

Going Global Istanbul 2026 – Concept Note

Future-ready tertiary education

Tertiary education across Central Asia, Türkiye and the South Caucasus is undergoing rapid expansion. Most of this growth has occurred over the past two decades and has been driven by an increasingly young demographic, more international students – particularly from Africa and the Middle East – and an ambition to diversify national economies, which requires both skilled people and internationally competitive research systems. An increase in international collaboration has run alongside this growth.

Rapid growth in tertiary education brings challenges in relation to maintaining quality and supporting equity and inclusion. Expansion is taking place at a time of geopolitical uncertainty, economic competition and rapid technological change, making it even more challenging to build a tertiary education system that will work not only for the needs of today, but also be ready for the future.

The regional Going Global 2026 conference in Istanbul will shine a spotlight on six countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye and Uzbekistan, which have between them over 900 higher education institutions (HEIs) and nearly 12 million students. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems across the region are also significant in scale, with c.3.5 million learners across the six countries, the majority (around 2.8 million) in Türkiye's short-cycle tertiary vocational programmes. The conference will explore six questions:

1. How do tertiary education systems safeguard **quality of teaching** and strengthen national and institutional capacity as they grow?
2. How can governments raise the **quality of research** within their universities, including through international collaboration?
3. What role can **digital modes of delivery, technology enhanced learning and Edtech** play in improving the quality of tertiary education?
4. How can tertiary education and TVET systems build resilience and prepare for future challenges, including **maintaining labour market relevance**?
5. How do tertiary education systems embed **equity and inclusion at scale** as they expand?
6. How can **international collaboration** – current and potential – strengthen national and institutional capacity, quality assurance, and innovation?

Rapid developments in AI, leadership competencies for transforming institutions, and student engagement and voice cut across all these themes.

This regional Going Global conference will bring together stakeholders with a wide range of expertise and points of view to propose innovative solutions for how the region might address these challenges. It will focus on how international collaboration – between the six focus countries and more widely with the UK, EU, Middle East and North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa – supports the development of innovation leading to positive change. It will provide an opportunity to share best practice and forge new collaborations.

Target audience

- chancellors, vice chancellors and senior tertiary education leaders
- senior government officials and policymakers
- quality assurance bodies and regulators
- funders and international partners
- industry and private sector representatives
- researchers, academics, and UK alumni
- student representatives/leaders

1. How do tertiary education systems safeguard quality of teaching and strengthen national and institutional capacity as they grow?

Across the six focus countries, governments are shifting their attention from quantity to quality. Qualifications frameworks, quality-assurance systems, curricula, and governance structures are all being used to improve graduate and learner outcomes and strengthen the international reputation of their tertiary education sectors.

The regional conference will draw on experiences from the focus countries which are all undertaking reforms in these areas. It will also look at the results of existing international collaborations with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and others, and consider what benefits further internationalisation might bring.

2. How can governments raise the quality of research within their universities, including through international collaboration?

The production of research is an important feature of the world's leading universities. Governments in the focus countries have set ambitious targets to enhance their universities' positions in global rankings, as an indicator of enhanced research performance, and to attract talent.

International collaboration plays a strategic role in improving rankings performance by increasing joint research publications and citations, expanding doctoral training partnerships, strengthening governance and quality assurance systems, and enhancing international staff and student mobility. The UK is among the region's leading research partners alongside Germany, the United States and Italy.

The conference will draw on examples from the UK and other research-intensive systems to inform discussions on standards, incentives and institutional capacity, including how collaboration can extend beyond major urban centres. It will explore how international partnerships can strengthen both research quality and graduate employability across the region.

3. What role can digital modes of delivery, technology enhanced learning and Edtech play in improving the quality of tertiary education?

For many years now, educational technologies have been a priority for universities and colleges, transforming digital learning through platforms such as MOOCs, AI-supported personalised learning, and virtual and augmented reality. Although expanded internet infrastructure has

improved access, inequalities persist and maintaining a balanced integration of digital and traditional education remains a key challenge.

Digital education continues to expand through transnational education (TNE) programmes, branch campuses and online and blended provision within national systems. In this environment, ensuring quality standards has become a key priority for institutions and regulators.

The conference will explore what is currently known about maintaining and improving quality in online and blended education. What further evidence, partnerships and regulatory innovation are needed to support universities and colleges to achieve future-ready education systems? How might this change in the future and how can institutions build resilience?

4. How can tertiary education and TVET systems build resilience and prepare for future challenges, including maintaining labour market relevance?

National strategies have articulated ambitious targets to improve alignment between tertiary education outcomes and labour market needs. Economies are diversifying and digitising, and systems are seeking to balance student demand and employer needs. Higher education and TVET are increasingly seen as part of a single system for delivering the right skills. It is essential that they work well together and that students can easily move between different kinds of institutions on their lifelong learning journeys.

An important question is how different countries design the balance of provision across higher and technical and vocational education to respond to changing labour markets. What roles can employers and private sector partners play in shaping programmes and improving graduate outcomes?

Across all focus countries, employers and private sector actors are increasingly involved in shaping curricula, offering internships, supporting applied research, and co-designing qualifications. International collaboration - particularly with UK and European partners - supports these efforts by providing expertise in skills-based curriculum design, quality assurance, governance reform, and innovation-led education models.

The Going Global regional conference will explore how different countries are addressing the ongoing challenge of ensuring tertiary education provides graduates with skills for both current and future labour markets.

5. How do tertiary education systems embed equity and inclusion at scale as they expand?

Governments see embedding equity and inclusion at scale as critical in the expansion of participation. They are looking to develop system-wide approaches to ensure that tertiary education becomes accessible to a broader range of learners, including women, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, persons with disabilities and displaced populations. As systems grow, international collaboration and institutional partnerships are increasingly being used to share good practice in inclusive teaching, student support and policy design.

Parts of the region also hosts large displaced and refugee populations. Prolonged conflict and instability in neighbouring areas have resulted in the settlement of displaced communities, increasing demand for access to tertiary education for both students and academic staff.

Managing inclusion at scale has therefore become a central policy challenge, requiring systems to balance access with educational quality and labour market relevance.

The conference will explore how tertiary education systems and institutions can evolve to improve outcomes for learners from diverse backgrounds. How can international collaboration in quality assurance support sustainable and inclusive development across the region?

6. How can international collaboration – current and potential – strengthen national and institutional capacity, quality assurance, and innovation?

Countries across the region are looking to bilateral, regional and wider international collaboration to help them achieve their goals.

They are competing to become a regional education hub, supported in this by knowledge transfer and capacity building via joint institutions and international collaboration within the region and beyond.

The conference presents an opportunity to share regional and global practices. We will evaluate which hub models are likely to work best and explore the role that intra-regional collaboration can play in strengthening them.

Going Global Istanbul will also feature the following spotlight event: International collaboration in times of crisis

This dedicated spotlight session looks at how international ties can generate hope for the future, even in the challenging conditions of an extended conflict. It explores Ukraine's experience over recent years, with a particular focus on leadership in practice. How do institutions adapt under pressure? And how can international collaboration support the development of resilient, forward-looking higher education systems?

The Ukrainian tertiary education sector continues to operate under significant war-related pressures: demographic decline, institutional consolidation, infrastructure damage and destruction, and the displacement of students and faculty. The sector is also undergoing significant transformation driven by resilience, reform, and international engagement. University leadership plays a critical role in navigating uncertainty and driving change. System-level responses focus on quality, institutional strengthening, and alignment with European and global standards, positioning universities as key actors in recovery, reconstruction, and innovation.

International partnerships have deepened significantly since 2022, with Ukrainian universities engaging with European institutions and funding bodies to strengthen leadership capacity and support new approaches to governance, decision-making, and institutional development.