

# Higher Education in the Commonwealth: Nurturing Soft Power, Workforce Readiness, and Global Challenges



**Dr. Balasubramanyam Chandramohan,**  
Senior Research Fellow,  
Institute of Commonwealth Studies -  
School of Advanced Study

Should countries focus on Higher Education or School Education? This has long been debated in several countries in the Commonwealth and beyond. In the past debates on development, Higher Education, or the Tertiary sector, was seen as a costly indulgence compared to investment in primary and secondary sectors. The rationale behind this perspective was that investing in early education would provide greater returns on investment in terms of social progress, as well as spin-off effects of having a bigger share

of population equipped with essential literacy and numeracy skills. However, the role of Higher Education in achieving economic and social progress has been receiving increasing recognition as countries look to contributing to supply chains in a more integrated and mobile world. Also, notions of lifelong education have gained fresh recognition and prominence, not least in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), instructional tools, and flexible credentialisation of learning.

**// The youngest children and more marginalised learners, including children with disabilities and those living in remote and rural areas, have been hit the hardest by the pandemic."**



Thus, Higher Education is seen as an engine of growth and prestige, and several attempts across countries in the Commonwealth have been directed at leveraging the vertical integration of education with economically demonstrable value-added supply chains and communities of practice, and with enhanced horizontal outreach with local and global communities. The debate now is whether the role of Higher Education should be one which helps to develop individuals and communities through nurturing qualities of free expression and individual responsibility, consequently enhancing the ‘soft power’ or alternatively to prepare a ‘work-ready’ population that can find jobs and contribute to the community and country through more visible ‘hard power’. Strategic orientation in policy and practice in education and training shifted in several countries which led to prioritising courses in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects over courses in subjects perceived as less ‘useful’

or of ‘low value’. Such shifts, more broadly, raise questions on how to find a balance between the apparent choice between academic and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) strands of education. In some countries, in the UK, for example, equivalence in academic and vocational qualifications in admission to Higher Education courses brings both streams together, in the process, countering some societal attitudes that privilege academic over technical/vocational education.

However, the binary between subject groupings is giving way to ‘hybridity’. This shift is manifested through the restructuring of knowledge taxonomies and organisational configurations within Higher Education, such as new Units/ Departments/ Centres/ Faculties/ Universities. Consequently, this reconfiguration influences the multi and interdisciplinary organisation of formulation, delivery, and quality assurance mechanisms of teaching and learning as well as research. The trend is to move away from canons of

subject orthodoxy to curricula that help with foregrounding ‘problem-solving’ aptitudes and skills that link Higher Education more effectively to the local, regional, and pan-Commonwealth job mobility, especially as some countries adopt a points-based approach to visas and immigration.

### Current developments

Current developments can be mapped along a life-cycle model of student mobility, admission, delivery of courses, assessment, credentialisation, alumni activities and new recruitment of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major problems in student mobility both within countries and across the Commonwealth, as colleges and universities were closed in order to maintain public health. However, as the pandemic eased, with greater availability of vaccines and the reduction in the severity of the pandemic, recruitment has gradually picked up. Additionally, COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption

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of new technologies in the field of online education, particularly in terms of course delivery and staff-student interactions. These developments have been uneven depending on the access that colleges and universities managed to develop and, crucially, the extent and quality of digital resources and IT infrastructure that students had. TVET was seriously affected, especially as it relies heavily on face-to-face contracts and hands-on learning and teaching. Nevertheless, the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) tools has opened not only new opportunities that bypass the limitations, but also new ways of training.

"TVET is critical for promoting a path to recovery and resilience building in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, and for accelerating progress towards Sustainable Development Goals."<sup>1</sup>

Post-Covid student mobility has seen a significant upsurge in the number of applicants planning to study in traditional destination countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This trend has also coincided with policy changes to make the residence more attractive in the intense competition for international students, who contribute to the intangible soft power of the individual institutions and nations, and tangible benefits of income flows to the institutions and local, regional, and national economies. Additionally, the number of international students is a key metric in some international rankings of universities.

Some policy changes in progress in India are likely to impact on student mobility in the Commonwealth. These include the decision to allow the Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs) to

offer courses overseas establishment of campuses by foreign universities, and mutual recognition of academic qualifications with some exclusions, between India and the UK as part of the UK-India Trade negotiations.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital resources and technology, foregrounded pedagogies requiring the acquisition of skills at a rapid pace by students and staff, and encouraged the implementation of innovative or alternative methods of assessment. In the context of public investment not keeping up with the demand for Higher Education, costs become a priority, as the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) points out: "[Open universities, online and blended approaches are viable options for increasing access and equity, improving quality, and cutting the costs of education.](#)"

Post-Covid, Sustainability and Climate Change are emerging as new multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary academic fields. Several universities in the Commonwealth have responded to the challenges by pooling their research expertise to address urgent global issues brought on by climate change. Additionally, in response to students' increasing demand for the "relevance" of their academic learning, courses are being (re)designed to incorporate UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the curriculum, even as campus buildings undergo sustainability audits. There are external pressures too, such as getting a good rank in the Impact rankings of the *Times Higher*, whose metrics are based on the SDGs.

While some universities have chosen to have dedicated organisational

structures, others have created ad hoc communities of learning. The concern with the social role of the universities is reflected in the interface between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and University Social Responsibility (USR) in emerging consortia that sometimes receive external encouragement, such as the support of the UK-India Business Council to the USR Consortium which includes universities in the UK, India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) has also given a prominent place to sustainability issues in its work through the Higher Education and the SDGs Network and the Commonwealth Climate Resilience Network. Other Higher Education-sector-organisations, such as Universities UK, recognise the importance of Climate Change and Sustainability.

The University of Plymouth had a stand at the Annual United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP), CoP27, in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt in November 2022, which foregrounded their work on sustainability and climate change.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth responds to global challenges and promotes knowledge generation by leveraging its ability to solve problems (such as contributing to the Oxford Astra Zeneca COVID-19 vaccine) and by reconfiguring its knowledge taxonomies to develop multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary solutions to problems of sustainability and climate change. ■

1. UNESCO (2022). *Transforming technical and vocational education and training for successful and just transitions: UNESCO strategy 2022-2029*.