

• Academia and sustainability: towards a holistic approach

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Background

In the early years of this century, UNESCO launched its Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2015), which yielded, among other things, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. Throughout that period, and down to the present day, UNESCO has remained dedicated to this mission, publishing several studies devoted to the integration of the 17 SDGs in educational strategies. In 2022, the publication of a report by a panel of independent experts, along with the World Higher Education Conference (WHEC) in Barcelona, embodied the solidification of these initiatives.

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Further reading

LEAL FILHO W. et al. (eds), 2020 – *Universities and Sustainable Communities: Meeting the Goals of the Agenda 2030*. Springer.

MEYER J.-B., 2021 – « Université et durabilité : survol de la littérature récente ». In : *Science de la durabilité*, Marseille, IRD : 116-119.

WHEC, an arena and a platform for global cooperation on matters of higher education and research

The attendees at WHEC were a carefully-selected bunch, chosen for their institutional affiliations and with a cap on the number of participants per country. 2500 participants attended the conference in person, with 8300 more following online. WHEC also attracted representatives of various governments (and ministries), higher education institutions and national, European and international authorities. Students were somewhat under-represented when compared with events such as the *Transforming Education Summit*, organised in July-August 2022 by the United Nations and aimed primarily at students. The over-arching theme of the WHEC event was “Reinventing Higher Education for a Sustainable Future,” broken down into 10 key topics for discussion: the impact of Covid, SDGs, inclusion, the quality of teaching programmes, academic mobility, university governance, funding, data, international cooperation and the future(s) of higher education. The SDGs were identified as a particular priority, after discussion of the fall-out of the pandemic, with ample discussion of UNESCO’s role in Agenda 2030. The motto “*leaving no one behind*” was a motif running throughout the conference, and discussions of inclusion served to highlight the social dimension of sustainability.

Transforming higher education for global sustainability

Co-authored by 14 independent experts, the report “*Knowledge-driven actions: transforming*

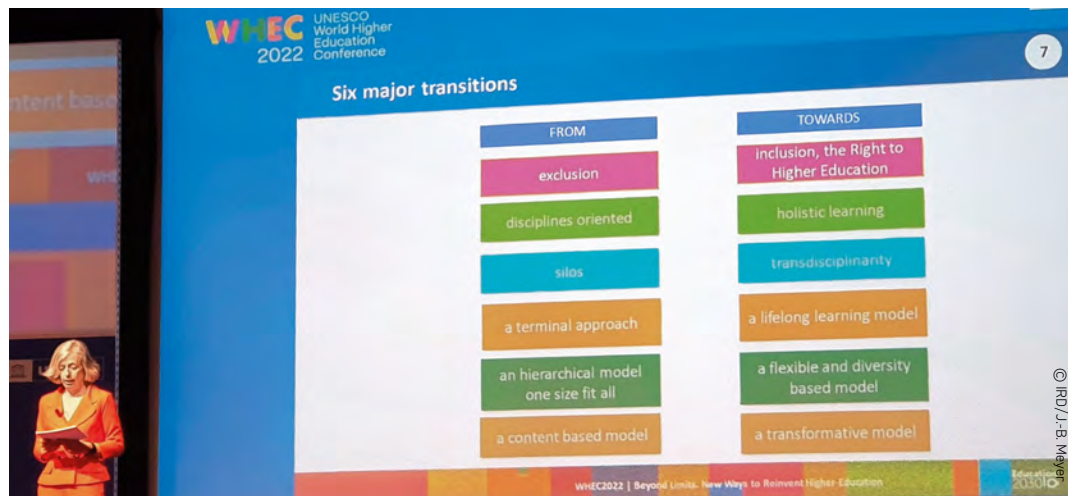
higher education for global sustainability (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380519>) – only available in English at time of writing – focuses on the need to transform higher education in the interests of sustainable development. The report highlights the responsibilities of universities, and the opportunity they now have to play a leading role in the transformation. The authors discuss how and why we can break down disciplinary boundaries in the pursuit of the SDGs, diversifying the forms of knowledge we produce and teach and opening up the academic sphere to engage with other sectors of society. They conclude with a series of general and specific recommendations touching upon all three components of the university triptych: teaching, research and outreach. These recommendations include putting sustainability modules on university *curricula*, establishing a global fund to support research and teaching on the SDGs, and creating an annual conference on this subject. The report also reiterates the importance of defining universal access to education as a fundamental human right. Higher education has a key role to play in this context, particularly in support of life-long learning. The report duly insists upon the individual and collective dimensions of higher learning, the notion of equity and also the importance of cultural diversity.

Radical transformations taking shape

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the report’s authors place great stock by multi- inter-transdisciplinarity as a means of promoting sustainability, calling for greater integration of *Arts, Social*

Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) with physics, natural sciences and engineering/information sciences. They also call upon the humanities to develop more explicitly critical, or even “transgressive,” approaches to engaging with the concepts and conclusions produced by the “hard” sciences, rather than focusing solely on their societal applicability. By opening up universities to trans-epistemic perspectives and embracing all forms of knowledge, the report seeks to push back against the creeping tide of populist obscurantism encroaching upon public opinion worldwide. Forces keen to manipulate public opinion often decry academia as a hermetic and elitist sphere, bent upon mystifying the population in order to maximise private profits. In concrete terms, the epistemic pluralism championed by the authors of this report takes the form of “organised scepticism,” an approach dear to

scientists, and indeed anybody concerned with the rigorous production of knowledge. The goal is thus to adopt an inclusive position which makes all forms of knowledge welcome in our universities, without every tipping over into intellectual relativism – the idea that any and all cognitive expressions are of equal value – and rendering the whole enterprise meaningless. Opening up to society in this manner will require a break with some of the traditional and more recent practices and trends of *academia*. They include the tendency towards splendid isolation, sometimes institutionalised, as well as the precarious employment circumstances of university personnel and the faith placed in international university rankings based on competitive factors that are manifestly at odds with the principles of sustainability. Indeed, sustainability must be the guiding principle behind a system which



Closing ceremony of the World Higher Education Conference (Barcelona, 20 May 2022)
with Stefania Giannini, UNESCO Assistant Director General for Education.

is both rigorous and diverse in its approach. A global system of *SDG benchmarking* has been mooted as a replacement for the existing rankings.

The missing links

This report, and the discussion of its findings at WHEC, are concrete examples of the emerging sustainability-led approach to higher education and research at the global level. They do not seek to deny the political dimension of this change, acknowledging that the sector's priorities need to change and that proactive decision-making is required. Nonetheless, both the report and the conference confirmed a rather worrying suspicion: the French-speaking world was very poorly-represented, and French-speaking developing nations were virtually absent! Not one of the 14 authors of the report is based at an institution in the French-speaking

developing world, whereas English, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking academics from developing nations were actively involved in this exercise. This observation is borne out by a recent bibliometric analysis which highlighted the remarkable decline of French-language contributions to major international debates (Meyer, 2021). Is there not a very real risk that our academic authorities are being left behind in discussions of universities and sustainability? In any case, there now appears to be a strategic window of opportunity in which we can take action to bridge this nascent divide between the international community and ourselves. The risk appears to have been spotted in certain quarters: the Jouzel report, published in February 2022, recommends closer relations and identifies the European scale as the first priority. The expansion of this collaborative dynamic to the developing world is no less important, and it falls to us to rise to that challenge.

KEY POINTS

The World Higher Education Conference consolidated the higher education sector's new focus on sustainability. A report published to coincide with the conference identifies a number of working perspectives for the development of inclusive, trans-epistemic universities. There is an opportunity to be seized here, particularly for the French-speaking academic community, which has thus far been underrepresented in international debates.

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