



**The Association  
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# **Higher education and the Millennium Development Goals: where are we coming from, and where are we going?**

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## Introduction

In 2000, the United Nations announced a new approach to addressing some of the world's most pressing development challenges. The approach was to establish eight specific development goals, around which the world's governments, major development bodies, NGOs, and civil society could all coordinate. The logic was that, when working together, we could collectively make significant progress towards improving people's livelihoods – and perhaps even abolish some conditions of underdevelopment altogether – by a target date of 2015.

These eight targets were termed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The challenge was always a considerable one but, with 2015 just around the corner, there is now a need to assess the progress that has been made, to draw lessons from our successes and shortcomings in tackling the MDGs, and to formulate the next global approach to improving lives worldwide.

What kinds of development targets are most appropriate now? Which targets have we been able to achieve over the past 15 years – and, of specific concern for us, how has (and how will) higher education fit into this picture?

Higher education was never explicitly involved in the MDGs as either a development goal in its own right, or as a potential agent to address other development goals. It is the latter, though, where we do find evidence of universities and research institutions playing a huge role in development terms. As teaching institutions, universities are responsible for producing the engineers, health specialists, teachers, policymakers, technologists, and scientists whose knowledge and leadership are needed to improve people's lives. As research institutions, universities have enormous power to generate the cutting-edge knowledge required to contend with issues of food security, disease, climate and environmental change, and the effects and causes of poverty.

We may already understand these linkages in the broadest terms but, specifically, how has the HE sector been involved in explicitly addressing the MDGs over the past decade? What past or existing initiatives can inform our conversation about the next approach to building a better world?

## Perspectives on potential – the role of higher education

Drawing the links between higher education and the development process is hardly a new conversation – leading thinkers in both of these sectors have long recognised their interrelationship.

The view from the Commonwealth Secretariat is that higher education is inextricably connected to prospects for development, through the teaching, research, and engagement capacities intrinsic to the university system. Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma has made the case that sustainable achievement of each of the eight MDGs remains dependent in part on contributions from the HE sector.<sup>1</sup>

This has long been a view shared by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), with our 2010 conference on 'Universities and the Millennium Development Goals' highlighting the contributions of HE to the global effort.<sup>2</sup> At the conference, the ACU pulled together some key recommendations for how the sector could be best positioned to meet pressing development challenges. These included government support for university-community engagement and knowledge exchange, that developmental research is encouraged and supported, and that universities across the developing and developed worlds strengthen their efforts to share expertise in directing knowledge to the benefit of society. Moreover, and perhaps most centrally to the Beyond 2015 campaign,<sup>3</sup> it was recommended that future development goals should explicitly recognise the role of higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Goolam Mohamedbhai – formerly Chair of the ACU Council, President of the Association of African Universities (AAU), and President of the International Association of Universities (IAU) – has also spoken forcefully about universities' pivotal role in addressing the MDGs, saying that there is 'no question' that higher education can and does contribute to the goals.<sup>4</sup> The Institute of International Education (IIE) is

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<sup>1</sup> Kamalesh Sharma, Opening ceremony address at the 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (29 August 2012) <<http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/opening-ceremony-address-commonwealth-secretary-general-kamalesh-sharma-18th-conference>>

<sup>2</sup> Karen McGregor, 'Higher Education a Driver of the MDGs', University World News (2 May 2010) <<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100501081126465>>

<sup>3</sup> Conference Statement, ACU Conference of Executive Heads (25-27 April 2010) <<http://capetown2010.acu.ac.uk>>

<sup>4</sup> Goolam Mohamedbhai, 'Higher Education Contribution to the UN Millennium Development Goals', Global University Network for Innovation (18 October 2007) <<http://www.guninetwork.org/resources/he-articles/higher-education-contribution-to-the-un-millennium-development-goals>>

another strong advocate of the intersection between HE and development, and advocates the inclusion of a specific higher education goal in the Post-2015 agenda.<sup>5</sup>

The connection between universities' capacity to effect social change and the specific targets set out by the UN in 2000 has been apparent to global leaders in the HE sector for some time. But is this view shared broadly outside the HE sector? What actual programmes and projects developed over the past decade support the recommendations that are often advocated within the sector?

## Higher education in action

While there is an established consensus on the value of HE in the development process – and on the need for universities to reach out beyond academia in order to have greatest impact – there is also an emergent portfolio of funded activity that has brought this consensus to fruition.

The evolution did not occur overnight. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank was seen to have largely neglected funding programmes for higher education, instead focusing their energies almost exclusively on primary education and on literacy; this trend was recognised by the World Bank itself, and largely followed by other development agencies.<sup>6</sup> This highly sectoral approach to supporting education had disastrous effects for HE – and for many countries' ability to lead endogenous development programmes, with the exacerbated brain drain and talent flight to the global North that an impoverished university sector impelled.<sup>7</sup>

In recognition of these negative impacts, though, and of the developmental capacity of universities as engines of skills and research, a sea change in donors' approaches to HE emerged in the 2000s. National and international funding bodies directed new efforts towards the HE sector in order that universities could play a bigger role in development in their countries.

The 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit is one example. The Summit advocated 'helping develop skilled professionals for Africa's private and public sectors, through supporting networks of excellence between Africa's and other countries' institutions of higher education and centres of excellence in science and technology institutions'. This commitment helped lead to the establishment of the Africa Unit – a partnerships and research office funded by the UK's Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Office of Science and Innovation (both now rolled into the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills). Based at the ACU, the Africa Unit was set up to support and promote the development of partnerships between UK and African universities as a means of helping to address Africa's HE capacity deficit.

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA) is another leading example. This consortium of US funding bodies – including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation – combined to dedicate nearly half a billion US dollars towards African HE initiatives across seven countries.<sup>8</sup> Projects supported by PHEA between 2000 and 2010 focused on areas such as gender equity, agriculture, health and population, development studies, outreach, research support, and governance and democracy. Each of PHEA's founding donor bodies continues to support higher education in Africa through their own individual programmes, but the period during which they collaborated in a truly joined-up programme marked a major shift in international thinking towards the potential of the university in development.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada supported a long-running universities and development programme which helped to establish over 2,400 interuniversity partnerships tackling a range of key challenges. Administered by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development (UPCD) programme brought Canadian universities together with partners in Africa, Asia and throughout the Americas in projects that focused, in large part, on building the institutional capacity to address development needs.<sup>9</sup> Projects concentrated on curriculum development, the strengthening of academic departments, and the training of professors, all while

<sup>5</sup> Raisa Belyavina, 'What Will 2015 Mean for Higher Education?', Institute of International Education (22 May 2013) <<http://www.iie.org/Blog/2013/May/UNESCO-MDG-Higher-Education>>

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1994) <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079956815/HigherEd\\_lessons\\_En.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079956815/HigherEd_lessons_En.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> Joel Samoff and Bidemi Carrol, 'Conditions, Coalitions and Influence: The World Bank and Higher Education in Africa' (Stanford University, 7 February 2004) <<http://www.eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0708/doc17679.pdf>>

<sup>8</sup> Susan Parker, 'Lessons from a Ten-Year Funder Collaborative: A Case Study of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa' (Clear Thinking Communications, September 2010) <[http://www.foundation-partnership.org/pubs/pdf/phea\\_case\\_study.pdf](http://www.foundation-partnership.org/pubs/pdf/phea_case_study.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development <<http://www.aucc.ca/programs-services/international-programs/university-partnerships>>

maintaining a broader strategy towards addressing environmental challenges, democracy and governance, health sciences, and sustainable development.

The UK's development arm, the Department for International Development (DFID), reformed its longstanding Higher Education Links programme to become both more explicitly developmentally focused, and more multilateral and Southern focused. The Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeLPHE) programme, which succeeded HE Links in 2005, was directly based on the MDGs, supporting projects which addressed the Goals in national and regional contexts.<sup>10</sup> Between 2005 and 2010, DeLPHE supported 200 interuniversity partnership projects in Asia and Africa. The programme was managed by the British Council, with the support of the ACU in brokering and mentoring South-South DeLPHE partnerships, and supporting the building of linkages between project leaders and community stakeholders. The DeLPHE programme concluded in 2010 with the observation that even small interuniversity partnerships, when well-designed and with development in mind, can have an extraordinary impact on community needs in areas ranging from disease prevention to gender equity to the development of new enterprise.

European-level initiatives have also been substantial. The EU's arm for development initiatives in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) created the EDULINK programme, which aims to foster capacity building and regional integration in higher education, and to support a quality higher education system that is efficient, relevant to the needs of the labour market, and consistent with ACP socioeconomic development priorities.<sup>11</sup> Among other priorities, the programme is rooted in the commitments made in the UN Millennium Declaration, the outcome of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development,<sup>12</sup> and the Framework for Action on Education for Sustainable Development in ACP States.

In addition, the EU's ACP Science and Technology Programme, also rooted in the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit as well as the 2006 EU Sustainable Development Strategy, is aimed at helping to achieve the MDGs.<sup>13</sup> Though the focus here is on enhancement in science and technology, the programme has particular implications for the HE sector in developing countries; for example, in the African context, anecdotal evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of scientific activity and research takes place in universities, as there is no substantial home-grown commercial sector conducting research.<sup>14</sup>

## **Aligning priorities – how funders support both institutional change and national development goals**

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; this is true for all actors in the development arena, not just universities. In addition, universities themselves need to be equipped not only to conduct, but also to disseminate and capitalise on development-orientated research. Successful research capacity requires competencies in issues such as governance and management, gender equity, strategic planning, and evidence assessment.

Since 2000, a growing number of major funders, such as the Wellcome Trust, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, have established 'capacity building' programmes alongside existing 'technical' programmes to address infrastructure and capacity deficits and emerging fields within HE. Examples include Carnegie's Research Management programme, the Wellcome Trust's African Institutions initiative (which specifically addresses research administration capacity within universities, including other organisations that conduct research), and the Women's Leadership Program (which places an emphasis on promoting educational access for women and encouraging their participation in the development of their communities and higher education institutions).

Other capacity building initiatives include the Bandwidth Consortium, which seeks to 'encourage cooperation and leverage economies of scale by purchasing Internet bandwidth in bulk, thus extending savings to tertiary educational and research institutions in Africa',<sup>15</sup> and Research Africa, a news and funding opportunities service designed to strengthen and deepen research capacity in African universities. Supported during its inception phase by DFID and SIDA and now a self-sufficient commercial publication and resource, Research Africa was funded according to the logic that increased research capacity amongst African universities presents a clear benefit to knowledge exchange, developmentally-orientated research, and the retention of skilled academic talent.

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<sup>10</sup> Development Partnerships in Higher Education <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/delphe>>

<sup>11</sup> EDULINK <<http://www.acp-edulink.eu>>

<sup>12</sup> Johannesburg Summit 2002 <<http://www.johannesburgsummit.org>>

<sup>13</sup> ACP Science and Technology Programme <<http://www.acp-st.eu>>

<sup>14</sup> N'Dri Assié-Lumumba, 'Empowerment of Women in Higher Education in Africa: The Role and Mission of Research', UNESCO Forum Occasional Paper Series, 11 (UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge, 2006)

<sup>15</sup> Bandwidth Consortium <<http://www.bandwidthconsortium.org>>

Funded programmes that are aligned with existing priorities at institutional, national, and international levels can provide greater focus and energy to work already underway, instead of dispersed support across wide-ranging and varied priority areas. This was the case for higher education initiatives and the MDGs, and will also be true after 2015, with a new set of international development standards; the question for us in advance is what role can HE play in establishing these new standards to begin with?

## Designing the strategy

The discussion on how the HE sector can approach the emerging Post-2015 strategy has already begun. Some are advocating the establishment of higher education as a discrete 'goal' in its own right, to which funding bodies can direct specific programmes of support, while others have pushed for the recognition that HE is intrinsic to all new goals, and that the sector's engagement is central to achieving every potential development target.

The role of the Beyond 2015 campaign is not to declare the best approach, but instead to convene leading lights and active members of the HE community in the discussion, to better incorporate the experiences of the past decade in informing progress towards the next. The Post-2015 framework may look very different to the MDGs themselves – in the earliest days of this discussion, the United Nations has already identified a wide range of broadly 'illustrative goals' that could lead towards five broad 'transformative shifts' in international development. Within these broad goals and shifts that help to frame the broad debate, what are the specific interventions and targets that HE can deliver, and what support do universities need in order to deliver them?

Shortcomings in the MDG process certainly exist; some have considered their full achievement as too unrealistic, and there have been significant challenges in monitoring progress. At the same time, any global framework through which multiple actors – including universities – can coordinate efforts is seen as a useful allocation of development energies, and can go further than a process by which many interventions are independently designed without reinforcing each other.

That is why, within the broad 'goals' and 'shifts' that form the initial stages of the Post-2015 strategy, the ACU has designed six key questions that can help to orientate the role of higher education. Our sector has been supported through a range of programmes and schemes over the past decade to enable better contributions to development. While there is now an established agreement that universities have much to contribute, we now face the question as to how we can feedback into this process, and ensure that higher education's role in the future is as efficient and effective as it can be.



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# **The world beyond 2015**

## **Is higher education ready?**

**The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expire in 2015 and will be replaced by a new set of international targets.**

**What next for universities?  
How will higher education  
respond to the challenges and  
goals that emerge beyond 2015  
– and is it ready?**

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?**

**Join the ACU's campaign to raise awareness of how higher education can and should respond to global challenges beyond 2015.**

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