



## *IAU 16th General Conference*

*Dublin, 25-28 October*

### Concept Note

The International Association of Universities (IAU), the global voice of higher education, invites its Members and the global higher education community to rethink and reimagine higher education for the future.

Universities are traditional and modern, conservative and progressive, inclusive and exclusive. Universities have no boundaries, they are institutions of tremendous influence that transcend geographical, social, and cultural limits. Over centuries of existence, they have adapted to externally imposed regulations, norms and pressures and have been responsive to societal expectations and changes in their environment. Their conceptual space is the global landscape of knowledge and ideas. Even when faced with limited financial resources, universities operate from a position of intellectual abundance, proposing solutions and developing opportunities. Universities are uniquely placed to actively shape local and global agendas as agents of change. **How can universities lead the way? What kind of leadership does this require? How does and can internationalisation of higher education inform the agenda? How do we ensure that society at large learns from universities' achievements in addressing challenges we face?**

Facing the future certainly also means overcoming local and global challenges: pandemics and their multifarious consequences, climate change and ecological crisis, the depletion of natural resources, growing social and economic inequality, disruptive technologies and labour markets, loss of human and democratic rights, scepticism of the scientific process. The value and relevance of universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) also hinge on how they address issues of inequality, intolerance, xenophobia, racism, social injustice, human rights violations, the possibility of ecological collapse and weakening democracy. The IAU 16<sup>th</sup> General Conference will debate how the higher

education sector can engage in a meaningful and system-wide discussion on these issues. **What are new models and strategies of engagement across the sector and at local, national regional and global level to better cooperate and synergise resources?**

Social relevance is part of the university's mission. Locally they are real economic drivers and have the grand capacity to ensure social wellbeing; though arts and culture they enrich the community in which they are based. They are drivers of transformation. Yet, they too often show signs of inertia and carry on as usual without going further to harness their potential. The UNESCO Futures of Education Report emphasises the need for educational systems to be transformed so that, in turn, they are able to be transformative in effect. They can act through research and as multipliers of knowledge, enable students to develop their personal capacities, prepare them for life as active citizens, and equip them with the skills and competences required to engage and shape the world of work and society at large. This is essential to surmounting the challenges and creating opportunities. **Will these assumptions and expectations be met in the future? There is already a myriad of forces at play which are destabilising established patterns and assumptions. How will universities respond to these?**

The pandemic has shown how crucial science, data and connecting different knowledge systems are to overcoming global challenges. The role of universities as trusted places of knowledge was reaffirmed. They also have to help overcome the trend of epistemic scepticism fuelled by increasing nationalist and populist rhetoric. We see that education is key to safeguarding democracy and human rights. **How can universities better leverage their power and sharpen their focus on creating a better world, one that is more equitable, ethical and democratic?**

Future society requires strong and high-quality education systems, strategically linking pre-primary to lifelong learning through higher education, that can bring forth well-educated, digitally competent new generations of citizens who are scientifically and humanistically literate. For this, we need to collectively develop strategies on how to strengthen the higher education sector and develop individual and institutional capacities and capabilities. **How do we ensure that universities provide individuals with the knowledge, skills and competences necessary to become the leaders, critical thinkers, systems thinkers, decision-makers, innovators, specialists, teachers and researchers and responsible citizens who will engage in building a better and more sustainable society? How does Agenda 2030 for sustainable development strategically help shape the university curriculum?**

Significant and sustainable investment in higher education has shown to be essential to help ensure the sector is able to address the risks we face. **How can universities communicate more effectively and shape the global narrative about the place of higher education in society? How will they secure better public and private funding and investment for ever more relevance to society?**