

Caribbean Tertiary Institutions and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

29 July & 5 August 2020



1. Participants represented the following institutions: Community Colleges, Teachers Colleges of Jamaica, MICO University College, University of the West Indies, University of the Commonwealth Caribbean, University of Technology, University of the Southern Caribbean, International University of the Caribbean, and the Accreditation Council of Trinidad & Tobago.

Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools across the Caribbean, including tertiary institutions. Colleges and universities turned to digital solutions and modified their pedagogy in order to sustain continuity of learning. Other adaptations like flexible payment schemes were made to allow students to stay enrolled. The University of West Indies' CCEP and CLRI and the IDB co-hosted a conversation titled ***“Caribbean Tertiary Institutions and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic,”*** which sought to explore how tertiary institutions were coping with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A follow-up meeting was held with several students from UWI to further explore how they had been impacted.

The conversation focused on three main questions, namely:

What are the most prominent challenges that your institution is facing as a result of the pandemic, and how are you dealing with those challenges?

What has your institution done well in adapting to new processes of teaching and administration?

What is your assessment of the sustainability of the measures you have adopted in supporting your operations in the medium to long-term?

Prof. Hilary Beckles, Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, provided a backdrop for the meeting, as follows: The English-speaking Caribbean has the lowest enrolment rate in LAC, one of the most unequal areas of the world. Universities suffer from a lack of diversity in students, research and fields of study. Caribbean countries have difficulties recovering from disasters and recessions because they lack a more vibrant tertiary sector to better develop human capital. This results in economic sluggishness and slow adoption of democratization. This pause offers an opportunity to better connect higher education discourse and education reform discourse around key areas like STEM, technology, and foundation skills.

What are the most prominent challenges?



The challenges revolved around economic challenges to institutions and students, technological challenges and delivery of courses, as well as the effect of great uncertainty on lecturers and students alike.

Economic challenges to institutions and individuals

Registration has declined because students are facing economic challenges and are unable to pay tuition and fees. Due to challenges with collection of fees, institutions lack funding to invest in better technology and to prepare for reopening post-COVID with upgrades to sanitary facilities, technology and more. These conditions create risks to continuity of education.

Insufficient technological infrastructure to shift to online teaching and learning

Although most institutions have been offering some online components, none were doing solely online classes when the pandemic forced them to close their campuses. Institutions scrambled to set up digital platforms, assist lecturers with adaptation of course content to an online format, and expand access to connectivity. In some cases, such as the University of Technology, practical components of work-based courses have been difficult (if not impossible) to deliver.

Need for staff training in digital tools

Some staff lack experience delivering online instruction and assessing students online. They have had to adapt quickly, and some have done so more adeptly than others, leading to inequities in the quality of educational offerings. Even when lecturers have managed to shift to online teaching, students expressed uncertainty and a lack of clarity around how their course work would be assessed.

The digital divide

Many students and lecturers lack access to devices and internet to connect to online classes, and most had little or no experience using the platform and tools selected. Even when institutions were able to pivot to online classes, continuity of learning is not guaranteed. Inequities are evident between students with and without resources to face the challenges and cope with the changes.

Psychological effects of the pandemic

Students and lecturers are suffering from psychological stress from the pandemic, the anxiety of the possible loss of jobs, and stress from working at home and juggling studies, work and family responsibilities. Students mentioned:

The absence of a dedicated space to focus, organize and study

A great feeling of loss at not being able to use physical spaces like the library and the classrooms

Loss of camaraderie and closeness with fellow students with the loss of face-to-face interaction.

Protocols for oversight of tertiary institutions

The lack of protocols and absence of a regional framework for tertiary institutions in cases of emergency has made it difficult for the Accreditation Council to monitor institutions. The pandemic revealed an absence of data to guide the sector and responses of institutions, as well as the need for better processes for monitoring in emergency mode.

How have institutions adapted? What have they done well?



Efforts were made to adapt quickly, move courses online, make devices and internet connection available and provide support.

Continuity of teaching and learning and reduction of the digital divide

Institutions took a number of steps to make it possible for their lecturers to continue classes and for students to continue studying. They provided staff with devices and training in the use of online tools, surveyed students to find out how many had access to devices and internet, and made an effort to connect students to devices and internet services. They liaised with local providers to obtain reduced fees for internet connection for students and staff. They also facilitated ways for students to come to campus to use internet services and reconfigured spaces to accommodate the practical components, observing social distancing practices.

Support to staff and students

Tertiary institutions introduced a **flexi-work policy** for staff and gave them the tools to deliver classes from home.

One institution set up a **robust quality assurance team** to ensure that the quality of instruction remained good when programs shifted to online classes.

Institutions also found **creative ways to stay in touch** with staff and students.

Students appreciated **meaningful gestures from staff members** to check on their wellbeing, as well as **help desks** set up by several institutions.

Finally, institutions introduced **online portals** for students to pay tuition and **made payments more flexible**.

New collaborations

The community colleges started to work more together to find shared solutions. Other institutions sought new collaborations with the private sector and reached out to international students for online learning to boost revenue. Many students had not used online platforms, and they coped by banding together, setting up zoom meetings, and coaching and training each other to use the adopted platforms and adjust to online learning.

Accreditation Council support to members

The Council made more flexible rules for pre-application to allow member institutions to make quick shifts to transition to online classes.

LESSONS LEARNED

How sustainable are these measures and do they provide opportunities to do things differently?



Most institutions felt that staff would be able to manage more online teaching with additional training, allowing for more options for course delivery in the future. The need to shift quickly also revealed what needs to improve.

Adoption of a new normal

Most institutions had already started to adopt digital technologies for teaching and learning. However, all institutions realized they would have to make further changes in order to fully embrace a digital transformation. This would include upskilling of staff in the use of technology, and a shift to new ways of teaching, including eventual hybrid education (face-to-face and online). All institutions will make efforts across the board to upgrade facilities and technology platforms to manage their study and research programs post-pandemic.

Keeping important aspects

To maintain the integrity of the tertiary education experience, efforts should be made to sustain some in-person teaching. Research and practicums also require working in person. Even given the changes, institutions made an effort to remain stable and familiar and to make incremental changes so staff and students could adapt.

The importance of collaboration

Community colleges have realized the benefit of working as a team; there was a call to recalibrate nationally and regionally to find greater ways to cooperate, join forces and resources to offer better quality tertiary education. Students echoed this call for institutions to explore the possibility of collaborating more on programs and having lecturers work together, which would make more resources available and programs more robust and wide-ranging.

Psychological effects of the pandemic

Institutions recognized that there could be new and better ways to do business through the adoption of flexible payment schemes, flexi-work policies to help staff manage dual responsibilities (home and work), and more flexible rules for members of the Accreditation Council.

Recognition and acknowledgement of students' prior knowledge and experience

Students recommended that institutions be more flexible and accommodate to students' circumstances and prior knowledge and experience (especially for graduate students) by

considering possible exemption from courses where students already have experience, based on some kind of assessment.

Need for more information across many fronts.

All the institutions recognized the need for better data to capture and monitor changes. Students highlighted a number of ways that institutions could assist by providing more information in these types of emergency situations, including:

An orientation and an adjustment period to be sure students were online and understanding how things would be done

Specific training in the use of the online platforms and more technology support to help students adapt

Clear information on financial options, especially for graduate students

Clarity in assessment methods to be used, including more heavily weighted participation for group projects and more opportunities to work in groups, which students have found more motivating than individual assignments

Accepting change

Change is difficult and demands patience, understanding and support. Staff and students expressed anxiety and the need for counseling services and greater support in the transition and adjustment to major changes and challenges. This was especially true for students with difficult home environments and for those who were juggling studies with home and work responsibilities.

More funding needed for tertiary education

The essential upgrades to technology infrastructure, training of staff, and provision of devices and connectivity will be costly. Institutions recognized that in a time of great economic uncertainty, and with students concerned about job loss and rising health costs, it would be very difficult to increase tuition and fees. More collaboration with the private sector and investments from international agencies will be sought.

NEXT STEPS:



For Caribbean Institutions:

Consider the recommendations from students regarding more flexible programs and payment schemes, and more targeted support

Commit to a continued effort to support students and lecturers with training, devices, access to connectivity, counseling and other social emotional support systems

Ensure a safe, clean environment for classes

Seek out more links to labor market needs and foster opportunities for learning on the job

Consider different financing mechanisms to ensure sustainability of the institution while offering more flexibility to students, especially during this time of economic hardship

For the IDB:

Share knowledge opportunities (webinars, seminars, courses, publications) with Caribbean institutions (through CCEP and CLRI)

Maintain CCEP and CLRI informed regarding our upcoming study on tertiary education

Share related studies and programs as relevant and as they arise – e.g. financing mechanisms piloted in universities in Latin American countries, hiring practices, programs that link school with work, training programs in the use of technology

JEL Codes: A22, A23, I21, I23, O54

Key words: COVID-19, tertiary institutions, digital tools, digital divide, online teaching and learning, staff training, technology

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