



The Association  
of Commonwealth  
Universities

# THE ROAD TO 2030

**BUILDING A BETTER WORLD  
THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Strategy 2019-2025**  
2021 update



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# CHAIR'S MESSAGE



On campuses and in communities all around the world, universities are helping to create healthier, greener, and fairer societies. Through the work that they do in research, teaching, and community engagement, universities are unlocking solutions to some of the greatest issues of our time.

Over the past year, we have witnessed the extraordinary contribution made by our member universities and partners in the fight against COVID-19, and their agility and inventiveness in adapting to new ways of living and learning.

The response to the pandemic has also shown the strength of a global network collaborating to address common issues. From COVID-19 to the climate crisis, finding solutions to the global challenges we face begins with working together to share knowledge and experience.

But the pandemic also drew global attention to longstanding inequalities in our societies – most acutely, perhaps, the uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, and choices. In a world already divided by wealth and geography, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to teaching, learning, and research for individuals and institutions alike.

I am proud that international collaboration is the core mission of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). Our vision for the university in the 21st century is one that builds bridges between individuals and communities through capacity building, mobility programmes, and research collaborations built on the principles of equity and inclusion. Universities are places where ideas can grow and flourish, individual talent and aspiration can be nurtured, and the building of intercultural understanding and global consciousness can help lead to a more inclusive future.

As we look ahead, the task for universities now is to use the considerable innovation and creativity they have shown during this pandemic to build a fairer future for higher education that leaves no one behind. I am proud that the ACU will draw on the strengths of our diverse community to promote the vital role of higher education, facilitate collaboration, deliver educational opportunities that make a positive and lasting difference, and show that positive change can happen when we work together across borders and cultures.

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**Professor Cheryl de la Rey**  
Chair of the ACU Council

# FOREWORD



Universities are essential for a more sustainable future for us all. At the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), we are proud to recognise and amplify the vital contribution that higher education makes to communities, nations, and the world at large. From public health to the climate crisis, our member universities are spearheading research and innovation, educating the next generation, and engaging the public in debate and action.

We also recognise – especially as we hopefully start to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic – the challenges that universities across the Commonwealth are facing. The need to widen access to quality higher education opportunities for all those who can benefit. The unequal partnerships that lead to unfair and unshared outcomes between partners. The societal structures that influence who gets to learn and who gets to teach.

Guided by our belief that international collaboration is the key to tackling global challenges, the ACU supports its members to develop the solutions we need. We are broadening access to higher education through innovative blended learning programmes. We are equipping early career academics with the skills they need to become research leaders. We are expanding international mobility opportunities through virtual and physical modalities. And we are promoting inclusive higher education through practical initiatives and intercultural exchange.

Our strategic plan, 'The road to 2030', continues to be a powerful guide and framework for our organisational vision. Our mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities are underpinned by a robust operational plan and key performance indicators that are reviewed annually by our governing Council. Our strategy is also a manifesto for how the ACU works with its members and partners to shape policy, strengthen capacity, convene the sector, and seed change.

Universities transform lives. Through international collaboration, we can foster stronger, more vibrant higher education systems, and create opportunities for individuals and societies. We look forward to continuing to work together to build a better world through higher education.

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**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.

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## Key facts

From 1990 to 2017, the global Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate (GTER) rose from 14% to 38%.

If the GTER continues to grow at this rate, by 2030 or soon after, half of all young people across the world will enter tertiary education.

The global GTER conceals wide regional variation: it is 77% in Europe and North America, but only 9% in sub-Saharan Africa.

Globally, only 55% of households are connected to the internet.

Women are a majority of university graduates but a minority of STEM graduates.

In OECD countries, the majority of primary and secondary-level teachers are women, but fewer than one in two teachers at tertiary level is a woman.

Only 11% of countries have a comprehensive tertiary education equity strategy.

# Priorities for higher education in the Commonwealth

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

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Access and inclusion, including gender equity

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International mobility and recognition of qualifications

Employability and the fourth industrial revolution

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Growing research capacity through partnerships

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The role of universities in fostering respect and understanding

The Commonwealth is a uniquely diverse network of 54 countries – including some of the world's largest, smallest, richest, and poorest nations – united by shared values, heritage, and language.

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Its combined population is 2.5 billion, of which more than 60% is aged 29 or under.

32 Commonwealth member countries are small states (usually with a population under 1.5 million), and 25 members are small island developing states.

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

## Sources:

*Changing Higher Education for a Changing World*, eds. C. Callender, W. Locke, S. Marginson (2020); Commonwealth Secretariat, 'Fact Facts: The Commonwealth' (2020); ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, *The State of Broadband 2019* (2019); OECD, *Education at a Glance 2019* (2019); UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020* (2020); UNESCO Institute for Statistics



# 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.

## Connect

Staff and students at ACU member universities are able to connect with others through our networks, communities and events.

## Learn

Alongside opportunities to apply for funding, ACU membership provides the chance to learn from experts from across the Commonwealth and beyond.

## Influence

ACU member universities join a community dedicated to championing higher education's contribution to sustainable development within the sector and with governments and donors.

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

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500 member universities in 50 countries

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76% of member universities are based in low and middle income countries

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Accredited by the Commonwealth and the United Nations

Around GBP 650,000 awarded in grants and scholarships annually

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

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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



Ms Sahlee Praveen Dipo  
Countrywide Gender  
Lead from Bangladesh  
Unit of Gender and Asian Studies

# OUR GOVERNANCE

The ACU is a UK-registered charity incorporated by Royal Charter. Our Patron is Her Majesty The Queen.

We are governed by our members through the ACU Council, which is responsible for overseeing the organisation's activities and determining its future strategic direction. Council members – vice-chancellors of ACU member universities from across the Commonwealth, elected by their peers – also act as our Trustees.

## CHAIR

Professor Cheryl de la Rey – Vice-Chancellor, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

## VICE-CHAIR

Professor Colin Riordan – President and Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University, UK

## HONORARY TREASURER

Professor Feridun Hamdullahpur – formerly President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Waterloo, Canada

## COUNCIL

Professor Dr Francis W O Aduol – Vice-Chancellor, Technical University of Kenya

Professor Pal Ahluwalia – Vice-Chancellor and President, University of the South Pacific

Professor Dr Md Akhtaruzzaman – Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Professor S A Ariadurai – Vice-Chancellor, Open University of Sri Lanka

Engr Ahmed Farooq Bazai – Vice-Chancellor, Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences, Pakistan

Professor Shalini Bharat – Vice-Chancellor and Director, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India

Professor Amanda Broderick – Vice-Chancellor and President, University of East London, UK

Professor Wim de Villiers – Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Professor Dhanjay Jhurry – Vice-Chancellor, University of Mauritius

Professor Tawana Kupe – Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Dr Rhonda L Lenton – President and Vice-Chancellor, York University, Canada

Professor Barnabas Nawangwe – Vice-Chancellor, Makerere University, Uganda

Professor Suhas Pednekar – Vice-Chancellor, University of Mumbai, India

Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng – Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Dr Sandeep Sancheti – Vice-Chancellor, Marwadi University, India

Professor Gabriel Ayum Teye – Vice-Chancellor, University for Development Studies, Ghana



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?'



Participants at a Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) network meeting, held in Kigali, Rwanda



Students and academics from ACU member universities working on issues related to gender equality, during a visit from our Patron



Students at an ACU Summer School hosted by the University of Mauritius, on the theme 'Public health: from a small island state to the global community'





For the lives we can lead

[www.acu.ac.uk](http://www.acu.ac.uk)

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