

The Future University in the Eyes of Today's Students

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What do today's students think about the university of the future? What are their hopes and fears, when thinking ahead to possible scenarios for higher education in 2050? This article presents the voices of some of the 741 respondents from around the world, who participated in one of 55 focus group consultations conducted in 2020–2021 as part of UNESCO's priority to examine the [futures of education](#).

In connection with this global initiative, higher education is brought into focus through the [UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022](#) as well as by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), through a large-scale project on the [plural futures of higher education](#). This project has included a global consultation with higher education experts, published as [Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the Futures of Higher Education to 2050](#), and a [public consultation](#) that engaged over 1,200 people in 100 countries during 2021.

Focus Group Participants

Focus groups participants, 502 of whom were students and 239 active in fields related to higher education (e.g., government, NGOs, academia), recognize the adverse effects of the pandemic as well as opportunities created by it on the processes of higher education. Some of the main topics that emerged from the focus groups are discussed below.

The Campus Experience Will Be Transformed

The campus, currently the hub of most students' higher education experiences, will be complemented—but not replaced—by integrating technology into teaching and learning. As one focus group participant noted, “an equilibrium must be reached where students are also able to learn by real experiences, human interaction and physical expression, without relying heavily, or borderline exclusively, on digital tools.”

While fears of a [global digital divide](#) abound, focus group participants felt that technology could have a positive impact on inclusion and accessibility. For example, one participant said that “digitizing classrooms will allow access to top education institutes for people who were geographically or otherwise left out previously. A student in rural California will be able to take classes online through top schools in San Francisco or Los Angeles. Any student around the world no matter [their] location will be able to access higher education.”

Although students were optimistic about the role of technology in opening up higher education, they also felt that the future may hold more “market characteristics.” It was felt that this competition would ultimately drive up quality in universities and colleges, but at the same time lead to greater stratification throughout society in terms of education.

A Paradigm Shift from Academic Mobility to Engagement

Participants recognized that “mobility will turn into connectivity” and that traveling to other countries would not always be necessary in the future, because students will learn how to stay engaged with the global community in different ways. Students see their future university attending to local needs by tackling all kinds of inequalities, while remaining responsive to international collaborations.

Participants believe that technology will act as an equalizer between countries in the future, and that “mobility opportunities should reach other countries and be more international.” Students and educators talked about restructured university degrees

Abstract

What do today's students think about the university of the future? What are their hopes and fears, when thinking ahead to 2050? Based on focus groups consultations conducted as part of UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative, key issues include the transformation of campus experiences by technology; a paradigm shift from mobility to engagement; cocreated learning environments; climate change concerns; links between higher education and the labor market; and the impact of artificial intelligence on employment.

Looking ahead, the links between higher education and the labor market are also important concerns for students.

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that would consequently lead to changes in curriculum content as well as forms of academic mobility. Students trust that virtual forms of mobility will be equally beneficial for intercultural exchange and understanding.

Cocreation of Learning Environments

Participants foresee “new forms of knowledge construction, based on cooperative and collaborative relationships between teachers-students and students-students. For this, it is essential to reconfigure the role of the teacher who, in addition to preserving his/her role as a specialist, must assume more [of the] role of tutor, mediator, facilitator, and motivator.” In this future, students are more active about what they want and need according to their contexts and realities. They will be cocreators in their own higher education, which includes having the ability to shape their learning pathways.

Climate Change, A Ubiquitous Concern

Among all participants, climate change is a major issue, particularly its lack of coverage in today’s higher education curricula. Focus group participants articulated the need for more interdisciplinary and accessible teaching and learning. This should incorporate climate change: “Topics such as sustainability and guidelines focused on social causes, will be more discussed and included.”

Another participant noted that “[c]limate change has effects on various diseases, but there are few specific links made during our education. We need to connect the dots and incorporate the impact of climate change.”

Links between Higher Education and the Labor Market

Looking ahead, the links between higher education and the labor market are also important concerns for students. While job markets will vary, students remained practical in their perception that a university degree serves to elevate their economic and social status. Unemployment is seen as a big threat in the future, and the university’s role in teaching students to be “market ready” will continue to be significant.

However, participants also looked beyond the financial benefits of employment, into fulfillment and reward from their chosen area of work. As one participant noted, the “fluid options of lifelong learning” present many opportunities for continuous growth and development beyond the “four walls of the classroom.” Students are aware of the need to reskill and upskill to maintain stable employment.

Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Employment

Automation and robotization will further affect human interactions and will specifically appear in the service field when “cars ... drive themselves, shopping will move away from brick and mortar and lead to more convenient lifestyles.” However, participants also expressed their concerns about the social effects of such change and predict various upheavals and social disorders.

Connectivity

If the findings from these very varied focus group consultations had to be summarized in one word, it would be connectivity. Participants no longer see higher education as created only by institutions, but connected to students in the cocreation of their learning pathways. Further, global processes should be connected with local communities. Students want to become better communicators and collaborators to thrive in a technologically interlinked world where learning runs throughout their entire lives. Individuals will continually upgrade their skills to stay relevant and connected in fluid labor markets. Participants acknowledge their role within the structures of higher education because they want to become better learners and serve global and local communities to the best of their capacity.

These focus groups have revealed students’ hopes and concerns, as they think ahead to 2050. The next big question is: Are universities ready to attend to students’ visions of the futures of higher education? ▲