

**HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR THE SUSTAINABLE
FUTURE WE WANT**

A CALL FOR ACTION

**High-Level Policy Forum
26th ICDE World Conference
Pretoria, South Africa**

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The High-Level Policy Forum in Pretoria, October 17, 2015, is focused on the timely theme of “*Higher Education for the Sustainable Future We Want*”. This is a direct link to the recent declaration at the United Nations of the [Sustainable Development Goals to 2030](#) agreed in New York.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline 17 goals and 169 associated targets focused on poverty, hunger, equity, the environment, security and education, with Goal #4 calling on all nations to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The targets associated with this goal give emphasis to access, equity, quality, affordability, skills for employment, literacy, and the skills to promote sustainable development – for all levels of education from pre-primary to university and includes both formal and informal approaches to education. It is clear that “business as usual” and “more of the same” are not what is intended here. To meet the commitments and the expectations they give rise to, education systems are challenged to think differently and much more inclusively about their future.

The achievement of the demanding SDGs and targets reflects the second component of the theme of this High-Level Policy Forum – *The Way Ahead for Online, Open and Flexible Learning Opportunities and Actions* – and demands a creative and focused response from every one of us attending the Forum. We need to develop and implement imaginative responses to the question: *How can online, open and flexible learning support sustainable education and the Sustainable Development Goals?*

Specific Plans for Action and Change

The potential roles of online, open, and flexible learning have been explored at a number of recent international events. UNESCO, ICDE, and many other partners and organizations presenting to the High-Level Policy Forum played central roles in these gatherings.

For example, at the [World Education Forum](#) in Incheon, Republic of Korea in May 2015, the conclusions highlighted the importance of flexible learning pathways and the use of information and communications technologies. The Qingdao, China [International Conference on ICT and Post-2015 Education](#) set an ambitious agenda for the use of ICT, including mobile learning and open and online solutions.

Previous High-Level Policy Forums, organized by ICDE and UNESCO in Bali and Paris, resulted in declarations focused on equity, access and quality for online learning, as well as calling on governments to provide effective policies, regulations and funding to support institutions, academics and students, and for innovations in higher education.

Now the dedication and continued momentum of ICDE, with UNESCO and other partners, has brought us here to South Africa, where the focus is on regional opportunities and, most importantly, regional action in online, open and flexible learning, set in the context of sustainability.

But what do we mean by sustainability? The definition of sustainability developed by the Brundtland Commission in 1992 applies particularly well in this context: development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. With world population estimated to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, and the world facing challenging issues with respect to climate, regional conflicts food supplies, health, biodiversity and economic development, the future requires us to think

Let us work together here to convert the goals and aspirations expressed in previous gatherings into specific plans for action and change that will produce results.

Higher education must be a means for reducing educational, social and economic inequality. Online, open and flexible learning is a core factor in reaching this goal.

differently and challenge our assumptions about development, innovation and growth.

It is in this spirit that this Call for Action is presented at the High-Level Policy Forum.

We suggest five key challenges, which those present at this Forum need to respond to if higher education in general, and open and distance learning in particular, are to play their essential roles in a different future. The great baseball player Yogi Berra once said “the future isn’t what it used to be” and, in the context of higher education, he is right. For higher education to respond creatively, effectively and imaginatively to the SDGs, we need to offer innovative approaches to learning so more people can access and succeed in more learning more often in their lifetime.

The Five Challenges

Five challenges related to open and online learning in higher education are presented to this audience since those present are leaders in innovation and leaders in the development of new approaches to teaching and learning who carry within them the potential to transform higher education around the world.

We each carry with us the essential responsibility of engaging faculty, academic administrators, policy makers, non-governmental organizations, and funders in effective action to address these challenges for the long-term benefit of students and potential students and society in general in every region of the globe.

Challenge 1: Committing to Equity in Outcomes and in Access

The statements made by ICDE members meeting in Bali and reiterated by the international participants at the subsequent meeting in Paris are important. Clearly, improving access to higher education, while extremely important, is not enough. There is also a need to increase the success of those who have been given access, but do not have the social and learning supports they need to ensure course completion and graduation.

This requires institutions and systems to look at several key issues, including:

- a. Admissions policies – positive discrimination to ensure access for those least able to afford or who are most often under-represented in higher education;
- b. Recruitment, retention and graduation as well as removal of barriers over and beyond the student’s capabilities such as means and availability to meet and learn in a safe environment;
- c. Rethinking the nature of programs to make them relevant, gender neutral and meaningful to a wider range of students;
- d. Differential instruction so as to better connect to the cultural and learning experiences of students; and
- e. A rethinking of assessment to reflect the knowledge, skills and to demonstrable competence of learners.

Substantive research studies show more equal societies are healthier, prosper economically, experience less crime, less mental illness and higher rates of happiness and satisfaction. Whether the test is life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity levels, crime rates, literacy scores, even the amount of rubbish that gets recycled, the more equal the society, the better the performance invariably is. These data show individuals, communities and nations benefit from higher

We need to challenge and change both what we teach and how we teach and build stronger connections between curriculum, competencies and skills in demand and the outcomes we need for civil society.

education when institutions focus on equity as the cornerstone of their values and actions.

The challenge is not just about access, but how we ensure we respond to individuals and their needs once they begin their learning at our institutions. Increasing access, while critical, does not help if the open door is just a revolving door.

There are outstanding examples of institutions increasing access and improving success for their students around the world through the use of open and distance learning, open education resources, peer and community support networks, anytime assessment, and competency-based learning and assessment – we need to do more to learn from these examples and to be innovative in the approaches taken.

We also need to focus on outcomes. It is insufficient to just admit. It is also inadequate to allow those less prepared to not get the support needed to succeed. Real gains will come from increasing the competencies of a greater percentage of population. It is not just about educational attainment; in the end, it is about employment, being able to earn a living, and being able to participate to a greater degree as a citizen.

Challenge 2: Rethinking What We Teach so as to Support Sustainable Development

There were 1.2 billion youth aged 15-24 years globally in 2015, accounting for one out of every six people worldwide. By 2030, the target date for the SDGs, the number of youth is projected to have grown by 7 per cent, to nearly 1.3 billion¹, with some of the countries showing the fastest rates of growth having high levels of youth unemployment (e.g. Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia). This is the largest cohort of young people entering the workforce the world has ever seen.

At the same time, youth unemployment is high. The International Labour Organization's most recent report suggests there were some 74.5 million young people unemployed in 2013. The global youth unemployment rate has reached 13.1 per cent, which is almost three times as high as the adult unemployment rate. The youth-to-adult unemployment ratio is particularly high in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in parts of Latin America, the Caribbean and Southern Europe.

Importantly, in the countries for which information exists, the proportion of young people “Not in Education, Employment or Training” (also known as NEET) continued the steep upward trend recorded since the start of the current economic difficulties. In certain countries, almost one-quarter of young people aged 15-29 are now NEET².

Of concern are advances in robotics and technology, generally coupled with new approaches to manufacturing and growing global competitiveness, that are lowering the estimates of net new jobs to be created over the next 15 years to less than 300 million³. There will be major challenges for higher education with respect to relevant, meaningful curriculum and learning.

1. Source: United Nations at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/popfacts/PopFacts_2015-1.pdf

2. Source: International Labour Organization _ Global Employment Trends, 2014 at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/-publ/documents/publication/wcms_233953.pdf

3. Source: Plan Canada working with Accenture and the World Bank. See <https://plan-international.org/youth-employment-0>

A key component of this challenge is the demand for more skills, knowledge and understanding – including skills and knowledge of the design arts and liberal education – will increase as the global competition for talent gets tougher.

The challenge is to use strategic foresight to rethink, change and develop curriculum which reflects the opportunities communities, regions and nations wish to develop as the basis for their sustainable development.

Challenge 3: Strengthening and Expanding the Use of Online, Open and Flexible Education

The challenge here is to increase the quality, rate and speed of adoption of blended and online learning and the use of open educational resources by more of our colleagues in colleges, universities and technical and vocational institutions as to improve both the experience of learning and the outcomes of that learning.

Every professor and instructor needs to better understand the opportunities technology-enhanced learning provides to both improve learning outcomes and provide opportunities to support learners in different ways as they move through a course or program of studies. This is essential if we want to improve equity, but it is also essential if we want to make the best use of all of the talents available to us to both teach and learn.

The aims here are clear:

- More students learning more often, anywhere and at any time;
- Improved quality of both learning and learning outcomes;
- More ability to learn in peer networks;
- More opportunities for different kinds of learning;
- More affordable learning;
- More focused opportunities for engaged learning, problem solving and competency development;
- More use of open educational resources as a way of increasing access to and success in quality learning; and
- More collaboration in the design and development of learning.

Experience in the growth and development of open and distance learning and open educational resources since the 1970s around the world shows there are real opportunities to make a difference to the achievement of SDGs by the use of these approaches, whether in colleges or universities, schools or community-based learning, formal or informal learning. To achieve the SDG's ambitious educational goals, it is essential that we use every method to reach out and connect in so many difficult circumstances.

Challenge 4: Supporting and Extending Learning for Life and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a phrase that has been with us for many years. It translates into continuing education and continued professional development, skills upgrading and transitional learning in many countries. But the SDG commitment is also focused on learning for life, which is about livelihoods, personal and family health, eating for health, building social and community wellbeing and responding to environmental challenges. It is also about how refugee children are going to access needed education to turn their lives around, how poor countries

The commitment from the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon is clear: “every person, at every stage of their life should have lifelong learning opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to fulfill their aspirations and contribute to their societies”.

are going to be able to step up rather than fall behind, and how nations are going to help one another. Here we have much to do.

Each institution and community represented here needs to develop meaningful and substantive action plans with measurable targeted outcomes in response to the sustainable development commitment to lifelong learning.

This commitment requires us to develop practical actions such as:

- Increasing the number, frequency and range of short informal and formal learning opportunities;
- Expanding online and distance learning opportunities to all people across all disciplines;
- Increasing learner mobility through transfer credit, transnational qualification agreements and credit banking;
- Offering more opportunities for different kinds of learning to become part of an individual’s e-portfolio for learning;
- Providing financial support for non-formal, as well as formal learning through lifelong learning tax credits or grants; and
- Partnering with non-profit and non-governmental agencies in offering community-based learning, peer supports for learning and community placements for students.

Creative approaches are needed to ensure the ambitions of the world education community are more than rhetoric: it is a time for action.

Challenge 5: Strengthening Collaboration and Co-Operation

Sustainable development requires substantial levels of collaboration and cooperation within and between communities, regions and nations. There are a great many opportunities for learning and development embedded in this work and a great many would benefit from learning more about effective teamwork, collaboration, co-operation and development in multicultural environments for complex problem solving. These include situations where those with means and capabilities are supportive of those less able and in need as is the case of world education systems responding to the Syrian refugee crisis by stepping forward to sponsor students.

This requires:

- Cooperative learning through social engagement and work-based learning;
- Developing peer-to-peer and expert to peer learning networks;
- Building effective communities of interest and practice;
- Collaborative program and course development aimed at meeting the SDGs and supporting collaborative practice;
- Using learning networks to enable change;
- Leveraging non-formal and informal learning to support community and individual development;
- Making effective use of community radio for learning and development; and
- Transferring knowledge, skills and understanding between one community and another and using the skills of knowledge translation to make such knowledge accessible and meaningful.

We need a whole new mindset of reaching out to help other nations. Not in a commercial competitive way but in a supportive, understanding way. Those with means have to share them. Those with expertise have to not protect but offer new ways while sustaining standards and competencies.

Strengthening communities and making a difference through collaboration, cooperation, cultural sensitivity and tolerance should be at the heart of all we do in terms of learning for development.

Access, Equity and Quality as Central Elements

These are the five challenges outlined in this Call for Action:

Challenge 1: Committing to Equity in Outcomes and in Access

Challenge 2: Rethinking What We Teach so as to Support Sustainable Development

Challenge 3: Strengthening and Expanding the Use of Online, Open and Flexible Education

Challenge 4: Supporting and Extending Learning for Life and Lifelong Learning

Challenge 5: Strengthening Collaboration and Co-Operation

Each of these five challenges speaks to the sustainable development goals, the mission of ICDE and its members, and reflects the work each institution represented at the Forum does to make quality online, open, and flexible education accessible and relevant. Addressing the challenges also demands we do more, take risks, challenge norms, and become much more aggressive and innovative if we are to meet the SDGs by 2030.

While the goals are lofty, they are also imperative if we are to collectively create a world that better serves its citizens. The goals must include higher education systems that are not elitist but inclusive, that are open and accessible, and that are cost-effective and sustainable.

As we define local and regional opportunities for action, it is essential we also talk about how each of our proposed actions can directly benefit students and those with aspirations to become students. In considering “the way ahead”, the sustainable future, the provision of higher education, and the contributions of online, open and flexible learning are all built around serving the present generation and ensuring the future of coming generations.

Looking at the links between sustainable development and online, open, and flexible learning in post-secondary education involves two perspectives:

- Sustainable development within higher education;
- Sustainable development through higher education; and
- Sustainable development in partnership with community development.

Sustainable Development within Higher Education

This involves meeting the needs of the present and the coming generations where online and open learning can make a huge difference through enhancing the central components of access, equity and quality.

Access

- Extending the reach of education to those who cannot attend on-campus classes;
- Making the learning accessible - limiting or eliminating the standard educational prerequisites for entry to post-secondary education as many of the large open universities have done;
- Providing, or making easily available, the technological infrastructure learners need to participate in online learning; and
- Making post-secondary education as affordable as possible for students, with one key aspect being access to course content through such strategies as the use of open educational resources and the availability of course content on all types of devices.

Equity

- Reaching those who have traditionally been left out of education – the poor, women, migrant groups, disabled, Aboriginal populations, etc.;
- Offering the special support, academic, social, financial, etc. to facilitate the success of groups with little tradition of post-secondary success;
- Designing courses that provide the academic content, as well as guide the learning in ways that encourage retention and success on the part of the learners; and
- Offering online courses that support communities of learners and community support for learners where this has been found to be a significant benefit, development of assessment and credentialing models that reflect the learning objectives and offer transferability and flexibility, such as prior learning assessment.

Quality

- Offering flexibility in timing in terms of students working at the times that best suit their schedules within the requirements of a course or an entire program;
- Offering flexibility in learning so students can repeat or review according to their needs, practice or focus until they achieve mastery, find additional resources that suit their particular needs and learning choices, choose which areas of a course need more attention and which they are comfortable with, work in groups or as individuals, and in general, helping students to shape their learning to achieve success; and
- Supporting student engagement and interaction through course designs that bring the students together online for discussions, debates, joint projects, and other interactions that create an active community of learners, gaining from their exposure to other ideas, concepts and opinions.

Sustainable Development through Higher Education

This can be achieved through the capacity of higher education institutions to not only educate their students, but also reach out into their communities and make

a difference through example, information, partnerships and support of other learning structures.

- The creation of a university and college structure and infrastructure that supports sustainable development in terms of environmental and social impact of the institution itself;
- Building an obligation to stretch to meet SDGs into the mandates of universities and colleges;
- Integrating the key factors of sustainable development into every program, both in their broad sense and in specific applications to each discipline;
- Creating strong programs dedicated to sustainable development; and
- Leading not only by example but through public sharing of information on, and strategies, for sustainable development at the individual and community level.

Through the power of education, augmented by the capacity of online, open and flexible learning to reach beyond any physical campus, higher education can have a tremendous influence in creating a more sustainable future.

Ideally, higher education can reach beyond the definition of the Brundtland Commission, which set the challenge of 'not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' to effectively improve the ability of future generations to meet their needs through delivering them a better world. That is the grand challenge.