

Imagining the Future of Higher Education in the Caribbean in the post-COVID era

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Last year's immense disruption as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the systemic inequalities that have been inherent in traditional models of development. No region has felt this more intensely than the Caribbean, given the pervasive legacies of colonialization and wealth extraction that have shaped its postcolonial societies. The IDB Report entitled "The Inequality Crisis" highlights that while GDP has dropped by 5% or more across Latin America and the Caribbean, the decline in real wages has been large – roughly 10% on average, but in some cases as high as 20%. With rising unemployment, poverty has also increased between 3 and 5% above pre-COVID rates. ECLAC in its report "The Social Challenge in Times of COVID-19" projects that the region's inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, will increase between 0.5% and 6.0%, with very large sections of the region's population already living in chronic financial insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The ripple effect of the pandemic on the economies and societies of region will, no doubt, be felt widely and deeply in years to come.

In the Caribbean's post-independent period, higher education has played, and must continue to play, a pivotal role in the advancement of our society. In some respects, it has been both a liberating and an equalizing force, providing pathways to progress for many. However, access to higher education in the English-speaking Caribbean remains a challenge, with only 15 per cent of young people enrolled in tertiary institutions, compared to an average of 35 per cent in Latin America. This has contributed to wide inequalities and to the sluggishness of English-speaking Caribbean economies, which have had lower economic growth rates than Latin American countries over the past decade. Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Caribbean has become interlocked with the climate crisis and the crisis of chronic diseases also afflicting large segments of the population, thus further exacerbating the levels of vulnerability experienced by Caribbean small island developing states.

Against this backdrop, the university cannot be viewed simply as a provider of tertiary education, but more importantly, as a driver of inclusive and sustainable development. This will require significant investment, even more so during this current period of fiscal contraction, in order to prevent communities from sliding back into poverty, help countries meet current and anticipated workforce needs, find innovative solutions to pressing development problems and push the frontiers of knowledge that can pave the way for more equitable development paradigms.

In designing the future of higher education in a post-pandemic world, greater emphasis will, therefore, have to be placed on institutional financing in order to ensure the survival of Caribbean Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs, therefore, face the difficult task of having to rapidly modify their business model, including adjusting their structure, cutting and re-training staff and rationalizing their teaching and research agenda, while at the same time fighting to preserve the university's mission as the engine of teaching, research, innovation and entrepreneurship.

At the faculty level, it will be necessary to emphasize flexible teaching and learning modalities to provide online experiences that retain some of the richness of in-person interactions, while benefiting from the advantages of distance education such as increased access, self-paced learning, quick re-skilling and re-tooling of adult learners as well as greater diversity and portability of certification through micro and digital credentialling. The immediate future will see Caribbean universities upgrading their offering with new digital technologies, robust and integrated business enterprise systems, expanded online and blended teaching, complemented by targeted experiential learning. Universities will also invest in new pedagogical material and approaches that allow for smooth transitions to virtual delivery and online business continuity when necessary. These are all part of the Caribbean's journey towards increased resilience, as was envisioned by CARICOM's Pathway for Resilient Development. This new university model will thus take into account the new possibilities generated by artificial intelligence, block chain technology and other evolutions of digital technologies, the rapidly changing world of work which requires more

knowledge-intensive skills than before and also the need to bridge the digital divide so that no one is left behind.

Additionally, universities will have to place greater attention on multilateralism, strengthening international collaborations and global advocacy. This can be realized by aligning themselves with regional and global networks of HEIs and organisations with similar mandates. Through effective North-South and South-South collaboration, universities can further leverage funding opportunities for joint research initiatives and advance scientific cooperation and science diplomacy.

The University of the West Indies (The UWI) for example, serves as the Secretariat for Universities Caribbean, an association of Caribbean-based universities and research institutes spread across CARICOM countries as well as Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and the French and Dutch-speaking Antilles, working to foster cooperation among the higher education institutions in the Caribbean region, leveraging expertise and strengthening the alignment between higher education, development agencies, the public and private sectors and civil society.

In addition to leading the Global University Consortium on SDG-13 within the IAU's Global Cluster for Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development, The UWI is also a co-chair of the Hemispheric University Consortium (HUC), comprising 14 universities across Latin America, the Caribbean, Canada and the United States committed to sharing academic and infrastructural resources and collaborating to address challenges in a range of thematic areas including human prosperity and well-being, climate change, sustainability and resilience.

As the future of higher education unfolds, universities will have to focus on re-defining their roles while staying true to their mission of contributing to strengthening democracy and the next phase of nation-building in the Caribbean. This will undoubtedly entail transforming the academe into a more agile and competitive institution to better serve the evolving needs of the workforce and wider society. It will also involve harnessing the

university's collective disruptive thinking to produce a shift in regional and global development paradigms that could help bring about a more just and sustainable future for all.