# Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Inclusive, Sustainable, and Future-proof?

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This overview article attempts to take a future-oriented approach to higher education from a global perspective, informed by both research findings and policy-driven perspectives. After first spotlighting developments promoted and driven by supra-national organisations such as the United Nations, the article explores higher education research through three thematic strands – globalisation, inclusion and sustainability. By analysing and assessing the current state of research from a global perspective, the authors aim to present not only achievements, but also existing gaps and unfulfilled promises. The discussion centres around outlining common challenges and issues, as well as an outlook for an alternative, future-oriented, and even disruptive route for higher education from a global South perspective.

*Keywords: globalisation, inclusion, sustainability, future*

## 1 Introduction

The world has been dealing with multiple crises for several years – recently it has been confronted with the now omnipresent climate crisis, the various wars around the world, economic crises, poverty and hunger, inequalities and social instability, as well as the influx of refugees and displaced people (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020b). As the United Nations (UN) claims, these crises demonstrate the multiple facets of the unsustainable world we live in (United Nations [UN], 2023). The message is quite clear: "*The survival of our societies and our shared planet depends on a more sustainable world*" (UN, 2023). And with it, the future itself is at stake. Developing a "*blueprint for our common future*" (UN, 2023) demands a reenvisioning of shared futures, a capacity for innovation and cooperation with multiple actors, openness to inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, and above all, education.

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set the tone and the transformational vision for the world by unveiling *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda* at the 2015 UN conference in New York. This agenda, which is playing a vital role in education, is preceded and framed by the "*United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)*" (2005-2014) (Combes, 2005; Mulà & Tilbury, 2009). Conceptually, the 2030 Agenda builds on the three dimensions of sustainable development that were

already an essential part of the DESD (Combes, 2005): the economic, the social and the environmental dimension (UN, 2015). The plan rests upon the five pillars of people, planet, and prosperity, supporting peace and building upon global partnerships, enhanced by multi-stakeholder partnerships and later expanded to include a sixth pillar, which highlights cities as central places of living (Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019, p. 517; UNESCO, 2016, p. 14). In its broad approach, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development *"unites global development and environmental goals in one framework"* (UNESCO, 2016, p. 5). The 2030 Agenda is operationalised through a normative framework comprising 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each goal is concretised by sub-goals or target indicators (UN, 2015, p. 5). The SDGs are formulations of global political goals with which a transformation towards sustainable development is to be achieved at global level by 2030 (for an overview, refer to Freitag, 2024). The Agenda sees the contribution of (higher) education as critical, as outlined in SDG 4, Quality Education: *"Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"* (UN, 2015, p. 19). The focus on equal access eliminates all discrimination in education, be it of gender, vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples or children in vulnerable situations, as well as promoting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship, which are of specific relevance for higher education (UN, 2015). Hence, higher education is expected to address the goals of inclusion and sustainability in a global context, empowering people to navigate these challenges and help contribute to a better future for all. The ongoing challenges will need to be met not by responding but rather by transforming the changing world, as stated by UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative (UNESCO, 2020b).

Although the 2030 Agenda and its goals are not a binding treaty, they *"involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike"* (UN, 2015, p. 7) and, as such, represent a sort of social contract for the global community, built on international law (Messner, 2018, p. 179). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that each country must set its own targets, *"taking into account national circumstances"* (UN, 2015, p. 16) and use *"different approaches, visions, models and tools […] to achieve sustainable development"* (UN, 2015, p. 17). However, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have been criticised by scholars, practitioners, and activists. Discontentment amongst critics stems from issues surrounding *"climate injustice as well as widespread hunger, wars, political extremism, and systemic discrimination*" (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, p. 44). Even more far-reaching is the criticism levelled against the *"corporate capture of climate politics"* (Guerrero, 2018, p. 34) and that the *"mainstream development agendas, like those of the UN, can be understood as situated within a contested but enduring modern/colonial global imaginery"* (Stein et al., 2019, p. 283).

While we readily acknowledge the criticisms and take them seriously, this article will focus on the potential of higher education and the role that it can play in transforming

the world into a better, more sustainable, socially just and inclusive place – thereby broadening perspectives beyond a Eurocentric, Western view to a more global one. In the following sections, we will take a closer look at global higher education in general and then turn to the role of inclusion and, consequently, sustainability in higher education. A joint discussion follows in which we will outline some common issues and finally posit an outlook for alternative or even more radical (in the sense of fundamental), future-oriented and even disruptive route for higher education, including a perspective from the global South.

## 2 Globalisation

Over the past few decades, the world faced major disruptions created by emerging technologies, rapid shifts in economies, climate change and pandemics that had a major impact on higher education and its role in shaping the global agenda. These unprecedented disruptions have magnified the need for systems and structures that help support the higher education sector in connecting to the global world (Knight, 2013; Matthews, 2022). In many ways, these 21st-century epoch-making developments not only disrupted higher education but also forced the sector to rethink its entire mission within the globalised space. Since time immemorial, universities have been established as national assets with the purpose of capacitating citizens and generating knowledge through research with an aim of contributing to the economic growth of the country (Matthews, 2022). In this context, universities were operating as isolated institutions with little or no interest to the nations beyond their borders. As countries increasingly became part of the connected world, there has been more movement of students and academics between and among countries. This increase in student and academic mobility led to more collaborative research activities, the development of joint degree programmes, the improvement of education outcomes, and the overall enhancement of a university's global standing.

UNESCO's (2024) most recent statistics show that the number of students who enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) outside of their countries of origin was estimated at 6.9 million in 2022, and over 4.6 million students are studying in 38 OECD countries. The considerable growth in the number of students and academics who study and work in other countries led to the need to develop globally recognised standards. In response to this need, the UN adopted the first treaty on global higher education through the Global Convention on the recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education with a directive to provide a framework to guide practices in the globalised education sector (UNESCO, 2019). Since then, five regional conventions have been signed with the purpose of providing legal frameworks that will facilitate recognition of qualifications across borders (UNESCO, 2019), and these treaties gave rise to the legitimisation of global higher education.

Global higher education includes student and staff mobility, academic cooperation, and knowledge transfer (Knight, 2013; Marginson, 2023; Teichler, 2009). UNESCO (2022) defines global education as a system that equips people with knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures, locations and backgrounds in preparation for operating in a global world, while Marginson (2022b) defines it as a system that connects institutions to the global world. Moreover, the terms globalisation and internationalisation have been used interchangeably by different scholars (Knight, 2013; Marginson, 2023; Teichler, 2009). For Knight (2003), *internationalisation* is a process of *"integrating international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education"* (p.2). The description of *globalisation* goes beyond nation-states but includes economic, cultural, and political processes that have major impacts on higher education (Marginson, 2023). Finally, the term *global* differs from internationalisation and globalisation and has its own distinct meaning in that it refers to issues that are of global significance, i.e. that affect us all: In a constantly changing world, higher education plays a critical role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, inequalities in education, socio-economic circumstances, digital divide and social justice matters (Marginson, 2022b). The 21st-century environment requires a global higher education that is going to address the many challenges of this era. Despite the benefits linked to global higher education, inequalities remain a challenge. Resource-rich institutions that are mostly based in the global North tend to attract students from other parts of the world because of their reputation and research prowess. Access to unique study and work opportunities was among the chief reasons students and academics chose to live in other countries. However, many of those who leave their home countries do not return, resulting in a major dearth of highly skilled workers needed to participate in the economic growth of their respective countries (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). Africa still remains *"the weakest player"* (Teferra, 2014, p. 15), as the movement of African students even within the continent is limited – except for South Africa as the "*only meaningful regional hub of scholarship for Sub-Saharan African students"* (Teferra, 2014, p. 15).

This inequality stems from the colonial imposition of European models of education in many English-speaking countries in the global South. To understand the impact of these models on global higher education, according to Schildermans and Tröhler (2024) there is a need to critically examine the undercurrent complexities of power, colonial foundations and historical realities – shaped in a *"globalist imaginary"* (p. 1) – that acts as a collective vision and a world view, conceptualising our world as a global community, shaped through a Westernised global lens. This globalist imaginary shapes our visions and how we conceptualise future(s). It acts as a *"homogenising force"* in discourses around the knowledge economy, the success of rankings and the discussions around excellence, and constricts the imagination on (desirable) futures of higher education. It *"configures and constrains discourses on higher education futures, while*

*at the same time retroactively reconstructing the history of higher education in terms of a process of global isomorphism, thereby suggesting a more or less logical line of development over centuries"* (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024, p. 2). Mills (2022) argues that colonial hierarchies are deeply embedded in post-colonial nations despite efforts of decolonial activism in South African universities. In many parts of the African continent, policies and structures that govern higher education are mostly dominated by colonial frameworks that do not cater for African needs (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024). These lingering legacies of higher education contribute to the exclusion of epistemologies from the global South. Education in Africa was and is still shaped by the British and French colonisers. Long after independence, African countries had still not developed "home grown" education models tailored to post-colonial higher education. Systems, structures, policies and practices remain as relics of colonial dominance in every part of the educational system in Africa.

Critics of global education have pointed out that what is considered local/regional/global knowledge is skewed towards the global North (Marginson, 2022a; Mills, 2022; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). English remains the lingua franca for business, academic, and scientific knowledge, and has redefined global education that is exclusive to those who can speak the language. Global North knowledge is treated as universal and relevant, while knowledge from other countries is not recognised. The use of English in global science, a language spoken by 5% of the world's population, legitimises the exclusion of other languages (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Mills, 2022). Most research citation indexes in the Elsevier (Scopus) and Clarivate (Web of Science) tend to characterise what universities consider as reputable scientific work and determine the performance of universities that get rewarded by world rankings (Marginson et al., 2025). The ownership of publishers and databases that use the English language are responsible for the expansion of the Anglophone cultural hegemony.

Despite the rise of global higher education, according to Marginson (2023), funding and governance of higher education are still in the hands of national governments. Therefore, global higher education cannot be separated from the hegemony that created it. If higher education is to be truly global, scholars need to critically reflect and engage with the dynamic interplay of social, political, economic, and cultural narratives that shaped it (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024). There is a need, therefore, to critically examine and analyse the past that led to the design of the current higher education systems with the aim of envisioning and re-imagining the future. To be able to overcome the globalist imaginary and to pave the way for re-imagining the futures of higher education, Schildermans and Tröhler (2024) point to five necessary shifts: (1) emphasising the significance of context, (2) examining regional ontologies, (3) investigating in a transnational and comparative manner relationships between different developments, (4) incorporating questions of power and inequality and (5) *"exploring the*

*complex dynamics of cultural exchange, recognising the agency of non-European regions in shaping their educational systems"* (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024, p. 9). They summarise: *"This approach disrupts the prevailing narrative of a globalised higher education landscape by acknowledging the diverse and interconnected histories of universities globally"* (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024, p. 9).

## 3 Inclusion

While the higher education landscape is constantly transforming, as in the field of technology, and such rapid developments are impacting the future of higher education (Yusuf et al., 2024; Yusuf & Tambuwal, 2018), research shows that higher education is far from being inclusive and that people continue to be excluded from education (Altunoğlu, 2024; Naylor et al., 2021; Sengupta et al., 2019), despite the potential of technological advancements, among others. Considering the growing diversity in studentship globally, there is a critical need for new approaches towards viable inclusive higher education (UNESCO, 2022). The UN defines inclusion as the *"dynamic state of feeling, belonging and operating in which diversity is valued"* (UN, 2021, p. 8) and the Futures of Education Initiative (UNESCO, 2021) claims that the *"future of our planet must be locally and democratically envisioned"* (p. vii), aiming for *"cooperation between all actors in education, guided by a commonly accepted ethic of inclusion"* (p. 108). The principle of "Education for All" is a commitment to the active inclusion of disadvantaged groups in education and is an internationally agreed consensus for education that should apply to all and be universal (UNESCO, 2022, p. 3). Envisioning inclusive higher education is the direct opposite of stigmatisation, discrimination, racism or exclusion. A sense of inclusion is said to contribute to better academic performance and promote mental and physical health (Taff & Clifton, 2022), helping to create a more holistic understanding of belonging. According to UNESCO (2021), such a holistic understanding of inclusion should consider diverse cultures, locations and backgrounds.

In the field of teaching and learning, inclusion is often defined as *suitable learning conditions for all students* from marginalised groups, including students with disabilities, those who reside in rural areas and those who are at risk of exclusion. Here, exclusion also comprises inaccessible or incompatible (digital) tools such as digital platforms or learning materials that are not adapted to students' needs (Reinders et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022; Vorlíček et al., 2023; Wilkens et al., 2021). Existing difficulties at the level of teaching and learning regarding students with disabilities (SwD) are evident at the University of South Africa: The identified main concerns include a lack of awareness and processes of identifying SwD, inaccessible learning material for SwD, a lack of capacity to support SwD, shortcomings in course design and implementation of disability policies and strategies (Zongozzi, 2022; Prinsloo & Uleanya,

2022). This shows the necessity for universities to invest in implementing inclusive teaching methods at a structural level, including training and continuing education programmes for teachers and thus addressing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities (Martins et al., 2018; Vorlíček et al., 2023).

In the realm of technology, *digital accessibility* is a broadly discussed and agreed-upon topic to enhance inclusion. A successful implementation can be supported through the use of training to increase faculty's competence in digital accessibility and course design. Particularly recommended are the following aspects: (1) involvement of all teachers in specific training programmes to promote institutional awareness, (2) inclusion of students with disabilities in the training programmes, and (3) training on relevant legislation, as part of ten recommendations by Bong & Chen (2024). In this context, *assistive technologies* (AT) can play a significant role for students with disabilities. Such AT include screen readers or magnifiers for visually impaired or hearing aids for hearing impaired students, and enable students to participate and engage academically, help them overcome learning difficulties, and even improve mental health issues (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Kulkarni, 2019; McNicholl et al., 2021; Yenduri et al., 2023). However, there are several potential obstacles that need to be taken into account. They include inadequate training of teachers, device limitations, or lack of support (McNicholl et al., 2021). An additional critique comes from the South African context, where Ndlovu (2021) points out that AT does not constitute full inclusion because it rests upon an individual-level solution. In contrast, she recommends applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a comprehensive approach that enables inclusive learning through a framework, characterised by the core principles of flexibility, engagement, representation, action, and expression (CAST, 2024). While Ndlovu's approach uses the originally North American idea of UDL at a South African HEI, she proposes a theoretical conceptualisation for the provision of AT, to prevent over-generalisation, because knowledge transfer between the West and the South can only be successful when it is adapted to the specific context.

Other rapidly developing technologies are *AI-driven solutions* and adaptive learning systems, which can create inclusive learning environments and increase access to educational resources (Mitre & Zeneli, 2024; Salazar et al., 2024). The benefits of AI tools are discussed as they apply to low-income, first-generation, minority, and rural students in overcoming challenges by providing individualised assistance when it comes to accessing academic resources (Johnson & Davis, 2024). These include AI tools that have the ability to convert text into speech to help students with reading difficulties to absorb information from university-level textbooks more quickly and accurately. Meanwhile, people with autism can use AI tools such as *Social Express* and *Calm Counter* to help them overcome challenges relating to communication, social behaviour, and executive functions (p. 53). However, Sarkar (2025) argues that it is

crucial that "*inclusion is not a downstream ethical consideration, but an upstream design decision"* (p. 6309), which will help to close the AI inclusivity gap.

Looking ahead, it is essential that long-term studies track the impact of AI in specific learning settings as well as in collaboration with the different higher education sectors, as this will be key for an ethical AI development to support all students, according to Bhatnagar and Sharma (2024). Other critical tasks include reducing algorithmic biases and ensuring AI transparency (Batista et al., 2024). On the institutional side, Popenici and Kerr (2017) see a need for reevaluating pedagogical models of teaching and learning, as AI will increasingly take on tasks, as well as influence the role(s) of teachers. Therefore, universities should remain vigilant and rethink their role in order to preserve their values and educational goals (p.13).

According to the target agreement of the UN's 2030 Agenda and SDG 4, HEIs are responsible for creating inclusive governance. However, there are still shortcomings in its establishment (Neyşci, 2025; Oswal et al., 2025). Obstacles include the conditions of access for students from disadvantaged groups (Matsieli & Mutula, 2024; Oswal et al., 2025). To address structural deficiencies such as access conditions, Oswal et al. (2025) recommend that HEIs establish uniform guidelines that combine international best practices, accompanied by regular reviews of the policies (Oswal et al., 2025; Zabeli et al., 2021). Neyşci (2025) considers inclusive governance to be part of higher education that creates social justice, by not only improving physical access, but also strengthening equity for students in terms of learning success. This broader interpretation encompasses the principles of equal representation, participatory governance, and the equitable distribution of resources to support disadvantaged groups and help them succeed in their studies, while promoting prosperity and democratisation processes in society as a whole (Neyşci, 2025).

The successful implementation of inclusion in higher education requires, therefore, a comprehensive understanding of inclusion that considers contextual references. To this end, it remains essential to consistently engage with the voices of all stakeholders, including marginalised groups, and utilise the outcome to create equitable education in the future.

## 4 Sustainability

The search for adequate approaches in HEIs to address issues of sustainability and to implement Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) dates back to the early 2000s (Corcoran & Wals, 2004; refer to an overview by Holst, 2023). An integrative approach to sustainability that links the different core functions and systems of the university was first described by an action research project in the Australian context (McMillin & Dyball, 2009, p. 56). The authors state a fragmented status of sustainability educa-

tion in most universities, being isolated in specific courses, not necessarily linked to research, and separated from campus operations. Due to this fragmentation, the results remain within narrow limits (McMillan & Dyball, 2009). To overcome these shortfalls, McMillan and Dyball (2009) coined the term *"whole-of-university approach"* (p. 57) for higher education that links research on sustainability with campus operations and with the curriculum and embeds it in a *"pedagogy of place"* (Rohwedder, 2004). Here, the campus itself serves as a *"readily available laboratory for hands-on projects, and acts as shadow curriculum for the students to apply to the campus what they learn from the campus"* (McMillin & Dyball, 2009, p. 58). With this move, the environmental performance of the university improves, while, at the same time, ecological literacy within the university community as a whole can rise. And, as Holst (2023, p. 1015) states, *"all learning is embedded within its socio-physical contexts."*

Although the last decade has flourished with respect to different attempts to follow Whole Institution Approaches (WIAs) in (higher) education to sustainability, and with studies reviewing their implementation and impacts (e.g., Findler et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2015; Menon & Suresh, 2020), it is only recently that a systematic qualitative analysis of international literature was conducted to assess the conceptual debate about WIAs (Holst, 2023). Five core principles of WIAs emanated from the analysis. *The* central feature that was identified was the *institutional coherence* ("walk the talk"), which means the entire experience in the institution, including learning inside and outside the classroom, formally, non-formally and informally. This was followed by *continuous learning* of the organisation, becoming a learning organisation that learns, unlearns, and relearns ; having the capacity to change by providing the opportunity for *participation* of all members of the organisation who share ownership of the institution while recognising its power relations. The fourth principle focused on the *responsibility* of the individuals as members of the organisation who jointly act for sustainability; and lastly *long-term commitment* – not only those that serve the aims of sustainability, but also those who act flexibly, are innovative, and have a willingness to take risks, taking into account the complexity of educational settings. The areas of action of WIAs include a pro-active and participatory *governance;* education for sustainable development in *curriculum and teaching* embedded in *community and networks* – within the region in a reciprocal manner. This will be done through *sustainable operations and campus management;* sustainability in *research* within the topic selected, drawing on disciplinary, inter- and transdisciplinary forms of knowledge production and dissemination, new partnerships and research collaborators (e.g., students); sustainable *capacity building* that empowers staff to develop sustainable Human Resource (HR) strategies and quality conditions; and lastly, *active communication* on sustainability that is inclusive and clear. These areas of action are framed by an *organisational culture of sustainability* that may be developed during the process of collective learning and collaborative action. The development of WIAs relies on contextual factors and exter-

nal conditions, including prioritisation of regional, national and international policies; sufficient and long-term funding; and access to expertise and support (Holst, 2023). Although it is precisely this demand for an organisational culture of sustainability that has come into greater focus (e.g., Tilbury, 2013), it has still not been further conceptualised and operationalised (Holst et al., 2025).

A systematic review on cultures of sustainability in international literature revealed the following fragmentations: first, in conceptualisations of the culture and how they manifest and change; second, the lack of differentiation between normative target perspectives of a culture of sustainability and descriptions of the status quo; third, the assessment of cultures of sustainability, especially with regard to invisible elements; fourth, the unclear pathways to change; and finally, the specific characteristics of HEIs that are relevant (Holst et al., 2025). Taking these outlined gaps as a starting point, cultures of sustainability need to be reconceptualised and differentiated between a *"culture of sustainability at HEIs as a normative orientation and the description of the current status"* (Holst et al., 2025, p. 500). Descriptions of the current status of specific cultures provide evidence for what supports or hinders sustainability. Future research from this identified perspective need to focus on the features of cultures of sustainability for gaining *"a more systematic understanding for pathways of change"* and provide *"space to the contested meanings of sustainability and their related struggles within academic communities"* (Holst et al., 2025, p. 501), focussing not only on single HEIs, but on higher education systems and their underlying rules and assumptions. Furthermore, understandings of sustainability are context-specific, as shown by Lotz-Sisitka (2004), who described the close relationship between social justice and ecological sustainability in post-apartheid South Africa, *"with environmental issues and risks being closely linked to human rights and social responsibilities in numerous policies, including the Constitution of 1996"* (Lotz-Sisitka, 2004, p. 319).

In a global view, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with its broad perspective and its emphasis on empathy, solidarity and action-taking is attributed to building a future *"not only to the successes of individuals, but also to the collective survival and prosperity of the global community"* (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 14). However, there appears to be a problem inherent in the higher education system itself, as Daniella Tilbury (2024) reminds us that the *"highest achieving graduates from the best academic universities go to lead fossil industry."* Hence, there seem to be paradigms deeply embedded in our higher education knowledge systems and relationships that are contributing to unsustainable development. Based on this, are universities acting as reproducers of the status quo, and *"as mirrors in our society",* or will they *"become social disruptors"* (Tilbury, 2024)?

Implementing sustainability in higher education needs to take the institution as a *whole* into perspective, including a context-related understanding of sustainability. Nevertheless, to reach and change society to become more sustainable, it requires a greater focus on the output of higher education, the graduates as future leaders, and the question of what students learn to become change agents and disruptors *for* the future, instead *of* the future.

## 5 Discussion

Having explored the three thematic strands of globalisation, inclusion and sustainability in higher education against the backdrop of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, a north-south divide emerges, despite the various achievements. Criticisms revolve primarily around the challenges posed by mainstream agendas, global isomorphism, excluded epistemologies, languages, contexts, and regions, and narrow viewpoints. At the same time, and in a broader sense as intended by the authors, our *"planet is in trouble and our survival as a species is in jeopardy"* (Von Kotze & Walters, 2023, p. 18). In view of the current imperialist attitudes and behaviours by politicians that continue to put universities and their autonomy under pressure, there is an urgent need to find new ways of re-imagining futures and making higher education future-proof. This seems even more urgent as even the *"mainstream development agenda"* (Stein et al., 2019, p. 283) of the UN and its sub-organisations[1] are under attack. Emphasising context, examining regional ontologies and recognising agencies of non-European regions (Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024) can help to lead this search, not only for developing futures but for getting a grip on the present in a sort of *"relationality approach"* (Lange, 2024, p. 252). As Elisabeth Lange advises, this approach *"can help us compost the aspects of modernity that feed the dynamics threatening all life on Earth. Through composting, we allow for aspects of these permanencies to break down and recycle them into new potentialities that can constitute breakthrough, as in the emergence model of social change"* (Lange, 2024, p. 240). Donna Haraway (2016), moving in a similar direction, urges us to be truly present, instead of being torn between awful pasts and apocalyptic futures, and to engage in new forms of (posthuman) *"unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings"* (p. 1).

All these aforementioned changes of perspective and new assemblages transcend a Eurocentric, Western perspective to broader, contextualised and future-oriented imaginaries. For a change of perspective, a future vision from the global South rooted in the (South) Africa past shall be sketched – as an alternative to the aforementioned

[1] The United States, as one of the founders of the United Nations, declared on 22 July 2025 that the United States will withdraw from UNESCO on 31 December 2026. They justified this, among other things, by stating that *"UNESCO works to advance divisive social and cultural causes and maintains an outsized focus on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, a globalist, ideological agenda for international development at odds with our America First foreign policy"* (Bruce, 2025).

– and lately crumbling globalist imaginary of HEIs in a global context. This vision – *Ubuntu* – could assist in finding ways to disinter the *"deeply embedded"* paradigms and to put them to disposal while HEIs are trying to *"become social disruptors"* (Tilbury, 2024).

*Ubuntu*, a Southern African-wide ethical paradigm, meaning *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* which is a person is a person through people, expresses the obligation to look after one another and the environment, believing that all our wellbeing is mutually contingent. *"As an ethics of interrelationships, it is situated in the communitarian social fabric of caring and sharing"* (von Kotze & Walters, 2023, p. 26). This ethical paradigm links to sustainable futures by acknowledging and learning from the past (von Kotze & Walters, 2023). *Ubuntu* as philosophy can be connected to other alternative philosophies across the world, which are related to the search for living well as *buen vivir* in Latin America or *"svadeshi, swaraj* and *apargrama* in India" (Acosta & Abarca, 2018, p. 132). Through *Ubuntu,* it is therefore possible to work towards inclusive higher education, as is particularly evident in Africa (Shandu-Phetla et al., 2024). This underlines the need to continue thinking about a transformation of global higher education in this direction, not least by means of rupturing Western paradigms. Especially with a view on new forms of co-belonging that transcend national affiliations, and that allow local as well as global connections, while still staying contextualised, *Ubuntu* could be an agent of transformation also with regard to sustainability and the future of our planet. Finally, the view on how we teach our students, on how we engage them in forms of transformative learning, while supporting them in developing attitudes and learning to care, makes universities and the higher education systems future-proof. And it makes our graduates the so eagerly awaited future leaders and *"social disruptors".*

## 6 Conclusion

This article provided an overview of higher education in a global perspective, taking our starting point from the predominant multiple crises in the ecological, economic, political and social spheres - showing the multilayered facets of the unsustainable world we live in. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets the transformational vision for the world as well as for (higher) education, and the critical role it should play. While taking into account the criticisms of the agenda, it is important to sketch global higher education and the issues connected to it to critically examine undercurrent power relations, colonial foundations and historical realities to work towards the options for future research. Finally, we discussed alternative routes for higher education that transcend a Eurocentric, Western perspective to broader, contextualised and future-oriented imaginaries. We concluded with *Ubuntu,* as a philosophy of the global South that could help us while reconciling with the past to connect

to the present and to develop alternative futures in higher education, both for institutions as a whole, as well as for teaching, learning and research.

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