



# Future Skills for Future Higher Education

*The day when we started to rethink  
learning...*

Ulf-Daniel Ehlers  
EDEN Annual Conference 2021  
UNED Madrid

Ladies and Gentleman, colleagues,

The EDEN community has made it almost a natural habit to think about the future.

To imagine what will come and to formulate strategies and concepts to be prepared, or to build a momentum for necessary change.

We usually do that by thinking about the most influential factors of today and projecting them into the future.

Today I would like to challenge this method.

Instead of asking “What is going to happen in the future?” let’s pretend we are already there and way beyond it.

We are looking back.

The future has already happened.

**The question then is “Who we were?”**

<Next Slide>



**We take a point of time in the future and we look back into the past to today.**

Why is it useful?

First - Because of the power of contextualisation. We can easily make sense of our own past, our history by framing the context around our experience.

This contextualisation of the future is difficult.

And – secondly: When we look back at our own lives and at the development of our own institutions, we immediately understand that while all our actions have their consequences, still: our past is not the result of a big plan or careful strategizing. It is rather the result of reactions to unexpected events which often we had not even imagined to be possible.

(COVID is just one example of such events)

We then begin to understand that just like the past, also the future is characterized by the unexpected. The emerging and not the foreseeable.

Any Education which claims to be Future Ready Education will aim to prepare learners to deal with the unexpected.

What education can contribute to gain future readiness is to equip us with a compass of clear values to take decisions and a community to reflect, share and learn.

That is why today I invite you to start to think about the future with the same perspective you look at the past.

“Who we were?”

To think about “Who we were?” allows to ask the question

“Was that the future we wanted?”

A cosmic scene featuring a large, dark planet with a blue and purple glow on the left. A bright, glowing star is positioned in the center, and a smaller, dark planet is on the right. The background is a deep blue and purple space filled with numerous small stars and nebulae. The text "Was that the future we wanted?" is centered in white.

Was that the future we wanted?



# The Future Now & Present Futures

distant emerging future (I)  
snapshot of current future (II)  
the immediate next (III)

I would like to structure my reflections into three parts:

Part 1 is looking at future higher education with a long term and removed view. We will see that education in essence always has been a struggle for the next best future.

Part 2 is about capturing what we can perceive already – but for which it is still an open question if we will be able and how to shape higher education accordingly.

Part 3 is about the immediate next future which we are already having on the fingertips.





What can we see in a long term perspective?

Education is a history of ideas.  
Constantly changing.



What do we know of education futures?

Renè Descartes 1663 in seinem "Discours de la Methode"

"Entzauberung der Welt", wie Theodor Adorno und Max Horkheimer

Immanuel Kant: 1784 "Was ist Aufklärung?" - : "Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit. ... Sapere aude! habe Mut, Dich Deines Verstandes zu bedienen!"



Transformation –  
as the future general  
principle.





Higher Education is as well changing its mission and with it its architecture.

If we look into the architecture of the higher education system we can literally see how it is changing shape.

From very exclusive but content rich and broad and divers in liberal arts

To massified and standardised in a time in which today academic education becomes a standards experience for the majority of people.

To a future which we view already as a postmodern architecture of rip and mix individualistic style.

Diversity coming back but with the challenge of designing it as inclusive higher education opportunities for all.



The future of higher education can be imagined in an almost utopian way as inclusive and diverse, catering for individualistic needs for all.

This will not be possible without digital technology, platform concepts, microcredentials, and the entire set of instruments which we just now develop.

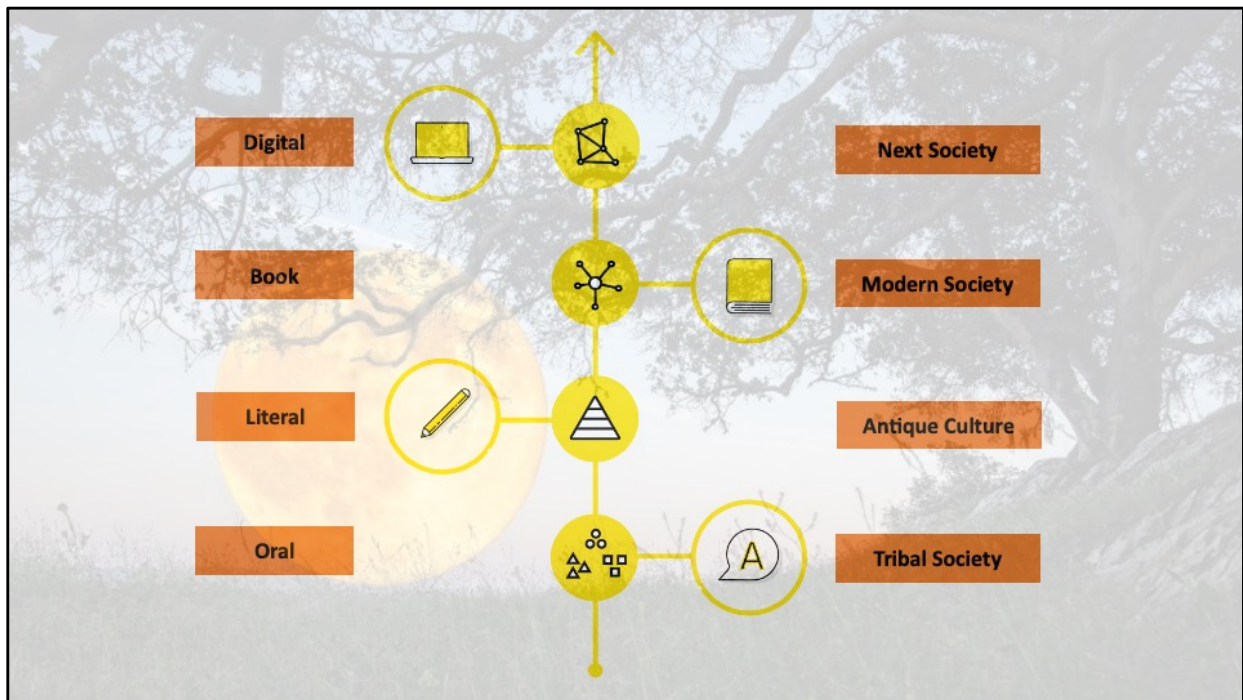




Our discussion is often centred around the digital and its influence on higher education.

When it comes to the future of higher education it is important to understand 2 things:

1. The digital is the engine, the catalyst of the process not the final result.
2. We are not “through” with the digital transformation but rather in the beginning. On the verge of a next society.



This was impressively analysed by Dirk Baecker who shows that the transition process from one leading media to another always was causing huge societal disruptions.

He calls them Media Epochs.

The transition of one epoch to the next epoch is always involving a major disruption.

It is characterised through a huge, huge overflow of information and communication possibilities and societies usually need a long time to get to terms with it and find structures, rules and regulations.

Where society took about 60 to 80 years for the last machine industrial age to unfold, we are still in early stages of a next society under digital change to take shape.

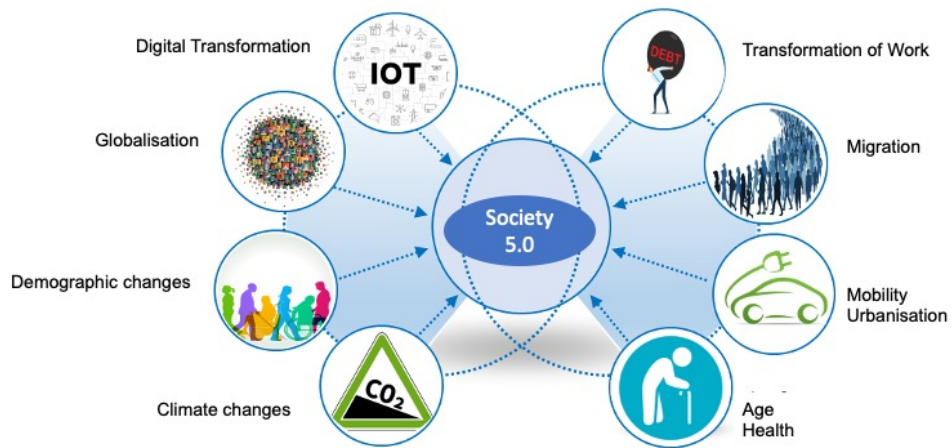
Today we can virtually feel that:



We live in a world with limitless possibilities – but without a good idea how to bring it into a sustainable zone.

Without having yet found structures, rules and ideas how to cope ....

## Trends & Challenges



In a society 5.0 higher education needs to focus on transformative skills or vertical literacies to enable learners to deal with the unforeseen.



Were we the ones who used ed-tech  
to support transformative literacies?

**We take a point of time in the future and we look back into the past to today.**

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Because of the power of contextualisation. We can easily make sense of our own past, our history by framing the context around our experience.

To do so with the future is difficult.

And – secondly: When we look back at our own lives and at the development of our own institutions, we immediately understand that while all our actions have their consequences, still: our past is not the result of a big plan or careful strategizing. It is rather the result of reactions to unexpected events which often we had not even imagined to be possible.

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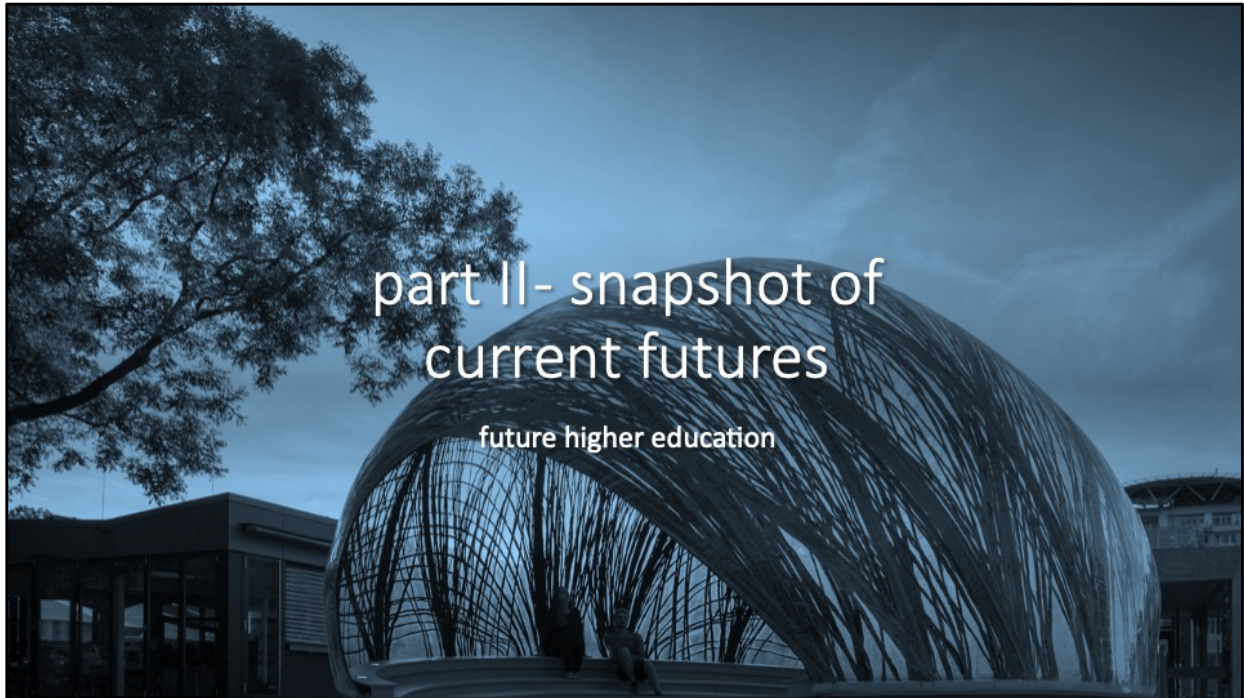
The only help we have is a compass of clear values guiding us to take decisions and a community to reflect, share and learn.

That is why today I invite you to start to think about the future with the same perspective you look at the past.

“Who we were?”

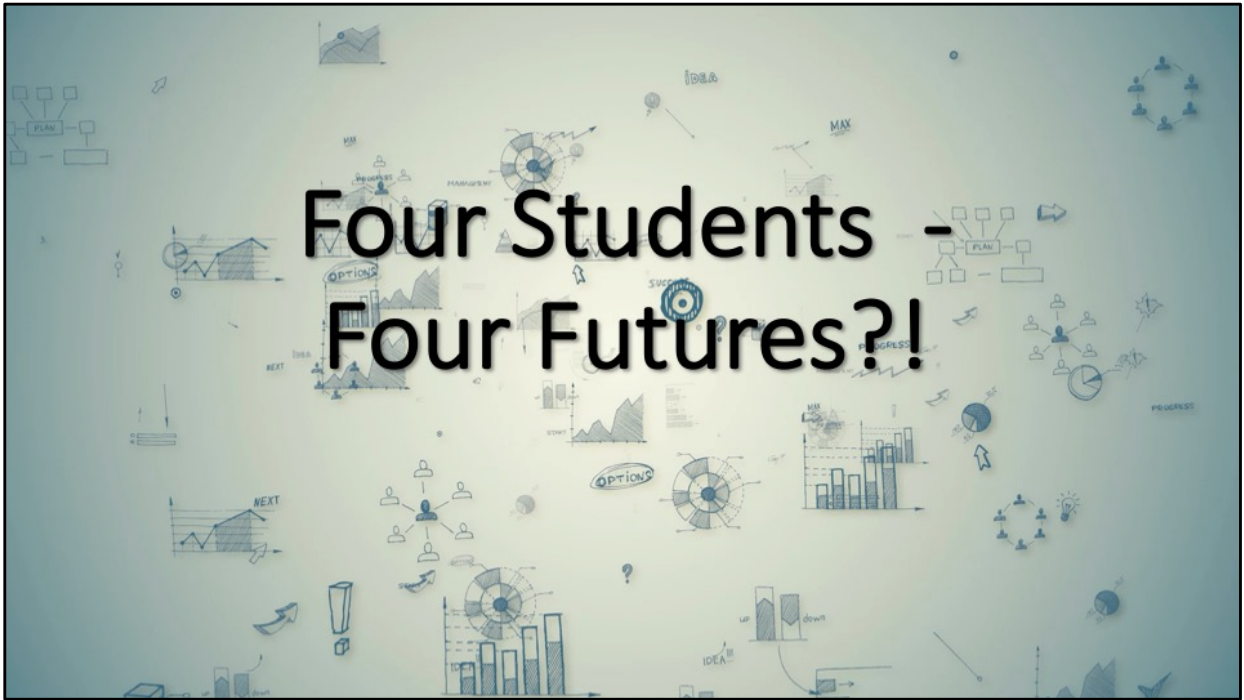
To think about “Who we were?” allows to ask the question

“Was that the future we wanted?”



The current future is described through trends – through causal reasoning – foresight – what we expect to happen. What will that be? Let\*s have a look





# Four Students - Four Futures?!



**First of all, there is Florence.**

She is just 20 and wants to start her studies.

Since she has recently joined the *Global Change Makers*, a group of European environmental activists she knows: She wants to shape the future of society.

And she wants to enter the lion's den: She wants to go to GOOGLE. To break the system from inside.

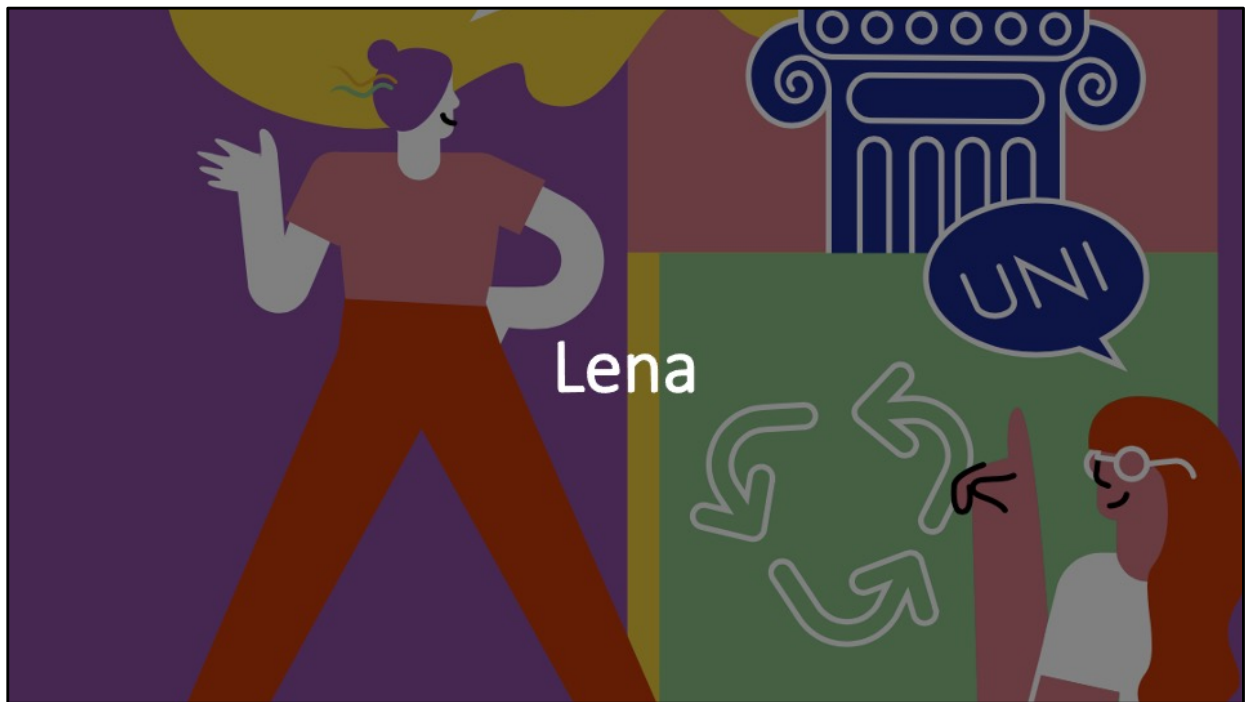
From conversations she knows: At GOOGLE, however, they are not interested in university degrees, but in what we call ***future skills***.

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This is about developing a mission rather than making a master. 'Future Skills' are e.g. Taking responsibility, taking decisions, being innovative and creative, being able to work well in international teams, and ethical competencies. That's what it's all about.

***Florence asks herself: Future Skills - where can I study them?***

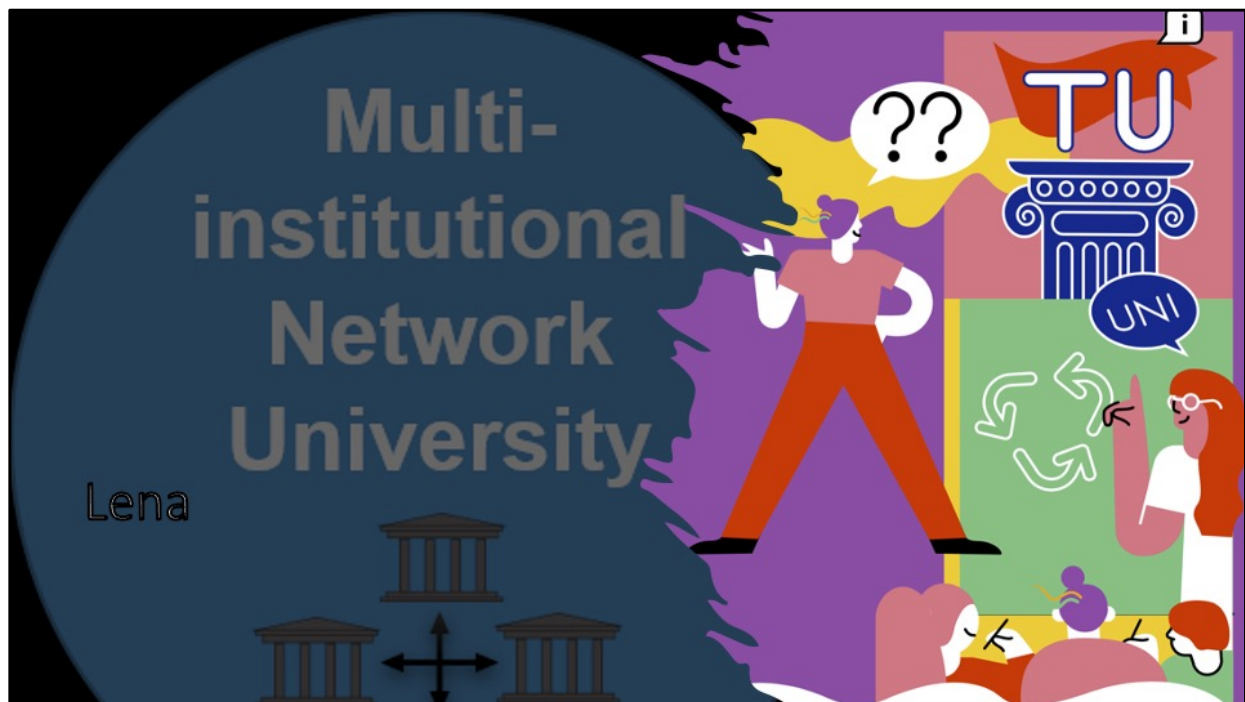


**Ulf: Lena wants everything in life.**

She has already started her studies and is now finding out more and more that there are interesting courses at other universities just for her study interests. Many of them are also online.

She therefore decides: She wants to study in a completely networked way and enrolls at many universities at the same time.

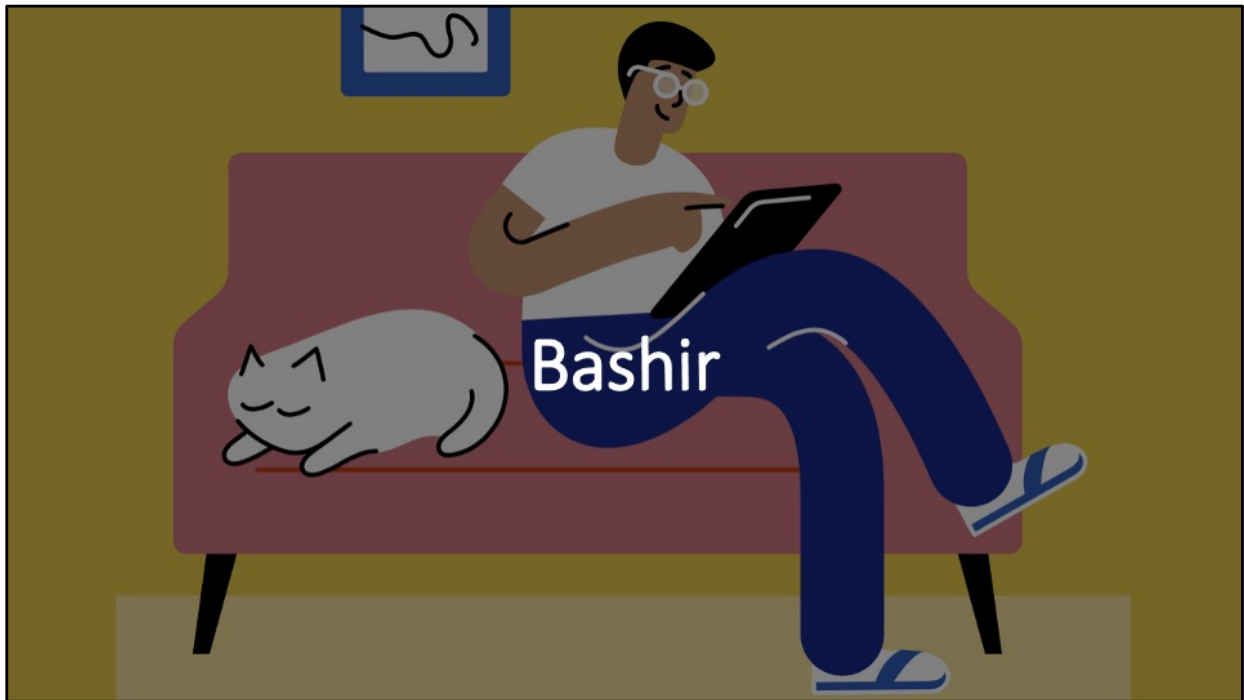
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We call it the multi-institutional study model. She wants to become a marine biologist. It should be networked, preferably at universities around the Baltic Sea or the Mediterranean. And European.

***But is that possible?***





**Ulf: Bashir is frustrated.**

He has dropped out of his studies. Somehow he doesn't fit into the system.

Sure - at first he was very interested in business psychology - the subject he had chosen. But then he was also interested in literary studies and theater pedagogy. After all, that's exactly what you can use later as a human resources manager. He would love to build his own curriculum.

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We call it the personalized MyCurriculum concept.

***But where can you do that?***



**Ulf: Nils has been an experienced social worker for 15 years and works with young people.**

He now wants to study social management.

But with only as much time as he has available, besides family, job and sports club.

And he wonders if there isn't a way that all of his experience can then be recognized in his new studies.

Because he has already seen: The contents of the study modules on 'deviant behavior in adolescents' and 'social psychology' - he already knows them inside out from experience and his 15 years of practice.

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Couldn't he just study the way it suits him?  
We call that lifelong academic education.

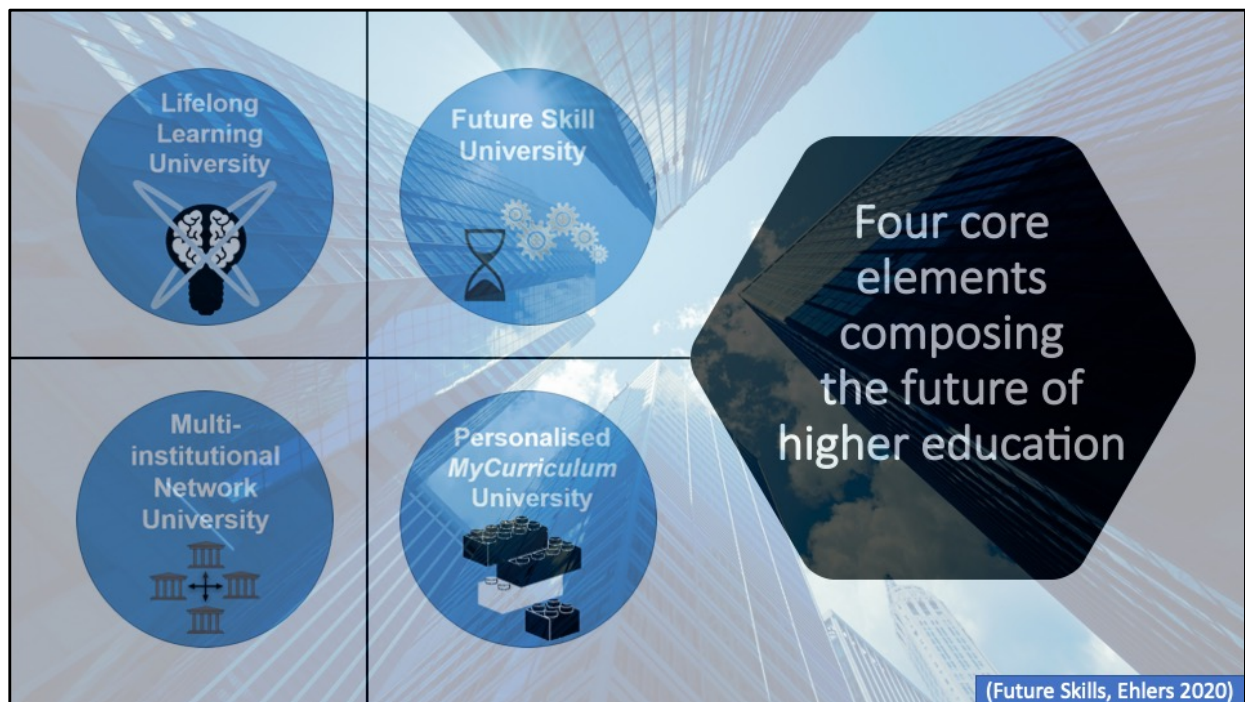


# What is the Masternarrative of Future Higher Education?

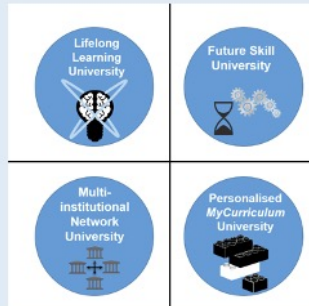
What are the ingredients for the Masternarrative of the future of higher education?







Which of the four futures will impact higher education within the next 5 years strongest?



Use link:

<https://www.menti.com/xcwzc2gjyb>

Or scan QR code

Or go to

[www.menti.com](https://www.menti.com)

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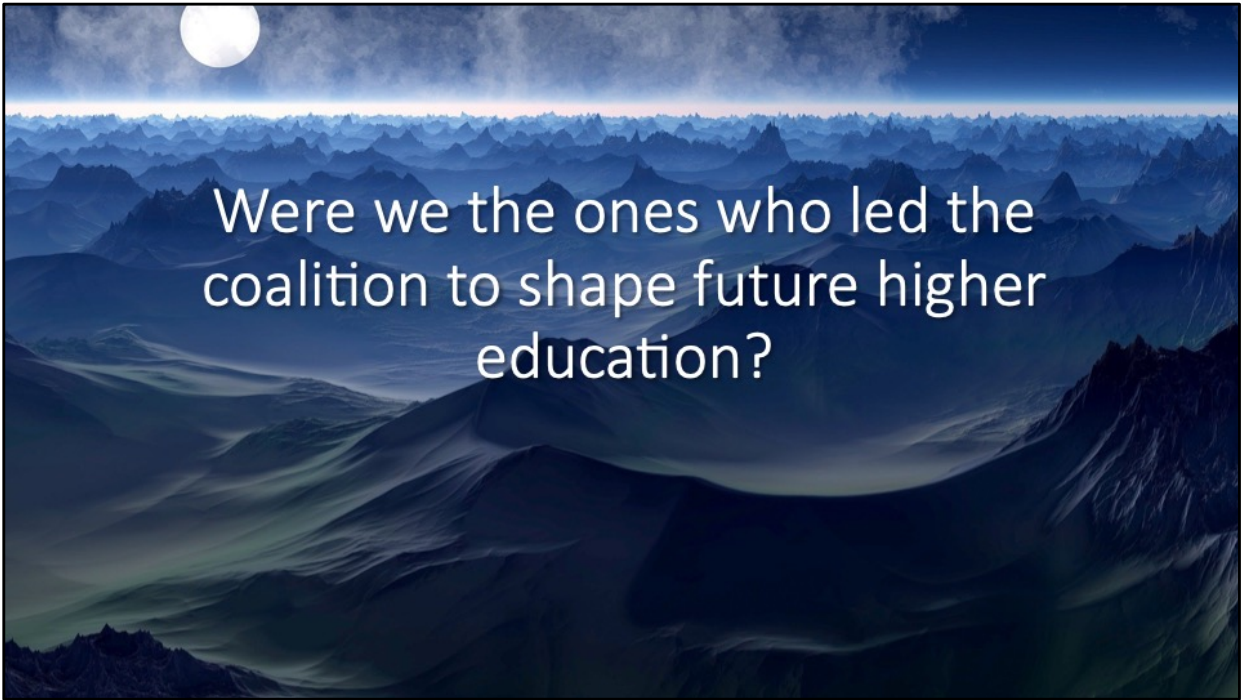
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<https://www.menti.com/xcwzc2gjyb>

Go to [www.menti.com](https://www.menti.com) and use the code 1539 1139

**Please rank the four factors from your point of view according to their influence on higher education in a 5 years period.**

- 1st | Factor 1: Future Skills University
- 2nd | Factor 2: Multiinstitutional Networked University
- 3rd | Factor 3: Personalised MyCurriculum University
- 4th | Factor 4: Lifelong Learning University

A surreal landscape featuring rolling hills and mountains under a full moon. The scene is bathed in a cool, blue light, with the moon positioned in the upper left corner. The text is centered over the middle of the image.


Were we the ones who led the  
coalition to shape future higher  
education?





Coming to part three

The immediate next




**Die NextSkills Initiative**

**Future Skills Book: Overview**

In this Open Access book, Ulf-Daniel Ehlers analyses changed basic coordinates of higher education worldwide and asks how higher education must evolve to meet in a world of global challenges, social changes and innovation-driven, agile fields of work.

[Download Full Version English](#)

[Download Full Version Deutsch](#)




**Warum eigentlich Future Skills?**

**Future Skills Introduction**

Can graduates really be prepared for the future by predominantly acquiring knowledge? Do we already have adequate concepts for competence development in higher education? Or do we need something new, something radical? Learn more about the definition of Future Skills and our study.

[More](#)



**Wer sind hier die Experten?**

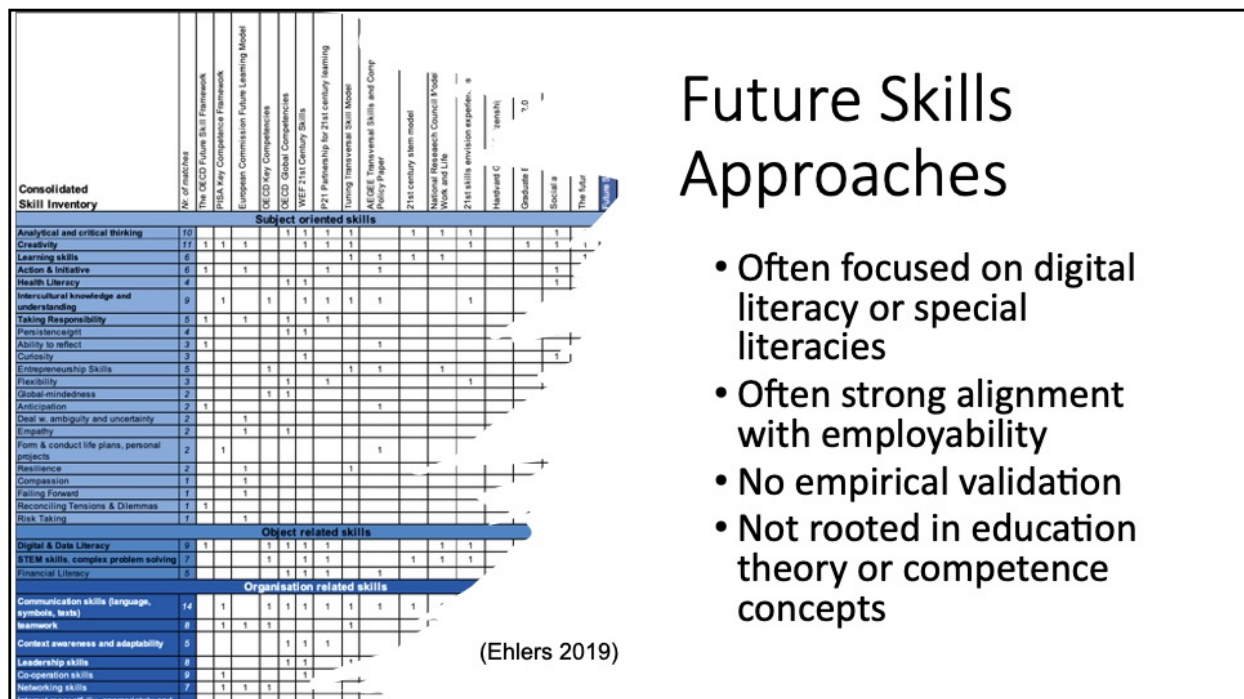
**The Future Skills Turn**

It's like having to replace the pilot in a car race, right in the middle of a steep turn and during a risky overtaking manoeuvre. The old institution of higher education is faced with the challenge of having to reinvent itself. Learn more about challenges and opportunities.

[More](#)

**www.nextskills.org**

We did a large research project to find out what can be said about the immediate next expectations in the future of higher education



Criticise: To little conceptualised  
 Too narrow, focussed on Digital data lietaracy  
 Too focussed on labour market employability

## Future Skill Profiles

- 17 Profiles through qualitative analysis
- Each profile contains several competences



## Self-determination



## Decision competence





**Ambiguity  
competence**



**Digital literacy**



**Reflective competence**



**Communication  
competence**

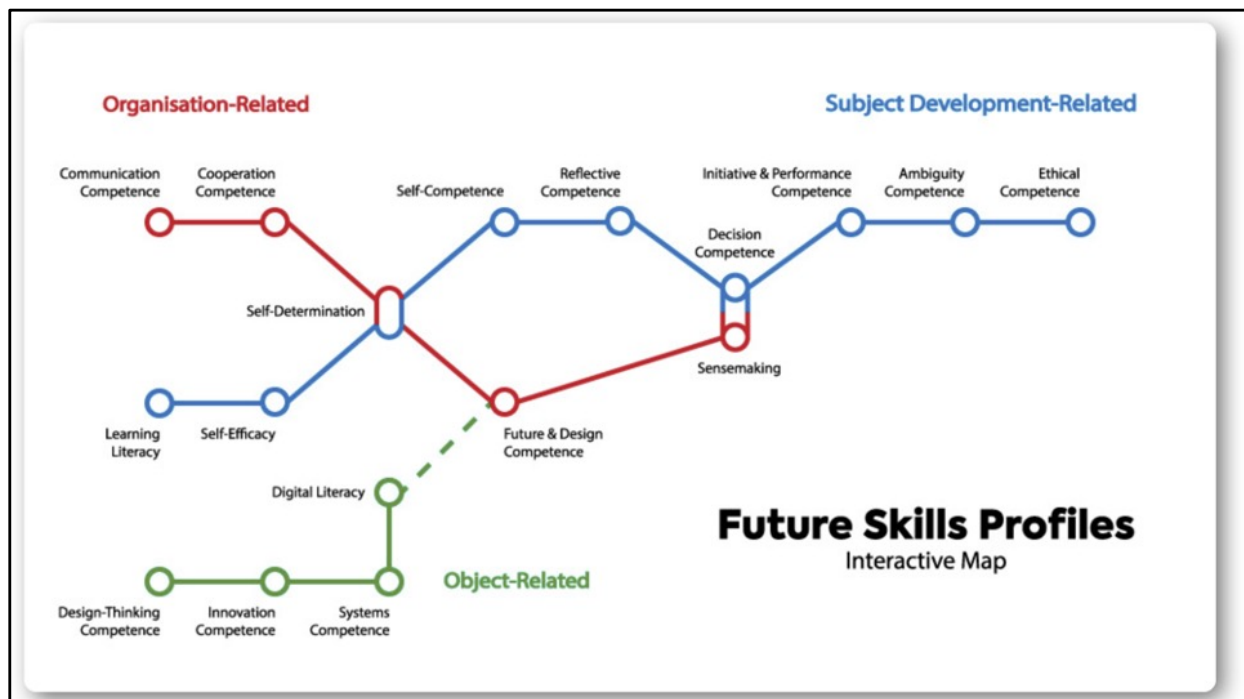


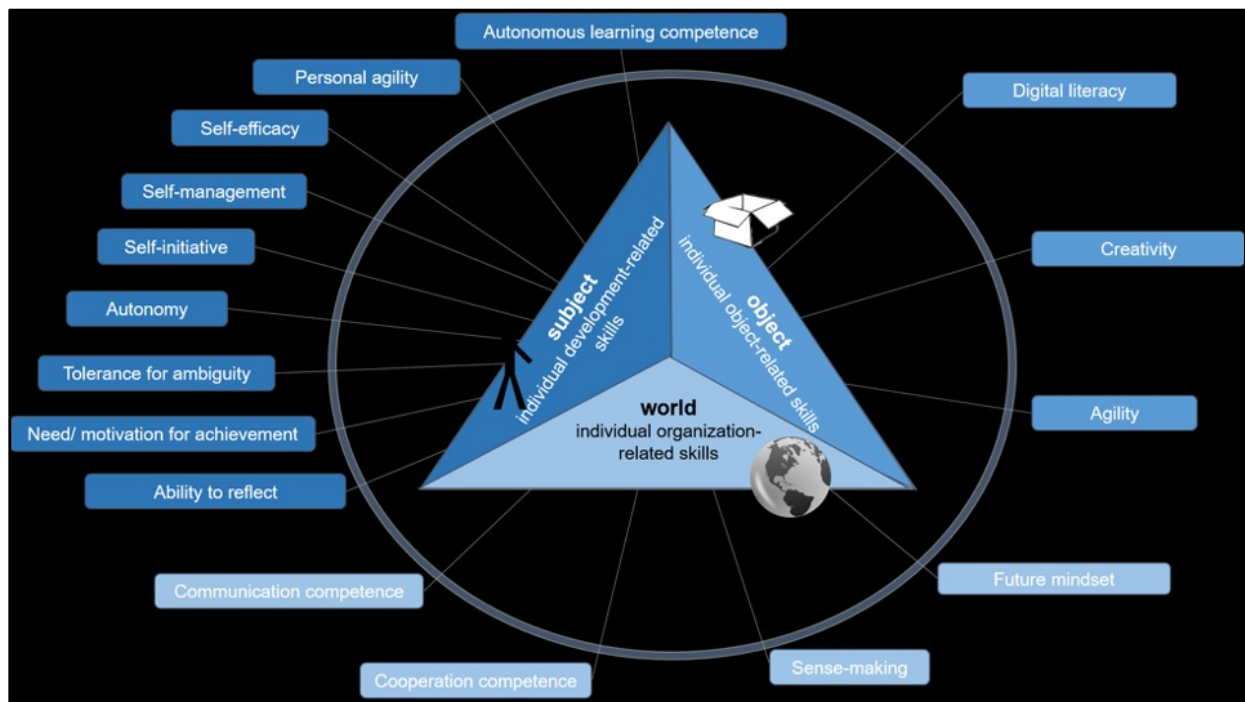
**Design-thinking  
competence**



**Ethical competence**







## **The Global Future Skills Project**

Towards the Future of Higher Education

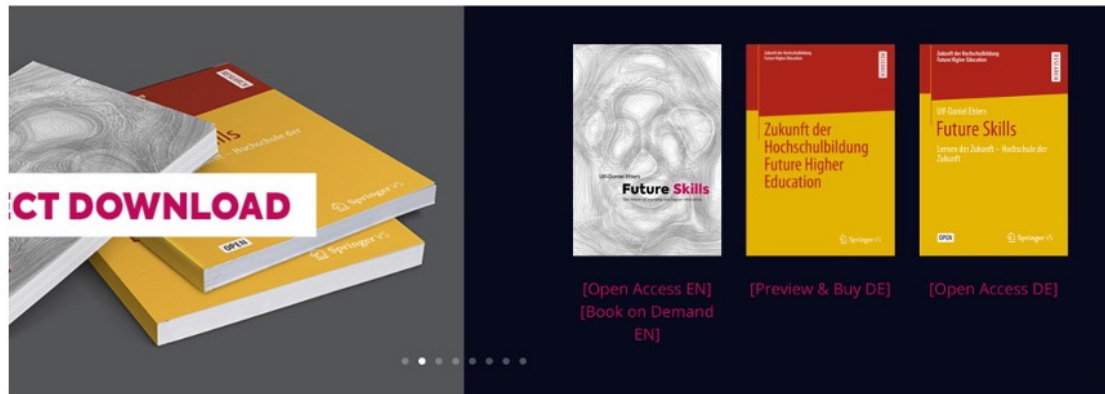
<https://nextskills.org/globalfutureskills/>

### **Global Future Skills Project**

- Collect Future Higher Education Programs on all 5 continents
- Videoportal & Articleseries
- Networked Community



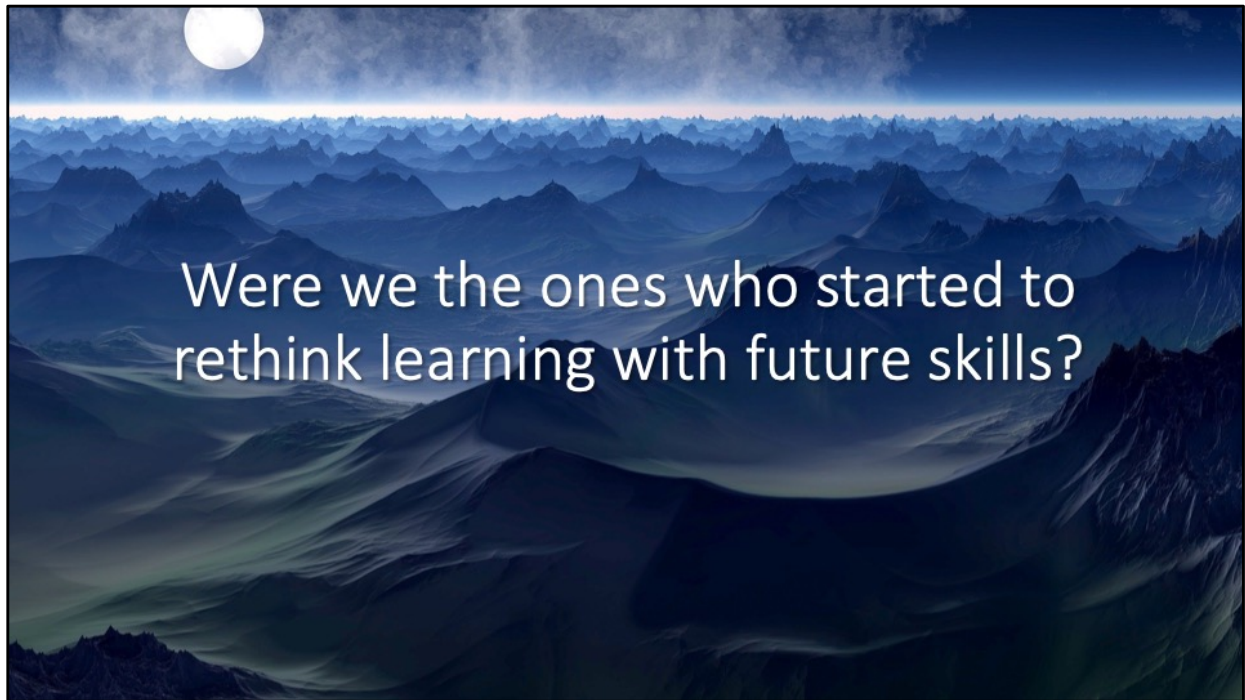
## Download Open Access (in German & English)



[www.nextskills.org](http://www.nextskills.org)



Coming back to the question at the outset of our common journey today:  
"Who were were?"



I believe we know what we have to do.

The implementation is the challenge. And it is on us:

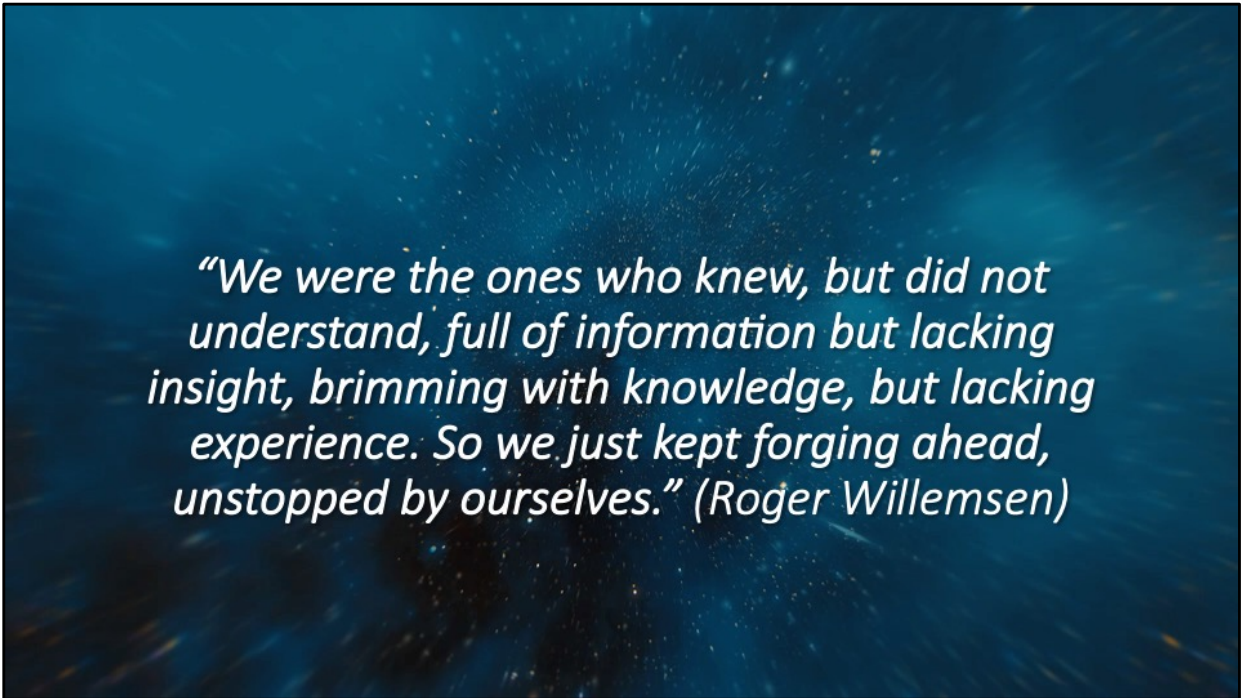
- It is clear that it can not be done through an individual teacher, it is a systems change.
- We know that the fundamental pedagogy which we need to turn our higher education institutions into revolutionary leading institutions is existing. We have developed it in the past;
- The pilots and tools and structures which are needed are there, we have tried them in the past

Now 2 issues are necessary:

1. Strengthening the belief in the competitiveness and viability of a future skills university,
2. spreading the new practices

I firmly belief that in a way, for higher education the future skills turn as I have

described it in the study is representing our landing on the moon of European higher education.

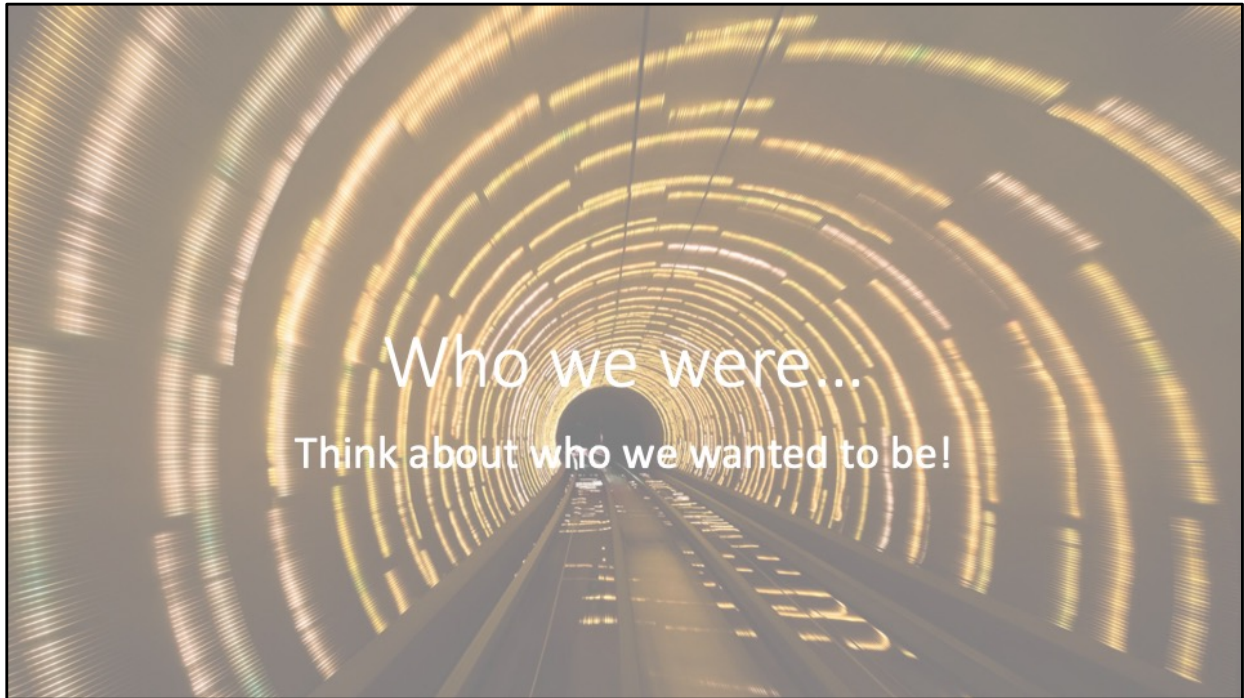


*"We were the ones who knew, but did not understand, full of information but lacking insight, brimming with knowledge, but lacking experience. So we just kept forging ahead, unstopped by ourselves." (Roger Willemsen)*

Roger Willemsen, an German thinker asked this question in his famous speech of the future a couple of years ago.

He concluded:

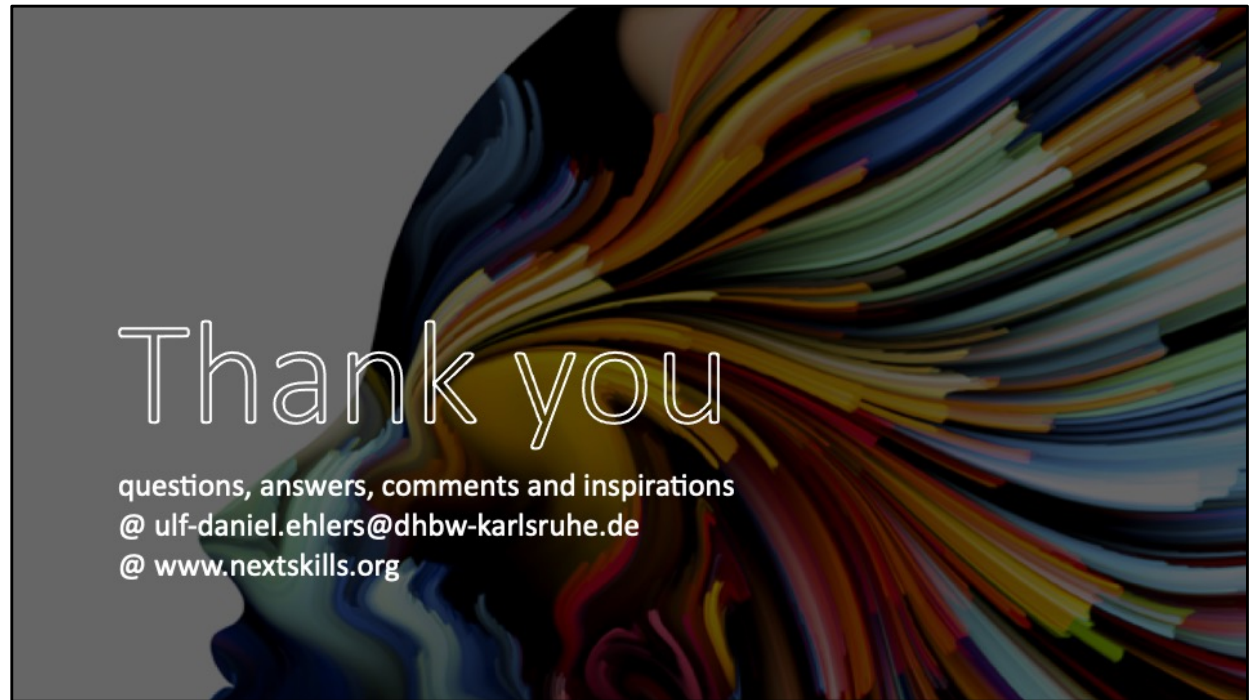








Let's start telling this story  
From today on!



# Thank you

questions, answers, comments and inspirations  
@ [ulf-daniel.ehlers@dhbw-karlsruhe.de](mailto:ulf-daniel.ehlers@dhbw-karlsruhe.de)  
@ [www.nextskills.org](http://www.nextskills.org)



So – my dear colleagues...

We all are standing at the beginning of this labyrinth.

And we all need to work together to develop good answers for the open questions.

But there is a wealth of experiences we can use to learn from.

Let's learn together!

And do the next step.