a new strategy, enable stakeholders, and use tools to enable a new future to emerge (Inayatullah, 2022). This methodology has been criticised for relying more on assumption than empirical or scientific fact (Bell, 2001; Weingand, 1995). However, its aim is not to provide future facts, but to generate divergent futures that could be used to challenge current assumptions and strategies (Facer and Sandford, 2010). Even though it is unlikely to imagine the future with precision, ‘we have at least given it some thought, which puts us in a better position than our colleagues who reason that the future will take care of itself’ (Weingand, 1995). Therefore, the focus on scenario development should be adapted to each context, which will ensure the desired futures, and the steps taken to reach them, are relevant and achievable.

Adapting futures methods for the context of UNESCO’s WHEC2022 process will assist us to answer the following questions:

- What are the possible futures and are they desirable?
- What are the desirable features in these possibilities that are worth strengthening?
- What are internal and external threats that will impact on Higher Education?
- What are the preferable opportunities that we can identify and build on?
A common starting point of determining desirable futures is to develop possible situations leading towards visions for the futures. Scenarios are often used to draw attention to specific trends that may influence the future; identify areas that may need to be eliminated with the ultimate goal of driving future developments (Kosow and Gaßner, 2008). The aim of scenario development is to explore multiple plausible future situations with the purpose of extending the sphere of thinking during the scenario development process (Amer et al., 2016). The design and development of scenarios can be used as a methodology that aims to change mental models, opening up and dealing with predictable and uncertain features, in order to re-frame issues and gain new perspectives (van der Heijden, 1996). Scenarios aim to challenge existing paradigms held within the higher education sector and bring together decision makers and other stakeholders from different sectors to discuss common desirable futures and their pathways (Blass et al., 2010; UNEP, 2016; Westerheijden et al., 2004).

In this scenario development process for WHEC2022, exploratory scenarios were used to explore the futures of higher education based on the description of the world today, an understanding of how systems interact and what changes might occur in years to come. The intent of exploratory scenarios is not to predict but to distinctively describe different plausible futures that capture a broad range of uncertainty (Kosow and Gaßner, 2008; van der Heijden, 1996; UNEP, 2016). In a nutshell, the scenarios aim to present futures that may not have been considered in certain contexts with the intention of generating enough interest to bring about action to do something differently (Kosow and Gaßner, 2008; Norzaini, Morshidi and Mohd, 2010).

Although there are different approaches and procedures for developing scenarios, Kosow and Gaßner's (2008) five phases of the scenario development were adapted and used as a guide. The scenario, according to Kosow and Gaßner (2008) starts with field identification, followed by factor identification, then analysis towards the development of a scenario and finally the scenario transfer. Whilst Kosow and Gaßner (2008) generated their scenarios on the fourth phase of their development process, the scenarios presented here were developed creatively from the second phase, after identifying salient features and factors from literature, empirical studies, technical and concept documents, as well drawing from the comments from youth who participated in focus groups gathering their views on the futures of education.

The questions that led to the development of the scenarios were based on the desirability of the conditions in the future, that is, ‘how would a desirable higher education sector look like in 2050?’ This question guided the development of the scenarios with a clear focus on the future point in time which aims at working out what needs to be done to attain the goal.
The aim of the field identification phase was to identify salient features and factors as well as trends and broad policy issues that have significant implications for the futures of higher education. The process was shaped by the following questions: How is the scenario field to be defined? What must be integrated and what is to be left out of consideration? To respond to these questions, scientific studies and technical reports on the futures of higher education from a wide range of countries were analysed.

It was found that several studies from low- and middle-income countries focused mainly on strengthening human rights by ensuring that all people have equitable access to quality education, which could address socio-economic gaps and social cohesion (see for example, Adefila et al. 2021; Beynaghi et al., 2015; Norzaini et al., 2010; SARUA, 2012). The concern raised by these studies was in the dominance of Western hegemony on knowledge production that tends to take precedence over local and cultural knowledges.

Similarly, studies from high-income countries were concerned with redesigning higher education to address the knowledge economy needs of the 21st century, as well as addressing the long-term impacts of technology in society (Blass et al., 2010; Facer and Sandford, 2010; Hammershøj, 2019; Muñoz et al., 2013; OECD, 2020; Westerheijden et al., 2004). The educational scenarios proposed in most of the studies reflected the current assumptions and trends that may influence the futures of higher education, of which desirable aspects were included in the scenarios.

In addition, comments pertaining directly to the futures of higher education were analysed from 55 youth focus groups, conducted within the framework of UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative. Out of 55 youth groups, 11 consisted of university students, however all responded to the following questions:

- What do we want society to look like in 2050? When you think about 2050, what are you most hopeful and most concerned about?
- What should be the collective purposes of education in 2050?
- How can its purposes, how we learn, and where we learn change in the future?

Although all youth focus groups were asked about the futures of education in general, the responses that referred specifically to higher education were analysed and findings suggested that young people saw higher education as an entity that provides relevant curriculum for the labour market that is increasingly digitalised, open, flexible and that promotes environmental and development issues that are sustainable. The youth voices were an important contribution in visioning the futures of higher education. However, most of the young people who participated came from Europe, and the voices of youth from other parts of the world were underrepresented. However, the recent IESALC public consultations included 19% of young people from other parts of the world who responded to an online survey that asked people to share their hopes, concerns, and ideas for how higher education could contribute to better futures for all (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021b).
Further work with youth across regions could be used for continuous improvement of the scenarios. According to the Pathways to 2050 and beyond: Findings from a public consultation on the futures of higher education report3, respondents imagined higher education in 2050 being driven by social justice principles of affordability, accessibility and inclusivity. They underscored that higher education should be responsive to the needs and interests of students by being flexible and personalized (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021b).

The 2021 report, Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the Futures of Higher Education to 20504 from UNESCO-IESALC’s Futures of Higher Education project, based on the concept notes developed by higher education experts, was also used to generate initial scenarios. 25 higher education specialists, with expertise in all UNESCO regions (Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean), were invited by UNESCO-IESALC to contribute concept notes where they were asked to respond to two open questions:

- How would you like higher education to be in 2050?
- How could higher education contribute to better futures for all in 2050?

The ideas presented in the concept notes were further extended at five two-hour, online, small group workshops that created space to engage in dialogue and share knowledge on the futures of higher education. The concept notes and ideas from the workshops were used to further develop the scenarios, incorporating ideas of sustainability, openness, flexibility and development, as well as a call for action.

The analysis of literature and technical reports on the futures of higher education from different contexts, as well as data that emanated from consultation workshops and a synthesis report of concept notes, were used to guide the process of scenario development. From these processes, four scenarios were produced (see Table 1). The detailed description of each scenario is presented in the Annex of this document.

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<th>Table 1. A summary of the four scenarios developed</th>
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<td><strong>Scenario 1. Open Higher Education</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Scenario 4. Development Driven Higher Education</strong></td>
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Following their development, the draft scenarios were shared with several higher education experts based in different UNESCO regions and who have extensive experience in higher education as teachers, researchers, policymakers and others who were experienced in other education and knowledge traditions beyond formal learning structures. The document was also distributed to the UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa expert advisory group on the futures of education. The reviewers made helpful comments on the document, which led to further refinement of the scenarios.

Overall, reviewers felt that all scenarios had distinctive aspects, but that they are not necessarily incompatible with each other, or mutually exclusive. Other reviewers suggested that some scenarios that have overlapping features could be combined as one. However, it was not expected that one scenario should be a perfect fit for any given context, instead the scenarios were developed so that each contained many strengths that could be taken forward in various contexts. For example, a strength of scenario 4 is in its alignment with sustainability and the development policy goals of numerous countries. Given concerns regarding climate change and environmental crises, scenario 3 was viewed as central to addressing this problem. Reviewers pointed out that the value of the technology-enhanced learning hubs (scenario 2) lies in its focus on global connections and communities without barriers. Scenarios 1 and 2 were identified as desirable because of the positive impacts that technological development has, and could have, on many societal changes and on education. Scenario 1 was also desirable due to its ability to create knowledge from diverse contexts. However, the lack of access to digital tools can further alienate and marginalise people who cannot afford these tools, meaning that these scenarios may not be relevant, or may need to be adapted to some contexts.

This process of scenario development would need to be adapted to each context and to be globally relevant to ensure the futures of higher education are beneficial for all. This document does not claim that the four scenarios are the only desirable scenarios for the futures, but it acts as an example to illustrate an innovative scenario development process in Higher Education that could inspire scenario development in different contexts.
Phase 3. Consultation

Following the review process, the four draft scenarios were further refined and sent to a diverse group of policymakers and stakeholders in higher education to interrogate the scenarios with the aim of eliciting ideas for discussion in a consultation workshop. The participants were chosen based on their skills, position in higher education policy, and region of the world. The aim of the consultation was to test out and further refine the scenarios with a group of stakeholders who provided insights into the scenario development processes, the relevance of the scenarios, and the ways in which these future scenarios may be promoted.

During the consultation, participants were asked to ‘imagine what 2050 will look like – how do we reach this desirable future, considering enablers and challenges?’ This question raised a variety of responses, both optimistic and pessimistic. As the visioning exercise was given the timeframe of 2050, there was great opportunity and challenge to consider the numerous possibilities between now and then. Most participants imagined connected communities of people living together, learning together, sharing knowledge and using scientific knowledge and technologies. They also envisaged higher education that is trusted by stakeholders and seen as highly relevant. Furthermore, higher education institutions were described as mirrors, which reflect the current problems in society.

Despite this outlook, participants expressed concerns that higher education is not recognized for what it stands for and what it offers. Some also felt that higher education institutions do not adequately understand the needs of the young people they serve. It was felt that the root problems of higher education are caused by the general lack of support from governments, policymakers, society, and other communities that are serviced by these institutions. Participants shared that, in some countries, governments tend to view themselves as having the right to appropriate how higher education functions. There was also a general apprehension about financialization and neo liberalization practices which led to privileging certain types of knowledges, degrees and jobs and unintentionally risk perpetuating inequalities within and between countries. All these factors show the need for change in the future of higher education.

When asked to consider ‘the steps needed to reach desirable futures of higher education’, participants expressed the need for action to ensure the future of higher education for the next generation. They suggested that ambitious visions were needed to ensure students are provided with ample and diverse opportunities to progress in the future. To advance on this, partnerships with governments, businesses, students, alumni, and other actors are vital for higher education to reach the desirable futures aspired for where all people have equitable access to quality education. Engaging in futures visioning allowed participants to come to conclusions they may not have envisioned before and recognise what they would like to see in the futures of higher education, as well as which aspects could be left behind.

The aim of engaging in this rigorous and yet imaginative process was to inspire decision-makers, policymakers, and other participants in the WHEC2022, to start working towards the process of developing scenarios and strategies that bring these images into fruition. The idea of including different stakeholders at this phase of the scenario process was to ensure that people take ownership of the process and the dissemination of results.
Phase 4. Recommendations for policy and practice

The realization of the four scenarios, which embody aspirations of the futures of higher education are dependent on political will and enabling policy environments that will guide the strategies at the levels at which higher education is governed. To achieve this, each scenario would require strong governmental support through financial investment, development of policies and the recognition of the value and the mission of higher education in developing and advancing society. Futures research was a useful tool to provide a range of alternative futures to assist higher education policymakers and decision makers to work with, or further develop and adapt the future scenario(s) they deem appropriate for their context. Mapping out desirable scenarios should be contextualized in order to get a global picture of what policymakers should do to address the social injustices inherent in current higher education system. It is therefore necessary for higher education stakeholders to think and act strategically to address the outcomes they want to achieve by imagining the futures for themselves. Detailed recommendations can be found in Section 5 below.

Phase 5. Public engagement

We hope that this creative and imaginative process of developing scenarios of the futures will provide inspiration to participants at the WHEC2022, and others engaging with this document. Based on the extensive literature review, technical reports and empirical data from youth focus groups and expert consultations, the four scenarios were developed and designed creatively to provoke thought and conversations around the futures of higher education. Each of them can be further developed. WHEC2022 participants and higher education stakeholders are encouraged to consider using such methodology for the process of scenario development for their specific countries, contexts and institutions.

These four scenarios individually, and together, help to challenge assumptions about the hegemony of knowledge production and dissemination that had neglected other knowledges from different contexts. For example, the pervasiveness of technology and the internet in particular has made it possible for learning to take place from technologically networked communities, through peers, resources, social media and many other non-formal and informal avenues. However, the success of setting up these community networks depends on the availability of stable ICT infrastructure, connectivity and digital skills. Despite this, it challenges the assumption that teaching and learning and knowledge generation can only take place in formal learning environments, such as university and college campuses. The traditional practice of venue-based examinations inherited from 18th century industrial education, may no longer be relevant in a socially just environment that enables equitable access to inclusive higher education.
04.

Conclusions
This background document is intended as a contribution to stimulating the debate on the futures of higher education. Engaging with futures research can help to reimagine higher education of the future and revisit the purposes of higher education in order to address its social, cultural, individual and community value. The four scenarios were developed with an understanding that higher education is complex, rich, diverse, and will remain as such for a long time. Hence, each scenario could be used in conjunction with others, can be used on its own, or further redefined depending on the higher education environment it seeks to address. Readers are also encouraged to engage critically with scenario development methodologies.

When developing these scenarios, we were acutely aware that what is considered desirable to some people is not necessarily desirable to others. And this is an inherent difficulty for the development of desirable scenarios. Of course, it is difficult to address every dimension of higher education in every scenario, however, this should not stop us from thinking about the future. Hence, it is our focus on presenting an effective example of scenario development methodology that will equip people with the basic knowledge on how to go about developing higher education that they aspire for in their own context.

Using common good as a visionary lens enabled us to envision the world that reaffirms the collective dimension of sharing diverse knowledges that are a common heritage of humanity (Denuelin and Townsend, 2007). The principle of common good as a utopian vision enabled us to envision the 2050 communities, economic activities, political and environmental space that will be serviced by higher education. In addition, the social justice framework was utilised to question the unjust practices that continue to dominate across higher education systems with the aim of identifying areas that need to be eliminated. This framework assisted us to identify legacy issues that stand in way of moving towards our ideal higher education of the future. The current practices that needs to be addressed includes the privatization of knowledge production and dissemination; the individualization of the learning process; the elitist model of education, continuing discrimination and many others. Secondly, we looked at areas that need strengthening such as sustainable development issues, environmental well-being, acknowledgement of diverse knowledges and learning systems, amongst others.

This background document proposes a methodology that can guide the process of generating scenarios for the future of higher education. As part of the preparation for WHEC2022, the context of application was global, and the methodology was uniquely adapted for UNESCO purposes by inviting experts from all regions to be involved. Looking forward, policymakers, decision makers and other actors, can envision new scenarios that are well suited to their specific contexts. Envisioning futures scenarios of higher education may create the conditions for paradigm shifts to emerge for new and more desirable futures.
The fundamental value of higher education is to prepare citizens to contribute to society through knowledge, skills, values and research needed for developing and advancing society as a community. Hence, a scenario development process was used to create images that reflect the notion of higher education as a common good, and mirror social and cultural practices that engender participation and shared responsibilities. The aim of re-visioning was to address the past and current injustices inherent in the higher education eco-system by imagining paths that will make higher education futures more relevant to different realities.

These proposed policy recommendations are addressed to international organizations, higher education associations, institutions and national governments, and other actors, who are highly influential in policy development. Organizations and institutions should continually engage all stakeholders in the development of desirable futures as an ongoing activity rather than something completed only once (Facer and Sandford, 2010). We live in a rapidly changing social environment that needs to be constantly revisited.

The following practical actions towards the futures are recommended:

**Recommendation 1. Towards developing capacities to engage with the futures research**

Futures research, like any other set of research methodologies, can be complex and challenges our existing knowledges and frames of references, while questioning our ways of doing things (Pouru-Mikkola and Wilenius, 2021). It is therefore important that people have the basic understanding of futures research methodologies to engage in processes of scenario development. This can be achieved by taking part in the following steps:

- Developing the individual’s capacity to use, imagine and act for futures is an important skill (known as ‘futures literacy’) to have as we are confronted with a plethora of changes that require higher education to reimagine its role in the future.
- Develop futures thinking and readiness to understand the plurality of futures and think more critically and creatively about the future on personal, local, regional and global levels.
- Develop knowledge and skills on the general knowledge about the future, and the basic understanding of the principles of futures research.
Recommendation 2. Towards the process of developing scenarios

Engage in processes of scenario development as a team within the institution, association or the country. Scenario development gives us the ability to focus on the bigger picture, rather than planning for the world we know. Scenario development is closely related to the mental images of the world we aspire for. This can be achieved by taking part in the following steps:

- Visualize images of the society that higher education needs to service in 20, 30, 40 years, and beyond. Start with the question, ‘how would higher education look like in 2050?’
- Identify salient features and factors, as well as broad policy issues that have significant implications for the futures of higher education.
- Identify driving forces, such as social, economic, political, environmental, and technological forces that will result in the future that higher education will find itself in. This could be done through reviewing literature, for example. Look out for the driving forces that could be predetermined and those that cannot be determined.
- Identify areas that need strengthening in relation to your visions, and those that will stand in the way of moving forward. This is an important stage because it assists in examining in depth what you need to move forward with and what needs to be discarded, as well as what is new.
- Provide platforms where people can engage in the visionary process through generating images of the future
- Develop a scenario, or multiple scenarios, drawing on the generated images, vision, literature, trends and policy issues that need to be addressed in the future.
- Solicit input from a diverse group of people to enrich the scenario development process, including youth, policymakers, higher education experts and community members.

Recommendation 3. Towards promoting a culture of envisioning the futures of higher education grounded on the global common good and a social justice framework.

This can be achieved by taking part in the following steps:

- Engage in the process of scenario development by reimagining national and institutional higher education systems that are guided by the common good principles, are socially just in themselves and contribute to socially just societies.
- Explore different scenarios that could address the issues and challenges in higher education based on global common good and a social justice framework.
- Encourage academics, faculty, researchers, higher education management, policymakers, students, and other stakeholders to consider futures research in order to reimagine higher education of the future based on the common good and social justice framework.
- Create public platforms to encourage debate on the futures of higher education. These public platforms or conferences will provide spaces for policymakers, higher education experts, government officials, and the higher education community to envision the futures of higher education grounded on the principles of common good and social justice. These platforms should also be used to develop relevant steps that need to be taken towards the aspired futures of higher education in different contexts.
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Annex

Four scenarios for the futures of higher education
Mission: To advance the social justice role of higher education by providing accessible, inclusive, flexible and equitable quality education to all.

The most basic characteristic of education is sharing knowledge, insights and information upon which new knowledge, skills and ideas are constructed, ‘thus openness is inherent in education’ (Cronin, 2017, p.1). Ideally, it encourages the culture of learning, creating, sharing and working together as a community of researchers, leaders, teachers, designers and learners. Open education includes practices that promote innovative pedagogical models and empower learners in being active and having autonomy in their own learning and on their lifelong learning paths.

Openness as a practice in higher education enhances access to work opportunities especially considering the greater demand for upskilling and reskilling people in times of rapid change. It also promotes activities that are concerned not only with using Open Education Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), but of producing and co-producing knowledges from diverse contexts and making it available through open access (DeSouza, 2021; McGreal, 2017). This approach looks to offer multiple programmes for diverse students, and so to be as accessible and inclusive as possible. The flexible nature of openness is key to enabling flexible equitable access to quality education as well as supporting professional collaboration by enabling access through using a variety of routes whether formal, non-formal, informal or a combination. Therefore, open higher education embraces an array of concepts that are linked to education as a common good and serve as an aid in addressing challenges posed by the idea of social justice. By so doing, it challenges the rules, workings, values and assumptions of market forces that are often exclusionary in nature.

In 2050, this scenario envisages that higher education:

- Promotes access to learning by accommodating an increased and more diverse student population.
- Ensures that education resources produced using public funds are made accessible and available at no - or very little - cost to the students and communities it serves.
- Supports learners to have a significant measure of control of their learning by offering flexible opportunities for them to choose their best options in personalising their own learning experiences.
- Provides enabling spaces that offer learners an opportunity to develop competencies that are needed to perform in new and emerging economies (knowledge economy, green economy, blue economy, ‘gig’ economy, social economy etc.).
- Employs new and emerging open pedagogies that encourage learners and the community to create their own knowledge.
Scenario 2. Technology-enabled networked learning hubs

Mission: To co-create societal transformations for advancing social well-being through facilitation of learning, generation of knowledge and engaging communities through technologically enabled learning networks.

Technological advancements, around artificial intelligence, internet of things and automation has made it possible for communities to form connections which assist collaboration across groups of learners; instructors; researchers and learning communities. These networks are ‘characterised by abundance and variety – of sources and resources, networks and groups, experiences and expertise’ brought together by a culture of sharing and collaboration (Muñoz et al., 2013). Networked learning hubs enhance the democratization of knowledge by using free online content and research to ensure access to information for all (Rizk, 2021). Learning and knowledge creation emerge as a collective culture of a network of individuals, a community or a society with a goal of generating network ecologies that are constantly evolving (Cabrero and Román, 2018; Downes, 2019). ‘The interaction and collaboration through a network transforms learning, memory, and intelligence from the individual level to the social network level’ (Ghassan, Issa et al., 2014).

The nature and structure of networked learning hubs are virtual, ubiquitous and extend beyond national boundaries to bridge geographic and developmental divides making learners and educators global (Rizk, 2021). Knowledge is democratized and shared on social media platforms, phone apps, community interactive audio streaming and can be disseminated to less privileged communities via simple technologies like radio and television. Individuals and communities such as the associations of farmers, artists, environmentalists, civic advocates, and many others do not only create learning materials, but they form local networks that identify and recommend resources to individuals, groups and communities. It is therefore important to sustain these pedagogical and knowledge construction commons to ensure inclusivity, accessibility and equitability for those who have access to technologies.
In 2050, this scenario envisages that higher education:

- Engages individuals from diverse communities and institutions in the development of content and facilitation of learning by placing emphasis on the diversity of opinions on learning and knowledge construction and sharing, and multilingualism.

- Engages members of marginalised communities, such as residents of remote areas; migrants and displaced communities; people with disabilities and workers who are in need of reskilling, upskilling and cross skilling across disciplines.

- Constructs digital higher educational collaboration networks where decision makers, teachers, learners, non-education institutions, civic associations, researchers to constitute learning and research communities (Downes, 2016).

- Develops partnerships in research and project development and strengthens international collaborative research among institutions across the globe, driven by common global knowledge (Rizk, 2021).

- Provides an accessible and inclusive environment to accommodate the different needs of diverse communities to participate in research and learning, enhances cooperation, and explores new, innovative ways of pursuing higher education missions.

- Designs connected learning environments around the production of knowledge and information by providing tools and opportunities for learners to produce, circulate, curate, and comment on media to foster skills and dispositions for lifelong learning and productive contributions to rapidly changing work and political conditions (Muñoz, et al. 2013).

- Utilises learning analytics to tailor educational services to individual students.

- Validates learning achieved by providing on-demand micro-certificates that can be stacked up into a larger, more recognisable credential or qualification. This will assist learners to increase their currency by creating more direct pathways towards the development of their careers (Downes, 2019).

- Provides space for members of society to engage in critical discourses widely across diverse societies.
**Scenario 3. Ecologically sustainable higher education**

**Mission:** To co-create and connect the world in developing and promoting learning and knowledge generation in the service of humanity and the planet, advancing sustainability through environmental improvements, social well-being and human development.

The idea of ecologically sustainable higher education points to the way in which higher education is connected to multiple ecosystems in its intellectual, societal, global, cultural, economic and environmental relationships with the world (Barnett, 2011; Stratford, 2015). This model paints a picture of higher education committed to advancing equitable and sustainable ecologies. The higher education sector in this scenario focuses on the ecologically and socially responsive understanding of humans in relation to the natural world (both organic and inorganic) and the human world (both individuals and collectives) but also knowledges (plural) of those worlds (Barnett, 2021). The idea is to reclaim knowledge systems to restore and cultivate new practices to regenerate ecological, social and cultural ecosystems (Teamey, 2016). In this world, higher education is viewed as a common good which evolved in ‘mutual social relationships, in and through which human beings enhance their well-being in relation to their natural world’ (Locatelli, 2018).

Such ecologically sustainable higher education institutions are expected to generate knowledge dealing with challenges such as climate change, food security, poverty, public health, peace and security, different types of inequalities and empowerment that stem from the climate crisis as highlighted in the United Nations’ The Future We Want report as well as developmental and systemic issues associated with colonialism, racial inequalities, human rights, migration and other forms of exploitation (Barnett, 2011; Beckles and Richards-Kennedy, 2020). If learning is to lead to change, then higher education needs to develop approaches that transform the way people respond to the world in our social practices, and in our imaginative and critical contexts (Stratford, 2015). To achieve sustainable futures, we need to recognise the connection between people, planet and all other living beings.

In 2050, this scenario envisages that higher education:

- Advances sustainability related knowledge, insights, understandings and dispositions through engagement on a local, regional or even global scale.

- Devotes resources to the co-creation of strategies and tools that transform education in pursuit of sustainable environmental improvement and social cohesion.

- Fosters understanding of the interconnected relationships between our conscious and unconscious thinking, our social and economic structures and humanity’s effect on the biosphere (Stratford, 2015).

- Addresses underlying epistemic structures and knowledge paradigms based on the history of colonialism and acknowledges and values the ideas, knowledge and histories of marginalised communities around the world (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020).

- Designs and develops an interdisciplinary curriculum that focuses on the co-existence of humans and nature, on this planet and beyond, exploring interconnectedness with the wider universe.
- Utilises indigenous languages and knowledge systems to develop people’s capabilities and develop innovative solutions to design simple technologies for water supply; inexpensive sustainable power sources for the benefit of the community (Walker, 2015).

- The aim is to address the physical and the social environment of the immediate communities and regions.

- Promotes cross-generational learning and connections centred on common interests and goals. Highlights the importance of cultural commons which represents intergenerational wisdom, ‘that provides humans with more sustainable and ethical ways to be’ (Stratford, 2015).

- Focuses on action-oriented approaches to problems which involve social, economic, environmental, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them.

- Leads society in generating global knowledge to address challenges of the environment, migration, peace and security, economic crisis, climate change, pandemics etc. through collaborative research built through technology-enhanced network communities.

- Places emphasis on participatory global green economy networks such as the green learning networks that enhance education capacity on green technology itself, green business and industry, and sustainable production consumption to address the environmental, economic and social concerns (Otieno, 2021).

- Instils interdisciplinary knowledge (both pragmatic and empirical) to help learners understand the multi-sectoral, and connections of the, social, political, environment and economic matters (Beynaghi et al., 2015).

- Forms partnerships and coalitions with municipalities, governments, traditional leaders, religious formations, non-profit organizations (NPOs) and non-governmental organization (NGOs), local enterprises and individual citizens or groups to work together towards building sustainable ecological systems (Beynaghi, et al. 2015).
Scenario 4. Development-driven higher education

Mission: To collaboratively create knowledge that will contribute to economic, and societal development of the nation and region by generating shared knowledge systems that uplift communities and support human flourishing.

Development driven higher education moves beyond today's narrow development discourses about economic growth (reflected in terms such as ‘innovation’, ‘skills gap’ and ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’) while acknowledging that future higher education will still retain close links to the economy.

Since the industrial era, education systems across the globe were designed to prepare people for the world of work. Hence, it is not surprising that current studies, which have engaged young people about their views on higher education, reported that job skills and employment are key reasons for participating in higher education. However, there appears to be an increasing disconnect between what higher education offer individuals and what a broader, humanistic, model of development requires. Therefore, higher education has a major responsibility to provide people with the knowledge and skills to effectively participate in the economic and social development, not only of the country, but of the region and the world.

A recent diagnosis of future employment suggests that professional ethos and personality will be central to employability (Hammershøj, 2019). If this is the case, then equipping people with skills needed only for today’s labour markets may not be a good approach. This shows that there are problems in focusing mainly on skills in a volatile and changing world. To ensure that higher education addresses future needs, there is a need for creativity and imagination that combines economically driven ideas of development with broader socially driven ideas. This scenario aims to create a development-driven higher education system that is based on common good principles of bringing different players together to share ideas and work together to use traditional and indigenous knowledge systems that will address the needs of communities and societies. In this scenario, higher education institutions are not only viewed as places that provides skill sets for employment, but should create an environment that cultivates a professional ethos and human capacities to solve economic, social and environment problems together (Hammershøj, 2019).

In 2050, this scenario envisages that higher education:

- Utilises indigenous and traditional knowledge systems to align teaching, research and community engagement to address community (local, national, regional) development needs as the academic mission.
- Facilitates employability of people by developing human dispositions and capabilities - mind-sets and skills sets - needed in the world of work and economy of the country and region (Hammershøj, 2019).
- Identifies areas of expansion into new markets (e.g. green economy, social economy) and provides a range of new local and global educational services including community-based research and local community development.
- Prioritises employability outcomes that strengthen local economies by providing learning programmes that address the knowledge, skills and capacities needed for the informal economy, formal economy and ‘gig’ economy. The economy is valued but only in the service of the social and even wider environmental and community’s well-being.
Promotes research activities geared towards integrating with local and indigenous knowledge systems that will not only benefit local industries but contribute to the knowledge base of the country, region and beyond.

Provides lifelong learning and continuous professional development programmes with the aim of strengthening participation in development, in its economic, social, communal and environmental dimensions.

Creates a teaching-learning and research ecosystem aligned with the development needs of the society.

Democratises higher education by ensuring that historically marginalised communities, youth and students’ voices are fully integrated into the knowledge production. Aim to break down barriers between higher education institutions and the communities they are intended to serve (Cortez, et al., 2021).
The future of higher education

Reimagining the Futures of Higher Education: Insights from a scenario development process towards 2050

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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