



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities



From funding to impact:
ACU grants and fellowships

Contents

Introduction	2
The value of ACU grants and fellowships	4
Creating safer campuses: Dr Nida Hussain transforms university responses to sexual harassment	8
Advancing gender-inclusive taxation policies: Dr Muganda Manini unlocks growth opportunities in informal markets	10
Competing for international funding: Dr Mercy Derkyi equips African researchers with tools for success	11
Enhancing air quality research: Prof Steve Hung Lam Yim's fellowship catalyses collaboration	13
Investing in early career researchers: Dr Yvonne Maphonsa expands her international networks	14
Conclusion	15

Author: Jasmine Ashurst

Introduction

Every year, the Association of Commonwealth Universities offers a unique portfolio of grants and fellowships to our member universities to support research development, staff training, and international mobility.

Through this portfolio, we bring our vision of a strong, active, and connected Commonwealth higher education community to life, and pursue our mission to support our members to advance their contributions to sustainable development.

Each of our grants is underpinned by our organisational goals:

- **Strengthening Commonwealth universities** by helping members deliver priority-led institutional change, boosting universities' visibility with key stakeholders, supporting thought leadership and social impact, and **reducing research funding inequities** faced by low- and middle-income Commonwealth countries.
- **Supporting sustainable development** by funding **cutting edge research** that is applicable across the Commonwealth and **brokering connections between member institutions** to create opportunities for strategic collaboration.
- **Connecting engaged leaders** by convening staff and students to **exchange knowledge and best practices, magnifying projects' impact** through cross-institutional partnerships, and **funding international mobilities** for conferences and in-person collaboration.

Members have reported that ACU grants and fellowships are the most important benefit of their membership, giving their staff access to funding that strongly aligns with their institutional priorities. The top priority sustainable development issues that members have identified over the coming years are health, gender equality, and climate resilience. In the 2022-23 funding cycle, over half of the initiatives that the ACU awarded a grant or fellowship for focused on these top three themes.

In addition to looking at the overall impact of ACU grants and fellowships, this report showcases five stories of academics from across the Commonwealth who have used these funding opportunities to build institutional capacity at their universities, create lasting international partnerships, and gain important opportunities for early career development. They include:

Key insights

- ACU grants and fellowships are the most important and utilised benefit for members and **strongly align with members' institutional priorities**.
- ACU grants and fellowships match members' top-priority sustainable development themes for the next five years, with more than half going towards initiatives in **health, gender equity, and climate resilience**.
- ACU grants and fellowships are **accessible to all our members**.

- In **Pakistan**, an ACU Gender Grant financed a project that promoted anti-sexual harassment campaigns and the formalisation of policies that make university campuses safer for female staff and students.
- In **Kenya**, an ACU Fellowship supported research into gender-inclusive taxation initiatives that bridge the gap between informal markets and regional government revenue generation.
- In **Ghana**, a Supporting Research Community Training Grant funded a multi-day workshop that developed African academics' capacity to attract international funding to their research and universities.
- Through an ACU Fellowship, researchers at member universities in **Singapore** and **Hong Kong** collaborated to publish a cutting-edge air pollution model that can be utilised across the Commonwealth.
- In **South Africa**, one academic's conference exemplifies how the ACU supports early career researchers to create global research partnerships at international conferences.

Together, these stories illustrate how the ACU grants and fellowships empower academics across the Commonwealth to drive impactful research, strengthen institutional capacity, and foster meaningful global collaboration.



Ziauddin University, Pakistan, used ACU Gender Grant funding to support staff to strengthen institutional responses to sexual harassment through training and ongoing support.

The value of ACU grants and fellowships

Every year, the ACU offers a wide variety of grants and fellowships that are available exclusively to our members. In 2022-23, five of the eight grants offered by the ACU were associated with ACU networks and communities of practice that addressed our members' key sustainable development themes:

- **Higher Education and the SDGs Community Grants**
- **Human Resources in Higher Education Community Grants**
- **Supporting Research Community Training Grants**
- **Commonwealth Climate Resilience Network Grants**
- **Peace and Reconciliation Network Grants**

The ACU also offered three funding opportunities outside of a community or network to reflect the remaining priority areas of our members:

- **Early Career Conference Grants**
- **ACU Fellowships**
- **Gender Grants**

These funding opportunities are tailored to reflect members' institutional priorities.

Most highly valued member benefit

The ACU conducted its latest membership engagement survey in 2024, gathering insights from over 700 staff members employed at over 200 ACU member universities across 41 countries. This comprehensive survey coverage enabled us to align our strategy with our members' priorities to ensure that they get the most out of their membership. Overwhelmingly, members expressed a strong engagement with the ACU grants and fellowships.

- Accessing ACU grants and fellowships is important to 97% of our members, with 89% describing it as a 'very important' member benefit.
- 38% of members have applied for a grant or fellowship in the past three years.
- The ACU awarded funding to 39% of applicants for their project, conference, training, or fellowship.

Grants and fellowships were especially popular with members in the following regions:

- South Asia and West Africa, representing 25% of applications, respectively.
- East Africa, from which 18% of applications were submitted.

Most members also agreed that these funding opportunities supported their institutional priorities: 75% to a great extent, and a further 22% deemed the funding to be somewhat effective.

Supporting members' top sustainable development priorities

When asked about their top-priority sustainable development issues for the next five years, nearly all members stated that health, gender equity, and climate resilience were their top three. Food security, sustainable cities and urbanisation, peace and reconciliation and promoting respect and understanding for different faiths, beliefs, and cultures, and blue and green economies closely followed. Refugee and migration issues were also considered a key focus for members.

In 2022-23, over half of the initiatives awarded funding focused on these top three themes. The next six sustainable development priorities reported by members were also in close alignment with the proportion of ACU grants and fellowships awarded in 2022-23. The ACU grants and fellowships are therefore on-target for supporting our members to address their top-priority sustainable development issues over the next five years.

The case studies that follow showcase how the ACU grants and fellowships have already contributed towards supporting universities to address these top sustainable development priorities.

The **ACU Fellowship** that enabled researchers at Nanyang Technological University and The Chinese University of Hong Kong to collaborate on an innovative air pollution model supports Commonwealth-wide efforts to improve **health** outcomes and **climate resilience**.

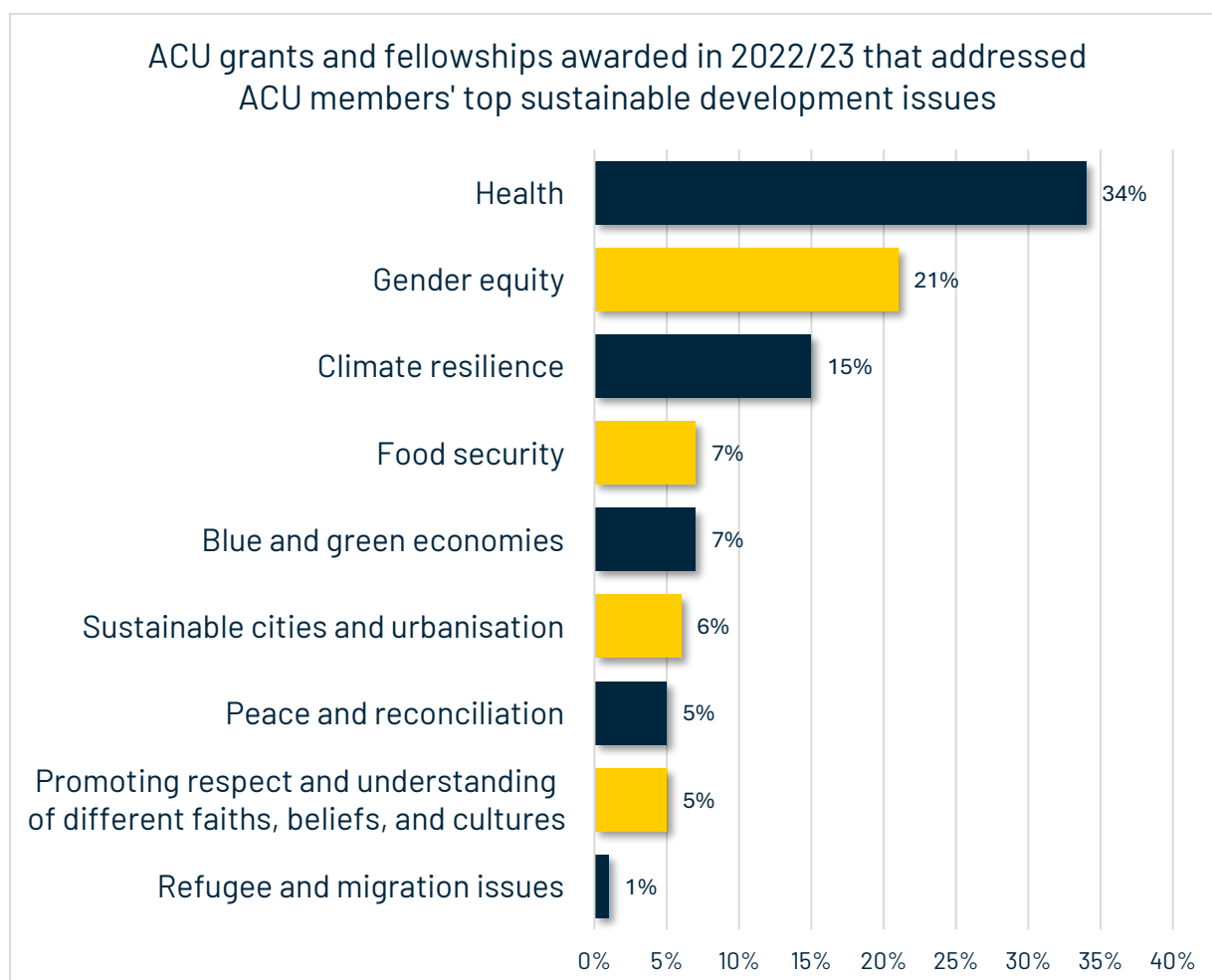
The **Gender Grants** that supported Ziauddin University to formalise anti-sexual harassment policy frameworks and Kibabii University to develop gender-inclusive taxation initiatives both exemplify the ACU's commitment to **gender equity** in the Commonwealth. The **Supporting Research Community Grant** that funded the grant-writing workshop at the University of Energy and Natural Resources also led to the university attracting two consecutive Gender Grants.

Through the **Early Career Conference Grants**, the ACU also funded an emerging academic at the University of Johannesburg to present her work on climate-resilient

Sustainable development issues	%
Health	98
Gender equity	97
Climate resilience	97
Food security	96
Sustainable cities and urbanisation	95
Peace and reconciliation	94
Promoting respect and understanding of different faiths, beliefs, and cultures	94
Blue and green economies	93
Refugee and migration issues	86

Percentage of ACU members who deem sustainable development issues moderately to very important in the next five years.

crops and their use in food products, thereby contributing towards the issues of **climate resilience** and **food security**.



Continuing to deliver impactful grants and fellowships

Since the 2022/23 cycle of the ACU grants and fellowships, the organisation continues to develop a funding portfolio that remains accessible, pertinent, and impactful for member institutions. In the 2025/26 and 2026/27 funding cycles, the ACU is staying on track to offer opportunities that align with members' priorities in health, gender equality, and climate resilience, whilst simultaneously supporting broader development for researchers, professional staff, and students.

Health

- In line with the Commonwealth's commitment to collective action on global health issues, the **Health Expert Group Grants and Fellowships** fund initiatives that foster resilient healthcare workforces, promote technological innovations in health, and strengthen education and training for healthcare providers.

Gender equality

- **Gender Grants** support member universities to strengthen their anti-sexual harassment policies and initiatives, support women in leadership, science, and research, as well as mainstream gender equity into the curriculum.

Climate resilience

- In alignment with collective Commonwealth mandates, the **Oceans Expert Group Grants and Fellowships** and the **Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group Grants** bolster member universities' capacity to translate their academics' research into policy and practice.

The ACU also offers opportunities to develop the skills, collaboration, and capacity of academic and professional staff at member institutions:

- **Early Career Conference Grants** enable emerging researchers to attend and present their work at conferences in other Commonwealth institutions.
- **Human Resources in Higher Education Community Grants** support projects for HR professionals to upscale recruitment and retain talent.
- **Supporting Research Community Training Grants** fund staff to deliver capacity-building training for their researchers.
- The **'Writing for the Media' Training** provided by **Universal Impact / The Conversation** offers professional and academic staff the opportunity to join a 6-month training course to adapt their work to a non-specialist audience in general media outlets.
- In addition to the Expert Group Fellowships, the **Accountancy Fellowship** fosters collaboration among finance and funding experts across the Commonwealth, and the **Hong Kong Inbound and Outbound Fellowships** promote exchange to and from universities in Hong Kong.

In addition to ACU-managed scholarship schemes, undergraduate students at member universities are eligible to apply for:

- **Global Grants**, which fund students to attend a summer school at a university in another Commonwealth country.
- **Edward Boyle Medical Elective Grants**, which fund final-year medical students studying at UK member universities to take their elective in a low- to middle-income Commonwealth country.

Creating safer campuses: Dr Nida Hussain transforms university responses to sexual harassment



Dr Nida Hussain, Pro-Chancellor of Ziauddin University in Pakistan, was awarded an ACU Martha Farrell Foundation Grant in 2023 (now part of the ACU Gender Grants) to lead the Sexual Assault Free Environment (SAFE) Project. This long-standing partnership between the ACU and the Martha Farrell Foundation supports university staff to strengthen institutional responses to sexual harassment through project funding, training, and ongoing support.

Set against a national context in which sexual harassment is widespread and contributes to limited employment opportunities for women, the SAFE Project responded to an urgent need for stronger institutional frameworks. Dr Hussain's initiative aimed to create safer, more inclusive environments for students and staff across Ziauddin University and 25 additional universities in the province of Sindh.

The project combined awareness-raising with institutional reform. Training programmes were developed and delivered to help students and staff identify harmful behaviours and report misconduct. In parallel, efforts focused on strengthening anti-sexual harassment committees and developing robust policy frameworks to ensure effective responses.



Beginning in November 2023, the SAFE Project convened a consortium of stakeholders, including partner universities, the Sindh UNDP Sustainability Unit, and the Sindh Higher Education Commission (SHEC). This collaboration culminated in the SAFE Colloquium in December 2024, where project outputs – including training resources, policies, and institutional practices – were presented to senior policymakers. Endorsement from SHEC signalled the potential for wider adoption of these frameworks across Sindh’s higher education sector.

At the institutional level, the project delivered measurable impact. At Ziauddin University, awareness of sexual harassment increased by 70%, alongside a rise in reports of misconduct which were effectively addressed. The initiative also catalysed sustained student engagement, with over 20 peer-led campaigns and workshops launched using SAFE resources.

Through partnerships spanning universities and policymakers, the SAFE Project has strengthened anti-sexual harassment frameworks across Sindh while fostering a collaborative network committed to ongoing dialogue and reform. It demonstrates how ACU-funded initiatives can drive systemic change, enabling member universities to share knowledge, build institutional capacity, and advance safer, more equitable campuses.



Advancing gender-inclusive taxation policies: Dr Muganda Manini unlocks growth opportunities in informal markets



Dr Muganda Manini, Associate Professor of Finance at Kibabii University in Kenya, was awarded an ACU Fellowship in 2023 to address the disconnect between women-led informal businesses and formal taxation systems. The Fellowship enabled him to strengthen financial literacy and support enterprise development.

The project responded to a structural challenge in Kenya's economy, where low tax revenue constrains investment in public services. A key factor is the prevalence of informal micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), many of which are unregistered and excluded from formal tax systems. Women make up a significant proportion of informal traders; however, little research considers how taxation strategies may impact women differently to men.

Through his Fellowship, Muganda addressed this research gap. He brought together trader groups, community leaders, government officials, tax authorities, and Kibabii University staff and students to contribute to the research and ensure its relevance. The project produced a rich dataset that is already informing academic research, development programming, and policy discussions. Its findings have shaped curriculum development at Kibabii University, embedding gender-sensitive approaches to taxation into teaching and research. Workshops and seminars further extended its reach.

Beyond the university, policymakers and community leaders gained actionable insights to inform more inclusive taxation strategies that support marginalised groups. The project also catalysed localised training initiatives. As a result, female informal traders reported improved understanding of tax regulations and greater confidence navigating compliance systems.

Tax authorities also benefited from stronger engagement with informal traders, gaining feedback to refine outreach approaches. Notably, the project prompted local government officials to review existing tax policies in light of Muganda's findings, demonstrating its influence on policy reform.

By elevating the voices of women in informal markets, Muganda's work represents an important step towards more equitable and effective taxation systems in Kenya. It illustrates how the ACU enables member universities to generate evidence-based solutions, strengthen institutional capacity, and foster collaboration between higher education, communities, and policymakers.

Competing for international funding: Dr Mercy Derkyi equips African researchers with tools for success



Dr Mercy Derkyi, Head of the Centre for Professional Development at the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR), Ghana, was awarded an ACU Supporting Research Community Training Grant to deliver the 'Winnable grant writing skills workshop'. The initiative sought to address a critical skills gap in grant writing among staff and doctoral students, which had been limiting the university's ability to secure research funding.

The project was delivered within a broader context of underfunded research systems across African higher education, where limited domestic investment places increasing emphasis on securing competitive international funding. Strengthening researchers' ability to develop high-quality grant applications is therefore essential for building institutional research capacity and supporting socio-economic development.

Demand for the training was strong from the outset, with participation exceeding initial expectations. With additional institutional support, the workshop engaged 99 participants and was delivered both in person and online, extending its reach to researchers from partner institutions in Kenya.



Over three days, eight expert facilitators from UENR guided participants through key stages of the grant writing process, including interpreting funding calls, developing budgets, and applying approaches such as problem tree analysis and gender responsiveness. The training was both instructive and interactive, which allowed participants to apply the skills and tools presented by the coordinators.

Participant feedback highlighted the relevance and practical value of the training, with many emphasising its immediate applicability to their work. The success of the workshop also demonstrated sustained demand, leading UENR to organise a follow-up training in 2025.

The initiative delivered tangible outcomes beyond skills development. Through the training, participants were introduced to ACU funding opportunities, which resulted in two successful applications to the ACU Gender Grants. These awards supported projects addressing sexual harassment and advancing women's participation in science and engineering at UENR, demonstrating how capacity-building initiatives can catalyse further institutional impact.

By strengthening grant writing expertise and fostering cross-institutional collaboration, the workshop contributed to UENR's ongoing efforts to enhance its research profile. It also exemplifies how ACU-funded training enables member universities to collaboratively address shared challenges and build sustainable research capacity.



05



CENTRE FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CePDEV Organizes a 3-Day Training on Grant Writing for Early Career Researchers

The Center for Professional Development (CePDEV) of the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR) organized a three-day training programme on grant writing for early career researchers. The training, which started from May 24 to 26, 2023 was funded by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the Regional Centre of Energy and Environmental Sustainability (RCEES). The aim of the training is to equip young scholars with the essential skills and knowledge required to secure funding for their research projects.

Participants throughout the 3-day training received insightful presentations from distinguished experts in academia.



Enhancing air quality research: Professor Steve Hung Lam Yim's fellowship catalyses collaboration



Professor Steve Hung Lam Yim, founding Director of the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Health at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, is a leading expert in air quality research and a member of the World Health Organisation's Global Air Pollution and Health Technical Advisory Group. In 2023, he was awarded an ACU Fellowship to collaborate with researchers at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), strengthening cross-institutional research and advancing work on urban air pollution.

There is global concern about the impact of air pollution on health, climate, and ecosystems. The ACU Fellowship enabled Steve and his collaborators to respond to this issue by pioneering the integration of statistical and machine learning approaches to assess air pollution. The project also helped to develop CUHK's 3D Real-Time Atmospheric Monitoring System (3DREAMS). Air pollution is a shared challenge across the Commonwealth, with particularly high levels recorded in parts of Asia. By addressing the complexity of atmospheric dynamics, Steve's research moves beyond traditional ground-level assessments and offers new insights into the drivers of urban air pollution.

The study demonstrated that lower- and upper-level atmospheric factors significantly contribute to ground-level pollution. It also validated that the 3DREAMS model is more capable of accurately measuring pollution variations and identifying local sources. These findings have the potential to advance urban planning, public health interventions, and the development of more effective air quality policies.

Beyond its academic contribution, the ACU Fellowship strengthened collaboration between NTU and CUHK, establishing a foundation for future joint research initiatives and funding applications. Publication of the research in *Science of the Total Environment*¹ and its presentation at the American Geophysical Union annual meeting (AGU24) annual meeting further enhanced the visibility of Commonwealth research on a global stage.

Professor Yim's fellowship demonstrates how the ACU enables its members to collaborate on global challenges and generate cutting-edge research. By facilitating knowledge exchange and advancing innovative methodologies, the project contributes to evidence-based solutions that support healthier and more sustainable urban environments throughout the Commonwealth.

¹ Li, Y. et al. (2024) *Integrating Doppler LiDAR and machine learning into land-use regression model for assessing contribution of vertical atmospheric processes to urban PM2.5 pollution*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.175632>.

Investing in early career researchers: Dr Yvonne Maphonsa expands her international networks



The ACU's Early Career Conference Grants provide emerging researchers with opportunities to participate in international conferences, enabling them to engage with the latest developments in their field and build professional networks. These experiences strengthen individual research and teaching and also support knowledge sharing within home institutions.

Dr Yvonne Maphosa, a lecturer in biotechnology and food technology at the University of Johannesburg, was awarded this grant in 2023/24 to attend the Institute for Food Technologists Annual Conference in Chicago². The event brought together a global network of researchers, industry professionals, and policymakers, providing Yvonne with a platform to contribute to and learn from international discussions.

Yvonne presented her research on sorghum-based probiotic beverages. This work aligns with efforts to promote climate-resilient crops, increasingly recognised for supporting sustainable food systems, particularly in regions vulnerable to environmental shocks. Through discussions on sustainable food technology, Yvonne demonstrated how early career researchers can engage with global challenges and share locally relevant expertise internationally.

The impact of the grant extended beyond the conference. Yvonne returned with strengthened professional networks, new academic and industry contacts, and opportunities for collaboration across multiple countries, reflecting the ACU's role in facilitating international engagement.

Most notably, the grant enabled Yvonne to establish a collaboration with a lecturer at Bells University of Technology, Nigeria. This partnership has progressed towards plans for a co-supervised PhD project, illustrating how conference participation can catalyse longer-term research collaboration and capacity building.

Through this grant, the ACU supports early career researchers to expand their academic profile, contribute to global knowledge exchange, and initiate cross-border collaboration. Dr Maphosa's experience demonstrates how targeted conference funding can generate lasting impact for researchers and institutions by strengthening networks, fostering collaboration, and advancing research in key areas of sustainable development.

² Note that the ACU has since refocused the Early Career Conference Grants to offer funding to staff of member universities who wish to attend a conference in another Commonwealth country only.

Conclusion

At the ACU, we envision a strong, active, and connected Commonwealth higher education community that is working together to build a more equitable and sustainable world. It is our mission to support Commonwealth universities, helping them to collaborate and advance their contribution to sustainable development.

Through our portfolio of grants and fellowships, **we strengthen Commonwealth universities** by:

- supporting members to design and deliver projects that transform institutional policies and practices in line with their priorities;
- funding projects that secure recognition for universities amongst stakeholders in higher education, the public sector, and local communities;
- positioning members at the forefront of thought leadership and social change;
- contributing towards closing the higher education research funding gap faced by low- and middle-income Commonwealth countries.

Our funding portfolio also **supports sustainable development** by:

- funding cutting-edge research into vital sustainable development solutions;
- supporting members to tackle development challenges in ways both tailored to their own contexts and applicable to partners across the Commonwealth;
- brokering connections between our members based on thematic priorities, thereby creating opportunities for strategic collaboration.

The funding available through the ACU grants and fellowships therefore allows us to **connect engaged leaders** from across the Commonwealth. We empower staff and students at ACU member universities to:

- leverage our convening power to exchange knowledge and best practices across regional and national borders;
- magnify the impact of their projects and research by fortifying cross-institutional partnerships;
- travel internationally, for both conferences and in-person collaboration with other member universities.

Through our grants and fellowships portfolio, we directly invest in our members to build their institutional capacity, enhance their contribution towards sustainable development solutions, and create fora for academics to develop, collaborate, and showcase their research. The status of the ACU grants and fellowships as the most important and utilised member benefit is testament to their accessibility to our membership, as well as their close alignment with our members' top-priority sustainable development goals. It is through the ACU grants and fellowships that Commonwealth universities can reap immediate and lasting rewards from their ACU membership.



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HF
United Kingdom

The ACU is registered in England and
Wales as a charity, number 314137

VAT registration number: 195 9141 72