



unesco

# Flexible learning pathways

---

Transforming higher education systems

**4th TPG B - LRC meeting**

24 June 2026

Wesley Teter, PhD  
Higher Education Section  
UNESCO

# Flexible learning pathways



Source: Katsushika Hokusai

**1. Why we need them**

**2. Current approaches**

**3. Lines of transformation**

**4. Towards a post-2030 agenda for lifelong learning**

# Why flexible learning pathways? *Dynamic & disruptive global contexts*

## Changing relationships between higher education and knowledge



- The continued expansion of knowledge production is welcoming new voices and dismantling gatekeeping.
- Technological developments are profoundly reshaping the possibilities of knowledge generation.
- Higher education institutions are being pressed to reimagine the ways they work with knowledge.

# Why flexible learning pathways? *Dynamic & disruptive global contexts*

## Changing relationships between higher education and learning



- New pathways of access to higher education are emerging.
- Traditional listen-and-repeat pedagogical methods seem increasingly poorly matched for a world desperate for creativity, collaboration and innovation.
- Generative AI challenges many established patterns and leads some to call for a rediscovery of higher education learning as process-focused.



# Why flexible learning pathways?

## *Dynamic & disruptive global contexts*

### Changing relationships between higher education and the public



- Even as the numbers of students in higher education continues to rise in all world regions, the value proposition of higher education is being increasingly challenged.
- When academic and professional programmes do not match changed global realities, the relevance of higher education is put into question.
- Younger generations are making new demands on higher education.

# Why flexible learning pathways?

## *Growing demands and unmet needs*

---

**269 million students**  
**43% enrollment ratio**  
more than double 2000  
levels

**9% of refugees access  
higher education**  
up from 1% in 2019

**7.3 million mobile students**  
More than triple 2000 levels  
**3% benefitting**

**One third of countries have  
affirmative action policies**  
compared to one-fourth a  
decade ago

# Our journey to flexible lifelong learning

**Agenda 2030**  
“We commit to promoting quality lifelong learning opportunities for all, in all settings and at all levels of education”  
(UN, Sept. 2015)



**Confucius, others?**

**Jan Amos Comenius**  
We should educate all people...  
(17<sup>th</sup> Century)



**Eleanor Roosevelt –**  
“Everyone has the right to education...and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”  
(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, 1948)



**Jacques Delors –**  
“Faced with a growing and at the same time increasingly quality minded demand for education, how can educational policies achieve the twin aims of high educational standards and equity?”  
(Delors Report, 1996)

## Challenges to recognize diverse forms of learning

“The comparability, recognition and quality assurance of qualifications has become a growing area of concern, **in particular in countries where administrative systems are weak.**”

- *Education 2030: Framework for Action*  
UNESCO, 2015

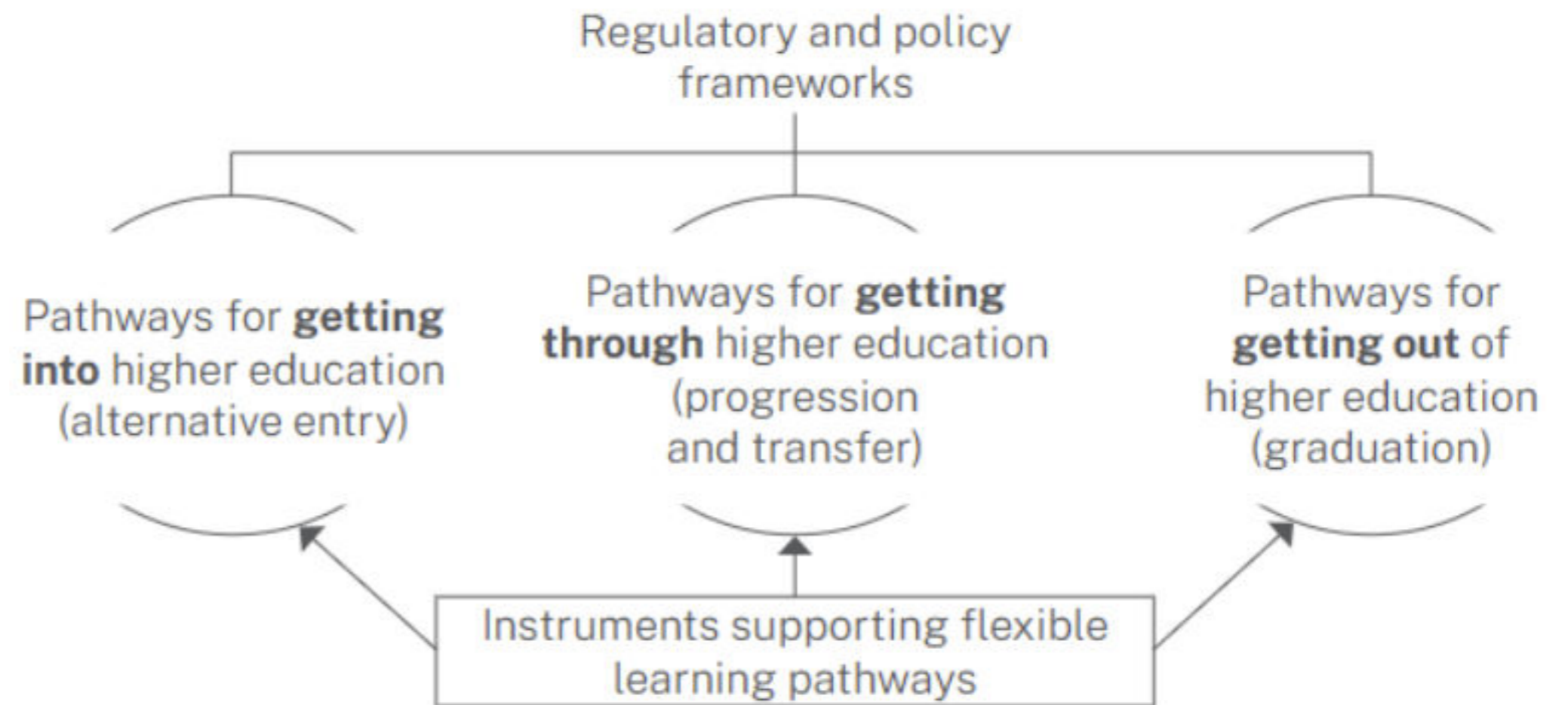
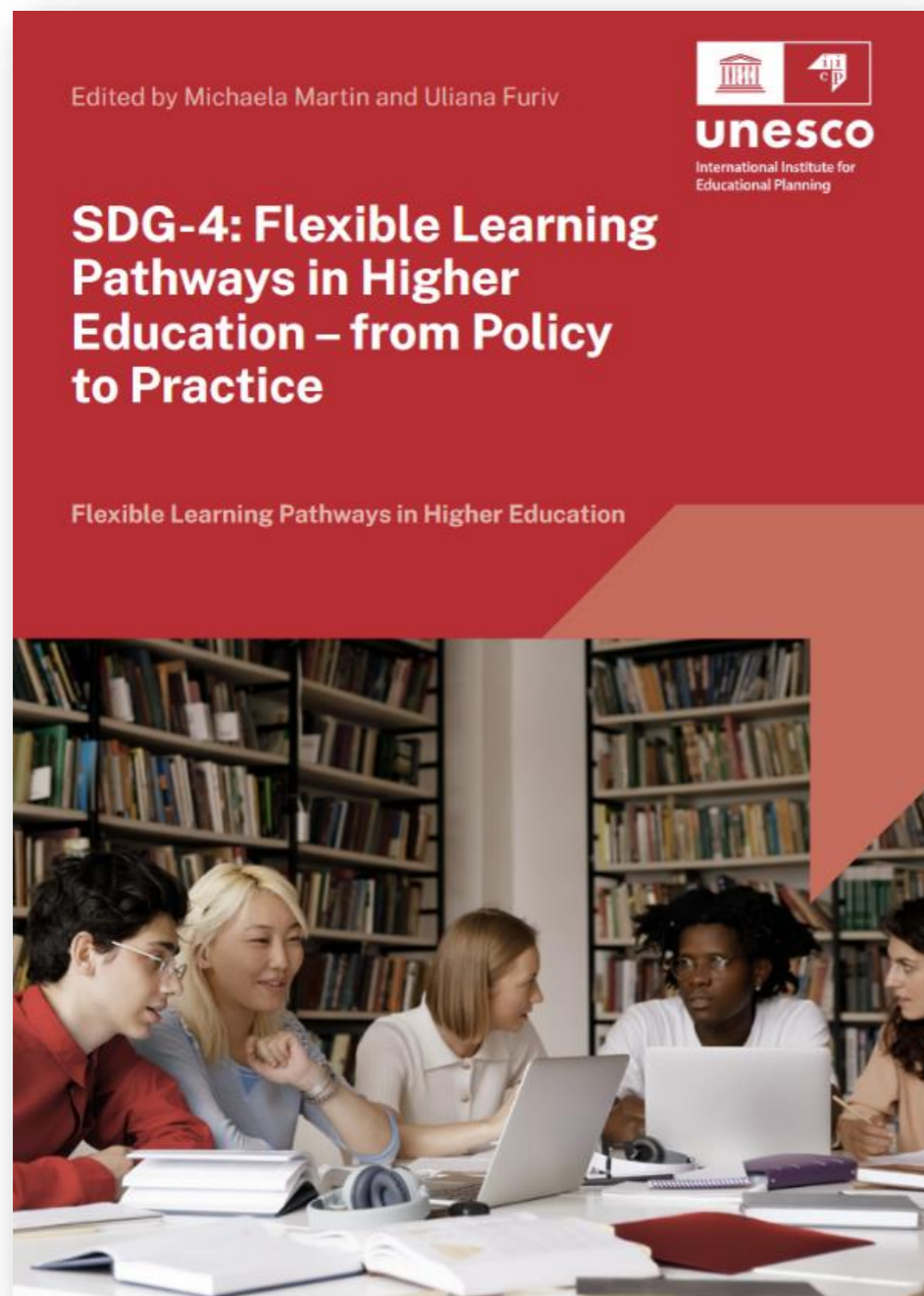
*Our “capabilities gap” to recognize  
diverse forms of learning*

**Formal**

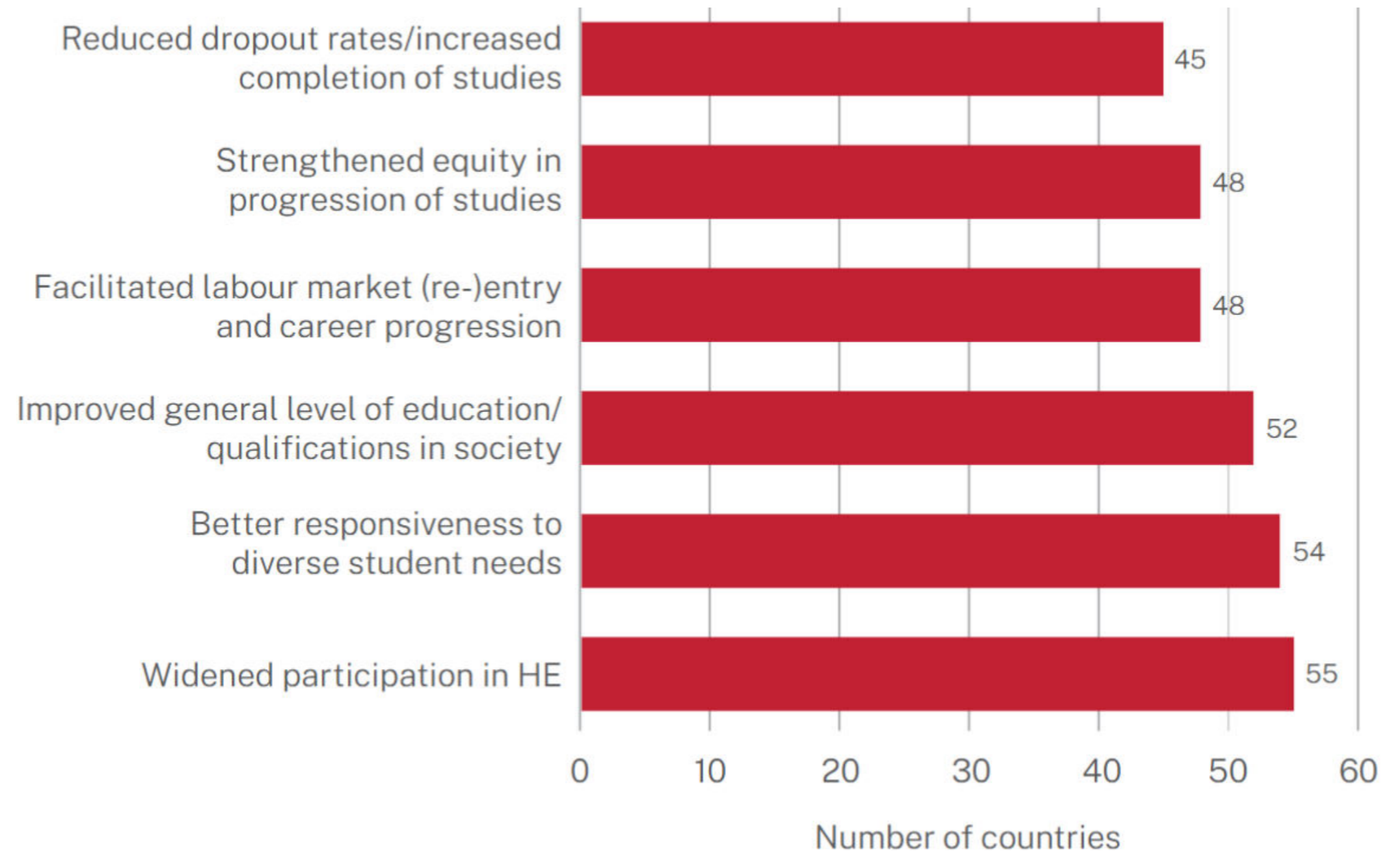
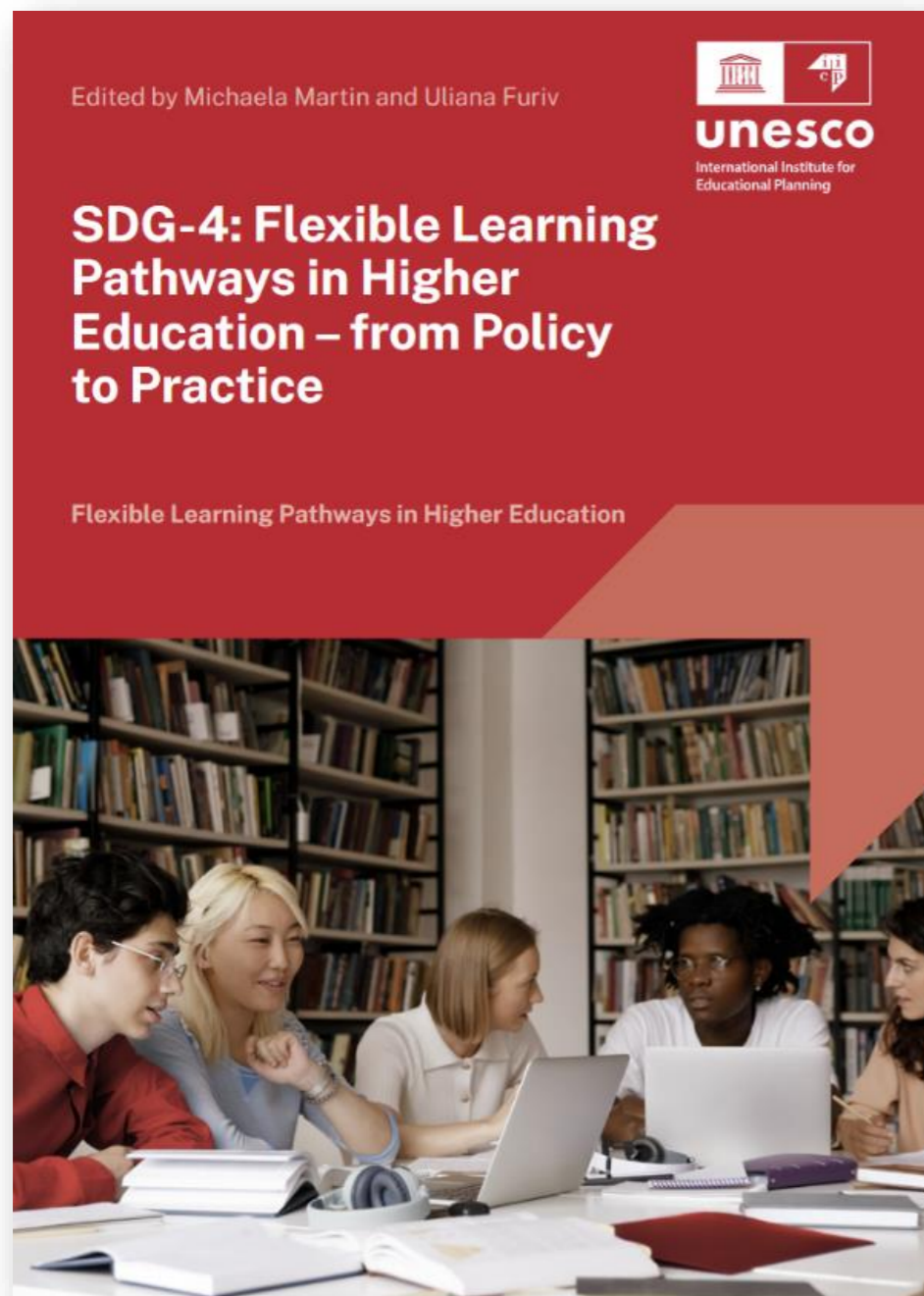


**Non-formal and  
informal learning**

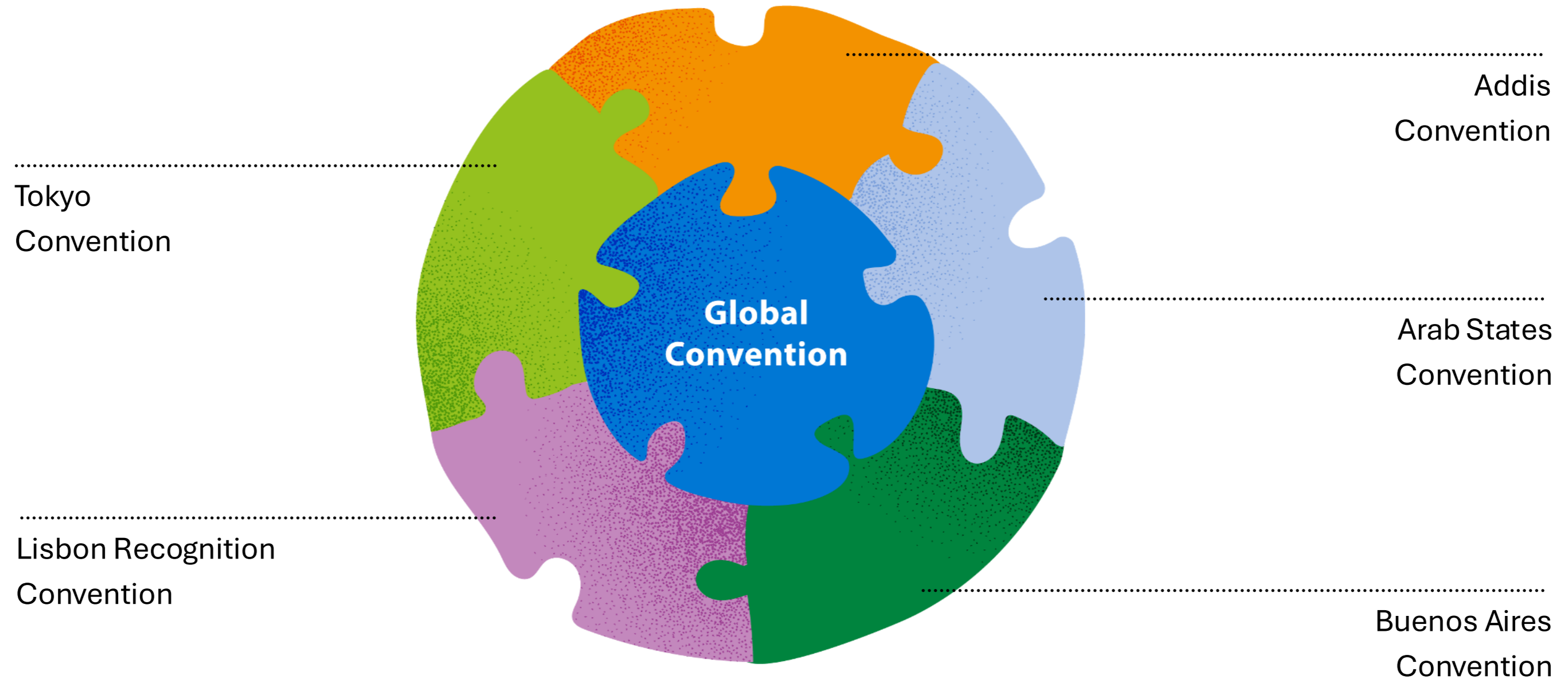
# Regulatory and policy frameworks and instruments that support flexible learning pathways



# Intended outcomes: Improved access, delivery and recognition?



# Linkages between global and regional conventions





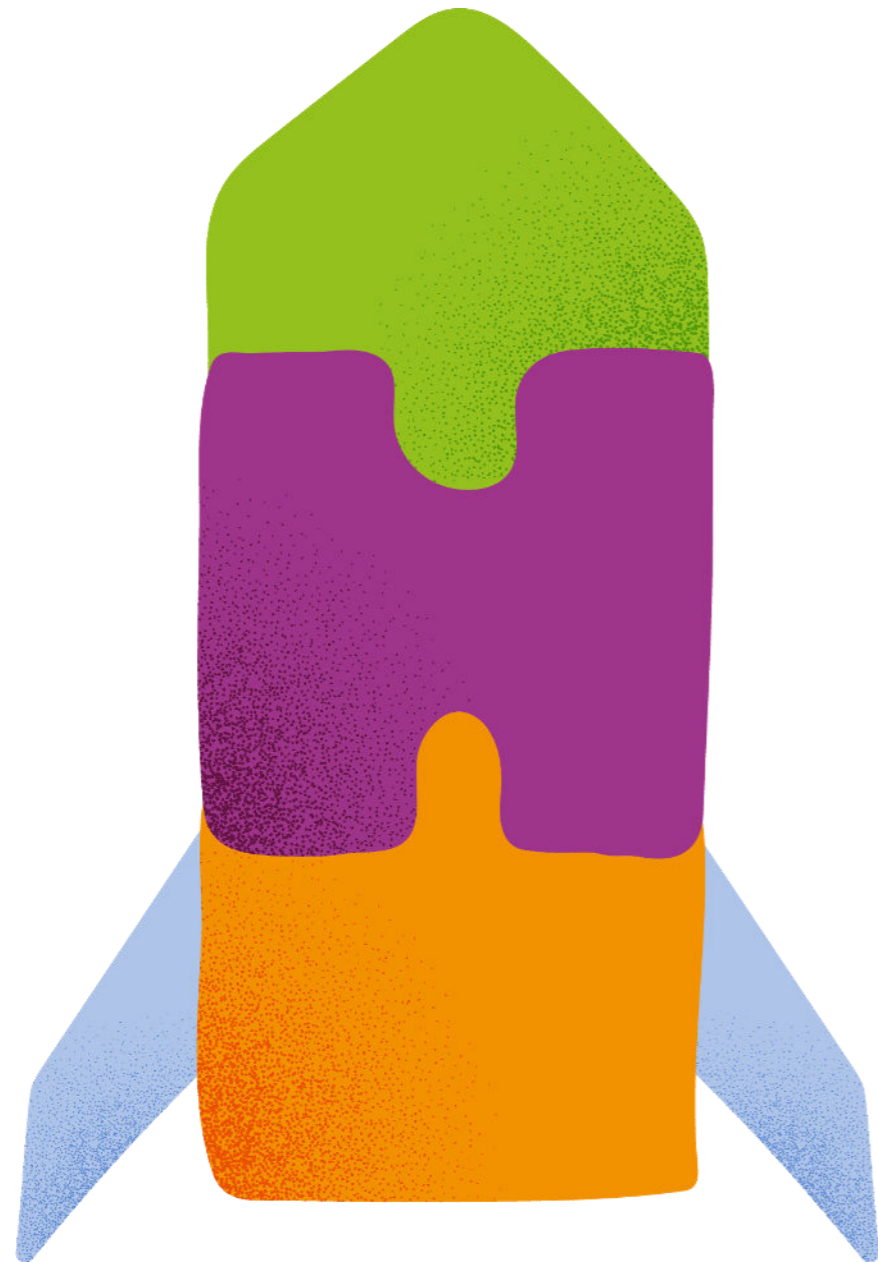
## **Students**

- Facilitates access to higher education internationally
- Supports entry into labour markets
- Helps refugees and displaced persons access opportunities



## Institutions

- Enhances education quality and builds trust in institutions
- Foster international cooperation in education, research and innovation
- Diversifies mobile student, faculty, and researcher populations



## States Parties

- Facilitates access to inbound, outbound and circular/return mobility
- Strengthens international cooperation on recognition practices in higher education
- Supports academic exchange, research and innovation
- Fosters trust and confidence in the quality and reliability of qualifications.
- Promotes inclusion and lifelong learning by recognizing diverse learning pathways
- Provides guidance on recognizing refugees' and displaced persons qualifications
- Promotes the sharing of accessible, up-to-date, reliable, information on HE qualifications and systems.
- Enables participation in global policy dialogue on emerging issues

## Current approaches

**Traditional  
Higher Ed**

**Expansion via depth and  
breadth**

Learning is a  
common goal

**Micro-  
credentials**

**Precision via acquisition or  
validation**

# Micro-credentials as a tool for more flexible pathways to recognition



**Evidence of their value and impact is still scarce.**

Source: [OECD, March 2023](#)

## Transforming higher education

Global collaboration on visioning and action



# A roadmap

## A collectively fashioned higher education agenda

Following the World Higher Education Conference and consultations, the 2026 publication promotes a **forward-looking** higher education agenda.

## Guiding principles to inspire the work of all stakeholders

Looking toward and beyond the horizon of 2030, the publication surfaces a set of **guiding principles** multiple stakeholders at multiple levels.

## A future different than today

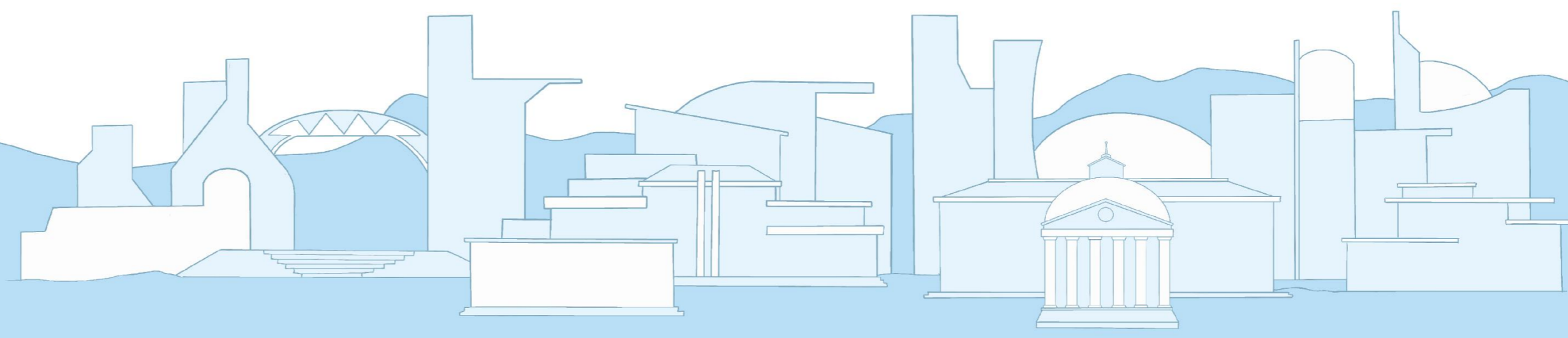
In the future higher education institutions and systems will need to be more inclusive; better protected and better connected; better resourced; more critical, creative and innovative; **more relevant and impactful**; and more attuned to sustainably living well together within planetary boundaries.

# A dynamic Roadmap - Transforming Higher Education

## Guiding principles

The report draws on inclusive consultations from the **World Higher Education Conference** and over 250 sessions, 1,500 inputs, and 250 knowledge products.

1. Committing resources to equity and pluralism
2. Promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally
3. Fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity
4. Establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies and AI
5. Embracing an ethic of collaboration and solidarity
6. Centring sustainability, stewardship, and regeneration
7. Supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence, and relevance



# Transforming higher education



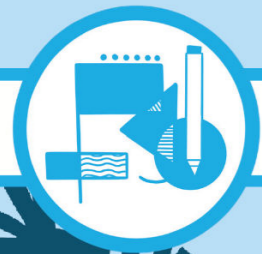
Exclusion and scarcity

Narrow programme focus



Disciplinary siloes

Hierarchical & fragmented



Abstract & unanchored

Traditional pedagogy



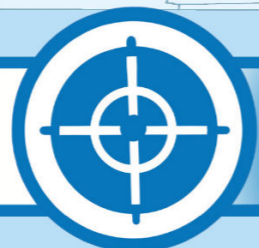
Disconnection from  
local economies

# Transforming higher education



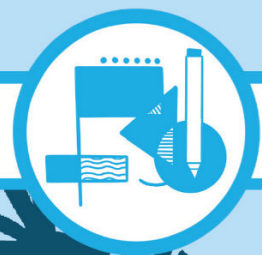
Exclusion and scarcity

Narrow programme focus



Disciplinary siloes

Hierarchical & fragmented



Abstract & unanchored

Traditional pedagogy



Disconnection from local economies



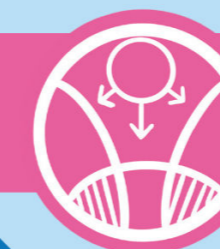
Active learning



Flexible & harmonized



Openness & inclusion



Economic opportunity & just transition



Lifelong learning orientation



Engaged & relevant



Holistic study & connected inquiry



unesco

## Two points of departure

- Assure the right to quality education throughout life
- Strengthen education as a public endeavor and a common good





unesco

# THANK YOU

---

[unesco.org/higher-education](https://unesco.org/higher-education) | [wr.teter@unesco.org](mailto:wr.teter@unesco.org)