

Research and Policy Insight

The Future of International Tertiary Education to 2037

November 2022



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scenario planning is a technique used to describe possible, plausible futures. This report describes possible, plausible futures for international tertiary education, primarily focusing on the delivery, student mobility and experience elements of international tertiary education.

The British Council commissioned ‘scenario planning’ and ‘futures’ experts Trajectory Partnership to create three different visions of the landscape of international tertiary education in 2037. Weaving together the knowledge and insight of a unique global network of experts in international education, alongside connections with prospective and recently graduated international students, we identified pertinent global trends for the student experience components of international tertiary education. These trends were then rated in terms of likelihood and global impact.

This report sparks the beginning of a discussion – an important discussion to consider the direction we (those involved in international tertiary education) are taking, the likely future scenarios we will face, and how to prepare for these situations. This is not a definite prediction of the future, but picture of what we are likely to face.

We present three scenarios: a core, central scenario that is, from our current position, the most likely outcome, as well as two alternative scenarios that describe less likely but equally impactful futures. These scenarios each describe at a global level how the landscape for international tertiary education will develop over the next 15 years, as well as trends in geopolitics, demographics, economics, technology and other factors will change international tertiary education in 2037.

These scenarios reflect a global picture – we recognise that not all trends will be felt in the same way in different parts of the world, and locally certain aspects of each scenario may be amplified or diminished. Each scenario is described from the point of view of 2037, reflecting back on the ‘last 15 years’ since 2022.

We invite you to consider each scenario: do the features of these seem likely to you? As a global community, are we heading in the direction of the scenario you see as most desirable? Will your institution, your country, your region be prepared for this likely future? What steps do we need to take to ensure we are on track to a more desirable future, and better prepared for the most likely future?





1. CORE SCENARIO – ADJUSTING TO A CHANGING WORLD

The last 15 years have been characterised by a sluggish economic recovery from the Covid19 pandemic and massive digital disruption as the world has settled into a new normality.

In 2037, the total population of the world and of young adults, has grown substantially, driven by huge growth in Africa and not offset by a slight decline in Asia. The middle class population has also surged, creating hundreds of millions of new consumers. In this context, the overall population of tertiary education students is much larger, with increased competition – competition for places on some programmes, for bright students and competition for resources.

Significant shifts in the use of technology and the normalisation of online studying mean that more students are studying internationally remotely, often without any travel at all – although ‘hybrid’ international education is also growing. While digital education is helping to grow participation, it is seen as inferior to the less accessible face to face education options.

International tertiary education (ITE) is also shifting eastwards. With China now the leading world economy the increasing prestige of Asian universities has served to make the region a major hub for international education, with global university rankings including more institutions from East Asia, and a declining number from Europe and North America.



2. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO A – A MORE INSULAR WORLD

In this scenario much of the landscape laid out in the core scenario remains in place. The world’s population continues to grow (and to age), and technology brings vast disruption to society.

However, the world is more divided and insular than before the pandemic, with reduced opportunities for international collaboration and mobility in education. The recovery from the pandemic has been slow and generally painfully; inequality has worsened both within and across nations.

The social order is also facing severe challenges in many parts of the world, with democracy questioned or under threat, the funding of higher education institutions compromised and the information environment deeply unstable.



3. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO B – OPEN AND INCLUSIVE

In this scenario much of the landscape laid out in the core scenario remains in place. The world’s population continues to grow (and to age), and technology brings vast disruption to society. China emerges as the world’s greatest economic force but the global recovery from the pandemic is much swifter than anticipated.

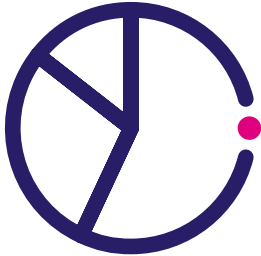
This has helped reduce inequality and expand opportunity – alongside faster-than-expected rollout of digital infrastructure more people, including those in the poorest parts of the world, now have access to tertiary education, and the potential to access tertiary education with an international component (at least online). In advanced economies, citizens are rejecting many digital services post pandemic, and prioritising face to face experiences wherever possible.

This, combined with substantial rises in participation from emerging and developing economies, is placing real pressure on education institutions, which are struggling to accommodate this demand.

A summary of some of the differences across the scenarios:

	Alternative scenario A (a more insular world)	Core scenario	Alternative B (open and inclusive)
International education environment	More challenging to create and sustain international partnerships, with system-to-system arrangements and 'Mutual recognition of qualification' agreements less plentiful than 15 years ago.	Challenges and questions exist around sustainable funding of tertiary education which have led to a more prominent role for the private sector, and for employers and industry. There is an increased importance of nationally funded scholarship schemes to provide opportunities for talented students.	Collaboration and partnership has helped to address many (but not all) of the challenges which have come with rapid technological development and increasing demand for tertiary education
Transnational education (TNE)	TNE stunted National visa policies for students and staff have become more restrictive in many countries. In addition, there are more challenges and barriers to collaborating internationally with fewer international quality assurance agreements in place.	TNE maintained – More national systems appreciate and recognise the value of TNE for local impact, mutual learning and capacity building. TNE is primarily delivered through collaborative partnerships, co-creation and co-delivery than physical presence (branch campuses). Increased mobility between campuses (for those institutions that have them)	A post-TNE environment TNE is no longer really a term in frequent use as the majority of tertiary education includes some form of international component. Wholesale recognition of TNE and online delivery of education, with clear rules regulations and guidelines in place in most countries.
Technology	Technological progress has not been as swift as some imagined, but many education programmes are delivered online (which brings challenges around security, trust and international recognition)	Advances in technology mean that a variety of options are available for institutions and students. A hybrid format of education programme (combining face-to-face and digitally delivered content) is widely adopted	Technology has advanced rapidly and some very immersive education experiences are on offer (for those with the requisite hardware, software and supportive infrastructure).
Mobility	International mobility for education has not continued to expand as many predicted with more financial and regulatory restrictions in place. What mobility does take place tends to be within region and shorter term.	A physical, face-to-face, mobility experience is the preferred format for students seeking an international element to their education. Short-term mobility experience is now the norm. Rise in intra-regional mobility	

THESE SCENARIOS WILL HAVE POWERFUL IMPLICATIONS FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION, BOTH DOMESTICALLY AND IN TERMS OF LINKING INTERNATIONALLY. THESE INCLUDE:



Fragmented experiences

New digital offerings (fully and partially online) will fragment the landscape of ITE. For many students this will not be the first choice, although it will be a more financially accessible option.



A crowded online space

With more students accessing courses online and more institutions offering such courses, digital education is set to become a very crowded space – this brings challenges not least around quality assurance, recognition, student experience and online security.



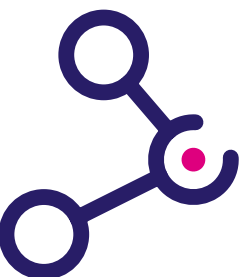
Transnational education could thrive

Mushrooming demand in some countries requires rapidly scaled up supply presenting an opportunity for international collaboration, and requiring careful quality assurance.



Inequalities need urgent action

If not addressed, inequalities – in tech access, wealth and mobility – could imperil the sustainable growth and social impact of tertiary education. Much of the future youth will be in Africa, where access to education and infrastructure is relatively very poor, and there is a real risk that marginalised communities will lose out.



Shorter international mobility experiences

Rising demand for both international experiences and shorter courses overall will compress the length of international mobility experiences, especially at undergraduate level.



Technology doesn't stop at remote

Screen based digital classroom and online modules will be most people's experience of digital education over the next decade. But virtual reality and internet-of-things technology could serve to make digital education much more immersive (for some) in the future. This has the potential to enhance the quality of online student experience but adds a new vector of inequality.



A more central role for employers

Vocational skills may be prioritised, especially qualifications that support new jobs in the digital economy. In these cases, employers themselves may offer courses as a more direct way of training their future workforce.



Lifelong learning partners

Older students may be less inclined to travel overseas but more likely to see education institutions as lifelong partners, rather than relevant only for a segment of their life.



Climate change a disruptor, but will it be a barrier to mobility?

Climate change will greatly affect how tertiary education institutions operate. The students we spoke to suggested it is unlikely to be a factor in reducing student mobility, but as student activism grows and the student voice becomes louder, will this remain the case?

The international tertiary education environment is changing and is likely to look quite different 15 years from now.

Through a process which has included the views of international students and recent graduates in addition to over 75 international education experts, across 17 countries we have created three visions of the future. It is striking to note that each future scenario presents challenges as well as opportunities. For instance, even in alternative scenario B (a future where there appears to be more opportunities for

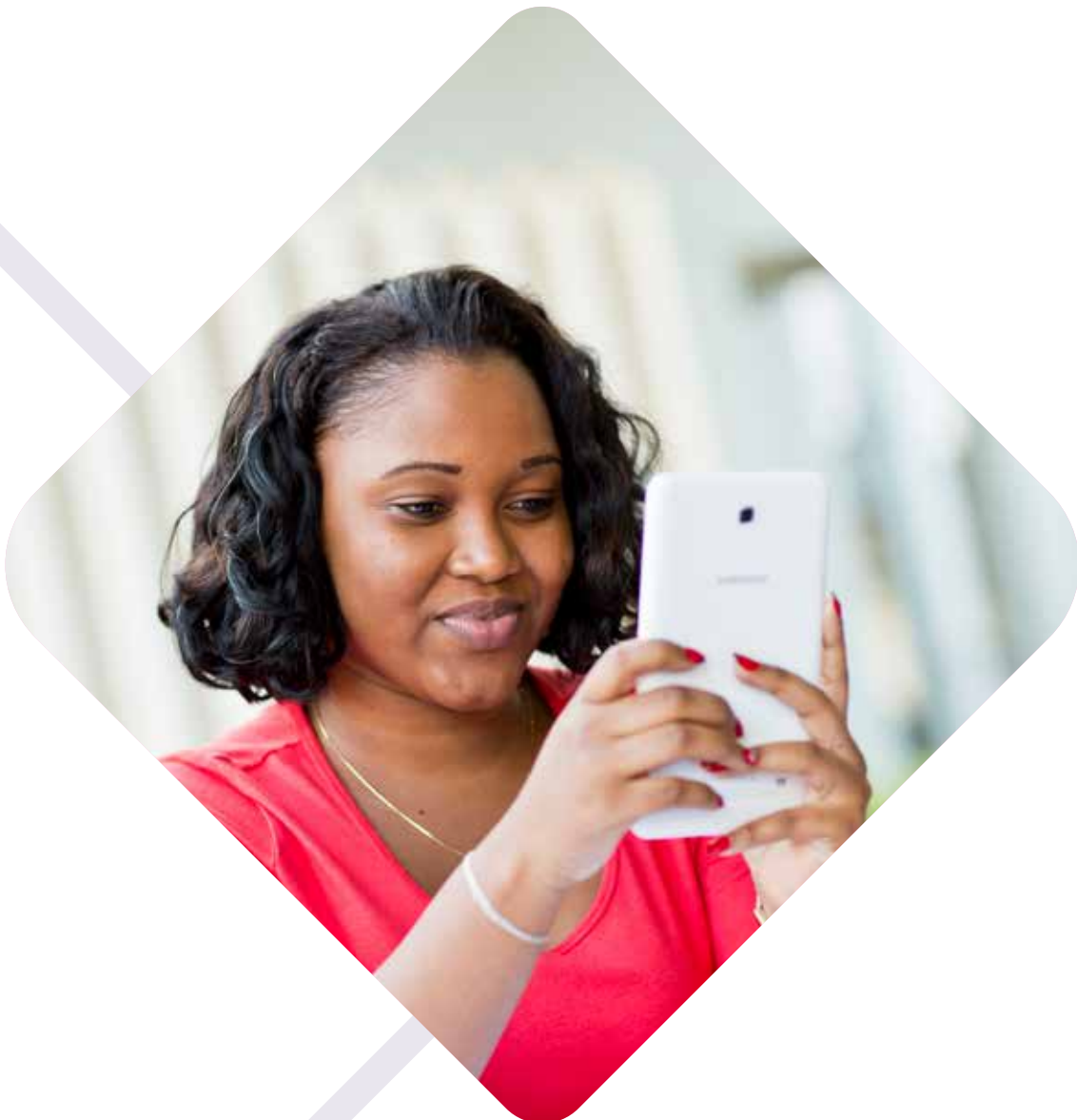
international mobility, collaboration and partnership), there are challenges which we will have to collectively plan for and address, especially around equitable access (and managing the digital divide), quality assurance, and the 'stratification' of international education experience.

By discussing these challenges openly, the international education community can work together to ensure we are on the best path for a future which provides high quality education opportunities for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The British Council carried out this study with Trajectory Partnerships. While there were large teams involved in the production of this research, there are a few people who made an invaluable contribution, in particular Tom Johnson, Paul Flatters and Patrick Brennan from Trajectory, and Michael Peak, Eugenia Asare and Izzah Meyer from the British Council.

Furthermore, the study would not have been possible without the network of experts in international tertiary education within the British Council and who work with the British Council offices globally.



CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the research

Since January 2021 the British Council has been applying Futures techniques to different areas to explore and investigate the future of Cultural Relations, the future of the English language and some initial work exploring future views of international tertiary education.

Following this initial work, the British Council decided to undertake more detail work identifying the trends driving future international tertiary education and scenarios for the landscape of international tertiary education in 2037. The term 'tertiary education' is used to refer broadly to post-compulsory education, and for this stage of the work we chose to focus on the student mobility and experience aspects of international tertiary education.

As part of this agenda, Trajectory Partnership were commissioned to create future scenarios on international tertiary education, analysing their impact at both a global and country level, having considered trends in economics, politics, technology, society, culture and other areas. This report contains those scenarios.

These scenarios were created following a programme of trends analysis, horizon scanning and scenario planning conducted by the Trajectory team in between October 2021 and March 2022.

It was important also that the study benefited from the British Council's unique global network of experts in international education, alongside connections with prospective and recently graduated international students and TNE students. Consequently, the research included interviews with experts and British Council stakeholders, qualitative research with recent and current international students, and regional roundtables with sector and policy experts around the world.

The scenarios are not predictions of what the future will look like, but possible, plausible descriptions of what the future could look like.

These scenarios are presented to start a discussion amongst the international tertiary education community globally, and to support colleagues in the community to anticipate, plan and develop strategic priorities for action today.

In addition to the global analysis, the research also included a particular focus and engagement with expert voices from the following nations:

Brazil	China	Egypt	France
Germany	India	Indonesia	Malaysia
Nigeria	Pakistan	Russia	Singapore
South Africa	Turkey	Vietnam	USA

1.2 Methodology

This project involved a six-stage methodology:

1. Immersion and stakeholder engagement
2. Broad horizon scanning/PESTLE analysis
3. Trends rating and skeleton scenario creation
4. Qualitative research with international students/graduates
5. Regional roundtables (with policy and sector experts)
6. Development of full scenarios, implications and recommendations

The project began with a brief immersion phase which included a series of interviews with 25 British Council education specialists, critically including representatives from each of the 16 countries included in the research. Interviews were also conducted with education experts outside of the British Council based in these 16 countries.

While the immersion phase was ongoing work began on the horizon scan. The scan followed a customised PESTLE approach and was designed to identify drivers that might affect the future of international tertiary education over the period to 2037. A longlist of potential drivers, along with data and information on how these might develop was compiled.

These drivers were then rated (by education specialists within and outside the British Council) based on their likelihood/certainty and impact and plotted on a trends map. From this trends map, three scenarios were identified – one 'core' scenario, which is the most likely, and two alternative scenarios, based on the trends that are impactful but less likely to happen.

These draft scenarios were then subject to detailed discussion, both internally within the British Council and more widely, with both recent and current international students¹ and during a series of nine regional roundtables held with experts from the nations included in the research². These roundtables discussed both the viability and implications of the scenarios at a global level as well as how they might vary at a national or regional level, including the applicability of individual trends.

¹ In total 99 students/graduates shared their views, and 23 took part in paired interviews or focus groups. The students/graduates had all experienced an international element to their tertiary education. For many this was a mobility experience (including, but not exclusively to the UK), and for some this was an online and/or TNE experience.

² Over 50 international education experts participated in the round table discussions. Typically between 4 and 6 participated in each (with the maximum being 8).

CHAPTER TWO: THE SCENARIOS

The following section presents three possible versions, or scenarios, of the future. Each is produced by a different set of trends and in it, the landscape for international tertiary education is distinct.

The scenarios are not equal; there is one 'core' scenario which is currently the most likely to occur, and two alternative scenarios that while less likely, are still plausible and impactful enough to be worthy of consideration.

Although distinct, the scenarios have some key features in common. Rather than repeat them in each of the following narratives, the trends are summarised here in section 2.1, followed by a detailed description of each scenario -- one core and two alternative- in sections 2.2 to 2.4.

Each scenario is described from the point of view of 2037, reflecting back on the 'last 15 years' since 2022.

We invite you to consider each scenario: do the features of these seem likely to you? As a global community, are we heading in the direction of the scenario you see as most desirable? Will your institution, your country, your region be prepared for this likely future? What steps do we need to take to ensure we are on track to a more desirable future, and better prepared for the most likely future?

2.1 Macrotrends common across all scenarios: The context for 2037

The world has continued to age. Consistent with projections from the early 21st century the world is on track to include more over 65 year olds than 18-24 year olds by 2050. But the impact of this ageing is very different around the world. Many advanced economies in Europe and elsewhere are dealing with the challenge of rising numbers of people beyond retirement age, stretching budgets in health, welfare and social care. The powerful emerging markets of the 2010s and 2020s -- especially in South East Asia and Latin America -- are also ageing, with rising numbers of people in retirement and a dwindling youth population.

In sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, the working age population has grown, helping power huge economic development.

Economic progress more widely has been mixed. The economic impact of the pandemic loomed large throughout the 2020s, suppressing GDP in major markets and leading to sustained high levels of unemployment and business failure. The sheer duration of the impact led to the 2020s becoming known as a 'lost decade', with the deepest impact on young people. Vaccine inequality meant that although the recovery was underway by 2022, the speed of recovery and the long-term impact of Covid varied massively.

Although the middle class has grown substantially in Asia, Africa and South America since 2021, many commentators speculate that were it not for Covid, the numbers in the new middle class in those regions would be much higher. Poverty and inequality also persist in these regions -- and even where there has been growth this is usually at very different scales around the world.

Also common to any future scenario is progress in technological development, especially the ongoing transformation of work and modern economies thanks to the fourth industrial revolution. With the 5G network largely rolled out across the world and major steps forward in both robotics and artificial intelligence, entire economy sectors are being reshaped. This is causing major disruption at both a macro and micro level; from the reshoring of manufacturing, to rising demand for reskilling and the growth of more insecure, temporary forms of work.

In this context, international tertiary education has also changed. There are more young people and more people (from all age groups) participating in education which has led to a rise in demand. Technology and digital, remote courses are helping to meet some of this demand, but even where available and reputable, remote is generally seen as inferior to face-to-face. The rise of Asia -- especially China -- as a hub for tertiary education is also a major disruptor common to all the scenarios. Here, the rising prestige of Asian education institutions is changing the global flow of students and driving competition for talent.

2.2 Core Scenario: Adjusting to a Changing World

The last 15 years have been characterised by a sluggish economic recovery from the Covid19 pandemic and massive digital disruption as the world has settled into a new normality.

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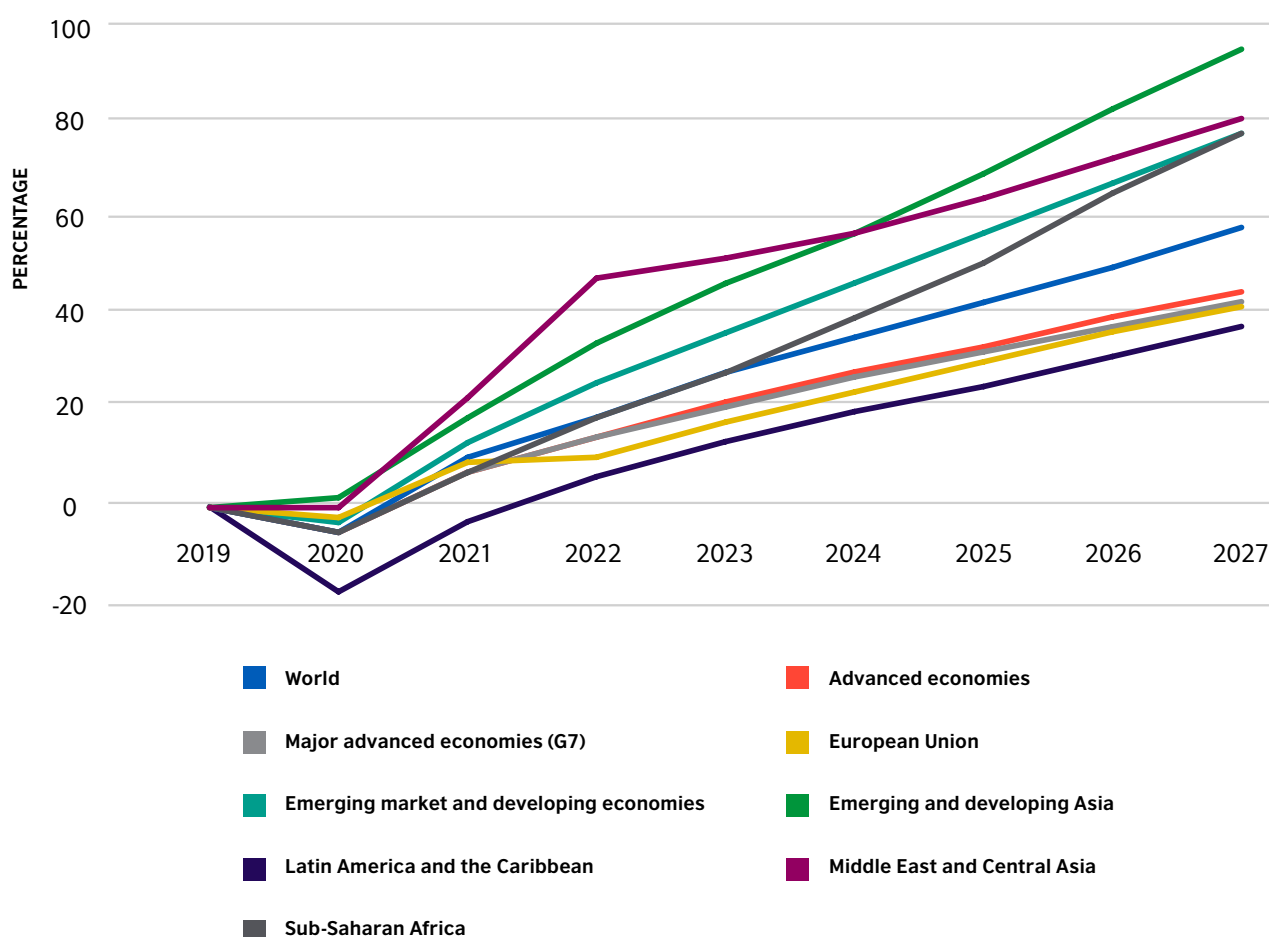
2.2.1 An unequal recovery from the pandemic

The world has taken its time to recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Although the acute health phase of the pandemic was over in the early 2020s

(fortunately, Omicron proved to be the final significant variant of concern) the economic aftershocks reverberated through the decade, causing supply chain pressure, geopolitical tensions and instability.

While overall output (measured by GDP) recovered quite quickly, the broader impacts were much more long lasting. This included substantial national debt (which affected central government spending on education) higher prices and product shortages, as well as significant challenges affecting health and education systems, which had to play catch up. Unequal vaccine rollout, in particular the very slow provision of vaccines to developing economies, meant this process was especially protracted in the poorest parts of the world.

Chart1: Economic recovery from the pandemic (GDP, 2019=0)

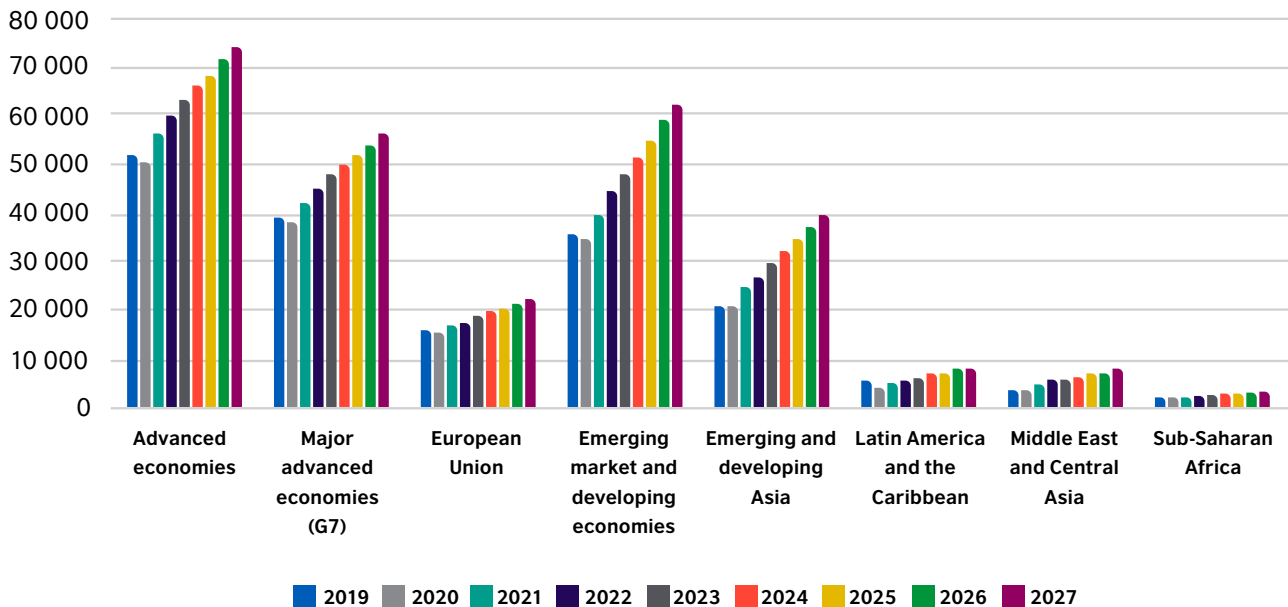


Source: IMF World Economic Outlook April 2022

By 2023, many economies were already significantly larger than they had been prior to the pandemic – but regions like Latin America and the Caribbean were only just getting back to pre-pandemic size. Even as all regions returned to strong growth the huge disparity in overall economic output meant that the gap

between the wealthiest and poorest nations grew. For example, the European Union had a combined GDP of \$22tn by 2027, while Sub Saharan Africa, had a combined GDP of just \$3.1tn at the same time – despite the total economy nearly doubling in size.

Chart 2: GDP for country groups US\$ (Billions) 2019-2027



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook April 2022

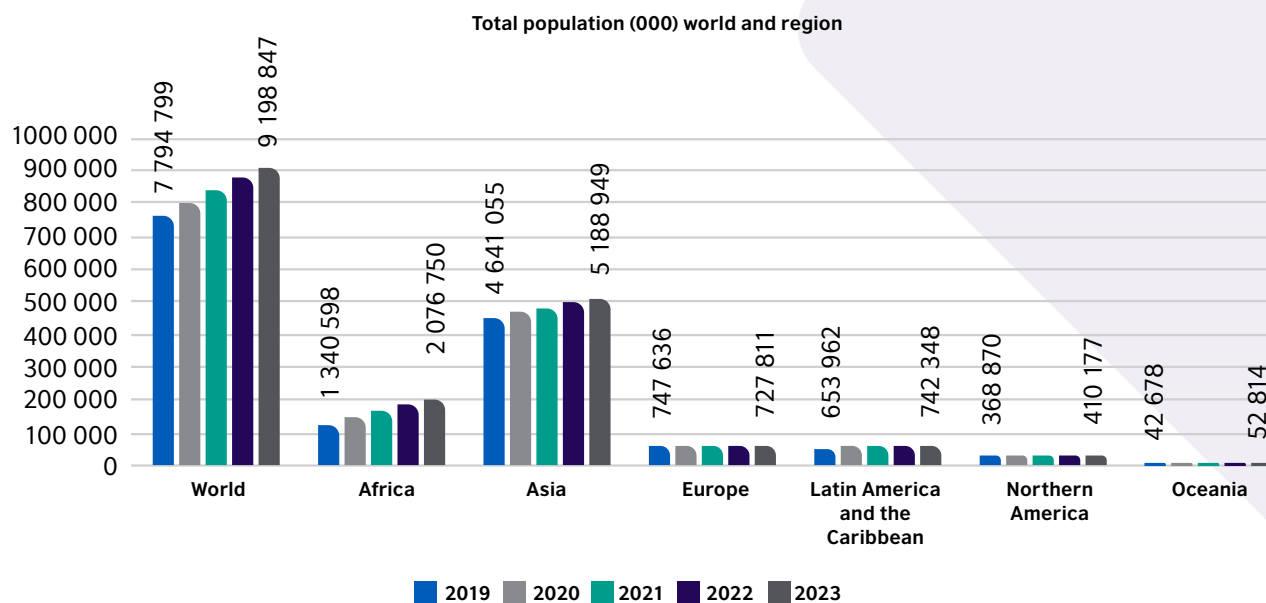
The result is that while lockdowns are a distant memory, the financial impacts are still felt, especially in growing inequality between and within wealthier and poorer nations. Throughout the 2020s, political uncertainty prevailed, particularly as a result of price shocks and geopolitical aggressions. War in Eastern Europe, coupled with supply chain disruption and inflation solidified the competing spheres of influence in the world. In the West, a US and EU led sphere, and in the East, a China led sphere. There is still great cooperation and economic integration between the spheres, but tensions in the years following the pandemic caused spikes in nationalist and populist sentiment.

By the mid-2030s, however, the world is generally calmer – albeit much changed from the decade before the pandemic. The recent memory of the difficult 2020s mean that risk and uncertainty are more prominent in the minds of institutions. Experiences

with Covid, especially the way people adapted to doing more online, has changed the way business and education operate. With online, remote options as default, more and more daily activities, from work to leisure are conducted online.

2.2.2 Uneven Demographic Change

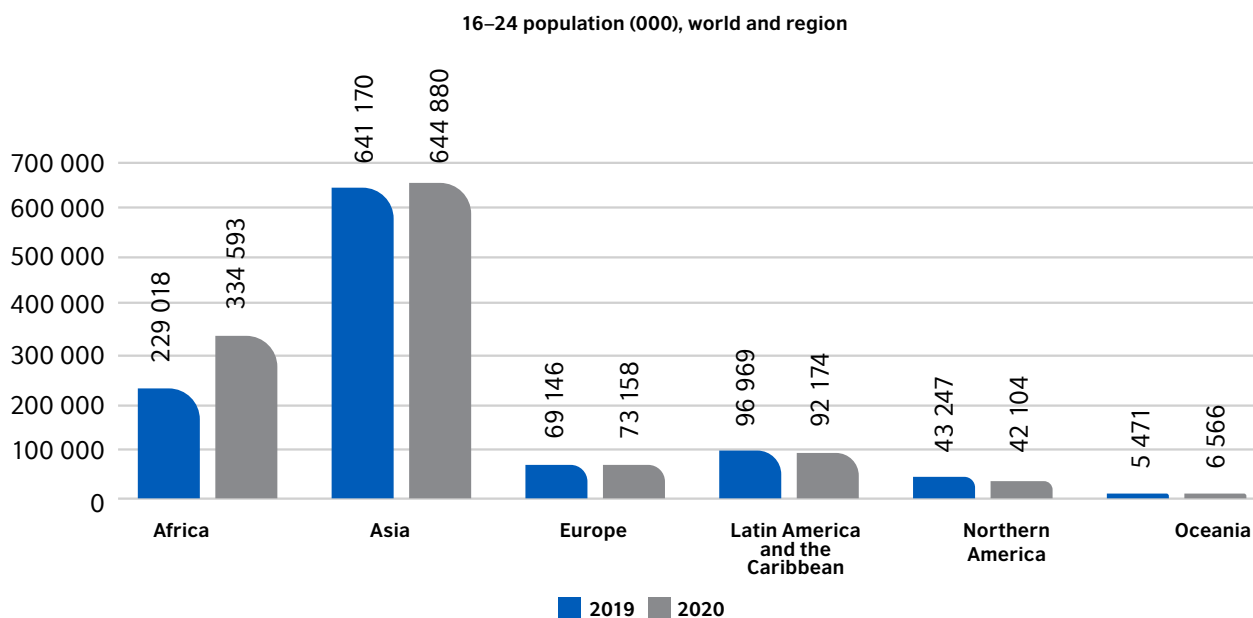
The world's population has expanded considerably in the last fifteen years. It has grown, substantially, from 7.8bn in 2020 to almost 9bn today. But not all parts of the world have grown in the same way. Asia, for example, remains the largest continent, with over 5bn people – most of them in China and India alone. But while Africa has grown dramatically – from 1.3bn in 2020 to 1.9bn today (and on course for over 2bn by 2040) – other parts of the world have seen much more modest growth, if any at all. North America and Latin America and the Caribbean have seen slight growth, while the population of Europe has actually declined.



Source: UN World Population Prospects, 2019 edition

The reason for these divergent changes is the age structure of the population. Higher birth rates in developing economies in recent decades have led to massive rises in the younger population, whereas ageing societies in Europe and North America have led to older populations that have seen less growth.

This means that while there are an extra 115m young adults in the world, almost all of these are in Africa, with the populations of North America, Europe and Asia barely changed since 2020. In some cases, there has been a fall.



Source: UN World Population Prospects, 2019 edition

This is having a huge impact on demand for tertiary education. Institutions in western economies are seeing fewer applications from domestic school leavers, but are more involved in lifelong learning amongst older generations. This is for a mixture of professional and personal development. The competitive labour market and rate of advancement in technology means many workers are keen to gain new skills to provide them with a competitive edge. At the same time, there is a growing segment of time-rich, affluent older people who want to learn for the sake of learning, and are enrolling in courses again, sometimes three or four decades after first completing formal education.

Globally, there is higher participation in tertiary education by school leavers almost everywhere, although this growth has not eradicated the stark inequality in overall access. Although an 18 year-old in Sub-Saharan Africa is much more likely to go onto tertiary education than they were 15 years ago, they are still much less likely to do so than someone of the same age in Europe.

2.2.3 Technological progress

Although some aspects of the world today – stark inequalities, an ageing West and geopolitical tensions – seem consistent with the landscape 15 years ago, life has been transformed by technology over the past two decades. This includes both technological infrastructure and individual access to devices.

The slow but steady rollout of the 5G network has resulted in massive improvements to speed and capacity of digital services. In every part of the world, connectivity is both more widespread and more powerful than 15 years ago, although the new networks are only just being completed in the poorest parts of the world. The pace of change is rapid and more affluent consumers race to acquire the very latest devices – but one implication of this is that the cost of acquisition of slightly older models falls very quickly. In turn, this means that the cost of participation in the digital economy has never been lower and access to digital services never higher, especially for young people who have grown up with this technology. In emerging and developing economies, progress was even faster (albeit from a lower base) as legacy fixed broadband networks were skipped entirely as nations went straight to high speed mobile broadband.

This combination of high connectivity and rising participation in the digital economy has seen the volume of data produced by the world's population grow dramatically. More data has allowed businesses and governments to understand consumers and citizens as individuals, rather than as members of broad segments of society, with personalisation in service delivery no longer a form of premiumisation

but rather minimum expectation, especially in advanced economies where more citizens and more services are online. This applies not just to consumer and commercial services but also public services and education too. Students expect their preferences to be taken into account and their studies – even when full time students – to work around other commitments.

However, at the same time, great inequalities also exist. The quality of mobile internet and the maturity and reliability of infrastructure varies greatly. The difference is especially stark in rural areas, especially rural areas within emerging economies (which often account for a significant proportion of the population). While some emerging economies – particularly in Asia – have 'caught up' with advanced economies in Europe and North America, many (especially in Africa) have not. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to the largest proportion of people who never use the internet.

This transformational technology is also rapidly changing the labour market, resulting in changing demand for skills and certification. As automation has progressed there are fewer jobs that require no skills – for example, Amazon and other companies have been working with fully automated retail stores and warehouses for a decade now – and therefore more demand for education as individuals look to enhance their employability.

The nature of education, especially at tertiary level, is also much changed by new technology. More of the world is online and participation in tertiary education is growing each year. In combination, these trends for greater access and greater demand means more courses are completed remotely. Often, these courses are simple and screen-based – barely different to the kind of screen based digital courses complete 15-20 years ago (although connectivity is more reliable and thanks to the 5G network, the resolution much higher). But some leading institutions are experimenting with more immersive online classrooms, using virtual reality to simulate a classroom, lecture hall or laboratory. Although not available widely, these hint at an even more technological future for education over the next 15 years.

2.2.4 New Student Experiences: a growth in TNE

The digitalisation of the classroom is one of the most significant ways in which tertiary education has changed over the past 15 years. International tertiary education is no different. Although in-person international experiences, in which the student travels and lives in another country, are still favoured, the high cost of this – especially amid heightened demand – has seen a rise in other forms of international education.

In 2022, transnational education (TNE) – where tertiary education qualifications are delivered in a country other than the country of the awarding institution –

was becoming more embedded in the domestic landscape of many countries. This trend has continued and international partnerships to deliver tertiary education are available in most countries and in many different formats and models.

With more universities reaching more students in more parts of the world – regardless of their physical footprint – many feel that the world of international education is shrinking, and that they are more culturally and internationally connected than ever before. However, for the rising number of programmes delivered entirely online, these international bonds seem weaker (even if they are more plentiful). Some institutions feel their relationships with other institutions, where international exchange is primarily or exclusively digital, can be more transactional than cultural.

But although social and cultural experiences are a key attraction of international mobility for education, they are not the only ones. Experiencing a different education system and approach is also a key motivator for students, and that ensures that demand for international experiences which don't involve international student mobility is still high. There are undoubtedly benefits to these digital and transnational relationships, although many feel that the benefits would be even greater if more people physically travelled and met.

In many cases, even 'in person' international experiences are different to how they were in 2022. Courses are generally shorter, driven by institutions managing both higher demand and students' own preferences. Correspondingly, the international component of many courses is also shorter – often just a semester, rather than a full year or longer. Many in-person international experiences also feature a digital element – some aspects of the course (often lectures, but sometimes seminars or tutorials too) take place online. This is intended to strike a balance between managing campus capacity and still giving international students the opportunity to experience another culture.

Ultimately, these changes have resulted in a much more diverse array of international education experiences. International and especially remote study has a long history but in the last 15 years it has fragmented. Where once international study meant travelling to another country and living there, today it can mean living and studying abroad, studying entirely online and everything in between. With further advances in technology and greater use of virtual reality, a variety of student offers is also emerging:

1. **In person, physical mobility, face to face tuition** – the preferred option for almost all students. This involves students travelling abroad, living and studying for a semester or more in another country, with the course taking place mostly or entirely in person.
2. **In person, Hybrid** – also rising in popularity, balancing international cultural experiences with digital education. Here, students travel abroad for their international cultural experience, but many of their studies take place online, with limited face to face teaching.
3. **Digital, Immersive** – this format doesn't involve international travel, but much of the course content takes place in virtual reality immersive classrooms with students from a variety of locations. Whilst students may miss out on the cultural experiences of living abroad, the dialogue and interactions with their peers and tutors maintains the international links and intercultural learning.
4. **International branch campus, joint and double degree through an international partnership** – these popular formats of TNE from 2022 continue to provide international education opportunities for students in 2037.
5. **Digital, Basic** – students complete all international aspects of the course online, without immersive elements.

With this fragmentation, clear differences in cost have become apparent and a hierarchy of perceptions of quality has emerged (with physical mobility experiences the most prized and most expensive to access, and non-immersive, online education lower cost and perceived by some as lower quality).

Whilst these new forms of international education delivery have meant that a greater number of students including from minority groups and marginalised communities are able to access tertiary education with an international component, challenges still remain. Non-immersive, basic online programmes are most accessible; physical mobility, hybrid, and immersive digital experiences all much less so, and often only available to the most affluent students, or those receiving scholarships (including from national programmes).



National and international quality assurance bodies have struggled to keep pace with the rapid developments and emerging models of delivery, and there remain some blindspots regarding quality assurance and recognition of some formats of education.

2.2.5 A shift East

Tertiary education is not just more digital but more global too. True to its growing geopolitical status, China has emerged as a major hub for international tertiary education, with the reputation of tertiary education institutions across Asia also growing. China's ageing population has seen it increasingly dependent on international students to support its higher education sector (there are 20m fewer 16-24 year olds in China today than there were in 2022).

China's sphere of influence includes many nations across Asia, including those where Mandarin is more widely spoken. Increasingly, students from South Asia and South East Asia travel to China for an international education experience. This is in no small part helped by the presence of many more Chinese and Asian universities in the highest tiers of the international rankings.

Although students and parents do not pay much detail to the minutiae of university ranking tables, the presence of 'in the top 50 universities globally' on marketing material is a powerful sell and has helped families change their assumptions about elite universities being largely located in the Global West. Staying regional is also a cheaper and more environmentally friendly option for students – while being a little closer to home in an uncertain world is also a motivator.

Although students from Asia are increasingly likely to be international students in China (and vice-versa) relatively few travel from West-East. A significant driver of this is geopolitical differences causing greater regionalisation. As the world has coalesced around two broad spheres of influence, students in the Global West are less likely to want to live under a different political regime.

2.2.6 Competition for students

The growing status of tertiary education in the East has caused some reaction in the West. With more reputable institutions and world leading academic centres in Asia, competition for students around the world is intense. This is less relevant for undergraduates but increasingly a part of post-graduate and academic movement.

Although the status of the most elite North American and European institutions is unchallenged by the rise of Asian universities, the middle ranking institutions are threatened – not just by the reputational damage of drifting down ranking tables but by falling demand from Asian students. Some have responded by lowering tuition fees, expanding and personalising digital options. Many institutions are also expanding their adult, postgraduate education offers, positioning themselves as lifelong educational partners to workers in ageing societies that want to both boost their employability and learn for personal betterment too.

This competition is felt by students too. Undergraduates with academic or research ambitions are keen to position themselves for postgraduate studies in the ideal location – occasionally bucking the trend and travelling between geopolitical spheres. As overall mobility and travel from country to country increases, more students – from all over the world – are attracted to the idea of a year or semester spent studying in another country, but face to face places are limited, and costly.

Funding varies by nation and institution but is essentially two tiered: more affluent students can pay for places while others compete for limited funding. Sometimes funded places come with maintenance grants but in almost every case the student themselves must fund at least part of their international experience. Face to face international education is an unattainable aspiration for many students – with growing numbers engaged internationally through online education and TNE.

Online education is also a key part of another highly competitive environment: the jobs market. Short courses and micro-credentials are increasingly seen as an addition to traditional degrees, not an alternative. Participation in such courses has accelerated as more institutions have offered additional credits for certain classes. Some students – particularly those in the fastest growing economies that have seen the most dramatic upturn in both degree attainment and labour market transformation – are already completing additional courses while studying at university, 'stacking' these accreditations on top of their main degree. These stackable qualifications are particularly prized by employers in the tech sector that favour university educated students with specific tech skills. There are concerns that this activity is further squeezing vocational education (and potentially reducing opportunities for students who do not or cannot go to university).

2.2.7 Student outlook

Given persistent inequalities and rising costs of participation, international tertiary education is not significantly more equitable than it was 15 years ago. Although many nations have succeeded in long term ambitions to increase participation in tertiary education from marginalised groups the cost barriers to international travel mean much of this increase is only in domestic tertiary education. Indeed, as the nature of transnational education has fragmented – with online options as common as face-to-face ones – arguably it is more unequal, with the cost barriers to international travel and the proliferation of cheap online courses powerfully stratifying the landscape.

This is helping change the voice of students – who are increasingly diverse and both more informed and more vocal than previous generations. On social issues, this is a more engaged student body – critical of historical injustices and keen to see rapid progress on inclusion and sustainability, as well as, in some places, the decolonisation of the curriculum. However, although institutions are engaging in these dialogues they do not feel threatened by these attitudes. Instead, the focus of institutions and students is – at least nominally – on correcting structural issues, like moving towards carbon reduction and expanding access to marginalised groups.

Institutions are having to play a more active role in supporting students studying overseas. An uncertain world – with more extreme weather, geopolitical uncertainty and health scares triggering local lockdowns – is causing more crises that institutions must respond to. Dialogue with students studying abroad is much more involved, and contingency planning is a bigger part of overseas preparations. The growth of these risks is not yet enough to dent appetite for international mobility, which remains strong.

2.3 Alternative Scenario A: A More Insular World

In this scenario much of the landscape laid out in the core scenario remains in place. The world's population continues to grow (and to age), and technology brings vast disruption to society.

However, the world is more divided and insular than before the pandemic, with reduced opportunities for international collaboration and mobility in education. The recovery from the pandemic has been slow and generally painfully; inequality has worsened both within and across nations.

The social order is also facing severe challenges in many parts of the world, with democracy questioned or under threat, the funding of higher education institutions compromised and the information environment deeply unstable.

2.3.1 A painful recovery

The last fifteen years has been an extraordinarily challenging period. The recovery from the coronavirus pandemic proved slow and painful, with supply chain pressures compounded by geopolitical conflict and unequal vaccine rollout. Subsequent spikes of Covid, particularly in nations in the developing world that did not get early access to vaccines, prolonged the pandemic in poorer nations and stymied the recovery in richer ones. Many countries turned inwards, focusing only on national priorities and reducing international cooperation and dialogue. Some supra-national organisations – especially the EU and ASEAN – have seen their influence grow, but outside of this, many countries are increasingly nationalist and isolated.

At the same time, rising prices and the unsustainable cost of essentials led to widespread social instability as hunger and poverty rose throughout the first half of the 2020s. By 2030, these pressures had eased and most countries were back in growth – although in many cases still trying to make up for the economic development they had missed over the previous decade.

There have been profound aftershocks from this fractious decade. There has been virtually no progress on global inequality – in fact, in many places, especially in Latin America, Africa and South Asia, nations are further behind advanced economies than they were before the pandemic. This inequality has new facets, too – as investment has stalled the rollout of new tech infrastructure is massively behind schedule. It had been hoped that the timely creation of high-speed mobile connectivity would allow developing nations to 'leapfrog' legacy infrastructure and gain some ground on advanced economies, but without funding this has not happened. There is still widespread digital poverty in these parts of the world, with negative impacts on job creation and labour market evolution too.

In the midst of this economic and political strife there have been challenges to the social order. More nations are experiencing anti-democracy populist movements that challenge the status and funding of higher education institutions. The information environment is also increasingly unstable: organisations defending the importance of education are drowned out by 'fake news'. Many institutions are struggling to balance high demand with falling funding, reducing the quality and accessibility of education.

2.3.2 Mobility declines

International travel never recovered to the levels seen before the pandemic. This has been driven by several related factors – anxiety about the wider world, the cost of travel and the fact that so many services have moved permanently online. Education is no exception. Although there is still some demand for international experiences, most international tertiary education takes place remotely, online, with students staying at home and accessing overseas courses digitally.

Even where a student is keen to travel and live in another country, the disparity between supply and demand is perpetuated by a lack of funding. There are very few funded places or national scholarship schemes, which means the (often capped or restricted) number of overseas slots go to more affluent students who can afford to pay and who are fortunate enough to be able to obtain the appropriate visas and student permits. Even here, in-person overseas experiences are quite different. The choice available is quite restricted, and often regional – it is very rare for students to travel to the other side of the world for an education experience. International experiences also tend to be much shorter – usually a semester or less. Institutions are also finding that they must play a much more involved role in supporting students while they are overseas, supporting them through instability or uncertainty.

This landscape has weakened international tertiary education. For some countries, economic conditions and diminishing international links have made international education largely irrelevant. More commonly, institutions are struggling with financial constraints to maintain their reputations. All but the most prestigious universities are finding it increasingly difficult to attract quality students and staff.

2.3.3 TNE stunted

Within this more insular and inward-looking environment visa policies for international students and staff have become more restrictive. There are more challenges and barriers to collaborating internationally with fewer international quality assurance agreements in place. Many of the 'Mutual recognition of qualification' agreements (MRQs) which were in existence in 2022 have not been maintained or in some cases have been removed as bilateral relationships have soured.

In this environment TNE partnership arrangements have been challenging to maintain, and although collaborative teaching arrangements do exist there are many perceptions of challenges around these arrangements (at institution level and also at student level).

2.3.4 Wholesale shift to digital

However, in an effort to navigate some of these challenges, many institutions have expanded their digital offer. It is not uncommon for tertiary education institutions today to be primarily online operations, with more students attending remotely than in person. This is true for both domestic and international tertiary education.

There have been some benefits to this. Where internet access is widespread, this has been something of an equaliser. Students who are also juggling family or work commitments are better able to complete their courses at times that suit them. Those with mobility impairments do not need to travel to a lecture hall. And almost everyone has access to a greater range of international courses – with English speakers at an advantage here, having a greater choice of options.

But at the same time, the dominance of remote within international education has raised questions around the quality of the student experience and weakening the strength of cultural ties between nations. This more fragmented world means that there is no universal qualifications framework, rather patchy and piecemeal regional ones – especially for online certifications. Many global employers continue to favour qualifications from established institutions and there is a certain level of scepticism around some online qualifications.

This is contributing to the decline of the degree as more people feel that gaining that qualification will be a poor investment of time and money and a growing number of employers are able to evaluate their certifications. Alongside changes to the value of the degree, the paucity of in-person international experiences is turning more prospective students off tertiary education entirely. With other options available, more young adults are exploring alternatives.

The prevalence of remote, digital education is also creating further inequalities. In many parts of the world, the inadequacy of telecoms infrastructure means that digital divides are strong – with digital education the default, those without access are excluded. As some institutions shift to even more immersive online teaching, using virtual reality to create immersive classrooms, those with basic internet access are excluded.

2.3.5 Value of the degree under threat

Over the past decade tertiary education institutions have faced two main challenges: reduced access to global talent and diminishing funding. These are creating a third, existential challenge: the perceived value of the degree is declining.

In advanced and emerging markets, rising costs and labour market saturation of graduates have meant that school leavers are pursuing alternative routes into the

labour market, often taking short courses to gain key skills and create employment opportunities in the digital economy. These online courses increasingly look like the traditional university experience, as so many institutions have shifted primarily online. They also offer a quicker and cheaper alternative to a three-or-four-year degree.

Employers – although initially sceptical about this trend – have started welcoming these new entrants to the labour market. The decline of traditional institutions and subjects has allowed employers more influence over course content and skills development, with several major companies partnering with online platforms to essentially launch their own courses: producing ready-made workers in the process.

In this context, the outlook for traditional tertiary education is bleak. Facing continued financial pressures it is also increasingly likely to be seen as less relevant to all but affluent young adults interested in pursuing academia or who can afford to learn for learning's sake.

2.4 Alternative Scenario B: Open and Inclusive

In this scenario much of the landscape laid out in the core scenario remains in place. The world's population continues to grow (and to age), and technology brings vast disruption to society. China emerges as the world's greatest economic force but the global recovery from the pandemic is much swifter than anticipated.

This has helped reduce inequality and expand opportunity – alongside faster-than-expected rollout of digital infrastructure more people, including those in the poorest parts of the world, now have access to tertiary education, and the potential to access tertiary education with an international component (at least online). In advanced economies, citizens are rejecting many digital services post pandemic, and prioritising face to face experiences wherever possible.

This, combined with substantial rises in participation from emerging and developing economies, is placing real pressure on education institutions, which are struggling to accommodate this demand.

2.4.1 Economic development and opportunity

Although the immediate recovery from the pandemic was hugely challenging – with the global economy struggling with the sudden resumption of activity after a two-year hibernation – by the middle of the 2020s supply chain pressures had eased and global growth surpassed expectations. This, combined with the faster than expected – and more successful – rollout of 5G

infrastructure around the world led a massive increase in both the number of online citizens and the quality of their access. This has resulted in significant job creation and economic development in the developing world, with more people lifted out of poverty in the last 15 years than in the 20 before that.

Although the US and China remain huge economic superpowers, the world below this hegemonic level has become notably more democratised. Emerging economies – particularly in the Middle East, and South-East Asia – have grown strongly, becoming large, high-income economies that are starting to rival established (if stagnant) nations in Europe.

As the major success stories of the 2020s such as Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia have arrived on the international stage – each wielding influence over their neighbours and their regions – there are more large economies capable of acting economically and strategically independently. The world has become less driven by power in global 'poles', and more by regional 'nodes' that are more evenly distributed across the globe.

The result is a world defined by partnerships based on regional proximity, trade and cultural affinity, with nations wielding as much influence in as many areas of the world as possible. As the Indo-Pacific, the Anglosphere and the Afrosphere have all grown in importance, alliances and partnerships on the basis of technology, cultural exchange and information sharing have become increasingly common.

2.4.2 A growing student body

Massive changes in the labour market and rising prosperity have meant participation in tertiary education is rising almost everywhere, faster than anticipated. Africa, home to an additional 100m young adults compared to 15 years ago, is seeing the fastest change, with more secondary education participation translating to substantially increased demand for tertiary enrolment too.

Economic growth in low income countries is not only reducing inequality between nations but also within them. With high speed connectivity near-universal and the cost of devices falling each year, access has never been greater, with much higher participation in digital services and the digital economy as a result. One key example of this is education: more prospective students are able to access courses than before, which in many countries is leading to greater participation from marginalised groups, especially those on or below the poverty line, and those in rural, previously unconnected areas.

2.4.3 Global Outlooks and Partnerships

With more of the world online and a greater array of regional and cultural alliances, a genuinely global community has emerged, with significant impacts on identity and outlook internationally. Individuals continue to think of themselves as (for example) German and European, or South African and African, but as borders have become more porous through increased international co-operation and cultural exchange, more globally engaged identities have increasingly come to supersede – and emotionally discharge – other supranational and national identities.

Educational institutions are responding to these calls for social justice and are increasingly conscious of their roles and responsibilities in supporting and delivering equitable and sustainable development for the communities they serve locally, and for their national, regional and global communities too. Many institutions have taken larger steps to develop stronger, more mutually beneficial partnerships with institutions, organisations and communities in developing economies. These initiatives involve capacity building, societal benefit, and mutual student and staff exchange, moving away from Northern-led extractive practices.

The increasing focus on opportunities stemming from digital education brought many challenges: namely for institutions to adopt new and emerging technologies, and for staff to adapt to these technologies. Many of these challenges continue to be addressed through collaboration, at local, regional and international levels for instance through co-creation and co-delivery of courses, mutual learning and professional development regarding digital and online delivery, and pooling of software and hardware resources.

2.4.4 A post-TNE era

The term “TNE” – which was used frequently in 2022 as a way to describe a ‘different’ type of tertiary education where qualifications were delivered in a country other than where the awarding institution was based – is now redundant. Almost all tertiary education programmes in most global regions involve a significant international element so it is no longer appropriate to distinguish some as ‘TNE’.

Permitted models and recognised formats of “TNE”/ international teaching partnerships do still differ from country to country, but almost all countries have laws which recognise and regulations which manage these forms of collaboration. This is even the case across many lower income countries where local sensitivities often relating to identity and (de)colonisation of the curriculum have been managed over the last decade through close collaboration and building of trust.

This ‘post TNE’ landscape has resulted in greater choice and accessibility for the students with institutions able to offer flexible and personalised education programmes.

2.4.5 Face-to-face experiences prioritised – but competitive

Despite the momentous global advances in digital infrastructure and access, people in high and middle-income countries emerged from the pandemic with some distaste for how technologically dependent they had become. Although many people in these nations continued to work in a hybrid or remote way – accepting the compromise of more time at home and less commuting – in other walks of life, including travel, socialising and leisure, and education – face-to-face was re-prioritised. Wherever there is the option – catching up with friends, joining an exercise class or studying – people choose the in-person option, happy to pay the premium to do so.

As the number of prospective global tertiary education students has risen, this demand for face-to-face teaching has caused serious capacity challenges. Even those institutions that have expanded space and invested in bigger campuses and more accommodation have struggled to meet demand. This has inevitably led to a stronger role for digital and remote teaching as an option for expanding capacity and widening access and inclusion.

These alternative options are generally seen as second best by students (compared to in-person education experiences) – but their reputation and recognition is improving in part due to the flexibility and personalisation that can be offered to students.

Many students in low or middle income countries are finding that although funded face-to-face places in high income destinations are hard to access, there are growing opportunities closer to home as institutions in their region flourish. The quality of digital and hybrid education is also growing, with several major institutions experimenting with much more immersive digital classrooms incorporating virtual reality tech.

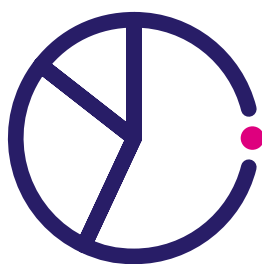
As global tech infrastructure has improved this is rapidly becoming a more realistic option for many.



CHAPTER THREE: IMPLICATIONS

The international tertiary education environment is changing and is likely to look quite different 15 years from now. Each of the scenarios created present challenges as well as opportunities.

Across all scenarios we have to consider the powerful implications which are likely to arise for tertiary education, both domestically and with regards to international collaboration and mobility. These include:



Fragmented experiences

There is no single future for international tertiary education, because the nature of the international experience will vary so widely. The experience of the Covid19 pandemic has ensured that more institutions are 'ready' to offer digital courses – but this is often not the preference for students. In person education is generally perceived to be a richer experience, and physical international student mobility for in person studies bring a host of cultural and social benefits too. But cost and demand constraints mean in the future, more international education will happen remotely and through new digital offerings (fully and partially online) .

For many students this will not be the first choice, although it will be a more financially accessible option.



A crowded online space

With more students accessing courses online and more institutions offering such courses, digital education is set to become a very crowded space – this brings challenges not least around quality assurance, recognition, student experience, institutional reputation and online security.



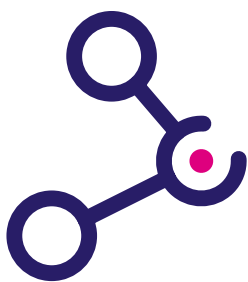
Transnational education could thrive

The core scenario could create the conditions for transnational education to thrive as mushrooming demand in some countries requires rapidly scaled up supply. Demographic trends are the key indicator for this, and nations expecting to see a young-adult boom in the next 10-15 years should plan for increased demand now, and could see TNE and international collaboration as a means to help meet this demand.



Inequalities need urgent action

If not addressed, inequalities – in tech access, wealth and mobility – could imperil the sustainable growth and social impact of tertiary education. Much of the future youth growth is coming from Africa, where access to education and infrastructure can be relatively poor, and there is a real risk that marginalised communities will lose out. Potential inequalities mean that although some institutions may make some progress with marginalised groups, there is a risk that in general participation in international tertiary education will remain the preserve of wealthier students who can fund either their studies, their living costs or the required software, hardware and access to digital infrastructure.



Shorter international mobility experiences

Rising demand for both international experiences and shorter courses overall will compress the length of international experiences, especially at undergraduate level. It will be more common for international mobility experiences to last a semester rather than a full year. At the same time, international experiences (through exchange or study abroad) are likely to become more complex and require more management by host and destination institutions, particularly as students deal with the impacts of geopolitical conflict, risk and climate change disruption.



Technology doesn't stop at remote

Screen based digital classroom and online modules will be most people's experience of digital education over the next decade. But virtual reality and internet-of-things technology could serve to make digital education much more immersive (for some) in the future. This has the potential to enhance the quality of online student experience, but also to add a new vector of inequality, as only those with high speed digital connectivity will be able to partake in these more immersive classrooms.



A more central role for employers

In some countries and sectors, vocational skills may be prioritised, especially qualifications that support new jobs in the digital economy. In these cases, employers themselves may offer courses as a more direct way of training their future workforce. There is also an opportunity for greater integration between institutions and employers encompassing an international element of a programme.



Lifelong learning partners

In many high-and-middle-income countries the population is getting older, often with a corresponding drop in the number of young adults. At the same time, demand for lifelong learning is likely to grow, partly for personal development and partly for professional reasons. These older students – more likely to be in work and with families – may be less inclined to travel overseas but more likely to see institutions as lifelong learning partners, rather than relevant only for a segment of their life.



Climate change a disruptor, but will it be a barrier to mobility?

Climate change will greatly affect how tertiary education institutions operate over the next 15 years, and in many cases will be a major disruptor. In 2022, the students we spoke to suggested it is unlikely to be a factor in reducing student mobility, and that climate change would have minimal impact on international experiences. But as climate emergencies are likely to affect or delay development in some regions, and with a rise in student activism, and the student voice gaining volume, will this remain the case?

There will also be implications relating to the language of education, and the role and future of English. This topic is explored in more depth in a related British Council study – “*The Future of English*” www.britishcouncil.org/future-of-english.

By discussing all of these challenges openly, the international education community can work together to ensure we are on the best path for a future which provides high quality education opportunities for all.