



---

REIMAGINING  
A new social  
OUR FUTURES  
contract for  
TOGETHER  
education

---

---

### **UNESCO – a global leader in education**

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.

### **Futures of Education initiative**

The International Commission on the Futures of Education was established by UNESCO in 2019 to reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet. The initiative incorporates extensive public and expert engagement and aims to catalyze a global debate on how education needs to be rethought in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and fragility.



---

Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2021

ED-2021/WS/20



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The members of the International Commission on the Futures of Education are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in the publication and for the opinions expressed therein. These are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Copy-editor: Mary de Sousa

Designed and printed by UNESCO

*Printed in France*

The work of the International Commission on the Futures of Education was generously supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Government of France, and Banco Santander.



---

REIMAGINING  
A new social  
OUR FUTURES  
contract for  
TOGETHER  
education

---

REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION

# Executive summary

Our world is at a turning point. We already know that knowledge and learning are the basis for renewal and transformation. But global disparities – and a pressing need to reimagine why, how, what, where, and when we learn – mean that education is not yet fulfilling its promise to help us shape peaceful, just, and sustainable futures.

In our quest for growth and development, we humans have overwhelmed our natural environment, threatening our own existence. Today, high living standards coexist with gaping inequalities. More and more people are engaged in public life, but the fabric of civil society and democracy is fraying in many places around the world. Rapid technological changes are transforming many aspects of our lives. Yet, these innovations are not adequately directed at equity, inclusion and democratic participation.

Everyone today has a heavy obligation to both current and future generations – to ensure that our world is one of abundance not scarcity, and that everyone enjoys the same human rights to the fullest. Despite the urgency of action, and in conditions of great uncertainty, **we have reason to be full of hope**. As a species, we are at the point in our collective history where we have the greatest access ever to knowledge and to tools that enable us to collaborate. The potential for engaging humanity in creating better futures together has never been greater.

This global Report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education asks what role education can play in shaping our common world and shared future as we look to 2050 and beyond. The proposals presented arise out of a two-year global engagement and co-construction process which showed that vast numbers of people – children, youth and adults – are keenly aware that **we are connected** on this shared planet and that it is imperative that **we work together**.

Many people are already engaged in bringing about these changes themselves. This report is infused with their contributions on everything from how to reimagine learning spaces to the decolonization of curricula and the importance of social and emotional learning and taps into their real and growing fears about climate change, crises like COVID-19, fake news and the digital divide.

Education – the way we organize teaching and learning throughout life – has long played a foundational role in the transformation of human societies. It connects us with the world and to each other, exposes us to new possibilities, and strengthens our capacities for dialogue and action. **But to shape peaceful, just, and sustainable futures, education itself must be transformed.**

## A new social contract for education

Education can be seen in terms of a social contract – an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for shared benefit. A social contract is more than a transaction as it reflects norms, commitments and principles that are formally legislated as well as culturally embedded.

**The starting point is a shared vision of the public purposes of education.** This contract consists of the foundational and organizational principles that structure education systems, as well as the distributed work done to build, maintain and refine them.

During the twentieth century, public education was essentially aimed at supporting national citizenship and development efforts through the form of compulsory schooling for children and youth. Today, however, as we face grave risks to the future of humanity and the living planet itself, we must urgently reinvent education to help us address common challenges. This act of **reimagining means working together to create futures that are shared and interdependent.** The new social contract for education must unite us around collective endeavours and provide the knowledge and innovation needed to shape sustainable and peaceful futures for all anchored in social, economic and environmental justice. It must, as this report does, champion the role played by teachers.

There are three essential questions to ask of education as we look to 2050: **What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? What needs to be creatively invented afresh?**

## Foundational principles

Any new social contract must build on the broad principles that underpin human rights – inclusion and equity, cooperation, and solidarity, as well as collective responsibility and interconnectedness – and be governed by the following two foundational principles:

- **Assuring the right to quality education throughout life.** The right to education, as established in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must continue to be the foundation of the new social contract for education and must be expanded to include the right to quality education throughout life. It must also encompass the right to information, culture and science – as well as the right to access and contribute to the knowledge commons, the collective knowledge resources of humanity that have been accumulated over generations and are continuously transforming.
- **Strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good.** As a shared societal endeavour, education builds common purposes and enables individuals and communities to flourish together. A new social contract for education must not only ensure public funding for education, but also include a society-wide commitment to include everyone in public discussions about education. This emphasis on participation is what strengthens education as a common good – a form of shared well-being that is chosen and achieved together.

These foundational principles build on what education has allowed humanity to accomplish to this point and help to ensure that, as we move to 2050 and beyond, education empowers future generations to reimagine their futures and renew their worlds.

## Between past promises and uncertain futures

Widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding and disruptive technological automation are the hallmarks of our current historical juncture. These multiple overlapping crises and challenges constrain our individual and collective human rights and have resulted in damage to much of life on Earth. While the expansion of education systems has created opportunities for many, vast numbers have been left with low-quality learning.

Looking to the future it is all too easy to paint an even darker picture. It is possible to imagine an exhausted planet with fewer spaces for human habitation. Extreme future scenarios also include a world where quality education is a privilege of elites, and where vast groups of people live in misery because they lack access to essential goods and services. Will current educational inequalities only worsen with time until curricula become irrelevant? How will these possible changes impact on our basic humanity?

No trend is destiny. Multiple alternative futures are possible, and disruptive transformations can be discerned in several key areas:

- The planet is in peril but decarbonization and the greening of economies are underway. Here children and youth already lead the way, calling for meaningful action and delivering a harsh rebuke to those who refuse to face the urgency of the situation.
- Over the past decade the world has seen a backsliding in democratic governance and a rise in identity-driven populist sentiment. At the same time, there has been a flourishing of increasingly active citizen participation and activism that is challenging discrimination and injustice worldwide.
- There is tremendous transformative potential in digital technologies, but we have not yet figured out how to deliver on these many promises.
- The challenge of creating decent human-centred work is about to get much harder as Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and structural transformations remake employment landscapes around the globe. At the same time, more people and communities are recognizing the value of care work and the multiple ways that economic security needs to be provisioned.

Each of these emerging disruptions has significant implications for education. In turn, what we do together in education will shape how it responds.

At present the ways we organize education across the world do not do enough to ensure just and peaceful societies, a healthy planet, and shared progress that benefits all. In fact, some of our difficulties stem from how we educate. **A new social contract for education needs to allow us to think differently** about learning and the relationships between students, teachers, knowledge, and the world.

## Proposals for renewing education

**Pedagogy should be organized around the principles of cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity.** It should foster the intellectual, social, and moral capacities of students to work together and transform the world with empathy and compassion. There is unlearning to be done too, of bias, prejudice, and divisiveness. Assessment should reflect these pedagogical goals in ways that promote meaningful growth and learning for all students.

**Curricula should emphasize ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning that supports students to access and produce knowledge while also developing their capacity to critique and apply it.** Curricula must embrace an ecological understanding of humanity that rebalances the way we relate to Earth as a living planet and our singular home. The spread of misinformation should be countered through scientific, digital and humanistic literacies that develop the ability to distinguish falsehoods from truth. In educational content, methods and policy we should promote active citizenship and democratic participation.

**Teaching should be further professionalized as a collaborative endeavour where teachers are recognized for their work as knowledge producers and key figures in educational and social transformation.** Collaboration and teamwork should characterize the work of teachers. Reflection, research and the creation of knowledge and new pedagogical practices should become integral to teaching. This means that their autonomy and freedom must be supported and that they must participate fully in public debate and dialogue on the futures of education.

**Schools should be protected educational sites because of the inclusion, equity and individual and collective well-being they support – and also reimagined to better promote the transformation of the world towards more just, equitable and sustainable futures.** Schools need to be places that bring diverse groups of people together and expose them to challenges and possibilities not available elsewhere. School architectures, spaces, times, timetables, and student groupings should be redesigned to encourage and enable individuals to work together. Digital technologies should aim to support – and not replace – schools. Schools should model the futures we aspire to by ensuring human rights and becoming exemplars of sustainability and carbon neutrality.

**We should enjoy and expand the educational opportunities that take place throughout life and in different cultural and social spaces.** At all times of life people should have meaningful, quality educational opportunities. We should connect natural, built, and virtual sites of learning, carefully leveraging the best potentials of each. Key responsibilities fall to governments whose capacity for the public financing and regulation of education should be strengthened. The right to education needs to be broadened to be lifelong and encompass the right to information, culture, science and connectivity.

## Catalyzing a new social contract for education

Large-scale change and innovation are possible. We will build a new social contract for education through millions of individual and collective acts – acts of courage, leadership, resistance, creativity, and care. A new social contract needs to overcome discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. We must dedicate ourselves to ensuring gender equality and the rights of all regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, age, or citizenship status. A massive commitment to social dialogue, to thinking and acting together, is needed.

**A call for research and innovation.** A new social contract requires a worldwide, collaborative research programme that focuses on the right to education throughout life. This programme must centre on the right to education and be inclusive of different kinds of evidence and ways of knowing including horizontal learning and the exchange of knowledge across borders. Contributions should be welcomed from everyone – from teachers to students, from academics and research centres to governments and civil society organizations.

**A call for global solidarity and international cooperation.** A new social contract for education requires renewed commitment to global collaboration in support of education as a common good, premised on more just and equitable cooperation among state and non-state actors. Beyond North-South flows of aid to education, the generation of knowledge and evidence through South-South and triangular cooperation must be strengthened. The international community has a key role to play in helping states and non-state actors to align around the shared purposes, norms and standards needed to realize a new social contract for education. In this, the principle of subsidiarity should be respected, and local, national and regional efforts should be encouraged. The educational needs of asylum seekers, refugees, stateless persons and migrants, in particular, need to be supported through international cooperation and the work of global institutions.

**Universities and other higher education institutions must be active in every aspect of building a new social contract for education.** From supporting research and the advancement of science to being a contributing partner to other educational institutions and programmes in their communities and across the globe, universities that are creative, innovative and committed to strengthening education as a common good have a key role to play in the futures of education.

**It is essential that everyone be able to participate in building the futures of education** – children, youth, parents, teachers, researchers, activists, employers, cultural and religious leaders. We have deep, rich, and diverse cultural traditions to build upon. Humans have great collective agency, intelligence, and creativity. And we now face a serious choice: continue on an unsustainable path or radically change course.

This Report proposes answers to the three essential questions of What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? and What needs to be creatively reimaged? But **the proposals here are merely a start.** This Report is more an invitation to think and imagine than a blueprint. These questions need to be taken up and answered in communities, in countries, in schools, in educational programmes and systems of all sorts – all over the world.

**Forging a new social contract for education is a critical step towards reimagining our futures together.**



**unesco**

United Nations  
Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural Organization

---

# REIMAGINING OUR FUTURES TOGETHER

## A new social contract for education

Our humanity and planet Earth are under threat. Urgent action, taken together, is needed to change course and reimagine our futures. Education, long acknowledged as a powerful force for positive change, has new, urgent and important work to do. Informed by a global consultation process engaging about one million people, this report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education invites governments, institutions, organizations, and citizens around the world to forge a new social contract for education that will help us build peaceful, just, and sustainable futures together and for all.

The report features in-depth looks at digital technologies, climate change, democratic slippage and societal polarization and the uncertain future of work. It aims not only to open the conversation about education to everyone and provoke thought, but to spur each of us on to action. It argues, above all, that it is through millions of individual and collective acts of courage, leadership, resistance, creativity and care that we will change course and transform education to build just, equitable and sustainable futures.

---