Global Learning and Intercultural Competence as Imperatives for the Future of Higher Education:

Reducing inequities and creating effective global problem-solvers

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Contribution from the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) to the UNESCO Futures of Education initiative

AIEA

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Introduction

The UNESCO Futures of Education initiative aims both to rethink education and shape its future and to foster debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimagined in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. The Director-General of UNESCO convened an independent International Commission to develop a global report on the Futures of Education. This commission considers inputs through consultation processes with groups and thought leaders from around the world.

The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) is a member organization that equips leaders to shape the future of higher education in a global context. UNESCO invited AIEA to take part in a series of focus groups in January 2021 as a part of the consultation process for the Futures of Education initiative. This report includes highlights from focus groups with members of the AIEA Board of Directors, AIEA's Executive Director, and UNESCO.

Trends impacting the future of higher education

Inequalities, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

The current context:
- Inequities exist along many different categories: gender, race, socio-economic levels, and rural/urban dynamics were identified as key areas of inequities that both impact education and are also important for education to consciously and intentionally address.
- Inequalities also exist at multiple levels—not just within countries in the categories listed above, but also between the global north and global south. We must understand who is making decisions that impact the future globally and act to ensure representation and the inclusion of diverse voices.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified disparities in education and health, both globally and locally.

Needed societal considerations:
- Education should be considered a public good and a human right at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Realizing this goal requires an equity of access within and among nations.
- Access to technology is crucial for increasing access to education and reducing inequities— without this, existing inequities will only be amplified.

The role of educators, administrators, policies, and education systems:
- Education is a way to empower individuals to challenge systemic inequities, and it is the job of educators and policy-makers to intentionally use education systems to address this global issue.
- Currently, U.S. society in particular is becoming increasingly polarized in partisan echo chambers perpetuating the validity of a singular worldview. This segmentation and trend of existing in a space with people, media, and ideas that reinforce a particular way of thinking also impact our students. Technology, while on the one hand a possible solution, also facilitates the creation of spaces that reinforce myopic perspectives. It is crucial for educators to remedy this by exposure and engagement with diverse viewpoints and perspectives, as well as digital literacy.
- It will be hard to overcome inequities without a shift in thinking as well as a willingness to change worldview. If we are not ready to give up something, nothing will change.
- Educators must stay student-focused in a way that respects student perspectives and engages in authentic mutuality by incorporating and giving space and importance to the voices of students.
- Education must teach students a version of history that is correct and takes a hard look at what has been taught in the past: how can students be guided to a collective view while they're lied to?

Trends impacting the future of higher education

Demographic Shifts and New Generations

- Population growth projections show a very young African continent. As youth represent future problem solvers, it's important to provide opportunities and foster global citizenship among this population.
- While many perceive this to be a globally connected generation, there is also fear that many are in a "bubble" and not exposed to diversity of ideas. Education must intentionally expose students to multiple worldviews and teach the skills and tools to engage with difference.

Climate Change

- Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing the world, and all generations are charged with the task of preventing irreparable damage to the planet and coming up with globally sustainable solutions.
- Climate change also impacts and exacerbates global inequities.

Technology

- Technology is a simultaneously a tool and a threat – it can unite and divide. It has fostered and accelerated cultural insularity but also provides tools to break this insularity.
- Improvements and innovations for teaching with technology are consistently evolving. One challenge with this is that course delivery often involves privately owned software, which can be an issue of ethics and access.
- Technology will continue to rely on artificial intelligence to make decisions that impact individuals and societies. Decision-making processes will be directly influenced by those who create the code and algorithms—this has implications for access and the need to train diverse groups of people so as not to perpetuate structural inequities.
- Increasing technological advances impact future job opportunities, as students will have a great many choices of career paths – including many careers that do not yet exist. As educators training students for unknown careers, we must focus on creative, critical, and intercultural thinking.

The Purpose of Education in 2050

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Why?

- Education must address the issues described above around access, inequities, technology, climate change, and demographic shifts.
- Education is a tool of empowerment for individuals to fight against systemic forces and a way for individuals to challenge systemic inequities.
- Education should contribute in some way to broader social, economic, political and cultural development.
- Ultimately, education is about peace-building and creating a just and equitable society.

When?

- Education systems must provide more resources for primary/secondary education as well as the recognition of tertiary education as a right and not a privilege.
- Basic, secondary and higher education should not be competing. Higher education must address local needs and issues.
- Educators and education leaders must themselves embrace the practice of lifelong learning and instill this as a value in students.

What?

- Education should teach about the way systems work and how to function effectively within existing systems and change systems as needed to better meet societal needs. It should advocate for and empower citizenship and participation as well as increase understanding of human rights.
- Education should be about values, character-building, and understanding the consequences of one's actions.
- Education should teach others the need for diversity, inclusion, and justice.
- Education should influence behavior change in ways that benefit society and contextualize our common humanity.
- The concept of cultural identity should be embedded in education, including an understanding of one's own cultural identity in order to better understand that of others.

The Purpose of Education in 2050

What? (continued)

- Education should teach digital and media literacy to avoid the pitfalls of unchallenged echo chambers.
- Education should be based in science; politics should not interfere with the teaching of scientific principles and issues.
- Education should focus on the creation and dissemination of knowledge.
- Educations should teach multiple modes of thinking, including:
  - Critical thinking
  - Creative and innovative thinking
  - Intercultural thinking

How?

- Education should be fast, smart, nimble, and flexible.
- Educational systems should include options for apprenticeship models and ways of integrating coursework with experiential education.
- Education must offer norming opportunities for dialogue with others who have a diversity of views. It should foster productive dialogue between differences and offer the opportunity to understand and process this engagement with difference.
- Educators must have the ability to pivot and change historical structures—they should identify what education currently does well, what needs to change, and when to be adaptive.
- Education should utilize technology for interaction across boundaries and provide a way to learn from and about one another. This technology needs to be accessible to all.
- The global north should see the global south as a partner—there has been a shift of power and, for example, China is providing educational opportunities for African students; and there is a movement away from western dominance in education. This is a fundamental shift that educators and education leaders must adapt to while seeking related opportunities to benefit all.
- Education should be simultaneously more universal and more personal. Holistic approaches to learning environments will result in better learning outcomes.

Charge for Educators and Administrators

In addition to the shifts for the education sector addressed previously, there is a responsibility and need for educators, education leaders, and administrators to reflect and holistically integrate several ideas and principles into their approach to education.

- Educators need to know who they are, including their own cultural biases and identities, in order to learn about and teach about others. If educators are not confident in their cultural identities, learning about others is challenging. Educators and administrators must model this process for students and society.
- Educators must be willing to re-learn things and recognize their own limitations. There are areas in which students may have more knowledge or experience than educators, and those teaching must listen to and respect this dynamic.
- Educators need to be open to learning that the way some subjects are taught may not have been historically accurate or based in science—and approach this with a sense of open-mindedness and humility while embracing the practice of lifelong learning.
- It will be hard to build a new future if educators are unwilling to change the way they see the world—whether it is issues of race or privilege at home, paradigms of western or Global North-dominated educational hegemony, or a nostalgic adherence to the past. Educators and education leaders must be open to change, even if it means the relinquishment of historical power.

Intercultural Competence as key to addressing these issues and the future of education

Through this examination of trends and looking to the future of higher education, it becomes clear that there is a particular need for the integration of intercultural competence—the process of being able to communicate and act effectively and appropriately across cultures—in order for students to succeed in solving global problems and actualizing the goals of education.

Intercultural competence building is crucial because:

- Everything is impacted by context given the diversity of our global community, and future generations need to understand and be able to act appropriately and effectively, understanding their biases and worldviews as well as other perspectives that impact global issues.
- Intercultural competence enables people to adapt to the future circumstances society will face and fosters skills and values that help to understand the "Other."
- Educators must recognize cultural and ethical values in their own societies in order to respect and understand other worldviews—and ultimately build towards peace. Intercultural competence provides a pathway for this ongoing process, which enables and strengthens education as a key path for peacebuilding.

With the growing polarization and "bubbles" of like-minded individuals consuming media and other information that may further insulate from differing opinions, building intercultural competence can create public spaces where dialogues are possible and we can explore a diversity of worldviews. Education needs to be able to break through this insularity, and intercultural competence building is a key method.

There is a need to translate the intercultural from a global context to the local context—thinking-patterns around difference as well as knowledge, skills, and attitudes around the "Other" in a national-culture context should be facilitated to apply to the "Other" at home. Energy and resources are often spent to focus on understanding on what is happening across the world, but that understanding and those ways of thinking are not always applied to local contexts.

There is also a recognized need to understand one's own culture from a more objective and measured approach in order to understand other worldviews. The intercultural competence literature addresses this and there is a body of scholarship around this practice, but it does need to be more intentionally integrated into educational pedagogies.

Educators also need to understand the motivations behind people who do not agree with intercultural principles. Educators and education leaders should explore narratives that work with these individuals and groups and become more precise and nuanced in how to build buy-in for intercultural competence as a priority.

Conclusion and About AIEA

Conclusion

Educators and education policymakers must reform thinking about education to a values-driven, equitable, and inclusive process that is no longer dominated by western hegemonic powers but crosses borders to prepare societies to address the complexities of future global issues. Education, then, must integrate principles of intercultural competence, creative and critical thinking, and engage in respectful and productive dialogue with stakeholders with different worldviews.

About AIEA

The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA), a membership organization formed in November 1982, is the only association specifically focused on international education leadership. AIEA equips leaders to shape the future of higher education in a global context.

AIEA members embrace the following values:

Ethical and Innovative Leadership
AIEA members are guided by respect for the dignity and rights of one another, and operate on the principles of civility, integrity, and professionalism to advance the internationalization of higher education and to make meaningful contributions to society.

Equity and Inclusive Excellence
AIEA members adhere to the tenets of fairness and reciprocity to integrate diverse voices in developing the strategy, policies, practices, and structures of higher education in a global context.

Curiosity and Respect
AIEA members recognize and value the benefit in learning from one another's experience and expertise and are willing to engage in the free exchange of ideas through dialogue and collaboration.

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