



ACU Congress 2025

Outcome report

ACUCONGRESS2025



University of Nairobi, Kenya
26-28 November 2025



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

1. Introduction: A Commonwealth Gathering in a Defining Moment

In November 2025, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) convened university leaders from across 20 nations at the University of Nairobi for ACU Congress 2025. More than 70 Vice-Chancellors, academics, students, funders, ambassadors and policy leaders came together under the theme **Connected and Resilient**, reflecting a moment in which universities are grappling with profound global disruption.

Across the Commonwealth, higher education systems are navigating rapid technological transformation, geopolitical fragmentation, economic volatility, and intensifying climate pressures. Youth populations are rising sharply, especially in Africa and South Asia, creating unprecedented demand for skills, employability, research and innovation. Meanwhile, public investment in higher education remains strained in many countries.

Against this backdrop, universities are expected not only to educate, but to anchor national resilience, drive productivity and innovation, support climate adaptation, and prepare graduates for a labour market transformed by artificial intelligence.

As ACU Secretary-General Professor Colin Riordan reminded delegates in his opening address:

“Universities are not simply education providers - they are national resilience infrastructure.”

Congress was therefore shaped as a space for strategic dialogue, evidence-sharing and renewal. It served as a reminder of the Commonwealth’s enduring strength: diverse but united systems collaborating to solve shared challenges.

2. Why the Commonwealth? Why Now?

Congress reaffirmed why the Commonwealth’s higher education community is uniquely positioned to lead global change. Its shared governance traditions, English-language systems, longstanding partnerships, and cultural interconnectedness provide a foundation for action at a time of instability.

The Commonwealth’s diversity is its strength. It brings together high-, middle- and low-income countries; small island states and large emerging economies; institutions with distinct histories, priorities and innovations. As one delegate reflected, the Commonwealth offers a “trusted space” where institutions can speak frankly, collaborate equitably, and build solutions that work across contexts.

3. Congress Themes and Framing

The themes chosen for Congress reflected the world universities are preparing students for and the complexities leaders must navigate as partners to governments, employers, communities, and young people. Across three days, delegates examined:

- **Skills, Employability and the Future of Work**- How universities can respond to fast-changing labour markets, demographic pressures and employer expectations.
- **Responsible and Equitable AI**- How institutions can harness AI while ensuring ethical use, avoiding exclusion and preparing staff and students for a digital future.
- **Institutional Resilience and Financing**- How universities can strengthen financial sustainability, diversify income and demonstrate impact.
- **Research, Innovation and Partnerships**- How to strengthen research ecosystems, promote fairness in partnerships, and maximise societal impact.
- **Leadership in Complexity**- How university leaders can govern effectively amid uncertainty, technological disruption and rapid change.
- **Equity, inclusion, and indigenous knowledge**- How to widen participation, support underrepresented groups, and embed Indigenous and local knowledge.
- **Climate Resilience and Sustainability**- How universities can drive research, adaptation and community resilience in the face of climate instability.

These themes are deeply interconnected. They reflect the reality that universities are no longer operating in isolation from global forces, they are at the forefront of shaping national capabilities, social cohesion, and economic futures.

4. Key Insights from Congress Discussions

4.1 Skills and Employability: Preparing Graduates for a Changing World

Professor Barney Glover, Australia's Skills Commissioner, opened this discussion with a keynote presentation outlining Australia's work to build a national, standardised skills framework and the implications for universities worldwide. His address resonated strongly with delegates, who noted a widening mismatch between the speed of labour-market change and the traditional structures of higher education.

Across regions, especially in Africa and South Asia, young people need adaptable, transferable skills to navigate rapidly evolving economies. Employers echoed this message, expressing frustration with rigid curricula, limited work-integrated learning, and insufficient alignment between academic programmes and real-world needs. Delegates agreed that universities must pivot toward skills-first, industry-connected models that embed practical experience and flexibility into learning.

Early insights from the forthcoming **ACU-Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Skills Study** which evidences how universities are evolving course offerings towards students' unique skills needs, reinforced this urgency, showing that micro-credentials, short courses and blended learning are no longer peripheral innovations but fast becoming mainstream. Congress sessions highlighted the need for more structured university–industry partnerships, stronger career ecosystems, and greater emphasis on applied learning.

Several institutions shared compelling case studies- from co-designed curricula and employer advisory boards to large-scale industry placements- that demonstrated measurable improvements in graduate outcomes. These examples underscored the potential for Commonwealth universities to lead skills transformation when partnerships are embedded and purposeful.

To support members in advancing this agenda, the ACU is launching a series of webinars in 2026 showcasing practical models of university–industry–government collaboration. These sessions will explore how institutions can forge effective partnerships, articulate the mutual benefits, and demonstrate the impact of these collaborations on local employability and skills ecosystems. This work forms part of ACU's broader effort to strengthen the role of universities in national skills planning across the Commonwealth.

4.2 AI and Digital Transformation: Potential and Challenge

Artificial intelligence emerged as one of the most urgent and cross-cutting issues discussed at Congress. Delegates acknowledged its immense potential to transform teaching, research and institutional operations, but also its risks—particularly the widening divide between well-resourced universities and those with limited digital infrastructure.

Despite rapid uptake of AI tools by students, only a small proportion of institutions reported having formal AI policies or governance frameworks. Leaders raised concerns about assessment integrity, staff readiness, ethical use, and the possibility that AI could exacerbate existing inequalities in access to technology, skills and connectivity.

Across discussions, it was clear that universities must move beyond reactive measures. Ethical standards, digital literacy across all disciplines, and system-wide capacity-building are essential if the benefits of AI are to be shared equitably across the Commonwealth.

As the ACU shapes its programme of work for 2026, the Higher Education Taskforce working group on Digital Access and AI will work closely with the Commonwealth Secretariat to advance a coordinated agenda on AI skills, readiness and equitable access. The ACU will also launch a series of webinars and knowledge-sharing sessions

showcasing how universities are embedding AI into administrative processes for efficiency gains and into curriculum design to prepare graduates for an AI-enabled world.

4.3 Equity, Inclusion and Indigenous Knowledge

Equity emerged as a unifying thread across every session at Congress, not an optional consideration, but a foundational principle for modern higher education. Delegates highlighted persistent disparities linked to gender, disability, rurality, socio-economic status and digital connectivity, noting that without structural approaches to inclusion, these gaps will continue to widen.

Institutions from New Zealand, Canada, the Pacific, the Caribbean and East Africa shared compelling case studies showing how Indigenous and community knowledge can reshape teaching, research and engagement. These examples demonstrated the power of culturally grounded methodologies, community partnerships and respect for local knowledge systems in making higher education more inclusive, relevant and just.

Building on these insights, the ACU will convene a series of webinars and discussions in 2026 focused on embedding Indigenous and community knowledge into research and teaching. These sessions will highlight emerging practice across the Commonwealth and provide space for researchers and practitioners to share methodologies, challenges and opportunities.

4.4 Climate Resilience: Universities at the Frontline

Climate change is an existential challenge for many Commonwealth nations, particularly across Africa and Small Island States. Delegates shared stark accounts of its direct effects on campuses and communities, from damaged infrastructure and disrupted learning to threats to food security, public health and national stability.

Throughout the Congress, universities were described as “resilience hubs”: anchor institutions that generate climate science, support community preparedness, lead adaptation strategies and facilitate knowledge exchange across regions. Delegates emphasised the urgent need for expanded capacity-building, stronger regional research networks and greater investment in locally led, place-based climate solutions

As the ACU advances its three newly launched [expert groups](#) on Oceans, Health, and Sustainable Cities, members will have new opportunities to work directly with policymakers and Commonwealth governments to shape climate research and influence policy development. These insights will also inform the ACU’s advocacy in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2026, ensuring that university expertise plays a central role in the Commonwealth’s climate agenda. The ACU manages a range of programmes designed to strengthen individual and institutional

capacity which members can contribute to, including a new Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and the Blue Economy in partnership with the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, and the King's Commonwealth Fellowship Programme to develop climate resilience in Commonwealth small island developing states (SIDS).

4.5 Research, Innovation, and Knowledge Ecosystems

Congress discussions highlighted widening disparities in research capacity across the Commonwealth. Delegates noted that concentrated funding, limited support for early-career researchers and a lack of established platforms for South–South collaboration continue to constrain the development of robust and inclusive knowledge ecosystems. As the ACU reviews its grants and fellowships portfolio, we will continue to leverage our resources to better enable international collaboration, mobility and knowledge exchange among researchers and professional staff.

Delegates also examined the influence of research assessment frameworks, stressing that current models can inadvertently reinforce inequities by undervaluing community-engaged scholarship, Indigenous research and work focused on sustainability or social impact. In response, the ACU will soon launch our support for the *More Than Our Rank* campaign, calling for research systems to embrace broader, fairer measures of excellence that reflect institutions' contributions to equity, inclusion and sustainable development—not only citation-based outputs.

4.6 Financing and Institutional Resilience

Universities across the Commonwealth described mounting financial pressures, including rising operational costs, unpredictable government funding cycles and an overreliance on international student revenue. Leaders stressed the urgent need to diversify income streams, strengthen financial governance and articulate more clearly the contribution universities make to national development and economic growth.

Evidence featured prominently in these discussions. The ACU's policy research, including the recent London Economics analysis of higher education's economic impact, reinforces the strategic value of investment in the sector: **a 1 percentage-point increase in tertiary attainment is associated with a 0.03 percentage-point rise in GDP per capita growth over five years**, with the largest gains accruing in lower-income countries. These findings strengthen the case for sustained public investment in higher education and will form part of the ACU's advocacy in the lead-up to CHOGM 2026, where we will highlight the role of universities as essential drivers of productivity, innovation and national resilience.

To support members grappling with declining public funding and changing financial landscapes, the ACU's Higher Education Taskforce working group on Funding and

Sustainability is overseeing new research into institutional strategies for funding diversification. This work, including case studies of successful models, will sit alongside the [London Economics study](#) to provide practical guidance and evidence for universities seeking to build more resilient financial futures.

4.7 Leadership in Complex Times

Across discussions, Vice-Chancellors reflected on the rapidly changing demands placed on higher education leaders. Financial pressures, geopolitical landscapes, technological disruption and rising expectations from students, governments and communities are reshaping what effective leadership looks like.

Delegates agreed that the role of the modern HE leader is evolving faster than existing leadership development programmes can keep pace. Agility, ethical and evidence-based decision-making, staff empowerment and deeper community engagement have become essential competencies, far beyond the traditional academic leadership pathway, and are critical for steering institutions through uncertainty.

In response, the ACU will launch a bespoke leadership development programme for member institutions. This initiative will support emerging and established leaders in strengthening the skills required for today's complex operating environment and building leadership capacity across diverse Commonwealth systems. Consultations will take place in the New Year, and members will be invited to help shape the programme.

5. ACU's Forward Agenda: Turning Insight into Action

ACU Congress 2025 was not an endpoint, but a launchpad. The discussions in Nairobi now form the foundation of a forward-looking agenda that will guide ACU's work over the next year. This agenda is rooted in evidence, shaped by member priorities, and designed to influence policy across the Commonwealth.

Central to this effort is the [ACU Higher Education Taskforce](#), comprising Vice-Chancellors from across the Commonwealth. The Taskforce will synthesise Congress insights into a coordinated programme of action and policy engagement ahead of key moments on the Commonwealth calendar, the Commonwealth Education Ministers Action Group (EMAG) in 2026 and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2026.

Taskforce working groups will develop practical recommendations and evidence across five priority areas that emerged strongly during Congress:

- AI and Digital Access
- Employability, Entrepreneurship and Skills
- Healthy and Inclusive Research Ecosystems

- Funding and Institutional Resilience
- Access, Equity and Inclusion

Through this work, the Taskforce will ensure that higher education plays a central role in shaping Commonwealth-wide responses to global challenges.

Beyond the Taskforce, the ACU will continue to mobilise its wider network--[expert groups](#), communities of practice, international mobility schemes, and grants and fellowships--expanding opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange and capacity-building. Through ACU Connect and our programme portfolio, we will actively broker partnerships sparked at Congress, support the development of cross-border research networks, and create new pathways for student and staff mobility, digital capability-building, joint degrees and equitable international partnerships.

5. Conclusion: A Connected and Resilient Future

ACU Congress 2025 demonstrated the best of the Commonwealth: honesty, partnership, shared purpose, and a commitment to building stronger, more resilient higher education systems.

As delegates return home, they carry with them not only new insights but renewed determination to strengthen skills, widen access, adopt ethical AI, champion climate resilience, and secure sustainable futures for their institutions and communities.

ACU will remain the bridge, platform and advocate that connects these efforts, convening leaders, shaping policy, enabling collaboration and building a shared Commonwealth higher education future.

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