

ACU Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group

Higher Education and Skills for Sustainable Urbanisation

Summary of Activities and Emerging Key Findings



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SUSTAINABLE CITIES
COALITION**

The Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition is an initiative led by the members of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Initiative working in collaboration with The King's Foundation.



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This report outlines the main activities and emerging key findings delivered under the ACU Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group – a cross-cutting workstream of the CSCC pilot focused on the role of Higher Education in developing the skills and competencies required to advance sustainable urbanisation across the Commonwealth.

Overview

In November 2025, the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition (CSCC) was launched as a pilot programme to advance the [Commonwealth Declaration on Sustainable Urbanisation](#) and deepen multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the growing challenge of sustainable urbanisation across the Commonwealth.

Funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and managed by the ACU, CSCC aimed to strengthen policy, governance, and climate resilience by supporting knowledge exchange, capacity building, and practical action amongst governments, policymakers, professionals, and urban development practitioners.

To do so, the pilot convened three transdisciplinary Action Groups focused on **Housing, Urban Finance, and Integrated Planning** to drive collaborative, evidence-based urban development.

These were supported by a crosscutting focus on **skills** - led by the ACU Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group - which focused on the role of Higher Education in developing the skills and competencies required to advance sustainable urbanisation in the Commonwealth.

Why this matter

Universities play a central role in training planners, engineers, architects, and policy professionals. Yet across CSCC workstreams, a persistent issue emerges: **skills supply is not keeping pace with skills demand**, creating a structural misalignment that exacerbates an ever-increasing capacity and competencies gap that directly effects national responses to the twin challenges of rapid urbanisation and climate change. Without aligned skills pipelines, investments in urban infrastructure therefore risk being undermined by limited institutional and human capacity.

With this challenge in mind, the Expert Group focused on the following practical questions:

1. What urban related higher education provision exists across the Commonwealth?
2. Where is this provided and how contextually relevant is it?
3. How is this delivered by higher education institutions in practice?
4. What enablers and barriers determine how well this provision aligns with wider societal needs?

5. How is technical expertise effectively connected to policy, professional, and community partnerships for mutual learning and benefit?

Expert Group Activities

To address these questions, the ACU Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group convened academic experts from 12 ACU member universities across 9 countries to design and deliver the following activities:

1. **Mapping relevant Higher Education provision across the Commonwealth** using the World Higher Education Database¹ – identifying **over 7,000 cases of urban-related provision across more than 1,300 universities in 47 countries**, enabling analysis of where sustainable urbanisation relevant teaching and research exists - and where gaps remain - both across and within national systems.
2. Launched the **ACU Sustainable Built Environment (SBE) Survey**, receiving **101 valid responses from 73 institutions across 28 Commonwealth countries**. The survey looked beyond what is taught to evidence how universities align institutional strategy, teaching, and research with urban policy frameworks in practice: the skills and competencies they prioritise, the external partnership models that shape research programmes and inform curriculum design and delivery, and the common enablers and barriers that effect alignment with government, industry and civil society.
3. **Commissioned deep-dive research** exploring how higher education interacts with and responds to urban development systems across the Commonwealth. [Higher Education and Urban Systems in Kenya](#) evidences a challenge common across many Commonwealth countries: that urban governance needs often expand skills demands faster than curricula can adapt. The report provides a structured methodology for assessing the alignment of higher education provision with the competency demands of Kenya's devolved governance system, with recommendations for strengthening a more integrated, systems-level approach to skills spanning planning, implementation and finance by deepening collaboration between universities, government, and industry.
4. **Developed case studies** showcasing innovative university approaches to skills and competency provision across planning, housing, finance, governance and inclusion across diverse Commonwealth contexts. All case studies - highlighting diverse delivery models, partnerships and learning environments across the Commonwealth - can be accessed via the CSCC website [here](#).
5. **Worked directly with CSCC Action Groups**, supporting the production and peer review of wider programme reports, policy briefs, and case studies.

Taken together, these activities intended to establish both a macro picture of the higher education landscape across the Commonwealth and good practice within the ACU's wider membership to identify the conditions or approaches that advance sustainable urbanisation and which could be adapted, replicated or scaled to different contexts.

¹ Higher Education data © International Association of Universities, supplied 2025.

Emerging Key Themes

Imbalances in provision across CSCC thematic areas

The SBE Survey reveals clear imbalances in how thematic areas are reflected across university strategy, teaching and research. Housing and integrated planning are the most prominent areas, while urban finance remains the least visible. Housing is reflected in 73% of institutional strategy responses, compared with 55% in teaching and 51% in research, while integrated planning is also consistently prominent, reaching 67% in teaching and 75% in research. By contrast, urban finance appears in only 27% of strategy responses, rising to 47% in teaching and 43% in research. This may suggest that universities are generally better positioned to address what to build and how to plan but less consistently engaged with the financial and fiscal mechanisms required to deliver sustainable urban solutions.

Emerging evidence from the wider CSCC programme also suggests that difficulties in the supply of these types of skills are likewise compounded on the demand side by poorly defined career pathways into, and professionalisation and structured training opportunities for, urban finance related roles.

Insights from the *Higher Education and Urban Systems in Kenya* report provides a further illustrative example of how these imbalances play out in practice. While Kenyan universities are well placed to respond to changing spatial planning and housing competency demands, the capacity to engage systematically with urban finance remains more limited. Skills related to land-based finance, municipal revenue generation and the structuring of urban investment are less deeply embedded in higher education provision, despite their importance to implementation at the devolved county government level. This reinforces a broader gap between technical planning expertise and the financial mechanisms needed to operationalise sustainable urban development.

This pattern of imbalance in provision is mirrored in how higher education activity is represented and captured at system level. The WHED mapping exercise evidenced where higher education provision relevant to integrated planning, housing, urban finance and climate resilience is present (and where it is absent) at national and sub-national levels. However, it also surfaced key challenges in the classification of university teaching and research, with provision distributed across institutional units or embedded within broader disciplines and programmes in ways not readily visible or comparable. As a result, important areas of expertise and skills development are likely to be underrepresented in structured mappings, even where substantive activity exists.

Universities as system bridges between policy, practice and place

Across the evidence base, universities operate most effectively as connective spaces linking global frameworks, national policy priorities and local urban realities. Survey findings show particularly strong alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals across strategy (82%), teaching (80%) and research (78%), alongside substantial engagement with local community development and resilience plans, especially in teaching (50%) and research (62%). Research also shows the broadest alignment with multi-level policy agendas, including national urban policies (44%), city resilience plans (48%) and digital or smart city strategies (48%). Whilst necessarily indicative, the survey data thus reflects a dual role: aligning with global agendas while responding to context-specific urban challenges.

Case studies illustrate this bridging role in practice. The [Wallumattagal Living Lab](#) links research and teaching with real-world implementation through a functioning urban ecosystem, building capabilities in systems thinking, data use and cross-sector collaboration. The [Urban Design Africa](#) programme in Cape Town brings together practitioners, researchers and government officials to develop applied, context-specific urban design approaches

across scales, from city-wide to local neighbourhood systems. In [Nairobi, reform coalitions](#) similarly highlight the critical role of universities in supporting facilitation, trust building and co-production of solutions between communities and government to tackle complex urban challenges, particularly in informal settlements, and advance inclusive urban reform at scale.

Skills gaps are relational, not just technical

Challenges in delivering sustainable urban outcomes are rarely due to a lack of technical knowledge alone. Survey findings show that universities place strong emphasis on systems thinking and interdisciplinary knowledge, with 84% of teaching responses and 75% of research responses highlighting critical, systems and problem-based thinking, and 86% of teaching and 77% of research highlighting interdisciplinary knowledge. Soft and employability skills are also strongly prioritised in teaching (86%). By contrast, technician or mid-level competencies receive lower emphasis (52% in teaching and 48% in research), as do practical, hands-on competencies (68% in teaching and 59% in research). The emerging pattern suggests a stronger emphasis on conceptual and analytical capability alongside continued delivery of applied and technical skills.

At the same time, survey responses indicate that real-world delivery barriers are primarily structural. Respondents identified fragmented policy systems, weak coordination, limited local government capacity, insufficient budgets and bureaucratic inertia as major challenges in aligning university provision with wider societal needs. These findings echo those identified in the wider [CSCC Linkages Report](#); consolidating evidence generated across all CSCC workstreams, the report highlights the challenge of weak alignment across the sectors that comprise urban systems, rather than constraints within any single sector, as the primary barrier to delivering affordable, inclusive and climate-responsive urban development. On this basis, addressing both technical skills deficits and strengthening connections between these systems are therefore critical to translating policy into coordinated, implementable delivery and achieving sustainable urban outcomes.

Case studies further underline this point. In [Bangladesh, integrated urban planning](#) is constrained less by the absence of plans and more by fragmented mandates and limited professional capacity to work across sectors. Disability-inclusive health planning in Johannesburg demonstrates that progressive policy frameworks fail without skills in implementation, monitoring and inter-agency coordination. In [Papua New Guinea](#), infrastructure development similarly requires an integration of technical, legal, negotiation and governance skills in relation to customary landownership.

Embedding integrated skills in practice

While integrated skills are widely recognised, their institutional embedding remains uneven. Fewer than half of survey respondents reported formal university-wide partnerships or agreements with external bodies to support sustainable built environment provision. Strategic joint research or innovation agreements were reported by 43% of respondents, while strategic joint teaching or training agreements were far less common at just 20%. At the same time, 86% of respondents indicated that they, their department or institution collaborate with external organisations in the operational design or implementation of teaching provision. Whilst indicative, the data therefore suggests that integrated skills are actively developed but are more often embedded within individual programmes and projects rather than through institution-wide initiatives.

Different models illustrate how universities are responding. The [RAMP University Network](#) demonstrates how universities build local capacity in climate-vulnerable contexts through applied teaching and professional training linked directly to public authorities, embedding skills within national institutions over the long term. Other models focus on applied and place-based learning. The [Wallumattagal Living Lab](#) integrates education, research and



campus operations, enabling students and researchers to develop systems thinking, data analysis and stakeholder engagement through work on real urban systems. The [Urban Design Africa](#) programme similarly embeds learning in real contexts through mapping, workshops and action planning, building applied capabilities across disciplines and scales.

Survey findings reinforce the importance of these applied and collaborative approaches. The most common mechanisms through which universities engage external partners include joint research or fieldwork projects (78%), placements within partner organisations (73%) and collaboration on curriculum design (73%), alongside joint teaching or training (66%). This indicates that universities are already using experiential and partnership-based models extensively to develop relevant skills. However, as these collaborations are seemingly more prevalent at programme level than through formal institutional arrangements, they remain more operational than strategically embedded.

Inclusion, equity and local knowledge as core skill dimensions

Equity, social inclusion and recognition of local and Indigenous knowledge are increasingly treated as core components of sustainable urban skills. Survey findings show that 67% of respondents reported that gender equality or social inclusion considerations shape how sustainable built environment skills or research are developed or applied, though this is not yet universal. Responses also pointed to formal gender or GEDSI policies, inclusive consultation processes, targeted outreach to women and girls, and research on equitable access to housing, infrastructure and urban services. At the same time, respondents highlighted continuing contextual barriers such as traditional gender roles, religious norms and cultural stereotypes that continue to affect participation in built environment fields.

Case studies reinforce that these are not peripheral concerns. The [Johannesburg case study](#) highlights the importance of policy translation, accessibility monitoring and data-driven planning in responding to and actively addressing disability exclusion. Reform coalitions in Nairobi show how lived experience and community participation can be embedded in planning and service delivery processes. The [Wallumattagal Living Lab](#) integrates indigenous knowledge and Caring for Country principles into urban land management and skills development.

Using evidence and mapping tools to strengthen future partnerships

The SBE Survey and WHED mapping exercise provide a practical basis for more targeted collaboration across the Commonwealth. Survey findings show that universities most commonly align provision with external priorities through regular engagement with industry bodies or professional associations (68%), participation in local or national government consultations or policy forums (66%), and formal partnerships with industry, employers or sector organisations (63%). Alignment is therefore achieved primarily through sustained external engagement rather than through internal academic processes alone.

Research collaboration is also strongly participatory. The most common approaches reported were knowledge exchange or research engagement activities (87%), participatory methods involving external partners in research design and delivery (81%), and co-design of joint funding bids or proposals (61%). These provide practical models to inform how future partnerships across CSCC networks could be structured, particularly where collaboration needs to link research, skills development and local delivery.



Likewise, the WHED dataset provides a way to map local skills supply chains geographically – helping partners target partnerships for university-local authority collaboration and capacity building – particularly within second and third tier cities.

Taken together, these tools can support more place-based and targeted partnerships by identifying concentrations of expertise, surfacing examples of effective practice and highlighting gaps in institutional capacity, particularly in secondary cities where provision may be less visible. In this way, the combined evidence base does not simply describe existing activity, but can actively support future collaboration, capacity building and knowledge exchange across the Commonwealth.



Appendices

I: ACU Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group Members

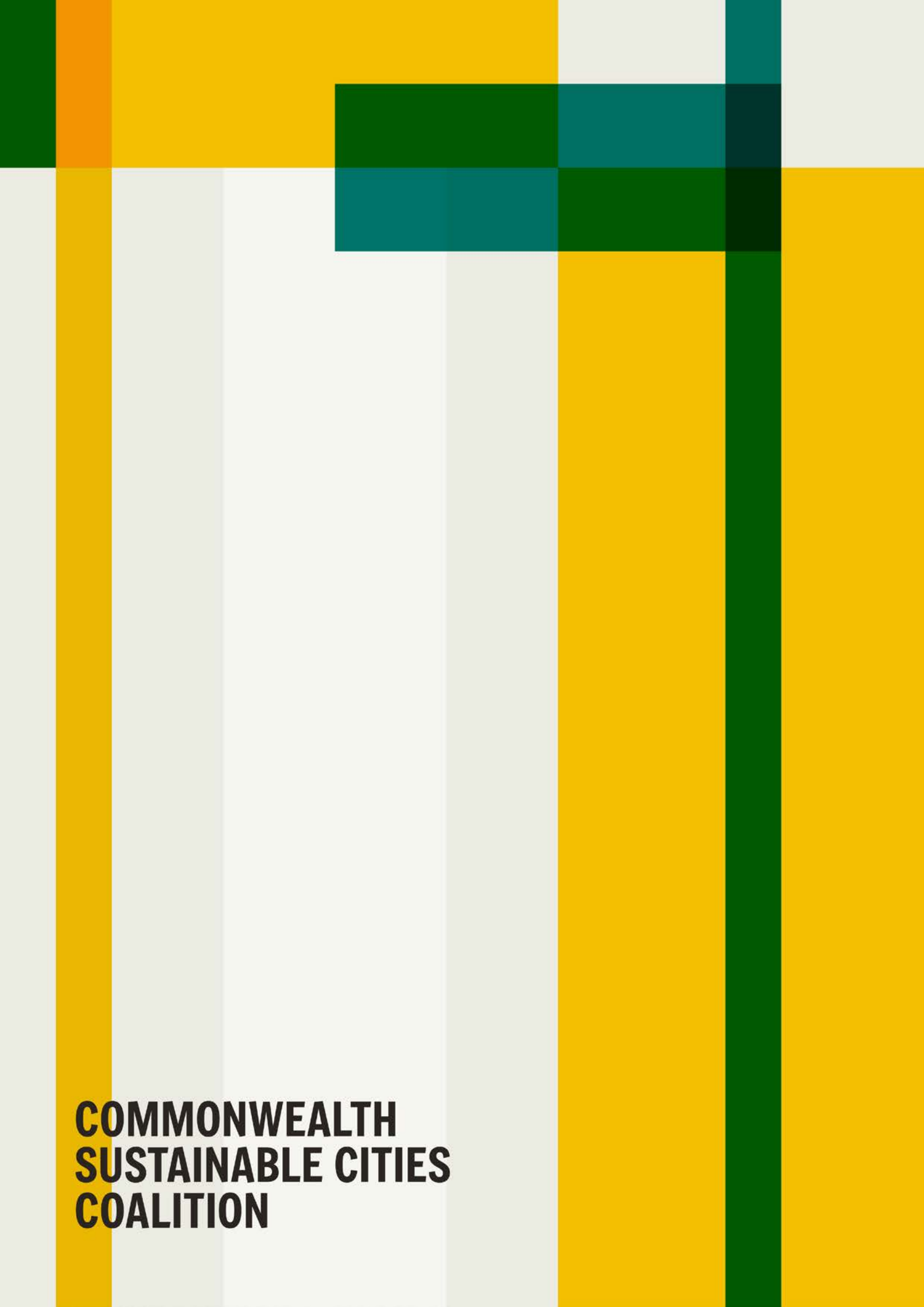
ACU Expert Groups represent a new research-to-policy impact initiative that harness the academic expertise of our 400+ university network to directly engage with Commonwealth governments and civil society partners to tackle key sustainable development priorities.

We are hugely grateful to the members of the Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group and their institutions for volunteering their time, expertise and support in contributing to all activities delivered under the CSCC pilot.

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II: ACU member case study contributors

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