Editorial

This Special Issue of the Contributions to Higher Education Research *(Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung)* explores the future(s) of the university and hence the future(s) of higher education from a global perspective, linking it with sustainability and inclusion. These topics are examined through various lenses and perspectives providing spotlights on research, university management and governance, policies, systems and structures, and on teaching and learning. In the wake of the Annual Conference of the Association of Higher Education Research in Hagen, Germany in 2024, this volume includes empirically based critical analyses of the present and the past as well as contributions that rethink and reimagine higher education. Most of these contributions take their focus and umbrella framework from the global policy work of the United Nations (UN). More specifically, most articles are underpinned by both the UN´s 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative.

First, the *Overview Article* by *Eva Cendon, Mpine Makoe and Irina Haury* sets the context and the scene for this volume, by proving an overview on higher education from a global perspective. The authors trace the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a transformational vision for the world as well as for (higher) education. Looking at current concepts and future needs, the authors expand the field from a global view, then delve into the state of the art of inclusion, before turning attention to sustainability – always reconnecting their thoughts to policies and current research in higher education. Finally, they discuss alternative routes for higher education that transcend a Eurocentric, Western perspective to broader, contextualised and future oriented imaginaries, taking *Ubuntu* as a philosophy of the global South and possible guiding principle to develop alternative futures in higher education.

After this introduction, the *Research Article* by *Diana Alférez-Rosales, Eric Alberto Emiliano-Gómez and Rosalba Badillo-Vega* takes Open Science and the UN´s Sustainable Development Goals as points of departure. The authors understand Open Science (OS) and Open Science Practices (OSP) as vehicles for a more rapid dissemination of knowledge and for enhancing transparency. The authors' focus is on Mexico, where OS has long been a common practice, not least because of researchers' and universities' limited resources for publications. Their methodological approach uses a bibliometric study of scientific publications of a public university in Mexico in an attempt to demonstrate how higher education institutions (HEIs) can promote OSP that foster the dissemination of research linked to the SDGs, while advancing greater equity in scientific production.

While the second *Research Article* takes a more general approach to the SDGs, the third *Research Article* focuses on SDG 4, Quality Education, and especially on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship. *Fady Guirgis, Milena Jostmeier, Swantje Notzon, Tobias Breuckmann, Rebecca Froese, Daria-Maria Gerke, Iulia-Maria Stroila and Lea Wilkens* take us to the European context, to Münster, a town in West Germany, where they analyse sustainability engagement and sustainability-related activities in three HEIs. Using the Whole Institution Approach (WIA) as a framework, they employ survey data to explore differences in perceptions, priorities, and commitment to sustainability between HEIs and status groups, integrating the perspectives of the different stakeholders inside HEIs – professors, technical and administrative staff, as well as students.

The next *Research Article* moves our focus to the future of teaching and learning as one central field in higher education. Looking at distance learning as a possible format of the future, *Caroline Trautwein, Roxana Bettinger, Julian Rebien, Anna Maria Pampel and Michael Hast* take a look at the most critical stage – the study entrance phase. With a scoping review capturing the global scenery of distance education, the authors explore the opportunities and challenges for successful onboarding of so-called non-traditional students. This descriptor can include students who come from vocational backgrounds, those who may have family or care responsibilities, or students who lack a "classic" standard university entrance qualification. In understanding the entry phase as a strategic moment which can help determine student success or failure, the authors finally connect their findings to UNESCO´s principles regarding the future of (higher) education.

From this global perspective, the fifth *Research Article* narrows our view again to the European context. *Lisa Steiner, Cordelia Menz and Sylvia Mandl* take up SDG 4, Quality Education, with its claim on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Based on the assumption that higher education should provide students with a safe and inclusive space in order to contribute to their mental health, the study moves beyond mere access to promote a Higher Education culture of inclusion and psychological safety. Using logistic regression and ANOVA, the analyses demonstrate a link between discrimination and mental health problems, while social integration mitigates this link.

Two *Insights Into Practice* provide us with perspectives from the Global South and critical accounts and diagnoses of the present while opening up perspectives for the future(s) of higher education. *Stephina Modiegi Ntsoane*'s conceptual paper delves into the South African higher education context, and examines, from a critical decolonial perspective, the extent to which policies are dominated by Euro-North American theories. In contrast, she offers the *Ubuntu* philosophy as an alternative framework

for understanding inclusion, thereby opening up the possibility of understanding and of conceiving higher education as a space that actively breaks down structural inequalities and strengthens all communities through joint design and knowledge exchange. *Romeela Mohee, Mpine Makoe, Buhlebenkosi Tshili and Ourvashee Roopchun* take us on a journey to redefine higher education on the African island of Mauritius. They offer us insights into a national initiative to develop a roadmap for the future of education in Mauritius' higher education system. To this end, a methodical analysis of the environment (SWOT) was combined with consultative stakeholder workshops focusing on a vision for the future in 2040. This resulted in four overarching priorities forming the basis for designing resilience strategies for the future of higher education in Mauritius.

The professionalisation of offboarding processes is addressed in a *Standpoint* by *Mathilde Niehaus and Kathrin Staufenbiel*. Such processes offer great potential in the context of demographic change in Germany, but also in other, similarly ageing (European) countries, and the associated shortage of skilled workers, lack of resources, and rapid changes in the current world of work. A precise and appreciative offboarding approach throughout the entire separation process, in the areas of administration, knowledge management, and support, can create sustainability in human resources management, which can ultimately fill or at least bridge personnel shortages.

Two *Book Recommendations* set the tone in terms of a global, sustainable and inclusive higher education: *Irina Haury* opens with a look into the anthology by Anna Kelly, Lisa Padden and Bairbre Fleming on *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality. Creating a University for All. Buhlebenkosi B. Tshili* provides insights into the collaborative open access publication with authors from all over the globe on *Higher Education for Good: Teaching and Learning Futures*, edited by Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin. Both recommendations invite readers to think further about institutional transformation processes and pedagogical innovations in the spirit of inclusive, future-oriented higher education in a global context.

Concluding the volume, in *Last but Not Least* Puleng LenkaBula, the vice chancellor of the University of South Africa and Ada Pellert, the former rector of FernUniversität in Hagen, provide insights into their experiences as leading distance universities. They share their understanding of a future-oriented leadership, highlight three remarkable features of distance universities, explore the biggest challenge facing in leading these institutions in present times, and finally outline how they prepare their universities for an uncertain future in a challenging era.

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