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## Peace is in peril but universities can make a difference

Celebrating diversity, reforming curricula and working closely with local communities are all ways in which higher education institutions can better foster peacebuilding, says Rocky Tuan

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[Rocky Tuan](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/author/rocky-tuan) (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/author/rocky-tuan>)



When we think of the best universities in the world, we look for groundbreaking and innovative discoveries, great scholars and cream-of-the-crop students. Indeed, we have always been driven to perform according to these standards as they contribute significantly to university reputation.

However, in doing so, universities – particularly large, research-intensive universities – may have lost sight of educating and nurturing students beyond preparation for employment and higher degrees. What are the missing pieces of higher education that are needed to address some of the pressing issues of the world today? One is peacebuilding.

Peace can no longer be taken for granted. The Covid-19 pandemic and recent surges of social unrest around the world are further inflamed by rampant protectionism, tribalism and self-interest. These alarming signals exhort us to rethink the role of universities and whether we are adequately empowering our students to value diversity, cooperation and globalisation. Peacebuilding efforts are urgently needed.



Source: iStock

Coined by the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung some 30 years ago, the definition of peacebuilding has evolved over the years. The United Nations secretary-general's policy committee has described peacebuilding ([https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/peacebuilding\\_orientation.pdf](https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/peacebuilding_orientation.pdf)) as involving "a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development".

Universities must play a role in contributing to peacebuilding. This is beyond offering programmes in peace and conflict studies. Central to peacebuilding is the celebration of diversity. Universities have failed to ensure that such diversity is truly included in their curricula and research. This is a convincing and

influential manner. However, human beings are often intrinsically motivated to be adamant with their own perspectives rather than trying to understand the views of others, resulting in conflicts. So how do we contribute to peacebuilding?

University education enriches the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and has the responsibility of nurturing our youth to grow into responsible citizens. We must rethink our educational objectives and make fundamental reforms to our curricula to include deliberate and systematic efforts in teaching peacebuilding. We need to help students to develop skills to analyse, critique and evaluate information, to understand and appreciate facts to arrive at the truth, and to portray our views in non-confrontational ways. Equally important, we need to teach students to understand and appreciate the humanities through learning about the history of peace and conflict. The university, as the first major exposure to diversity for its young students, is an ideal incubator to make this experience life-changing.

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The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also addressed the need for peacebuilding, not only in goal SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) but also in other goals, such as SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). Hence, universities work in promoting the SDGs must continue to grow.

Peacebuilding is not just a matter of global relevance. Social unrest around the world has reminded us that peacebuilding is desperately needed locally, and this can be addressed through our role as a civic university. Many universities around the world were founded with a civic mission to contribute to their local communities, but have evolved over the years to become research-intensive and have been rewarded for their achievements. The emphasis of internationalisation in a university's agenda may have come at the expense of local interests. Universities should form active local partnerships and holistically include experiential and service-based learning into their curricula so that students can appreciate the sanctity of a job well done and develop humility and empathy.

As the young poet Amanda Gorman shared during US president Joe Biden's inauguration, peace is in peril and we need to confront this. There is an urgent need for us, as vanguards of education, to contribute to peacebuilding.

*"We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all."*

**Rocky Tuan is vice-chancellor and president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/chinese-university-hong-kong>).**

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