

Higher education based on cooperation and interdisciplinarity has a key role in a global sustainable development

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Abstract

Purpose – To highlight that, for higher education (HE) to fulfil its role and provide societies with the required knowledge and competencies that will enable a sustainable future, through research, education and campus operations, it needs to cooperate and promote interdisciplinarity within the sector and with society at large.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is a follow-up on the author's presentation, as President for the International Association of Universities (IAU), at the IAUP triennial conference 2021. It is not presenting outcomes of a specific research project but rather a personal experience and reflections on challenges and opportunities debated at global HE conferences, national and international seminars, IAU publications and global surveys.

Findings – There are many publications on challenges and opportunities when it comes to developing and capitalizing on the social responsibility of HE for a sustainable development. However, there is a lack of discussion on internal institutional responsibilities and support for the societal value of HE beyond the sector.

Originality/value – This is the personal view of the author and builds on a long experience as scientist and academic leader.

Keywords Interdisciplinarity, Cooperation, Values, Academic freedom, Global societal responsibility

Paper type Viewpoint

Background

With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education (HE), HE has shown its capacity to adjust and to take societal responsibility but has also stressed both the challenges and opportunities needed to develop the sector as a key stakeholder and actor for a sustainable future. HE has a key role in providing societies with the critical thinking and the broad knowledge base and competencies that will allow it to address complex global challenges. HE must therefore build its future in cooperation with societal stakeholders, within and beyond academia, and develop interdisciplinary approaches in research and education.

The key role of HE for sustainable development (HESD) has been supported and promoted by many actors for decades and was clearly stated by the UN Agenda adopted in 2015 while offering a roadmap or guideline to achieving the sustainable development goals and realizing Agenda 2030. The International Association of Universities (IAU) [1], the global network of higher education institutions (HEIs) and organizations, has been actively engaged in HESD since the beginning of the 1990s, through sharing and developing knowledge; providing global policy documents, statements and publications; and regularly performing global surveys on HESD in HE. The third one is still open at the time of submission of this paper.

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However, despite the voiced relevance of HE for democratic and sustainable societal development by policymakers and stakeholders in society, there are many shortcomings in the HE system in fulfilling this role. These shortcomings became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic in national and regional studies and surveys, and at the global level, as has been documented by the IAU in a series of networking meetings with national, regional and international organizations throughout the pandemic and through a series of global surveys on the topic [2]. At the same time, it is to be highlighted that COVID-19 was reported to have increased awareness and recognition of the relevance of HE in society, including among government officials and policymakers. HE has proven to be the true provider of knowledge and competencies to meet and tackle the complexity of societal challenges at the local and global level. This complexity requires interdisciplinarity and cooperation within the HE as well as between HE and governments, policymakers, business and private and public stakeholders.

There are excellent publications, conferences and webinars sharing experience and best practices on how the HE sector is to develop to better meet societal needs and foster a sustainable future. HE cannot take the responsibility for a sustainable global future on its own. This requires an integrated approach by all stakeholders and calls for both high quality and smart cooperation. The importance of transforming and developing research in cooperation with society, which has true societal impact, societal responsibility and/or local mission, is increasingly noticed and valorized. However, successful cooperation and joint action are built on mutual trust and understanding of each stakeholder's intentions and calls for strong and even legal frameworks. The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussions on responsibilities and actions to be taken by each actor to enable true interdisciplinarity and much needed cooperation within the HE sector and beyond to develop the sustainable future we call for.

Actions and responsibility to be taken by the higher education sector and institutions

For trusted developmental cooperation, each party must adhere to a set of values. Indeed, the unique role of HE, and its relevance to society, is dependent on a set of fundamental values [3]. These include academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the coupling of research and education, values that are the basis for knowledge creation and dissemination without political or ideological interference or pressure. These values also include equality, inclusiveness, tolerance of diversity and local and global societal responsibility. They are crucial for HE to develop curiosity and critical thinking for students and staff to engage in applied research, and disciplinary and interdisciplinary understanding, while acquiring the complementary competencies required to contribute to societal innovation. It is a responsibility of the HE sector to jointly act to promote, advocate and defend these values and take action and responsibility to increase the understanding of these values within the HEIs and to societal stakeholders, locally and globally.

This is even more urgent today when we witness increased populism, de-democratization and even governmental or societal questioning, ignoring and even silencing of HE and rejecting the much-needed fundamental values, in particular academic freedom. This development is also impacting negatively on the internationalization of HE, on research and education cooperation, and on the idea that HE is to share and develop knowledge to equip all societies to jointly meet the global challenges.

Another action and responsibility of HE is to promote, defend and show the relevance of performing research and education in all disciplines and to encourage and support cooperation among them. Interdisciplinarity is essential to better understand the world in which we live and to develop the kind of solutions required for the challenges we face. The humanities, social sciences and the arts are traditional academic disciplines providing knowledge and competence to societies and complement the sciences, technology,

engineering and mathematic – the STEM. The combination of all disciplines is vital to address the complexity of societal needs for democratic and sustainable development.

However, and for many years, there has been an increased focus on the STEM disciplines in governance and funding of HE around the world, neglecting the reality that HE provides knowledge and competence and future leaders for all sectors of society, not only the business and technology sector. We need a complex set of competencies to support health-care sector, the education ecosystem, culture etc. The lack of financial support to disciplines in the humanities and social sciences for many years has affected research and education, which will be further developed below.

It is urgent for the HE within their institutions to support disciplinary breadth and at the same time take actions and responsibility to bring awareness and understanding of their societal relevance and the consequences losing them. Without these disciplines, there is no base for the interdisciplinary cooperation needed to meet complex societal challenges, with local relevance and global responsibility.

The private and public sector is increasingly taking responsibility for global sustainability and thus asking for new competences to include social, ecological, and economical perspectives. This is an opportunity for the HE sector to convince governments, policymakers and other funders to support interdisciplinary initiatives in education and research.

Finally, the HE sector must take responsibility for developing an alternative academic merit system that values interdisciplinarity within the HEIs and with societal stakeholders. The merit system is international and yet also owned and developed by the sector itself. There is also a dire need for much better valorization of education itself and for strong pedagogical skills among academics teaching in universities around the world that enhance the learning experience and ensure better the acquisition, transmission and sharing of the knowledge that society as a whole needs to acquire. There needs to be a pedagogy that fosters the development of competencies needed for a democratic and sustainable development.

Actions and responsibility of external stakeholders in society, including the private and public sectors

The local mission of HE and societal cooperation has been increasingly discussed and documented through publications, conferences and webinars. Many national and regional HE institutions and organizations support this development and IAU has shared and discussed best practices from around the world and at the global level. The importance of cooperation between HE and society was also clearly stated by UNESCO and in particular by Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director General for education, in her speech on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of IAU, 2021 [4].

HE has a key role in providing society with knowledge and competences through research and education and dissemination and there is a general trend in HE to increasingly open up to cooperate with societal stakeholders. In some sectors, cooperation and collaboration with external stakeholders has a long tradition. The health-care sector and technology intensive companies often foster research and develop intensive cooperation with the HE sector. This is common practice in professional education.

There is a general view that cooperation between HE and the societal stakeholders is needed for the sustainable development. But this may result in increased pressure and demands on the HE system, which might not be aligned with its fundamental values and resource capacity. The pressure is often linked to issues of financing. When HEIs become dependent on external, too often short-sighted and disciplinary directed, the quality of research and of education are negatively impacted.

Mutual respect and understanding of cooperating actors' goals, prerequisites and legislations are necessary to support the common responsibility for taking actions for a sustainable societal future. Cooperation with the HE includes respect for its fundamental values, which cannot be neglected. There is much to be accomplished through cooperation based on trust and respect and with a common goal.

The HEIs witness an increased demand from government and employers on educating for today's needs of the job market, thus neglecting that HE educates for today and for the future. Students will be the future leaders and societal transformers; they need to be educated in analytical and creative skills and develop constructive critical minds regardless of the sector in which they will operate. They need to be prepared to be part of societal transformation. Moreover, the rapid and unpredictable changes in society make it difficult to predict the job market of the future and the competencies needed.

The HE sector must take joint action to enhance understanding and support of its values and the key role it has for a democratic and sustainable development from the public and the private sectors, and from civil society at large. HE as a public good needs to be made clearer to policymakers and governments around the world. HE also needs to advocate for funding of HE to support both education and research in all academic disciplines that foster interdisciplinarity and cooperation.

Actions and responsibility of governments and funding agencies

There is a new trend in HE research funding to promote and value societal impact in pursuit of the sustainable development goals and realizing the Agenda 2030. This includes academic interdisciplinarity but also interdisciplinary cooperation between HE and societal stakeholders. However, the current governance and funding of HE has to be changed to support this development.

The majority of the 20,000 universities and other HEIs listed and documented in the IAU-UNESCO World Higher Education Database (WHED) lack sufficient public funding; this makes them dependent on external funding that too often comes with "strings attached" and specific demands imposing constraint on research and education programs and thereby hamper the HEIs from taking responsibility for its key role in society. Public funding of HE varies between nations and regions and more so in Europe. The Second IAU Global Survey Report on the impact of COVID-19 on HE indicates that HE public funding is at serious risk to decrease in the coming years. The vulnerability of HEIs depending on tuition fees from international students became apparent during the pandemic. Hopefully, cooperation between HE and society will help convince governments that HE is a public good, a true and valuable investment in the future and not a "cost."

The dependence in HE on external funding for research also hampers its ability to develop and support research and education free from external interference, to participate in international research cooperation, to perform quality research in disciplines beyond the STEM area, and to take responsibility for capacity building in all regions. HEIs also need non-earmarked resources to be an independent partner in cooperation with external stakeholders and to perform basic research in all disciplines. This does not mean that public funding does not come with the responsibility to report and give back to society, but public funding generated through an open and transparent tax system allows to develop the much-needed high-quality and independent research we need.

There are positive signs coming from the research funding agencies increasingly announcing projects where cooperation and interdisciplinarity is required. A recent report from the International Science Council [5] stresses the necessity of cooperation between science and research and society. The report highlights the importance of research being solution-focused, driven by common good and interdisciplinary.

Take home message (summary)

HE must be recognized as a public good and has a unique and decisive role to play when it comes to building democratic sustainable societies around the world. The fundamental values upon which to develop quality HE are key for them to fulfil their role in research and education. Trustful and respectful cooperation between HEIs and societal stakeholders must be developed for HEIs to address societal challenges at local levels with a global perspective. The HE sector cannot do this on its own. For this to be realized, HEIs have their responsibility yet they need strong support and recognition through adequate financial support and governance from governments and policymakers and by funding agencies.

Notes

1. IAU was founded by UNESCO in 1950 and is an official partner of this official UN organization and benefits from Associate status – see: www.iau-aiu.net
2. IAU organizes regular Global Meetings of Associations. Twenty-nine national, regional and international associations and organizations are members of the IAU, see: <https://iau-aiu.net/Members>. IAU developed a series of global surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on HE. The Report on the Second Global Survey was launched in 2022 and is available for free download online: <https://iau-aiu.net/The-Second-IAU-Global-Survey-Report-on-the-Impact-of-COVID-19>
3. These values include academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility locally and globally; cooperation and solidarity based on mutuality of interests and shared benefits; tolerance of divergent opinions, freedom from political interference; equity in access and success in HE and open access to knowledge; scientific integrity and ethical behavior as cornerstones of conduct for all stakeholders in higher education; higher education and research in the public interest; and quality in learning, research and outreach; see: <https://iau-aiu.net/Vision-Mission>
4. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgpLY0H5X7c
5. International Science Council – https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/202108_Unleashing-Science_Final.pdf

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