Reimagining the Future of Higher Education:
A Youth Perspective

A reflection by the SDG4Youth Network

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Preface

The greatest treasure of our time is not found in the deepest of seas, but in the minds and hearts of young people. Our greatest commodity is human potential. Education has the potential to change humanity's course, protect the planet, and dismantle entrenched inequalities and global disparities. But education itself needs to be transformed to be able to achieve this vision.

As we build the future of Higher Education, youth voices and youth-led actions are essential to achieving this vision. Youth are not only the guardians of the future, but the leaders changing education systems, policies and practices today. This Youth Report unites voices of young education activists from countries across the world and is the youth perspective on the future of higher education.

The right and access to quality education is what unleashes the capabilities of young learners to build a prosperous future. But as this report discusses, Higher Education should no longer be limited to formal learning. We need to collaborate on providing Open Access to Higher Education and knowledge so that everyone can learn no matter their socio-economic circumstances.

The pandemic instilled a sense of adaptability and urgency for change, but the global desire to unite forces showed us a path of hope. It is possible for us to come together and develop innovative strategies to provide learning opportunities for each and everyone of us.

This report serves as the starting point of including youth perspectives in education governance, policies and decision making.

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About the SDG4Youth Network

Youth and students are key partners towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for Education as the primary stakeholders of education. However, they have continuously been excluded in the discussions and decision-making processes around the education sector's development. Young people bring unique experiences and perspectives of learning across formal, informal and non-formal education. The Secretary-General's 'Our Common Agenda' includes recommendations for meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement, including through better political representation and by transforming education, skills training and lifelong learning.

Around the world, young people are driving change and claiming fundamental freedoms and rights; improving conditions for them and their communities; as well as opportunities to learn, work and participate in decisions that affect them. Young people have placed education as a key concern and challenge affecting their lives.

The SDG4Youth Network includes over 100 young education activists who are shaping global education policies in countries all over the world. The Network Youth Representatives work directly with the multi-stakeholder SDG 4 Education 2030 High-level Steering Committee to better advocate for the voices of youth.

Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools

As much as education is about learning, it is also about the learner. Therefore, an inclusive, equitable and safe environment is essential for youth to thrive in their academic journeys. We can no longer leave millions of aspiring scholars behind in shaping our future.

The World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) presents very discouraging levels of education inequality across the globe. Although pursuing Higher Education is a choice, it should not be a privilege. Many young learners are faced with barriers around their entry into Higher Education Institutions and entities; whether this be their disabilities or abilities, ethnic backgrounds, sexual and gender orientation, cultural roots, socio-economic backgrounds, or even situations of displacement arising from conflict and/or natural disasters. Diverse classrooms are not only beneficial for the inclusion of those students, but also creates an environment for novel information and knowledge sharing. Overall, contributing positively to the world of academia, research, and innovation.

Although learning environments can be a place for growth and collaboration, they also have the potential for great harm to a student's safety. Therefore, the rights of young learners need to be sacredly protected and taken seriously. Acts of sexual and gender based violence should have dire consequences and the protection and wellbeing of student survivors is essential. Therefore, innovative approaches to creating safe campuses and collaboration with private sectors should be developed. Young learners also play a great role in creating safe environments for their peers and youth leadership in this direction should be welcomed.

There is also no doubt that COVID-19 pandemic worsened the mental wellbeing of youth and young learners. As determined by UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children 2021* international survey on youth mental wellbeing, 1 in 5 children (between the ages of 15-24 years old) reported feeling depressed. Therefore, it is imperative that Higher Education Institutions provide the necessary supports for young learners to not only survive, but thrive.

Recommendations

Inclusion

1. Inclusive practices could only be adopted as well as implemented effectively if done rightly on time at the grass-root or the beginning levels of formal as well as non-formal education i.e. Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary. Hence, we are of the opinion that the bottom-up approach should be introduced, moving from special education or dedicated community institutions (for minorities, refugees, differently-abled people etc.) to more inclusive institutions opening gates for people from all walks of life under one umbrella.

2. To enhance the number of students within educational infrastructure whether formal or non-formal, adaptive and flexible financial support programs should be introduced specifically for the minority students, including but not limited to: students with disabilities, first generation students, senior citizen students, mature students, international students, refugees students, LGBTQ+ students, and BIPOC students.

3. Integration of EDI practices training as a mandatory training for academic as well as non-academic staff and students within the infrastructure of educational institutions to support the smooth acceptance of people from all walks of life under the same roof.

4. Create opportunities for all staff, Deans, Faculty members, and Teaching Assistants on important EDI practices.

5. Develop a recruitment and retention plan to equitably increase diversity among students, staff, Deans, Faculty members, and Teaching Assistants.

Safety and Rights of the Learner

1. Organize cultural audits to directly learn about the culture of safety from students.

2. Develop safe and accessible reporting tools for reporting acts of sexual and gender-based violence on campuses of Higher Educational Institutions.

3. Provide mandatory training to all students, residence supervisors, staff, Deans, Faculty members, and Teaching Assistants on sexual and gender based violence and available supports or resources.

4. Invest in safe walk programs to provide escort services to students walking home late at night from in-person lectures at Higher Educational Institutions.

5. Develop a national Digital Rights strategy to protect the rights of students participating in online examinations through proctoring services.

Wellbeing and Health of the Learner

<u>Physical and Nutritional Wellbeing</u>

1. Invest in Student Financial Aid Bursaries to provide food vouchers for students struggling to buy groceries.

2. Provide subsidised high quality food to students on campuses as well as within institutional hostels.

3. Integration of physical as well as sporting subjects in degree programs to better enhance the understanding and the importance of physical wellness.

4. Provide students with discounted memberships to local gymnasiums and exercise facilities to encourage physical activity and remove financial barriers around health for all students.

Mental Wellbeing

1. Invest in Mental Health Care (digital and in-person) and Student Wellness Centres at Higher Education Institutions to organize mindfulness activities, provide counselling, rehabilitation programs for students with substance abuse problems, psychoeducational support, and therapy (CBT and other forms) for students.

    a. Develop and strengthen existing community-based interventions for students needing additional and/or immediate support.

2. Higher Education Institutions to provide mandatory mental health training to all staff, Deans, Faculty members, Teaching Assistants and students.

3. Create policy for short term academic accommodation requests that may arise suddenly from extenuating circumstances and/or mental health challenges.

4. Develop a Code of Conduct and Digital Rights policy aimed at protecting young learners from potential psychological distress or harm, such as in lecture content or digital learning settings.

Youth-Led Solutions

Youth around the world have been finding innovative and creative ways to make schools inclusive, safe, equitable and healthy. Learn more about how youth and students from the SDG4Youth Network are transforming education in their communities from around the world.

Raising Teenagers: Fighting Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Raising Teenagers in Uganda works with school principals, girls and boys, parents, and teachers to fight GBV in schools and communities. It focuses on ending child marriage and sexual gender-based violence in schools and communities, a way of supporting girls not only to access but to remain in school and complete their studies. It also educates teachers on handling children with mental health challenges and creating a positive environment for them to freely open up and speak up when faced with issues such as anxiety, fear, and depression. It is also working on schools having WASH facilities, menstrual products, and changing rooms for girls to ensure they menstruate safely while at school. That way, they wouldn't drop out of school.

Restless Development: Leading a healthy and sustainable lifestyle

Restless Development has over 30 years of expertise assisting young people in making the transition to a good, sustainable way of life. They have effectively assisted young people in remaining in school, gaining necessary skills, gaining formal work possibilities, and establishing their own enterprises. In December 2021, the group ran a campaign called "Make Education Work," in which twelve young researchers from twelve different nations polled 3,294 young people from 70 countries around the world. Young people's requests were categorized into three major themes: Education Restart Grants, A new curriculum centered on practical skills, and A place at the table in defining education policy.

Digital learning and transformation

There is no doubt that technology is leading in the transformation of our society and continues to shape how we live and learn about the world around us. Not only do technological tools advance knowledge acquisition and sharing, but also act as an extension of human capabilities and experiences, have the potential to support human rights and even amplify actions targeted towards achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

According to UNICEF and the ITU's "How Many Children and Youth Have Internet Access at Home" report (2020), more than two-thirds of the world's school-age girls and boys aged 3 to 17 years, which is around 1.3 billion children don't have the ability to access the internet at home. Additionally, 63 % of youths aged 15 to 24 years, which is around 760 million youth also lack Internet access at home. Similarly, worldwide, over 2.2 billion children and young people aged 25 and under do not have internet access in their houses.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented great opportunities for development of technology to support education. Higher Educational Institutions rapidly developed digital infrastructures for remote learning. Although imagining a post-pandemic world without digital learning is almost impossible in most countries, many young learners around the world do not have access to the necessary support for digital learning. Therefore, investments need to be made to narrow the digital divide and barriers to learning opportunities. Technological development and tools should be democratized to be inclusive of all learners, their needs, and socio-economic circumstances.

With that being said, digital infrastructures are key to providing young learners with the freedom to fuel their academic curiosities and contribute their findings as scholars. Open access to higher education is essential for this transformation and global citizenship should be the heart of digital collaboration, knowledge exchange and learning across countries.

It is also important to keep in mind the role that Higher Education and Higher Educational Institutions play in preparing young learners for Professional Work. Experiential learning opportunities are crucial to equip young learners with knowledge and skills to succeed in the real world. Therefore, it is necessary now more than ever that we foster partnerships with the private and public sector to innovatively engage learners digitally.

As schools around the world are connected to the internet. The big question is what happens next? Connected devices have the potential to be a gateway to quality education for all, but we can't just put our existing education system online. We need new ways to engage kids and teach them the skills they need to succeed in our knowledge economy.

Thinking ahead to a near future, young learners need to be educated about the potential of exponential technologies in solving the world's largest issues and their ethical considerations.

Recommendations

Narrowing the Digital Divide
1. Increase investment in digital curriculum delivery to meet needs of all students, especially those with visual or hearing impairment and other disabilities.

2. Create a national Mechanism that generates guidelines and blueprints regarding creative and cost-effective solutions to provide educational content in hybrid, offline and low-data consuming formats to enable access to a wider audience in the short-run.

3. Develop an effective strategy to support the access of the internet. Higher Education Institutions should work with private sectors and internet providers to reduce the internet cost for students from low income households and regions, especially developing countries and rural regions.

4. Create additional grants for Higher Education Institutions to provide students from low income households with technology to be able to succeed in their academic journey. An effective strategy may incorporate technology loan programs in which students can borrow a technological device similar to signing out a library book.

5. Government should subsidize the deployment of smart ICT Infrastructures. Decentralized approach should be established in order to create "Innovation Hubs" that foster home-grown ICT technologies that are easier to implement, cost-effective and create a digital culture within the society.

6. Co-finance the acquisition of mobile smartphones which are the most used in out of reach communities, and create ad-hoc financial settings that enable sharing data plans with multiple individuals easily ensuring at least 3G data speed.

7. Enabling free options to use public transportation between rural areas and connected villages and cities, to optimize the connection availability for educational and work purposes.

Digital Skills and Citizenship
1. Develop and monitor a national Digital Rights Strategy for Educational Institutions.

2. Invest in the professional development of educators and students to leverage technology for teaching and learning.

a. Provide further training to educators in assistive technologies to effectively support the needs of students with disabilities.

3. Invest in digital citizenship education for young learners within the national curriculum to 1) engage in positive manners with their peers online, 2) be mindful of the promotion of loneliness, selfishness and narcissism, and 3) understand how to intervene and combat cyberbullying or other violation of their human rights online.

4. Launch at national and regional level ideathons or hackathons on a rolling basis, strategically thinking about the student semesters timelines and co-integrating different market players to foster digital skills learning, create innovative ideas and create lasting change.

5. Advocate, advertise and share impact models of experiential learning methods centered on service learning and global citizenship that are usually implemented in small private schools by collaborating with the local government and the target innovative schools.

Open Access to Higher Education
1. Develop a free of cost public digital library with educational material from various disciplines as an opportunity to encourage passionate learners to acquire higher education who may be faced with financial or social barriers to pursue a Higher Education degree.
    a. Develop online infrastructures alongside the private sector.
    b. Foster partnerships with corporations to employ students with the necessary knowledge to succeed in the professional world.
    c. Develop a Quality Assurance framework for educational material.
    d. Create an Educator Incentivization plan to engage educators in the development of such a public library of academic content.
    e. Ensure up-to-date and globally influenced knowledge and information, both using institutional and open-source methodologies.

2. Employ asynchronous and hybrid learning options to support flexibility for learners, and create standardized modus operandi backed by evidence.

3. Develop opportunities for experiential learning that foster global connectivity and foster a sense of purpose within students as citizens in a specific community.

4. Develop a national youth-lead initiative of reference that plays a role of academic and professional guidance focusing on available opportunities, scholarships, international exchanges, grants and major enriching events targeting students at a critical stage of their career.

Youth-Led Solutions

Youth around the world have been finding innovative and creative ways to digitize learning. Learn more about how youth and students are transforming education in their communities from around the world.

Tract.app: Education by Kids for Kids

Tract is an online community where kids teach kids. Kids learn, create, share and teach in a safe, moderated, supportive, positive community. Kids of all interests, backgrounds, and abilities can create simple media projects (proofs of learning), teach advanced lessons (proofs of mastery), and everything in between. Technologies like Tract to teach our next generation creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration

Newhopeu: SDG'S brainstorming platform,and global ecosystem builder

Newhopeu acts as an ecosystem builder and growth facilitator by providing a digital all-in-one platform for young students and social entrepreneurs. By leveraging crowdsourcing methods young people can brainstorm on SDG's issues and solutions by region, create teams, visualize efficient partnerships and generate data for local governments. With the aim to create long lasting social change, and increase personal growth opportunities they provide educational content and inspirational dashboard on a daily basis.

Learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development

The future of education and learning is aligned with the future of work. Therefore, professional development and learning with a purpose is essential. Young learners need to be equipped with not only knowledge but the necessary skills to thrive in their future work environments and make an impact in their community.

With that being said it is important to be mindful of global problems that discourage young learners from pursuing certain Higher Educational degrees. The decline in young learners entering certain educational streams, namely those in the humanities and arts, is synonymous with the decline in employment in those fields. The issue of underemployment is growing and prevents young scholars from contributing their knowledge in meaningful ways.

Higher Education Institutions now have a bigger duty to train "contemporary-world-ready" students and also simultaneously be a part of critical actions and initiatives which are directly linked with some of the world's challenges and opportunities. HEIs should become more "open" in accommodating best practices which allows them to situate themselves in a mobile world, and in a digital world where educational institutions are more than just the physical infrastructure. At the same time, it is critical to the growth of young people (including but not limited to higher education students, postgraduates, doctorate students, early-stage researchers) that they are paid as well as appreciated well, and given an atmosphere along with support infrastructure where they are allowed to take charge and undertake independent intensive research and/or educational projects which are not totally dependent on senior academic faculty.

Sustainability and climate change should be taught in the curriculum, the importance of future generations' demand for carbon-free life, the process of adaptation to living conditions and the green jobs of the future should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. This education will give every young person the ability to contribute to a more resilient and sustainable society.

Youth-Led Solutions

Youth around the world have been finding innovative and creative ways to support learning relevant for life and focus on sustainable development. Learn more about how youth and students from the SDG4Youth Network are transforming education in their communities from around the world.

Youth for Climate Turkey

Youth for Climate Turkey has launched a signature campaign to provide climate crisis education to children and youth through education. The campaign launched on change.org aimed to provide comprehensive and up-to-date education on climate emergency and ecological crisis to all school-age youth and children regardless of how they go to school. Through this, we created change with 33,535 supporters and with the news announced by the Ministry of National Education, climate crisis education was added to the curriculum.

The Walkway School: A Social Enterprise Providing Access to Education

Supported by Youth Co:Lab, Asia Pacific's largest social entrepreneurship movement co led by UNDP and Citi Foundation, The Walkway School (TWS) has been working on enabling the access to education for the underprivileged children in rural Pakistan for the last four years. TWS has been constructing safe spaces and classrooms within communities to strengthen the children's home-to-school connections for positive school experience. TWS is aiming to build at least 50 cost-effective sustainable inter-community schools to further the access to primary/secondary education in the remote rural areas with no access to education.

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