



CCEM Policy Brief 1: Lessons learned from Covid-19 mitigation and recovery strategies

Recommendations

Following a consultation of Commonwealth higher education stakeholders, the following recommendations are made to Commonwealth Education Ministers:

1. **Widen access to higher education and lifelong learning** by supporting digital transformation initiatives in universities. Commit to addressing the prevailing digital divide through funding, financing, and public-private partnerships, including investing in digital means and enabling internet connectivity, hardware, and infrastructure including electricity access.
2. **Increase funding for higher education**, in recognition of its vital contribution to society and as an effective means for supporting an education-led economic and social recovery from the pandemic worldwide.

Summary

Universities across the world have faced enormous disruption as a result of the pandemic, with those that can, forced to move their activities online. This rapid shift has particular significance in a Commonwealth context, where stark disparities in internet connectivity and infrastructure persist – and for ACU member universities, two thirds of which are in low-and middle-income countries. These divides laid bare by the pandemic are a major obstacle in the drive for inclusive and equitable access to higher education by 2030 – a target of Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The need to accelerate technological innovations demanded by the Fourth Industrial Revolution became more urgent as the pandemic exposed the unpreparedness of the higher education sector for the digital switch everywhere. From logistical, technical, and pedagogical perspectives, the pandemic forced institutions to accelerate innovation and implement high-end technologies that had been talked about in the past but had been rolled out slowly often because of insufficient digital infrastructure. The need for investment in fulfilling the digital gap and for investment in digital learning has never been greater.

Although the pandemic had a hugely negative impact on higher education internationalisation, which in turn stalled programmes and reduced revenue streams of sectors of the economy that depended on these, it also showed the urgent and most critical need for international collaboration. The development of interdisciplinary research collaborations can support countries to vigorously respond to the shared challenges affecting the development of Commonwealth nations, collaboratively, on all areas. Important windows of opportunity surfaced to reimagine internationalisation initiatives in ways not considered possible before the pandemic, mainly enabled by digitalisation and virtualisation. From providing people with new skills, to working with partners to grow businesses and spark innovation, higher education should be invested in as an effective means for supporting an education-led economic and social recovery from the pandemic worldwide.

In a post pandemic world, greater resilience and adaptability must be built into our education systems, enabling them to weather future crises, including pandemics, natural disasters or other unexpected events. This requires investment in capacity (especially ICT) to provide teaching and learning opportunities at a distance when and where circumstances require; supporting and validating learning undertaken in non-school/college modes and settings; developing mutually supportive relationships between educational establishments on the one hand and homes, communities and economic enterprises on the other.

Strategies for recovery from Covid must include 'catch-up' and 'second-chance' provision to make good lost learning opportunities resulting from school and college closures. Closures have had heaviest impact on the already disadvantaged and neediest groups in society. Special incentives and support packages may be required to assist Covid-induced dropouts to resume their learning.

Blended learning and digital access

The ACU's Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) programme (see Policy Brief 3 for further information), was implemented prior to the pandemic, however, the project also played a key role in supporting participating universities to adapt to online provision following the closure of campuses as a result of Covid-19. During the pandemic, PEBL partner universities have reported significant benefits from the project in enabling an effective pivot to quality remote learning including;

- An improved network of universities sharing degree-level blended learning courses in East Africa.
- Strengthened and increased use of regional (OER Africa) and individual learning management systems (LMSs).
- Increased capacity of universities to support pedagogical approaches for blended learning.
- Strengthened quality assurance systems for blended learning courses tailored to the institutional needs in East Africa.
- High-quality, credit-bearing blended learning courses included in university programmes in participating universities in East Africa

The PEBL model offers an opportunity for Commonwealth governments to scale up and adapt PEBL's collaborative model for different contexts. The ACU is developing further insights to support member governments to implement effective digital education strategies through research with the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and Maseno University in Kenya, funded by the British Council.

The Digital Divide

The pandemic has triggered a "great pivot online" as many universities moved their operations online in the space of days and weeks. In May 2020, the ACU undertook a survey of digital engagement¹ across its network to gain an understanding of digital connectivity and engagement in Commonwealth universities, as well as the pandemic's impact on teaching, learning, and research.

The survey results highlighted a stubborn digital divide between and within countries and institutions, and the impact on universities' current capacity to deliver teaching and research. Results point to further disparities at different levels within universities, and between students, academics, and professional staff. The expansion of online learning in response to the pandemic also presents a window of opportunity to use the lessons learned to build stronger, more resilient institutions, and to widen access to higher education. However, this potential will only be realised if governments and institutions take swift action to ensure no one is left behind in the shift online.

ACU Digital Now events

The ACU manages a number of thematic networks for its 500 member universities, and during the pandemic in 2020, these communities of academics and professionals from across the Commonwealth came together to share best practice through a series of webinars that showcased how members had dealt and responded to the pandemic. Sessions included University libraries beyond the campus walls and managing a research office in lockdown – with speakers from the HR in HE Community; and Strategies for successfully moving courses online and Moving assessments online – lessons learned, with speakers from the Supporting Research Community.

The ACU also partnered with the University of Johannesburg Library on their virtual international conference on the theme of 'From zero to hero: Rising to the challenge in a time of crisis'. The conference celebrated the resilience, ability to adapt, and the work of librarians supporting staff and students in their institutions during the COVID-19 crisis. In 2021, the partnership continued through the delivery of a second virtual international conference on the theme of 'Conversations about the journey of change: A 'new normal''. The conference explored lessons learnt, ongoing challenges, best practice examples and innovative solutions to the 'new normal'.

¹ <https://www.acu.ac.uk/media/2344/acu-policy-brief-digital-engagement-2020.pdf>