

# UNESCO Higher Education Activity Report

## (June 2020-April 2021)

*For the Bologna Follow-up Group Meeting LXXVI (online, 15-16 April 2021)*

This document gives an overview of UNESCO higher education activities in 2020-2021 of relevance for members of the European Higher Education Area, with a particular focus on the recognition of higher education qualifications.

Before this, however, a few words on UNESCO's action in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and over 177 million students and youth across the planet who are affected by school and university closure as of 14 April 2021. UNESCO launched the **Global Education Coalition** that seeks to facilitate inclusive learning opportunities for children and youth during this period of sudden and unprecedented educational disruption. Detailed information on the Global Education Coalition and UNESCO's action in response to COVID-19 is available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>. A few notes on higher education have been issued:

- [Higher education institutions' engagement with the community](#) (2020)
- [COVID-19 education response webinar: Implications for the global higher education campus; synthesis report](#) (2020)
- [Quality assurance and recognition of distance higher education and TVET](#) (2020)

As part of the Global Education Coalition, partners are working together to mobilize, coordinate, match and deliver distance education through leveraging hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches. Under the umbrella of the Global Education Coalition, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University launched a consortium together with Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO to establish and promote a common understanding and criteria for quality in online and open higher education and facilitate sharing of best practices. Plans are underway for a number of universities in different countries to pilot test a benchmarking framework and data set for online, open, smart, and technology-enhanced higher education in 2021.

## UNESCO Conventions on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications

### The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention, LRC)

UNESCO and the Council of Europe, as co-secretariats to the LRC Committee, are currently supporting the LRC Bureau to undertake a new monitoring of the implementation of the Convention. The survey analysis report will be tabled with the LRC Committee meeting in 2022.

The first monitoring of implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention was done in 2014-2015 and was presented during the Lisbon Recognition Committee meeting in 2016. Fifty States Parties contributed to the report (available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368036>). The survey covered the ten main provisions of the Convention. Questions focused primarily on how the Convention requirements are regulated

at national level; to what extent the rules are reflected in national legislation; and, where some or all of the provisions are not regulated at national level, how national authorities oversee the implementation of the principles of the Convention at institutional level.

### **Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education**

After eight years of preparation process, the text of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education was unanimously adopted by UNESCO's Member States at the 40th session of the General Conference on 25 November 2020. The text of the Convention was certified and transmitted to all Permanent Delegations to UNESCO and National Commissions in June 2020. The Convention is available in the six UNESCO's official languages on the webpage of UNESCO's Conventions ([http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=49557&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49557&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)). The Convention will enter into force after the deposit, with the Director-General of UNESCO, of the 20th instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession. Efforts are underway to support Member States' adherence to this instrument, ratified by Norway and Nicaragua in 2020.

In order to ensure greater adherence and its entry into force, UNESCO released "[A practical guide to recognition](#)" in November 2020 and launched a global campaign to facilitate and promote its ratification and implementation. The Third World Conference on Higher Education (Barcelona, October 2021) is expected to provide a platform with guiding directions regarding the ratification process, not only of the Global Convention but also of the Regional Conventions.

### **Other Regional Recognition Conventions**

- The Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (the Tokyo Convention). As of to date 12 countries have ratified/acceded to the Convention (Afghanistan, Armenia, Australia, China, Fiji, New Zealand, Japan, Republic of Korea, Holy See, Mongolia, Russian Federation and Turkey). The 2nd Meeting of the Convention Committee was held in Bangkok (September 2019) that also launched the new APNNIC Network of Information Centres (<https://apnnic.net>). The 3rd Committee Meeting will take place in Japan in 2021 (postponed from 2020). Further information can be found at: <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/promoting-fair-recognition-qualifications-asia-pacific>.
- The 2014 Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (the Addis Convention) entered into force on 15 December 2019 and has twelve States Parties (Burkina Faso, Congo, Djibouti, Gambia, Guinea, Holy See, Mauritania, Mauritius, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa and Togo). The first meeting of the Convention Committee, which will be composed of a representative of each State Party is foreseen to be held before December 2021.
- The Latin America and Caribbean region adopted by consensus a new Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in 2019. Thirteen Member States from the region signed the Buenos Aires Convention. UNESCO's International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) in Caracas, Venezuela, as the Secretariat for this Regional Convention, has launched a ratification campaign which includes a series of webinars and an online course at IESALC virtual campus intended mostly to foster capacity development among international education officers in higher education institutions and in ministries. Additionally, IESALC has started the process to set up a regional network of national information centres with the overall goal of facilitating cooperative efforts particularly in line with the growing trend to use credits as a universal measurement of academic work.

## **The UNESCO Qualifications Passport (UQP) project**

The UNESCO's Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP project) – a key implementation mechanism for Article VII of the Global Convention – is ongoing with phase II of the pilot programme in Zambia together with the Ministries of Education in Norway and Zambia and local authorities. Piloting in Iraq has been launched and is under discussion with India and Brazil. Various global actors have expressed their interest and support to use the UQP methodology.

## World Higher Education Conference 2021

The **World Higher Education Conference: Reinventing the role and place of higher learning for a sustainable future** will be organized in Barcelona from 7 to 9 October 2021. This 3<sup>rd</sup> world conference by UNESCO is organized with the generous support of the Government of Spain, the regional Government of Catalonia, the City Hall and the Regional Authority of Barcelona, in partnership with GUNi/ACUP (Global University Network for Innovation/Catalan Association of Public Universities) and with the technical support of the IESALC (UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean). The WHEC 2021 will bring together all relevant stakeholders to define and prepare their roadmap for a new era of higher education systems and institutions. This roadmap will be responsive to the challenges faced by humanity and the planet, as a result of diverse forms of crises, with special attention to the global disruption created by the COVID-19. Furthermore, higher education must anticipate and prepare for its role in societies that go beyond the next decade.

Members of the BFUG are invited to contribute to the conference's open knowledge depository under the themes of the WHEC 2021. Conference information will be updated in [World Higher Education Conference 2021 \(unesco.org\)](#) To discuss knowledge contribution or sponsorship, please contact [whec2021@unesco.org](mailto:whec2021@unesco.org).

### Ten themes of the WHEC 2021



## Quality assurance in higher education

Quality higher education is a matter of global concern as higher education institutions can build highly skilled human resources and drive socioeconomic development. Quality assurance agencies are therefore key in ensuring that quality assurance systems are in place through evaluation, accreditation and recognition of higher education programmes and institutions. UNESCO is working with governments to build capacity for quality assurance in higher education, and particularly in developing countries. UNESCO IESALC published research papers on [COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow; Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations](#) and [Towards universal access to higher education: international trends](#) in 2020.

In Africa, this has led to the recent establishment of national quality assurance agencies in Cabo Verde, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, and Senegal, while process is currently ongoing in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo. In 2020, UNESCO also supported the establishment of the network of national quality assurance agencies for French-speaking Africa (RAFANAQ). In the Arab region, UNESCO launched a technical support intervention with the Education Committee of the Lebanese Parliament for the establishment of a national Quality Assurance Agency.

In 2020, UNESCO initiated scoping studies to design contextualized interventions in six countries in Africa - Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Senegal, United Republic of Tanzania, and Uganda - together with national

stakeholders to enhance the capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) and respond to the skill needs for national development by facilitating collaboration between HEIs and the industry, labour market-oriented teaching, and competence-based learning. This work will address youth unemployment by skills matching with industry needs and will ultimately promote socioeconomic development.

In the Arab region, UNESCO supported Palestine in developing its first higher education strategy, adopted by the Prime Minister's office in August 2020. As follow-up, the Ministry has requested UNESCO to prepare a policy analysis on higher education. At the regional level, UNESCO is supporting a regional capacity building training on strategic planning in higher education, including financial simulation in which representatives of Palestine will also join. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, UNESCO developed a regional reference framework for the quality assurance of e-learning for higher education institutions. This the fruit of the work of regional experts and based on experience sharing with European region, upon suggestion of the Ministries of higher education of Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The reference framework is to serve higher education ministries and institutions upon recognition for the need for quality assurance standards for e-learning.

In the Latin America and the Caribbean region, IESALC is currently supporting the governments of Colombia and Peru in their efforts to promote excellence in higher education, beyond the current baseline, and in close cooperation with the corresponding national quality assurance mechanisms. On top of this, IESALC is providing backstopping to the two main regional networks of quality assurance agencies, RIACES (Red Iberoamericana de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior) and SIACES (Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Educación Superior).

UNESCO is working on an updated reference framework on the main challenges facing cross- border higher education and recommendations for improved use of a revised version of UNESCO-OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. The document will be available for competent authorities and other stakeholders. The document will include a state-of-the-art, challenges, trends and general recommendations for Cross-border Higher Education.

UNESCO, 13 April 2021