Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education

Global Forum on Higher Education 2025:
Renewal of the Democratic and Civic Mission

3-4 June 2025, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

General Rapporteur's Report

Executive Summary

The theme of the 2025 Global Forum on Higher Education was *Renewal of the Democratic and Civic Mission*. The relevance of this theme was prompted by the growing crisis of democracy throughout the world. While there is an interdependent relationship between the vitality of democracy and the health of higher education, it was recognised that higher education can no longer take-for-granted societal acceptance of its pivotal status in sustaining democratic virtues, through its role as provider of education and generator of (independent) knowledge.

The over-riding message of contributors to the Global Forum was of the *urgent* need for *collective action* by all partners involved in higher education. *Change*, potentially systemic, is required. Encouraging examples were shared demonstrating how change is possible and the transformative outcomes that can result. However, the challenge for the sector is how such initiatives, to renew and advance higher education's civic and democratic mission, can become integral to the everyday work of universities, rather than isolated exemplars. Global collaboration, shared learning and solidarity will be needed to meet that challenge, as well as to preserve and advance democracy during this critical time.

The report synthesises the discussions, which took place during the Global Forum, under four themes: (1) the nature of the *current context*; (2) the *purpose of higher education* in the second quarter of the twenty-first century and beyond; (3) the *tensions between aspirations and current cultural norms*; and (4) the identification of *six priorities* for action.

Preamble

The theme of the 2025 Global Forum on Higher Education was *Renewal of the Democratic and Civic Mission*. This, the 8th conference of the Global Forum, was hosted by Charles University, in Prague, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, between 3-4 June 2025. This invitational event was sponsored and hosted by 'The Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education', which includes the Council of Europe, the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy, the International Association of Universities (IAU), and the Organisation of American States (OAS). The conference was further sponsored by Campus Compact, The Netter Center for Community Partnerships, the American Council on Education, and the Magna Charta Observatory.

The Global Forum took as its starting point the urgent need for higher education to renew its civic and democratic mission as well as stand for and exemplify democratic values including diversity, inclusivity, tolerance, equity, and open inquiry. The relevance of this theme was prompted by recognition of the growing crisis of democracy throughout the world, with attacks on academic freedom, higher education as a public good, human rights, and democracy itself accelerating at an alarming rate. Higher education's crucial role in the development and preservation of democratic values is complicated by current societal tensions and waning trust in institutions, locally and globally. This divisive context is fuelled by a complex and polarised political landscape, spurred on by the growing accessibility of mis- and dis-information. Given this context, the 2025 Global Forum's particular focus was on bringing voices from diverse regions around the world together for sharing information, understanding, and collaborative solutions to what specifically can be done to renew higher education's civic and democratic mission in order to preserve, strengthen and advance democracy during this time of rising populism, authoritarianism, and the erosion of democratic norms.

The discussions during the Global Forum were framed around four questions:

- What is the nature of the current threats to democracy and higher education's democratic work?
- What are the causes / why is this happening (including higher education's failure sufficiently to stand for its democratic mission)?
- What, AND how, can higher education do to change the current situation and effectively combat the threats to democracy?
- What, AND how, can the Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education and its constituent partners do to combat effectively the threats to democracy and help renew higher education's democratic mission?

Contributors to the Global Forum were drawn from the leadership of higher education institutions and partners based in Europe, Oceania, Africa, the Middle East, and North, Middle and South America. A cross section of partners involved in higher education were invited to contribute including representatives of students, early career researchers, academics, and senior university

and college administrators, as well as government officials, and the leadership of foundations and multi-national agencies responsible for policy development and implementation.

The Global Forum follows Chatham House rules and these protocols are reflected in the style of this report. The Rapporteur's report does not aim to summarise the content of individual sessions or contributions, rather it is a synthesis: identifying recurrent themes, drawing connections between contributions and noting areas of discussion.

Overview – key message

The over-riding message of all contributors to the Global Forum was of the *urgent* need for *collective action* by all partners involved in higher education[1]. The interdependent relationship between the vitality of democracy and the health of higher education was repeatedly recognised. It is precisely the centrality of higher education institutions to democracy, through education, research, and service, that has placed them over the centuries in the cross hairs of oppressive regimes. The preservation and advancement of democratic principles benefit from a flourishing higher education sector and vice versa. Yet, it was understood that higher education can no longer take-for-granted societal acceptance of its pivotal status in sustaining democratic virtues, through its role as provider of education and generator of (independent) knowledge. There has to be honest reflection and recognition of how the activities and perceived attitudes of those associated with universities and colleges have themselves contributed to the creation of the circumstances of today. Reflection and statements alone will not provide an adequate response. *Change*, potentially systemic, is required.

Introduction

The discussions during the 2017 Global Forum on the theme 'Higher Education for Diversity, Social Inclusion, and Community: A Democratic Imperative' (held in Rome), prompted the General Rapporteur to start her commentary by posing the question: "what is the purpose of education in this critical moment?"[2] (Jibladze (2017), p.235). Eight years later, the pertinence of this question for higher education has become ever more pressing and contested in the face of challenges to democratic norms, supported by increasing accessibility to often unverified information. The unanimous view during the 2025 Global Forum was that universities and colleges cannot afford for another eight years to roll by without further clarification and tangible demonstration of their public good mandate in the eyes of citizens. Higher education is not detached from democracy and civil society; it bears the responsibility of being both constituted by, but crucially also, constitutive of the societal contexts in which it is embedded. These interdependencies mean universities need rapidly and honestly to examine their own priorities and

[1] The higher education sector consists of a diversity of institutions, including colleges, universities, and polytechnics. Institutions differ in their individual missions, yet viewed from the outside, the sector is generally perceived as a whole with the distinctive qualities of each institution rarely acknowledged.

[2] The question "what is the purpose of education in this critical moment", echoed the sentiments expressed by Hannah Arendt about education in 1961 following the Second World War (Arendt cited in Jibladze (2017), p.235).

practices, and tellingly recognise the need for systemic change. Perceptions of universities as ivory towers of self-entitlement and detached elite privilege, rather than the bulwarks of truthfulness, are a 'reality', which all associated with higher education needs to own, reflect about (briefly), and crucially take action to change.

The collective recognition of the participants at the Global Forum of the need for *urgent action* was clear. The current moment is not someone else's problem, it is 'ours' individually and collectively. While there was a shared understanding of the challenge, there were also many encouraging examples, demonstrating how change is possible and the transformative outcomes that can result. The challenge for the sector is how such initiatives, to renew and advance higher education's civic and democratic mission, can become integral to the everyday work of universities, rather than isolated exemplars.

The remainder of the report seeks to add nuance to the bold message of the Global Forum. The following observations synthesise the discussions, starting by interrogating further the nature of the current context, and then going on to consider the question which was ever present: what is (or should be) the purpose of higher education in the second quarter of the twenty-first century and beyond? The final sections explore tensions between aspirations and current cultural norms in higher education, before concluding by identifying priorities for the future.

Context: higher education and democracy

There was a shared understanding of the critical role of education, particularly higher education in preserving, strengthening and advancing democracy. Yet there was also a further shared understanding that there has been an erosion of trust in the idea of higher education as a societal good. Higher education providers, including universities, colleges and polytechnics (amongst others) are not uniform in their missions, priorities and practices. Some are locally embedded in their communities, supporting first generation students through undergraduate education, others position themselves globally, especially with regards to research and the generation of new insights and innovations, while most seek to balance a varied mandate across research and teaching. This diversity makes generalisation problematic at the level of individual institutions, but in the eyes of governments and citizens higher education is viewed collectively, and as a sector it has seen an erosion in political traction amongst electorates and hence politicians. By comparison with issues such as cost-of-living, affordable housing, health care, food security, secure employment, personal safety, climatic variability and early years education, higher education is often now considered to be peripheral.

Worse than being marginal to political priorities, universities are perceived to be detached from the concerns of 'ordinary folks', including the local communities in which they are located. The narratives of the most visible institutions tend to be framed around their global position based on vague and intangible measures of 'excellence', at least as far as the archetypal 'person on the street' is concerned. In contrast, citizens largely encounter and judge universities on the basis of their personal local experiences. This disjuncture between global status and local experience

encourages a sense that universities are elitist and disengaged from wider societal responsibilities. Hence, rather than being pivotal to flourishing democracies and local communities, higher education institutions are regarded as self-serving, entitled and disconnected.

The loss of seeming public relevance is in many ways paradoxical as it coincides with a time of the greatest productivity in higher education as crudely measured by numbers of credentials awarded and the quantum of knowledge generated in the form of published journal papers. Further to this, the unimagined rise in public access to information through social media platforms and the as yet unknown implications of large language models (LLM) might logically be perceived to justify increased societal faith and dependence on universities and colleges, as verifiers of knowledge and educators of citizens. So, why this disjuncture between university productivity and societal attitudes? How far is it simply symptomatic of changing times? How far should the sector take some responsibility for contributing to the current malaise, and what needs to be done to alter the narrative?

It was clear from discussions during the Global Forum that the sector is not ignorant of current societal attitudes and the combined challenge they represent to the mutually reinforcing inter-relationships between democracy, including effective democratic governance, and the flourishing and independence of universities. Many contributors shared examples of initiatives that have sought to develop and/or advance the civic and democratic missions of individual universities and colleges in a diversity of environments across Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Australia and Europe. (See further discussion below of specific initiatives.) These initiatives demonstrate recognition of the need for evolution (perhaps even a [sustainable] revolution) in the activities of higher education institutions. While change is usually a long term process, current evidence suggests that despite the promise offered there is limited consolidated momentum. These initiatives tend to exist in isolation from the dominant agendas and priorities of universities, with traditional academic cultures proving highly resilient.

Analyses abound of the nature and impact of neoliberal ideologies and populist politics, and in turn the implications these global trends have for the form and priorities of higher education institutions[3]. But are universities and colleges impotent in the face of these forces, or can (and should they be) active agents in forging new paths? As the embodiment of the future of higher education it was telling that the contributors representing students and early career researcher were forceful in their condemnation of the narrowness of vision and inertia they currently find within universities. Notwithstanding differences of nuance and tone, the contributors to the Global Forum were united in calling for the sector to take responsibility for its future. In so doing it was acknowledged that established academic norms and cultural practices will need to be thoroughly scrutinised, leading to change across campuses world-wide. The prerequisite for change is knowing the goal and hence clarity of purpose. The fundamental underlying question for the sector therefore is: what should be the purpose of higher education at this time?

[3] See for example: Bok 2003; Collini 2012; Giroux 2019.

What should be the purpose of higher education at this time?

The question of the purpose of higher education, should more properly be viewed in two parts: what should be the collective purpose of higher education, and given this agenda how should individual institutions and their constituent partners respond and change? In reflecting on these fundamentals, contributors were less concerned about semantics and erudite treatises, and more with practical actions. It was emphasised that the actions required must be more than public relations exercises, which fool no-one. Actions need to demonstrate meaningful and tangible commitment to the civic and democratic mission of higher education, while remaining true to the twin underlying principles of institutional autonomy and the responsible exercise of academic freedom[4]. There is no inherent contradiction between this commitment and these principles. They are (and should be understood as) mutually reinforcing.

The purpose of higher education is at one level obvious, *to educate and to generate knowledge for the common good*. However, operationalisation within individual institutions, governmental policies and international frameworks is much more complex involving decisions about priorities and emphasis. Beyond the focus on teaching and research, universities and colleges additionally exist as large and resource-rich corporations within the communities in which they are physically located. In recent years this has been recognised in terms such as 'anchor institutions' or 'civic universities'[5]. The mission to educate and research is not free-floating, rather it is importantly situated within specific sets of local relationships, such as housing and labour markets, political imperatives and cultural affinities.

To educate

The greatest 'impact' any individual academic can have is in the classroom, aside from a very few exceptions. Students are the future. Pedagogy therefore matters, most obviously in terms of what and how students are taught, but pedagogy does not exist in isolation from the wider culture of universities and colleges, reflected in admissions practices, student support and mechanisms of representation.

Contributors to the Global Forum shared inspiring examples of initiatives which are seeking to develop existing practices and challenge conventions, and in so doing demonstrate the possibility of a renewed democratic and civic mission for higher education. The following provide four examples:

- Institution-wide curriculum reform requiring all students, regardless of discipline, to undertake projects initiated by and accountable to members of the local community in order to complete their degrees.

[4] The Council of Europe's forthcoming report provided context for the Global Forum's discussions on academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Maassen et. al. forthcoming).
[5] See for example: Bergan et. al. 2021; Cantor et. al. 2013; Ehlenz 2017; Goddard et. al. 2016; Maurrasse 2019.

- Re-designing admissions processes so as to better value the capabilities of first generation students, and linked to this, reappraise the nature of the institutional academic culture so as to create a less alien and more welcoming environment for those from non-traditional backgrounds. Further to this, more generally inviting and encouraging local community members onto campus.
- Given a context in which young people may perceive their generation to be alone in facing challenges such as the climate crisis or cost-of-living pressures, encourage inter-generational learning, exemplified in a project with the espoused goal of over-coming isolation amongst seniors, but which at the same time supports student well-being and cross-generational understanding.
- Reconsideration and development of doctoral programmes and support for post-docs and early career researchers, to provide preparation and training in the civic and democratic responsibilities of higher education institutions.

There were two recurrent themes underpinning discussions concerning pedagogy. First, the crucial role of higher education in developing *critical thinking* capabilities amongst the citizens of democracies. The second concerned the demonstrated promise in many of the cases presented of various forms of *community engaged learning* [6]. Critical thinking has long been a foundational purpose of teaching in higher education. However, the growth and rapidity of the circulation of information, including truths, half-truths, conspiracies and falsehoods, elevate higher education's role as an agent of knowledge verification through education and research. Citizens need to be able to insightfully evaluate what they hear and read if democracies are to be effective. Civil discourse (including how to disagree respectfully and consider trade-offs) are critical skills for citizenship and innovation, which higher education is (or at least should be) uniquely placed to nurture.

Community engaged learning both complements critical thinking, but also represents a response to frustrations that higher education focuses on developing students' proficiency in analytical critique without also supporting the practical (and intellectual) capacities needed to effect change in 'real world' settings. It is not enough to understand the nature of a problem in the abstract; higher education needs to cultivate the capabilities of creativity (and perhaps pragmatism) which are necessary for civic engagement and a robust democratic culture. Hence, education should nurture student's ability to apply universal understandings to the particularities of specific problems, and vice versa: the capacity of practical judgement. Projects and initiatives engaging students beyond the walls of the ivory tower, especially locally, were viewed as central to re-energising higher education's democratic and civic purposes. While there are dangers that ill-considered attempts at community engagement, including linked to student learning, can reinforce narratives of elitism and detachment, this risk only emphasises the current challenge and the importance of such initiatives.

[6] See for example: Botchwey and Umemoto 2020; Boyer 1990; Bringle and Hatcher 2009; Mitchell 2008.

Neither critical thinking nor community engaged learning are especially new or novel as pedagogical aims and practices.[7] It is the scope, depth and intentionality of their implementation across higher education which was at issue and the focus of discussion. The sector is judged by its norms not by its exceptions.

To generate (independent) knowledge

Knowledge generation is central to the purpose of higher education, and complements and informs teaching. Conceptual, practical and methodological insights resulting from academic research underpin and advance societal understandings and innovations. However, higher education is by no means the only provider of knowledge. In a world of information abundance, the traction of academic knowledge has become ever more openly scrutinised, if not yet entirely displaced. The popular derogatory reference to something as being 'academic' and therefore of little practical relevance and public benefit is not new, but there is an increasing edge to the disdain for academic research. This trend has worrying implications for democratic governance, as knowledge sources proliferate, including those with dubious or malign intent. As trust in public institutions, including universities wanes, there is evidence of growing confidence in the postings of random individuals and software robots, the visibility of which are determined by hidden algorithms largely for commercial purposes. The challenge therefore is how higher education can better demonstrate the *public value* and *societal impact* of the knowledge generated, and hence reaffirm societal trust in its purpose as an independent generator and verifier of knowledge.

There was a common understanding that academic knowledge needs to be made more *accessible*, *inclusive* and *participatory*. Contributors to the Global Forum shared inspiring examples of initiatives which are seeking to challenge norms and develop academic practice. A common goal was to find ways to demonstrate the 'impact' of research beyond the academy, and in so doing support the reinvigoration of the democratic and civic mission of higher education. The following provide three representative examples:

- Revision of the criteria for the assessment of research 'excellence' to include more centrally 'impact' beyond the academy in relation to individual projects, promotion criteria as well as institutions.
- Provision of the institutional infrastructure and resources needed to support and sustain the many forms of community engaged research, such as co-design, co-creation or co-production, and also evolve conventional research practices.[8] As a result, enabling the expanded role of citizen scientists and community researchers, and empowering the non-academic community to have more traction in framing research priorities and defining questions, as well as collecting data, and crucially scrutinising the value and outcomes of research projects and programmes.

[7] See for example: Addams 1910; Dewey 1916; Freire 1970.
[8] See for example: Benson et. al. 2017; Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016; Pohl 2010. These methodological approaches also link to traditions of participatory action research (PAR), see for example: Greenwood and Levin 1998; Reardon et. al. 1993.

- Creation of (comfortable) spaces for face-to-face interaction and encounter, between and amongst academics and non-academics. In a world of increasing disconnection and contestation, opportunities for in-person listening and learning, reflection and sharing, are increasingly critical to the future of democratic governance. This model challenges the traditional academic dissemination method of talking *at* people (lecturing), to a process of mutual learning through long-term deliberation and facilitation. Examples include, supporting difficult conversations and developing collaborative projects in contexts where deep divisions have long existed between local communities or ways of understanding.

Common to many of the initiatives discussed were conscious attempts to overcome the artificial boundaries created by the organisation of knowledge into disciplinary silos. The nature of *inter-disciplinarity* is much discussed with new terminology emerging such as cross-, trans- or multi-disciplinarity, but at its core the challenge is to overcome the way knowledge is compartmentalised so that it fails intellectually and practically to address the challenges facing society. Depth of knowledge remains crucial, but it needs to be complemented by the search for mechanisms which support synthesis across disciplinary boundaries if the re-imagination of higher education's public value is to be advanced.

Contributors to the Global Forum demonstrated the possibilities for a renewed and revitalised mission and purpose for higher education. However, if such an agenda is to be advanced, critical aspects of the prevailing higher education culture will have to be addressed.

Purpose meets culture: resistance and change

The priority of increased societal engagement whether in relation to education or the knowledge generated by universities may seem to be premised on a benign view of the wider context in which higher education is located. This is certainly not the case and was the source of much discussion during the Global Forum. Universities and colleges are part of complex webs of inter-relationships, which require judgements to be made as to when external forces, such as governments, donors and other partners, need to be embraced and when they have to be challenged or repelled. This reinforces why clarification of the over-riding public purpose of higher education is ever more critical. How far are the current demands of certain politicians, for instance, detracting from higher education's mandate? How far should these demands be resisted rather than accommodated, and equally, is there the kernel of something which needs to be heard and change enacted, no matter how discomforting? The shared view of the contributors to the Global Forum was that all of the above applies. Higher education needs both to resist and change, collectively and institutionally, in order to remain true to and strengthen its civic and democratic mission.

There are many intersecting aspects to the institutional culture of higher education, influencing the sector's capacity to resist and change. Inertia, based on unquestioning confidence in established academic tenets and practices, is evident, and has even (perhaps inadvertently) supported the emergence of what is commonly referred to as the 'neoliberal university'. The following highlights

three aspects of academic culture with particular implications for the democratic and civic mission of higher education raised during the Global Forum.

Arguably the central tenets of higher education are the principles of *institutional autonomy* and *academic freedom*. These principles, which currently face unprecedented challenge, are pivotal to the sector's capacity to flourish as a part of the infrastructure of a democratic society. However, autonomy and freedom, whether at the level of the institution or individual academic, do not mean 'anything goes', including in the classroom or in terms of research. There was a collective sentiment that higher education has hidden behind the concept of academic freedom without engaging the *responsibilities* that accompany such rights. The assertion of "academic freedom", without demonstrated articulation of the associated obligations and responsibilities, has served to reinforce a narrative of a privileged elite and undermine public trust. Hence, if the currently shaky, in some cases broken, relationships with citizens are to be rebuilt, the responsibilities and public value of the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom need to be evident in the outcomes of teaching and research. The engagement of higher education institutions with the communities in which they are located through a local democratic mission was recognised as a particularly powerful way to better realise this goal.

The second aspect of academic culture which frames and determines priorities are the *criteria* by which 'excellence' is judged and increasingly measured. There are two inter-locking processes, one at the scale of institutions and reinforced by various *international league tables*, and in many cases further enumerated at a national level, and a second articulated through the mechanisms of *tenure and promotion*. The translation of 'excellence' into metrics which determine institutional status and individual career success, frame academic realities regardless of rhetoric. However, the underpinning metrics are not immutable. The academic community reproduces itself through a myriad of inter-locking practices from early career mentorship and reviews of individual journal papers, through responses to national funding structures and international ranking systems controlled by commercial companies. It would be naïve to believe that at the level of individual academics and institutions promotions criteria and rankings can be simply set aside in the quest for a greater good. But change will not happen if academics and institutions fail to grapple with the distorting implications of these pervasive metrics. Responses will be needed which counter current systems of evaluation to research and learning by emphasising the inclusion of community voice and consideration of societal impact. This will require a complex choreography of actions across higher education partners.

The third aspect of academic culture which was much discussed during the Global Forum concerned the *communications* practices of higher education institutions. The traditional academic approach to the dissemination of new knowledge is through publication in international peer reviewed journals or books, and in turn translation into the curricula students are taught. This is clearly not an approach which fits with the predilections for information acquisition of a twenty-first century populous. Certainly, there is need for the academic community to communicate its work and achievements rather more effectively, but there was a shared view that the challenge was not merely one of the mechanisms by which the sector communicates, but the tone and

fundamental content of the messages being delivered. There has to be more engagement and listening, and less seeming to talk at or patronise people from on high.

Priorities for the future: change and action – a collective endeavour

There was no disguising the magnitude of the moment in the voices of the contributors to the Global Forum. Higher education needs honestly to reckon with how better to support the advancement of democracy. It cannot be presumed that the award of credentials and the generation of research papers is sufficient societal justification for the privilege of 'academic freedom'. The education of students and the generation of knowledge carry wider public responsibilities, especially in a global context where democratic values and modes of governance cannot be taken-for-granted. Despite much good work and many inspirational initiatives, perceptions of universities and colleges as disconnected elites pontificating from on high need to be owned and confronted by the sector if it is to contribute to the revitalisation of democratic practices. This becomes ever more urgent as citizens face a proliferation of sources of information, including of dubious reliability and malevolent intent.

A series of priorities emerged from discussions during the Global Forum. The overwhelming message was of the urgency of the need for change and action across the higher education sector. The importance of action, rather than statements and laudable words, was strongly emphasised. As a result, the first and over-riding priority is:

- *To identify actions reaffirming and extending higher education's tangible commitment to the advancement of democratic values*.

The presumption of the contributors to the Global Forum was that detailed refinements to existing practices would not be sufficient to meet the scale of the current challenge, rather actions leading to systemic change are required. Effective change is premised on clarity of purpose, therefore, the second priority is:

- *To clarify the purpose of higher education at this moment*.

Clarity of purpose is an important precursor to change, but such commitments need to be tied to an appreciation of the resiliency of academic cultures. It is crucial that the key cultural drivers of inertia are identified, such as the criteria for the evaluation of individuals and institutions, and how they need to evolve and change in order to support higher education's democratic and civic purpose. The third priority is:

- *To identify the key drivers of academic cultures and develop initiatives to support significant change and increase public trust.*

The interdependency of the sector globally, along with the scope and depth of the change required means that collaboration, shared learning and solidarity will be needed. All partners in higher education will need to work together, including students, early career researchers, academics, heads of department, senior administrators, government officials, politicians and donors. Student voice and agency, which has been much less prominent than it should have been, needs to be

particularly elevated.[9] The global nature of the inter-relationships in higher education requires world-wide engagement.[10] The fourth priority is:

- *To collaborate with all partners involved in higher education in the agenda for change and build solidarity globally.*

Perceptions that higher education has become disconnected from societal concerns and local communities, means the sector must do more than collaborate with itself (as priority 4). Thoughtful engagement, especially with local communities, is vital, and linked to this the creation of spaces for human interaction and innovation in democratic practices. The fifth priority is:

- *To nurture engagement between and amongst academics and non-academics.*

The final priority focuses on the immediate practical steps the partners in the Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education can take to support the change agenda and priorities identified. It was evident from the contributions to the Global Forum that many inspirational initiatives are already being taken forward. The challenge is to support such initiatives to become the norm through mechanisms such as communities of practice, webinars, virtual platforms, and working groups. The sixth priority is:

- *To identify immediate practical steps to facilitate shared learning, dissemination of innovative practice and active collaboration to renew higher education's democratic and civic mission in the context of rising populism and authoritarianism.*

Concluding comment

The current context makes the challenge (and opportunity) for higher education huge. Universities and colleges cannot be on-lookers if they are to contribute to the reinvigoration of democratic practices. This will require humility combined with a clarity of conviction as to higher education's core democratic and civic purpose. It is time for bold and audacious collective action.

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[9] This is exemplified in the Council of Europe's new initiative to develop a Student Rights Charter. This project acknowledges the importance of recognising students as active rightsholders. The Charter will codify students' rights to access, participation, expression and protection.

[10] The Global Forum included representation from Africa, North and South America and the Caribbean, Europe and Australia. The crucial importance of including representation from Asia in the future was recognised.

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Materials from the Global Forum on Higher Education 2025: Renewal of the Democratic and Civic Mission

- **Global Forum on Higher Education 2025** - official 2025 Forum webpage hosted by the Council of Europe
- **Program for Global Forum 2025** - full brochure and program agenda
- **Global Forums | The International Consortium** – post-forum materials hosted by the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy