



The Association
of Commonwealth
Universities



UNESCO Global Education Meeting

Joint position paper by AUF, ACU and IAU

Statement

We fully support the commitment of the Member States to invest in quality education as a vital investment in the people and future of every nation. However, we urge governments and stakeholders to include higher and tertiary education in the Declaration. These sectors have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with potential ramifications for the education sector as a whole. Higher education is a critical part of the education ecosystem: universities strengthen and inform education policy and practice at every level – training teachers, creating pedagogical content, and leading educational research. At the same time, university research, teaching and engagement will be key to developing short and long-term solutions to the current crisis, to economic recovery, and to delivering all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is therefore more important than ever that higher education is supported and protected, as an integral part of the education sector.

The impact of COVID-19 on higher education

- The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every sub-sector of education, including higher and tertiary education.
- According to a survey conducted by the IAU in April 2020, 59% of universities surveyed (and 77% of those in Africa) were completely closed for a period as a result of the pandemic. 80% of universities predict an impact on enrolment for the coming academic year, and 80% also reported a negative impact on research, with 52% indicating that current scientific projects are at risk of not being completed.
- In April 2020, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 175 countries and communities, and over 220 million post-secondary students –13% of the total number of students affected globally – had their studies ended or significantly disrupted due to COVID-19.
- At the same time, universities have responded with unprecedented speed and scale to the crisis. There has been a rapid pivot to online teaching and learning, with an estimated 75% of universities moving to online and blended provision.
- Universities and research institutions have been at the forefront of local and international scientific responses to COVID-19, from clinical and vaccine research, diagnostic testing, epidemiology and public health, to mathematical modelling and economic, behavioural and social sciences.
- Universities have been central in informing national policymaking and media coverage, and there are countless examples of institutions and students mobilising to provide direct support to national and local efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and support their communities.

Our commitment to protect education finance at the time of COVID-19

- The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a major financial impact on the global higher education sector in both the short and long term.
- The predicted long-term reduction in public funding and private funding will likely result in the permanent closure of programmes and institutions.
- This will inevitably lead to a loss of skills and human capital in academic and administrative positions, the loss of research, and the loss of universities' contributions to local and national communities and culture.
- Universities are often central to local and regional economies, serving as 'anchor' institutions and adding social and economic value to their communities.

- Protecting public financing for higher education, alongside that for basic education, is essential if we are to preserve the unique contribution of universities to the wider education sector, local and national economic recovery, and to the realisation of Agenda 2030.

Our priority actions to accelerate progress towards SDG 4 in the COVID-19 context and beyond

- Safe reopening of university campuses is essential for the long-term viability of the majority of institutions and to enable a full range of teaching, research and engagement activities.
- Inequality of access has been rapidly exacerbated by the pandemic meaning efforts to realise SDG 4.3 must be redoubled, paying attention to those most at risk of being left behind – including students without internet access, with learning challenges and/or disabilities, and institutions in rural areas and serving marginalised populations.
- There are particular challenges for higher and tertiary education institutions due to the greater susceptibility of university students to coronavirus (compared to that of school age students), and the residential model of many institutions, which entails significant movement of domestic and international students into campus and local communities with an increased risk of transmission.
- With 75% of universities transitioning to online and blended learning, the lack of reliable internet access for a significant proportion of universities is leading to severe inequality of access to higher education.
- Closing the digital divide has the potential to realise a 'digital dividend', increasing access to higher education in the long term.
- Support for university staff, students, and institutions is required to enable effective online and blended teaching and learning.
- Universities also have an important role to play in economic recovery, providing skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship (SDG 4.4). This includes the delivery of technical and vocational education, training and lifelong learning, providing the reskilling required by economies disrupted and transformed by COVID-19, climate and technological change.

The way forward

There is a need to strengthen the representation of the higher education sector in the global mechanisms for education cooperation, to consolidate the whole-sector approach that the current challenges facing education require. This is essential to ensure a better future for all.

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