



# CCEM Policy Brief 2: Rethinking education for decent work and employability

## Recommendations

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

1. **Support innovations in pedagogy and teaching and learning** that develop critical skillsets relevant to national development priorities and well-rounded and civic-minded graduates equipped to respond to a changing world. Invest in and encourage digital literacy, the development of soft skills and green skills, and entrepreneurial education.
2. **Invest in lifelong learning and adult education** to meet the anticipated need for ongoing upskilling and reskilling to meet the evolving demands of the world of work.

## Summary

There is rapid growth in demand for higher education across the world, and it is forecast that there will be an increase from the 200 million places required today to 320 million places by 2030. This exponential growth needs to be balanced against the demands of an ageing world and the impact of increased automation, which could see seven in ten workers employed in jobs that could be replaced by machines. Universities are educating students for a changing world, not least in the world of work. This requires universities to rethink curriculum and learning conversations to evolve graduates that are adaptive, civic minded, entrepreneurial, and socially aware.

Access to higher education remains a significant obstacle to Commonwealth nations with more applicants than places in many countries leading to an insufficient number of skilled graduates entering the workforce. Digital transformation initiatives have the potential to significantly increase access to higher education (see policy brief 1 and 3), however, if Commonwealth nations are to benefit from a greater number of young people accessing higher education, the quality and relevance of the education being offered must also be addressed.

Universities have a critical role to play in creating social impact, helping to develop entrepreneurial skills, and ensuring students leave university prepped to be both employed and to become employers. Skills such as communications, team-working and problem-solving are vital in allowing graduates to adapt to a changing labour market and it is essential that these are developed as part of a formal university education. Students must be prepared for the Fourth Industrial Revolution with skills in digital literacy and basic statistical analysis. Principles of ethics and green skills will also be important and necessary for sustainable development and employability. Flexible lifelong learning should be invested in to best enable continual upskilling and reskilling to meet the evolving demands of a changing world of work.

International aid interventions, including those funded by Commonwealth governments, have been successful in strengthening higher education systems, resulting in greater access to a high-quality education that ultimately leads to increased numbers of graduates with the relevant skills for the labour market. ACU [research](#) has shown that international higher education partnerships are crucial to all forms of development, including economic development and funding for programmes such as these will be essential to realising this.

## Donor support for higher education systems

Donors have an important role to play in strengthening higher education systems. Such investments have been proven to have significant impacts on sustainable development, including SDG9 – Decent work and economic growth. Through its investment in Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR)<sup>1</sup> the UK has demonstrated its view that higher education is essential to sustainable

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spheir.org.uk/>

development. This ODA funded investment in higher education systems in low-and-middle-income countries has supported multi sector partnerships that aim to transform the quality, relevance, scale, access, and affordability of higher education. The ACU managed [PEBL](#) programme is funded through this programme and following the success of its East Africa model, has received further funding from the Australian government to expand the programme into West Africa. This provides a useful case study of how Commonwealth donor countries can use higher education to promote sustainable development.

The success of SPHEIR supports the evidence presented in a 2021 ACU report<sup>2</sup> that explored the role that international higher education partnerships have in addressing the SDGs. The report mapped 110 higher education partnerships and found that international higher education partnerships are highly effective in supporting progress against all 17 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report found that many of the mapped partnerships feature HEI-industry collaboration and learning transferable skills for industry at higher education institutions. Other partnerships target the private sector through working conditions and equal pay as well as economic policies.

### **Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and the Blue Economy**

The ACU is working with the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and ACU member the University of the West Indies to establish a new Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and the Blue Economy. The centre will act as a hub for marine science and blue economy research and education, enabling international mobility and exchange, and will provide training for marine industries and address skills gaps in the region. The ACU is convening universities from across the Commonwealth to harness academic strengths and develop the networks and collaborations which underpin education and research-led solutions to support this ambition.

### **Africa-UK Physics partnership<sup>3</sup>**

Although the pipeline of highly skilled graduates is increasing throughout the Commonwealth, there is a need for governments to understand how to get the best value out of university graduates. The current situation means that many African students finish their PhD and leave to work elsewhere (usually outside of Africa) as there aren't the jobs available. In 2019, the ACU carried out a feasibility study in partnership with the Institute of Physics, to create an evidence base for a potential multi-year programme to improve physics training, research, infrastructure and collaboration in nine Commonwealth countries in SSA (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda). The Africa-UK Physics Partnership aims to create high-value jobs for physics, and support African graduates to contribute to their home economies.

The AUPP programme aims to highlight how physics prepares students to enter a wide range of high skilled professions, ones that are vital the economic growth in the future and to tackle global challenges. It also seeks to support innovation and entrepreneurship in research with grants supporting higher risk research that has the potential to address challenges, such as the climate crisis, weather management and energy supply.

There is a need to engage industry, creating inward invest in countries and providing a source of the high-value jobs physicists are looking for in their home countries. In turn, industry can benefit from the highly skilled graduates that countries are producing.

### **The Commonwealth Virtual Exchange<sup>4</sup>**

Research has consistently demonstrated the value of an international experience for students' academic performance, graduate earnings, and intercultural agility. The ACU in collaboration with ten of its member institutions is planning a virtual student exchange pilot. The pilot, which will commence in October 2022, will be for 50 undergraduate students from the participating institutions in the UK, Australia, India, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

- 

The programme will offer students the opportunity to work collaboratively (in teams of five) on a project that is designed to enhance entrepreneurship and intercultural competencies of the participants. Over a period of eight weeks, each student team within the programme will study and analyse a global challenge linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Teams will be assigned a facilitator whose job it is to lead

---

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

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.iop.org/about/international/africa-uk-physics-partnership-programme-feasibility-study#gref>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.acu.ac.uk/acu-events/commonwealth-virtual-exchange-addressing-global-challenges-through-intercultural-collaboration/>

discussions during the regular facilitated online sessions, monitor the team’s progress, and remind students of the milestones along the journey.