

Asunción Declaration 2023

In the city of Asunción, Paraguay, on November 22 and 23, 2023, representatives of Higher Education Networks, Associations and Councils of Rectors of Latin America and the Caribbean, convened by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC), the National University of Asunción (UNA), the Latin American and Caribbean Space for Higher Education (ENLACES) and the Association of Public Universities of Paraguay (AUPP), held the X Meeting of Higher Education Networks, Associations and Councils of Rectors of Latin America and the Caribbean, the National University of Asunción (UNA), the Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area (ENLACES) and the Association of Public Universities of Paraguay (AUPP), held the X Meeting of Higher Education Networks and Councils of Rectors of Latin America and the Caribbean and the third preparatory meeting towards CRES+5.

Considering:

1. Higher Education Institutions face important challenges derived from their desire to respond to the needs of a plurality of territories, societies and cultures, but they are also required to assume an ever-increasing demand and higher expectations of quality, equity and relevance, in a context of limited resources, all within the framework of social, political, economic, ecological and technological transitions on a global scale.
2. One of the ways in which higher education is responding to these challenges is by reviewing the mechanisms that facilitate access to digital tools and resources, particularly after the pandemic, in a horizon of innovation and permanent improvement of its main forms and contents of activity, both in training, relevance and updating of its curricula, as well as in the field of research and its social commitment.
3. Cooperation networks are an opportunity for higher education institutions to face their challenges in this area as well, creating synergies that strengthen academic, political and administrative relations.

In view of the above considerations, the participants of this X Meeting of Higher Education Networks and Councils of Rectors of Latin America and the Caribbean oriented their work around three objectives:

1. Analyze and debate the achievements and challenges of digital transformations in higher education in the region.
2. Exchange ideas and experiences of progress in digital transformation processes and in the application and use of disruptive technologies.
3. Formulate recommendations for governance and management in the face of the challenges of digital transformations in higher education, as a contribution

of the Networks and Councils of Rectors of Latin America and the Caribbean to CRES+5.

Having concluded their work, they state that:

1. Higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean have been making significant efforts to accelerate their digital transformation, intensified by the conditions imposed during the pandemic, and are committed to continue developing strategies to improve both the quality and flexibility of teaching and learning processes and, as a whole, the student experience and the work of teachers, technical, administrative and service staff.
2. The ultimate goal of digital transformation must be, beyond greater efficiency, to achieve more and better learning for all students, placing educational innovation, open and distance education programs and hybridization at the service of the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and groups, above all, contributing to reducing gaps and inequalities.
3. The digital transformation requires higher education institutions to operate in an enabling regulatory and funding environment for higher education, in order to develop an institutional strategy that favors cultural change with the development of the capacities of all stakeholders, from teachers to students, including technical, administrative and service personnel, avoiding any risk of precariousness in their working conditions. The leadership of the institutions, and their sustainability, will continue to be the critical factor in guaranteeing these conditions for success.
4. Confidence in the benefits of digital transformation cannot leave aside four major shared concerns that higher education institutions are committed to address as priorities:
 - a. The gaps that can be widened: digital transformation carries the risk of leaving many students behind, particularly the most vulnerable. Digital transformation policies that favor the most vulnerable students should therefore be promoted. And, at the same time, governments must favor with public policies that treat connectivity as a public good and a universal right, with a gender perspective to avoid new gaps and inequalities.
 - b. Privacy and data commoditization: the universal platform that underpins the digital transformation of institutions must be carried out with the utmost respect for privacy and the rejection of the blind commoditization of data as mechanisms for financing digitization.
 - c. Impacts on the environment: the commitment of higher education institutions to sustainability requires addressing the digital transformation within the framework of institutional policies that facilitate the use of renewable energies and the recycling of equipment, with a reasonable and sustainable use of resources.

- d. The risks involved in the unconscious use of artificial intelligence: higher education institutions must promote research on artificial intelligence and the training of the human skills required, including technological and ethical aspects, but they must also be at the forefront of social institutions in applications that favor quality, inclusion and equity in higher education.
5. Therefore, higher education institutions must reimagine themselves as fair, safe and ethical models of digital transformation for other institutions and social organizations, leading this process from a deep sense of social commitment and reduction of inequalities, specifically addressing the needs and contexts of indigenous peoples and the protection of their languages, cultures and ways of knowledge.
6. For their part, the governments of the region, today more than ever, are called upon to reinforce their commitment to equitable and inclusive quality higher education, through funding and quality assurance mechanisms that are respectful of university autonomy and academic freedom, as well as the specific needs of the various communities, particularly indigenous peoples, offering decent working conditions. And, in this sense, governments should establish systems for regulating transnational offers that, supported by digitalization, ignore the quality assurance requirements established at the national level with a denaturalized offer, decontextualized and insensitive to the real needs of the peoples of the region.

For all these reasons, the participants in the Meeting consider that the organizers of CRES+5 should consider the convenience of allocating a broad space for debate on this topic, absent from the thematic axes, because it will mark, as much or more than other topics, the evolution of higher education in the region in the coming years.

Finally, they wish to express their appreciation to UNESCO IESALC for convening and organizing this X Meeting and their gratitude to the National University of Asunción and its authorities for their support and invaluable welcome and shared leadership for the success of this event.

Asunción, Paraguay, November 23, 2023.