The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) has a proud history of achievement spanning almost a century. When the Association was established, Europe was one year from the beginning of its 30 years’ war of the 20th century. The birth of the modern Commonwealth was 36 years in the future and the United Nations and UNESCO were not even dreams.

Since the Association was established other organisations have come and gone, yet the ACU has endured and has prospered. It has done so because it has been able, from one decade to the next, to remain relevant. Time and again the Association has been able to demonstrate its relevance to the needs and concerns of its members. The achievements of the past have provided sound foundations but today we must once again demonstrate anew to our members, and to prospective members, the value that we bring to them. Our members are now part of many different networks internationally and we must therefore demonstrate why the Commonwealth network remains vital to them. In achieving this goal we shall look, as we have always done, to the needs of governments, the private sector, and most importantly of all, the peoples of the Commonwealth. Indeed as the Association plans for its centenary, in 2013, we must recognise that the greatest challenges and opportunities in our history will face us in this decade.

Access to higher education for all

The world of higher education is shifting in dramatic and profound ways. We are living through the greatest expansion of higher education in human history. More does not mean worse: it never has. Neither does it mean, in that ugly word and concept, massification. This democratisation of access to higher education means that the doors of learning are opening to all.

Access to higher education is a basic human right. For too long in too many countries we have lived with the legacy of restrictive conceptions of higher education and those who can benefit from it. It has never been the case that only a privileged few possessed the capacity to benefit from the liberating and empowering experience of tertiary education. The extraordinary and dramatic successes of Open Universities across the Commonwealth, as they have opened the doors to lifelong learning, and the success of the Commonwealth of Learning, have removed any basis for a restrictive conception of access.

If, therefore, we are to achieve our aims of universal access and of lifelong learning, we shall also need to re-envision institutional forms. Colleges providing tertiary education, or a mixture of secondary and tertiary education, will have a central part to play in achieving the access goals of this century. The innovative Millennium University of the Highlands and Islands offers a compelling example of the consequences for the democratisation of access and the provision of relevant high quality tertiary education if we are prepared to think outside established institutional structures.

Democratic access must equally mean access to high quality tertiary education. Every government across the Commonwealth is grappling with this dilemma. The Commonwealth must do far more than hitherto to share experiences of appropriate means of ensuring and enhancing quality under these conditions. To do so the Commonwealth must develop more effective collaboration with UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and World Bank who are all contributing increasingly effectively to the understanding of how best to ensure cultures of quality.

Gender equity

Nowhere have restrictive views of access been more pernicious than in their impact on women. A core principle of the Commonwealth is our commitment to equality for women. We know the dramatic consequences for individuals, for families and for communities of opening the doors of learning to all women. This Association has a long and honourable record in the promotion of gender equity, in particular in developing programmes that enable women to break the glass ceiling into senior management. The members of the Association have invested heavily in support of these programmes over two decades.

Our task in the coming decade is to broaden and deepen these programmes; to develop new networks of women in tertiary education; and to develop new partnerships, with other agencies, with governments and with the private sector, to achieve gender equity. We shall certainly debate the most appropriate strategies to adopt, but we shall be unwavering in our commitment to gender equality on grounds of justice and our common interest.
The significance of science and technology

If sustainable development requires a commitment to gender equity, it also requires a new commitment to the centrality of science, technology and innovation. Few would now dispute that in our times human capital is the key factor of production. Equally, few would doubt that ‘the global environment is unforgiving in punishing those not appropriately positioned to take advantage of the competitive knowledge driven economy’. As Mamphela Ramphele has cautioned, ‘the gap between those that are reaping the benefits of investing in high level skills and the promotion of science and technology and the rest is growing’ ever faster and ever wider.3

Sir David King has reminded us that while it is possible to govern today without a basis of science and technology, it is not possible to govern well. This is true for every nation. In any society a competitive economy and a stable government must be knowledge-based and must be integrated into the global scientific and technological community.4

Science and technology specifically and universities generally are not, as is sometimes argued, elitist luxuries, necessary to countries only once poverty has been abolished. They are essential priorities and necessary conditions for the abolition of poverty as governments across the Commonwealth recognise.

Hence, science and technology are at the heart of the Report of the Commission for Africa and the ‘Renewing the African University’ project – a ten-year programme developed by the Association of Commonwealth Universities in close partnership with our African sister organisations – in particular the Association of African Universities – and with the strong support of our sister organisations of universities across the Commonwealth.

New approaches to the provision and utilisation of science and technology must be central to the thinking of the Association and its members as we begin to explore together how best to forge improved linkages between universities, government, the private sector and civil society to promote across the Commonwealth the dynamic national systems of innovation that are the keys to economic growth.

The role of the university in the community

Effective science and technology strategies, of course, must be defined in the context of specific national and community needs. The Kigali Institute of Science and Technology and the Rwanda National Plan for Science and Technology provide a telling example of the way in which focused and determined political and institutional leadership can bring rapid and dramatic improvement in the lives of the citizens of a country through the provision of innovative programmes in science and technology.

Universities have never been, in that idle depreciatory phrase, ivory towers. As the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge has reminded us, Cambridge was already practising knowledge transfer in the 16th century, while the University of Glasgow from its very foundation has been defined by its community engagement.5

Universities today are increasingly dynamic engines of community development, across the Commonwealth. The Talloires Initiative, for example, aims to reinforce and build the international movement to elevate the civic engagement of higher education institutions. This reveals a Commonwealth-wide, and indeed a global, commitment among university and college leaders to their responsibilities in developing new partnerships and programmes to support community development, and engagement.6

The need to support university leaders

Just as the challenges facing the Association have never been more profound so the responsibilities of university leaders have never been greater. Every vice chancellor and president and principal of every university across the Commonwealth could, if asked, eloquently describe the ever more complex challenges facing them. Equally, each of them can point to successes in meeting these challenges. We must do far more to tell and to celebrate those success stories. But equally we must recognise the urgent need to develop new programmes to support university leaders and to continue to strengthen institutional management.

This year the Association has developed further its partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning, with the Scottish Executive and with the University of Abertay and the other universities of Scotland, to introduce a new programme for university leaders – Managing Change in the Global Knowledge Economy.

Common interests and responsibilities unite the ACU

When the executive heads of the universities of the Commonwealth gather together, as they did earlier this year in Adelaide, it is in part because of those ties of sentiment, to which the Liberal statesman and philosopher R.B. Haldane referred in 1912 in the discussions that led to the establishment of this Association. But it is also because of our recognition of our common interest as members of the Commonwealth and because we recognise that as Commonwealth, and global, citizens we inhabit a common moral universe.

The need to reaffirm our commitment to that common moral universe has never been more important than it is today. The meeting of Heads of Commonwealth Governments in Malta called on the Commonwealth to develop new programmes and imaginative initiatives to promote greater mutual understanding and respect amongst all parties, peoples and communities.

The universities and colleges of the Commonwealth, are uniquely placed to contribute to that process of moving humanity towards, in the words of a former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Sir Shridath Rampal, recognition of its mutual interdependencies.7

Like the Commonwealth itself, the Association of Commonwealth Universities represents all regional groupings, all types of universities at all levels of economic development. And like the broader Commonwealth, our shared history, our tradition of multiculturalism, multilateralism and of decision making by consensus – the Commonwealth way – makes us
uniquely placed to work together effectively to address the central issues of our time.

As we plan our future there will be in our meetings and conversations what John Stuart Mill once called that ‘collision of adverse opinions’ so necessary to a complex and healthy democracy. But that ‘collision’ will take place in the context of our common desire to enable our universities and colleges to seize the extraordinary opportunities that face us as we help to construct the knowledge societies of the 21st century.

The Commonwealth in Malta reaffirmed its commitment to place the interest of future generations at the heart of its work. That commitment is part of the very raison d’etre of this Association and, with the support of our members, we are actively developing new programmes to connect the Association far more directly to the student community across the Commonwealth.

We shall truly construct the new democratic universities of the 21st century only if we place at the centre of our concerns, our common interests, in overcoming what the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon, rightly describes as the greatest scandal of our age: global poverty.

We have it in our power to choose to do so. The universities of the Commonwealth have an inescapable responsibility to contribute to achieving the goal of eradicating poverty, and all of the Millennium Development Goals, through their research, their teaching and their community engagement.

Through our work we can help to fashion that shared space of human solidarity and mutuality that is the heart of the Commonwealth ideal.

Our generation has it in its power to choose to be, as Mr Mandela, has said, that great generation that overcame poverty.

If we make that choice, then hope and history may rhyme, not once in a lifetime, as in Seamus Heaney’s great poem celebrating a free South Africa, but rather throughout our lives.

This article is based on Dr Rowett’s opening address to the Conference of Executive Heads of Commonwealth Universities, University of Adelaide, 9 April 2006.

Endnotes

1 Enrolment has increased from 13m student in 1960 to over 110m in 2003. For future projections see Vision 2020: Forecasting International Student Mobility: a UK Perspective (British Council/IDP, 2004)


5 For an illuminating account of the role of the University of Glasgow see University, City and State: The University of Glasgow since 1870 (eds. Moss, M., Munro, J.F., Trainers, R.H.) (Edinburgh University Press, 2000)

6 The Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education (September 2005)

7 See One World to Share: Selected speeches of the Commonwealth Secretary General, 1975-9 (Shridath Ramphal) (Hutchinson Berham, 1979)

Biographical notes

Dr John Rowett began his career as a academic historian, first at University College Wales (Aberystwyth, UK) and then at Brasenose College (Oxford, UK). He co-founded and edited the academic journal, Twentieth Century British History and was subsequently joint editor of the English Historical Review. During the late 1990s he oversaw the development, construction and academic programme of the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford (UK).

From 1999 to 2004, he was Chief Executive of the Rhodes Trust and Warden of Rhodes House, also in Oxford. He was responsible for the centenary celebrations of the Rhodes Trust in South Africa and the United Kingdom, which culminated in a major event at Westminster Hall in July 2003 addressed by the British Prime Minister, Blair, by former US President Clinton and by former South African President Mandela. During 2003 Dr Rowett was jointly responsible for conceiving and launching the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, one of Mr Mandela’s three legacy organisations.

In 2004, Dr Rowett became Secretary General of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. New initiatives have included the development, with the Association of African Universities, of a substantial partnership programme. He remains a trustee of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation and is also a trustee of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation (Windsor, UK) and of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. In 2005, Dr Rowett received an OBE for his contribution to UK–South African relations.