



UCL African Partners Summit Report

October 2020

Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu, Pro-Vice-Provost (Africa & Middle East)

Funi Nemaheni, Senior Partnership Manager (Africa & Middle East)

Overview and Context

The purpose of the UCL African Partners Summit was to initiate discussions, with African partners, regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the Higher Education (HE) sector and the future of HE global engagement.

This report forms the main output from the Summit and will potentially feed into UCL's development of the Global Engagement Strategy 2021-26, while also informing developments around UCL's engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Summit was held on Microsoft Teams Live. It was held in two sessions in an interactive question and answer format. Attendees submitted their questions and comments using Sli.do.

The Summit was open to anyone with links to, experience of, or an interest in collaborations between UCL and African partners.

Professor Michael Arthur, President & Provost of UCL opened the Summit and Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu, Pro-Vice-Provost (Africa & Middle East) chaired the Summit. Dame Nicola Brewer, Vice-Provost (International) opened the second session on the future of global engagement.

Panellists included Vice-Chancellors of African universities, a representative from the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), a representative from the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and key partners of UCL.

This report is divided into two sections: (1) Summit Areas of Convergence & Recommendations and (2) Summary of Discussions.

The full recording of the Summit can be accessed at this [link](#).

Panellists

	Professor Michael Arthur, President & Provost, UCL
	Dr Dame Nicola Brewer, Vice-Provost (International), UCL
	Summit Chair, Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu, Pro-Vice-Provost (Africa & Middle East), UCL
	Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Town, South Africa
	Professor Ernest Aryeetey, Secretary General, African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), Ghana
	Professor Zebon Vilakazi, Vice-Principal and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Postgraduate Studies), University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
	Professor Deenan Pillay, Pro-Vice-Provost (International), UCL
	Professor Willem Hanekom, Director of the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI), South Africa
	Dr Joseph Macarthy, Executive Director, Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC), Sierra Leone
	Professor Delmiro Fernandez-Reyes, Biomedical Computing, UCL
	Mr George Ananga, Senior Membership (International), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)

Summit Areas of Convergence & Recommendations

The Summit consisted of two sessions. The first session focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the HE sector. The panel discussed three themes: the impact of severe shocks such as COVID-19 on the HE sector, the HE response to COVID-19 and the lessons learned from COVID-19 to date.

The second session focused on the future of global engagement. Similar to the first session, the panel discussed three themes: developing and sustaining global partnerships during and after the pandemic, the barriers to sustainable global partnerships and the impact of global partnerships on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This section of the report highlights the main areas of convergence that emerged from the discussions at the Summit and the corresponding recommendations for UCL and for UCL's African partners.

Panel discussions: key themes	Recommendations for UCL	Broader recommendations for African partners
Encourage further interdisciplinary ways of researching COVID-19. An interdisciplinary research focus into COVID-19 could provide more robust solutions to problems such as unexpected differential death rates and challenges around global recovery.	Building on UCL's strong existing approach to interdisciplinary research through the Grand Challenges, explore a COVID-19 call that focuses on interdisciplinary research either through the Global Engagement Funds, UCL-Wits Seed Funds or the Africa & Middle East Teaching Initiative.	Encourage interdisciplinary funding for COVID-19 research at both university and government level funding.
Inequality of access to adequate digital infrastructure has been exposed both within countries and across international borders. Explore potential to invest further in online platforms to continue supporting academics to develop, sustain and enhance global partnerships.	GEO to work with other departments at UCL e.g. the Office of the Vice Provost Advancement (OVPA), to develop best practice and guidance to support online international academic engagement and enhance, where possible, online platforms already operating at UCL.	Continue to enhance online platforms for online teaching and research collaboration in order to support the development of effective and more sustainable global partnerships. More engagement with governments could be explored to encourage investment in digital infrastructure across research intensive public universities.

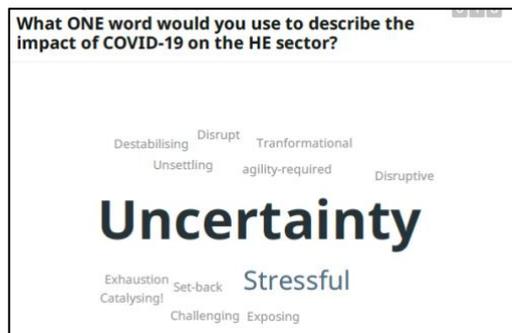
<p>Encourage and support early career researchers in partner institutions to maximise any opportunities presented by COVID-19. For example, early career researchers could pivot their research towards the pandemic and take on leadership roles in areas where their Principal Investigators (PIs) aren't able to participate fully in the projects, due to travel restrictions.</p>	<p>GEO to explore how existing and new seed funding schemes can better support early career researchers to encourage innovative research approaches to COVID-19. This can be interdisciplinary and enabled either via the Global Engagement Funds, UCL-Wits Seed Funds or the Africa & Middle East Teaching Initiative.</p>	<p>Continue exploring avenues for enhancing and supporting early career researchers to take on research leadership positions within universities.</p>
<p>Develop partnerships with multilateral organisations in the African continent in order to achieve a critical mass to influence and shape the African research agenda (including research priorities and funding that is locally driven) such that Africans benefit fully from the research.</p>	<p>GEO should aim to strengthen UCL's partnerships with HE multilateral organisations, such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Academy of African Sciences (AAS) and the United Nations Forum for Higher Education in order to enhance efforts to achieve equitable research funding for the global south.</p>	<p>African universities should continue lobbying international research funders to achieve a decolonised funding landscape and should continue to proactively shape the research priorities in the continent by lobbying through multilateral HE organisations such as ARUA.</p>
<p>New partnerships need to pass a longevity test in order to be truly sustainable. A majority of PI to PI partnerships are built around projects and disperse when the project ends. Existing partnerships need to be monitored to ensure that they continue to be grounded on the</p>	<p>GEO should continue to encourage academics to pursue sustainable partnerships with African partners while supporting PIs to develop partnerships that are grounded on principles of equivalence. Where possible, follow-on funding opportunities should be</p>	<p>Where possible, African universities should encourage the building of cross border institutional partnerships.</p>

<p>principles of equivalence.</p>	<p>actively identified at the start of the project.</p> <p>GEO to establish an ‘Africa Steering Group’, chaired by Pro-Vice Provost (AME) to oversee and develop UCL’s approach to partnership development in Africa, both in the context of existing links and future ones. This might include developing ‘principles of engagement’ to support academics as they seek to collaborate with potential African partners.</p>	
<p>Explore the possibility of offering virtual student exchange programmes, e.g. with students paired and working on a joint project in separate locations. Travel restrictions provide an opportunity for wider access to each other via electronic solutions.</p>	<p>GEO to discuss with UCL Study Abroad and interested academics the possibility of hosting a virtual ‘summer school’ for the 2020/2021 academic year with African partners.</p>	<p>Universities should continue exploring the possibility of more virtual study abroad opportunities with global partners.</p>

Summary of Discussions

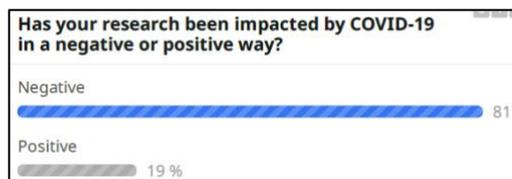
Session I: The Impact of COVID-19 on the HE Sector

Theme 1: Impact of COVID-19 on research



When asked to describe the impact of COVID-19 on the HE sector, the majority of attendees mentioned the word 'uncertainty.'

The panel agreed that COVID-19 negatively affected research activities in HE in a number of ways: operational, financial and scientific, especially in low resource settings.



When asked if their research had been impacted by COVID-19 in a negative or positive way, 81% of the attendees stated that their research was negatively affected.

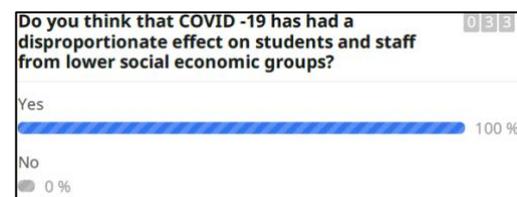
Most research priorities were reported as being redefined and pivoted in order to respond to the pandemic. This includes opportunities for African scientists to delve into new areas of research, such as researching whether people living with HIV or tuberculosis (TB) suffer worse outcomes if they become infected with the virus.

As a result of the pandemic, most governments in Africa are putting more funding into healthcare research to

enable African health researchers to study the impact of COVID-19. A more pre-emptive approach would be to have a clear interdisciplinary focus on emerging threats in order to build up the research base.

The panel agreed that the disruption of research and teaching due to lockdown regulations has hugely affected the student population in African countries where the digital infrastructure remains under-resourced. For instance, Njala University in Sierra Leone is faced with the challenge of students' limited access to laptops and providing students with email addresses in order to deliver 'fit for purpose' online teaching and content.

Other challenges include non-conducive home environments due to cultural expectations (i.e. female students being expected to carry out domestic chores at home). This domestic burden prevents female students from learning optimally in a home environment.

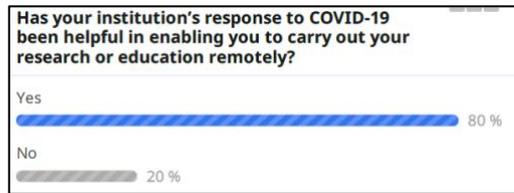


100% of attendees answered 'yes' when asked if COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on students and staff from lower socioeconomic groups.

The panel pointed out that the availability of a vaccine will worsen the inequality gap between the global north and the global south, if not accessed equitably. There is a need to move away from a nationalistic agenda (i.e. nations securing vaccines for their own populations, to a more global outlook when developing the vaccine for a global pandemic).

Theme 2: Response to COVID-19

The panel noted that research and education activities in their universities have been hugely supported.



80% of the attendees agreed that their institutions' response to COVID-19 has been helpful in enabling them to carry out their research or education remotely.

In terms of universities' response to online learning, the panel noted that COVID -19 exposed the infrastructure deficits within HE systems in Africa and the world. There is a need for African governments to invest in online infrastructure. 95% of all research in Africa is in public universities.

There are ongoing discussions between some African universities and telecommunication companies to extend bandwidth to students in rural areas.

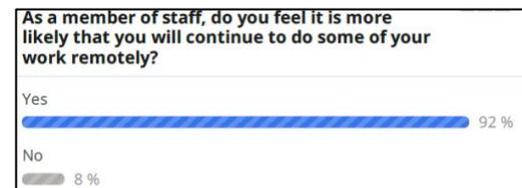
In African countries where online platforms are more advanced, such as Wits University in South Africa, student participation rates have increased compared to participation in physical classrooms.

As more universities are moving to online learning, the panel expressed that universities should start the conversation on fee reduction for online learning.



74% of the attendees voted 'no' when asked if they think that online learning offers sufficient value for money.

The panel noted that working remotely meant that most of the universities' estates have not been in use, but there is a strong case for maintaining the campus experience for both staff and students.



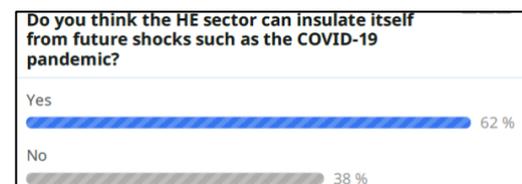
92% of attendees voted 'yes' when asked if it is more likely that they will continue to conduct some of their work remotely.

It is likely that remote working will continue but as the pandemic becomes more controlled, staff are more likely to return to offices and face-to-face teaching is more likely to resume. New universities have the opportunity to remodel the future of the digital HE experience.

On mental health related to the pandemic, the panel noted that more resources are needed to care for students and staff with mental health issues that may have been exacerbated by the lockdown measures in many countries.

Theme 3: Lessons learned from COVID-19

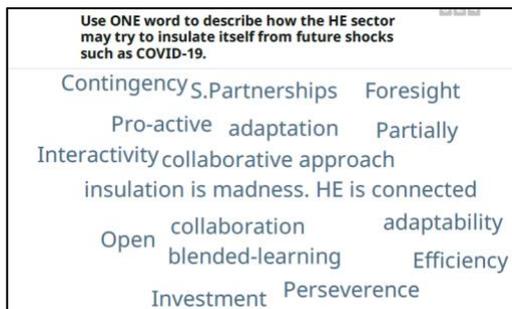
Universities' processes and structures should be agile in order to adapt swiftly when faced with shocks such as COVID-19. More focus should be placed on change management in order to effectively insulate the HE sector from future shocks.



62% of the attendees voted 'yes' when asked if they think the HE sector can insulate itself from future shocks such as COVID-19.

The pandemic exposed systemic weaknesses in the HE sector that need to be addressed urgently, such as the inequality and the digital divide emanating from online learning.

There are unique opportunities for working together collaboratively across borders and there is a strong need to focus HE strategies on working with multiple stakeholders in an interdisciplinary way.



Attendees' one word descriptions of how the HE sector may insulate itself from future shocks such as COVID-19.

There is a strong desire for HE institutions to define their mission in contributing to society. The UK mortality rates were among the highest in the world, despite the fact that most of the top performing universities in research excellence are in the UK. Research excellence needs to translate into societal benefit.

Governments should continue to work closely with researchers through task force teams to come up with well-informed research policies.

'Helicopter science'¹ will continue happening in Africa until African researchers define their own research agenda. Research funders in the UK have started decolonising the funding landscape and asking for research that is driven by local researchers. For instance, the Wellcome is working with the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) to run programmes that respond

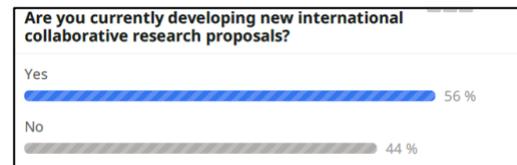
¹ Used to describe situations where researchers from wealthier countries fly to developing countries to collect data, analyse it

to local challenges. Similarly, the United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) agency has been funding research that is more locally driven.

Session II: Future Directions of Global Engagement

Theme 1: Developing, sustaining and enhancing global partnerships during and after the pandemic

The panel noted that mutual partnerships are based on trust built over face-to-face interactions. Universities need to start thinking more about ways to build trust virtually, especially for new partnerships.



56% of attendees voted 'yes' when asked if they were currently developing new international collaborative research proposals.

For established partnerships, a majority of collaborations are being sustained through virtual interactions.

In addition, universities need to think of ways to support academics' global partnerships during a global pandemic and/or future shocks.



Attendees' one word descriptions of the support from their institution in managing

elsewhere and publish the results with little involvement from local scientists.

their research and learning partnerships during the COVID-19 crisis.

The panel also noted that mobile technology in African countries is considered to be a "leap frog" model, in that it has enabled economic development on an unprecedented scale with mobile banking, reduced road transport and greater access to public services. Collaborators need to recognise the potential for using mobile technology for building/sustaining partnerships.

The panel recommended that universities should encourage young researchers to maximise the opportunities presented by COVID-19, for instance pivoting their research towards the pandemic and taking on leadership roles in areas where their Principal Investigators (PIs) aren't able to fulfil these leadership roles due to travel restrictions.

The panel noted that universities should reimagine offering a campus/residential experience via virtual study abroad programmes.

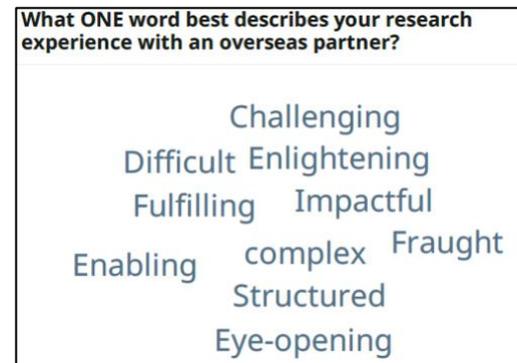
Theme 2: Barriers to global partnerships, especially in Africa



87% of attendees voted 'yes' when asked if they believe there are significantly more barriers to research and learning partnerships with African partners.

The panel noted the global asymmetry in knowledge production, lack of critical mass in research intentions and disproportionate research ownership in global partnerships. This creates a power gap when creating cross border partnerships.

The lack of digital infrastructure in some African countries prevents the development of mutually beneficial global partnerships. Few African universities have the capability to process large data sets that are increasingly required for cutting-edge internationally funded research.



Attendees' descriptions of their research experience with overseas partners.

While the African continent is a rich resource for a variety of datasets, African researchers often have to rely on the global north for processing of the data. This creates a challenge with regard to research ownership.

The panel noted that African governments' funding for research is limited. While there is a huge capacity for research, the lack of financial and infrastructure resources to enable research production remains a burden and further plays into the narrative that Africa is the 'poor cousin' instead of an equal player in partnerships.



Attendees' one word descriptions of barriers to global research partnerships.

More engagement with multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations, is needed to highlight the need for more funding for research grants in the global south. In order to lobby and advocate for more funding with multilateral organisations, African governments need to show that they have already started funding research in their own countries.

The panel noted that universities in the global north should incentivise researchers to encourage good behaviour towards mutual partnerships and discourage ‘helicopter science,’ a description used when global north scientists arrive to harvest data and analyse it, with no consideration given to the African data providers or the needs of the continent’s residents.

“Instead of asking partners in the global south ‘what can we do for you?’ there should be a two-way conversation about ‘how can we work together to arrive at a solution?’”

**- Professor Willem Hanekom,
Director of AHRI**

Excellence exists everywhere and researchers need to be purposeful in their use of language with partners – instead of asking partners in the global south “what can we do for you?” this should be a two-way conversation about “how can we work together to arrive at a solution?”

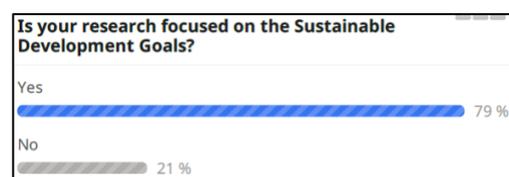
The panel expressed the need to influence and shape the African research agenda and to decolonise the funding landscape.

The panel noted that new partnerships need to pass a longevity test in order to be truly sustainable. Most partnerships are built around projects and disperse when the project ends.

Universities should encourage the building of partnerships around a wider institutional strategy in order to create sustainable interactions.

Other barriers to partnerships include the sheer cost of travel, weak currencies and poor internet bandwidth. All these contribute to unequal research relationships.

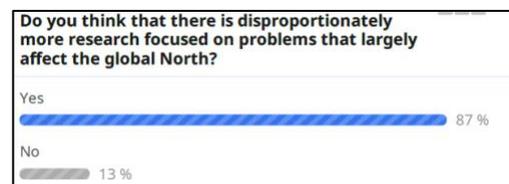
Theme 3: Research to address the 2030 SDG Agenda



99% of attendees answered ‘yes’ when asked if their research focused on sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The panel agreed that more research is needed to study the impact of pandemics on specific ethnic groups such as Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups.

The panel also noted that solutions to research questions should benefit those that need the intervention most. For instance, current COVID-19 vaccine trials in the UK have shown that 90% of trial participants were white, despite the overwhelming burden of COVID-19 morbidity and mobility being disproportionately borne in Black people.



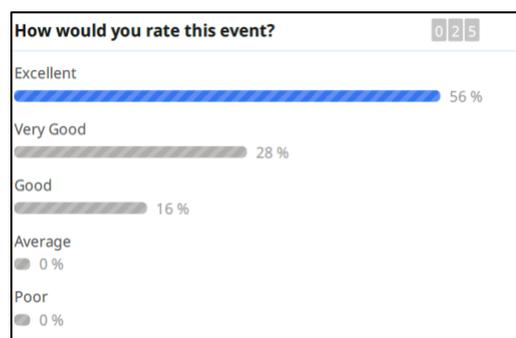
87% of attendees answered ‘yes’ when asked if there is disproportionately more research focused on problems that largely affect the global north.

When asked for areas where more research funding is urgently needed, the panel highlighted eight areas: (1) climate change, (2) poverty-related

diseases, (3) youth mobility research, (4) women in STEM, (5) infectious diseases, (6) mental health, (7) inequality in disease responsiveness, and (8) the interplay between governance and infrastructure to enable science to benefit society.

Summit Evaluation

When asked to rate the Summit, 56% of attendees voted excellent, 28% voted very good and 16% voted good:



With thanks to the UCL African Partners Summit organising committee:

UCL Global Engagement Office:
Funanani Nemaheni, Sophia Hilt,
Lucy Crick, Jinnie Chua and
Tomoyo Miyakawa

UCL ISD: Patrick Robinson

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Twitter: @UCL_Global