Futures of Education

LEARNING TO BECOME

Visioning and Framing the Futures of Education

February 2020

The statement that follows is the outcome from first meeting of the International Commission on the Futures of Education held in Paris, 28-29 January 2020. Established by UNESCO, the Commission is charged with looking at 2050 and beyond to issue a report in 2021 to rethink how knowledge, learning and education may address the challenges and opportunities, both those foreseen for the future and those with us in the present. The statement below outlines the core elements, principles and visions that will frame its work.

A World of Increasing Complexity, Uncertainty and Fragility

We live in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and fragility. The precarity of economies and the strains to peaceful coexistence as well as to natural ecosystems are becoming more and more apparent. Recent assessments indicate that the scale of climate change and its implications are worse than what had been imagined even five years ago when the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted. Persistent inequalities, social fragmentation, and political extremism continue to undermine social cohesion and trust in established institutions, bringing many societies to a point of crisis. Changing patterns of human mobility bring great opportunities but also challenges. Advances in digital communications, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology are fundamentally transforming the way we live, work, communicate, process knowledge and learn. These technological disruptions hold great promise for improving human welfare. However, they also raise serious ethical, social and political concerns, especially as past technological innovations have an uneven record of contributing to human flourishing. All of these complex issues pose significant new governance challenges at a time when multilateralism, international cooperation, and global solidarity are under assault.

Reframing Development and Human Flourishing

Two decades into the twenty first century, the traditional model of economic growth is in crisis, calling into question established development and education approaches. The multiple interconnected challenges in the current historical juncture require that we urgently reexamine narratives of progress and explore alternative development models. Development cannot be simply framed in terms of economic growth; human flourishing and the accessibility of lives of purpose and dignity must be primary concerns. Continued technological change and the accelerating transformation of human cultures and societies seems inevitable. Furthermore, we might be shaping futures where there are fundamental transformations in human consciousness and human identities. As we come to terms with the anthropocene as a geological era of human-caused change to the planet, and as we grapple with a more-than-human world, the key question before us is: what do we want to become? This is a question to be asked and answered through education.

Re-visioning Education and Navigating Plural Realities

This current historical juncture requires us to re-vision knowledge, and rethink the purposes of education and the organization of learning. While there have been great advances in access to education over the past several decades from early childhood through to higher education, consistent quality remains elusive, and millions of children, youth and adults are denied quality learning opportunities. In some settings, debate on the future of education centers on the radical disruption and redesign of learning systems. In contrast, in too many other settings quality universal basic education needs remain unrealized. Looking to the future requires that we navigate plural realities across communities in both the North and South. The world has seen great evidence of what education can accomplish. The uncertainty of changing and complex contexts is matched only by the certainty and commitment of most actors that knowledge, education and learning have key roles to play in charting a course across predicted and possible futures, towards preferred futures for humanity and the planet.

A Humanistic Approach to Education and Development

The UNESCO vision was laid out 75 years ago, most famously in the UNESCO Constitution's call for constructing the defenses of peace in the minds of men and women. UNESCO is committed to the *democratic principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect*; it works to advance education and culture for purposes of justice, freedom, harmony and peace; and, it seeks to further the rule of law and human rights. International cooperation and collaboration – in the spirit of mutual assistance and concern – has been the basis of UNESCO's work for three quarters of a century, particularly on the right to education. There is no question that today more than ever everyone's work must be based in *intellectual and moral solidarity* that extends across the planet.

Embracing pluralism and grounded in the notion of 'common humanity', UNESCO has consistently advanced a humanistic approach to human development and education. A view of humanism as multi-dimensional and always transforming is enshrined in UNESCO's mission and is taken forward in UNESCO's intellectual, normative and operational work. Faced with the bankruptcy of models of development rooted solely in economic growth, humanistic development must be guided by a concern for sustainability, understood as improving the quality of human life without compromising future generations and our supporting eco-systems. In this vision, the purpose of education should be seen fundamentally in moral and ethical terms and as *sustaining and enhancing the dignity, capacity and welfare of the human person in relation to others and to nature*.

Knowledge as a Global Common Good

Broadly speaking, knowledge can be conceived as information, understanding, skills, artistic creation, attitudes, and values – in sum, as the ways individuals and societies apply meaning to experience. There are diverse ways of knowing and diverse forms of knowledge. And, as much as humans organize the world through knowledge, knowledge also organizes our being in the world and the principles that guide our reflections and actions. In the past few decades, digitalization and globalization have radically transformed the ways that data, information and knowledge are created, processed, managed, governed and used. Machine learning, information and communication technologies, and the proprietary commercialization of data have generated tensions on how to ensure the flourishing of scientific, cultural and indigenous knowledges, as well as on how to manage their equitable and democratic circulation and utilization.

UNESCO's 2015 publication *Rethinking Education* reaffirmed that knowledge is an inherent part of the common heritage of humanity. Because of the need for sustainable development in an interdependent world, we should be inspired by the value of solidarity grounded in our common humanity and recognize knowledge as a global common good. If public goods are resources managed as part of a social mandate, frequently by governments, common goods are less instrumentally-configured collective resources whose production, protection and use is properly ensured through transparent social collaboration, participation and trusteeship.

Framing Learning and Education

Learning is typically understood as naming the process of acquiring knowledge, wisdom or capabilities. Learning is both a process and the result of that process; a means, as well as an end; an individual practice as well as a collective endeavour. Learning is a multifaceted reality defined by context. What knowledge is acquired and why, where, when and how it is used represent fundamental questions for the development of individuals and societies alike. While the concept of learning has been core to UNESCO's work over since its founding, in recent years learning has gained increased global prominence in policy and public discussions about education. Alongside the input factors of teaching and curriculum, learners are increasingly recognized as active creators, designing and determining their own educational pathways. This trend should be applauded. At the same time, it must be accompanied by continued enhancement of the professional work of teachers that appreciates the moral responsibilities entrusted to educators. Robust understandings of learning encompass development that is affective as well as cognitive; processes of becoming that unfold over time; as well as the relational dimensions of pedagogy. Above all else, learning is a social endeavor rooted in communities and plural social worlds. It is within these settings that we should discuss what values and practical knowledges should be taught and learned. And, it is at local levels that the collective purposes of education need to be deliberated upon and acted upon.

Education is usually understood as encompassing education and training institutions and programmes, as well as other less institutionalized learning processes such as workplace-based and community-based, as well as self-directed learning – in sum, all forms of organized learning throughout the life cycle. Like knowledge, education is to be regarded as a *global common good*. Seen as part of the global commons, education, knowledge and learning represent *humanity's greatest renewable resource* for responding to challenges and inventing alternatives. While education may be considered to be a 'necessary utopia' (Delors et al 1996), it is important to recognize that the organization and pursuit of learning is a world-making fact of the here-and-now. It is also an ethical arena where values are lived and where being, knowing, doing, and living together are not just prepared for but are actualized.

A Strategy to Use and Democratize the Future

The work of the International Commission on the Futures of Education intersects with a broad global engagement and consultation involving focus groups, online platforms, and reports from other meetings and organizations. Gathering global collective intelligence is essential for understanding and making the multiple possible and desirable futures of humanity on our shared planet. Key to this is the use of the time horizon of 2050 and beyond – and the calling into question of traditional strategies. As a foresight exercise, this initiative explores predicted, possible, and preferred futures and then seeks to bring creative rethinking from the future into the present.

Committing to Equity and Inclusion

The futures of education must be informed by human rights and social justice considerations that take human dignity and equality as core precepts, not future accomplishments, but rather practical starting points that are nonetheless in need of constant, ongoing recognition and realization. One key part of this is child and youth empowerment and the recognition that in all matters inter-generational justice should be an overriding concern.

Core Areas to Explore

As a starting point, the International Commission's work will focus on four core areaa. The recommendations and guidance provided in the report of the International Commission will be informed by a set of precepts and commitments pertinent to each area.

> **Human and Planetary Sustainability –** We must take collective and collaborative ecological responsibility for fostering sustainable life on the planet. Education has a key role to play in changing mindsets but also in changing existing, unsustainable, wasteful practices. Education must channel human capabilities in directions that improve the quality of human life while respecting supporting ecosystems.
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> **Knowledge Production, Access and Governance –** Knowledge must be respected as a global common good. Education must take different voices into account; recognize local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, inter-cultural exchange, and the plurality and fluidity of knowledge—while also addressing persistent asymmetries. Scientific research and other processes for generating, sharing and applying knowledge should be inclusive, democratic, transparent, localizable, and participatory. The relationship between knowledge and truth needs to be openly explored.
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> **Citizenship and Participation –** Participation is fundamental to creating preferred futures. Education must strengthen capacities for collective action and deepen commitments to democratic values, including respect for pluralism, diversity, intellectual emancipation and freedom of thought and expression. At the same time, education institutions and systems must live out and enact these commitments in their own operations and processes.
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> **Work and Economic Security –** Meaningful employment and economic security are cornerstones of human dignity and flourishing. Transformations in the nature of work make it all the more urgent to support learning across the lifespan and to consider higher-order skills and socio-behavioral competencies as foundational within learning systems.

Among the transversal issues that cut across each of these areas, particular attention will be given to **gender** (with gender equality understood as a persistent, enduring challenge that intersects with other forms of discrimination); **culture and cultural heritage** (seen as a key resource that links generations); and **technology** (seen as a tool that needs to be properly harnessed for flourishing, inclusive and sustainable futures). On all these dimensions and topics the International Commission will provide guidance and will identify promising practices to reimagine knowledge, learning and education to shape the future of humanity and the planet.

For More Information

Please consult https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/ or email futuresofeducation@unesco.org.