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You Are Here: UNESCO's Higher Education Roadmap

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Abstract

This article analyzes the UNESCO decision to present a Roadmap document at the end of the Third UNESCO World Higher Education Conference instead of a declaration. It problematizes its content and also highlights the aspects that are missing, which are mainly the actions that could be driven by states, governments and societies. On the one hand the Roadmap could be seen as a sign of openness but on the other a mark of weakness.

The Third UNESCO World Higher Education Conference took place in Barcelona, Spain, on 18th May 2022. This was the first time that it was moved from the main UNESCO headquarters in Paris. This edition of the conference occurred 13 years after the second, held in 2009, while the first conference took place in 1998. The participants of the first two conferences adopted world declarations that had varied impacts.

For the most recent conference, UNESCO decided to present a *Roadmap* instead of a declaration. Although declarations have had significant impact in some areas, questions have been raised regarding the extent to which their content signifies pure rhetoric and zero effect. While some declarations can be quite impactful, others have been more subdued. Nevertheless, the decision to introduce a roadmap was an interesting move. Contrary to previous formal and solemn declarations, which were signed by all country members and called for action at different levels, the *Roadmap* has significantly different characteristics.

The *Roadmap* is informed by various insightful documents that were produced in advance by groups of experts around the world (i.e., *Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability*; *Reimagining our futures together; A new social contract for education*; and *UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science*). These documents, as well as the *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications* and other official documents on the Sustainable Development Goals, are frequently referred to throughout the report. This methodology is often applied by international organizations—UNESCO never starts from scratch.

The *Roadmap* begins with a discussion of the current convulsive state of the world, emphasizing facts such as climate change, armed conflicts and the resulting increase in refugees, growing income inequality, and the decline of democracy as a value in societies. Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic finds its own space in the document. It further

informs readers about the characteristics of changes that have recently been adopted in systems and institutions. Next, the *Roadmap* presents UNESCO's vision for the sector, followed by the "Principles to share the future," and suggestions on ways to reinvent higher education. Finally, the *Roadmap* proposes a series of initiatives.

Among the different topics included in the six sections of the *Roadmap*, the following five recurrent ones attract significant attention.

Democratizing Participation: The Challenge of Access to Higher Education

Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts forth that "admission to higher education should be based on the merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, shown by those seeking access to it." However, ways to reduce inequalities among those enrolled in higher education institutions are a recognizable challenge. The *Roadmap* does a commendable job in addressing criticism regarding the idea of merit and takes a bold position in mentioning that higher education is an integral part of the right to education and a public good. If this were a world declaration, some countries might have refrained from signing it, as already observed at the second conference. Considering access, however, the main challenge is not the one presented in the *Roadmap*; rather, it is the action that needs to be undertaken. The *Roadmap* suggests building sustainable higher education systems that respond to the new demographic characteristics and social demands faced by countries, but it struggles to find a direction in terms of ways to accomplish this aim. Evidently, action has been a noteworthy limitation of UNESCO.

The Importance of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications

Unlike the topic of access, the Global Convention, which was unanimously adopted by the UNESCO General Conference at its 40th session on 25 November 2019, has a well-defined aim. It was signed by 16 states (out of 193)—four short of the total number of signatures needed for it to be enforced. If it gets the required signatures, it could be considered an initial success for the sector, resulting from decades of work by UNESCO. The Convention is a response to issues of academic mobility, educational options for refugees, and ways to grant recognition for students' learning. However, despite the enthusiasm for the Convention shown in the Conference and the *Roadmap*, four years after its adoption, it is still not clear whether it will attain the necessary support to become an effective instrument for its purposes.

Encouraging Lifelong Learning Experiences

This is a transformation that includes incorporating inter- and intradisciplinary approaches in higher education systems. Stepping away from traditional expectations regarding age and full-time/part-time enrollment of students, the *Roadmap* emphasizes the relevance of lifelong learning experiences as a goal in higher education. It further highlights that higher education needs to provide a holistic learning experience (including the transmission of integrity, values, and ethics). It insists that education cannot be narrowly focused on the sole acquisition of professional skills.

Recognizing the Role of Research, Innovation, and Knowledge Production

The *Roadmap* recognizes not only the importance of producing relevant knowledge but also that of technology. The use of technology, which was particularly significant during the first years of the pandemic, is here to stay. The *Roadmap* refers to the document on Open Science—which emphasizes making multilingual scientific knowledge available, accessible, and reusable for everyone—as a potential answer to current challenges. This is consistent with the requirement for higher education to become more socially responsible. Also, the document underscores the role of innovation and addresses—perhaps insufficiently—the scarcity of resources in higher education institutions around the world that are suffering from reduced public funding. However, the suggestion that everybody needs to find their own way is too inconclusive to help countries build their own scientific capacities.

Cooperation vs. Competition

The *Roadmap* insists that the route that higher education must take—especially in the so-called Global South—is to persevere in building cooperation. Indeed, one of the principles of *Reimagining our futures together* is to look for excellence through cooperation rather than competition. Encouraging cooperation over competition is a commendable principle, but countries and institutions have always been competing—whether this is accepted or not. What has been problematic is finding a constructive balance between competing and cooperating.

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Neither Original nor Innovative—Just Showing "You are Here"

Presenting a roadmap instead of a declaration could be interpreted as a sign of openness (moving away from the principle of "one recipe for all," as in other international organizations). But it might also be emblematic of UNESCO's weakness—of its lack of leadership in opting not to publish an official declaration for the Third UNESCO World Higher Education Conference or to produce a document with sufficient power to send a clear message to states, governments, and societies around the world.

The *Roadmap* is a valuable document that synthesizes primary debates in higher education today, but cannot be considered original or innovative. It is an effective map that helps us locate our current position ("you are here"), but falls short of being a powerful navigational system with sufficient coordinates to guide us to our destination. The absence of concrete goals and lack of support for previous initiatives prevent the *Roadmap* from being a strong instrument to help bring about a restored, reinvented, more integrated, and improved higher education sector. ◢

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