



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Executive Board

Two hundred and ninth session

# 209 EX/5.I.A

PARIS, 14 February 2020  
Original: English

Item 5 of the provisional agenda

## FOLLOW-UP TO DECISIONS AND RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE AT THEIR PREVIOUS SESSIONS

### PART I

### PROGRAMME ISSUES

#### SUMMARY

#### A. The Futures of Education initiative

Pursuant to 206 EX/Decision 6.III, the Director-General informs the Executive Board on the progress made in the implementation of the Futures of Education initiative and the global report to be released in 2021. The report will outline a vision and frame a number of issues related to the changing landscape of education, learning and knowledge to serve as an agenda for policy debate, policy research and action as we look to the future.

The financial arrangements are covered in paragraph 11.

Decision required: paragraph 12.



## **A. The Futures of Education initiative** (Follow-up to 206 EX/Decision 6.III)

---

### **I. Background**

1. We live in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and fragility. Recent estimates indicate that the scale of climate change and its implications are worse than what we had imagined even five years ago when adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Persistent inequality and growing social fragmentation continue to undermine social cohesion and trust in established institutions, brining many societies to a point of crisis. Advances in digital communication, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology are fundamentally transforming the way we live, work, communicate and learn. While these technological disruptions hold great promise for human welfare, they also raise serious ethical, social and political concerns. Finally, changing patterns of human mobility pose new governance challenges at a time when multilateralism, international cooperation, and global solidarity are under assault.

2. Two decades into the twenty-first century, the traditional promises of development and economic growth have produced uneven results, calling into question established development and education models. The multiple interconnected challenges in the current historical juncture of global development require an urgent re-visioning of human welfare, a rethinking of the purpose of education and the organization of learning. Yet, while much of the current debate on the future of education is centered on the need for a complete redesign of learning systems, the promises of universal quality basic education remain unfulfilled in many parts of the world. It is therefore critical to navigate plural realities as we chart a course across predicted and possible futures, towards preferred futures. Education and knowledge remain necessary sources of hope. There is an urgent need to reimagine how knowledge, learning and education can contribute to the common good of humanity and a sustainable future for our planet.

3. This is precisely the aim of the Futures of Education initiative that is catalyzing a global debate to rethink knowledge, education and learning for the future. Considering knowledge and learning to be humanity's greatest renewable resources for responding to challenges and inventing alternatives, the initiative builds upon UNESCO's long experience in providing its interdisciplinary expertise and humanistic lens in the service of forward-looking visioning of education and knowledge as global common goods. Further to 206 EX/Decision 6.III, the Director-General reports to the Executive Board on the progress made towards the implementation of the initiative and the development of the global report on the future of education.

4. The Futures of Education initiative strengthens the Organization's function as a global observatory of societal transformation and a laboratory of ideas as a key component of UNESCO's role in leading on global education. It complements the Organization's mandated role to coordinate partnerships, generate data and monitor progress on global education goals and targets. The initiative further responds to the United Nations Secretary General's recent call for UNESCO "to take on its leadership role in the debate on the future of education", and is aligned with the forward-looking global conversation "to reimagine our future together" launched in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.

### **II. Approach and governance structures**

5. The initiative comprises two interconnected tracks. The first is an independent International Commission of thought-leaders from the worlds of politics, academia, the arts, science, business, and education. Established by the Director-General and working under the leadership of the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Her Excellency President Sahle-Work Zewde, the International Commission is mandated to define an agenda for policy debate, research and action on the futures of education. This is being done through the development of an ambitious new global report to be released at the 41st session of the General Conference in late 2021.

6. The second track relates to the process of developing this global report whereby the Commission will carefully consider inputs received through a process of broad public online and offline dialogue and debate with multiple stakeholders at global, regional and national levels. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the debate on the futures of education at this early stage will not only enrich the process of developing the report by leveraging humanity's collective intelligence, but it will also set the ground for outreach and engagement in 2022-23 following the release by the International Commission of the conclusions of its deliberations in 2021.

7. This two-pronged strategy is further supported by an Advisory Board comprised of heads/representatives of key strategic partners in global education. The Advisory Board provides strategic guidance to UNESCO on the Futures of Education initiative, offering input on content, process and outreach. In addition to providing analytical input for the development of the report by the International Commission, Advisory Board members are also mobilizing their networks to support the broad public consultation and global engagement of multiple stakeholders in the Futures of Education initiative.

### **III. Developments on the Futures of Education initiative**

8. UNESCO launched the Futures of Education initiative during a high-level event at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 25 September 2019, which was also web-cast at UNESCO Headquarters. The event was marked by the presence of President Rumen Radev of Bulgaria, President Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa of Portugal, and the Prime Ministers of Andorra and Norway, Xavier Espot and Erna Solberg respectively, as well as other ministers. Educators, representatives of student organizations, youth, civil society, technology, academia and business also shared their diverse perspectives on the policy challenges and opportunities for learning systems of the future.

9. During its first meeting organized at UNESCO Headquarters (Paris, 28-29 January 2020), the International Commission endorsed its mandate, agreed on the principles to guide the vision on the futures of education, identified the main lenses through which to examine a set of key issues around knowledge, learning and education, and defined the modalities of its work for 2020-2021. On 12 March 2020, the Chair of the International Commission shared the results of this first meeting and plans for the way forward with the Advisory Board who provided strategic guidance and institutional support as appropriate. The second meeting of the International Commission will be organized back to back with a meeting of the Advisory Board in September 2020 allowing for further exchange and enrichment between the two bodies.

10. The UNESCO Education Research and Foresight Team, acting as the Secretariat for the initiative, has also been mobilizing collective intelligence through diverse channels. In addition to three on-line modalities for contributing views and ideas, the Secretariat has been engaging with partner networks and platforms to leverage their visions, ideas and multiple perspectives. UNESCO has also been contributing to and benefitting from national, regional and global conferences on diverse aspects on the futures of education. Moreover, a selection of 200 think pieces received from the global network of UNESCO Chairs was presented to the International Commission for their deliberations at their first meeting in January 2020. Finally, a series of UNESCO regional youth dialogue sessions are also planned for the last quarter of 2020 to ensure that the views and priorities of diverse groups of students and youth are taken into consideration in the work of the International Commission and the preparation of the report on the Futures of Education.

11. The Futures of Education initiative largely depends on extra budgetary funding, through the generous support provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency for the UNESCO Education Research and Foresight programme. Other sources are being explored to further support the initiative and supplement the regular funding in the current programme and budget for 2020-2021 (40 C/5).

**Proposed draft decision**

12. In light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 209 EX/5.I.A,
2. Welcomes the Director-General's efforts to strengthen UNESCO's intellectual leadership in global education through the Futures of Education initiative;
3. Acknowledges the need to rethink education and the organization of learning in the current context of transformation, complexity and uncertainty;
4. Expresses its appreciation for the Director-General's efforts to ensure a broad participatory approach in leading the global debate on the future of education;
5. Invites Member States to mobilize the broad engagement of educational communities to contribute to the global conversation;
6. Urges Member States to provide extrabudgetary support to strengthen UNESCO's education research and foresight function and the sustainability of the Futures of Education initiative;
7. Requests the Director-General to report to it at its 211th session on the progress made towards the development of the global report on the future of education.