



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

THE ROAD TO 2030

**BUILDING A BETTER WORLD
THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

Strategy 2019-2025



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A MESSAGE FROM OUR PATRON



Reuters/Phil Noble

As Patron of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), it brings me incredible pride to support a network of universities each aligned with the shared goal of enabling students worldwide to maximise their potential through access to higher education.

The experience of attending university allows students to graduate into the world with the social skills and intellectual prowess that will set them up for greater success; that happens not simply on a micro level in their own lives, but on a macro level. The choices they make and challenges they endeavour to overcome create deep and meaningful global impact.

It is important to note that for many young people around the 53 countries of the Commonwealth, the opportunity to achieve their full potential through education can simply feel out of reach. Whether it is cost prohibitive or that the cultural stigma in their specific community restricts their ability to attend by virtue of their gender, race, or creed – the ACU seeks to break through these boundaries and enable all curious minds the opportunity to whet their appetites for the experiential value of higher learning.

In many territories throughout the world, a university education is the key to ending poverty by empowering students to generate incomes for their families and wider communities, as well as securing their own futures.

It is only right then that the ACU plays a critical role in making this happen; this esteemed network supports universities and students to open doors that have otherwise been closed, and in doing so to open minds as well.

I am inspired by the students of today, by their vision and ambition for positive change, and by their understanding of the powerful role higher education can play to create a brighter future. The Commonwealth's young people are an incredible asset, and it is vital that we invest in them.

HRH The Duchess of Sussex
Patron of the Association
of Commonwealth Universities

FOREWORD



Universities transform lives. They strengthen our democracies, bolster our economies, nurture curiosity and invention, and find solutions to the greatest challenges of our time. And with more than two thirds of the Commonwealth under the age of 30, they are a bedrock – a foundation stone – of a safer, fairer, and healthier future.

Yet there are profound obstacles to be overcome. A soaring youth population has placed unprecedented strains on universities. Stubborn inequities in access mean that many are still left behind. Meanwhile, entire generations find their young lives blighted by conflict, environmental disaster, and civil unrest.

These formidable issues demand collective action. And that's where the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) comes in. Our far-reaching network offers a powerful mechanism for joint action in the common interest. We connect, we coordinate, and we convene, harnessing the vast wealth of perspectives, insights, and experience shared by those we represent. In doing so, we demonstrate one of our fundamental beliefs: that global challenges can only be solved through international collaboration.

Just as importantly, we are a collective voice for the value of higher education to society. By virtue of the breadth and number of universities we represent and our accredited status, this voice is amplified a hundred times over, with more power to influence national and international government agendas than any one institution alone.

With this in mind, we have named our strategy 'The road to 2030' – a reference to the target date for the UN Sustainable Development Goals and higher education's intrinsic role in making them a reality. The pages that follow outline the path we will take – our mission, vision, values and strategic priorities, underpinned by a robust operational plan and key performance indicators that will be reviewed annually by our governing Council. It is a framework for our vision, showing the interconnected nature of all our activities and the common goals to which they lead. In this, it captures the essence of an organisation built on collaboration, cooperation, and the free and open exchange of ideas. As we adapt and evolve, we are proud that these principles continue to define us.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Joanna Newman', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Dr Joanna Newman MBE FRSA
Chief Executive and Secretary General

OUR CONTEXT: WHY HIGHER EDUCATION MATTERS

Higher education is integral to building healthier, happier, and wealthier societies. Universities equip people with the skills they need to take up or to create jobs, and drive innovation, progress, and prosperity through cutting-edge research.

The crucial role of higher education in economic and social development was acknowledged by its inclusion in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – the internationally-agreed set of targets that form the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Universities train teachers and create pedagogical content for primary and secondary schools, and support lifelong learning – they are a critical part of the education ecosystem underpinning Goal 4 on quality education.

Universities are also living laboratories, developing solutions for local, national, and global challenges. Higher education underpins all development targets, from poverty reduction to employability, health to environmental sustainability. Meeting these targets depends upon skilled graduates and research evidence.

The past 20 years have seen a rapid and vast increase in the number of people studying at university. From 1995 to 2015, the world Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (GTER) rose from 16% to 36%. Yet this growth is uneven. In 60 countries, over half of those of school leaving age are in tertiary education, and the Oceania region has the highest GTER at 79%. At the other end of the scale, the GTER in sub-Saharan Africa is 9%.

There is also a growing gap between supply and demand. Demand is being driven by urbanisation and, if participation continues to grow at the present rate, in another generation, half of all young people across the world will enter degree programmes. But the quality of the education they will receive is not guaranteed. Access to quality education continues to be dependent on geography and wealth. And while there are now more female than male undergraduates globally, gender parity at postgraduate level and in certain academic disciplines has yet to be achieved.

Increasing scientific endeavour continues to lead to new discoveries, and research is more internationalised than ever before. Universities operate on a local and global scale, connecting researchers and resources across national borders.

Higher education underpins all development targets, from poverty reduction to employability, health to environmental sustainability.

Priorities for higher education in the Commonwealth

Higher education's contribution to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Access and inclusion, including gender equity

International mobility and recognition of qualifications

Employability and the fourth industrial revolution

Growing research capacity through partnerships

The role of universities in fostering respect and understanding

The Commonwealth is a uniquely diverse network of 53 countries – including some of the world's largest, smallest, richest, and poorest nations – united by shared values, heritage, and language.

Its combined population is 2.4 billion, of which more than 60% is aged 29 or under.

31 Commonwealth member countries are small states (usually with a population under 1.5 million), and 24 members are small island developing states.

One in three young people aged between 15 and 29 live in Commonwealth countries: about 640 million out of 1.8 billion.

Sources:

1. Commonwealth Secretariat, 'Fact Facts: The Commonwealth' (2018) 2. S. Marginson & M. van der Wende, 'Globalisation and Higher Education', OECD Education Working Paper No. 8 (2007) 3. S. Marginson, 'The new geo-politics of higher education', Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper No. 34 (2018) 4. S. Marginson, 'World higher education under conditions of national/global disequilibria', Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper No. 42 (2018) 5. UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2019 (2018)



THE ASSOCIATION OF COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITIES



The ACU is an international organisation dedicated to building a better world through higher education.

We believe that international collaboration is central to this ambition. By bringing universities together from around the world – and crucially the people who study and work within them – we help to advance knowledge, promote understanding, broaden minds, and improve lives.

We champion higher education as a cornerstone of stronger societies, supporting our members, partners, and stakeholders as they adapt to a changing world.

A catalyst for positive change

The ACU expands educational opportunities for students and academics across the world by managing prestigious international scholarship schemes (including the UK government's three major scholarship programmes and the Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships); and offering grants and fellowships to support student mobility and international research collaboration.

A platform for collaboration

The ACU enables member universities to connect with and learn from each other by bringing them together to address key policy issues such as gender and equity, climate resilience, and peace and reconciliation; organising events and initiatives to share best practice and benchmark performance; and running programmes to support professional and institutional development.

A champion of higher education

The ACU is an advocate for its members and for higher education, maintaining close working relationships with other Commonwealth and international organisations including the Commonwealth Secretariat, United Nations, national governments, British Council, and regional and national university associations

The world's first international university network, established in 1913

More than 500 member universities in 50 countries

66% of member universities are based in low and middle income countries

Accredited by the Commonwealth and the United Nations

Around GBP 650,000 awarded in grants and scholarships annually

3,500 students on an ACU-administered scholarship at any one time – nearly 90,000 alumni over the past 60 years

Governed by member universities through an elected Council

OUR MISSION

To build a better world
through higher education.

OUR VISION

A world in which higher education transcends
borders, strengthens societies, fosters
innovation, and lifts the lives of people
throughout the Commonwealth and beyond.

OUR VALUES

Quality

We strive to excel in all we do, and continuously reflect on our work to find new ways forward.

Collaboration

We believe that cooperation and sharing ideas makes us stronger.

Innovation

We encourage people to think differently, be curious, and explore new ideas.

Respect

We treat others in the way we would like to be treated – with fairness, integrity, and generosity.

Inclusion

We value difference, and encourage and celebrate the diverse voices of our colleagues and partners.



OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

1

To champion the power of higher education to improve lives

SHAPING POLICY

We will:

- Promote, at the highest levels, the value of universities to society, and their role in sustainable development
- Present a powerful collective voice for universities, large and small, on a global stage
- Lead debate and dialogue around key issues in international higher education

We will do this by:

- Using our accredited status and strategic partnerships to influence policy agendas regularly at international, regional, and national levels, including Commonwealth ministerial meetings (such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings) and at the United Nations High-level Political Forum
- Providing thought leadership within the higher education sector and engaging with international, regional, and national platforms, including Going Global, Times Higher Education Summits, and UN forums
- Raising the profile of universities' contribution to sustainable development within the sector and with governments and donors, in order to influence higher education policy

2

To support the long-term vitality of universities

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY

We will:

- Support the development of the core human and institutional resources that underpin the university mission
- Improve equity, inclusion, and access, which are critical to the future of higher education
- Share learning from local and regional initiatives to deliver wider impact

We will do this by:

- Managing innovative projects and platforms that connect universities across borders to help meet demand, enable vital research, improve performance, and develop higher education systems
- Awarding grants to build institutional capacity
- Hosting organisations that promote innovation and best practice in teaching and learning

3

To engage and connect universities across borders, and promote collaboration among them

CONVENING THE SECTOR

We will:

- Strengthen and grow our international network of universities to extend our global reach
- Create forums through which institutional knowledge and resources can be shared and multiplied
- Deepen our engagement with member universities to identify areas of shared interest and remain responsive to their needs

We will do this by:

- Enhancing member engagement at institutional and regional levels
- Growing our policy networks to enable universities to share best practice, create new programmes and shared curricula, and influence policy agendas within and outside the sector
- Facilitating new global partnerships, especially north-south and south-south linkages

4

To deliver educational opportunities that make a positive and lasting difference

SEEDING CHANGE

We will:

- Run prestigious scholarship schemes that build enduring international connections, understanding, and engagement
- Seek to create and expand educational opportunities
- Demonstrate the impact of international educational experiences and initiatives

We will do this by:

- Managing the UK government's three major scholarship schemes: Chevening, Commonwealth, and Marshall Scholarships
- Growing the Queen Elizabeth Commonwealth Scholarships scheme to increase the number of scholarships available to study in developing countries, which directly addresses Sustainable Development Goal target 4b
- Funding grants and fellowships to support international mobility

5

To uphold the ACU's reputation for excellence and demonstrate its impact

BEING A WORLD-CLASS ORGANISATION

We will:

- Create and sustain a high-performance culture by delivering efficient core services to support our people
- Tell our story in compelling new ways and show evidence of our impact
- Forge alliances with strategic partners to further our mission and achieve our objectives

We will do this by:

- Enhancing our standing as an employer of choice to attract, develop, and retain the best talent
- Building our brand to connect with new and existing audiences and inspire engagement with our mission
- Demonstrating our impact through annual reports on our performance, mapped against the operational plan that underpins our strategic priorities



Students at an ACU Summer School held at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, on the theme 'Global food security: can we feed a growing world?'



Students at an ACU Summer School held at Bath Spa University, UK, on the theme 'Creating greener narratives through the environmental arts and humanities'



Students at an ACU Summer School held at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, on the theme 'Global food security: can we feed a growing world?'



University HR and PR professionals at a conference at the University of Glasgow, UK, on the theme 'Steering institutional strategy: the critical roles of HR and PR'



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