

Renewing Education to Transform the Future



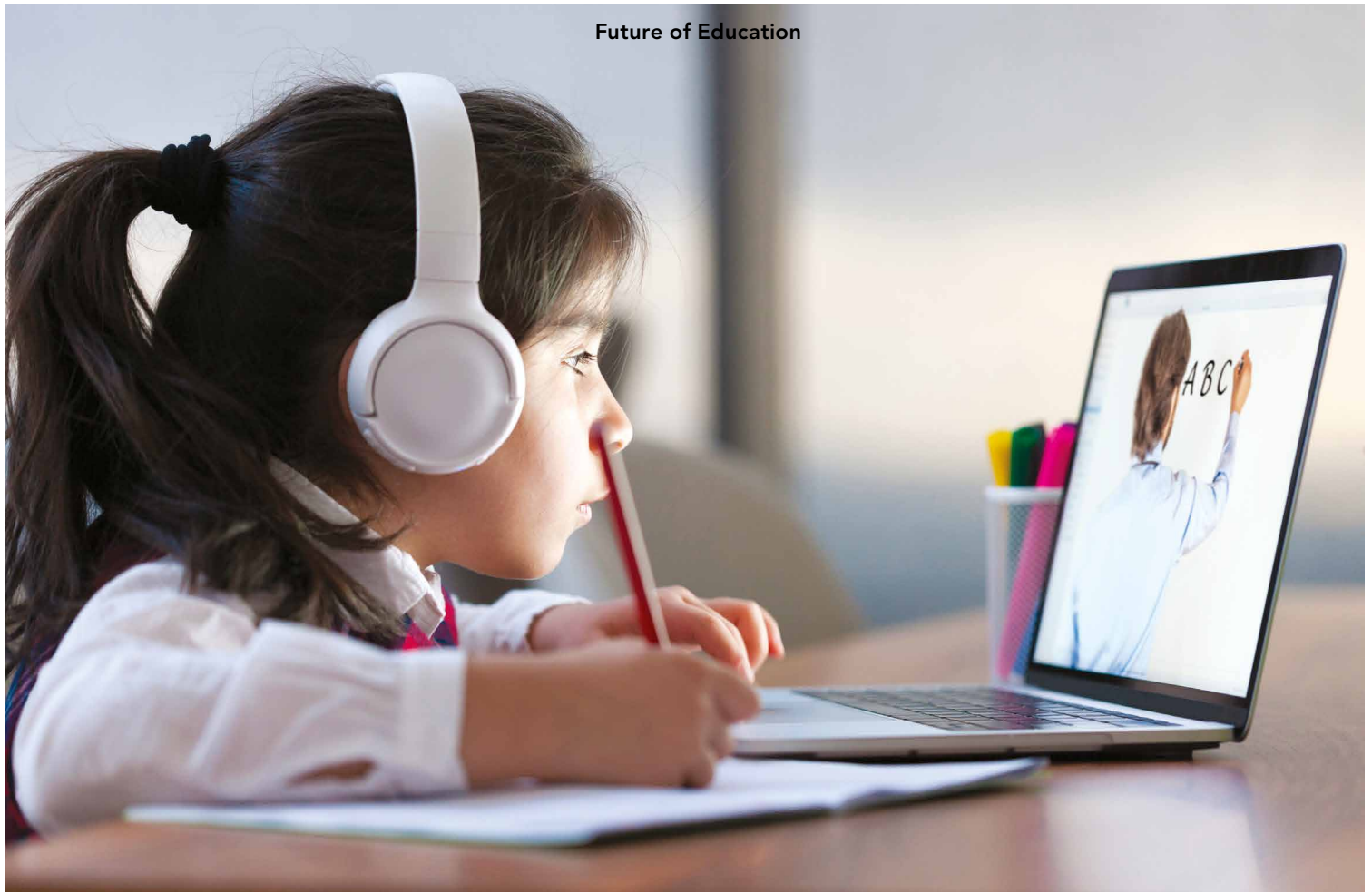
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There has recently been much reference to the transformation of education in global development discourse. This is undoubtedly related to the Transforming Education Summit (TES) convened by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General in New York in September 2022. The process around the Summit arguably represents one of the most significant mobilisations of the international education community in recent years. Bringing together heads of state and government in New York, the Summit was preceded by a pre-Summit at UNESCO in Paris attended by over 150 Ministers and Deputy Ministers of Education. The process also included the mobilisation of international expertise around five thematic tracks, the organisation of national consultations with over 130 countries submitting national statements of commitment to transform education, and the release of a vision statement by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Despite this international mobilisation, however, there has been little clarity on why we need to transform education, confounding the short-term need to address the impact of the COVID-19 educational disruption with ambitions to strengthen commitment to the globally agreed education goals and to unlock the transformational potential of teaching and learning for longer-term change.

There has also been very little discussion on what “transformation in education” actually means and how it may differ from reform. In order to provide more clarity, it is useful to go back to the UN Secretary-General’s 2021 report — Our Common Agenda — which first announced the Summit on Transforming Education, referencing the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education as a key framing document for the process.¹

The 2021 report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for education*, proposes a vision for the renewal of education. It begins by looking at the present with a long view towards 2050. Any effort to reform,



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renew, or transform education must begin with a critical re-examination of our present realities, shaped as they are, both by past trends, as well as our visions of probable and possible futures.

Examination of projections based on current development trends makes it abundantly clear that probable futures are bleak and even dystopic. Indeed, environmental destruction continues unabated with an acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss that threatens the future of life on Earth. Unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, exacerbated by demographic pressures, continue to exceed the capacity for replenishment of the natural world. Greater concentration of wealth across the world fuels growing inequalities. Regression of democratic space is undermining

hard-won gains in human rights. And while the digital transformation of our societies offers new possibilities for human development, it not only ushers in uncertainties about the future of work but also contributes to greater surveillance and the polarisation of societies. The new multipolar world continues to be a stage for violent conflict, the destruction and disruption of lives, and the displacement of millions.

We are at a critical historical juncture in global development with threatening prospects of probable futures. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that the UN Secretary-General, in his 2021 Our Common Agenda report, affirmed that: "Humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough." This framing is echoed in the Futures of Education

report, which states that "the future of humanity and the planet is at risk" and that "we are faced with an existential choice: continue on an unsustainable path or radically change course."²²

But in highlighting that "no trend is destiny", Reimagining Our Futures Together insists, not only on the possibility of shaping alternative futures, but also on the urgent necessity of doing so. It reaffirms that education is key to changing course. As the foundation for human development, knowledge and education are also the basis to transform and shape alternative possible futures. Indeed, education has great potential to help shape more just, inclusive, and sustainable futures by rebalancing our relationships with each other, with the living planet, and with technology. Despite this potential, however, the

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report argues that current educational models, approaches, and practices will not help us change course and transform the future.

The first rationale for the renewal of education is the persistence of widespread exclusion from educational opportunity despite progress made in expanding access worldwide over the past several decades. How can current education possibly transform the future when over 770 million youth and adults around the world are non-literate?³ When an estimated one in four youth are excluded from education, employment or training?⁴ How can our models of education transform the future when close to 60 per cent of youth around the world do not possess minimal proficiency levels in reading and mathematics?⁵ We cannot hope to transform the future without addressing these knowledge divides and educational exclusions. Doing so requires addressing the root causes of social exclusion. As argued in the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, today's gaps in access, participation, and outcomes are based on yesterday's exclusions and oppressions.⁶ Past injustices need to be addressed and corrected. This is the necessary condition for the renewal of educational models and approaches that can hope to shape more just and inclusive futures.

But we also know that some of our educational approaches, models, and practices also contribute to the socially, economically, and environmentally unsustainable development trends we are witnessing today. The second rationale for renewing education is based on the recognition that education has been part of the problem; sustaining models based on human exceptionalism,

individual accomplishment, selection, competition, and exclusion. Our educational models continue to be informed by a utilitarian approach with its imperative on economic growth that all too often overrides the role education can play in promoting social or environmental justice. Indeed, as has been noted, "[t]he world's most educated countries and people are the ones most accelerating climate change", and that if "being educated means living unsustainably, we need to recalibrate our notions of what education should do and what it means to be educated."⁷ The same can be argued about the role that many education systems play in perpetuating bias, discrimination, and division and in undermining social cohesion. More of the same will not do. Maintaining or strengthening political commitment to, and financing of, current education systems as a foundation for national development policies cannot take us towards breakthrough. We need a different education. In order to shape more just and sustainable futures, education itself must be transformed. We need to rethink our models, our approaches, and our practices.

What, then, does transforming education actually mean? The more than 130 national statements of commitment to transform education submitted as part of the 2022 Transforming Education Summit process represent a useful starting point. Unsurprisingly, the analysis of these statements indicates that the vast majority of countries highlight the need to renew how and what we teach and learn. Almost 95 per cent of countries have highlighted teacher training and professional development, while almost 70 per cent cite curriculum reform and the renewal of content and methods as key levers to improve the quality of

teaching and learning and transform education.⁸ Paradoxically, however, only a third of countries acknowledge the need to improve the working conditions and social status of teachers, only a quarter address the fundamental issue of teacher shortage, and only a handful reference the question of contract teachers. To what extent can we hope to transform teaching and learning practice without addressing the fundamental social, economic, and political issues that define the teaching profession?

Renewal of education must mean going beyond reform. Rather than better versions of existing systems, renewal implies education systems that are different from today.⁹ It implies fundamental changes to educational processes and opportunities. And while we know that teachers remain the most significant factor in educational quality, we also know that their role must change. There can be no renewal of education without the transformation of the teaching profession. The voice of teachers is key in shaping the future of the profession and of education. The profession must be both revalued and reimaged as a collaborative endeavour that builds new knowledge and capacity to bring about possible alternative futures. ■

1. United Nations (2021). *Our Common Agenda. Report of the Secretary-General* (p.40).

2. UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for education*. Report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education (p.7).

3. UNESCO Institute of Statistics data.

4. International Labor Organization data.

5. UIS (2017). *Fact Sheet No 46*.

6. UNESCO (2021: 20).

7. UNESCO (2021: 33).

8. UNESCO (2022). *Analysis of National Statements of Commitment on Transforming Education*.

9. International Commission on the Futures of Education (2022). *Transforming education together for just and sustainable futures*. Statement from the International Commission on the Futures of Education. June.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SIERRA LEONE

Higher education in Sierra Leone was restructured by the Universities Act of 2005, which provided for the establishment of private universities. Under this Act, the University of Sierra Leone was reconfigured to incorporate the historic Fourah Bay College, the Institute of Public Administration and Management and the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences. Since 2005, administration of the University of Sierra Leone has been overseen by a Vice-Chancellor and Principal, who are the chief academic and administrative heads of the University respectively, and a Registrar.



Fourah Bay College

The oldest college of the university was established as far back as February 1827 and is administrated by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and a Deputy Registrar. It comprises four faculties: Arts, Engineering and Architecture, Pure and Applied Sciences and Social Sciences and Law. In 2000, the College replaced the trimester with the semester system. The rearrangement of the academic year from three to two sessions also gave birth to the modular system of student assessment.

The College is located on Mount Aureol, with a picturesque view overlooking Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Its beautiful landscape and serene learning environment are etched into the beautiful green scenery and provide a panorama over much of the capital city. At a 300m elevation above sea level, and with a low carbon foot-print, the location is ideal for both learning and ecotourism.

The Institute of Public Administration and Management

Established on 5th November 1980, it has two faculties. The Faculty of Management Sciences comprises four departments – Accountancy and Finance, Business Administration, Banking and Finance and Public Administration – and the Faculty of Information Systems & Technology, which is composed of the Department of Information Systems and the Department of Technology.

The College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences

The first medical school in Sierra Leone was founded on 12th April 1988 by the Government of Sierra Leone, in collaboration with the Federal Government of Nigerian and the World Health Organization. The College is tasked with the training of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, biomedical scientists and laboratory technicians, with a view to improving the healthcare delivery system across Sierra Leone through its four faculties of Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Nursing and Pharmaceutical Sciences.



Image by miff68 - Freetown from Fourah Bay College