



Libraries Contributing to a New Social Contract for Education

UNESCO Futures of Education Report Brief

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In order to address the pressing challenges of today and prepare to meet the future needs of humanity, our conceptualisation of and approach to education must be radically reimagined.

This involves addressing persisting inequalities, creating collaborative learning spaces that give a central role to environmental responsibility, and empathy, and re-evaluating dominant knowledge-systems. It calls to expand the vision of the right to education to a right that persists throughout life, and to strengthen education's place as a public, common good.

This is what UNESCO refers to as a new social contract for education – defined as the “implicit agreements and principles that enable and inspire social cohesion around education, and that give rise to corresponding educational arrangements” ([UNESCO, p.142](#)).

Dimensions for this new social contract are laid out in the report, [Reimagining Our Futures Together: a new social contract for education](#), published in November 2021.

This report is the result of collective work by the International Commission on the Futures of Education, established by UNESCO in 2019. Learn more: [UNESCO Futures of Education.](#)

With the goal of achieving meaningful change by 2050, this report is intended to act as a catalyst for dialogue, research, and action towards a new social contract for education. It does not seek to replace current education systems, but instead explores the following essential questions: *What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? What needs to be creatively invented afresh?*

In addition to, and in combination with, these questions, we add our own:

What is the role of libraries, librarians, and information professionals in imagining and co-creating this new social contract?

This brief provides an overview of the Futures of Education Report. It highlights areas where the library field has an important role to play and encourages reflection on how library professionals can be involved in the creation of a new social contract for education.

Why is a new social contract for education necessary?

This report was written within the context of increasingly urgent challenges, with dire implications for the way humans interact with our environment, emphasising the need for radical re-evaluation of our current systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a harsh light on the critical importance of fostering scientific, media, and information literacy in our populations. It has highlighted the adverse effects felt by billions of children and young adults who have been unable to attend physical school.

In addition, the ever-increasing threat of climate change places the world at a precarious turning point, requiring urgent action to change course.

Beyond these immediate threats, global trends have shown the fabric of civil society and democracy to be fraying in some parts of the world, spurred on by increasing inequalities and a rise in identity-driven populism.

Digital technologies have changed the way we interact with one another and access information, but have also led to significant questions around privacy, privatisation of information, and misinformation.

Humanity is facing an increasingly complex and uncertain future. Against this backdrop, and in conjunction with the goals of Agenda 2030, there is a clear need to create systems of education that prepare humanity to face these challenges.

A new social contract for education - an "implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for shared benefit" - is needed. A new social contract for education must change our collective approach to education.

It calls for a reimagining of education systems in line with the core principles of cooperation, solidarity, and respect for humanity's place in an interconnected ecological system.

This will take all stakeholders, at all levels, working together to determine what is working in our current systems and to reimagine a future of education in which all people can take part in accessing, creating, sharing, and benefitting from knowledge.


The Dimensions of a New Social Contract

The Report examines five dimensions for change which are needed to build a new social contract for education.

Pedagogy for Solidarity and Cooperation

This dimension calls for pedagogy to be reimagined around the principles of **cooperation and solidarity**, in place of individualism and competition. Critically, pedagogy needs to be designed to foster empathy and compassion, breaking down barriers between different ways of knowing, and building the capacity for individuals to cooperate to transform the world.

Within this dimension, the importance of early childhood education is stressed, specifically the role it plays in promoting encounters with the world and setting up a lifelong love for learning. Here, a wide variety of partners that support parents in early childhood education, including day-care centres, libraries, museums, community centres, and parks, are encouraged to be well-funded and treated as **essential public services**.



The involvement of these learning spaces, especially libraries and museums, goes even further, playing a role in developing a learner's awareness of their place in the world. Here the importance of **cultural heritage** is clear. It helps learners understand what has come before - the memories, traditions and aspirations that have informed our collective histories. In order to reimagine a more sustainable and inclusive world, there is a need to learn to understand our past and one another.

"Students need to learn how others' actions affect them and how their actions affect others and, for this reason, classrooms and schools should bring students in contact with others who are different from them."
(UNESCO, p.60)

Curriculum and the Knowledge Commons

Fundamentally, human rights and democratic participation should be key building blocks in curricula that helps learners access the common knowledge of humanity - the **knowledge commons**. This should take special care to address inequalities in access to knowledge, especially relating to gender, race, and physical ability.

These curricula should be underpinned by two vital processes:

- the acquisition of knowledge as part of the common heritage of humanity
- the collective creation of new knowledge and new possible futures.


Both of these processes must consider **interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives**, allowing all students to both learn from and contribute to the knowledge commons.

This stresses the importance of promoting increased **diversity in knowledge**. This includes linguistic diversity, diverse world views, and ways of knowing that have traditionally been left out of formal education, such as indigenous knowledge.

The dimension calls for **climate education** to be prioritised in order to fundamentally reorient how the place of humans in the world is understood. Further, it stresses the importance of building literacies, including media and information literacy, to counter the spread of misinformation.

Teachers and Educators

This dimension emphasizes the values of collaboration and teamwork in the teaching profession.



It suggests that teachers work in teams with their fellow teachers, with subject specialists, literacy specialists and librarians, special needs educators, guidance counsellors, social workers, and others, to create learning environments that support both educators and learners.

It also stresses that knowledge production, reflection, and research are a part of the teaching profession. As teachers are also learners themselves, it emphasises the need to support **ongoing professional development** for educators.

Safeguarding and Transforming Schools

Collaboration is also key to this dimension, which calls for the building of collective capacity to redesign our schools and learning environments.

The report notes that schools are places where **social relationships** are formed, where dialogue and cultural exchange are facilitated. Schools can act as examples of the futures we aspire to, upholding human rights and modelling sustainability and environmental responsibility. More than anything, schools must ensure diverse groups of people are brought together to learn with, and from, one another.

As learning environments now span both physical and digital spaces – it is stressed that digital technologies must aim to support – and not replace – schools.

As the report stresses that education happens both **within and beyond** the traditional school space, it suggests that schools should work more closely with other educational spaces to create learning communities. It imagines classrooms breaking down walls with the outside world, school being open and flexible, and helping learners access a wider set of social, cultural, and environmental resources.

Achieving this requires engagement with communities and other educational spaces (like libraries). One example given is the role university libraries can have in augmenting primary and secondary education by working cooperatively across institutions.

It is worth noting that many libraries already embody these values, such as modelling sustainable behaviours for their communities.

Education across time and space

In line with the call to expand the vision of the right to education as being one that **persists throughout life**, this dimension looks at where and when education happens. It reimagines education as taking place in more times, spaces and stages of a learner's life than is currently the norm.

It calls for adult education to not only focus on 'skilling' and 'reskilling', but to fully help learners of all ages embrace the transformative possibilities that education can provide, upholding their right to lifelong learning.

As the world is rapidly changing, ensuring that people of all ages – especially those outside the formal schooling system – can access opportunities is increasingly important.

Regarding spaces where education happens, this dimension defines healthy educational ecosystems as ones that **connect natural, built, and virtual** sites of learning. In virtual spaces, UNESCO prioritises open access and open-source platforms, with strong protections for student and teacher data.

Key Points for Libraries

Library and information professionals are brokers of **access to knowledge**. The world needs libraries to take part in the creation of environments where diverse ways of knowing are accessible, explorable, and able to be applied to education at all levels, so that in turn, new knowledge can be created in an inclusive manner.

Here are key takeaways from the Futures of Education Report and its dimensions of a new social contract, as summarised above, which may be of particular interest to the library profession:

Knowledge and Information Literacy

The report stresses that **embedding literacy** of all types into a new social contract for education is critical for success. This includes traditional literacy, but also digital, scientific, textual, ecological, and mathematical literacy. Literacy helps create an understanding of how to participate in the civic process – it is required to build critical thinking skills and create independent and ethical thinkers and doers.

Literacy learning requires students to actively take part in processes of corroboration and sensible sourcing, learning to come to sensible conclusions, authenticate findings and communicate them accurately.

In this, library and information professionals are critical players in the educational framework. They can help students of all ages build these literacies through the **discovery and navigation of knowledge**, and the ways information is accessed, assessed, and shared.

Interconnected Human Rights

Throughout this report, it is stressed that the right to education is critical for the realisation of all other **social, economic, and cultural rights**. Importantly, it stresses the link between the rights to education, culture, science, and information.

“Freedom of opinion and expression can only be properly maintained when people have the ability to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.” (UNESCO, p. 114)

The right to participate in cultural life is supported by education, as access to cultural resources helps shape identities and expand worldviews. Education can, in turn, enable the ability to create and expand on cultural resources.


This is closely linked to the importance of ensuring diverse knowledge systems are embedded in the knowledge commons. Ecologies of knowledge must reflect the many different ways in which different populations, cultures, and traditions read and understand the world.

Libraries stand at the intersection of access to education and access to culture. Libraries help ensure that information relating to diverse knowledge systems is accessible and can be meaningfully applied to enrich education experiences.

Collaboration for new learning environments

Perhaps no theme is more present in the Futures of Education report than that of **collaboration**. The need to co-create learning spaces and learning communities is stressed throughout the report.

Librarians are called on to collaborate with teachers and community members to contribute to the creation of these spaces.



Librarians have important input to provide. This is especially true when viewed in parallel with the Report's strong focus on collective learning. **Libraries already are collaborative learning spaces.** While traditional schooling systems often emphasise individual success, the report urges future education systems to value **collective fulfilment, co-creation, and experience.**

Further, learning in libraries already is largely free from the pressure of assessment associated with measuring individual success. Instead, they are spaces of discovery, exchange, and exploration.

It is worth highlighting the following passage from the report:

*We can imagine these new school environments as a **large library** where some students study alone, connected to the internet or not, and others present their work to classmates and teachers. Others are outside the library in contact with people and worlds outside the school, possibly in far-flung places.*

The library supports an immense diversity of situations and space times. It is a new environment quite different from the usual structure of the school and the classroom. This library can be taken both as a metaphor and literally. It reminds us that school times and spaces need to serve as portals connecting learners with the knowledge commons. (UNESCO p. 95)

Calls to Action

The report stresses that its function is to spark a dialogue – to present a proposal for a future of education and call on all stakeholders at all levels to explore pathways towards achieving this vision.

Coming out of this report, the International Commission on the Futures of Education proposes the following two calls to action:

Call for a New Research Agenda for Education

The proposals made in this report can form the basis of a robust research agenda that can help guide implementation of future education systems.

This research must centre **the right to education for all throughout life**, while taking possible future disruptions and their implementations into consideration.



Researchers must gather data and evidence that is inclusive of **diverse sources and knowledge systems**. To achieve this, research must be carried out with a diverse stakeholder group, gathering insights from different perspectives and ways of knowing.

Libraries can be critical infrastructure for this research to take place. Beyond access to print and digital resources, libraries can be platforms for inviting input from diverse stakeholders. Libraries also play an important role in preserving this research information and outputs, allowing it to be accessible in future processes of reimagining education systems.

When discussing the decolonisation of information, librarianship – including indigenous librarianship – plays a key role in the way diverse knowledge is preserved, categorised, discoverable, and applied.

In support of this action point, libraries must also be active in studying and researching their own practices and impacts.

Call for Renewed Solidarity and Cooperation

The report stresses that the goal of creating a new social contract cannot be accomplished without **solidarity and collaboration** at all levels. This requires action within classrooms and learning spaces as well as creation of national, regional, and global commitments and policy frameworks.

There is an important role for all stakeholders to engage at the national, regional, and international levels to cooperate on initiatives that reduce inequalities and reinforce new educational commitments.

Within this is also a call to create a shared pool of international evidence and data around education, which includes enabling cross-border research.

Access to formal education and learning will need to be complemented by **equitable access to knowledge and information**: everyone, everywhere, will need digital access. Just as the health of any is connected to the health of all, our future survival depends on meeting the educational needs of every child, youth, and adult worldwide, so that they can participate conscientiously and actively in shaping and managing our common futures.

Libraries will be an essential piece of the social fabric in support of education as a public and common good. Civil society organisations representing libraries at the national, regional, and international levels should be considered key stakeholders in creating new education standards and practices.

In our advocacy, we must work to **promote development policies** that support education holistically, including educational infrastructure that includes libraries.

Looking Ahead

At its core, this Report calls for and aims to facilitate broad social dialogue, imagining the futures we want and conceptualising how education can help build them.

Education has many stakeholders – students, teachers, families, education administrators and decisionmakers at all levels of government. Education also concerns the public sector and civil society – especially where it intersects with social issues, inclusion, and justice.

This report is a starting point for this dialogue involving these stakeholders. It is an invitation to think and act together to co-construct a new future of education.

Library and information professionals can and must take part in these dialogues.

What Can Be Improved?

Although libraries are named as participants in cooperative learning environments, the report could have included a more robust focus on the role of non-formal education providers in designing the future of education. The knowledge and experience held by library professionals as educators and brokers of knowledge, as well as the **potential of libraries to contribute to the co-creation of inclusive learning spaces**, could be further explored.

The call to **expand the scope of right to education to include all stages of life** is reiterated throughout the report. However, this call could be strengthened by exploring where and how lifelong learning can occur.

Libraries already are champions of lifelong learning, which goes beyond skill-based adult and vocational education.



Meaningful inclusion of libraries will be both effective and necessary for expanding the vision of the right to education and strengthening education's place as a public, common good.

What Can You Do Now?

A good first step is recalling the three core questions that UNESCO proposes, as well as the additional question we proposed:

What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? What needs to be creatively invented afresh? What is the role of libraries, librarians, and information professionals in imagining and co-creating this new social contract?

Library professionals have insight into current bright points in education, as well as a wealth of ideas on what can be improved and reimaged. This can be the beginning of a **dialogue** that builds off the report, while adding a new dimension to the conversation.

Library Associations are encouraged to reach out to their [UNESCO National Commissions](#) and use this report to spark a conversation and explore follow-up actions.

Please reach out to IFLA with questions and ideas: claire.mcguire@ifla.org

More Information:

Access the full [Futures of Education Report here](#).

Access the [Executive Summary here](#).

Watch: [UNESCO Explains the Futures of Education Report \[YouTube\]](#)