

EDITORIAL — RECONFIGURING HIGHER EDUCATION: SOCIETAL RELEVANCE, FUTURE COMPETENCES, AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION*

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Dear readers,

Higher education is undergoing a period of profound transformation. Digitalisation, artificial intelligence, ecological pressures, changing labour-market expectations, and widening demands for societal relevance do not act in isolation; they reinforce one another and reshape the conditions under which universities understand and fulfil their mission. Questions of competence development, institutional adaptation, practice integration, and social responsibility have therefore moved from the margins to the centre of higher education research and development.

The 2025 annual conference of the German Society for Higher Education Research (Gesellschaft für Hochschulforschung – GfHf) in Heilbronn took up these questions and provided the intellectual ground for a broad collection of contributions. To give this breadth sufficient space, the special issue is published in two companion issues. This first issue concentrates on societal relevance, Future Skills, artificial intelligence, and institutional and curricular transformation. The second turns more explicitly to new learning spaces, practice-integrated formats, transfer, and educational inequality. The division is not a separation of unrelated themes, but an invitation to follow two closely connected lines of inquiry in greater depth.

The issue opens with *Beyond the Third Mission: Pluralising Societal Relevance in Higher Education*. The contribution establishes an important conceptual point of departure by challenging the idea that societal relevance is singular, self-evident, or endlessly expandable. Instead, it presents relevance as plural, contested, and relational. Higher education is thus not simply asked to become more useful; it must negotiate different public expectations while preserving its critical and educational functions.

Digital Skills Followed by Future Skills? Recent Research Insights and Impact on University Development extends this discussion from societal expectations to the capabilities needed to respond to them. By linking digital literacy, Future Skills, and university development, the article shows that competence cannot be treated as an isolated curricular add-on. What students and staff need to learn is inseparable from how institutions organise themselves, define educational quality, and prepare for uncertain futures.

A Study of Stakeholder Perspectives on Established Characteristics and Areas for Development in a Cooperative State University in Germany then grounds the debate empirically. Its findings show that established features of cooperative higher education continue to be valued while also revealing clear fields for development, including adaptation to artificial intelligence, stronger connections between theory and practice, more inclusive access, and greater attention to life skills.

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The article therefore captures a central tension of institutional change: renewal must build on what works without turning institutional continuity into inertia.

The next two contributions place artificial intelligence at the centre of the discussion, but from complementary perspectives. *Promoting AI Literacy: Development, Implementation and Initial Validation of an AI Competency Model for Higher Education (AICM-HE)* presents a structured and practice-validated framework for embedding AI literacy in higher education. Its differentiated sectors and levels of competence respond to the heterogeneity of institutional contexts and offer a valuable basis for curricular development.

Institutional Translation, Organisational Identity, and AI in German Higher Education shifts the focus from individual competence to institutional self-representation. Through its examination of human translation, machine translation, and LLM-based workflows, the article demonstrates that AI is not merely a technical instrument. It also affects language politics, international visibility, and the ways in which universities articulate their identity. Read together, these two contributions make clear that responsible engagement with AI requires both competence architectures and institutional reflection.

The issue concludes with *Interprofessional Education in Health Sciences Programmes: Enabling Competence Development Through Constructive Alignment*. This article brings pedagogical design into sharp focus. It shows how the coherent alignment of learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment can support multidimensional competence development across professional boundaries. The contribution is particularly significant because it translates broad ambitions for relevance and competence into the concrete work of curriculum design.

Across these six contributions, three themes stand out. First, societal relevance is not an external demand that can simply be added to existing academic structures; it is negotiated through institutional missions, curricula, and relationships with society. Second, competence development must be understood broadly. It includes technical capability, but also critical judgement, ethical reflection, collaboration, autonomy, and the capacity to act under conditions of uncertainty. Third, transformation depends on institutional mediation: between continuity and change, technology and pedagogy, public expectations and academic responsibility.

This first companion issue therefore resists the idea of higher education transformation as a linear process of optimisation. The contributions instead reveal a field of negotiation in which competing purposes and pressures must be balanced. They offer conceptual frames, empirical evidence, competence models, and pedagogical designs that help us think more precisely about this work.

The second companion issue continues the conversation by asking where and through which arrangements transformation becomes tangible: in digital learning environments, agile professional learning, industry–university partnerships, third learning spaces, transfer-oriented research, and the unequal conditions of academic success. Together, the two issues trace a shared movement from purpose and competence to spaces, practices, and participation.

We hope that this issue stimulates discussion across disciplines, institutions, and national contexts. We thank all authors, reviewers, and editors whose work made this publication possible and whose contributions bring depth and differentiation to the debate about higher education's present and future.

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