

# “Sharing best practices across universities”

Education conference 2023: “Digital Transition and Inclusion in Education, an agenda for action”

University of Nicosia, Cyprus 19<sup>th</sup> May 2023

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Principal, University of Edinburgh



**Founded in 1583**  
**The oldest civic university in**  
**the English-speaking world**



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Influencing the world since 1583

# University of Edinburgh facts

- **World rankings:** Times Higher 29; QS 15; Times Higher United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on 'industry, innovation and infrastructure' 5; QS social and environmental sustainability performance 4, 1<sup>st</sup> in Europe.
- **Research excellence:** Research Excellence Framework published May 2022, rankings of research power (excellence x scale): 1<sup>st</sup> in UK for computer science, sociology, anthropology, veterinary medicine\*, chemistry\* (\* = joint submission). 4<sup>th</sup> overall in UK across all submissions. **Top 5** in UK in **75%** of subject areas.
- **19 Nobel Prize laureates including 4 Physics, 6 Chemistry, 6 Physiology or Medicine; also 3 Turing awards; an Abel Prize laureate and Fields medallist; 4 Pulitzer Prize winners; (3 UK Prime Ministers and several Olympic gold medal winners).**
- As of 2023, 49000 students of which 25% from Scotland, almost half from outside the UK; 15000 staff; annual turnover £1.3billion

**Local and global relevance**



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# Some predictions (firmly held opinions!)

- In the decades/centuries to come, universities will overcome short- and medium-term disruption by geo-political complexities such as Brexit, USA-China relations, the war in Ukraine and other challenges which are as yet not even imagined.
- **There will be some “silver-linings” of the dark clouds of the Covid-19 pandemic** and the most successful universities will be those that identify and seize the opportunities most effectively.
- **Solutions/mitigations to the world’s most pressing problems will come from global research universities**, especially if they collaborate with each other across national and international boundaries and with industry and the “third sector”.
- **The biggest risks to our success would be a failure to be sufficiently bold and confident; failure to learn from history; undue conservatism or inflexibility in the face of challenge.**
- **The campus university is far from an outdated concept, certainly not dead...**



Every cloud has a silver lining....

**COVID-19**

A dramatic sky with a large, dark, stormy cloud in the center. The cloud is labeled 'COVID-19' in white, bold, sans-serif font. A bright, golden light breaks through the bottom of the dark cloud, creating a 'silver lining' effect. The sky is filled with other smaller, lighter clouds, and the overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, greys, and bright yellows/whites.

# What can be the positives from Covid?

1. The world learned to cope with, and defeat, a new virus; universities made major contributions
2. Universities adapted remarkably quickly/effectively
3. “Internationalisation without travel” can be achieved
4. Change has been accelerated and some of it will be irreversible (if we so wish)
5. Inequalities have been exacerbated, their profile has been raised: the transformative power of universities is needed more than ever



# Digital transition....

Universities adapted remarkably quickly/effectively

Online/digital learning was already growing; the pandemic accelerated it, enhanced scale and scope. “Hybrid” model

Examinations: “open book”, reduced intensity, Year 1/2

Staff “working from home”. Our survey 10%/80%/10%

Many researchers remained very productive

Markedly reduced travel: save money, cut climate impact

**Efficiency has improved; more student & staff choice**



# ...and now generative AI (ChatGPT etc)

JISC advice: 3 options (a) outlaw (b) outrun (c) embrace

Student assessments and marking need to adapt/embrace

Universities no longer the source of information, need to focus on knowing which information is good & which not, how to use/interpret information etc

Implications for jobs/roles/future workforces

<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/what-every-ceo-should-know-about-generative-ai>





# Inclusion in higher education

Massive rise in university participation: UK 4% early 1970s, 14% by late 70s, now (50 years later) >40% [USA: ?50%]

Ability and potential are evenly distributed across the human race but opportunity is not

Students from less advantaged backgrounds need levelling of the playing field: context of school results, financial, social and mentoring support including post-graduation

**Edinburgh: 14-15% of Scots, outcomes indistinguishable**



# Work still to be done on inclusion

Non-local students: pay higher tuition fees, subsidise university finances for inadequately funded activities including home students and almost all research. Need financial support schemes, scholarships (?philanthropy) as well as similar/extra social and mentoring support

Education as a powerful driver of social mobility

Importance of “digital poverty” (devices, signal, time)

**Challenges and opportunities for universities, whose transformative power is needed more than ever**



# University of Edinburgh: Strategy 2030 (published 2018)

## Our vision

Our graduates, and the knowledge we discover with our partners, make the world a better place.

## Our purpose

As a world leading research intensive University, we are here to address tomorrow's greatest challenges. Between now and 2030 we will do that with a values-led approach to teaching, research, and innovation, and through the strength of our relationships, both locally and globally.



Values-led | Behaviours Charter | Dignity & Respect



# The power of collaboration

- **Crosses national and international borders** Whilst this brings risk it also brings opportunity. Universities achieve progress by taking risks: it is important that we realise this, mitigate risks where possible but in my opinion it would be counter-productive for universities to become too risk-averse.
- **Facilitates inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity:** there are countless examples of major challenges being best addressed by collaboration between and across disciplines (example of Ebola).
- **Promotes mobility** for students and staff, enabling personal and professional development, getting outside one's "comfort zone", meeting new people, learning new languages & other skills. Role of university networks, also bi- or tri-partite partnerships
- **Leverages funding, especially but not only in research:** better 'value for money' for funding agencies; 'matching' funding eg from governments but also philanthropists. However, example of UNA-Europa and impact of Brexit....



# Collaborations in the context of ACU (1 of 4)

- **From 2016 - UoE a technical partner in the Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) East Africa project**, supporting 23 universities across 4 countries to scale blended learning capacity benefiting over 10,000 students through **the digital transformation of teaching and learning**. Led by ACU, funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office as part of the SPHEIR (Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform) programme. PEBL East Africa established a solid foundation for new programmes to grow, such as PEBL West Africa, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).  
<https://www.acu.ac.uk/get-involved/pebl/>
- **2019 - UoE partnered with ACU and British Council to convene and host a symposium 'Extending the Welcome'** bringing together participants from a dozen countries across public, private and academic spheres to discuss the education gap faced by refugees and displaced people and what universities can do to help bridge that gap. <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/extending-the-welcome-developing-long-term-solutions-to-supporting-refugees-and-at-risk-scholars/>



# Collaborations in the context of ACU (2 of 4)

- **2019: UoE's Vice Principal Global Access contributed to a panel discussion** about the experience of a Commonwealth Scholarships Commission Scholar as part of the World Access to Higher Education Day Global Summit 2019, organised by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) England and hosted by the University of Edinburgh. UoE had previously worked with NEON to hold an event on access to Higher Education with the support of the University of Cape Town.
- <https://worldaccesshe.com/world-access-to-higher-education-day-global-summit-2019-edinburgh/>
- **2019: UoE hosted one of the researchers from the 2019 cohort of ACU Fellows.** The fellows are selected to travel to another country to undertake research in a wide range of topics, ranging from climate change to mental health. UoE's visiting ACU scholar was Dr Mohd Golam Quader Khan, from Bangladesh Agricultural University.
- <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/acu-fellowships-supporting-research-collaboration-across-the-commonwealth/>
- [https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/events/equitable\\_access\\_to\\_higher\\_education/](https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/events/equitable_access_to_higher_education/)



# Collaborations in the context of ACU (3 of 4)

- **2020 – UoE’s Regional Director for South East Asia contributed to the ACU India Forums.** Amrita Sadarangani showcased the ways the University of Edinburgh applies blended learning to build capacity and resilience.  
<https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/acu-india-forums-building-capacity-and-resilience-through-blending-learning/>
- **2021 – UoE’s Principal contributed to a high-level meeting** of research sector leaders from across Africa and UK, convened by The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) in partnership with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and ACU. Discussions focused around **enhancing research partnerships to tackle global inequalities; embedding international collaboration in the next generation of researchers; innovative models for doctoral training and research career support and strengthening research systems for more and better research.**  
<https://www.acu.ac.uk/africa-uk-communique/>



# Collaborations in the context of ACU (4 of 4)

- **2022: UoE contributed expertise to the highly successful first edition of the Commonwealth Virtual Exchange (CVE) programme.** With funding from the Northern Consortium, the ACU brought together 40 students from 10 member institutions in Australia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia and the UK for an innovative and stimulating eight-week virtual exchange programme linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These students, who had not previously studied abroad, created a new business idea to address one of the global challenges, built intercultural awareness and developed an entrepreneurial mindset while working with others. The CVE programme had no fees for students from ACU member universities to take part, and because it is delivered online, it allows students who are under-represented in international mobility programmes to take part alongside their university studies. **NB: University of Edinburgh's student team won first place at the closing CVE mini-conference and pitch session with their innovation: Scan Sustainably QR Code.**
- <https://www.acu.ac.uk/news/commonwealth-virtual-exchange-students-dream-up-the-sustainable-business-ideas-of-tomorrow/> **We would encourage all ACU members to get involved!**





# Innovation, commercialisation, wealth creation, economic impact

- **Universities need to be hot-beds of innovation.** Our students and staff are full of ideas: we need to provide an eco-system in which these ideas can be developed, learning from experts (eg “entrepreneurs in residence”; other staff with commercialisation and industrial experience; technical, legal and governance advisors).
- **Research commercialisation needs to be encouraged, incentivised, recognised and rewarded.** Promotions procedures, hiring policies, reward strategies need to recognise that it is not only about papers published or grants won.
- **New companies create new jobs and attract inward investment.** Communities can be regenerated and/or rejuvenated by innovation clusters around universities



# Challenges to global universities

Politics, politics, politics.....

Geo-politics, demographic changes, economic instability

The rise of alternative providers: online education, Google etc (MOOCs have not made the impact on universities that some evangelists predicted). Importance of “outside the classroom”

Paying attention to climate change and sustainability issues should not in my opinion preclude internationalisation

**Universities provide solutions, not problems**



# The campus university....



A model with centuries of provenance

So much more about what happens outside the classroom than in it

Camaraderie, new friends/contacts, learning from difference

A protected environment in which to grow up, develop, make mistakes

**Irreplaceable?**



# Advice to universities

Focus on your strengths, define your “niche”

Be relevant and accessible to your local community as well as globally competitive

Seek collaborations whereby you can either:

- (a) achieve scale which is impossible on your own
- (b) move from being excellent to being globally significant
- (c) achieve shortcuts to mobility
- (d) leverage funding and/or influence



# Take home messages/discussion points

1. Universities are highly resilient organisations.

**Be confident!**

2. Universities that adept best to adversity will flourish

3. Collaboration is so important: UoE's participation in ACU schemes has enhanced our university. **Join in!**

4. If we are smart about harnessing the changes that have worked well, this period can have a net benefit

**5. The transformative power of universities is needed now more than ever**

