

Trust, Quality and Relevance

Towards a New Social Contract for Higher Education

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Higher Education Section

UNESCO

Trust, Quality and Relevance



Source: Katsushika Hokusai

- 1. Key challenges**
- 2. Guiding principles**
- 3. Lines of transformation**
- 4. Discussion: Co-constructing a new social contract for higher education**

Hokusai's woodblock prints – Quality as a localized process

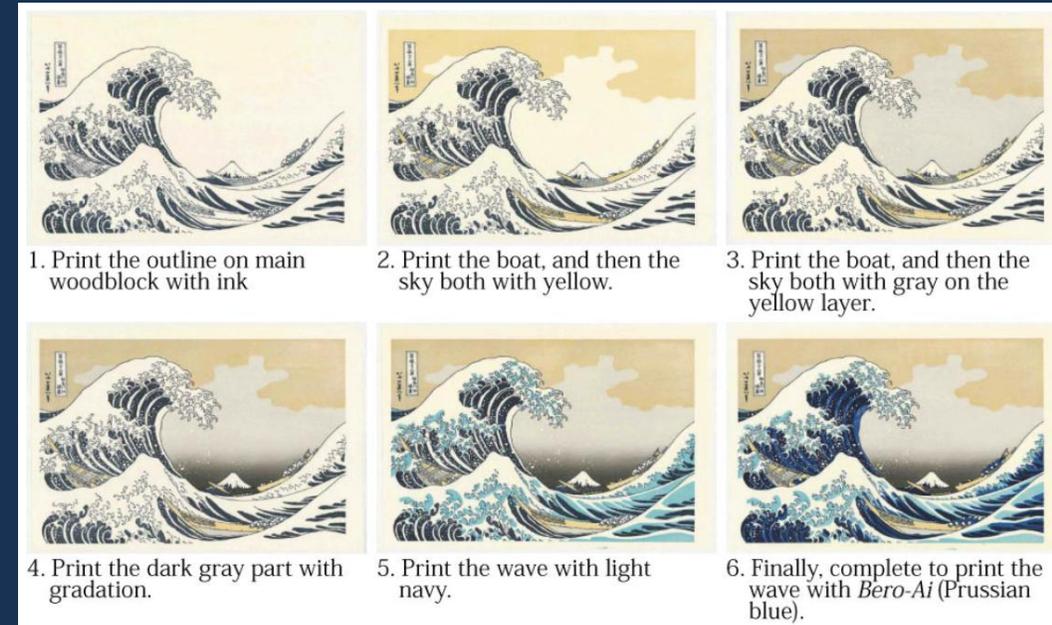


Source: Katsushika Hokusai



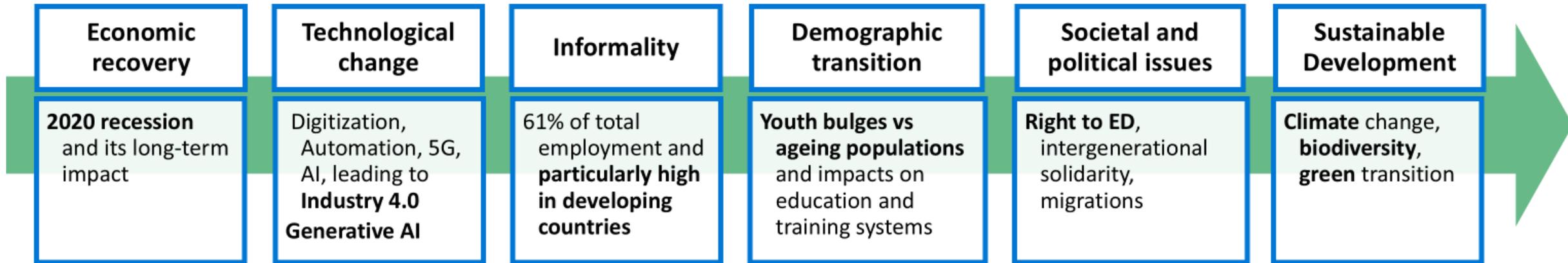
Since one woodblock will be needed for each color, Horishi (carvers) might carve **5 to 20 woodblocks**.

After carving all the woodblocks, these are entrusted to the printer for the next process.



Source: [Takahashi Kobo](#)

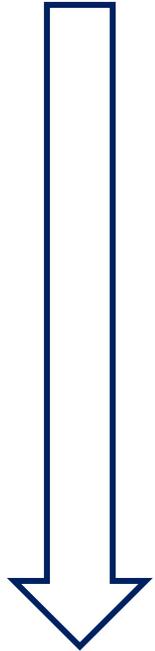
Key challenges worldwide



Shared challenges – ending poverty

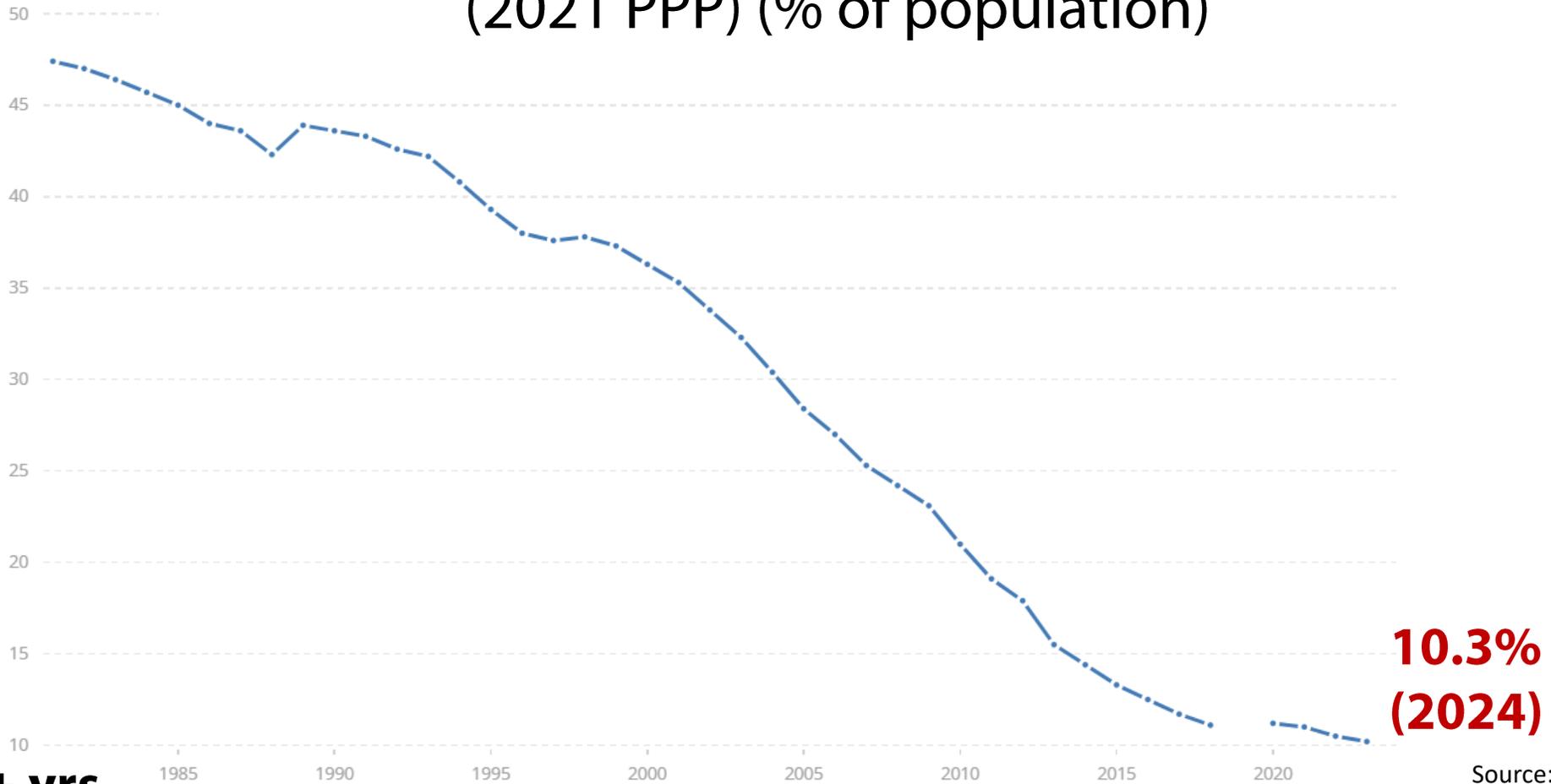
Worldwide poverty headcount ratio at \$3.00 a day (2021 PPP) (% of population)

47.1%
(1981)



78%

decrease in 40+ yrs

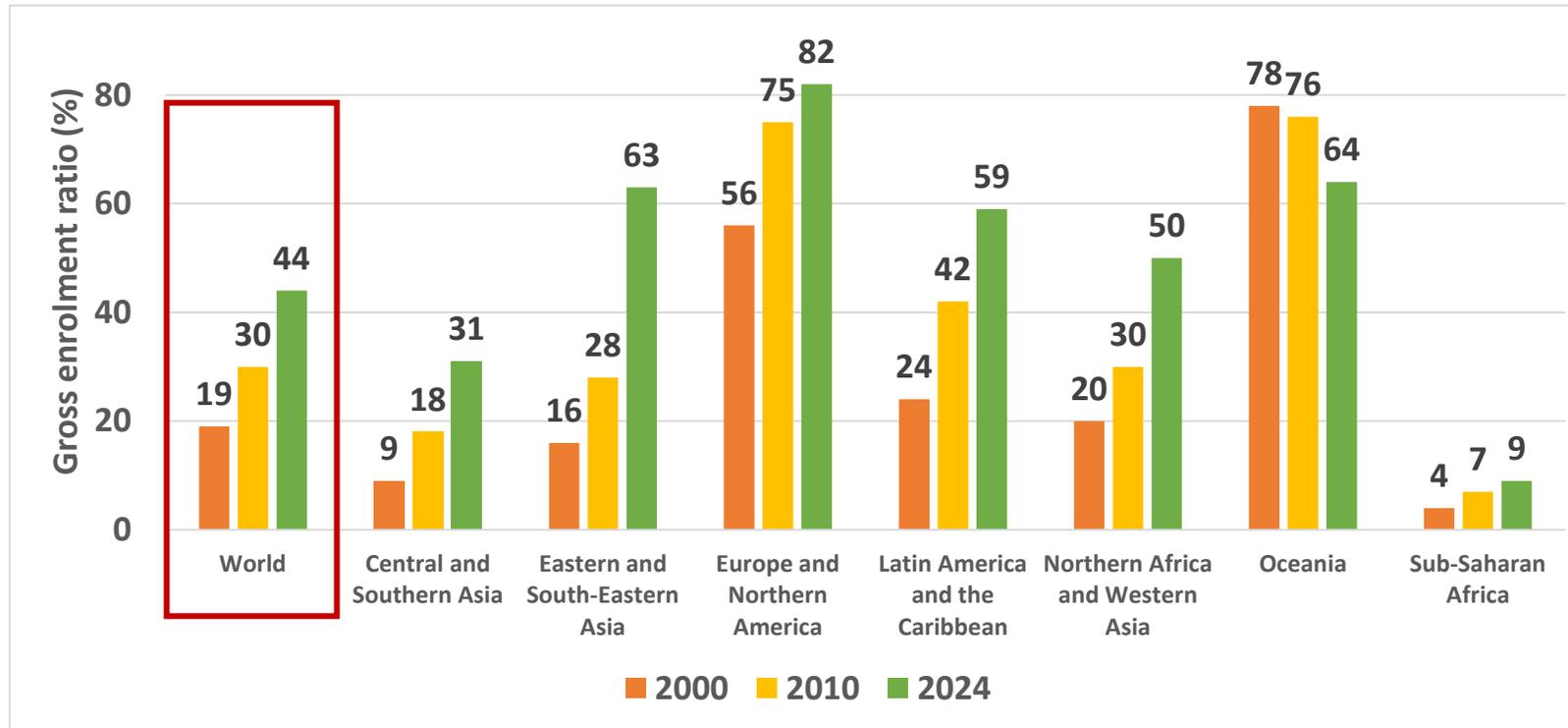


10.3%
(2024)

Source: [World Bank](#)

Shared challenges – rapid expansion and number of providers

Gross enrolment ratio (%), by region, 2000-2024



19% to 44%

The average world's gross enrolment ratio for higher education more than **doubled**, increasing from 19% in 2000 to 44% in 2024.

82% vs 9%

The global enrolment average masks **large disparities** in access to higher education, with the highest world region at 83% and the lowest at just 9%.

Gross enrolment ratio (GER) for tertiary education, ISCED levels 5 to 8:
Total enrolment in tertiary education regardless of age expressed as a percentage of the population in the 5-year age group immediately following upper secondary education.

Key challenges – *How will quality assurance respond?*

- **Persistent inequities** in access to quality education
- Increasing **fragmentation** in lifelong learning
- Rise of **fraudulent** credentials, qualifications and providers
- Fundamental challenges facing **international cooperation**
- Promoting **ethical and learner-centred use of AI**
- Calls to demonstrate **local value and relevance**



Guiding principles

And wherever they arrive, migrants remind us that **societies have always been built upon encounters, the flow of ideas, the sharing of knowledge.**

Mr Khaled El-Enany
Director-General of UNESCO
18 December 2025

UNESCO for the people

Led by Member States, there are three key bodies - General Conference, Secretariat and Executive Board.

Khaled El-Enany Ezz was nominated by UNESCO's Executive Board for the post of **Director-General**.



Source: AP (7 Oct 2025)

A unique mandate in higher education



Higher education has evolved over time and with the times. Today, we recognize it as a key part of the right to quality education throughout life...

Two important opportunities for engagement

Revising the UNESCO Recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel (1997)

Developing a Guidance Note on Quality Assurance, including in instances of cross-border education (Global Convention on Higher Education)

Inclusive conversations on SDG4

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



and the post-2030 Agenda

A dynamic Roadmap - Transforming Higher Education

Guiding principles: *How does quality assurance contribute?*

The report draws on inclusive consultations from the **World Higher Education Conference** and over 250 sessions, 1,500 inputs, and 250 knowledge products.

1. Committing resources to equity and pluralism
2. Promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally
3. Fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity
4. Establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies and AI
5. Embracing an ethic of collaboration and solidarity
6. Centring sustainability, stewardship, and regeneration
7. **Supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence, and relevance**

Source: UNESCO, forthcoming

Lines of transformation



A new Roadmap - Transforming Higher Education

Lines of transformation

Working towards....

- a) an openness and inclusion paradigm
- b) flexible and harmonized integration**
- c) a life-long learning orientation
- d) dynamic engagement with labour markets and entrepreneurial opportunity
- e) holistic study and inquiry
- f) active, problem-, and project-based learning
- g) closer engagement and connection with future needs and aspirations

The report draws on the **World Higher Education Conference** and over 250 sessions, 1,500 inputs, and 250 knowledge products

The Global Convention on Higher Education



**Improving lives and societies
through** equitable access to
quality higher education
&
fair recognition of qualifications



The Global Convention on Higher Education

- **The first global UN treaty on higher education** entered into force in March 2023
- Establishes universal principles for the recognition of qualifications – **fair, transparent, timely and non-discriminatory policies and practices**



The Global Convention on Higher Education

40 State Parties and Growing



2.2 million (30%)

of the world's 7.3 million mobile students are hosted by the States Parties



20+ Member States

Are reported to be well-advanced with ratification procedures, including countries in all UNESCO regions



Regional conventions

36 out of 40 countries that ratified the Global Convention are States Parties to one or more **regional conventions**

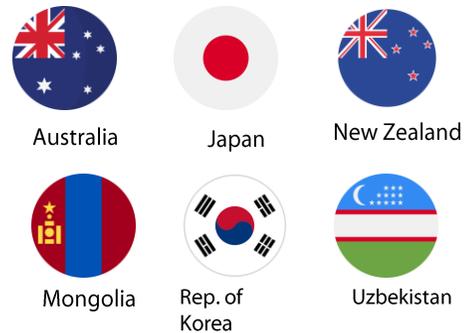
Africa



Arab States



Asia and the Pacific



Latin America and the Caribbean



Europe



*Imminent

Global and regional frameworks for recognition



An ecosystem of international legal instruments promoting qualifications recognition.

The Global Convention on Higher Education

Quality assurance: An ongoing process by which the quality of a higher-education system, institution, or programme is assessed by the competent authority/authorities to assure stakeholders that acceptable educational standards are continuously being maintained and enhanced

Source: Global Convention on Higher Education

Facilitating fair and transparent recognition of skills and qualifications

Prioritizes efforts to eradicate **fraudulent practices**

Encourages use of **technology** for easy access to **information**

Includes **recognition of prior learning** (in addition to partial studies)

Calls for assessing qualifications **with the same procedures** regardless of...

***The Global Convention:
Policy that we can all use...***

learning modes
(e.g. face-to-face, online) provided quality assurance is comparable

how many countries are involved
(e.g. transnational education)

Benefits of the Global Convention on Higher Education



Learners

- Facilitates access to higher education internationally
- Supports entry into the labour markets
- Helps refugees and displaced persons access opportunities



Institutions

- Enhances education quality and builds trust in institutions
- Foster international cooperation in education, research and innovation
- Diversifies mobile student, faculty, and researcher populations



States Parties

- Fosters inbound, outbound and circular/return mobility
- Strengthens international cooperation on recognition practices
- Enables participation in global policy dialogue on emerging issues

Recent developments



Second Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties took place

24-25 June 2025 and included:

- Adoption of operational guidelines
- Special panel discussion on micro-credentials

The interim **work programme** (2025-2027) envisions:

- Guidance on the relationship between the Global Convention on Higher Education and regional conventions
- **Guidance on quality assurance**, including in instances of cross-border education
- Guidance on qualifications recognition for refugees and displaced persons

Guidance on quality assurance, including for cross-border education

These guidelines aim to address:

- 1) the evolving higher education and cross-border education landscape, e.g. transnational education
- 2) Recommendations on quality assurance for relevant stakeholders

Thematic areas for discussion on the status of higher education teaching personnel (1997 Recommendation)



Institutional Autonomy – safeguarding independent decision-making on academic affairs, finances, and administration amid pressures from governments, donors, students, and industry.



Academic Freedom – protecting independence in teaching, research, and expression, including safeguards against interference and reprisals.



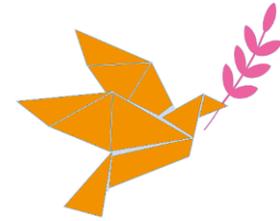
Employment Conditions – addressing precarity from fixed-term/part-time contracts, career progression risks, workload, and professional development.



Digital Transformation & AI – clarifying roles and responsibilities as technology reshapes teaching, assessment, and autonomy.

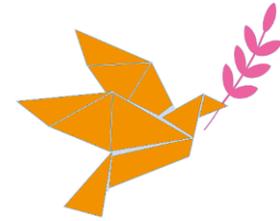


Education in Emergencies - safeguarding higher education personnel in conflict and crisis contexts, ensuring continuity, safety, and professional support.



**Discussion:
Co-constructing a new social contract
for higher education**

Think - Pair - Share:



Choose 1 guiding principle and 1 line of transformation

How can QA systems enable this work?

Example: Address challenges to recognize diverse forms of knowledge – for life-wide and lifelong learning

“The comparability, recognition and quality assurance of qualifications has become a growing area of concern, **in particular in countries where administrative systems are weak.**”

- *Education 2030: Framework for Action*
UNESCO, 2015

*Our “capabilities gap” to recognize
diverse forms of learning*

Formal



**Non-formal and
informal learning**

Take a policy-driven approach to recognize micro-credentials



Managing micro-credentials and QA challenges for “Credentials as You Go”



The UNESCO recognition conventions support a policy-driven approach to micro-credentials



Source: UNESCO-ICHEI, March 2024.

[Special edition on micro-credentials.](#)

Global Digital Collaboration Conference 2025



A Historic Gathering in Geneva

On July 1 and 2, 2025, representatives from 46 leading organizations came together to advance digital trust infrastructure for the benefit of all humanity.

Strengthen
collaboration
on credentials
and wallets

Take part in the
Global Digital
Collaboration
(GDC, Sept
2026)

Additional resources



- **Global Convention on Higher Education - Operational Guidelines**
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395680.locale=en>
- **What is the Global Convention on Higher Education?**
(benefits, how to ratify it, how to implement it)
www.unesco.org/en/education/higher-education/global-convention/about
- **A Practical Guide to Recognition**
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374905>
- **Resolutions** Intergovernmental Conference of the States Parties to the Global Convention
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386727> and
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389637>
- **Regional recognition conventions**
www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/conventions
- **Model instrument of ratification** for all UNESCO conventions
www.unesco.org/en/node/66846

More information:

www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/harare

Thank you

For questions or inputs contact: wr.teter@unesco.org

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Education
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