



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities

The Road to 2030

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Introduction

Since the inception of 'The Road to 2030' in 2019, the geopolitical and economic environment has become significantly less stable. The Covid pandemic, rising international tensions and conflicts, along with a continuation of the trend away from globalisation, have led to a fundamental shift in the context in which our members, and therefore the ACU, operate.

Partly in response to those changes, this refreshed strategy places emphasis on our strengths and what makes us distinctive:

We are an accredited Commonwealth organisation with a formal role in representing higher education and supporting policy development for Commonwealth governments.

In 2022 Commonwealth Ministers of Education endorsed the crucial role of higher education in economic and social development, following the ACU's advocacy. We will continue to be a voice for universities in these global fora, to use our accredited status to provide platforms to our members and their impact, and to support Commonwealth member states to deliver their commitments through our new Higher Education Taskforce.

As a membership organisation we enjoy an unparalleled combination of commonality and diversity that allows us to maximise benefits for our member universities on the basis of co-creation through equitable partnerships.

It is not only the English language, but also common heritage, structures and traditions, as well as friendly, co-operative relations between our members' governments that allow us to make the most of the extraordinary diversity in terms of geography, age, mission and nature that is to be seen in our member universities.

In contradistinction to the great majority of international university associations, we host, design and deliver education, research and mobility programmes, with and on behalf of Commonwealth governments, agencies, charities and other partners.

Throughout the history of the ACU these programmes have provided life-changing opportunities for thousands of scholars, researchers, academics and professional staff. The cumulative effect of these interventions contributes not only to the ACU's member institutions, but also to the higher education systems and international development landscape in which they operate.

This multifaceted role affords us the opportunity to convene our member universities around some of the most pressing challenges for the Commonwealth. By focusing on thematic areas which are of central relevance to almost all of our members – such as education, health and climate resilience – we combine delivering value to our members with achieving impact on the world of higher education and wider society.

Mindful of the centrality of the Commonwealth of Nations to our identity as an organisation, our strategy is informed by the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter as we pursue our mission to support our members in making their contribution to sustainable development in the form of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We recognise that the Commonwealth is a free association of nations underpinned by voluntary co-operation to help shape a better world for the future. The ACU, with collaboration at the heart of our mission, will play a key role in supporting that endeavour.

Our strategy is a manifesto for how the ACU works with its members and partners to strengthen higher education, support sustainable development and

connect engaged leaders. It is these long-term goals that form the backbone of our strategy. Our ambition will be delivered by deepening our membership engagement, working in strategic partnership and drawing not only on our strong brand and reputation, but, crucially, on our Commonwealth identity.

Our updated plan, 'The Road to 2030', continues to be a powerful guide and framework for our organisational vision. Our mission, vision, values and long-term goals are underpinned by a robust operational plan and key performance indicators that are reviewed annually by our governing Council.

We look forward to working with all our members and stakeholders to achieve these ambitions.



Colin Riordan

Professor Colin Riordan CBE
Secretary General and
Chief Executive



Cheryl de la Rey

Professor Cheryl de la Rey
Chair of Council

Our context – why higher education matters

Higher education underpins all development targets, from poverty reduction to employability, health to environmental sustainability. Meeting these targets depends upon skilled graduates and research evidence.

Universities equip people with the skills they need to take up or to create jobs, and drive innovation, progress, and prosperity through cutting-edge research.

Universities train teachers and create pedagogical content for primary and secondary schools, and support lifelong learning – they are a critical part

of the education ecosystem and meeting development targets at all levels.

Universities are also living laboratories, developing solutions for local, national, and global challenges.

Demand for higher education is outstripping supply and this is only likely to increase. The changing nature of work makes the role of universities in preparing these graduates more pressing.



Tertiary enrolment gaps

Between 2000 and 2018, median gross tertiary enrolment in Commonwealth countries was over 25% lower (13.94%) than in non-Commonwealth countries. (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Research & development investment

Commonwealth countries invest less in R&D than non-Commonwealth nations (0.75% vs. 0.91% of GDP in 2021). (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Global education financing gap

Education budgets have decreased globally by 13.5% compared to 2020, with two-thirds of low and lower-middle income countries reducing public education spending. (Source: UNESCO)

Digital divide

Commonwealth citizens historically had less access to the internet compared to non-Commonwealth countries. Despite recent improvements, significant digital inequities remain. (Source: International Telecommunication Union)

Gender disparity in enrolment

Female enrolment in tertiary education (ages 18-23) remains lower in Commonwealth countries compared to global averages. (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Projected higher education demand

Global university enrolment is set to grow from 207 million in 2014 to 380 million by 2030, with significant demand increases driven by Commonwealth countries India and Nigeria. (Source: UNESCO & ICEF)

Commonwealth underinvestment

Commonwealth countries have spent, on average, 2% less on tertiary education than non-Commonwealth countries since 1970. (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics)

Projected population growth

Over the next decade, the Commonwealth is expected to experience much higher population growth than the global average, adding more than 385 million people by 2033. (Source: UNCTAD)

International collaboration

In 2022, 77% of research publications from Commonwealth countries were produced through international collaborations, higher than the global average. (Source: SciVal)



Priorities for higher education in the Commonwealth

Higher education's contribution to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Navigating the digital frontier: Digital access and AI

Bridging the gap: Improving access and inclusion in higher education

Developing future-ready graduates: Advancing employability, entrepreneurship, and skills in higher education

Equitable partnerships

Making the case for sustainable higher education funding and finance

Fostering sustainable and inclusive research ecosystems

About the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a uniquely diverse network of 56 countries – including some of the world's largest, smallest, richest, and poorest nations – united by shared values, heritage, and language.

Commonwealth member governments have agreed to shared goals like development, democracy and peace. These values and principles are expressed in the Commonwealth Charter.

33 Commonwealth member countries are small states (usually with a population under 1.5 million), and 25 members are island nations or 'large ocean states'.

The Commonwealth's roots go back to the British Empire. But today any country can join the modern Commonwealth. The last two countries to join the Commonwealth were Gabon and Togo in 2022.

Its combined population is 2.7 billion, of which more than 60% is aged 29 or under.

One in three young people aged between 15 and 29 live in Commonwealth countries: about 640 million out of 1.8 billion.



The Association of Commonwealth Universities

The ACU is a global network of more than 400 universities in over 40 countries with a shared commitment to working together to build a more equitable and sustainable world. Accredited by the Commonwealth and incorporated by Royal Charter, the ACU has been fostering international collaboration in higher education since 1913. As the voice for higher education in the Commonwealth, the ACU supports its members, individuals, and partners to collaborate and advance their contribution to sustainable development.



Key facts and stats about the ACU



The world's first international university network, established in **1913**

65% of our members are in low and middle income countries

£700k awarded in grants and scholarships annually

90,000 alumni over the past 60 years

c. 2,000 students on an ACU-administered scholarship at any one time

A network of **10M** students and **1M** academic and professional staff

400+ member universities in **40+** countries

Members in more than **50%** of Commonwealth large ocean states

Vision

A strong, active and connected Commonwealth higher education community that is working together to build a more equitable and sustainable world

Mission

To be the voice of Commonwealth universities, supporting them to collaborate and advance their contribution to sustainable development

Values

Collaboration

We strive to build an empowered community who share ideas and catalyse change

Creativity

We encourage curiosity, innovation and exploring new ideas, adapting to an ever-changing world

Equity

We celebrate diversity, promote inclusion, and act with respect and integrity

Excellence

We endeavour to be impact focused, delivering high standards and upholding our good reputation

We work in partnership with members and stakeholders to advance our long-term goals

1

Strengthen Commonwealth universities

In a landscape of rising demands, shrinking budgets, and rapid change, we empower our member universities to meet challenges, fulfil their missions, and widen access to higher education.

We aim to:

- Influence Commonwealth higher education policy and funding environment to benefit our members
- Secure recognition for the value of Commonwealth universities
- Support our members to develop and strengthen their own institutional policies and practices and enhance their educational capacity

We will do this by:

- Showcasing the impact of higher education through research, analysis and thought leadership
- Advocating for higher education with decision makers, leveraging our Commonwealth status and securing platforms for our members
- Providing resources, training and platforms for our members to share good practice
- Maintaining a portfolio of innovative educational programmes and partnerships



2

Support sustainable development

Universities play a crucial role in generating solutions to complex global challenges. We enhance this contribution and leverage our multilateral role and Commonwealth connections to amplify the impact and expertise of our members.

We aim to:

- Enhance our members' capacity for research and practice on sustainable development
- Create more opportunities for members to collaborate with each other towards the sustainable development goals
- Broker increased involvement of ACU members in relevant Commonwealth forums and initiatives

We will do this by:

- Designing and delivering innovative programmes and student and staff mobility schemes that facilitate collaboration
- Convening members on thematic priorities, brokering connections within the Commonwealth, and using our grant giving portfolio to catalyse collaboration
- Evaluating, demonstrating, and advocating for the impact of higher education on sustainable development at the highest level

3

Connect engaged leaders

In a polarised and ever-changing world, international collaboration is key. From vice-chancellors to rising-star researchers and students, we support our members to develop their skills, knowledge and networks.

We aim to:

- Increase opportunities for our members and their communities to build equitable and enduring cross-border relationships
- Develop current and future leaders in their fields

We will do this by:

- Convening our members to exchange knowledge and experience
- Promoting and enabling staff and student mobility and intercultural exchange
- Partnering to provide practical tools and resources to develop leaders and scale up effective practices

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