



CCEM Policy Brief 5: Education for sustainability and a peaceful, cohesive Commonwealth

Recommendations

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

1. **Underline the contribution higher education makes to tackling entrenched global challenges and realising all of the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** – through research, teaching, and community engagement. Higher education-led partnerships should be recognised as an effective model that adds value to the investment of international donors and funders.
2. **Support the investment of university-led research and teaching solutions** to develop new knowledge and partnerships including through collaborative research consortiums and fellowships.
3. **Work together to support displaced students and staff** and invest in addressing barriers to education for refugees and displaced people.

Summary

From pre-school provision for early years to higher education, education will be crucial to the post covid recovery in the Commonwealth and creating a more prosperous and sustainable future for all. The pandemic has demonstrated higher education's critical contribution to wider sustainable development through its unique combination of teaching, research, and social engagement. Universities have been at the forefront of local and international scientific responses to Covid-19, and central in informing national policymaking and media coverage. As has been illustrated by the ACU's #HigherEdTogether campaign¹ institutions and students have mobilised to provide direct support to their communities.

Higher education also provides a critical and unique contribution towards sustainable development through research, teaching and engagement. Through research, universities produce new knowledge and innovation to address global challenges and provide evidence for informed public policy. Through teaching, universities develop generations of new leaders and skilled professionals who will drive social and economic development. Through community engagement, universities work with a rich variety of stakeholders – including governments, the private sector, and civil society – for local, national, and global impact. It is therefore more important than ever that higher education is supported and protected, as an integral part of the education sector.

As the 2018 Nadi Declaration from Commonwealth Education Ministers stressed, partnership working among Commonwealth stakeholders, most notably governments, is key for unlocking Commonwealth potential in building back better towards achieving the SDGs and creating a more cohesive Commonwealth. As societies face the challenges of climate change, food security and threats to health, they must make difficult personal and political decisions in attempting to set long-term collective benefit against short-term considerations of private financial gain or avoidance of personal inconvenience and sacrifice. Creating more aware and informed electorates and generating valuable high-level research findings in Commonwealth higher education institutions are indispensable contributions that the education sector can make to ensuring the sustainability of our planet and human well-being.

Higher education partnerships for sustainable development

¹ <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/higheredtogether-how-universities-are-fighting-covid-19/>

In 2021, the ACU, in partnership with the British Council published research² that explored the role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The research found that international partnerships in higher education are shown to support universities to deliver developmental impact. As contributors to the knowledge base, partnerships improve our understanding of global challenges and develop practicable solutions. As implementers of new knowledge, partnerships not only conduct research to enrich the knowledge base, but also implement their results in practice. One SDG cannot be achieved in isolation and international higher education partnerships are better equipped than single organisations to address societal issues

Climate and oceans

The ACU's work on climate and the oceans is a strong demonstration of how universities can work together across borders to address the Goals. Supporting international research and collaboration on climate, oceans and environment, United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, has praised the work of universities as "essential to our success" in addressing climate change.

During the pandemic, the ACU has continued to connect members to support the Commonwealth Secretariat and member countries to address global environmental challenges, including through support for the Commonwealth Blue Charter, supporting climate research capacity in Africa and beyond, and drawing on our Climate Resilience Network led by our members in Small States to develop research to better understand how universities can impact wider climate behaviour.³

Blue Charter Fellowships⁴

Research and international collaboration have a vital role to play in driving the success of the Blue Charter and climate action. To boost cutting-edge research on marine plastics pollution and reduction, between 2018-2021 the UK Government and Waitrose & Partners provided funding for two phases of the ACU Blue Charter Fellowships Programme, supporting a total of 48 outstanding talents in the field to produce research, build knowledge exchange skills, and translate their knowledge into action to support the implementation of the blue charter.

Centre of Excellence in Blue Economy and Oceanography

The ACU is working with co-chair of the Commonwealth Blue Charter action group on the Blue Economy the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and ACU member the University of the West Indies to establish a new . The new centre of excellence will support the Government's transition to a blue economy by advancing intellectual progress and strengthening institutional capacity in the areas of marine science and the blue economy while harnessing the societal, economic and environmental development opportunities for the Caribbean and the region within this emerging sector, and providing learnings for other Commonwealth nations.

The ACU is convening universities from across the Commonwealth and developing the networks and collaborations which underpin research-led solutions to support this ambition. A mapping exercise by the ACU to scope interest in this project in 2020 elicited responses from 70 individuals at member universities, with representation from every global region.

The ACU is working alongside the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, UWI, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council (CWEIC) and the Commonwealth Secretariat to mobilise support for this project. There are opportunities for Commonwealth Governments to support and partner with this.

Commonwealth Futures Climate Research Cohort

The ACU and the British Council have partnered to establish the Commonwealth Futures Climate Research Cohort, supporting 26 rising-star researchers to bring local knowledge to a global stage, delivering peer-led research-to-action projects in the lead-up to the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) and attending the conference itself. By supporting the development and retention of research leaders, the ACU-British Council partnership works to build a more equitable research landscape, ensuring that university research continues to thrive, inspire action, and play an essential role delivering impactful climate solutions across the Commonwealth

² <https://www.acu.ac.uk/media/4018/international-he-partnerships-and-the-sdgs-report.pdf>

³ <https://www.acu.ac.uk/get-involved/commonwealth-climate-resilience-network/>

⁴ <https://www.acu.ac.uk/funding-opportunities/for-students/fellowships/blue-charter-fellowships/>

Sustainable Cities Initiative

As part of preparations for the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda, the ACU is working in partnership with the Commonwealth Association of Architects, the Commonwealth Association of Planners, and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, in collaboration with the Rwandan Ministry of Infrastructure, the Rwandan Ministry of Local Government and The Prince's Foundation, with support from other Commonwealth organisations, governmental, professional and technical partners. The initiative is working together to promote a Call to Action on sustainable urbanisation in the Commonwealth. The initiative represents an important example of how Commonwealth universities can work together with different sectors to develop innovative solutions to global challenges.

Peace and reconciliation

A defining characteristic of the Commonwealth is its plurality of perspectives – the wealth of cultures, faiths, language, and perspectives – bound by a shared commitment to equality, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter. Universities, meanwhile, are the natural home of free and open intellectual inquiry, critical thinking, and the free exchange of ideas, where discovery and innovation are always ongoing.

Universities (like culture) can also go where diplomacy cannot. They can transcend borders and, in doing so, open minds to new ideas and knowledge – even in societies that remain closed through other channels. The ACU Peace and Reconciliation Network brings together an interdisciplinary collective of academics, researchers and professional staff from more than 40 universities across the Commonwealth, who work in the fields of peace, truth, justice, and reconciliation. The network aims to connect and support those interested in peace and reconciliation, facilitating collaboration and sharing approaches to truth-telling and reconciliation in society and within universities themselves.