

**Education & Academia Stakeholder Group –
Sectoral Position Paper to the High-Level Political Forum 2024**

**FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY:
EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE PURSUIT
OF THE 2030 AGENDA**

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Executive Summary

The world is currently grappling with crises of unprecedented magnitude, including the COVID-19 pandemic consequences, wars and armed conflicts. These challenges necessitate a reevaluation of our approach to achieving the SDGs. The disruptions caused by these crises have not only affected global education systems, impacting learners across all age groups, but have also exacerbated existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. This presents a critical opportunity to both restore and enhance educational frameworks, accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda. A comprehensive, transformative approach is imperative for the recovery process and achieving the SDGs comprehensively.

Critical barriers to education remain for girls and women, who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Additionally, they encounter challenges such as violence, insufficient gender-responsive policies and programs, and inadequate facilities. These obstacles hinder their educational attainment and limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth, perpetuating cycles of inequality and poverty

The impact of crises on education worldwide

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented educational interruptions, affecting over 1.6 billion learners globally. The sudden transition to alternative learning methods, including the increased reliance on digital tools, has underscored the depth of the educational divide. While digital tools were essential during the pandemic and hold potential for increased outreach and access to education, they also risk exacerbating the digital divide and neglecting certain fields of education and social groups. Concurrently, conflicts and wars in several regions have denied millions of individuals their basic right to education, destroying infrastructure, limiting access, and exacerbating inequalities, thereby threatening long-term socio-economic development

Education as a catalyst for recovery and sustainable development

The recovery from current crises and the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda are intricately linked, with education serving as a vital bridge between the two. By addressing systemic issues and adopting a holistic approach that prioritizes teacher empowerment, increased funding, especially in public education, non-formal education and learning, equity, lifelong learning, and community engagement, we can transform the education system into a resilient, equitable, and potent tool for sustainable development. Investing in education is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for building a more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable future for all.

Introduction

The world is currently grappling with crises of unprecedented magnitude, including the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, **ongoing wars, and armed conflicts**. These **global challenges necessitate a profound reevaluation of our strategies** for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The disruptions stemming from these crises have profoundly impacted global education systems, affecting learners across all age groups and exacerbating existing inequalities. Vulnerable populations have been disproportionately affected, highlighting critical gaps and the urgent need for inclusive and resilient educational frameworks. This situation presents a crucial opportunity not only to restore but also to enhance our educational frameworks, thereby accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda.

The impact of these crises on education worldwide has been staggering. The COVID-19 pandemic alone has led to unprecedented educational interruptions, affecting over 1.6 billion learners globally. The sudden shift to alternative learning methods, compounded by issues of access and quality, has deepened the educational divide. Concurrently, **conflicts and wars** in various regions have further deprived millions of their basic right to education, exacerbating inequalities and threatening long-term socio-economic development. Such widespread disruptions underscore the vulnerability of our educational systems and the critical need for robust, flexible solutions that can withstand future crises.

Education must be viewed not only as a fundamental human right but also as a cornerstone of sustainable development. It has the power to transform societies, drive economic growth, and achieve key outcomes such as gender equality, poverty reduction, and the fostering of innovation and resilient societies. In this context, revitalizing the education sector becomes crucial for sustainable progress across all areas of the 2030 Agenda.

This imperative calls for a **comprehensive, transformative approach to education** that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and quality from early childhood through to adult education and education of older people. Such an approach involves empowering educators, integrating sustainable practices and global citizenship into curricula, and leveraging non-formal and community-based educational initiatives to reach underserved populations. Moreover, it requires addressing systemic issues such as the privatization of education and ensuring that education systems are equipped to tackle both current and future challenges.

As we move towards a pivotal juncture in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda, the role of **education as a catalyst for recovery and sustainable development** cannot be overstated. By adopting holistic strategies that address the root causes of societal challenges and by fostering an education system that is inclusive, equitable, and resilient, we can transform these unprecedented crises into profound opportunities for growth and progress.

Strategies for enhancing quality education and lifelong learning

1. Prioritizing inclusivity and equity

Efforts must be intensified to reach marginalized and vulnerable groups, addressing barriers such as economic hardships, security concerns, geographical isolation, and social stigmatization.

The importance of inclusivity and equity in education is a critical theme that resonates across various global efforts and strategies aimed at addressing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups. Central to these efforts is the recognition of education as a fundamental human right, essential for the development of just, equitable, and sustainable societies. By advocating for the protection of this right and calling for systemic changes in education policy and practice, organizations are working collectively to ensure that education systems are inclusive and equitable.

One significant approach to fostering inclusivity is the integration of transformative education models, which include global citizenship education (GCE) and education for sustainable development (ESD). These models emphasize the role of education in empowering individuals to participate actively and responsibly in a global society, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, have access to the skills and knowledge needed to address contemporary global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequalities.

Inclusivity also extends to the physical and digital realms of education. Organizations highlight the critical need for safety and security measures that protect students from both natural and human-made threats, within and outside of the context of armed conflict, thereby creating learning environments where students feel secure and supported. Concurrently, there is a push to bridge the digital divide in urban communities, ensuring that marginalized populations have equal access to digital resources, which are increasingly essential for educational and societal participation. Additionally, enabling education in regional and minoritized languages is of utmost importance, as well as reaching out to those furthest away from learning, and providing access to career and learning guidance for all.

Furthermore, inclusivity in education addresses economic barriers and geographic isolation, which disproportionately affect indigenous peoples, immigrants, and persons with disabilities. By adapting educational systems to meet the diverse needs of these groups, including the implementation of robust safety and security protocols and support for literacy (including financial, civic, health, media and digital literacy) educational equity can be enhanced.

Inclusivity in education stands as a vital instrument for the empowerment of women and girls, contributing to the gender equality. This goes beyond balanced participation of men and

women, girls and boys, but requires gender-responsive education sector planning and budgeting that consider intersectionality, acknowledging the diverse challenges faced by women across various socio-economic and cultural contexts. Policies must be crafted with a special focus on women, particularly in initiatives aimed at enhancing literacy rates and addressing systemic issues of power imbalances and oppressive cultures prevalent in curricula and educational settings. By prioritizing women's education and dismantling barriers rooted in gender discrimination, societies can unlock the full potential of women and girls, fostering greater gender equality and societal progress.

Lastly, the role of adult education in promoting inclusivity cannot be overlooked. Organizations advocate for adult learning opportunities that are accessible and free of charge, particularly for those who are educationally disadvantaged or distanced from learning. Adult education is recognized as a powerful tool for enhancing social inclusion and solidarity, empowering adults to participate fully in societal and decision-making processes.

Collectively, these initiatives and strategies form a cohesive approach to ensuring that education systems worldwide are truly inclusive and equitable, capable of transforming individuals and societies by providing all learners with the opportunities to grow, participate, and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

2. Strengthening lifelong learning and a holistic approach

Lifelong learning and adult education programs can equip learners with the necessary knowledge and skills for a rapidly evolving world. This includes promoting soft skills, literacy, vocational training, and emphasizing peace and human rights education, intercultural dialogue, critical thinking, and media literacy.

Lifelong learning (LLL) is an expansive concept that encompasses a broad spectrum of educational practices aimed at enhancing personal and societal growth. It fundamentally seeks to promote active citizenship, peace, and sustainability through diverse educational initiatives. These initiatives are designed to enhance soft skills, literacy, and vocational training, thereby enabling learners to adapt to a rapidly changing world and tackle pressing global challenges.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) serves as a cornerstone in the lifelong learning landscape, supporting learners of all ages to confront global issues like climate change and social inequities. By fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, ESD enhances individuals' capacity to actively engage with and influence their environments in meaningful ways. This holistic approach to education integrates not only academic learning but also emotional and behavioral development, ensuring that education is comprehensive and impactful.

In areas affected by conflict and instability, education programs are tailored to not just impart knowledge but also assist individuals in processing and overcoming their traumatic

experiences. These programs, often inclusive of counseling services, first aid training, and community dialogues, play a crucial role in building resilience and restoring peace within communities. Such comprehensive educational strategies are vital in helping learners navigate the complexities of their circumstances while fostering a sense of community and collective growth. The incorporation of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) into formal, non-formal, and informal educational systems further exemplifies this integrative approach. By addressing both the content and delivery of education, GCED ensures that learning environments are equipped to handle issues such as environmental degradation and climate change, preparing learners to be responsible and active global citizens.

Non-formal education also plays a pivotal role in supporting lifelong learning, especially in urban settings where traditional educational systems might not reach all learners. By offering vocational training and skill-building programs, non-formal education addresses economic challenges and unemployment, equipping individuals with practical skills and competencies necessary for their professional and personal development. Crucial are investments in quality skills training and development and education for decent work and livelihoods with dignity that translate into viable employment opportunities, as well as continuing opportunities to acquire and enhance relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies, including life skills, work-specific skills, soft skills, and transferrable skills. This transformation prepares students for the 21st-century workforce, ensuring they possess the necessary skills to succeed in a global economy.

Media and information literacy (MIL) is another crucial aspect of a holistic educational approach. By teaching individuals to critically assess information and navigate complex societal issues, MIL cultivates informed, thoughtful learners capable of contributing effectively to their communities and the broader world. The role of teacher training is indispensable in driving educational reform. Effective teacher training programs that support basic teacher competencies and encourage ongoing professional development are essential for fostering a culture of creativity, resilience, and relationship building within educational settings.

Lastly, the need for sustainable financing in education is highlighted by advocacy for reforms in global governance and economic structures. Founding education is key to bear any kind of transformation in any education system around the world, as TES (Transforming Education Summit 2022 stated). By supporting education through progressive taxation and budgetary allocations for public services, educational systems are better equipped to provide continuous and inclusive learning opportunities, thereby strengthening lifelong learning.

In conclusion, the strategy to strengthen lifelong learning through a holistic approach is multifaceted, involving a blend of innovative educational practices, supportive policy frameworks, and adequate resource allocation. These efforts collectively prepare individuals not only to meet their immediate learning needs but also to actively participate in addressing the larger societal and global challenges they face.

3. Promoting community and non-formal education initiatives

Non-traditional learning environments and community-based educational programs can effectively reach underserved populations, offering flexible and relevant learning opportunities while fostering social cohesion and community development.

Non-formal education plays a pivotal role in reaching underserved populations, offering tailored educational opportunities that enhance social cohesion and support community development. This form of education is particularly effective in both urban and rural settings, where it adapts to the unique needs of the communities it serves.

In urban areas, non-formal education initiatives provide flexible learning options that are critical for engaging diverse populations. These programs often focus on skills development and the integration of practical knowledge, which are essential for fostering employability and active citizenship. By investing in community-based education, organizations help urban dwellers overcome economic challenges and engage more fully in their community's socio-economic activities. Rural communities benefit significantly from non-formal education as well. Initiatives in these areas often focus on empowering local teachers and leveraging community resources to build educational programs from the ground up. This approach not only addresses the lack of formal educational infrastructure but also ensures that the education provided is relevant and responsive to the community's specific needs and resources.

The integration of online, distance, and flexible learning modalities has further expanded the reach of non-formal education, making it accessible to those who must balance educational pursuits with other responsibilities such as work or family care. This flexibility is crucial for extending educational opportunities to busy or remote populations, fostering community development through adaptable education solutions.

Moreover, the formalization of non-formal education through policies and acts like the Non-Formal/Literacy Education Act is essential for enhancing the structure and impact of these programs. Such formalization ensures that non-formal education initiatives are recognized and supported, enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

Cultural and linguistic diversity is also a critical focus of non-formal education, which aims to respect and incorporate the varied cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds of learners. This inclusivity is crucial for fostering environments that support equity, social cohesion, and democracy, enhancing the educational experience for indigenous, immigrant, and minority communities by ensuring that their cultural identities are acknowledged and valued.

Furthermore, the involvement of higher education institutions in non-formal education through community engagement and participatory knowledge building helps bridge the gap between formal education systems and community needs. These institutions can play a significant role in enhancing local educational resources and fostering a shared commitment to sustainable development.

Finally, the overarching emphasis on human-centric and learner-centered educational approaches ensures that technology and digital tools enhance rather than replace the vital interactions between teachers and students. This perspective maintains the importance of personal connection and community in the educational process, ensuring that learning remains a transformative experience that promotes personal and community growth.

In summary, non-formal education is essential for creating flexible, inclusive, and community-focused learning environments that adapt to the needs of all learners. By fostering diverse and adaptable educational opportunities, non-formal education plays a crucial role in enhancing social cohesion, community development, and lifelong learning across various societal settings.

4. Reinforcing teacher support and training

Empowering educators is central to educational revitalization. Ensuring they receive comprehensive training, adequate resources, social recognition, and fair compensation, even in resource-constrained settings, is essential.

Empowering educators is foundational to the revitalization of education systems globally. Teachers are the number one resource necessary for education reform and improvement. They are the drivers of transformative education and planting the seed of lifelong learning. Central to the efforts is enhancing teacher competency through tailored professional development programs that build upon existing skills while introducing new pedagogical strategies. This holistic approach to teachers' development and teachers' training is essential for adapting to the dynamic requirements of modern education, which increasingly include the integration of technology to enhance learning and make education accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.

Professional development for educators now often emphasizes not only content knowledge and traditional teaching skills but also the proficiency to handle digital tools and resources effectively. This shift ensures that teachers can navigate modern educational environments where digital literacy is integrated. A precondition is to improve recognition, working conditions, and initial and further training opportunities for educators, teachers and facilitators through policy initiatives, strategies and programmes. A comprehensive and sustained approach to the digitalization of education includes investment in teachers' training, digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, and access to devices. The focus on inclusive technologies and methodical training further underscores the commitment to making education equitable and accessible for every student, irrespective of physical ability.

In settings disrupted by conflict, the flexibility and resilience of non-formal education structures become particularly valuable. Organizations like DVV International highlight the importance of supporting educators in such environments, where they often face direct threats yet continue to educate. Here, teacher training includes managing volatile conditions and

providing psycho-social support alongside traditional educational content, which is crucial for building resilience and maintaining educational continuity.

Additionally, the integration of skills-based education is becoming increasingly important. Entities like CBS Canada emphasize the need for education systems to evolve, preparing students for a 21st-century workforce that values critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. This transformation necessitates a significant rethinking of teacher training to cover these essential skills, preparing educators to deliver a more relevant and engaging curriculum.

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) also play a crucial role in contemporary education, advocating for teaching approaches that foster critical thinking, systems thinking, and an understanding of global interconnections. These competencies are vital for students to actively engage with global challenges such as climate change, social inequities, and sustainability.

The need for broader participation in the educational process is also highlighted, with calls for social control over government contracts with technology companies to ensure that educational technology implementations are beneficial and genuinely enhance the teacher-student interaction.

Ultimately, the continuous support for educators through enhanced training opportunities, better working conditions, and recognition is essential for fostering an environment where teachers are well-prepared, respected, and capable of facilitating effective learning experiences. This comprehensive approach to teacher empowerment not only enriches the teaching profession but also significantly enhances the overall quality and inclusivity of the education system.

5. Addressing systemic issues through transformative education

Education should not only meet present needs but also address the underlying causes of crises, systemic issues, and structural inequalities, fostering sustainable solutions through a transformative approach. Education systems globally are increasingly recognized as pivotal platforms for addressing the roots of societal challenges, emphasizing the need for transformative changes that extend beyond mere knowledge transfer.

Transformative education serves as a critical tool for addressing global inequalities and crises. By integrating Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), educational policies promote inclusivity and equip learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to tackle contemporary global challenges. This approach fosters critical thinking and systemic understanding, enabling learners to reflect on and address the underlying causes of conflicts and societal disparities. Programs that emphasize the resolution of conflicts and the reflection on systemic issues enable individuals to work towards peaceful solutions, contributing to social and ecological justice. For instance, initiatives that

facilitate access to quality education in both urban and rural areas help mitigate the disparities caused by inadequate infrastructure. Addressing these disparities through strategic planning and stakeholder engagement enhances the capacity of education systems to serve all community members equitably.

Secure and sustained institutionalized spaces for the meaningful participation and engagement of civil society, youth, and all stakeholders in education policy and decision-making processes, including the implementation, monitoring, follow-up, and review.

The transformation of education also involves rethinking its goals and methods to focus on competencies relevant to sustainability and global citizenship. This shift aims to address systemic issues such as racism, ageism, sexism, colonialism, and authoritarianism, positioning education as a tool for comprehensive societal change and sustainability. In this context, academia plays a crucial role. It drives societal change through evidence-based recommendations and insight into the sustainable practices, modeling sustainable development and supporting educational reforms that address broader societal challenges. This strategic involvement ensures that education not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes significantly to a more equitable and just society.

Ultimately, by advocating for transformative education as a cross-cutting theme essential to achieving global commitments such as Agenda 2030, stakeholders underline the potential of education to serve as a transformative force that addresses systemic issues and structural inequalities. Dedicated funding and policy support for all levels of education, including adult learning and education (ALE), are crucial for sustaining this transformative role, ensuring that education continues to contribute to societal progress and equity.

Finally, systemic issues, structural problems and causes can't be addresses without participation of diverse stakeholders. Securing and sustaining institutionalized spaces for the meaningful participation and engagement of civil society, youth, academia and higher education in education policy and decision-making processes is paramount for advancing SDG4 at all levels. Civil society plays a crucial role in advocating and contributing to the inclusive and equitable education systems, ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities are heard and their needs addressed. Academia, particularly higher education institutions, serve as vital facilitators, bringing together diverse stakeholders and leveraging their expertise in teaching, research, and community engagement to foster collaborative partnerships. Through participatory knowledge building, sharing, mobilization, and transfer, academia contributes to innovative solutions and evidence-based practices that drive progress towards achieving SDG4. By fostering interdisciplinary and collaborative research and teaching approaches, academia equips educators across all educational levels to deliver high-quality education and effectively engage with the broad goals of sustainable development. Embracing whole-institution or whole-community approaches, higher education institutions can catalyze transformative change and empower individuals and communities to realize their full potential.

6. Prioritizing public education and increase funding

Ensuring that essential services, particularly education, remain primarily public is crucial for fostering equitable access and social cohesion. Enhanced investment in education and lifelong learning across various sectors, particularly through public funding, facilitated by changes in the global financial architecture and increased ODA is pivotal for fostering individual, societal and economic based on justice and sustainable principles.

Addressing corporate influence in the education sector through financing reforms is critical, since the shift towards multistakeholderism has raised concerns about the privatization and commodification of education. While private sector engagement can bring innovation and resources, it must not undermine the public system's integrity, accessibility, and commitment to serving all segments of society, ensuring the right to education for all. States should uphold their responsibility as primary providers of education, ensuring it remains a fundamental human right and a public good, accessible to all. This entails providing free, inclusive, equitable, and quality education while safeguarding it from corporate interests prioritizing profit over students' welfare. Combating the privatization and commodification of educational services is essential for maintaining education's focus on equity and accessibility, supporting the development of more just and sustainable societies.

Increased public funding and progressive tax reforms are crucial for supporting equitable and quality education. Education models should consider the comprehensive needs of low-income students, including accommodation, transportation, and nutrition, to ensure financial barriers do not hinder their educational pursuits. These efforts are integral to leveraging education as a catalyst for reducing longstanding disparities within education systems.

Strengthening the public education system is imperative to prevent the privatization of digital learning platforms and to strictly regulate the operation of private education providers in accordance with international human rights law and the Abidjan Principles.

Last year's HLPF revealed that 80% of countries do not meet SDG 4, with significant setbacks, mainly due to insufficient financing and lack of tax justice. To achieve the national benchmarks of SDG4, which have lower ambitions compared to the original targets, 79 low- and lower-middle-income countries still face an average annual funding gap of \$97 billion.

Increased investments in education, particularly through public funding, are prerequisites for sustainable, resilient, and gender-transformative public education systems. This requires ensuring accountability and transparency in public finance, prioritizing education in national stimulus packages, enhancing domestic resource mobilization, increasing ODA for education, and negotiating debt restructuring. Additionally, progressive tax reforms should be implemented to generate more funding for essential social services, particularly education, health, and social protection. Addressing illicit financial flows, which deplete the resources of developing countries, is also essential.

Conclusion

The nexus between recovering from current crises and advancing towards the 2030 Agenda is profoundly anchored in the transformative potential of education. As we navigate through unprecedented global challenges—ranging from pandemics to socio-economic disparities—the role of education transcends traditional boundaries, becoming a fundamental catalyst for systemic change. In light of the HLPF 2024 theme, "Reinforcing the 2030 Agenda and eradicating poverty in times of multiple crises: the effective delivery of sustainable, resilient and innovative solutions," it is clear that education is not just a sector to be reformed but a powerful tool for societal transformation.

The strategies discussed—focusing on inclusivity and equity, strengthening lifelong learning, promoting community and non-formal education initiatives, reinforcing teacher support and training, and addressing the underlying causes of crises through education—collectively forge a path towards an education system that is resilient, equitable, and capable of driving sustainable development. Each strategy is interlinked, reinforcing the others in a comprehensive approach that seeks to not only mend the gaps exacerbated by current crises but also to proactively prepare for future challenges.

1. **Empowering educators and inclusivity:** By professionalizing the field and empowering educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, resources, and support, we enhance their ability to deliver education that meets the diverse needs of all learners. This empowerment is crucial in making education systems more inclusive and capable of addressing the varied educational disparities that marginalize vulnerable populations.
2. **Lifelong learning as a tool for resilience:** Lifelong learning equips individuals with the adaptability and skills required to navigate and thrive in a rapidly changing world. By promoting both formal and informal learning pathways, education systems can provide continuous learning opportunities that are essential for personal and professional development, thereby enhancing societal resilience.
3. **Community engagement and non-formal education:** Integrating community-driven non-formal education initiatives helps bridge the educational access gap, especially in underserved areas. These initiatives are vital for fostering community resilience and social cohesion, making communities more robust in the face of crises.
4. **Systemic reforms to tackle root causes:** Addressing the systemic issues and structural inequalities through education requires bold reforms and a commitment to maintaining education as a public good free from commercial pressures. These reforms should aim at creating an equitable education system that supports every student and ensures that education contributes positively to social and ecological justice.
5. **Sustainable financing and global governance:** Advocating for sustainable financing and improved global governance of education underscores the necessity of a well-supported education sector. Financing strategies that prioritize education can ensure the delivery of innovative solutions that are crucial for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

By adopting these strategies, the education system can be transformed into a dynamic force that not only addresses the immediate impacts of various crises but also contributes to the long-term sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda. This holistic approach emphasizes not just recovery but a profound reimagining of education as the bedrock for sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development.

Investing in education, therefore, is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity. It is pivotal for building resilient societies that are well-equipped to face future challenges while ensuring that no one is left behind. As we move towards HLPF 2024 and beyond, it is imperative that we harness the power of education to forge a path toward a sustainable, just, and equitable future for all.

Contributors to this paper

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Members of EASG, especially:

- [ASPBAE \(Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education\)](#)
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- [Commonwealth Students Association \(CSA\)](#)
- [DVV International](#)
- [European Association for the Education of Adults \(EAEA\)](#)
- [Global Campaign for Education \(GCE\)](#)
- [Global Student Forum \(GSF\)](#)
- [Grass-root Organization for Human Development \(GODH\)](#)
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- [York University](#)

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