

21st Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers

Ministerial Statement

“Rethinking Education for Innovation, Growth and Sustainability post-Covid-19”

Preamble

1. We, the Ministers of Education of Commonwealth Member States, met on 27th and 28th April 2022 for the 21st Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers (21CCEM) in Nairobi, Kenya, in a hybrid format, to re-affirm the fundamental role of education for inclusive economic growth, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and in responding to major challenges such as financial crisis, climate change, pandemics and systemic shocks. We resolve to build back better and with resilience for fair, inclusive economic recovery and a sustainable future, and rethink education delivery towards equity, equality, human dignity, social inclusion, and wellbeing.
2. Reaffirming our commitment to the Nadi Declaration to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, we reiterate that urgent consideration must be given to ways in which to close the gap on inequality in learning opportunities, including gender inequality, among the mitigation and recovery strategies, and rethink an education fit for an accelerated technological era.
3. We reiterate the right to education for all persons (UN 1948) and that education is the basis for the realisation of all other rights, in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We consider that the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change should provide ample impetus for States to start rethinking their educational models and recognise the need for urgent learning recovery for all and the right to affordable internet access as part of the right to education.
4. Recognising the importance of human capital for sustainable development, we vow to invest in education and skills for all ages, with a particular focus on ensuring foundational skills for all, improving outcomes for disadvantaged students, the promotion of 21st-century skills that will improve transitions from education to employment for students, teacher development and strengthening research and development capabilities. Furthermore, with education as the single most powerful societal sub-system for transmission of values, beliefs, and norms, we commit to preventing violence through an education sector that promotes peace, values, and beliefs and responsible active global citizenship.
5. We reiterate our commitment to leave no one behind and to ensure that resources are made available in an equitable way for an improved and resilient education system that caters to the needs of all learners, including girls, marginalized and vulnerable groups, and those with special learning needs.

Resilience and Sustainability

6. We commit to mitigating the impact of crises including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-related events, and conflict on education systems to ensure access to quality education for all, recognition of prior learning and educational continuity through all modalities including distance and blended learning, and through formal and non-formal education for lifelong learning. We hold prioritising foundational skills for all, equity, and gender equality at the centre of our decisions to address disparities in education.
7. We will consider an integrated approach to global citizenship education including through national curricula and generative educational opportunities.
8. We recognise the potential for climate change to impact national education systems, including infrastructure, and the importance of education in addressing the impact of climate change on communities. We welcome initiatives to boost energy literacy across the Commonwealth, enhance knowledge and raise awareness amongst children, young people, and local communities on the impact of energy production and consumption on climate change and develop skills needed for a just and inclusive transition to more sustainable forms of energy.
9. We note the numerous benefits of sport and physical activity for all in terms of physical and mental health and psycho-social wellbeing. We acknowledge the need for greater investments in counselling and guidance as a key element to addressing mental health, as well as physical education at all levels of the education system and encourage the implementation of initiatives such as UNESCO's Fit for Life programme and Commonwealth Moves initiative which aim to encourage greater awareness about the importance of physical education. We commit to promoting and systematising healthy environments through education.

Learning Technologies

10. We recognise the potentially transformative impact of digital technologies on education and stress the need to urgently address the digital divide, with particular attention to supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, through appropriate access to ICT, including low-tech solutions and training of learners and development and distribution of relevant digital materials. This includes the development of personalised learning approaches and adaptive technologies for learners with special needs. In the context of the digital transition predicated by the pandemic, we will give special attention to enabling internet and electricity connectivity, hardware, and infrastructure including broadband access, and remove barriers to ICT.
11. We recognise the importance of reskilling and improving the tech capabilities of teachers, school leaders, and the educational workforce, as fundamental to the success of digital transformation. The ethical use of digital technology is important in educational settings, and we call on stakeholders to appropriately apply safeguarding regulations.

Leadership in Education

12. We acknowledge that leadership in education is exercised by many, at all levels. We commit to value-based development and preparedness of aspiring and current educational leaders for collaborative, responsive, crisis-ready, and contextually sensitive practice; and for schools and learning spaces that are inclusive and integrated into the community with support for parental participation in curriculum implementation.
13. We recognise the critical role played by teachers, educators, and education support staff as leaders and agents of change. We pledge to support their induction and continuous professional development at all levels, together with their mental health and wellbeing. We will also support the development of student leaders as agents for change and community transformation.

Transitions within and outside the education system

14. We recognise the need to provide equal access to all levels and types of education and to facilitate transitions between levels, from early childhood education to primary, secondary, post-secondary education, including higher education, TVET, and other lifelong learning opportunities, particularly for girls, women, and vulnerable groups, as one of the means to address educational, professional, economic, and social inequalities.
15. We recognise the crucial role of education in preparing young people for entrepreneurship, jobs of the future, and globalisation. We reaffirm the importance of the coordination between education and labour policies to facilitate youth transitions from school to work and commit to cooperating with the labour sector to better prepare secondary and higher education sectors for the changing world of work. We further acknowledge the role and contribution of industry and the private sector in helping to create the jobs now and for the future through their contribution to the preparation of a skilled workforce.
16. We acknowledge that tertiary education is vital to sustainable development and that universities play a critical role within the Commonwealth education ecosystem, and that they can contribute positively towards all aspects of economic and social development and the successful realisation of all 17 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. We recommend that the appropriate resources are made available for high-quality tertiary education, including open and distance learning systems to thrive.
17. We further recommend that access to tertiary education and apprenticeship programmes should be available to all those who would benefit and to all students regardless of gender. Learners with special needs should be supported with the means and mechanisms to participate, complete their education, and succeed. Equality of access and inclusion must consider necessary adjustments for disability and representation from disadvantaged or under-represented groups.

Addressing Disparities

18. We reiterate the importance of supporting young people and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face disproportionate challenges and a higher risk of falling further behind due to the pandemic and other socio-economic factors. Measures should be taken that are preventive and tackle the structural roots of social exclusion and provide opportunities for all including those who have left school or have experienced significant learning losses.
19. We underscore that human and social capitals build more prosperous and peaceful societies that are resilient to diverse shocks, whether from pandemics, conflicts, or climate change. We, therefore, commit to providing learning opportunities, especially for the most disadvantaged including women and girls, to build intergenerational resilience and mitigate the gendered impact of climate change.
20. We recognise that while globally, girls from poor households remain less likely than boys to enrol in school, in many countries boys are at a greater risk of repeating grades, failing to progress and complete their education, and not achieving adequate learning while in school. We will take appropriate measures to make learning safe and inclusive, especially for the poorest, including girls, invest in better data and evidence, build, and finance equitable education systems, and promote integrated and coordinated approaches to improve education for all learners.
21. Recalling the Commonwealth's commitment to increasing access to quality eye care for all and eliminating blinding trachoma which disproportionately affects women and children across the Commonwealth. We encourage a multi-pronged approach to screenings and affordable vision treatment and eye health for children, including for students in schools, and acknowledge the positive impact it has on learning outcomes.

Financing of Education

22. We recognise the urgency of increasing investments in education. We hope to see progressive increase in the domestic education expenditure towards at least 4-6% of Gross Domestic Product or 15-20% of the total public expenditure global benchmark, in order to accelerate the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in accordance with country context.
23. We will consider policy options including, strengthening tax systems, exploring tax reforms for equitable education provision, reprofiling debts where necessary, and exploring innovative debt solutions such as climate-resilient debt instruments to adequately finance education.
24. We value efficiency, better-targeted spending, increased accountability, and equity in education including for the most disadvantaged communities to ensure that education investments enhance learning outcomes and labour market prospects.

Way forward

25. We support a clear, transformative, and innovative vision and mission for education as one of the cornerstones of sustainable growth and stability. We call on the Commonwealth Secretariat and stakeholders to assist member states to accelerate progress on education and the 2030 Agenda and transform education by identifying and sharing evidence-based examples of successful policy interventions; exploring key factors for education for the future, as well as preparing for the Transforming Education Summit, hosted by the UN Secretary-General with Heads of State in September 2022.
26. We recognise the urgent issues raised in the Kenyatta Call to Action on Education Finance in 2021 and the need for efficient domestic financing of education. We agree to look for suitable opportunities to consider the financing of education and welcome initiatives that support the capacity building of ministries of education on the financing of education including ‘innovative’ financing solutions.
27. We will explore a multisectoral approach and synergies across the social sectors and identify factors to promote transformative change for an inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy education sector. We encourage cooperation in areas, such as education for sustainable development, the promotion of digital skills, science, and technology, building research capabilities in schools, and a focus on the blue economy and greengrowth within the education sector.
28. We recognise the important contribution of non-formal education and its role in the development of young people’s knowledge, skills, and competencies for employability, digital and life skills, as well as experience in working in teams, problem-solving, and being creative and entrepreneurial. To this end, we welcome the upcoming launch of the Commonwealth Quality Youth Leadership Alliance that will support the non-formal training and capacity building of young people across the Commonwealth, with possibilities of accelerated learning to offer educational gainsto those who have missed out on learning opportunities.
29. We urge the expeditious efforts to eliminate all forms of violence, especially those within and against learning spaces which should be safe environments. We endorse the Commonwealth Global Citizenship Education Charter that affirms our commitment to peace education, creates a better understanding of social rights and responsibilities, and respects cultural and religious diversity through formal and non-formal education and training.
30. We commit to building resilient education systems that can withstand future threats and disruptions. We seek to improve access to digital connectivity and skills to support teaching and learning, we pledge to ensure inclusion and equity, harness partnerships with the private sector and empower children and young people to shape the digital transformation of education in the Commonwealth.
31. We reaffirm the role of governments in providing 12 years of uninterrupted quality and inclusive education for all, particularly marginalised groups including disadvantaged girls, and the need for investing in early childhood education alongside primary and secondary education.

32. We thank the Secretariat for the work undertaken in the publication and dissemination of toolkits including the Commonwealth Education Policy Framework, Early Childhood Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and the Commonwealth Curriculum Framework for Sustainable Development. We recommend the Secretariat to review and promote the Curriculum Framework for Sustainable Development.

Commonwealth of Learning

33. We appreciate COL's focus on promoting learning for sustainable development through the use of technologies and took cognisance of its report and good work in support of distance education and learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, in training teachers to move online, forming alliances such as Commonwealth Wise Women and in skilling large numbers using the web. Digital development through digital transformation, especially for women, has become ever more important since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we call on stakeholders to assist countries in their respective capacities.

Association of Commonwealth Universities

34. We support the principles and objectives of higher education for a skilled workforce, and to achieve socio-economic resilience by enabling a skilled workforce, student mobility through education exchanges and scholarships, joint research schemes, and versatile high-performance online training. We recognise the achievements of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP), which celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2019 and look forward to its continued strengthening.

Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility

35. We welcome CTEF's Higher Education Governance and Leadership project to build knowledge regarding the evolution of ideas and roles of higher education and support member states to frame the future role of the higher education sector.

Concluding Remarks

36. We express our sincere appreciation to the Government of Kenya for the effective chairmanship and excellent arrangements made for the 21CCEM and look forward to the next CCEM. We will submit this Statement to the 26th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Rwanda in June 2022.