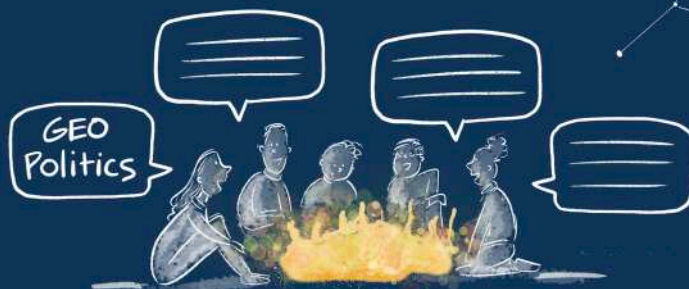


# NAVIGATING the FUTURE



## ETF Conversations



The Role of Geopolitics in shaping Education and Skills for the next Generation

## NAVIGATING THE FUTURE:

### THE ROLE OF GEOPOLITICS IN SHAPING THE EDUCATION AND SKILLS OF THE NEXT GENERATION

#### AN ETF & EUI POLICY BRIEF

#### Background

In January 2024, over 50 thought leaders from different backgrounds, including EU policymakers, academics, business representatives, international financial institutions and civil society organisations, came together to explore potential future scenarios in geopolitics and education. This high-level event included representatives from EU Member States, Global South and EU neighbouring countries, EU institutions, NGOs and research groups/think tanks.

Future scenarios were analysed through the lens of geopolitics, considering potential threats, challenges and opportunities, with a particular

focus on the EU's global positioning. Discussions tackled critical issues, such as the broader European context, fragility, conflict and peace, and the global economy. Key topics included access to shared global resources, competition for vital resources, threats facing multilateralism and democratic systems, hybrid warfare complexities, and the growing impact of artificial intelligence and new technologies on society and politics.

The debate followed a structured sequence of envisioning, discussing, and shaping strategies to equip the next generation with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the intersections of geopolitics, education, and technology.

## Foresight in action

Imagining, debating and shaping the future involves using scenarios to become better at perceiving and making sense of change. This includes welcoming uncertainty and viewing complexity as a source of inspiration rather than an obstacle. Imagined futures shape our perception of the world as it emerges. Through these scenarios we improve our ability to recognise and refine the assumptions guiding our current choices and behaviour.

This process of collective intelligence enabled participants to articulate both individual and collective anticipatory assumptions. Making decisions that embrace complexity and treat uncertainty as a resource requires an enhanced capacity to use the future to understand the present. Building this capacity involves understanding how future-oriented thinking impacts current decision making. This approach shows that conscious exploration and decision-making processes can integrate future insights into practical choices.

The event aimed to provide participants with an opportunity to explore anticipatory systems and their application by examining the interconnected futures of geopolitics and education. Participants engaged in a process structured around the three horizons framework, enhancing their capacity to reflect on strategic decisions in ambiguous contexts by thoroughly exploring the potential of the present. The goal was to use diversity and complexity as sources of inspiration, helping to appreciate the varied and unpredictable nature of the world while valuing freedom and unexpected discoveries.

## Setting the Scene

**Geopolitics in a turbulent future.** Envisioning the future of geopolitics, education, and skills reveals a challenging landscape with numerous pressing issues. Strategic autonomy has emerged as a significant driver, perceived to reduce multilateralism and heighten competition for resources. Interdependence, once considered a mitigating factor for conflicts, has become a source of insecurity. Multiple threats such



as hybrid warfare, inequalities, and climate degradation challenge global stability. Fragility and inequalities are rising, fuelled by resource conflicts and climate change impacts. Historically, EU enlargement has been transformative, serving as a peace-building initiative. However, current sluggishness and changing migration patterns pose new challenges. Meanwhile, Asia's attractiveness continues to rise.

**Uncertainties in the future geo-economic landscape.** Future economies may become more integrated or multipolar or increasingly polarised and disconnected. Emerging economies are gaining attention, while the EU faces challenges such as brain drain and shifting migration flows. Ageing populations are causing the EU to lose one million people annually from the workforce. Coupled with rigid migration policies, these trends pose severe challenges to EU welfare states. Additionally, citizens' distrust in governments is increasing, with extreme political parties on the rise. These factors contribute to increased uncertainties about the future of the EU, including whether it will expand or contract, and how its alliances and borders may shift.

**Increasing fragilities.** Displacements and migration flows are expected to rise due to various fragilities compounded by climate change and conflicts. To create opportunities for peace and inclusion, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates humanitarian aid, development efforts, and peacebuilding initiatives, especially in fragile settings, with a particular focus on education. Flexible funding and empowering local actors to deliver quality education and learning outcomes are key in such contexts.

**Current education systems reinforce inequalities.** Current education systems exacerbate inequalities, widen gender and digital divides, and face diminishing public funding. Education is increasingly perceived as a competitive advantage between nations, rather than a global enabler promoting mutual learning and open knowledge sharing, worsening existing disparities.

**Addressing these trends.** To make education meaningful, it is essential to address these

trends. New education systems that reflect 21st century dynamics are beginning to flourish, creating opportunities that can be capitalised upon due to increasing demands for foundational and future skills.

## A broader Europe

**Collaboration is key.** In an increasingly interconnected world, global, EU and local partnerships are essential to address evolving challenges in education and skills development. Collaborative efforts across these levels can enhance resilience, inclusivity, and adaptability in education systems, ensuring they meet future needs.

**EU initiatives in skills and education.** European initiatives such as the [Global Gateway](#), [European Education Area](#), and [Erasmus +](#) underscore the EU's position as a leader in global education. These initiatives promote a Europe that is more competitive, resilient and secure. The designation of 2023 as the [European Year of Skills](#) significantly boosted skills anticipation, and especially skills needed for the digital and green transition.

**The need for further coordination and local agency.** The EU is committed to allocating 10% of humanitarian budgets to education. However, collaborative and coordinated efforts are essential to maximise impact. Trusting and investing in the capacity of local actors and organisations to deliver contextualised, high-quality, and inclusive programmes have the greatest potential to break the cycle of conflict and instability.

**Boosting EU programmes.** Initiatives such as the [EU Talent Pool](#) and [EU Skills and Talent mobility package](#) aim to integrate qualifications and skills recognition, but further efforts are needed. Flexible funding for education, particularly in conflict zones and fragile settings, is essential to bridge disparities and promote inclusive growth. These efforts affirm the EU's leadership in the digital and green transitions. Embracing complexity, uncertainty and technological innovation in future skills and new teaching and learning approaches are key for lifelong learning systems and future labour markets.



**Promoting education as soft power.** Education drives economic growth, helps to build shared values, strengthens active citizenship and creates a sense of belonging to the EU. It serves as a tool for soft power diplomacy, promoting European values and building global partnerships. This should be prioritised in EU external policies to support EU enlargement and prepare the next generation for an evolving labour market.

**Advancing global collaboration and partnerships.** International partnerships and global collaboration in education and skills development are essential for reducing poverty, improving equity and health, and promoting peace and global stability. These collaborations advance education systems amidst geopolitical complexities, promote future skills, and facilitate cross-regional learning for mutual benefit. Public-private partnerships can support the twin transition while ensuring flexibility, adaptability and lifelong learning opportunities. This includes promoting micro-credentials and vocational education and training, which, though not widely recognised, are often more flexible and future-oriented than traditional education systems.

**Building future skills and literacies for peace and resilience.** 21st century dynamics require a combination of foundational and future skills, including cultural and futures literacy, essential for navigating the complexities of the future. Education can serve as the foundation of international solidarity and diplomacy, promoting peace, resilience and inclusive growth. It could be Europe's most valuable international asset, enhancing global cooperation and understanding.

Ultimately, this is key to empowering marginalised communities with context-based solutions, and equipping global citizens with resilience, empathy and a culture of caring.

## Addressing uncertainties

**A comprehensive approach to humanitarian, development and peace efforts.** By embracing a comprehensive approach involving all actors, education can become a tool for peace and progress. Flexible funding and investment in contextualised solutions are critical for providing education in times of conflict, and delivering high quality, inclusive programmes that can break the cycle of conflict and instability. In fragile settings, ensuring access to quality education, achieving improved learning outcomes, implementing systemic interventions based on needs assessments, and paying attention to both pupils and teachers on the move is particularly important. Additionally, accreditation and recognition of educational achievements are essential.

**Addressing trends for meaningful education.** Anticipating and addressing identified trends and weak signals is crucial for education to evolve as a form of soft power and a tool for diplomacy, promoting EU values and preparing the next generation. Investments in education and human capital is therefore vital for the EU's strategic development.

**Building resilience through education.** In navigating geopolitical complexities and uncertainties, prioritising human capital

development is imperative. Education must equip individuals with critical thinking and foundational, soft and entrepreneurship skills, beyond technical ones, and the resilience needed to address emerging challenges. Embracing foresight and preparedness enables better responses and resilience to crises. Integrating education into peace and conflict negotiations, prioritising skills recognition, and enhancing global collaboration are key strategies for shaping the future.

**Innovating teaching and learning.** Classrooms should become safe and brave spaces that welcome diversity and shape cultural literacy, where different viewpoints are embraced, and conflicts are resolved through dialogue and mutual understanding. Teaching should focus on coaching and building competences for a transitional world through continuous reskilling and up-skilling, helping individuals to develop the skills required to navigate complex problems with a shared sense of responsibility. Active teaching and learning should become blended and bi-directional, allowing learners to take ownership of their individual learning pathways. Open-source scientific knowledge, creativity and participatory governance systems should drive education systems and, in turn, policy and decision-making.

## Enhancing Europe's position in the global economy

**Education and the EU's geopolitical positioning.** Europe faces significant economic challenges and needs to better position itself to attract global talent. Amid geopolitical tensions and global crises, Europe must collaborate effectively to navigate future challenges. Partnerships, collaboration and private sector engagement are essential for anticipating and addressing skills gaps, driving development and promoting inclusion. This approach enables equal access to quality education systems and improved learning outcomes for all. Additionally, diversification and derisking strategies are important for economic resilience rather than focusing solely on strategic autonomy.

**Education as an asset and trade advantage.** People are the EU's greatest strategic asset, with increasing global demand for European knowledge and expertise. Building partnerships is key to capitalising on these opportunities. European ministers need to prioritise education funding, viewing it as an investment rather than a cost. This will help shape effective, inclusive and cost-efficient education systems through partnerships, using digital learning technologies and private sector investments.

### 2. THE CHALLENGES OF PERMA CRISES

By embracing a Holistic, humanitarian, development peace approach, involving



Education can be leveraged as a TOOL for PEACE and PROGRESS

FLEXIBLE FUNDING IS CRITICAL for providing Education



To break the cycle of CONFLICT instability, we need to invest LOCALLY to deliver HIGH QUALITY INCLUSIVE and contextualised programmes

NEW SKILLS Education Needs to Foster



Propaganda DISTORTION Complex Global Scenarios

Looking to the FUTURE, Europe must reassess its strategies to provide the tools to THRIVE in FRAGILE contexts.

INTEGRATING Education + skills AGENDAS → PEACE and CONFLICT negotiations

### Integrating economic and educational goals.

Aligning economic policies with educational initiatives can create a strong framework for sustainable growth. By strengthening links between vocational training programmes with industry needs, policymakers can ensure that the workforce is equipped with relevant skills. Encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship through curricula will promote a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability. Moreover, investing in lifelong learning and adult education can help to address the challenges of an ageing population and a rapidly changing job market. This comprehensive approach not only strengthens the economy but also builds a more resilient and inclusive society.

### The soft power of education

**Geo-economics and geopolitics.** The evolving landscape of global economics and politics highlights the importance of addressing both geo-economic and geopolitical aspects within education. As societies navigate these shifts, quality education becomes essential in building resilience and reducing potential conflicts, inequalities and crises.

**The role of education in navigating geopolitics, education and skills.** Investment in education is essential for building human capital

and addressing global challenges. To promote resilience and peace, as well as a sustainable collective future, systemic interventions in all contexts, especially in fragile settings, are necessary. Education and skills play an important role in managing conflict, addressing climate change, and creating equitable societies. Diversification, openness, and investment in education are important strategies for enhancing economic development and geopolitical positioning.

**Education as a force for peacebuilding.** By cultivating a culture that prioritises the well-being of individuals, the planet, and our collective future, education can advance peacebuilding and sustainable societies. Embracing a new educational paradigm rooted in empathy and interconnectedness offers a path towards greater opportunity and resilience in the face of unprecedented global challenges.



## Education systems promoting sustainability.

Education systems need to develop global citizens, characterised by high levels of resilience, empathy and a culture of caring. Schools should become safe and inclusive spaces where young people can reach out and build bridges. Promoting future skills, supporting public-private partnerships, and ensuring inclusivity and accessibility in education systems are essential steps towards building resilient, equitable, and sustainable societies.

## Key takeaways

**Challenging current assumptions.** To move forward strategically, it is essential to challenge key assumptions, including existing power systems, the need to decolonise geopolitics, and our approach to diversity, inclusion and partnerships. We must confront notions of unlimited growth and unrestricted use of global resources. Likewise, it is necessary to re-evaluate how we exercise democracy and define fulfilling jobs to ensure education systems can prepare citizens for the future in a lifelong perspective.

**The future of Europe.** Education should be viewed as one of Europe's main international trade products and the foundation of international solidarity and diplomacy. This strengthens cultural and futures literacy, facilitating dialogue and peace. This vision should be combined with sustained needs-based financing and systemic interventions that position Team Europe as a leader in global investments through mutually

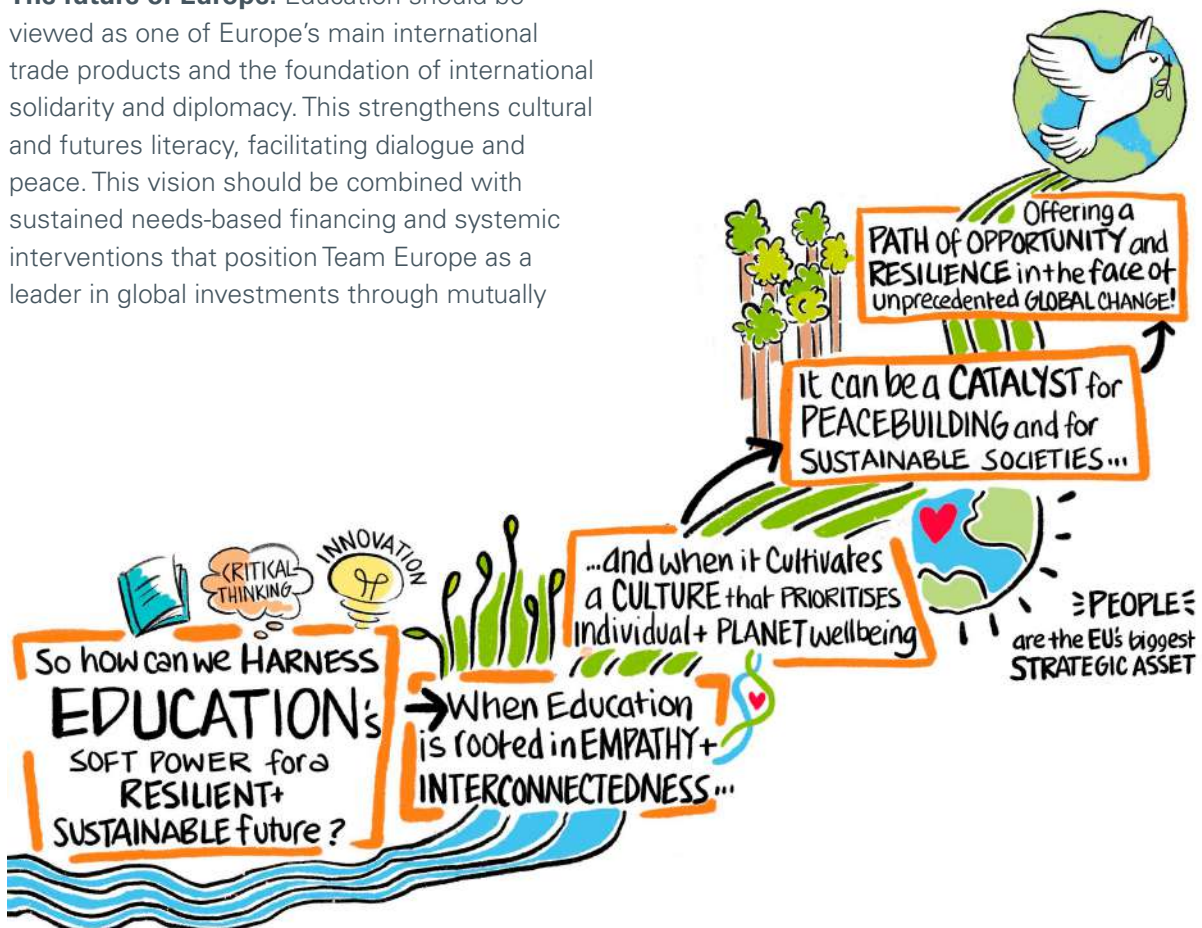
beneficial partnerships and commitment to the SDGs. These initiatives are essential for developing joint solutions to common challenges and encouraging sustainable progress.

Furthermore, this approach should empower marginalised communities and support bottom-up initiatives, providing Europe with the leverage to become a trusted future-oriented education leader.

**Recommendations** to further integrate education into EU external policies to shape a resilient, adaptive and inclusive future, along with related policy implications, include:

### 1. Strategic investment in education:

Advocate for a paradigm shift in viewing education as a strategic investment rather than a mere expense, as one of Europe's main foreign trade products. Education should be seen as a critical advantage that enhances global competitiveness. This requires revisions in budgetary allocations to prioritise education and skills development initiatives, increased funding to enhance education infrastructure and promoting lifelong learning



opportunities, in line with the dynamics of the 21st century. Team Europe can lead this global investment effort, setting a benchmark for others. According to Development Assistance Committee (DAC) statistics, European countries collectively contribute a significant portion of global aid to education, demonstrating their commitment to this objective.

**2. Leverage education for diplomacy:** Harness the soft power of education to promote diplomatic relations and mutual understanding. Team Europe should collaborate to project European values and way of life globally, integrating education and skills development into diplomatic agendas. Education has a unique capacity to connect individuals and cultures, demonstrated by the long-term return on investment in programmes like Erasmus+. Education serves as a beacon for civic values, instilling principles such as sustainability, gender equality, and human rights. This future-oriented approach must also embrace a decolonialised perspective, which involves recognising and addressing historical inequalities and promoting a more inclusive and equitable global education system. By doing so, education can be positioned as a tool for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development worldwide.

**3. Address fragilities and inequalities through education:** Tackle the growing inequalities exacerbated by education and training systems. Prioritise public funding for education, promote accessibility, and bridge the gender and digital divides to create inclusive and equitable societies. Ensure schools are safe places that provide

a supportive environment for all students. Provide flexible funding mechanisms to support education in fragile settings, empowering local actors and marginalised communities to drive sustainable progress and peacebuilding efforts.

**4. Global collaboration in education:** Promote global collaboration and partnerships in education and skills development. Focus on foundational skills and diverse literacies that prepare learners for an unknown future. Facilitate knowledge sharing, innovation, and mutual learning through public-private partnerships to address emerging challenges effectively.

## Looking towards the future

As the world grapples with geopolitical uncertainties and emerging challenges, prioritising education and skills development becomes essential for building resilience, promoting peace, and driving sustainable development. Shaping the next generation of geopolitics, education, and skills will require making strategic decisions today. This includes developing future skills and individual resilience via inclusive and personalised learning pathways. By embracing these recommendations and enhancing global collaboration, policymakers can guide societies towards a more prosperous, equitable, and resilient future. Ultimately, a shared vision of the future should shape how education systems of the 21st century will look and the roles they can play in helping society navigate towards a hopeful future while embracing emerging uncertainties.



**WHERE WE ARE NOW**  
 In a time of INCREASING GEOECONOMIC + GEOPOLITICAL tensions → there's an URGENT need for EUROPE and its neighbours to work together in Partnership.

**1. LOOKING TOWARDS a BROADER EUROPE**  
 - ENLARGEMENT

**EDUCATION is CRUCIAL for UNDERPINNING EUROPEAN VALUES**  
 into the Education System

and building SHARED VALUES + ACTIVE Citizenship → Strengthening

**Greater COLLABORATION**  
 between the GLOBAL NORTH and SOUTH → Education

Developing systems based on **INCLUSION**  
 EQUITY | ACCESSIBILITY

Offering a **PATH OF OPPORTUNITY and RESILIENCE** in the face of unprecedented GLOBAL CHANGE!

**FAKE NEWS**

To NAVIGATE these UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES the **QUALITY of EDUCATION** is CRITICAL ... and it has an **INDISPENSIBLE** ROLE in

could help foster support for engagement for the **NEXT GENERATION** → PREPARE for an INNOVATION Labour MARKET

**Fostering GLOBAL CITIZENS** with Empathy Resilience A culture of caring

...and when it Cultivates a **CULTURE** that PRIORITISES Individual + PLANET wellbeing

It can be a **CATALYST** for PEACEBUILDING and for SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES ...

**2. THE CHALLENGES OF PERMA CRISES**  
 By embracing a Holistic, humanitarian, development Peace approach, involving ALL ACTORS LOCAL and International

**FLEXIBLE FUNDING** is CRITICAL for providing Education in times of CONFLICT → but there's a SIGNIFICANT funding GAP - with only a fraction of humanitarian aid being allocated to Education

So how can we **HARNESS EDUCATION'S** SOFT POWER for a RESILIENT + SUSTAINABLE future?

When Education is rooted in **EMPATHY + INTERCONNECTEDNESS**

European finance ministers need to **PRIORITISE** Education funding

are the EU's biggest **STRATEGIC ASSET** → PEOPLE

Education can be leveraged as a **TOOL** for PEACE and PROGRESS

To break the cycle of CONFLICT instability, we need to invest **LOCALLY** to deliver **HIGH QUALITY** INCLUSIVE and contextualised programmes

Looking to the **FUTURE**, Europe must reassess its strategies to provide the tools to **THRIVE** in **FRAGILE** contexts.

**3. The GLOBAL ECONOMY and EUROPE'S position** init

the idea of **STRATEGIC AUTONOMY** was challenged → Instead - a **SHIFT in MINDSET** to **DIVERSIFICATION** and **DE-RISKING** was advocated

European finance ministers need to PRIORITISE Education funding → EFFECTIVE, INCLUSIVE and COST-EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

## About the organisers

The European Training Foundation is the EU's agency supporting countries surrounding the European Union to reform their education, training and labour market systems. Our unique role is based on the expertise of our staff, and experience gained over nearly 30 years of working hand-in-hand with governments, business, and social partners in countries in the EU's neighbouring regions. Our aim is to support each country's own process for education, training, and labour market reform, with a range of evidence-based methodologies.



European Training Foundation

The Florence School of Transnational Governance, part of the European University Institute, trains current and future leaders in policymaking beyond the state. The school offers executive training to professionals, a Master in Transnational Governance, and a Global Executive Master. It also organises high-level policy dialogues and hosts Policy Leader Fellows and Young African Leader Fellows.



## Disclaimer

This policy brief developed by the ETF and EUI at the crossroads of geopolitics, education and skills stems from the high-level event discussion. It does not reflect personal or institutional positioning, but captures the collaborative dialogue of participants. The brief highlights ways in which education can help build resilience, promote peace and drive sustainable development, emphasising the need to work towards a common vision of the future to shape 21st century education systems fit for an uncertain future.



*Authors: Cristiano Cagnin, Thierry Foubert, Joanna Anstey, Riel Miller, Gaia Taffoni, Elodie Lafont*