International Association of Student Affairs & Services

IASAS 8th Global Summit 2026 - Toronto, Canada
Fast Forward: Keeping Pace with a Rapidly Changing World

Working Group Sessions Brief:
What is the Role of Student Affairs in Socially Responsible Colleges and Universities?

The Global Summit brings together student affairs leaders from across the globe to engage in strategic dialogue on key issues in student affairs and higher education. It is a platform for critical discussion and deepening the global community of practice within an international framework and local relevance for students and institutions.

What are the Working Group Sessions?

As part of this gathering of over two hundred student affairs professionals from over forty countries, there are two facilitated working group sessions, followed by a working group share back in plenary.

These sessions will explore how the work of student affairs professionals contributes to ensuring post-secondary institutions continue to evolve in socially responsible efforts at a local and global scale.

Each session will have a room facilitator as well as note-takers who are University of Toronto graduate students involved in the *Hart House Creative Citizenship Cohort*. The emergent themes from the sessions will be summarized and shared on the closing day of the summit.

What are the Elements of a Socially Responsible Post-Secondary Sector?

Using the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the post-secondary sector is not only relevant to the fourth goal to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, but in fact to contribute to advancements in all seventeen SDGs.

The SDGs are central to the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, which provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, serving as a call for action by all countries to work in global partnership.

The goals recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests. Much has transpired since the adoption of 2030 agenda with a global pandemic and increasing geopolitical tensions, but the SDGs remain as a critical driver for global partnerships to address issues and build sustainable solutions together, and the post-secondary sector plays a key role in this regard.

Working Group Themes and Contextual Documents

The following themes serve as a contextual brief for the working group sessions:

A. The Role of the Post-Secondary Sector in Addressing Societal Needs
B. The Role of Higher Education Networks to Address Societal Needs
C. Current Challenges & Opportunities for Transformation in Higher Education in Addressing Societal Needs

These themes draw on sections of the following documents:

- Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) report, *Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local* (2017);
- UNESCO Report, *Higher Education Global Data Working Document* (2022); *and*
- UNESCO Report, *Transforming Higher Education: Global Collaboration on Visioning and Action* (2026)

The following sections will highlight some key concepts and quotations from the above-named reports to serve as a summary for each theme.

A. The Role of the Post-Secondary Sector in Addressing Societal Needs

The following quoted excerpts are from: *Higher Education in the World, 6: Towards a Socially Responsible University; Balancing the Global with the Local (abridged version) - Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) - Special Contribution (Lamotey, 2017, 465-470):*

> *Over time there has been increased pressure from governments, funders and society to play more meaningful roles. The relevance of the university in addressing societal needs has become an issue of public concern, leading to a series of adjustments by universities in an effort to address the economic and developmental needs of society. (p. 466)*
>
> ***How much higher education contributes to national development will depend on the extent to which it addresses issues of social concern.*** *Essentially the general role of knowledge is for sustained progress. In order to sustain any progress within a community, there is a need to integrate the underlying principles into the culture of the people or the users of knowledge. (p.466)*
>
> *Higher education institutions need to account for the use of public funds and this demands efficiencies in the higher education system.* ***Higher education systems must therefore provide the space for raising and debating issues that affect society and also provide avenues for efficient and judicious use of resources.*** *(p. 467)*
>
> *The call for community-based research and network development and student community engagement would lead to the* ***establishment of the right networks****. These networks will further lead to anchoring local solutions in the global context.(p.468)*
>
> ***Higher education systems exist primarily not only for knowledge creation, but to address the practical issues of life. Universities should be able to address the challenges that communities face by not merely providing solutions but also building the requisite societal capacity to enable communities to handle future challenges****. (p.468)*

Lamotey's special contribution closes with a ***call for the sector to seek high-level buy-in for community participation in higher education, and for higher education to engage in more reciprocal relationships with local and global communities***.

B. The Role of Higher Education Networks to Address Societal Needs

A further section in the GUNI report, 7.1 *Mutual Learning & Empowering Support: Network and Balance Between Local and Global Demands (Tremblay, Singh & Lepore, 2017, 391-400)* indicates that university action is needed to tackle global challenges as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

It states that ***"global and local networks are providing important spaces that encourage collaboration, trust, knowledge sharing, capacity building, and innovations between higher education institutions and several kinds of agents, including civil society, government, municipalities, and the private sector".***

This section also emphasizes that ***sustainable development requires system innovation*** – which is a non-linear, social learning process involving multistakeholder engagement. Multistakeholder engagement requires ***trans-disciplinary collaboration and co-creation of knowledge, and networks serve as catalysts for this to happen***. Catalyst networks can give visibility and strengthen local action. ***Global, national and local actors need to be involved early in the process as co-developers of ideas and institutions to help knowledge-driven innovations to flourish***.

Engagement in transdisciplinary collaboration can be a difficult process and efforts can become fragmented – core senior positions are needed to build facilitative structures for this work. ***Higher education institution involvement in civic engagement needs to be grounded in reciprocity, and be grounded in a high value of multi-stakeholder collaboration***. Locally relevant networks, linked to communities of practice can promote collective action on larger scale challenges.

C. Current Challenges and Opportunities for Transformation in Higher Education in Addressing Societal Needs

The UNESCO 2022 *Higher Education Global Data Working Document* focuses on the information and issues associated with ***equitable access to affordable and quality post-secondary, technical and vocational education***. It speaks to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic that further highlighted global disparities in access and the "digital divide" that was clearly demonstrated across higher education systems. Data indicated greater need for international policy dialogue in this regard, as well as ***enhanced guidelines and training to improve use of technological tools***.

Since then, the ***rapid emergence of AI has brought on more complex considerations of technology, with respect to both academic integrity as well as student well-being***. As well, there have ***notable shifts in international student mobility with various policy and geopolitical considerations impacting the flexible learning pathways of horizontal and vertical articulation within and between countries***.

The UNESCO 2026 report, *Transforming Higher Education: Global Collaboration on Visioning and Action*, notes:

> *In a rapidly evolving landscape shaped by climate change, biodiversity loss, health crises, persistent inequalities, democratic backsliding, conflicts, economic challenges, technological change including AI, and rapidly transforming worlds of work,* ***higher education systems and institutions are called upon to evolve, so that they can respond to complex challenges and support lifelong learning for all.***

This 2026 UNESCO report outlines the following guiding principles and lines of transformation to evolve the higher education landscape:

Guiding Principles	Lines of Transformation
• *Committing resources to equity and pluralism*	• *Towards and openness and inclusion paradigm*
• *Promoting the freedom to learn, teach, research and cooperate internationally*	• *Towards flexible and harmonized integration*
• *Fostering inquiry, critical thinking and creativity*	• *Towards a life-long learning orientation*
• *Establishing a human-centered role for digital technologies and AI*	• *Towards dynamic engagement with labour marketings and entrepreneurial opportunity*
• *Embracing and ethic of collaboration and solidarity*	• *Towards holistic study and inquiry*
• *Centering sustainability, stewardship and regeneration*	• *Towards active problem- and project-based learning*
• *Supporting enriched understandings of quality, excellence and relevance*	• *Towards greater relevance and connection with future needs and aspirations*

The document closes indicating that, ***at the level of higher education systems, openness, inclusion, and flexible and harmonized integration should allow learners to move across institutions and countries***.

It further states that ***at the level of higher education institutions, adopting a life-long learning orientation with more dynamic engagement in labour markets, entrepreneurial opportunity and problem- and project-based learning*** makes that learning more meaningful to students of all ages.

"Reclaiming higher education as connected and holistic studies will help mitigate against fragmentation and help the sector live up to its promise of serving the global common good."

So… What is the Role of Student Affairs in a Socially Responsible Post-Secondary Sector?

What is notably absent in these high-level international guiding documents is a clear perspective on the role of student affairs – student experience, student services, experiential learning, student belonging and well-being, etc. – in contributing to a socially responsible post-secondary sector.

The 2026 IASAS Global Summit Working Group Sessions provide a unique opportunity to grow and evolve the discussions that have happened in this international network to bring a clear voice for student affairs in the transformation of higher education as part of a global collaboration on visioning and action.

Each working group session will pose some key questions for discussion, and will culminate in steps toward a response to the 2026 UNESCO Report on *Transforming Higher Education: Global Collaboration on Visioning and Action.* Facilitators and note-takers will guide and capture the discussion in each session.

Working Group Session 1: Wednesday October 28 – 11:00 – 11:50am – DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Where is student affairs already making a contribution to Guiding Principles and Lines of Transformation in the 2026 UNESCO Report?**

2. **Where is the work of student affairs not considered or under-represented in broader conversations about the transformation of higher education?**

Working Group Session 2: Thursday October 29th – 2:45 – 4:15pm – DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **How can we build on existing networks in student affairs – locally and globally – to more directly engage in institutional and sector responses to societal challenges and the local, national and global levels?**

2. **What should a collective statement on the role of student affairs in a socially responsible post-secondary sector include?**

The Group Work Share Back on the final day of the summit will present the high-level themes from these discussion areas, and speak to a process by which they can be shaped into a collective response to the 2026 UNESCO report.