

I am tomorrow, or some future day, what I establish today.
I am today what I established yesterday or some previous day.

James Joyce

UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education is not exactly a 'once in a generation' event but it does come close, considering that it only happens once every decade. The first two incarnations (1998 and 2009) were defining moments of their time in the trajectory of higher education systems and their constituent institutions for the future of higher learning needs by, and for, all stakeholders – learners, teachers, researchers, institutional leaders, policy makers and crucially for the communities they serve.

The 3rd World Conference on Higher Education (WHEC2022), convened for the first time outside of UNESCO's Headquarters (Paris, France) in Barcelona, Spain from 18-20 May, was in many respects a continuation of this tradition and scope: to set the agenda for HE in the coming decade and particularly in defining how the communities of higher education globally can rise to the challenges they face locally, nationally, and regionally in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the world's commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

WHEC2022 – subtitled *Reinventing Higher Education for a Sustainable Future* - drew 2,400+ in-person participants to Spain and 12,300+ following on-line in a hybrid manner from 190 countries, marking it as the largest global engagement of any conference in UNESCO's 75-year history. 140 sessions, 49 HED_Talks and 55 side events during the HED Week in Barcelona was an unprecedented opportunity to bring people together to talk about the futures they need and the role that higher education needs to play in shaping these futures. Social media that didn't exist in 2009, was in 2022 awash with #unleashthetalent. Times have changed immeasurably since 2009, as has the eco-sphere of higher education.

Framed around 10 key thematic areas¹, 250+ background papers, policy and consultation open knowledge contributions guided the discussions: be they formally in dedicated sessions – or perhaps even more critically – during

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/03/whhec2022-concept-note-en.pdf>
<https://www.whhec2022.org/EN/homepage>

informal networking opportunities in and around the conference and now beyond.

Three days is never enough time to truly unpack everything that the higher education communities need to reflect on. But it is a starting point. A starting point for sharing ideas, knowledge, experiences (both successes and challenges) and the way we go forward.

Unlike previous UNESCO HE world conferences, in 2022 we broke with tradition and did not have an outcome Communique or Statement. Instead, we presented a *Roadmap for HED to 2030*², elaborated by an international group of experts which presents suggestive descriptive – not prescriptive – directions which individual HE systems and/or institutions might use to forge their own future directions that best meet the challenges they face. There is never one size fits all, and this should not be the case. Different systems and institutions are at different crossroads and will take different directions to assure their relevance to their communities. Ultimately therefore the WHEC Roadmap is a living and organic *SatNav* for higher education. Take the scenic-route or take the road-tolls option. That is the choice of every institution and every HE system.

Looking ahead, UNESCO is already planning for a Barcelona+5 event to take stock of progress and challenges, however the real work now begins at home and on the ground. What will your institution take away from the WHEC? What will it do to embrace the 10 thematic priorities that speak most relevantly to your students and communities?

As Benjamin Zander says in his life affirming *The Art of Possibility*³, “how fascinating!”.

P. J. Wells.

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² <https://www.whec2022.org/EN/homepage/Roadmap2030>

³ <https://www.benjaminzander.org/the-art-of-possibility/>