

Higher education associations: supporting the development of international higher education partnerships to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Introduction

International university associations are an integral part of the higher education ecosystem and play a vital role in coordinating universities and bringing together diverse voices from across the globe. The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), and the International Association of Universities (IAU), are three such organisations that between them represent more than 2,000 higher education institutions. As individual organisations, the three associations develop and deliver programmes and activities that support members to work together collaboratively on issues of importance to advancing quality higher education, bringing together institutions, academics, and students to forge partnerships.

While there is a growing recognition of the role that higher education has in sustainable development, it has often been limited to its role within the education ecosystem (SDG-4). There remains a more limited understanding of the broader potential that universities have to deliver against all other UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recent evidence from the ACU, has shown that higher education partnerships are delivering impact against all 17 SDGs and providing added value compared to other forms of aid intervention.

In this brief document, we reflect on the vital role that international higher education partnerships have in contributing towards the SDGs, highlighting evidence that the ACU, AUF and IAU have produced. We will then focus on some of the mechanisms that our three associations employ to facilitate these partnerships and outline some of the successful programmes that have been delivered that support our members to make a positive impact.

Background

In 2019, the ACU, AUF and IAU [released a joint statement](#) where we agreed to strengthen collaboration to advance and promote the contribution of higher education to meeting shared global challenges. A formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed at the UN HLPF in 2020. The coalition identified three priority areas for collaboration:

- Higher education for sustainable development
- Quality and vitality of higher education systems
- Internationalisation in higher education

Together, the three associations represent members across more than 140 countries – providing a strong base to advocate for higher education on a wide international scale.

How are international higher education partnerships supporting progress towards the SDGs?

The potential that universities have to contribute to the SDGs is becoming more widely understood and there is a growing body of evidence to support this. In October 2020, the British Council published [a review of academic research published over the past 10 years](#) which presented a correlation between tertiary education and positive development outcomes in low and lower-middle income countries (LLMICs) and in late 2021, the ACU, in partnership with the British Council [commissioned a research project that explored the role of international higher education partnerships in contributing towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals](#).

The latter report found overwhelming evidence that international higher education partnerships deliver against all 17 of the SDGs and furthermore, provide added value compared to other forms of international aid interventions. This reflects our coalition's belief that universities are essential to achieving the SDGs and that international higher education partnerships represent an effective vehicle for mobilising actors and resources, including donor funds.

Although higher education is explicitly referenced under SDG 4 (quality education), the role of universities has often been limited to their contribution within the wider education system. To be clear, this role remains vital; to have high quality basic education, universities are required to develop high quality pedagogical material, good teacher training is required, and good departments of education will need to be created. However, our belief is that universities must be considered beyond the confines of SDG 4. This is a view supported by the ACU report, by the [IAU policy statements](#) and work on higher education and research for sustainable development (HESD), and also by a recent [UNESCO report authored by the Independent Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda](#) which established that universities can be central to driving progress towards all 17 SDGs, and not just the obvious goals related to education or partnerships.

The role of higher education in sustainable development is multidimensional and delivered through four main avenues:

- research generates the knowledge and innovation needed to address the most complex and intractable issues of our time;
- teaching and learning shapes generations of graduates and leaders who will go on to tackle these challenges in their professional lives;
- campus initiatives will set the examples needed for the HE community to scale up in society;
- community engagement enables local partnerships and the co-production of critical knowledge.

International partnerships are shown to support all four elements to thrive. As contributors to the knowledge base, partnerships improve our understanding of global challenges and develop practical solutions. As implementers of new knowledge, partnerships not only conduct research to enrich the knowledge base but also implement their results in practice.

International higher education partnerships are highly effective in both devising and delivering solutions to global challenges and harnessing the potential of multisectoral and multidisciplinary partners.

How can international associations convene partnerships?

As has been established, international higher education partnerships are highly effective in delivering positive development outcomes: they provide added value compared to other forms of (aid) interventions and support the strengthening of higher education systems which, in turn, improves graduate outcomes.

Creating partnerships is not a straightforward process though. Developing partnerships takes time, financial support, and trust amongst partners. Higher education associations have an important role to play in facilitating partnerships and our three associations have a strong track-record of creating mechanisms that facilitate this.

The ACU, AUF and IAU all operate extensive networks of institutions and academics that extend globally. For instance, the ACU promotes knowledge sharing and knowledge democracy through its university networks and communities of practice in Climate Resilience, Peace and Reconciliation, Higher Education and the SDGs, Supporting Research, and HR in HE. These networks connect nearly 2,000 colleagues across its membership, providing platforms for staff and students from universities around the Commonwealth to share ideas and best practice and build partnerships.

When it comes to HESD, one of the four IAU priorities, the IAU convenes similar networks that encourage and support their members to collaborate for sustainable development, actively using the SDGs as a guiding framework. [The IAU Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development \(HESD\)](#) is a richly diverse and intercultural network that engages HEIs with the UN Agenda 2030 process by fostering attention and work specifically on the SDGs. It brings together HEIs from around the world on equal terms, to jointly address the SDGs and enhance partnerships. The network consists of 16 lead universities, each engaging on one SDG, while connecting to the other SDGs in the process. The IAU leads the work on SDG 17 by fostering global HE partnerships. The lead universities, from all world regions, collaborate with several 'satellite' institutions, engage with a particular SDG and initiate concrete projects, also across all goals.

In a similar manner, the [ACU's own SDG Network](#) engages with over 400 individual active members spanning every region of the Commonwealth inclusive of over 35 countries. Both networks serve as a resource and networking hub both for institutions already engaged in sustainable development and moving more strongly to help address the SDGs locally and seeking innovative partnerships around the world, and for those starting to engage with the SDGs at their institutions.

It is important to note that in this example, ACU members in low-income countries and small states often lead the way, as their national and local concerns are closely aligned with the SDGs. The link between the local and global is reflected in for example the impact of climate change as a part of everyday conversations in small island states, such as those in the Pacific. That is why universities such as the University of the South Pacific and Fiji National



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Universities integrate sustainable development into their operations and teaching, aligning strategic planning and curricula with the SDGs.

Among its 1000 higher education and research establishments in more than 119 countries, AUF includes university networks specialising in health, environment, science and technology, engineering, governance, digital and gender. These networks are made up of higher education institutions, research laboratories, specialised institutions centred around common themes, working together on global or local solutions to global challenges. They provide a space for members to exchange ideas and by sharing expertise, networks collectively develop capacity for action and increase individual expertise. For example, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the network of French-speaking medical establishments of the AUF mobilised health specialists for 2 years (140 faculties of medicine) to propose recommendations and solutions aligned with SDG 3 to stem this global health crisis.

What kind of international higher education partnerships do the three organisations support?

As has been shown above, international higher education associations have a key role to play in bringing universities and individual academics together, however, they also have an important role to play in supporting the partnerships to grow further, whether through the provision of grants, delivering projects and programmes that involve university partners, or providing infrastructure and services.

Often working in parallel to networks, our associations provide additional services that support universities to take the next step towards partnership. The ACU provides grants across its networks that support members to develop partnerships outside the confines of the network. For example, [ACU Commonwealth Climate Resilience Challenge Grants](#) are open to academic and professional staff within member universities to support initiatives addressing climate resilience. The grants support collaborative work focused on the two main strategic priorities of the network.

Support to these networks can also be in the form of training and support services and providing information. One way the IAU supports universities and the HESD Cluster Network is to provide a platform for exchange and giving visibility to its members and partners events, activities and publications on the [IAU HESD Global Portal](#). This comprehensive platform has been highlighting actions carried out by higher education for sustainable development since 2012 and is open to the public for searching specific SDG actions by keyword, region and more.

Furthermore, member institutions are also brought together via externally funded programmes that allow members to work together on projects that help drive progress towards the SDGs. Through the [Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning \(PEBL\)](#), the ACU has been working with 24 universities across four countries in East Africa to scale up blended learning and co-create locally relevant online teaching modules, supported by the online learning expertise of global partners. Thanks to this project, which is part of the UK Aid-funded SPHEIR programme, international collaboration has combined with local delivery to dramatically scale up access to quality content – more than 13,000 students across Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania are studying PEBL modules.

Another UK government funded programme, [CIRCLE](#), has been working to strengthen climate change research within sub-Saharan Africa through an innovative dual approach: supporting individual academics to undertake research, while also working with universities to improve their capacity to support and promote quality research.

AUF is active too in regard to the socially responsible and inclusive university. And this problem is twofold because it covers both the role of the university in and for society, and what universities do as a society. Therefore, AUF supports university networks in their new social role, their civic contribution, universities concerned with environment and development of a more sustainable world. AUF has supported numerous projects and programmes that strive to support SDGs including UniLab – the francophone think tank on the responsible university of tomorrow (SDG 17), REFESP – the network of francophone public health establishments (SDG3), SAFIR – a social entrepreneurship project (SDG8), RESUFF – the Francophone Network for Women Leadership in Higher Education and Research, the International Consortium for Gender Equality or OFDIG – the Francophone Observatory for Gender-based Inclusive Development (SDG5).

At the individual level, the ACU worked with the British Council in the run up to COP26 to convene the [Commonwealth Futures Climate Research Cohort](#) – a cohort of 26 rising stars in climate and environment research, each with a deep understanding of communities disproportionately impacted by climate change. The cohort programme brought together a group of multidisciplinary researchers with global experts to develop solutions for climate-vulnerable regions, giving these early careers researchers a platform to shape our future. IAU works with various UN organisations including UNODC on projects advancing on specific SDGs. With UNODC, IAU worked on SDG16 related initiatives for young scholars which resulted in the publication on [Higher Education engages with SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions](#).

How our three associations work together for collective impact

Our three associations serve as a global voice for higher education and sustainable development and through our MOU we have been able to collaborate more closely and align our advocacy work related to the role of higher education in achieving the SDGs. This has already led to close collaboration at the UN, in particular at the annual High-Level-Political Forum, and we will continue to work together at global conferences, member workshops and other initiatives developed at the local and the regional level.

The three associations met in Paris at UNESCO in September 2021 to reinforce our coalition, strategize and plan for middle-term projects. Next to working groups on specific themes with representatives from all three associations, ongoing projects and events will be in the focus for 2022.

As in previous years, the coalition will submit a workshop proposal to UN DESA for the HLPF 2022 and also be represented at other key events, such as the UNESCO WHEC, Stockholm +50, the IAU 2022 16th General Conference, and Commonwealth education meetings. We will mobilize the higher education community and our members ahead of COP27. While there has been strong recognition of the research dimension of universities and importance of the findings of individual academics at previous COPs, such as COP26 in Glasgow, higher

education as such has yet to raise its voice more strongly as a partner for SDG 13 (Climate Action) and interconnected SDGs.

Conclusion

We have established through this paper that universities are essential to the achievement of the SDGs and that university partnerships are key to maximising this impact. Partnerships not only devise solutions, but deliver them too, and in doing so have been shown to provide added value compared to other forms of (aid) intervention. The experience of our three associations working with sustainability more broadly and specifically on SDGs through a partnership approach has shown that the UN 2030 Agenda and SDGs are not solely a concept for governments, but also for universities, considering local needs and circumstances.

To accelerate progress towards the SDGs it will be important to create and nurture partnerships, and as this paper has shown, international higher education associations will have a key role to play in this. Through the use of networks, the ACU, AUF and IAU have brought together universities and academics from across the world to forge partnerships that have gone on to deliver positive development outcomes. Furthermore, we have provided financial and technical support that allows partnerships to grow and in doing so, develop practical solutions for global challenges.

Through our MOU, our three associations have committed to working in partnership to maximise the impact of our international advocacy for the role of higher education in sustainable development. The coalition is in a unique position to convene universities internationally and support international efforts for a sustainable transformation of society. The three associations can have a meaningful impact shaping policy and encouraging actions towards SD. Bringing HEIs from our global networks together adds value in their contribution to the 2030 Agenda. The role of higher education and research partnerships, for sustainable development and beyond, needs to be acknowledged and concrete examples from our work illustrate this.

The coalition urges the participants of the WHEC2022, UNESCO, and governments to scale up resources for higher education's contribution to with sustainable development, acknowledging the diversity of actors and systems in the sector in the drafting process of the UNESCO roadmap for a new era of higher education.



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Resources and further information

Association of Commonwealth Universities and the British Council (2022): *Role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals*. <https://www.acu.ac.uk/media/4018/international-he-partnerships-and-the-sdgs-report.pdf>

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Mallow, S., Toman, I., and van't Land, H. (2020). *IAU 2nd Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development: Higher Education and the 2030 Agenda: Moving into the 'Decade of Action and Delivery for the SDGs*. International Association of Universities (IAU).
https://www.iau-hesd.net/sites/default/files/documents/iau_hesd_survey_report_final_jan2020.pdf

IAU Strategic Priority HESD: <https://iau-aiu.net/HESD>

IAU publications on SDGs, [IAU Horizons with papers on Leadership for SD](#) (2021)

AUF [Digital Library of Francophone University](#) (Bibliothèque Numérique de l'Espace universitaire Francophone - BNEUF) including a [digital resources section](#) and a multi-disciplinary [directory of francophone experts](#)