

The Message of Hagen

Under the theme “**Rethinking Higher Education: Engage, Adapt, Include,**” we have explored the urgent need for education systems that are more responsive, inclusive, and connected. Across days of dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, we identified both the opportunities ahead and the responsibilities we carry as representatives of higher education’s future.

We agree that higher education must become more **engaged**. Institutions must step beyond their traditional boundaries to co-create value with stakeholders, ensuring an extended dialogue with industry, civil society, and learners themselves.

At the same time, higher education must be prepared to **adapt**. Flexibility must be embedded in both structures and mindsets. In an era defined by rapid technological change, hybrid learning, and increasingly diverse learner pathways, adaptability is essential—not only for institutions but for educators, learners, and systems. Lifelong learning must be fully embraced, with modular approaches, stackable learning, and innovative recognition systems that reflect the changing realities of how, when, and why people learn.

Above all, we affirm that **inclusion** must be a central design principle of educational transformation. We cannot rethink education without addressing who it serves—and who it too often excludes. Inclusion must be intentional, systemic, and visible across all dimensions of policy and practice. This includes supporting students with diverse needs, tackling digital and social divides, and creating learning environments that foster a genuine sense of belonging and participation.

Throughout the conference, several key themes emerged. One of the most prominent was the potential and responsibility that **digital learning now offers**. While technology offers unparalleled opportunities for access, flexibility, and innovation, it also requires careful pedagogical design, robust infrastructure, and an unwavering focus on human connection. We must not mistake digital delivery for digital equity. What matters is not only what we deliver, but how—and for whom.

Another key insight was the critical importance of **interoperability**. As institutions increasingly adopt micro-credentials and modular learning frameworks, we must ensure that systems and platforms work seamlessly across institutions, countries, and sectors. Learners need the freedom to move without encountering administrative or technological barriers. Achieving interoperability requires more than technical alignment; it demands shared standards, mutual trust, and collaborative governance.

I • HE2025

08 • 10 October 2025

Rethinking Higher Education:
Engage, Adapt, Include

Innovating Higher Education Conference

 EADTU



FernUniversität in Hagen

We also reaffirm the value of **research-informed innovation**. The integration of a full research track at I-HE2025 underscored the importance of grounding our transformations in evidence. Strengthening a two-way dialogue between research and education is key to designing systems that are both visionary and implementable.

Importantly, we must not overlook the **mental wellbeing** of both students and educators. As we personalise and digitise learning, we must be vigilant in supporting the human beings behind the screens. A learning environment is only successful if it fosters health, safety, and connection. Innovation without care is unsustainable.

We thank **FernUniversität in Hagen** for hosting this timely and meaningful gathering. As we leave Hagen, we do so with a stronger sense of purpose, a clearer understanding of the road ahead, and deeper connections across our shared European and global educational landscape. We return to our institutions committed to building systems that are engaged, adaptive, and inclusive—not in words alone, but in action.

This is our message from Hagen. Let it guide us in the months and years to come.

Theo Bastiaens

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