**The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities**

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

September 2024

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Table of Contents

Overview

Three years post-pandemic, the global higher education sector faces a crucial turning point. COVID-19 deepened existing inequities but also drove global innovation and adaptation. This report highlights five key themes discussed by ACU members from over 20 Commonwealth countries at the 2024 ACU vice-chancellor summit and presents recommendations for action to be pursued with Commonwealth Governments, including at the Heads of Government Meeting in October 2024 and the 2025 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM).

The 2024 ACU vice-chancellor summit brought together over 100 distinguished guests, including vice-chancellors, Commonwealth education ministers, and international stakeholders. The summit focused on critical issues like higher education funding, graduate employability, research management excellence, and the role of artificial intelligence in education.

This report summarises these discussions and identifies five critical thematic challenges and opportunities where governments and universities can work together to make a big impact. These have been developed by the ACU's Higher Education Taskforce, a group of 20 ACU member vice-chancellors who have been tasked with supporting Commonwealth education ministers in their

commitments to realising and achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030[1].

These themes will ultimately shape the future of global higher education:

- Bridging the gap: Improving access and inclusion in HE
- Making the case for sustainable higher education funding and finance
- Navigating the digital frontier: Digital access and AI
- Fostering sustainable and inclusive research ecosystems
- Developing future-ready graduates: Advancing employability, entrepreneurship, and skills in higher education

The ACU will use this report as a strategic roadmap to guide its advocacy efforts, policy recommendations, and support initiatives across the Commonwealth. The themes and recommendations will inform the ACU's ongoing dialogue with governments, international organisations, and higher education institutions, ensuring that the voice of the Commonwealth's higher education sector is heard on the global stage. This report will also serve as a key reference document in the lead-up to critical meetings, such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in October 2024 and the 2026 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM), where it will underpin the ACU's proposals and advocacy efforts.

For ACU members, this report serves as both, a reflection of collective insights and a call to action. Members are encouraged to integrate these themes into their institutional strategies, advocate for the recommendations within their national contexts, and actively participate in the ACU's collaborative initiatives.

The takeaway for members is clear: by aligning with these priorities, universities can not only contribute to the achievement of the SDGs but also ensure their institutions are at the forefront of global higher education leadership. Members are invited to work closely with the ACU to turn these recommendations into tangible actions that will drive positive change in their institutions, countries, and the broader Commonwealth community.

---

[1] In 2022, Education ministers at CCEM in Nairobi, Kenya, issued a joint statement in which they recognised the urgent need to increase investment in education and skills at all ages, with particular focus on ensuring foundational skills for all. The meeting marked the first time Ministers recognised the important role of higher education in meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU
Higher Education Taskforce

Finance and funding: making the case for higher education

Rising operational costs, technological advancements, and the increasing demand for skilled professionals underscore the pressing need for sustained and increased funding in higher education.

Globally, many institutions are grappling with financial challenges that impact their ability to provide quality education and research opportunities. In 2022, 3.7% of GDP was spent globally on education[2]. However, figure 1 shows that despite a consistent rise in GDP per capita, tertiary expenditure per student has declined, falling by more than 10% from 2000 to 2016.

Tertiary Expenditure per Student by Year

● Sum of GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international $) ● Median of Government expenditure per student, tertiary (% of GDP per capita)
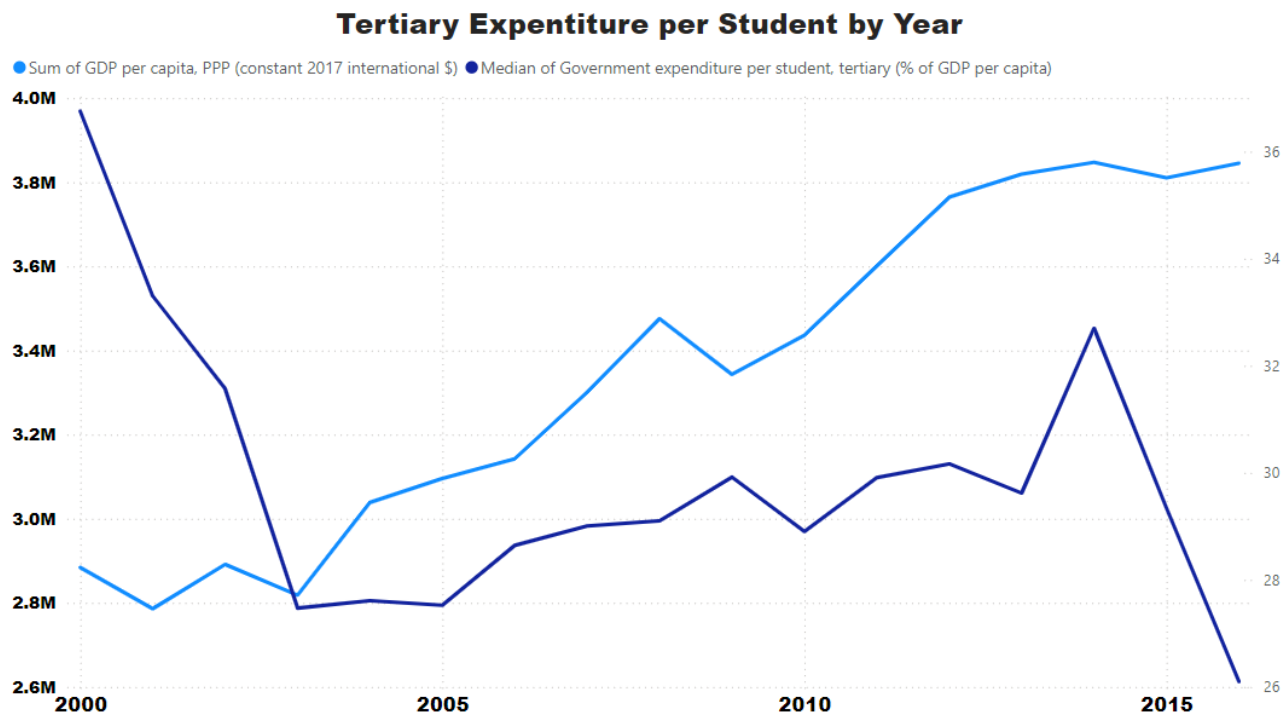

Figure 1 Tertiary expenditure per student per year, GDP per capita. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

The trend shown in figure 2 indicates that government expenditure on tertiary education has not kept pace with increasing enrolment rates, because whilst enrolment has increased exponentially since the year 2000, tertiary education expenditure as a percentage of GDP has remained relatively stable.

---

[2] Accessed July 2024; https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Tertiary Education Expenditure as % of GDP (%) and Average Enrolment Numbers by Year

● Median of Government expenditure on tertiary education as % of GDP (%)   ● Sum of Enrolment in tertiary education, all programmes, both sexes (number)
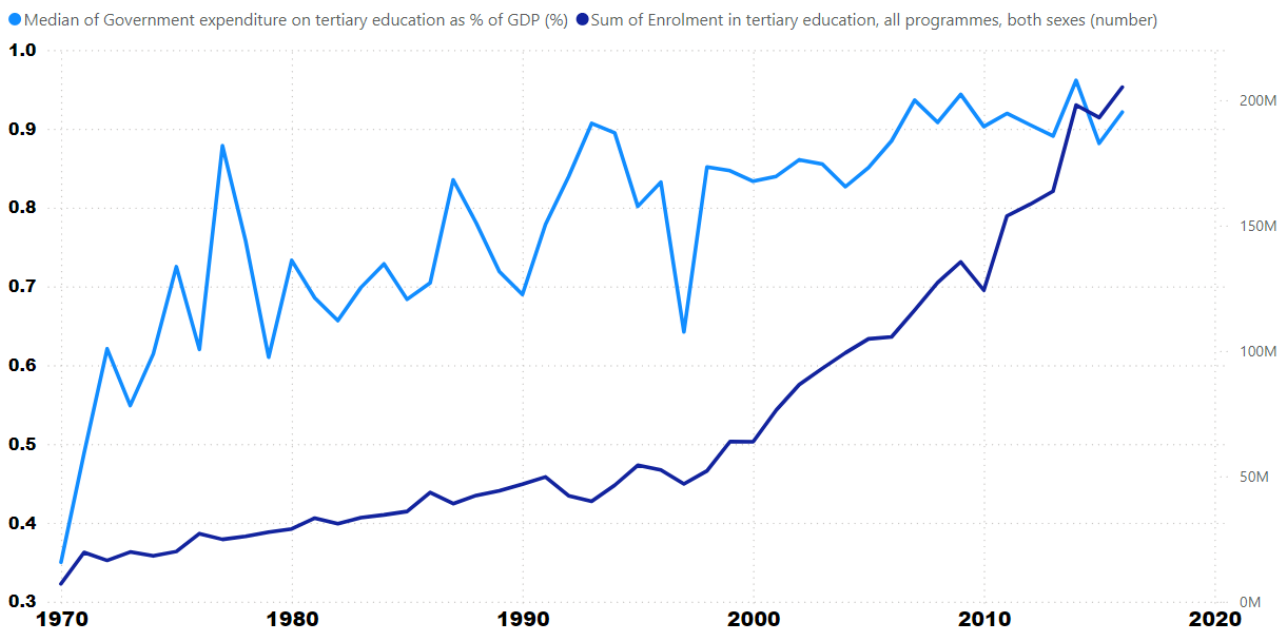
Figure 2 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

In the face of diminishing government investment, Commonwealth countries, particularly those in the Global North (GN), have become increasingly reliant on income from international students. In the UK, for example, international students accounted for 23% of income in 2022/23, up from around 5% in the mid-1990s.

This financial dependence can strain university systems, especially when a significant proportion of these students originate from a limited number of countries, affecting the overall quality of education. Geopolitical dynamics and domestic political agendas have prompted several high-income nations, notably the UK, Canada, and Australia, to impose new restrictions on international students. These restrictions have resulted in a decline in revenue for universities, which have traditionally used higher international student fees to subsidise research costs. With fewer international students, there is less funding available, leading to potential cutbacks in research projects and academic staffing. In the UK, for example, tightening of student visa regulations and post-study work opportunities, has

led to a drop in international student numbers[3]. This has had a direct impact on the revenue streams of UK universities, which are now grappling with budget deficits and reduced funding for research initiatives.

Underinvestment in tertiary education has been a particularly prevalent issue in Commonwealth countries, where tertiary education expenditure as a whole has been on average 2% lower than non-Commonwealth countries since 1970. Figure 3 shows that in the 20-year period from 1996 to 2016, Commonwealth countries typically dedicated a lower proportion of their education expenditure to Tertiary education than non-Commonwealth countries. Whilst figure 3 shows that this gap narrowed in 2016, the knock-on effect of historical underfunding will likely be felt for years to come.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most significant disruption to education systems globally in history. It has revealed deep disparities not only between countries and education systems in terms of access, quality, and relevance but also among different groups of learners within countries. At the heart of this education crisis is a global financing gap, which hinders adequate and equitable funding for public education policies worldwide, currently impeding progress toward the SDGs.

According to UNESCO, while one-third of upper-middle and high-income countries have reduced their education budgets since the pandemic began, two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries have also cut public education spending. On average, global public spending on education has decreased by 13.5% compared to 2020. These significant reductions in education budgets are further worsening the learning crisis.

---

[3] New analysis highlights UK universities' reliance on international enrolments - ICEF Monitor - Market intelligence for international student recruitment; accessed: August 2024.
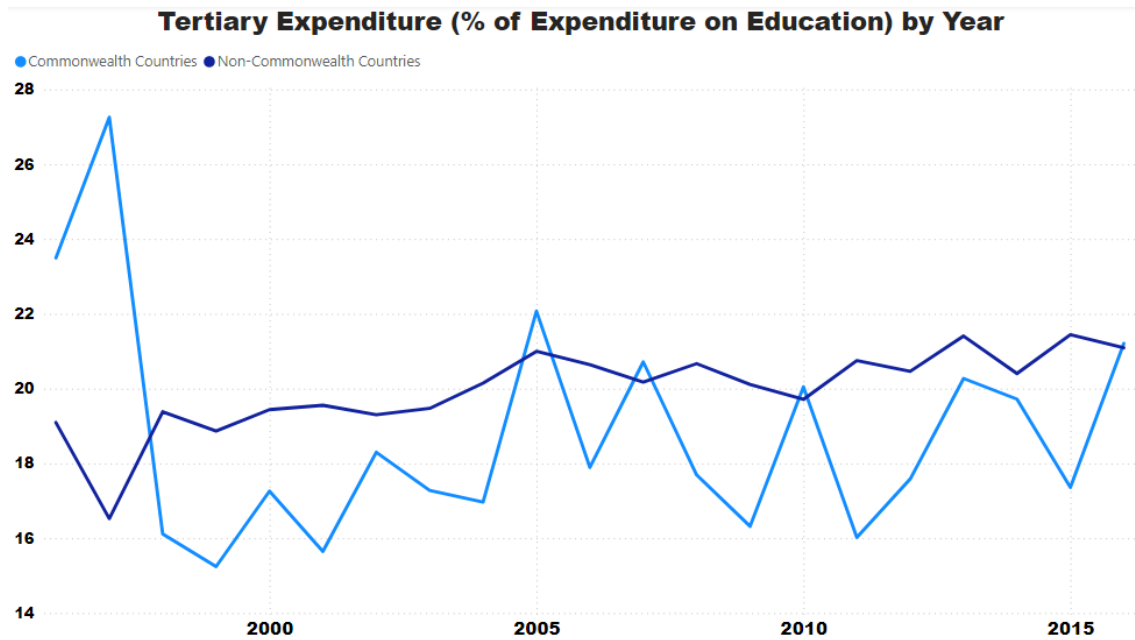
Figure 3 Tertiary expenditure, % of Education expenditure, 1996-2016, CW vs non-CW, Source: OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)
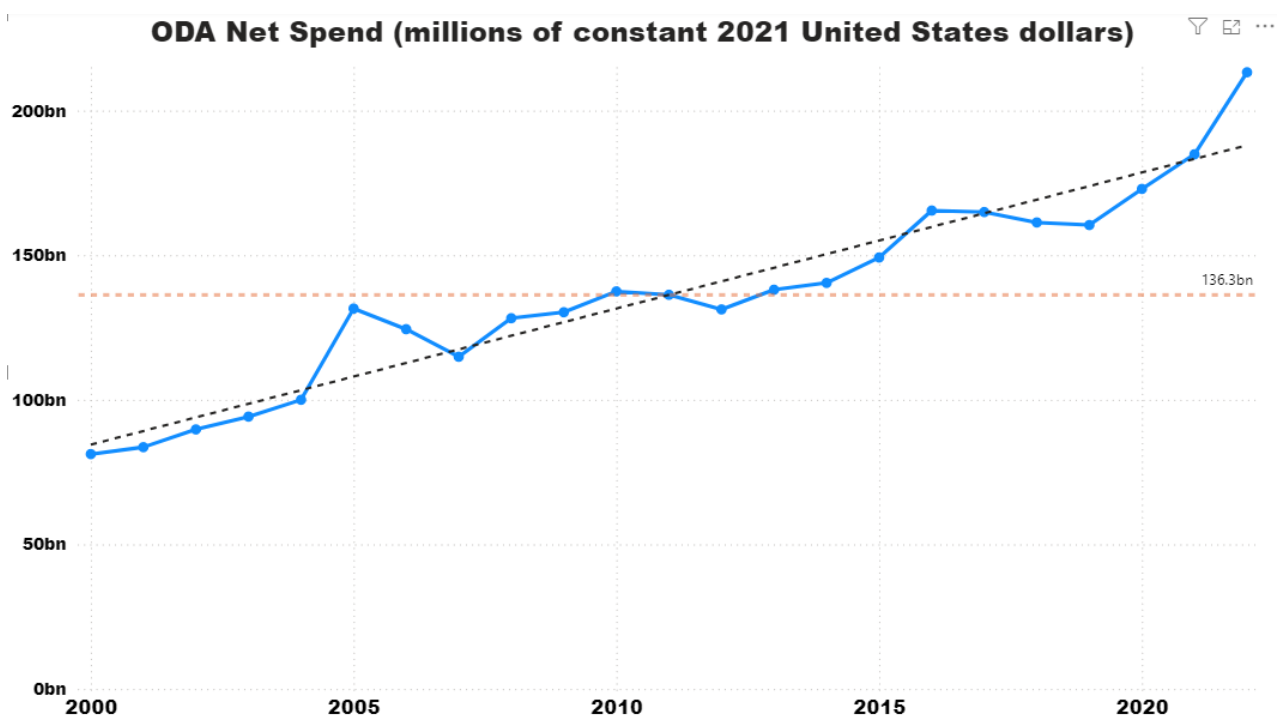

Figure 4 Source: OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

6

Figure 4 shows that globally, ODA net spend has consistently increased since the turn of the millennium. However, in the case of lower income countries in receipt of development aid, the pandemic worsened existing gaps in education investment across and within countries. With an overall decline in overseas bilateral aid, around 40% of lower and middle income countries reduced their spending on education by an average of 13.5% in 2022. World Bank data shows that education spending has not recovered since the start of Covid-19 and remains lower than before the start of the pandemic[4]. Figure 5 shows a particularly marked decrease in the UK's ODA net spend since 2020, and spending has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Australia and New Zealand have also decreased ODA spend since 2020. Canada appears as a notable outlier.
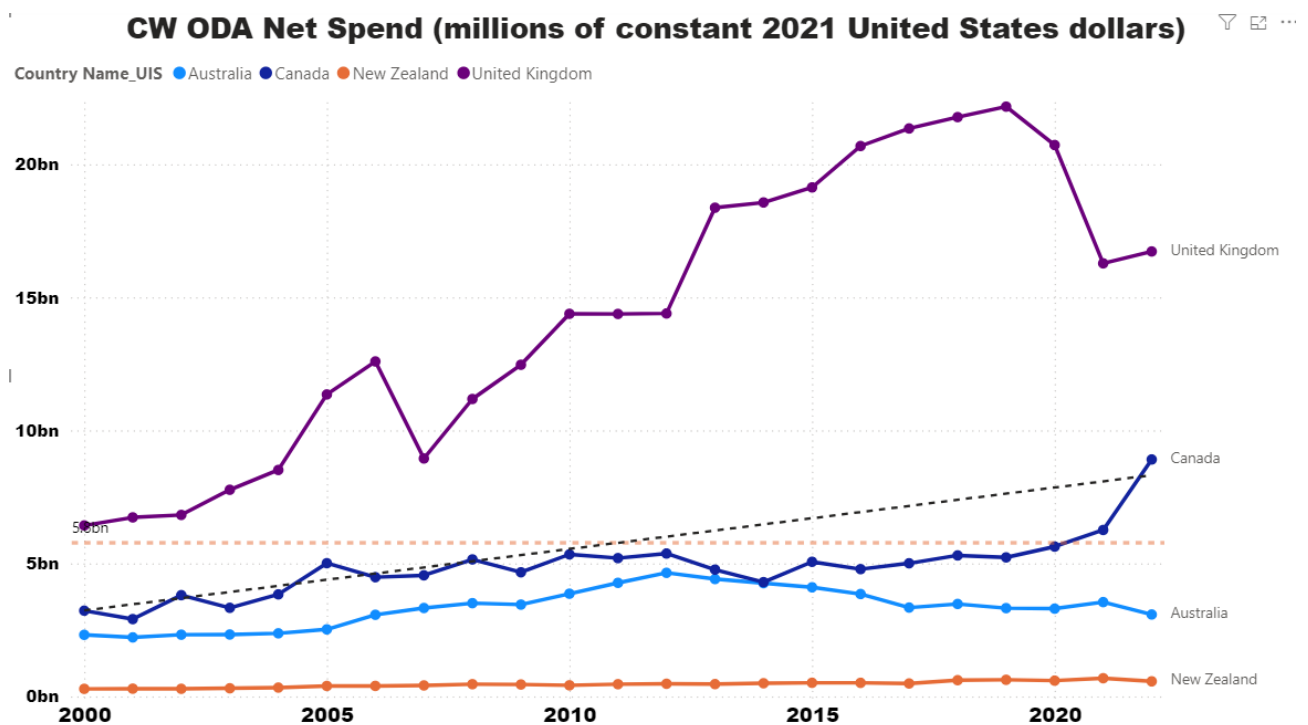

CW ODA Net Spend (millions of constant 2021 United States dollars)

Country Name_UIS ● Australia ● Canada ● New Zealand ● United Kingdom

Figure 5 Source: OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

Although in recent years, there has been an increase in overall development aid, this is largely due to support for Ukraine. There are concerns therefore about the future direction of donor country aid budgets amidst economic uncertainty.

---

[4] https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/28/financing-for-education-stagnant-or-declining-despite-chronic-learning-needs-post-covid-19; accessed 06/09/2024

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Compounding all of these economic challenges and exacerbating the impact of declining public funding, cash has eroded in real terms with soaring inflation and a cost-of-living crisis cutting across multiple contexts.

Currently, with 60% of the Commonwealth's population aged 29 and under[5], the demand for education and competition for global talent is set to increase significantly. Nearly half of Nigeria's total population, for example, is currently under the age of 15, and this is projected to grow to 70% by 2050[6]. Such demographic shifts will have profound implications on the demand for education and the nation's labour market. To demonstrate this, figure 6 shows that Gross Tertiary Enrolment (GTE) has increased dramatically since 1970. In the 30-year period from 1980 to 2010, global GTE increased from 8% to 32%. However, it took just ten years, from 2010 to 2020, for GTE to climb to 52%. This demonstrates that the percentage of the population enrolling in tertiary education is rapidly increasing, and this trend appears set to continue. Notably, GTE in the Commonwealth lags behind significantly at just 25% compared to the global rate of 52%.

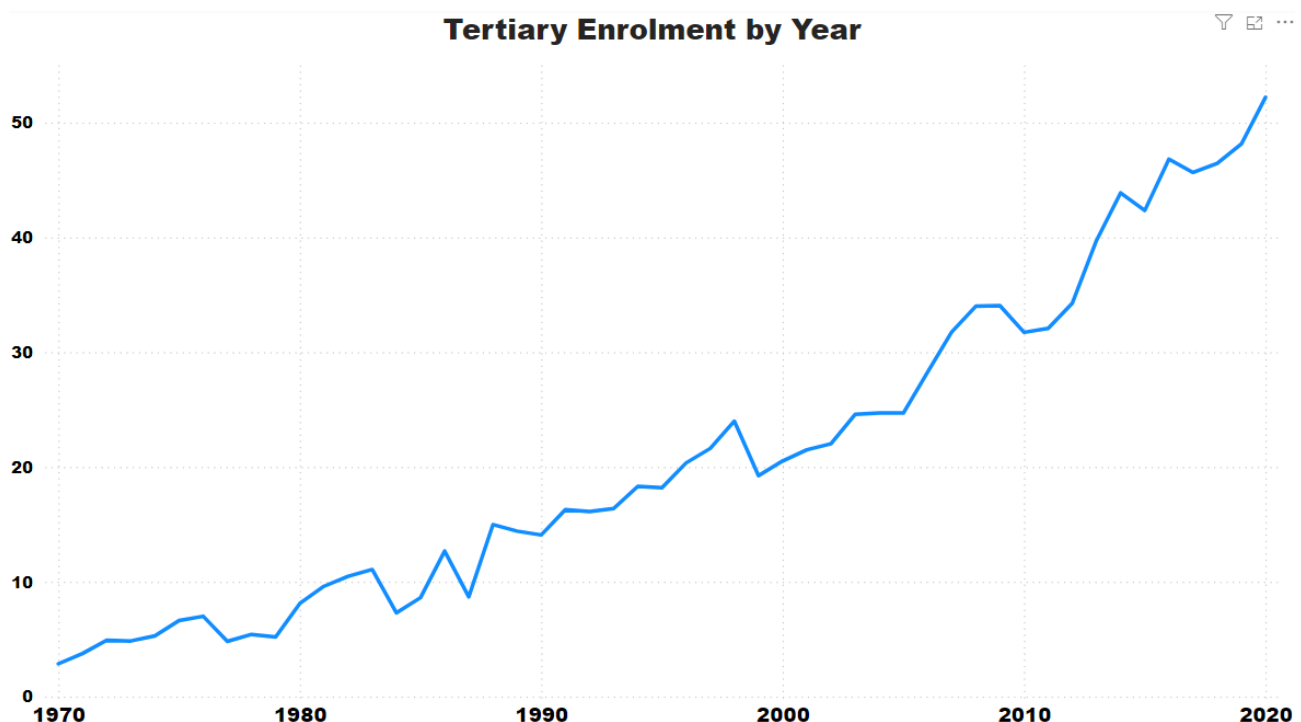**Tertiary Enrolment by Year**

Figure 6 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

---

[5] Year of Youth 2023/24 | Commonwealth (thecommonwealth.org); Accessed July 2024

[6] Situation of women and children in Nigeria | UNICEF Nigeria; Accessed August 2024

Higher Education in the Commonwealth
Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Participants at the ACU summit spoke about the urgent need to demonstrate the value of higher education and build a social consensus around HE as a public good. In the UK, for example, HE ranked 27th among voter priorities in the 2024 elections[7], highlighting the challenge of securing public support and funding. Defining the social benefits of higher education involves understanding the beneficiaries, which include individuals, businesses, the state, local businesses, and the broader economy. Each beneficiary should contribute to funding HE, reflecting the diverse benefits they receive from research, innovation, and skilled graduates.

Evidencing the pivotal role of higher education in driving economic growth and societal progress is crucial for securing additional funding. There is a clear global demand for high-quality graduates, underscoring the importance of HE institutions in economic development. Moreover, the SDGs offer a real opportunity for universities to reestablish their reputation and access capital. Universities must advocate for their role in achieving the SDGs and actively engage in public discourse to rebuild their reputation and secure funding.

To secure public funding, universities must align with their country's development objectives and make themselves relevant to their national context to address talent shortages and surpluses effectively. However, even in doing so, declining resources and potentially waning public support for HE has made new funding models and partnerships with public and private bodies essential to ensure the sustainability of higher education. For instance, there are examples of Australian universities which have developed successful tripartite partnerships involving HE institutions, government, and the private sector in order to align their research missions towards real, local and national challenges. Such models can diversify revenue streams and reduce reliance on government funding. The rise of private universities, which constitute 60% of HE in India for example[8], adds another dimension to the funding landscape.

The financial challenges facing higher education institutions globally highlight the critical need for sustained and increased funding. The decline in tertiary expenditure per student, especially in Commonwealth countries, coupled with a reliance on income from international students, underscores the vulnerability of universities to geopolitical and economic shifts. Additionally, lower-income countries face reduced overseas aid for education, further straining their systems. With a significant portion of the Commonwealth's population being young, the demand for higher education is set to rise, necessitating robust funding strategies. To ensure sustainability and relevance, universities must align with national development objectives, diversify funding sources, and actively

---

[7] "High Esteem Low Priority? Perceptions of UK universities and their importance in deciding the general election", https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/high-esteem-low-priority-uk-universities-and-the-election.pdf

[8] International Journal of Innovative Social Science & Humanities Research (csirs.org.in); Accessed August 2024

advocate for their role in achieving societal and economic progress. The adoption of innovative funding models, such as partnerships with the private sector and alignment with SDGs and national priorities, is essential for the continued vitality of higher education.

Recommendations from the ACU summit and the ACU Higher Education Taskforce:

1) Link higher education funding to broader social and economic development

Governments should recognise and prioritise higher education as a key driver of social and economic development by integrating it into national and international development strategies.

How ACU will support: The ACU will lead research initiatives to demonstrate the broad benefits of higher education, providing governments with robust evidence of its impact on employability, skills development, and economic progress. The ACU will also facilitate dialogues between governments, educational institutions, and international organisations to integrate these findings into policy frameworks.

2) Advocate for sustainable government investment in higher education

Governments globally must commit to sustainable and increased investment in higher education, particularly in research and development, to address both national and global challenges like healthcare, climate change, and green technologies.

How ACU will support: The ACU will advocate in international platforms for increased higher education funding and help governments design and implement funding strategies that align with global development goals. The ACU will also provide technical assistance and share best practices to help countries optimise their education investments for maximum impact.

3) Align university missions with global development goals

Governments should collaborate with universities to ensure that higher education institutions are aligned with local, national, and international development objectives, particularly the SDGs.

How ACU will support: The ACU will support universities in developing programmes that meet local and global talent needs, prevent brain drain, and reduce regional disparities in skilled professionals. The ACU can also facilitate partnerships between universities and governments to ensure alignment with development objectives and track progress toward the SDGs.

4) Promote global higher education partnerships

Governments should actively promote and participate in three-way partnerships involving higher education institutions, governments, and the private sector, ensuring alignment with national priorities and global SDGs.

How ACU will support: The ACU will play a coordinating role in developing and supporting these partnerships, focusing on aligning them with SDGs and national priorities. The ACU will also share successful initiatives and best practices globally, fostering international collaboration and ensuring that both Global South and Global North countries benefit from these partnerships.

5) Explore and implement innovative global financial models

Governments should explore and adopt innovative financial models to sustainably fund higher education, reducing dependence on traditional funding sources and supporting broader education targets.

How ACU will support: The ACU will research and promote these innovative financial models, such as tax models and debt swaps, providing governments with the tools and knowledge to implement them. The ACU will also facilitate partnerships with international private sector entities and financial institutions, helping universities diversify their revenue streams and strengthen financial sustainability.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Navigating the digital frontier: Digital Access and AI

The integration of artificial intelligence and the digital revolution is reshaping the landscape of higher education, promising both innovation and challenges. These transformative technologies hold vast potential for revolutionising teaching and learning methods, yet they also exacerbate disparities in access. The pandemic has underscored the digital divide, revealing stark discrepancies in technology access and infrastructure that threaten to perpetuate existing inequalities, particularly in the global South.

Figure 7 demonstrates the extent of the access disparities across the world. Until as recently as 2022, citizens of the Commonwealth were markedly less likely to have access to an internet connection than those living in non-Commonwealth countries. Although this has increased in recent years, this trend disguises ongoing digital inequity within the Commonwealth itself.

Figure 8 demonstrates that even within the Commonwealth, the populations of high- and upper-middle-income economies are vastly more likely to have an internet connection than those living in lower-middle- and low-income economies.
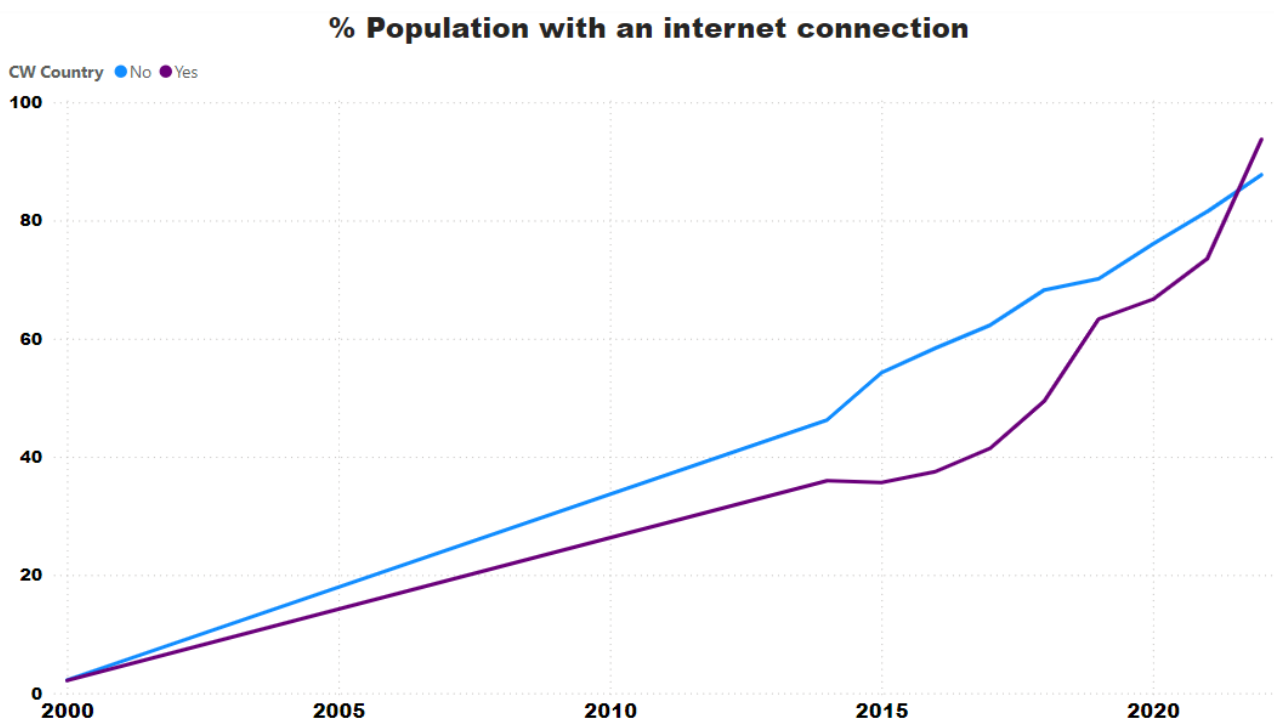

% Population with an internet connection

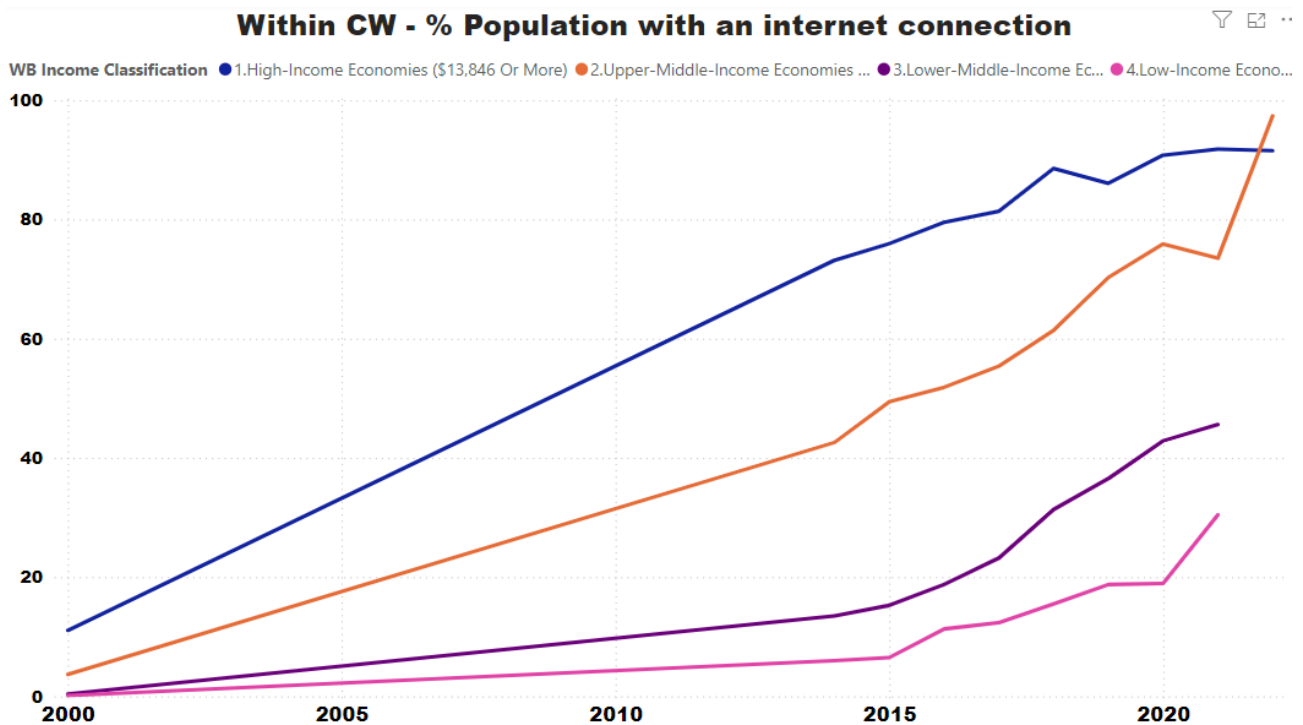*Figure 7 Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU)*

Figure 8 Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

The mainstream adoption of artificial intelligence and IT innovations has triggered a race among governments and institutions to both innovate and regulate. These technologies have the capacity to revolutionise entire sectors and reshape labour markets, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the higher education landscape. Ironically, technology, though expensive, is essential for reducing costs across other parts of the university landscape. The high costs associated with digital and AI technologies for example, including cloud-based information systems, pose a significant financial challenge for universities. Therefore, universities must work towards innovations that help lower these costs including collaborations to avoid redundant investments.

Technological advancements in areas like synthetic biology and neuroscience further underscore the dynamic nature of the research environment. Universities have a pivotal role in leveraging AI to improve teaching practices and in training students to utilise generative AI, thereby meeting industry needs. Faculty must endeavour to embed AI into curricula to prepare students for the future workforce.

AI, however, presents both challenges and opportunities for universities. Participants at the Summit discussed how AI can enhance learning, but it also raises questions about assessment and academic integrity. Institutions must develop policies to manage AI use in learning and maintain the integrity

of assessments. There is a need for training programmes to equip faculty and students with the skills to utilise AI effectively and universities must ensure that their staff and students can navigate the complexities of AI and integrate it meaningfully into their work.

The accelerated shift towards digitally-enabled teaching and learning, precipitated by the pandemic, has spawned educational innovations and expanded access opportunities. For example, through the [Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL)](#), the ACU has been able to develop an effective and scalable model for addressing higher education capacity challenges in countries where demand outstrips supply. Through the programme, the ACU has worked with 23 universities across four countries in East Africa and 12 universities in West 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, 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.

However, the transition towards digital learning also brings forth persistent challenges, including declining demand for traditional in-person education and heightened competition from tech firms offering cost-effective online instruction. Therefore, there is an urgent need for legal frameworks to regulate AI. Ethical questions surrounding the use of AI must be addressed, including issues of academic integrity and the potential misuse of AI technologies. Institutions require support in developing these frameworks to ensure responsible AI deployment.

Amidst these shifts, participants at the ACU summit recognised that universities play a pivotal role in cultivating digital and data literacy among students, addressing the demand for these skills in the job market, and fostering critical thinking to discern misinformation prevalent in digital spaces. Moreover, as cyber threats become more frequent and severe, posing risks to both organisational integrity and national security, institutions must prioritise cybersecurity measures to safeguard against potential disruptions.

In essence, the evolving landscape of AI and the digital revolution presents a multifaceted terrain for higher education institutions. Balancing innovation with equity, addressing emerging challenges, and harnessing the transformative potential of these technologies are imperative for universities to navigate this rapidly changing environment effectively. Universities need to avoid competing and instead work collaboratively to tackle challenges posed by AI. Collaboration with industry is essential to develop practical solutions and innovations and sharing policies and practices related to AI use in education can help to foster collective progress. Finally, ensuring equitable access to technological advancements, particularly for students in developing regions is essential.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Recommendations:

1) Foster digital access and inclusion

Governments should ensure that all students and institutions have equitable access to digital resources by providing necessary funding and support for the integration of digital technologies in higher education. This includes recognising the critical role of connectivity and digital equity in promoting lifelong learning and open education, with a commitment to leaving no institution or student behind.

How ACU will support: The ACU will advocate for digital access and inclusion by supporting efforts to address disparities in digital resources among institutions and students. The ACU will work with governments to secure funding and provide technical assistance to help universities integrate digital technologies into their education systems, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to benefit from digital advancements.

2) Develop ethical and regulatory frameworks

Governments should develop and implement ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to govern the use of AI and digital technologies in education, ensuring academic integrity is maintained in the digital age through appropriate training and safeguards.

How ACU will support: The ACU will support universities in contributing to the creation and implementation of these ethical guidelines and frameworks. The ACU will provide a platform for universities to collaborate on developing best practices, offer training programmes on digital ethics, and advocate for regulatory frameworks that protect academic integrity while embracing technological advancements.

3) Encourage collaboration and knowledge-sharing

Governments should encourage collaboration between institutions and ensure that there are ongoing conversations and knowledge-sharing initiatives on AI and digital technology in education. This collaborative approach should aim to create unified strategies for managing AI's impact on education.

How ACU will support: The ACU will act as a convener, bringing together institutions and governments to foster ongoing dialogue on AI and digital technologies. The ACU will facilitate the development, dissemination, and adoption of best practices for AI use in education, helping

institutions share knowledge and experiences. Additionally, the ACU will encourage member institutions to collaborate on course development and policy-sharing to create a cohesive approach to AI in higher education.

4) Leverage AI for Innovation and Impact

Governments should support the use of AI to drive educational innovation, ensuring that the technology is used in ways that benefit all students and do not exacerbate inequalities.

How ACU will support: The ACU will assist institutions in leveraging AI to foster educational innovation while prioritising inclusivity. The ACU will provide guidance and resources to help universities use AI effectively and equitably, ensuring that technological advancements contribute to reducing, rather than increasing, educational inequalities.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Employability, entrepreneurship and skills

The landscape of the job market is evolving rapidly, driven by technological breakthroughs and changes in economic structures. With 60% of the Commonwealth population aged 29 and under, demographic shifts pose both opportunities and challenges for the education and the labour market and young people are more likely to feel the impact of these shifts.

Figure 9 shows that since the mid-1980s, young people in the Commonwealth have been disproportionately more likely to be out of education, employment or training compared to non-Commonwealth citizens. This disparity is growing, whilst for non-Commonwealth nations this number is falling.
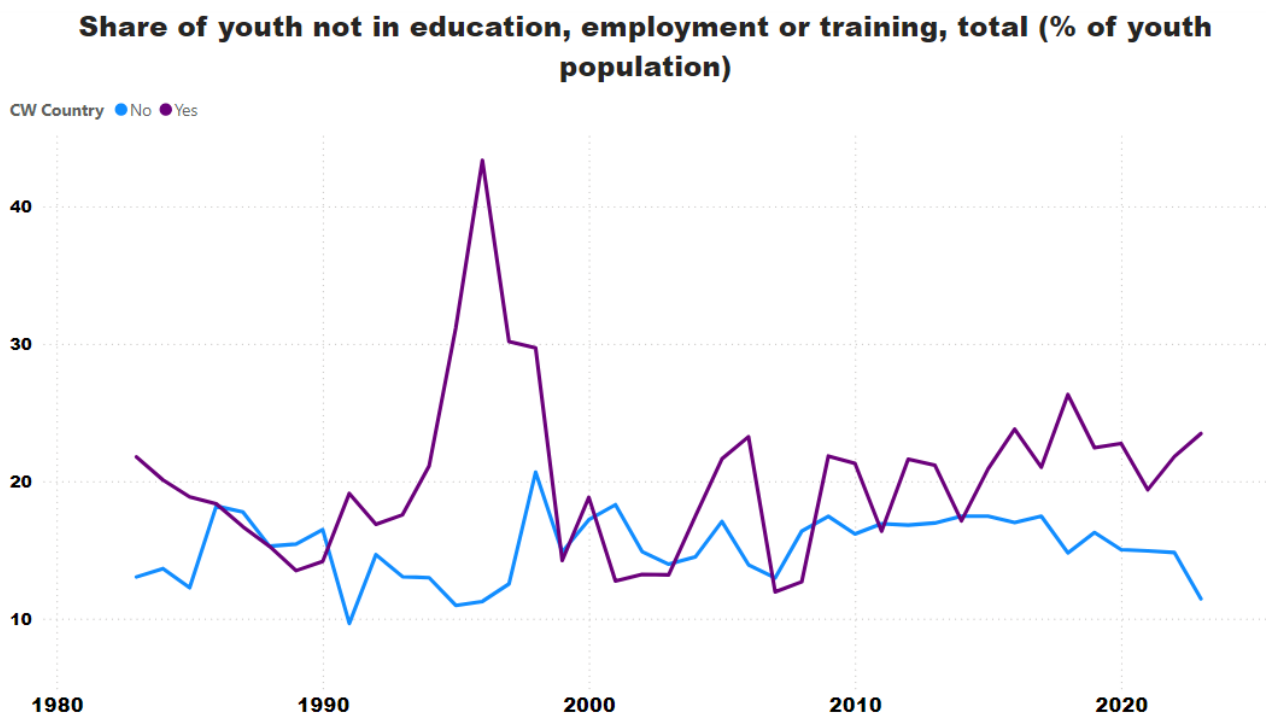
Share of youth not in education, employment or training, total (% of youth population)

Figure 3 Source: International Labour Organisation.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Understanding global megatrends is crucial for grasping the rapid and continuous changes affecting education, work, and livelihoods. Key megatrends include escalating climate change, digital and disruptive technologies, shifting global value chains, demographic shifts, rapid urbanisation, global interconnectivity of conflicts, and global inequality. These trends contribute to a state of 'permacrisis,' marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, necessitating collaboration and resilience[9].

While some countries face an ageing population and declining birth rates, others are experiencing significant population booms, such as Nigeria, where nearly half of the total population is under 15, with the youth population projected to reach 70% by 2050[10]. These trends will inevitably impact demand for education and the labour market, leading to increased competition for global talent.

Participants at the ACU summit recognised that higher education institutions must adapt to prepare students for the future world of work, emphasising employability, entrepreneurship and to be globally responsible citizens. This involves not only updating curricula to include emerging technologies and responsible citizenship goals but also new forms of work and importantly, a culture of lifelong learning. Moreover, foundational skills, especially communication and numeracy are critical to building the workforce of tomorrow. Governments must adapt and make more flexible education curriculum requirements to ensure universities can play a proactive role in equipping students with the skills needed to thrive in a dynamic and uncertain job market. An example of these are Ghana's pre-engineering programme and India's National Grading Framework[11], both successful initiatives that allow for adaptability in curricula.

Livelihoods, employment, and the socio-economic development of Commonwealth member countries are severely threatened by climate change trends, and the green transition will require significant adjustments in the current and potential workforce. Universities need to collaborate closely with professional bodies to ensure educational outcomes meet industry needs. Addressing the mismatch between job availability and the number of graduates, requires integrating entrepreneurship into university curricula, and showcasing the role of universities in fostering job creators, not just employees. Moreover, there is a need for mandatory entrepreneurship courses alongside career counselling services to better prepare students for the job market. Ghana's £60

---

[9] How megatrends can impact the global investment landscape | World Economic Forum (weforum.org); Accessed August 2024.

[10] Nigeria's growing population can be an advantage, with better data and a policy focus on young people (theconversation.com); Accessed August 2024.

[11] National Curriculum Framework (NCF)| National Portal of India; Accessed August 2024.

million World Bank programme to support student entrepreneurship highlights the need for Government support for programmes like these.

Participants at the ACU summit emphasised that regular partnerships between universities and industries are crucial to maintaining relevant curricula and research shows that employers consistently make a plea for better communication skills among graduates[12]. Successful models addressing these gaps can be found in universities in Sri Lanka, Malta, Bangladesh, and the UK, where universities are effectively integrating practical experience, interdisciplinary studies, and industry collaboration to address key skills such as communication.

Moving beyond employability as the sole measure of educational success, there is a need to highlight the significance of critical thinking, social consciousness, and interdisciplinary learning that universities provide. Nelson Mandela University's inclusion of a social consciousness module[13], for example, was commended as a model for fostering well-rounded graduates.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had lasting adverse effects on economies, employment, and poverty in many Commonwealth countries, exacerbating the youth jobs crisis, particularly in Africa and parts of Asia. The pandemic has highlighted universities' role in addressing national challenges, leading to increased spending on innovation, research, and development in higher-income countries. However, disparities remain, with government expenditure on education varying across regions and countries, further emphasising the need for sustainable funding models and equitable access to education.

Recommendations:

1) Strengthen collaboration with industry and professional bodies

Governments should actively promote and facilitate collaboration between universities, professional bodies, and industry partners to ensure that higher education curricula are aligned with the evolving skills needed in the workforce.

How ACU will support: The ACU will work closely with professional bodies and industry partners to support universities in aligning their curricula with workforce needs. The ACU will facilitate

---

[12] https://heprofessional.co.uk/edition/what-skills-do-employers-want-from-graduates-release; Accessed August 2024
[13] About Us - Social Consciousness and Sustainable Futures Course (mandela.ac.za); Accessed July 2024

partnerships, provide guidance on curriculum development, and organise forums that bring together academia, industry, and government to discuss and implement effective strategies.

2) Promote entrepreneurship education

Governments should encourage and fund initiatives that integrate entrepreneurship education into university curricula to address job market mismatches and promote graduates as job creators.

How ACU will support: The ACU will advocate for the inclusion of entrepreneurship education in university programmes and work with governments to develop and support these initiatives. The ACU will also provide resources, training, and best practices to help universities effectively incorporate entrepreneurship into their curricula, ensuring that graduates are equipped to create their own opportunities in the job market.

3) Develop comprehensive and flexible curricula

Governments should support universities in developing comprehensive and flexible curricula that allow institutions the autonomy to adapt their programmes to prepare students for a rapidly changing job market.

How ACU will support: The ACU will advocate for flexible education systems and support universities in designing curricula that respond to dynamic workforce demands. The ACU will provide research, policy recommendations, and examples of best practices to help universities create programmes that are responsive to both local and global employment trends.

4) Promote education for sustainable development and lifelong learning

Governments should prioritise education for sustainable development and lifelong learning by encouraging universities to incorporate critical thinking, social and environmental consciousness, and interdisciplinary learning into their curricula.

How ACU will support: The ACU will support universities in integrating education for sustainable development and lifelong learning into their programmes. This includes promoting curricula that foster critical thinking, social responsibility, and environmental awareness, as well as emphasising essential skills like communication and numeracy. The ACU will also provide resources, training, and forums to help universities implement these educational priorities effectively.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU
Higher Education Taskforce

Fostering sustainable and inclusive research ecosystems

Developing fair and transparent assessment systems will be key to fostering a collaborative and inclusive research environment. The pursuit of maintaining high research quality while increasing research quantity is a dilemma for universities, further intensified by the pressure to publish. Further, research capacity is unevenly distributed, with developing countries often lacking the resources and infrastructure needed to fully participate in the global research community. Figure 10 shows a growing gap in investment in research and development, with Commonwealth countries investing a lower portion of GDP into research and development in comparison to non-Commonwealth countries.
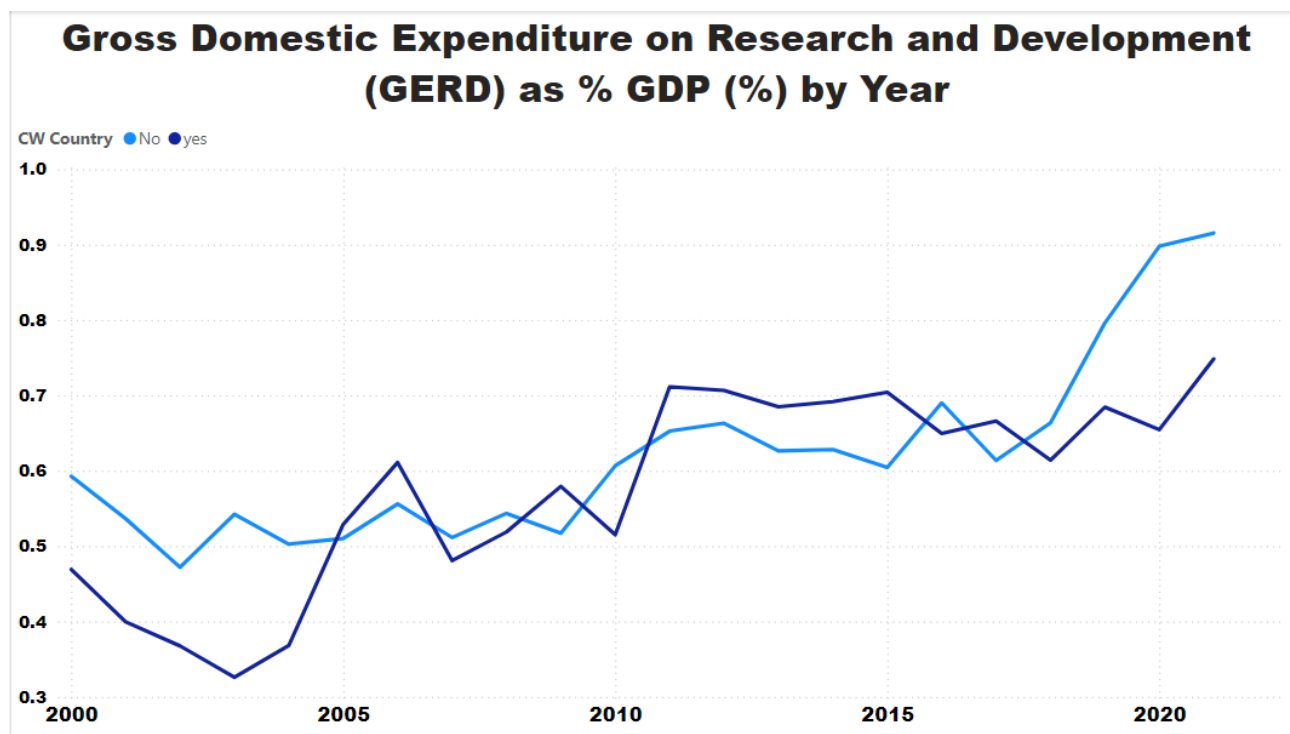

Figure 10 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Developing robust assessment frameworks that comprehensively gauge the impact of research remains a challenge, as traditional metrics may not capture broader societal contributions and traditional research metrics, and assessment systems often fail to capture the quality and diversity of research outputs needed to address global challenges. As such, universities have been exploring new ways to incentivise and capture impactful research, such as through the creation of searchable research hubs and support for international collaborations. Policy changes, advocated for by the ACU, are helping to address these issues by promoting collaborative networks that foster more

inclusive assessment frameworks involving addressing disparities in access, resources, and opportunities.

HE capacity strengthening

The climate and nature crisis presents a significant challenge globally, with extreme weather patterns and flooding affecting health, food production, and biodiversity. The impacts and costs of these climate-related issues are likely to fall disproportionately on local communities. In addition, resource shortages and growing competition between countries and regions may lead to further instability as nations seek to protect energy, water, and food security. As calls for climate reparations grow from those at the forefront of climate change effects, many of which are Commonwealth nations, participants at the ACU summit called for more collaboration across borders and disciplines to address complex global challenges. Universities, as community hubs, can play a role in enhancing our understanding of disaster vulnerability, resiliency, mitigation, knowledge production, response and recovery- as well as providing relief and support to the affected through direct engagement with bridging actors[14].

These shared challenges necessitate greater collaboration among various actors, including universities, participants recognised- which can spur more research and action on mitigation and adaptation. Moreover, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research remains crucial amidst the growing emphasis on STEM subjects from Governments which dismiss the value of non-STEM subjects. The collaborative research institute established by the University of the West Indies (UWI) and Glasgow University[15], demonstrates the importance of addressing historical injustices and their contemporary impacts and highlights the value of ethical engagement and the need for universities to be proactive in fostering interdisciplinary research.

Participants at the ACU summit also highlighted the need to connect academic experts with governments and policymakers in order to enhance policy implementation by providing evidence-based insights and innovative solutions. These programmes promote knowledge exchange, strengthen national and international collaboration, develop expertise and leadership, and increase the societal impact of academic research by translating it into actionable policies, ultimately contributing to sustainable development and long-term positive outcomes. To enable impactful action, university networks like the ACU should connect academic experts with governments and policymakers by embedding them in intergovernmental action groups around charters and commitments, such as the Living Lands Charter and Blue Charter Fellowships. The ACU Blue Charter

---

[14] https://www.researchcghe.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/publications/final-working-paper-55.pdf; Accessed: July 2024.

[15] Historic Memorandum of Understanding signed between The University of the West Indies and the University of Glasgow | UWI Global Campus; Accessed: August 2024.

Fellowships Programme supports 48 outstanding talents to produce research, build knowledge exchange skills, and translate their knowledge into action. The ACU is now developing a proposal for a new Living Lands Charter fellowship scheme to support commitments across five thematic areas, including food security.

Post-Covid recovery and research impact

Participants highlighted that the pandemic had underscored the importance of robust global research ecosystems. Universities are increasingly facing complex and stringent global research funding requirements. Discussions among vice chancellors highlighted how universities have responded to these challenges by developing collaborative initiatives aimed at strengthening researchers' ability to demonstrate impact. Examples include the creation of research hubs, such as in Guyana, where institutional capacity has been built through dedicated research centres that foster interdisciplinary work.

Open access and open science

The open science and open access agenda, emphasising transparency, accessibility, reproducibility, and integrity of research and data, presents both challenges and opportunities, participants at the ACU summit said. The diverse disciplinary, epistemic, and regional differences complicate these issues and increased focus on research security and enhanced due diligence further compounds these challenges. Universities in Australia have seen success in tackling challenges around research security through collaborative efforts with government and other stakeholders, which could be a model for other domains.

Research collaboration

Finally, participants recognised that addressing research, digital, technological, and knowledge divides within and between countries requires effective international collaborative models. This is an area in which the Commonwealth has historically excelled. Figure 11 below shows that since 2013, the proportion of publications produced with one or more international collaborators has been consistently higher for Commonwealth countries compared to non-Commonwealth countries. In 2022, 77% of Commonwealth publications were the result of international collaboration.
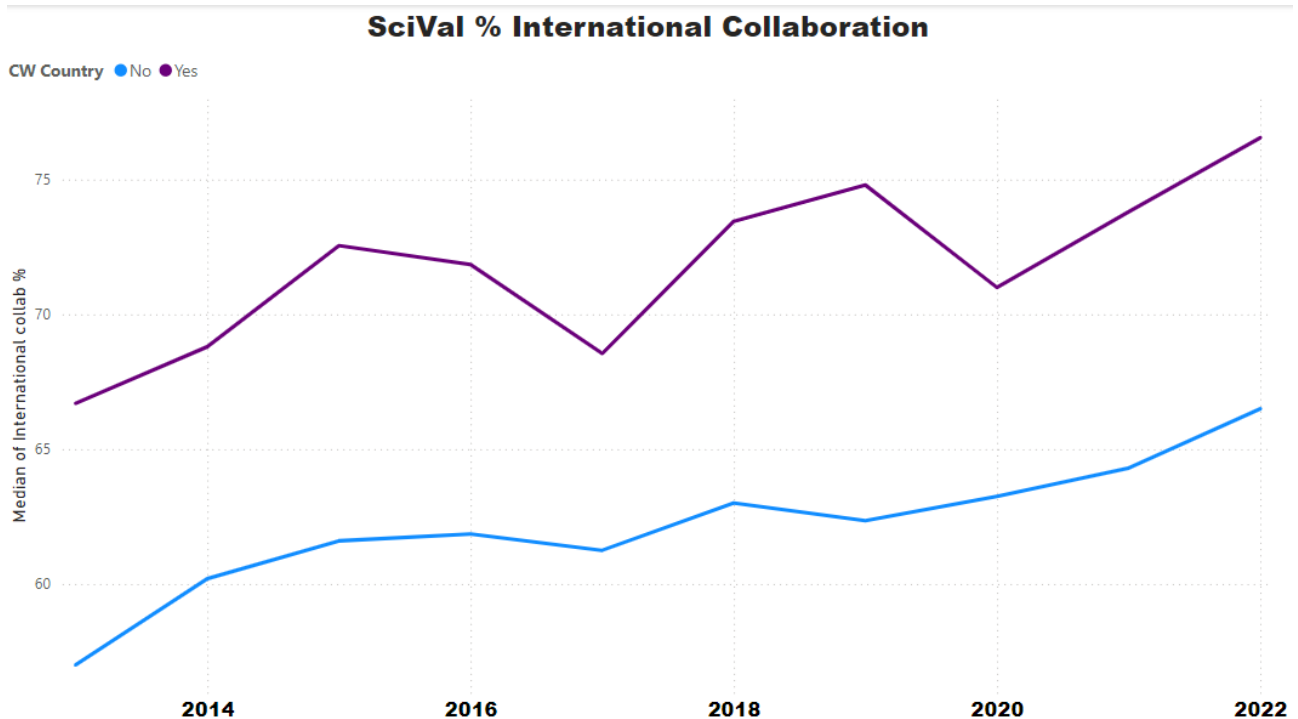
Figure 4 Source: SciVal

Beyond academic publications, successful examples of effective collaboration models include the multidisciplinary research centres of excellence in India and international research collaborations that have significantly increased citation rates. Collaborative research models, such as those facilitated by the Research Data Alliance, underscore the critical role of multilateral organisations in fostering effective partnerships. The Ethical Data Initiative (EDI)[16], for example, a collaboration between the University of Exeter and the Technical University of Munich, works to increase equity in the data space through capacity development and outreach.

---

[16] The Ethical Data Initiative - Putting values at the heart of data. Accessed: September 2024.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Recommendations:

1) Promote responsible research assessment frameworks

Governments should adopt and promote responsible research assessment frameworks that go beyond traditional metrics to recognise and incentivise research with broader societal impact.

How ACU will support: The ACU will actively participate in and promote equitable research assessment initiatives, advocating for the inclusion of diverse and impactful research outputs in assessment criteria. The ACU will also facilitate discussions between governments, research institutions, and other stakeholders to develop and implement these frameworks effectively.

2) Foster collaborative and equitable research ecosystems

Governments should support and facilitate cross-border and interdisciplinary research collaborations, ensuring that partnerships are equitable and focused on addressing global challenges.

How ACU will support: The ACU will leverage its convening power to create and strengthen collaborative research networks that span countries and disciplines. The ACU will promote equitable partnerships, share best practices, and encourage innovative funding mechanisms by organising international research forums and providing platforms for collaboration among researchers, governments, and funding bodies.

3) Promote open science and security

Governments should endorse and support the open science agenda, ensuring that research is transparent, accessible, and reproducible while safeguarding research security. They should also encourage interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research to address complex global challenges.

How ACU will support: The ACU will champion the open science agenda by advocating for policies that ensure transparency and accessibility in research. The ACU will work with governments, funders, and publishers to align research outputs with policy needs and promote interdisciplinary collaborations. Initiatives like the CSCI/WUF roundtable can be utilised to explore research governance and design funding calls that support open science and research security.

4) Connect and embed academics in intergovernmental action groups and national policymaking

Governments should strengthen the integration of academic expertise into intergovernmental action groups and national policymaking processes to ensure that policies are informed by the latest research and aligned with international agreements and goals.

How ACU will support: The ACU will work to enhance the impact of academic experts by facilitating connections between academics and policymakers. This can be achieved by organising high-level collaborative platforms, promoting initiatives that link governments with academic experts, and influencing policy through targeted international Commonwealth policy fora. The ACU will also ensure that these connections are aligned with national and international development goals.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Access and Inclusion

While Access and inclusion emerged as a theme that the Taskforce recognised underpins all other areas, particularly given the intersectional nature of the challenges, it is also significant enough in driving progress elsewhere to require its own workstream.

While enrolment rates in higher education have increased globally, access remains uneven across different regions, socio-economic groups, and gender lines. Figure 12 shows that high-income countries tend to have higher enrolment rates compared to low and middle-income countries, due in part to financial, geographical (urban vs rural), and social class barriers.
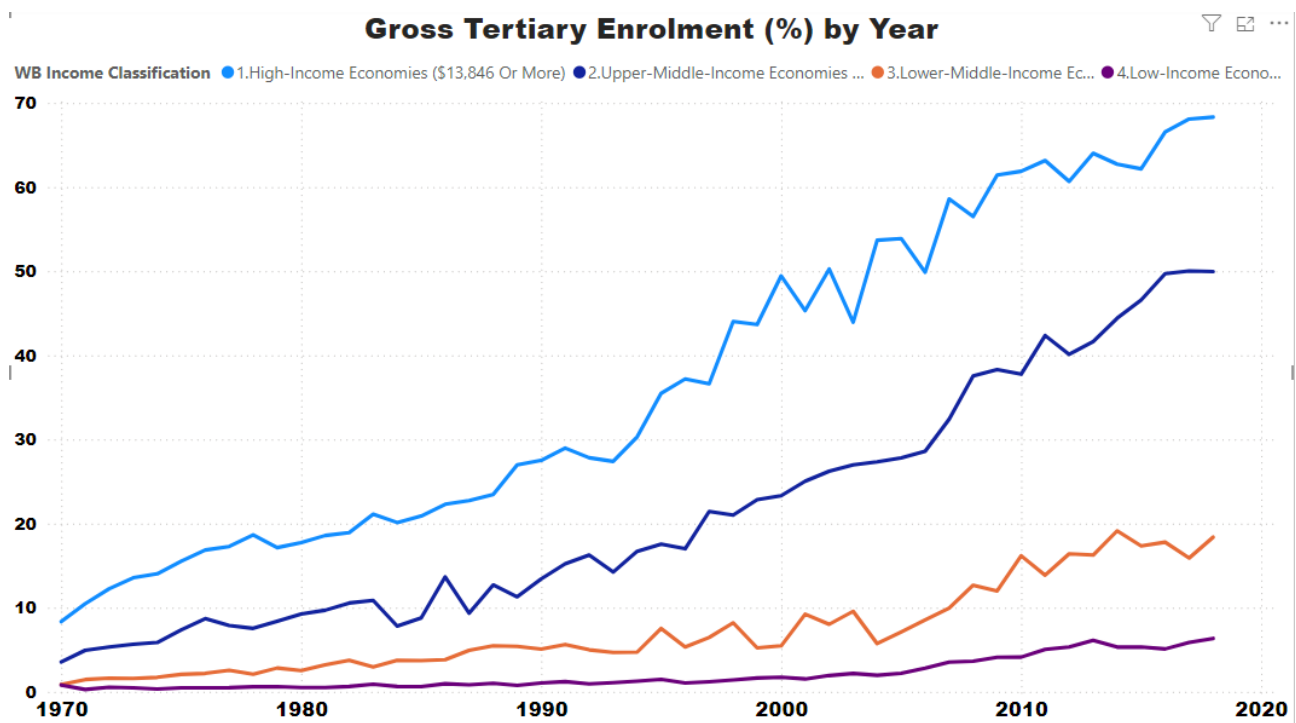

Gross Tertiary Enrolment (%) by Year

WB Income Classification ● 1.High-Income Economies ($13,846 Or More) ● 2.Upper-Middle-Income Economies ... ● 3.Lower-Middle-Income Ec... ● 4.Low-Income Econo...

Figure 5 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Tuition fees, living expenses, and indirect costs like textbooks and transportation limit access for economically disadvantaged students while students in rural and remote areas face significant obstacles, including a lack of nearby higher education institutions, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to information and communication technology (ICT). Ironically, digital literacy though it can often exacerbate inequality based on access, also offers significant potential for expanding access to higher education as online learning platforms, open educational resources, and distance

education can reach students in remote and underserved areas, breaking down geographical barriers.

Despite improvements, gender disparities continue, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Figure 13 below shows us that the percentage of females, aged 18-23 years enrolled in tertiary education is significantly less in countries within the Commonwealth than in the rest of the world. Cultural norms, safety concerns, and economic factors often prevent women from pursuing higher education. Participants at the ACU summit recognised that addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions that consider the unique challenges faced by girls in these countries, including comprehensive educational reforms, economic support for families, and the promotion of gender equity in both policy and practice. Additionally, leveraging the Commonwealth's collective commitment to education and gender equity could help accelerate progress in improving girls' access to tertiary education.

Participants also highlighted the critical need to address the significant evidence gap concerning the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. Despite ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity and accessibility, there remains a lack of comprehensive, disaggregated data that captures the full range of challenges, opportunities, and outcomes for students with disabilities. This gap is particularly pronounced when considering the intersecting identities of students, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographical location, which can compound the barriers they face in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

To effectively address these disparities, it is essential to prioritise robust data collection and research initiatives that go beyond surface-level analysis. This involves developing and implementing standardised methods for collecting data on disability in higher education, ensuring that this data is disaggregated to reveal the nuanced experiences of students with multiple intersecting identities. Such data should cover a wide range of indicators, including academic performance, retention and completion rates, access to support services, and post-graduation outcomes.

Moreover, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track the experiences of students with disabilities throughout their academic journeys and beyond, providing insights into the long-term impact of higher education on their personal and professional development. This research should also explore the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms and identify gaps where additional resources or policy interventions are needed.

Addressing the evidence gap is not only a matter of equity but also of ensuring that higher education institutions can create truly inclusive environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive. By generating robust, comprehensive data, policymakers, educators, and advocates can develop

targeted strategies to remove barriers, enhance support systems, and ultimately improve the educational and life outcomes for students with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
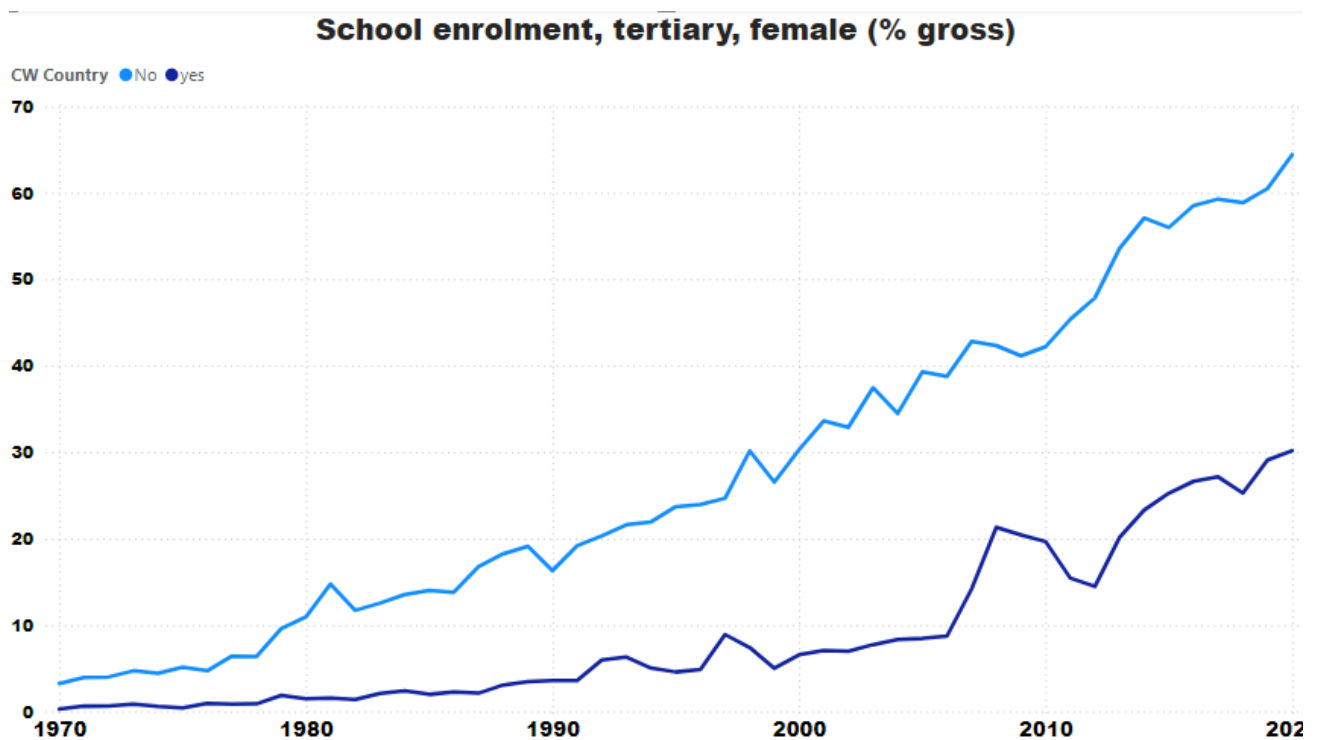

Figure 13 Source UNESCO Institute for Statistics

While gender barriers remain in terms of access across higher education, figure 14 shows that there has been some progress made in terms of gender equity across academic staff. The data shows that since 1970, the proportion of female academic staff has increased consistently, and is now approaching 50% in both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth nations.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU
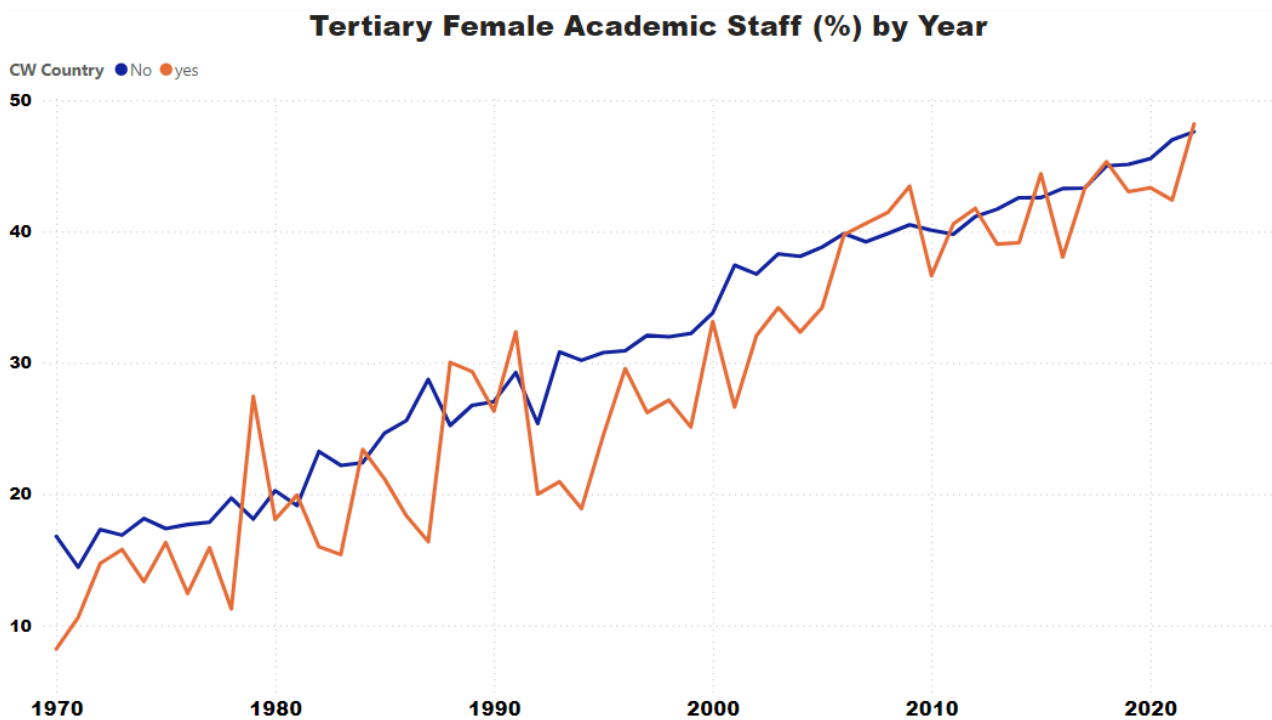## Higher Education Taskforce

Figure 14 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Many institutions lack the necessary infrastructure, resources, and policies to support these students effectively. The intersection of various identity characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, compounds the barriers to higher education access. These intersecting identities often result in multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion.

There was some discussion amongst participants about the need to address indigenous issues, many of which are deeply woven into the social, cultural, and political fabric of many Commonwealth countries, reflecting a legacy of colonisation, marginalisation, and ongoing struggles for recognition and rights. Indigenous communities often face significant disparities in access to education, health care, economic opportunities, and political representation. These challenges are compounded by the erosion of traditional knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices, which are vital to the identity and resilience of Indigenous peoples.

In this context, higher education institutions within the Commonwealth have a crucial role to play in addressing Indigenous issues. By actively engaging with Indigenous communities and incorporating their perspectives, knowledge, and needs into the academic framework, universities can contribute

to the empowerment and upliftment of these communities. Moreover, to address the educational disparities faced by Indigenous students, universities can implement targeted outreach, scholarships, and support programmes that remove barriers to higher education. This includes providing financial assistance, academic tutoring, mentorship, and culturally relevant support services. Universities should also strive to create inclusive campus environments that respect and celebrate Indigenous cultures, ensuring that indigenous students feel valued and supported.

Participants at the ACU Summit recognised that universities are at the forefront of driving innovative solutions to global challenges, particularly in addressing gender and equity disparities and outcomes and ensuring every citizen can achieve their full potential. The critical work of universities extends beyond theoretical discussions to practical implementations, emphasising the need for a multifaceted approach to make access to higher education inclusive at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

This involves addressing access hurdles that create barriers for students with disabilities, scrutinising the intersectionality of equality characteristics, addressing the evidence gap on disability and accessibility, and establishing explicit connections between access to higher education and economic outcomes. Tackling the gender divide in thematic areas such as the digital realm and employability is paramount, as is recognising the unique needs of indigenous and refugee groups.

Recommendations:

1) Advocate for Inclusive Policies and Resource Provision

Governments should develop and enforce inclusive policies and ensure equitable resource allocation to address inequalities in education, particularly for girls, women, disabled people, and vulnerable groups. A specific focus should be on bridging the gender divide in digital skills and employability.

How ACU will support: The ACU will actively promote and support the implementation of these inclusive policies by providing evidence of the economic benefits of equitable access to higher education. The ACU will also facilitate partnerships and knowledge-sharing between governments and higher education institutions to ensure that inclusivity is central to education and employment strategies.

2) Gather Comprehensive Evidence on Post-COVID Gender Disparities

Governments should prioritise the collection and analysis of data on post-COVID gender disparities in education and ensure that policies are informed by comprehensive evidence, particularly in accommodating individuals with disabilities.

How ACU will support: The ACU will lead efforts to close the evidence gap by conducting research on gender disparities and the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in higher education. The ACU will also compile and share best practice case studies that highlight successful strategies for creating accessible learning environments, helping governments adopt effective inclusion policies.

3) Examine and Address Intersectionality in Higher Education

Governments should investigate how intersectionality across characteristics such as race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status affects access to and success in higher education. Special attention should be given to the needs of indigenous and refugee groups, with policies tailored to address these intersecting challenges.

How ACU will support: The ACU will conduct research on intersectionality within higher education and advocate for policies that address the complex needs of diverse groups. The ACU can also support universities in implementing inclusive practices and policies, particularly for indigenous and refugee students, by sharing research findings and facilitating policy development.

Higher Education in the Commonwealth

Reflections and recommendations from the ACU Higher Education Taskforce

Conclusion

The ACU vice-chancellor summit highlighted the critical challenges and opportunities facing the global higher education sector in the post-pandemic era. By focusing on improving access and inclusion, sustainable funding, digital transformation, research ecosystems, and employability, the summit underscored the transformative potential of higher education in fostering a more equitable and prosperous future. The recommendations provided aim to guide the ACU's policy and advocacy efforts, ensuring that higher education institutions across the Commonwealth can effectively contribute to national and global development goals, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

As the ACU takes these recommendations forward to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in October 2024 and beyond, the future of higher education depends on a collective commitment to addressing financial challenges, leveraging technological advancements, fostering inclusive research practices and access to HE, and preparing graduates for a rapidly evolving job market. By aligning higher education with social and economic development objectives, and embracing innovative funding and collaborative models, the ACU and its member institutions can ensure that higher education remains a powerful driver of positive change and a cornerstone of a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable global community.

Read more about the ACU Higher Education Taskforce and its members.