

2024 U7+ Statement on Global Access to Higher Education

Preamble

We, the Presidents of the U7+ Alliance of World Universities, an alliance of over 50 universities on five continents dedicated to taking action to address global challenges, ask to work together with G7 governments to increase access to education globally. We believe supporting the continued development of a strong higher education sector that provides equitable access to quality education needs to be done in partnership with governments with the goals of transforming individual lives, driving economic growth and global development, and ultimately providing opportunities for communities everywhere to achieve well-being and prosperity.

As the G7 convenes in Apulia in June 2024, we encourage governments to see universal access to primary and secondary education as part of a continuum that also requires increased access to higher education. Higher education institutions make a unique and invaluable contribution to society, building capacity in advanced research and innovation while cultivating critical thinking skills, enabling student mobility and fostering international understanding. In turn, higher education institutions equip the next generation of leaders needed to ensure the development of quality primary and secondary education systems.

Challenges in access to higher education vary by region. In many regions, higher education institutions face significant funding, social, and/or cultural challenges, limiting our ability to provide equitable access to all qualified students. Deep inequalities were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some universities were unable to provide access to their students due to a lack of strong digital infrastructure or access to the internet. For many students, having safe, quiet places to study is an ongoing challenge. There are opportunities to address some of these inequities through global partnerships amongst universities, and between universities and other sector actors. Universities frequently serve as bridges between peoples and nations, particularly in a rapidly changing and increasingly unstable geopolitical context. Our institutional purpose includes fostering dialogue, academic freedom and freedom of speech, and working together to solve access issues strengthens our capacity to build a more peaceful and secure world and find solutions to society's most pressing problems.

The crucial role of higher education for prosperity and development

The U7+ Alliance is committed to promoting the benefits of higher education for the communities we serve. This means providing equitable access and actively seeking to remove any barriers that qualified students may face in pursuing an education at U7+ institutions. Higher education plays a crucial role in preparing the leaders of tomorrow, opening a lifetime of opportunities for students while strengthening civil society and building the knowledge economy.

Equitable access increases diversity of experiences and perspectives in lecture halls and on our campuses. There is a wealth of evidence that diversity in higher education brings great benefits to scholarship and societies, including increased ability to solve complex problems locally and globally. These skills are even more important in the fourth industrial revolution, where higher education institutions are best placed to cultivate the innovative and creative thinking that will be required for individuals and societies to flourish.

Eliminating barriers to higher education

The U7+ Alliance acknowledges that significant barriers to accessing higher education exist and persist within our societies and institutions. We also acknowledge that inequities in access to higher education exacerbate existing inequalities in the societies we serve. To address these inequities, universities need to support talented individuals from local communities as well as from across the globe and give them opportunities to grow and thrive. To achieve this goal, careful attention must be paid to the full cycle of the student journey from admission to graduation and through the academic pipeline into all stages of academic research. Identifying the major bottlenecks to equitable access along the full cycle of a student journey is a necessary step in designing policies that are effective and tailored to the local context. U7+ Alliance members commit to continue addressing access issues within our own institutions, by assessing admission criteria, and by providing funding and services to as many students in need as possible to help them succeed.

The importance of a global perspective

Access to higher education is a global issue, relevant to all members of the U7+ Alliance. Many of our institutions are developing strategies to increase access; however, increasing access is not limited to policies within our own institutions. Global mobility is also a key factor in supporting access to higher education. U7+ Alliance members are committed to engaging globally to support talent development while mitigating brain drain. We are committed to equitable research and education partnerships, to promote the circulation of talented individuals for the mutual benefit of all partners.

International students hoping to study at our institutions often face significant barriers to access due to difficulties in obtaining the necessary visas. This is an especially pressing issue for refugees, students and scholars at risk. Many of our institutions are members of scholars-at-risk networks and regularly host students and scholars who are persecuted or impacted by conflict in their home countries. Given the continuing rise of geopolitical tensions and the dislocation of large numbers of people in recent years, our institutions increasingly serve as vital stepping stones for those fleeing persecution and violence. According to UNHCR estimates, only 5% of refugees can gain access to higher education today, and visa issues present a major hurdle in doing so. Members of the U7+ Alliance are committed to continued collaboration in helping to address this particular inequity, and we look to national and multilateral bodies for support in enabling global mobility for students and scholars alike.

Our commitments to access to education

Members of the U7+ Alliance are already implementing a number of collaborative initiatives to advance the goals identified above.

For example, University Corridors for Refugees – UNICORE 6.0 (<https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/>) – was launched in Italy by 41 universities, the UNHCR, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and other partners. It aims to provide higher education opportunities for refugees currently residing in Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Italy, aiding with visa issues and financial support.

In another example, almost 100 institutions - including many members of the U7+ – have signed on to the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations (<https://parc.bristol.ac.uk/africa-charter/>), among them the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the COIMBRA group of universities in Europe. The Charter will pioneer a radical transformation in the approach to global research collaborations between Africa and the Global North. This will increase the access African scholars have to the global knowledge project, and vice versa. While the Charter focusses on African scholarship, its principles are applicable to many countries in the Global South.

As members of U7+ Alliance, we commit to:

1. Continued pursuit of excellence and quality education in the classroom and through fostering opportunities for our students to engage with industry, governments, the not-for-profit sector, and local and global communities;
2. Working with our communities to create pathways to higher education, continually evaluating admissions processes to minimize built-in biases and disadvantages;
3. Fostering an inclusive and supportive culture on our campus where all students, faculty and staff can flourish and providing financial, social and academic supports for students from disadvantaged communities to mitigate unintentional barriers to equal access;
4. Continuing to welcome and support refugees, students and scholars at risk as part of our communities where possible, as one measure to safeguard scholarship and academic freedom globally;
5. Continuing to foster dialogue and partnerships amongst higher education institutions, including student and faculty exchanges, to ensure members of our communities are engaged in a global perspective;
6. Contributing to partnerships among Global North and Global South institutions that intentionally build capacity in low- and middle-income countries to support high-quality education and centres of innovation globally.

Requesting the G7's commitment

We respectfully request that G7 leaders work with the U7+ Alliance, and other multilateral organizations, to prioritize and advance access to education in four key areas:

1. Committing to continued focus and support for developing high-quality and inclusive education systems from primary education through to higher education within G7 nations;
2. Supporting and advocating for investment in higher education in low-income countries and creating funding that supports capacity building in higher education in low- and middle-income countries;
3. Providing adequate funding support for both domestic and international undergraduate and graduate students from marginalized communities locally and globally through government scholarships and other mechanisms;
4. Supporting and prioritizing visas for visiting scholars, students and scholars at risk and refugee students fleeing oppressive regimes, armed conflict or threats of conflict.

To learn more about the U7+ Alliance of World Universities, visit u7alliance.org