



## Progress and potential

# Higher education playing its part in the Sustainable Development Goals

September 2015

The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) believes that higher education is uniquely placed to help address global challenges – not least through informing policy with research evidence, and through graduating generations of new leaders and skilled professionals. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not explicitly reference higher education – either as a development goal or as a potential agent to address development challenges. With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set to replace the MDG framework this year, a unique opportunity emerged to help advance the role of higher education in development spaces. The ACU's 'The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready?' campaign was launched in October 2013 to raise awareness, elicit expert views, gather evidence and advocate for the role of higher education in delivering social and developmental impact.

### Key points

- **Higher education underpins all development targets**, from poverty reduction to employability, health to environmental sustainability.
- Higher education institutions are well placed to feed **research evidence** into the design of national development policy and strategy.
- Meeting the MDGs and SDGs depends upon **skilled graduates**.
- Harmonisation of education strategy from **primary through to higher education** can ensure sustainable paths for students and can lay the groundwork for accommodating growth in enrolment at **all education levels**.
- Growing enrolment at primary and secondary levels behoves a comprehensive strategy to ensure **access and quality** at the higher education level.
- The ACU's 'The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready?' campaign has published an extensive and open access body of evidence of how higher education can **demonstrate social impact** and influence development policy ([www.acu.ac.uk/beyond-2015](http://www.acu.ac.uk/beyond-2015)).

In 2013, the UN High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda presented its report, framing a vision for global development ahead of the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015. In the same year, the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) celebrated its first centenary, highlighting 100 years' experience of working with and for the international higher education sector – convening networks, facilitating staff and student mobility, running capacity-building programmes, and providing resources. This was an opportune time for the ACU to look forward to the long-term higher education landscape in the Post-2015 era.

The ACU has long been active at the nexus of higher education and development. In 2010, we convened an international conference on 'Universities and the Millennium Development Goals', examining the contributions of the sector to the global effort. At the conference, the ACU drew together some key recommendations for how the sector could best position itself to meet pressing development challenges, including government support for university-community engagement and knowledge exchange, encouragement of developmental research, and strengthening of universities' efforts across developing and developed countries to share expertise in directing knowledge to the benefit of society.<sup>1</sup> The ACU's 2015 conference on 'Research and innovation for global challenges: the role of universities in strengthening development' moved beyond making the case for higher education, identifying good practice in research institutions (including universities) to examine how they can be supported in a coherent way to ensure impact.

*“HEIs...have a responsibility to ensure that students are sensitised to... myriad development challenges, and that graduates not only find meaningful employment according to their skills, but are also equipped to create an informed and engaged citizenry.”*

**Dr Goolam Mohamedbhai,**  
former President, Association of African Universities<sup>2</sup>

To better meet global challenges after 2015, governments and donors will depend upon evidence-based policy, informed by relevant, high-quality university research. Improved quality primary and secondary education will depend upon increased numbers of qualified teachers and robust processes for evaluating and enhancing learning – with vastly expanded cohorts of secondary school leavers as a significant consequence. Greater reduction in, for example, infant mortality rates will rely in part upon expanded health science programmes graduating more skilled doctors and nurses locally.

This all places higher education institutions (HEIs) in an extraordinary position – while being 'crucial for educational and national development', they have been 'strikingly missing from the international discussions on future goals'.<sup>3</sup>

'The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready?' campaign (referred to herein as the Beyond 2015 campaign) has provided a platform for hundreds of voices from across and outside the sector, all speaking to how higher education has supported (and can further support) development processes in a global context. We invited university leaders, students, academics, and representatives from NGOs, funders, and think tanks to contribute articles, essays, and case studies about higher education's impact on development, and participated in dozens of workshops and events to engage stakeholders face to face. Though curated by the ACU, the campaign's message has been driven by its contributors.

18 months into the campaign, the ACU tabled a briefing paper at the 19th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (19CCEM) in June 2015. Our recommendations were simple: without strong higher education systems, the targets identified in the MDGs and the emerging Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will remain distant.

<sup>1</sup> ACU 2010 Conference of Executive Heads statement (Cape Town, 2010) <<https://www.acu.ac.uk/publication/download?id=243>>

<sup>2</sup> Goolam Mohamedbhai, 'Transforming African higher education for graduate employability', *The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready?* (29 September 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=31>>

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Burnett and Colin Felsman, *Post-2015 Education MDGs* (Overseas Development Institute, 2012) <<http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7776.pdf>>

## Connecting the sector

### The campaign

The Beyond 2015 campaign was modelled as a global conversation, driven by its contributors and participants, within a broad thematic structure. The campaign was open to any individual or organisation with an opinion on how higher education can and should respond to global challenges.

We developed a series of six key questions to elicit comment on and analysis of what universities can and should be doing to contribute to the broader development agenda:

1. Why does the Post-2015 agenda matter for higher education?
2. How are universities already addressing local, national, and international issues?
3. How can universities prepare to respond to the Post-2015 agenda?
4. What partnerships should universities establish to achieve their objectives?
5. How can universities champion their contributions to wider society?
6. How relevant and realistic are the Post-2015 goals likely to be?

Within this structure, we launched a call for evidence, inviting submissions in a variety of forms, including articles, blog posts, videos, and podcasts. Regular email newsletters to subscribers provided a synthesis of ideas and experiences, highlighting both trends and specific examples.

This input informed sessions that we ran at events, which in turn offered the opportunity to gather further evidence. We also encouraged ACU members to undertake activities to engage with the campaign and develop their own submissions.

The campaign website, still active as a digital repository of published evidence and commentary, serves as both the vehicle and the primary output of the campaign: [www.acu.ac.uk/beyond-2015](http://www.acu.ac.uk/beyond-2015)

### Contributions

The Beyond 2015 campaign drew together a breadth and depth of insight to help inform future education and development strategy. The campaign had a broad international and multi-sectoral reach, in terms of both published submissions and audience engagement.

Over 18 months, the campaign published over 120 essays, articles, and interviews from contributors in more than 31 countries, including opinion from government bodies, funding agencies, and civil society organisations, as well as from higher education institutions themselves. Of these submissions, three-quarters were from HEIs, including 56% from ACU member universities specifically. Another 16% of submissions were from international organisations and national governmental and civil society organisations, including UNESCO, British Council, and Engineers Without Borders. Authors from major development and research funding organisations have also contributed, including the University Grants Commission (UGC) in India, Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC), National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa, and the World Bank.

The campaign was run primarily online, driving key messages to over 500 newsletter subscribers, 600 Facebook page subscribers,<sup>4</sup> and 1,800 Twitter followers.<sup>5</sup>

Offline, the campaign was also active at a range of high-profile international conferences and relevant workshops and seminars, involving university leaders, students, and development professionals. At these events, we not only presented findings and advocated the issues, but also sought to engage participants directly to learn more about their thoughts. As such, we collected nearly 200 'Q-cards' – postcard-sized feedback cards on which participants contributed brief reflections on the role of higher education in development.<sup>6</sup>

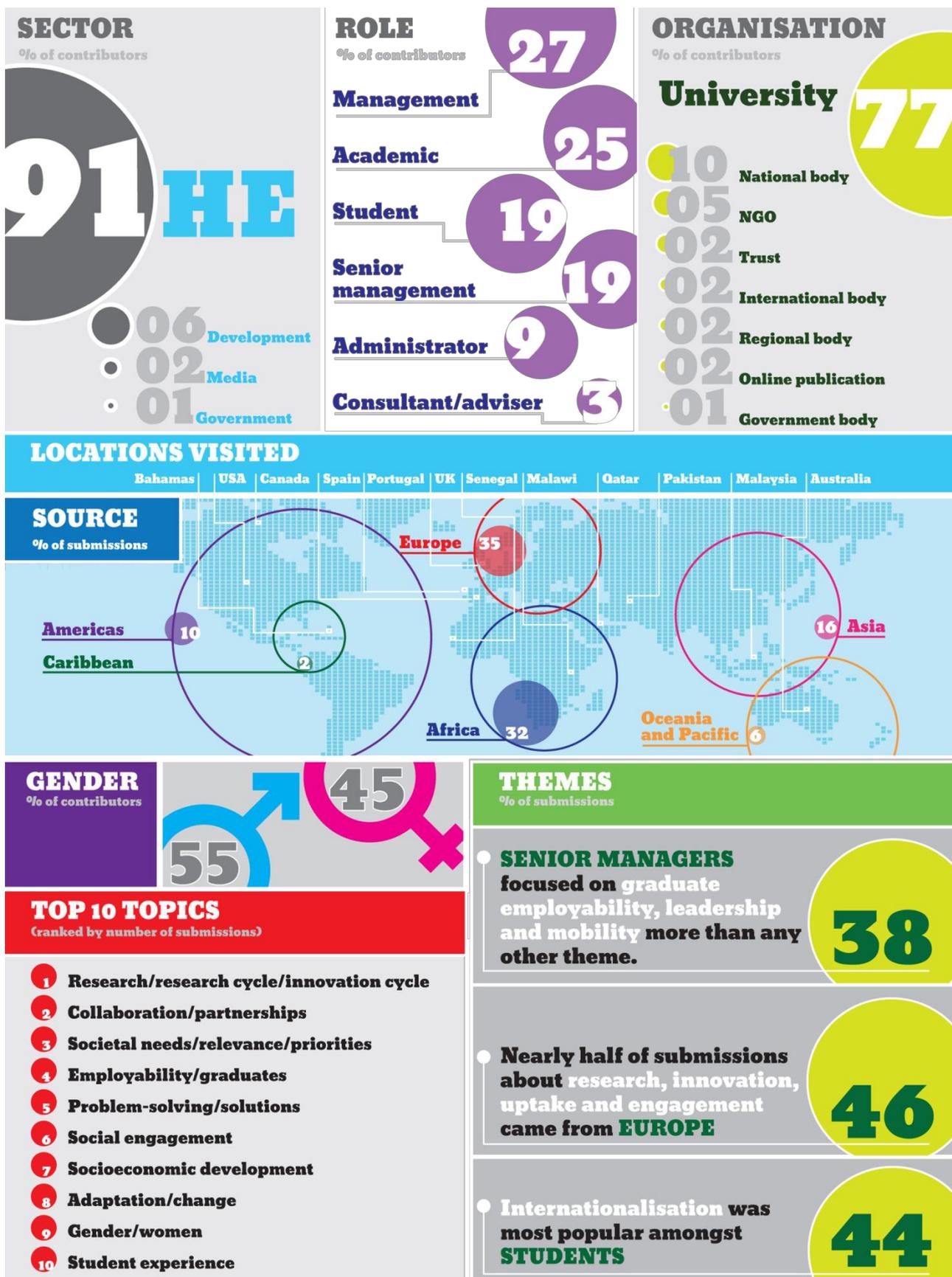
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<sup>4</sup> [www.facebook.com/HEbeyond2015](http://www.facebook.com/HEbeyond2015)

<sup>5</sup> [www.twitter.com/HEbeyond2015](https://twitter.com/HEbeyond2015)

<sup>6</sup> <https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/q-cards>

In addition, the campaign served as a prompt for others in the sector to convene discussions on higher education in the Post-2015 agenda, notably COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Pakistan, and the Global Universities Network of Innovation (GUNI).



## Higher education and the Post-2015 agenda

The SDGs, launched in New York in September 2015, will define the global development agenda for the next 15 years. The role of higher education is specifically referenced within this framework, through Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

While the MDGs represented a targeted hit list of pressing challenges to be addressed in the first 15 years of the new millennium, the SDGs are much broader, aiming to cover the breadth of development issues and ensure that the framework is applicable to all countries, with a call to 'leave no one behind'.

It remains to be seen whether the SDG framework of 17 goals and 169 targets will capture the imagination of world leaders and the public, and galvanise action on a global scale. Irrespective, the Beyond 2015 campaign has shown that higher education underpins efforts to improve social and economic development at all levels and in all spheres. Rather than being limited by a narrow definition of the sector's role as outlined in a specific goal or target, HEIs cut across thematic areas through the knowledge and graduates they create. Given that the SDG indicators will be crucial in defining the impact of the framework, but have yet to be defined, there is also a clear requirement for the specific skills and expertise that universities can provide in establishing, monitoring, and measuring progress against these indicators.

### Approaching the SDGs

The Beyond 2015 campaign chimed with several examples of fellow higher education institutions and organisations appraising the part that higher education plays in the Post-2015 agenda through their own activities at national, regional, and international levels. This emphasises the sector's recognition of the need to align with the emergent development agenda – and the challenges posed. Contributors to the campaign have viewed higher education uniquely as both a mechanism for the delivery of the SDGs, and also a sector that requires its own transformative and development process.

Contributors are adamant: universities already dedicate a large portion of their resources to address local, regional and international issues. A South African contributor told of a group of researchers engaging with their local community to solve sanitation issues,<sup>7</sup> a network of Australian universities submitted a case study on their progress in finding a cure for a deadly tropical disease,<sup>8</sup> and another discussed the collective approaches developed by research centres towards mitigating climate change.<sup>9</sup>

The higher education sector's efforts to prepare to respond to the Post-2015 agenda require new thinking in terms of scale and modality. As national institutions addressing global challenges, universities need to be able to incorporate diverse demands and diverse stakeholders into their own agendas. Contributors also highlighted the need for change and adaptation within the sector. Examples included new models of financing,<sup>10</sup> exploiting digital technologies,<sup>11</sup> and ways to support traditionally marginalised groups.<sup>12</sup>

When considering partnerships, contributors emphasised that collective action, networks, and interdependency are key in shaping both the future development agenda and the future of the higher education sector.

Universities also see the value of championing their contributions to wider society, ensuring that their mission and activities are communicated clearly to a wider stakeholder audience. Examples included a national initiative to showcase the relevance of university research to the general public,<sup>13</sup> as well as a range of views on how best to ensure that research translates into useful and sustainable impact.

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<sup>7</sup> Lorraine Amollo, 'Researchers and community collaborate to solve Enkanini's sanitation problems', *Beyond 2015* (18 September 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=19>>

<sup>8</sup> Ian McMahon, 'Group of 8 universities assist in the global fight against malaria', *Beyond 2015* (9 October 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=29>>

<sup>9</sup> Renard Siew, 'Approach towards mitigating climate change', *Beyond 2015* (22 September 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=114>>

<sup>10</sup> Mitch Hartman, 'Financing the university in a post-2015 world', *Beyond 2015* (29 May 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=85>>

<sup>11</sup> Kushagra Sharan, 'Education and Connection', *Beyond 2015* (1 July 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=92>>

<sup>12</sup> Saeeda Shah, 'Women's comparative absence from senior research and leadership positions', *Beyond 2015* (03 February 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=57>>

<sup>13</sup> Peggy Papakosta, 'People show the way for university research', *Beyond 2015* (11 June 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=90>>

## Cross-cutting themes

Voices heard through the campaign were diverse and wide ranging. Within this diversity, several cross-cutting themes have emerged that can help to inform both higher education policy and national and international development policy.

- **Engagement** – Higher education, by virtue of its mission for community engagement, already plays a leading role in socioeconomic development.<sup>16</sup> As examples, one contributor to the campaign highlighted a Centre for Society-University Interface, established to bridge the gap between the university and rural society, with an emphasis on confidence-building for rural girls.<sup>17</sup> Another contributor outlined how environmentally-friendly farming practices were being implemented in a small island state, improving local livelihoods while also addressing environmental challenges that are global in nature.<sup>18</sup>
- **Access and equity** – HEIs need to be able to accommodate growing cohorts of skilled secondary school leavers to support a new generation of leaders and job creators. One contribution to the campaign in particular emphasised the need for HEIs to strive for both accessibility and quality.<sup>19</sup> Universities also need to be fully inclusive in their approach, ensuring that they involve traditionally marginalised groups – for example, by mainstreaming disability in higher education.<sup>20</sup>
- **Employability** – HEIs are expected to generate highly-skilled workers and future employers. Employability, however, requires that graduates have skills that are appropriate to market contexts and can be seen to be in demand – including in addressing developmental challenges. One campaign contributor underlined the benefits of curriculum relevance and private-sector linkages in helping achieve this.<sup>22</sup>
- **Mobility** – Increasing internationalisation of the higher education sector places both academics and students in a strong position to share learning and experiences to help inform policy to address

*“Community engagement should not be seen as an ‘addition’ to learning and teaching, but intrinsic to it. This is essential if education is to be a vehicle for social transformation and attainment of social justice, rather than a means to individual prosperity alone.”*

**Dr Pankaj Mittal,**  
University Grants Commission, India<sup>14</sup>

*“Given that many non-disabled are potential disabled persons, disability must be included in the national higher education policy architecture of all countries and located in every higher education institution’s strategic plan.”*

**Felix Kayode Olakulehin,**  
National Open University of Nigeria<sup>15</sup>

*“Dramatically more globally relevant curricula are needed in all of our nations if our students are to be able to play the kinds of roles that are needed to take on the many grand challenges – social, environmental, cultural, health and economic.”*

**Prof Budd Hall and Dr Rajesh Tandon,**  
UNESCO Joint Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pankaj Mittal, ‘Different meanings of social responsibility’, *Beyond 2015* (3 December 2014).

<<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=121>>

<sup>15</sup> Felix Kayode Olakulehin, ‘Mainstream the margins: disability, disadvantage and access to higher education’, *Beyond 2015* (26 November 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=46>>

<sup>16</sup> Moses Oketch, Tristan McCowan, Rebecca Schendel et al, *The impact of tertiary education on development* (London: Institute of Education, 2014) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-tertiary-education-on-development>>

<sup>17</sup> Pankaj Mittal, ‘BPS Women’s University addresses local, national and international needs’, *Beyond 2015* (18 October 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=38>>

<sup>18</sup> Vinod Bhanooduth Lalljee, ‘Sustainable island farming in Mauritius’, *Beyond 2015* (19 February 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=63>>

<sup>19</sup> Gerard Grobler, ‘UNISA on the challenges facing higher education’, *Beyond 2015* (12 December 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=50>>

<sup>20</sup> Olakulehin

<sup>21</sup> Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon, ‘No global justice without cognitive justice’, *Beyond 2015* (23 October 2013)

<<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=30>>

<sup>22</sup> Mohamedbhai

transnational challenges. One contributor provided an example of how regional research exchange programmes have enhanced student and staff mobility, and have also helped to lead to harmonisation of curricula to address common development objectives.<sup>23</sup>

Engagement, access and equity, employability, and mobility all help frame the landscape around the reach, quality, and implementation of targets under the SDGs. They point to HEIs being as concerned with who and what they produce, as who and what they have to work with. These examples are illustrative, but provide insight as to the capacity and experience that higher education already offers to the design of development-relevant policy, and how this knowledge can be better leveraged.

*“The next phase of student mobility must focus more strategically on providing greater opportunities from immersion, not only confined to participating in the academic-economic setting of the participating countries but equally that of socio-cultural diversity.”*

**Prof Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abdul Razak,**  
Albukhary International University, Malaysia<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mabel Imbuga, 'Harnessing network and innovations in higher agricultural education', *Beyond 2015* (18 August 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=104>>

<sup>24</sup> Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, 'International student mobility: the next phase', *Beyond 2015* (24 March 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=71>>

## Summary

In convening higher education stakeholders around the question ‘Is higher education ready?’, we have marshalled a wide range of perspectives on where the sector can have greatest developmental impact. These represent a valuable resource in assessing potential higher education strategies and models of good practice to achieve social and developmental impact.

Though there will be diversity between national strategies, we have nevertheless drawn some key lessons from the campaign which can apply to international frameworks such as the SDGs:

- High-quality, engaged university **research** in developmentally-strategic areas can inform **good policy**, and can unearth solutions to key problems across all SDG focus areas.
- Access to quality higher education systems underpins **economic growth**, and generates professional paths for skilled graduates with strong leadership skills.
- Harmonisation of education strategy from primary through to tertiary can ensure sustainable paths for students and can lay the groundwork for accommodating growth in enrolment at **all education levels**.

*“Higher education can be a truly transformative investment in a country’s governance, developing leaders and coalitions that can build nations.”*

**Dr Susy Ndaruhutse**,  
Head of Education System Reform  
and International Development,  
CfBT Education Trust<sup>25</sup>

The background review for the Beyond 2015 campaign notes that ‘if universities are to be agents of change, and to contribute to the wider economy and to delivering the Millennium Development Goals, funding programmes should be aligned with national priorities’.<sup>26</sup> Such funding programmes should recognise education systems holistically, with an understanding of the unique potential for the higher education sector to support evidence-based policy.

In dialogue with national governments, HEIs can play a constructive role in translating and applying the knowledge they produce. Such knowledge can help inform the design of national development targets in ways that align with the international goals established through the SDG framework. Concurrently, a dedicated focus from national ministries and governments on strengthening higher education systems – as well as championing the developmental role of higher education with bilateral donors – comprises an essential strategic component to meeting targets across the SDG framework.

In today’s global knowledge economy, higher education serves as an ‘engine of development’ now more than ever.<sup>27</sup> Higher education institutions are well positioned between local, national, and international spheres – and the knowledge they generate is also well positioned to inform development policy at all levels. As diverse voices to the ACU’s Beyond 2015 campaign have made clear, a robust higher education sector (within a wider education strategy) is indispensable for achieving development targets across the forthcoming SDG framework.

<sup>25</sup> Susy Ndaruhutse, ‘Higher education in the post-2015 agenda: proof that it matters’, *Beyond 2015* (1 August 2014) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/submissions/view?id=95>>

<sup>26</sup> Liam Roberts and Patrice Ajai-Ajagbe, ‘Higher education and the Millennium Development Goals: where are we coming from, and where are we going?’, background review for ‘The world beyond 2015 – Is higher education ready?’ campaign (London: The Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2013) <<https://beyond2015.acu.ac.uk/about/background-review>>

<sup>27</sup> Colin Power, ‘Higher Education: The Engine of Development’ in *The Power of Education: Education for All, Development, Globalisation and UNESCO* (Singapore: Springer, 2015) <[http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-981-287-221-0\\_10](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-981-287-221-0_10)>