

In terms of social value, higher education's greatest challenge in the coming years is to materialize the contribution made by knowledge to building a sustainable future for humanity and for the planet.

Sustainability involves the development of a new culture. This should encompass an analysis of knowledge itself, including a review of the assumptions that sustain our understanding of the world and the human dynamics within it.

Two levers of change are needed to bring about a substantial shift in systems. The first is to question thoroughly concepts that we think are obvious (which have been classed as truths and have therefore become immovable). The second is to be able to imagine what we want to bring into being. This second lever is the greater challenge, as it is limited by the collectively accepted beliefs on which we constructed the previous system.

The current education system is created within and is framed by a model of civilization that includes values, a development model and an understanding of contemporary society, and it responds to this model's needs.

What is at issue today is the need for a new conception of human progress. This changes the context for education, which has been too focused, in recent decades, on short-term instrumental performance, within a socioeconomic system that is growing exponentially. We are on the verge of a change in the model of civilization, which cannot be built from the old paradigm of a system that has reached its limits.

Inherent to the way in which we educate is a given understanding of reality. Therefore we need to review, in current education systems, the often non-explicit assumptions on which this understanding of reality is based.

We know that we cannot solve problems using the same level of awareness and understanding with which they were created. We need to create a new consciousness of being in the world, based on a new understanding of the dynamics of this relationship.

We are witnessing the end of a cycle, though with a certain amount of resistance

and even greater uncertainty. We know that we must change the bases of economic, political and social systems to channel the harmonic coexistence of all life on the planet. We are already aware of the multifactorial interrelation that underlies all reality, all dynamics and all activities.

In this context, an ever-widening gap could arise between the space and the value we give in our systems to knowledge that facilitates *human and social welfare* and instrumental knowledge for intermediate human operations.

- What knowledge do we prioritize as the most useful and what purpose does it serve?
- What ethics and values do we transmit in the existing education process?
- Can we maintain current quality standards in higher education without shifting towards complex thought in the creation and transmission of knowledge?
- Are we ready to investigate the concept of knowledge in depth in order to progress towards interdependence and uncertainty?

Nowhere is it prescribed that the knowledge that should be gained in the higher education (HE) process should be that which leads to a deep understanding of humans and their relationship with the Earth. However, it would certainly be reasonable to expect that knowledge to be incorporated into HE, given the mission of HE to prepare people to be professionally competent and to consciously co-create the reality in which they live.

We must explore how to tackle ethical issues and values, recognize their inherent existence and question the idea of an absolute truth. We must also review our monocultural perspective and promote dialogue between different types and sources of knowledge.

The academic community and society need to reconsider the supremacy of the scientific-rational paradigm and the accepted knowledge of experts as the only kind of knowledge that is valid.

This is linked to a second issue: the capacity to put knowledge at the service of society. On the whole, educational institutions are not at the centre of the debate on the global

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crises that are affecting our world, nor are they participating actively in the critical renewal of ideas for change. Consequently, it is even more necessary to establish new ways of transferring knowledge to society. Universities have progressed in devising strategies, processes and activities for businesses, and they should now focus on transferring knowledge to society as a whole.

At least three sources of tension influence the role of institutions in social dynamics:

- The ability of institutions to anticipate change and be proactive rather than reactive.
- The departmental organization of knowledge vs. the organization of knowledge around topics of social interest.

The United Nations University (UNU) is a leading example of an institution that has clearly adopted this latter approach. There is no need for all universities to move towards this model, but we should adopt some of its principles.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) can contribute to the renewal of thought in our society through the proactive, systematic criticism of ideas, particularly established beliefs about the way we organize our community and how these beliefs are reflected in our education systems. Universities can also help to distinguish between knowledge, information and ideology, to facilitate a diversity of positions, based on available knowledge.

In addition, HEIs can generate the knowledge required to support political decisions that affect the entire world population or large parts of it. In the future, this will be an increasingly pressing need (and hopefully a demand).

Therefore, we need to reduce the time it takes to transfer new knowledge to society and we also need to open up access to knowledge to ensure that it is as useful as possible. This can be done by establishing relationships with institutions, civil society organizations, international organizations, governments and the citizenry, and providing them with plural and expert advice. In addition, HEIs need to become cosmopolitan centres by building bridges between different cultures, and to participate openly in the debate on their social relevance.

We have already explored several assumptions. When we consider all of them together, emerging issues related to **managing knowledge in our education systems and institutions** are brought to the fore.

1. We work with a fragmented, linear and cumulative model in knowledge management. However, in its growth and interconnectedness, knowledge is beginning to behave as a living organism.

2. The interrelationship between disciplines, a holistic approach and the topic-based organization of knowledge is necessary, but our structures are centred on disciplines.
3. Knowledge multiplies, at the same time as part of it becomes obsolete, increasingly rapidly, in all fields. In addition, there is a long delay between the generation of knowledge and its inclusion in curricula.
4. All the knowledge that is generated is not enough to reduce the level of uncertainty about social, environmental and human circumstances. In fact, we increasingly feel that we have less control over what happens.
5. We cannot cover all available knowledge in the design of degree courses. The difficulty of selecting relevant knowledge is a well-known, controversial debate in intradisciplinary terms and an emerging one in cross-disciplinary terms. The tendency to cover more under the same concept of education, including lifelong learning, is unlikely to succeed if the above premises are true.
6. Paradigm shifts are essential in the development model, energy sources, the economic system, political and representational models, in the forms of human relationships with respect to diversity and coexistence, and in our relationship with nature. Education itself requires a paradigm shift on which to base learning and teaching.

One option is to strike a balance between the importance we give to transmission, that is, ‘the accumulation of knowledge’, and the importance we give to the transformational process of ‘training the one who knows’. That is, we should develop the potential for knowing using the least energy and as effectively as possible.

We should prepare people to handle complex realities in a simple way and we should integrate emotional abilities with instrumental and knowledge abilities. We need to train people to learn to learn; to fully understand and tolerate uncertainty and change; to handle a vast and complex universe of information from many sources and of many different natures; and to discriminate between information, knowledge and wisdom. We must train people to understand what we are, what we are like and how to be, both as individuals and as a group, and to manage their own education and development throughout life.

We should recover the notion of an education based on the development of the individual, and ensure that there is a balance between transcendental and lasting aspects and practical and temporary ones, so that the

purpose of knowing also becomes collective harmony, peace and prosperity. We should move from a model in which the main focus is on the content, to one that also emphasizes the container – a model centred on **being**.

If we move in this direction, we will have a wealth of new horizons to explore in relation to the function of HE. This should bring us closer to the transcendent meaning of life and to the transmission of wisdom, which will probably makes us feel happier and more in tune with life, while we remain in a rigorous academic context that is focused on the search for and dissemination of what we call truth.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The aim of the fourth GUNi Report *Higher Education in the World* is to explore HE's commitment to sustainability. In this task, the first step is to present the current context and its impact on HE, and then to share experiences of what is already being done in the different world regions, to identify barriers in HEIs and possible solutions, and finally, to propose different visions for higher education and sustainability to make the transition from understanding to action.

We start by analysing the context because it still seems strange to talk of a Planetary era, which is simply humanity's awareness of what has always existed. However, this reality changes everything, as we now know the opportunities, the limitations and their impact; we know what works and what does not. An awareness of the state of the world is what justifies the need to transform the purpose of education and the systems in which it is carried out.

The second part of the Report, 'Regional perspectives: What has been achieved at this stage', aims to illustrate how Africa, the Arab states, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin-America and the Caribbean, and USA and Canada have introduced sustainability in HE, complemented with subregional or national analysis and a selection of trending topics related to the different aspects of sustainability and the role of HE. This section also includes examples of networks on HE and sustainability working in each region as well as experiences and good practices on how some HEIs in the different regions are introducing sustainability into the curricula, research, social and community engagement and institutional management.

In Part III, the reader will also find a study 'Moving from understanding to action: Breaking barriers for transformation' intended to establish which barriers prevent HEIs from achieving sustainable development

(SD) in their performance and to seek ways of trying to overcome them and propose some solutions. For this study, participative channels have been created to involve all those experts interested in the transformation of HE towards sustainability, such as:

- the GUNi 1st Round Poll: Breaking barriers for transformation
- the work done during the Parallel Workshops: Moving from Understanding to Action: Breaking Barriers for Transformation, held at the 5th International Barcelona Conference on Higher Education, 'Higher Education's Commitment to Sustainability: from Understanding to Action'
- the GUNi 2nd Round Poll: Breaking barriers for transformation, based on the results of the first poll and the workshops
- the creation of a working group within the GUNi Knowledge Community for discussing the results and preparing the final piece in which ten international experts have participated.

The fourth section of the Report, 'Visions for transformation', aims to shed new light on the current paradigm and to propose a different perspective on it, where alternative ideas can be raised. Within this section of the Report we would like to make a breakthrough on the established paradigms; renovating and adjusting them into the current realities in which we live. We have encouraged authors to move away from the normal and conventional way of thinking and suggest innovative ideas that can offer new future perspectives and give new horizons for academia and policymakers working in the field of HE. We expect readers to find different proposals for acting in alternative and creative pathways.

We are very pleased to bring together 85 experts from the worldwide academic community who are working on the transformation of HE systems and institutions towards sustainability. In their works they present an exciting series of ideas, options, visions and specific challenges for the commitment of HE towards sustainability.

The final goal of this Report is to stimulate debate among all those whose different links with the world of HE could contribute to enriching the discussion. We aim to stimulate serious and profound thought, which will open opportunities that should be jointly analysed, discussed and hopefully used by academics, university leaders, policymakers and members of civil society and the business community. Thus, we invite everyone to follow the discussion in the GUNi *Knowledge Community*, a new collaborative network initiative by GUNi.