

A Fairer Future for Higher Education



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The Commonwealth is home to one in three of the world's youth. This young population has extraordinary potential to build a fairer, greener, and more prosperous future for all if empowered with the knowledge and skills they need to do so. Higher education is the key to unlocking this potential. Yet governments worldwide often focus on basic education reform, leaving higher education struggling to compete for funding and recognition.

At the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), we believe that this “either/or” dynamic overlooks the bigger picture, in which universities are a cornerstone of international development and the education ecosystem as a whole. As the only organisation to represent higher education in the Commonwealth, and through forums such as the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, we make the case that investment in higher education is a vital investment in the development of every society and nation – and one no government cannot afford to ignore.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the first such global goals to include tertiary education.

Their forerunners, the Millennium Development Goals, made no mention of higher education, either as a development target itself or as a driver for international development more broadly. Its explicit inclusion among the targets for SDG 4 arguably signalled the start of a long-overdue shift: from viewing higher education as something primarily benefitting the individual towards its rightful role as a public good.

But there is still some distance to go in achieving the recognition that universities need and deserve. Higher education is a cornerstone of the education ecosystem – training teachers, creating educational content for schools, and supporting lifelong learning – and is essential to realising the targets set out under SDG 4. But its contribution goes far beyond that. University research produces the knowledge and innovation needed to tackle global challenges, from the development of drought-tolerant crops to life-changing vaccines. Through teaching and learning, they shape generations of skilled, employable graduates whose knowledge and training will move the world forward and bring social and economic developments to their societies. Through community engagement, universities combine academic knowledge with the experience and



expertise of their communities to address social disadvantage and local challenges. And in a polarised world, universities offer a space for critical thinking and the open exchange of ideas that can broaden minds and transcend borders. In short, the SDGs can only be achieved with higher education.

Of course, the SDGs are not just interlinked but indivisible. A lack of progress on one hinders progress on others. This means that for higher education to fulfil its potential as an engine of social and economic development, opportunities to access it must be made available to all those who would benefit. But access remains one of our gravest challenges. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, has a population of over a billion, 70 per cent of whom are under the age of 30.

This young population have immense potential to shape their nations and build a fairer, more prosperous future. And yet the gross tertiary enrolment ratio in the region is just 9.4 per cent, significantly below the global average of 38 per cent. Such figures are a stark reminder that access to higher education is still too often dictated by geography, wealth, and circumstance.

So, what can be done to close the gap? Commonwealth collaboration is the bedrock of the ACU's work and elevates everything that is vital and valuable about higher education – from research partnerships to the student experience. Our 500 member institutions across 50 countries represent the breadth and diversity of universities worldwide and the wealth of expertise that exists within them. We know that there is no 'one size fits

all' approach to improving access, but international collaboration offers some important ways forward.

One of these is international mobility – the opportunity to study or undertake research in another country – as referenced under target 4b ('to substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries... for enrolment in higher education). The ACU has a proud history of promoting opportunities for international mobility, including the management of major international scholarship schemes. These include the UK Commonwealth Scholarships, which are led by international development objectives, and the Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships, which offer opportunities for students from all parts of the Commonwealth to study at a university in a developing country.

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Our decades of experience in this area have shown us that scholarships have an impact far beyond the individual. Thinking of SDG 4, for example, the evaluation of the Commonwealth Scholarships shows that its alumni are helping to fortify education systems across the world, increasing the supply of qualified academic staff, strengthening doctoral capacity, and enhancing the provision of university teaching and supervision for new generations of students.

While scholarships are inevitably limited in number, there are still ways to expand the opportunities they provide. The Commonwealth Split-site Scholarships, for example, enable PhD candidates in low- and middle-income countries to spend 12 months at a university in the UK, accessing equipment and research resources that might not otherwise be available to them. Meanwhile, virtual mobility opportunities, such as the ACU’s Commonwealth Virtual Exchange programme, create opportunities for intercultural and knowledge exchange without the need for international travel.

Another area with huge potential to widen access is blended learning. This hybrid approach combines online and face-to-face learning in an integrated and complementary way, aided by purpose-built learning technologies. It is particularly useful in regions where

demand for higher education outstrips supply, with the potential to reach far more students than traditional campus-based study – including those in remote or rural areas. However, its design and delivery can present challenges, particularly where resources are stretched, or investment in online learning has been constrained.

The ACU-led Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) aims to address this challenge. This innovative collaboration brings universities together – including those with particular experience in online learning – to share teaching resources and expertise. By working together in this way, they are able to develop, share, and deliver quality-assured, credit-bearing degree courses on a far greater scale than would have been possible by going it alone. At the same time, the partnership trains academic staff to design and deliver blended learning, meaning the project will continue to yield benefits in the years to come.

PEBL launched its West Africa project in 2022, building on the success of PEBL East Africa, which has unlocked learning opportunities for over 40,000 students to date and trained more than 3,400 academics in the design and delivery of blended learning. Participating universities reported that being part of the programme also offered a considerable advantage when the COVID-19 pandemic forced

universities to make a rapid pivot online.

Yet this also highlights the double bind of online learning’s potential. While online teaching and learning can enable many more people to surmount the traditional barriers to higher education, it relies on internet access, to which precisely the same barriers exist.

The pandemic laid bare this gaping digital divide, not only between high- and low-income countries, but within countries and institutions themselves. For many students, access to learning became rapidly reliant on their capacity to access the internet – not just a fast, stable connection, but also the devices, data costs, and infrastructure that enable online learning to happen. It became clear that if we are to prevent unequal access to the internet from further entrenching existing inequalities in education, digital equity must become a priority for both the sector and society.

This mix of challenge and opportunity is what defines Commonwealth higher education now and in the years ahead: higher education is a powerful force for realising global sustainable development, if accompanied by a radical transformation in access and inclusion. Finding solutions, and realising its potential, calls for universities and countries to work together, and the Commonwealth provides a powerful and relevant framework for exactly that. ■

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