IAU 2025 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE (21-23 October 2025)
Hosted by the University of Rwanda

Building Trust in Higher Education

The university, in its corporate structure, is one of very few institutions in global history that have survived the passing of time. Ideally, universities are marked by unique ethical commitments that enhance their trustworthiness. The idealized view of academia stresses its openness, its universality, its institutionalized procedures for self-criticism and self-correction, being a force for good across all its missions.

But what is challenging higher education as we know it is that it has become increasingly harder to convincingly demonstrate its merits and benefits. Given the growing influence of technology and commodification of universities, it is being asked whether the university is still one of the most suitable institutions to provide the skills and competences the labour market requires and if a university degree is still key to personal and collective economic growth and societal advancement.

In epistemic terms, universities are confronted with an expanding scepticism, causing a breakdown in the semantic acceptance of reason and fact. Universities are faced with a growing gap between their scientific understanding of how humans process and understand information and the vulnerabilities to misinformation and propaganda they endure when they fail to leverage this knowledge in communicating scientific findings and principles, especially in the age of generative AI.

In social and moral terms, the university is being challenged along questions of political and cultural interference while having to reconcile an array of societal expectations, which, in conjunction with populist and nationalist policies, is casting doubt on the validity and relevance of higher education as a cultural pillar of society.

Ideally, universities serve as trusted and independent institutions that critically accompany and scrutinise the forces of politics and the market. After all, universities have such influence that, whether through action or inaction, they shape the society around them as much as they are being shaped by it. For universities to sit passively as the political, social and economic structures necessary for their mission degrade around them, would have drastic consequences for their role in building societies and fostering democracy.

Given the inextricable relationship between universities and trust afforded to them over time, this conference wishes to ask what it is that creates trust in higher education? What must universities do to retain it across all their missions? Their governance, administration, research practices, teaching methods and learning processes, admissions procedures, and knowledge-sharing approaches? How can they strengthen their engagement with the dynamic and diverse world beyond their institutional boundaries to build better and just societies? After all, it is trust in higher education where it starts and ends.